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Christian Ethics, Lutheran Tradition, and Pluralistic Society

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Summary: In the Lutheran tradition, the particular aspects of theological ethics have often been overlooked, if not outright denied. Thus, it is not uncommon for Lutheran theologians to emphasize the universal aspects of theological ethics and to downplay its particular aspects, even to the point of arguing that a Christian ethics does not exist. Against this background, the article gives several arguments for drawing Lutheran ethics in a direction that will allow its particular aspects to be more clearly articulated. It also presents certain features of Luther's ethical position that might foster an understanding of the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics. Building on this, the article points to a contemporary Lutheran position of relevance to a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Lutheran ethics, theological ethics, Christian ethics, pluralistic society

Zusammenfassung: In der lutherischen Tradition wurden die besonderen Aspekte der theologischen Ethik oft übersehen, wenn nicht gar geleugnet. Daher ist es für lutherische Theologen nicht ungewöhnlich, die allgemeinen Aspekte der theologischen Ethik hervorzuheben und ihre besonderen Aspekte herunterzuspielen, bis hin zu dem Argument, dass es keine christliche Ethik gebe. Vor diesem Hintergrund entfaltet der Artikel mehrere Argumente, um die lutherische Ethik in eine Richtung zu lenken, in der ihre besonderen Aspekte klarer artikuliert werden können. Zudem werden bestimmte Merkmale der ethischen Position Luthers vorgestellt, die das Verständnis der besonderen Aspekte der lutherischen Ethik fördern können. Darauf aufbauend verdeutlicht der Artikel die Relevanz der zeitgenössischen lutherischen Position für eine pluralistische Gesellschaft.

Schlüsselwörter: Martin Luther, lutherische Ethik, theologische Ethik, christliche Ethik, pluralistische Gesellschaft

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I. Introduction

For the past several decades, it has been commonplace to describe many societies as *pluralistic*. When the term *pluralistic* is used to designate a society, this qualifies it as being diverse. In this regard, societies have always been pluralistic to an extent, as Peter L. Berger has pointed out.¹ The concept *pluralistic* encompasses various dimensions. For example, it can refer to a diversity of languages, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and/or ethical viewpoints in a society. The extent of plurality in a society can also vary. It can be deep, or it can be superficial. It can increase or decrease. Many agree that the plurality of Western societies has increased since the middle of the twentieth century, due to the rise of globalization and increased migration, among other things.

This pluralistic societal situation has caused many social theorists to acknowledge that religious people have viewpoints and outlooks on life with which many non-religious people may disagree. This is evident, for example, in the later writings of John Rawls as well as the later writings of Jürgen Habermas. Both operate with the notion that religious people may have shared viewpoints with those of their own religious tradition but not with the wider society. This is a fundamental premise for their thinking about the participation of religious people in public debates.²

It is also an increasingly common perception among theologians to assume that many contemporary Christians reason ethically and take ethical positions different from many non-Christians in society. However, within the Lutheran tradition, such a stance has often met with resistance.³ For example, Paul Althaus argues that, according to Luther, there is no difference between *lex naturae* and *lex Christi*.⁴ In the same way, Clarence Bauman states the belief that there is no *nova lex Christi* in the writings of Luther, since Luther believed that the natural law constitutes a sufficient foundation for ethical discernment.⁵ Moreover, Thomas D. Pearson denies the very existence of a Christian ethics in the theology of Luther:

1 Peter L. BERGER, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in: A Pluralist Age* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), p. 1.

2 For example, see John RAWLS, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in: *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, 3 (1997), 765–807; Jürgen HABERMAS, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” in: *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, 1 (2006), 1–25.

3 Cf. Theo A. BOER, “Luthers Theologie: Ethik? Christliche Ethik?” in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 48, 1 (2006), 18–32, here: 18.

4 Paul ALTHAUS, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965), 42.

5 Clarence BAUMAN, “The Theology of ‘The Two Kingdoms’: A Comparison of Luther and the Anabaptists,” in: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38, 1 (1964), 37–49, here: 49.

The Jew, the Turk, and the heathen employ the same tactics of ethical deliberation, the same resources of the natural law, that Christians do. In this sense, there appears to be no such thing as a 'Christian ethics' for Luther. There is just ethics, a human activity fueled by natural desires, satisfied by practical arrangements, enforced by political structures, producing at its best the conditions under which each one may serve the neighbor and live in peace.⁶

Thus, in the Lutheran tradition, an articulation of the particular aspects of theological ethics has often met with difficulties.⁷

The aim of this article is to contribute to the development of this emphasis on the particular aspects in Lutheran ethics. This will be done first by presenting arguments for the necessity of operating with a Christian ethics. Then, the article will sketch the contours of several significant aspects of Luther's moral theology, in an attempt to help foster an understanding of the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics. Finally, it will consider the development of a contemporary Lutheran ethics relevant to a pluralistic society.

II. The Particular Aspects of Christian Ethics as a Necessity

It is common for Christian theologians to operate with a Christian ethics. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, this is less common among Lutheran theologians. The denial of a distinct Christian ethics, however, does express a specific ethical position, which can be challenged in various ways. Below, I present three arguments in an attempt to do exactly that.

First, one can challenge the denial of a Christian ethics with reference to the biblical scriptures. An essential aspect of the Lutheran tradition is its commitment to these scriptures. If one is to develop a Christian ethics, rooted in ethical reflections found in early Christian congregations and reflected in the scriptures of the New Testament, several reasons lead one to operate with ethical considerations

⁶ Thomas D. PEARSON, "Luther's Pragmatic Appropriation of the Natural Law Tradition," in: *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. by Roland Cap EHLKE (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 39–63, here: 63.

⁷ Some important concepts and expressions in this article should be defined. By Christians ethics, I mean critical reflections on the ethical implications of believing in the Christian faith. The expression *the particular aspects of Christian ethics* refers to what distinguishes these ethical implications from other ethical systems. The expression *the universal aspects of Christian ethics* denotes what these ethical implications have in common with other ethical systems. In this article, I understand *theological ethics* as more general reflections on the ethical nature of Christianity.

implying a distinctively Christian way of living. Jesus' preaching concerning conversion implies consequences for the human way of life (Matt. 4:18–22; 5:33–7:6; 19:16–30). This preaching simply would not make sense were this not so. Further, it is obvious in the writings of Paul that he believes that as a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, that person's life will be changed (2 Cor. 5:17–19). Thus, Paul repeatedly encourages congregations not to live according to the norms of the surrounding society (see e.g., Col. 3:5) nor to accommodate themselves to it (Rom. 12:1–2; 13:11–14); he thus assumes that a Christian way of life deviates from a non-Christian way of life. Moreover, Christians must expect to experience persecution, according to both Jesus and Paul, and thus the cross is a mark of the Christian way of life and the Christian church (Matt. 16:24; John 15:20; 2 Cor. 3:12). This perspective makes clear the necessity of a stronger articulation by Lutheran theologians of the particular aspects of Christian ethics. Without this articulation, difficulties will hinder efforts to develop theological ethics rooted in the ethical reflections of the New Testament scriptures.

Second, one can challenge such a position from a comparative perspective. There are many ethical positions in contemporary pluralistic societies, and it is not fair to believe that Christian ethics can stand for anything. Should one not be led to believe that the Christian tradition holds more certain and determined ethical content?⁸ And should one not consider that Christian ethics differs in some ways from many atheistic or many Islamic ethical positions? In line with this, we may say that non-Christians understand good and evil differently from Christians and are influenced by their own concepts, traditions, and values, just as Christians are influenced by theirs.⁹ However, it is important to make clear that a Christian ethics will never be determined once and for all. It is an ongoing challenge to discern what a Christian ethics implies, and there will surely always be much disagreement concerning this. Furthermore, it is also important to be aware that a Christian ethics will not always differ from every other ethical position in a pluralistic society. Its distinctiveness will differ from case to case, from context to context, and from time to time. The difference will be dynamic, and it will be variable.¹⁰ This perspective also clarifies the necessity of a more precise articulation by Lutheran theologians as pertains to the particular aspects of Christian ethics.

8 For example, the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount have often been essential to Christian ethics.

9 Cf. Gifford A. GROBIEN, "What Is the Natural Law?" in: *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. by Robert C. BAKER and Roland Cap EHLKE (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 17–38, here: 37.

10 Jeppe Bach NIKOLAJSEN, "Kristen etik i et pluralistisk samfund: En ny kurs for dansk teologisk etik," in: *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 79, 2 (2016), 105–121, here: 119.

Third, one can challenge such a position by arguing that contemporary Lutheran ethics must take another direction due to the increasing ethical pluralization of many societies today. Even though many Western societies are still rather homogeneous and harmonic, over the past several decades a general pluralization has occurred that can be confirmed by empirical surveys.¹¹ Thus, this societal development itself demands a clearer articulation of the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics. In the midst of the ethical pluralization of many societies, a Christian ethics is emerging more distinctly. Thus, Ulla Schmidt and Jan-Olav Henriksen argue that when a society becomes more pluralistic, people become more aware of differences and dissimilarities; phenomena which previously were not so apparent become more obvious.¹² Emphases in theology always emerge within specific historical and cultural contexts, and they will always be impacted by these contexts. If Lutheran theologians take this into account, they will then be better able to provide relevant explanatory ethical theories. This contemporary perspective also illustrates the necessity of a clearer articulation of the particular aspects of Christian ethics by Lutheran theologians.

III. The Threefold Use of the Law and Christian Ethics

In the Lutheran tradition it is not uncommon to operate with a threefold use of the law. The first use of the law is the political use and deals with ethics in society (*usus politicus*). The second is the theological use and deals with the disclosure of humans as sinful (*usus theologicus*). The third is the sanctifying use and deals with ethical instructions for a Christian life (*usus didacticus*). These three aspects were long understood as being in agreement with Luther's own position. For example, this was a widespread understanding in Lutheran orthodoxy.¹³ However, the renewal of historical studies of the writings of Luther in the twentieth century

11 For example, the religion and ethics of populations in Europe were examined in a major survey called RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism) some years ago. Part of the survey, which investigated the Nordic countries, was conducted in the late 1990s. One of the conclusions was that the Nordic societies have undergone a pluralization of ethics in recent decades. See Lars ØSTNOR (ed.), *Etisk pluralisme i Norden* (Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2010).

12 Jan-Olav HENRIKSEN and Ulla SCHMIDT, "Religionens plass og betydning i offentligheten," in: *Religion i dagens Norge*, ed. by Pål Ketil BOTVAR and Ulla SCHMIDT (Oslo: The University Press, 2010), 81–94, here: 81.

13 Lauri HAIKOLA, *Usus Legis* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1981), 8.

challenged this understanding.¹⁴ Thus, when Luther writes about the uses of the law in his late commentary on Galatians, he mentions only two uses of the law, namely the first and the second. The same is evident in the Schmalkaldic Articles and some of his other writings. However, one does find two clear examples of a threefold use of the law in Luther's writings.

The first instance is in a sermon from 1522, *Epistel am Neujahrstage*, where Luther mentions a "dreyerley brauch des gesetzes"¹⁵. The threefold use of the law which appears here is related to three groups of people and their relation to the law. The first group does not follow the law; the second group follows the law but only externally; and the third group follows the law both internally and externally. Thus, this understanding of the threefold use of the law is rather different from – and not easy to reconcile with – what is commonly understood as the Lutheran threefold use of the law, as outlined above.¹⁶

The second instance is found at the end of *Die zweite Disputation gegen die Antinomer* from 1538, where both terminology and theology correspond with the common Lutheran understanding of the threefold use of the law.¹⁷ However, the authenticity of this passage in the text has been called into question. Werner Elert has shown that this occurrence of the third use of the law is most likely "eine Fälschung."¹⁸ Gerhard Ebeling believes that this is an interpolation by Philipp Melanchthon in the manuscript. Therefore, Ebeling's conclusion is that Luther operates only with a twofold use of the law and never goes beyond this.¹⁹

Today, there seems to be a widespread consensus that Luther did not explicitly operate with the third use of the law, but that this third use was introduced by Melanchthon in his important work *Loci communes*, in an edition dating from 1535.²⁰ However, several theologians, including Hans Herbert Walther Kramm, Helmut Thielicke and Paul Althaus, have pointed out that even though the precise terminology is not found in the writings of Luther, the concern is nevertheless

14 HAIKOLA (see above, n. 13), 8.

15 WA 10I,456 (*Epistel am Neujahrstage*).

16 Cf. Finn B. ANDERSEN, *Luther og lovens tredje brug: En undersøgelse af Luthers syn på lovens betydning for kristenlivet med udgangspunkt i en analyse af Melanchthons lære om lovens tredje brug og dens senere udformning i Konkordieformlen* (Aarhus: Teoltryk, 1990).

17 WA 39I,485 (*Die zweite Disputation gegen die Antinomer*).

18 See Werner ELERT, "Eine theologische Fälschung zur Lehre vom tertius usus legis," in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 1, 2 (1948), 168–170; see also Werner ELERT, *Law and Gospel*, transl. by Edward H. SCHROEDER (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 38–40.

19 See Gerhard EBELING, *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), 66–68.

20 Melanchthon's *Loci communes* was first published in 1521 and later in several revised versions. The above is partly inspired by Stephen J. HULTGREN, "Revisiting the Third Use of the Law," in: *Lutheran Theological Journal* 49, 2 (2015), 99–102.

present.²¹ In continuation of this viewpoint, in what follows I present several important aspects of the moral theology of Luther in an attempt to shed light on his understanding of Christian ethics and its particular character.²²

IV. Luther's Theology as a Resource for Christian Ethics

The center of Luther's ethics is *justification by faith*. Althaus makes it clear that in the ethics of Luther, justification by faith is the premise for and the source of a Christian life.²³ According to Luther, a person is justified without works, but a justified person will necessarily *do* good works. Thus, even though one must differentiate between faith and works, these matters must not be separated.²⁴ Luther writes that his teaching should not be considered as aimed at separating faith and works in any way. On the contrary, he believes that good works should be drawn "into the faith ... spring out from it, live in it, and should be praised and regarded as good only because of it."²⁵ In *Vorrede auf die Epistel S. Paul: an die Römer*, Luther writes:

Faith is a divine work in us, which transforms us, and which makes us born anew of God, John 1, and which kills the old Adam; God makes us altogether into a different people, in heart, in spirit, in mind, and in strength, and the faith brings with it the Holy Spirit. O, this

21 BOER (see above, n. 3), 30–31; see H. H. KRAMM, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (London: James Clarke, 1947), 61; Helmut THIELICKE, *Theological Ethics, Vol. I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 134–135; Paul ALTHAUS, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 4. Auflage (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), 237; cf. Eugene F. KLUG, "Luther on Law, Gospel, and the Third Use of the Law," in: *The Springfielder* 38, 2 (1974), 155–169: here, 166.

22 The ethical methodology employed in this article can be described as a kind of constructive methodology and concerns the process of retrieval and reconstruction of an ethical tradition (for example, this implies that I do not operate with a hidden church as Luther does). For helpful resources on theological retrieval, see *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*, ed. by Darren SARISKY (London: T&T Clark, 2017); see also Simeon ZAHL, "Tradition and Its 'Use': The Ethics of Theological Retrieval," in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71, 3 (2018), 308–323.

23 ALTHAUS, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (see above, n. 4), 11–23.

24 WADB 7,16 (*Vorrede auf die Epistel S. Paul: an die Römer*).

25 WA 32,353 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): "[Du must aber die spruche und lere von wercken nicht so ansehen, das du den glawben davon sonderst, wie sie unser blinden lerer stuem-peln, sondern altzeit] jnn den glauben zihen, das sie darinn verleibet, aus dem glauben und jnn dem glauben gehen und umb desselben willen gepreisset werden und gut heissen, [wie jch sonst offt gelert habe]". In this article, I have translated all quotations myself using an idiomatic translation methodology. The original texts can be found in the footnotes.

faith is alive, powerful, active, and mighty. It is impossible that it should not cause good works incessantly.²⁶

When a person is justified by faith alone, the Holy Spirit is given to that person, and thereby sanctifies them. Thus, in *Der Große Katechismus*, the Holy Spirit is called *Sanctifier*.²⁷ Luther also writes: “Christian holiness ... is, when the Holy Spirit in people creates faith in Christ and by doing so sanctifies them ... that is, creating in them a new heart, soul, body, act, and being, and writing God’s commandments not on tablets of stones but in tablets of human hearts.”²⁸ Furthermore, it is *only* a justified person who can do good works. For Luther, it goes: No Christian faith, no Christian life. Thus, he writes in the *Sermon von den guten Werken* that even if a person could wake up people from the dead or would be willing to be burned as a martyr, this person would not be able to do good works if this person were not a believer.²⁹ With reference to Paul, he argues: All that is not of faith is worthless (1 Cor. 13:3).³⁰ Thus, Oswald Bayer concludes that, according to Luther, faith is God’s doing and *makes it possible* for a person to do good works.³¹

This view has implications for Luther’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. According to Luther, faith is of fundamental significance for Christian ethics. Several times in his sermonic exposition of Matthew 5–7, *Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5-7*, Luther makes clear that the Sermon on the Mount is not intended as ethical instruction for the whole of society. It is exclusively intended to be instructional for *Christians*. For example, Luther expresses it like this: “Therefore, we need carefully to draw attention to what Christ is talking about and to whom he is talking, since this is key to understanding all of this. He is talking about the spiritual life and he is speaking to Christians about how they should

26 WADB7,11 (*Vorrede auf die Epistel S. Paul: an die Römer*): “Aber glawb ist ey n gotlich werck ynn vns, das vns wandelt vnd new gepirt aus Gott, Johan. 1. vnd todtet den allten Adam, macht vns gantz ander menschen von hertz, mut, synn, vnd allen krefften, vnd bringet den heyiligen geyst mit sich, O es ist ey n lebendig, scheffftig, thettig, mechtig ding vmb den glawben, das vnmuglich ist, das er nicht on vnterlas solt gutts wircken”.

27 WA 30I,187 (*Der Große Katechismus*).

28 WA 50,626 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): “Denn Christliche heiligkeit [oder gemeiner Christenheit heiligkeit] ist die, Wenn der heilige Geist den Leuten glauben gibt an Christo und sie dadurch heiliget, [Act. 15.] das ist, er macht neu hertz, seel, leib, werck und wesen, und schreibt die gebot Gottes nicht in steinern Tafeln, sondern in fleischliche hertzen”.

29 WA 6,206 (*Sermon von den guten Werken*).

30 WA 6,206 (*Sermon von den guten Werken*).

31 Oswald BAYER, *Martin Luthers Theologie: Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 282.

live, and how they should relate to God and to the world.”³² In *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*, Luther also writes that Jesus *only* presented his Sermon on the Mount to “his beloved Christians. It is also *only* they who want to hear and act according to it ... If all people were Christians, then all of his preaching would concern them, and they would act in accordance with it. However, not all are Christians and therefore his sermon does not concern them, and neither are they willing to act in accordance with it.”³³

The same is evident in Luther’s interpretation of the Decalogue. In his *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, Luther mentions that faith is the fulfillment of the first commandment and that all good works must come subsequently: “The fulfillment must happen by faith, prior to all works, and all works must follow this fulfillment.”³⁴ Later in the same text Luther also writes that faith and works must be understood in the right order; works do not create faith, but faith creates works.³⁵ Thus, faith is the premise for and the source of the fulfillment of the Decalogue. Bayer denotes the first commandment as both *preamble* and *interpretative matrix* for the remaining commandments, which function as subordinate to the first commandment. Thus, faith becomes an operational denominator for the right understanding of the Decalogue. For Luther, therefore, faith is a premise for and a source of a distinct Christian ethics, a fact which too rarely receives attention in discussions of his theological ethics.

Luther gives many concrete examples of what characterizes *a holy Christian life*, as he often calls it. For example, Christians “should not be hostile to anybody, should not rage, hate, envy or, seek revenge, but they should forgive, loan, help, and give advice to others.”³⁶ This also implies that Christians should not collect treasures, and should not worry about tomorrow. Christians should live a life of

32 WA 32,389 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “Diesen unterscheid fasse und merck wol als den grund der sachen, darnach man auff solche fragen leichtlich kan antworten, das du sehest wo von Christus redet und wer die leute sind den er predigt, nemlich von geistlichem wesen und leben und fur seine Christen, wie sie fur Gott und jnn der welt leben und sich halten sollen”.

33 WA 11,252 (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*): “[Eigentlich sagt ers nur] seinen lieben Christen. Die nehmens auch alleine an und tun auch also ... Wenn nun alle Welt Christen wäre, so gingen sie alle diese Wort an und sie tät also. Nun sie aber Unchristen ist, gehen sie die Wort nichts an, und sie tut auch nicht also” (italics added).

34 WA 7,26 (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*): “Bo die erfüllung fur allen wercken durch den glauben muß geschehen seyn, und die werck folgen nach der erfüllung”.

35 WA 5,32 (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*).

36 WA 50,643 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): “Jtem wenn wir niemand gram sind, keinen zorn, hass, neid, noch rachgir gegen unserm nehesten tragen, Sondern gern vergeben, gern leihen, helfen und raten”.

love, forgiveness, and service.³⁷ This holy Christian life should be expressed in homes and workplaces and in ordinary life. It is a misunderstanding when Luther is accused of ignoring the importance of Christians living Christian lives. This is demonstrated when he writes that he has always wanted to teach about the good works of the faith.³⁸

However, Luther does not believe that Christians will live a life that is in every way different than that of others. This is due to the fact that all humans are created by God and that thereby important ethical resources were also given with the creation of the world. The natural law is available to all, Christians and non-Christians alike. In his early commentary on Galatians, Luther describes the natural law as follows:

Therefore, there is one law which runs through all ages, which is known to all human beings, which is written in the hearts of all people and which leaves no one from beginning to end with an excuse, although for the Jews ceremonies were added and the other nations had their own laws, which were not binding upon the whole world.³⁹

Often, Luther goes to the length of stating that due to human nature, conscience, and reason, all people can not only potentially but also (to some degree) actually concede what is ethically right or wrong.

Even though several aspects of Luther's theology support the universal aspects of theological ethics, there is especially one consistent theme in Luther's thinking about the life of Christians in this world, which especially emphasizes the particular aspects of his theological ethics. Again and again, Luther underlines that living a Christian life implies persecution. He refers to Jesus, who says that his disciples will experience persecution (John 15:20), as well as to Paul, who points out that all who want to live a Christian life will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).⁴⁰ Thus, Luther writes in his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount:

If you become a Christian, then you know for sure what it means to grieve and suffer. If you cannot do anything else, then ... decide to live in faith as one who holds God's word dear, and do what is demanded of you in your situation. Then you will soon experience, both among your neighbors and in your own home that it will not go as you want and that you will be prevented and hindered everywhere, so that you have many troubles and will be

³⁷ WA 32,389-390 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*).

³⁸ WA 6,205 (*Sermon von den guten Werken*).

³⁹ WA 2,580 (*Galatas commentarius*): "Igitur una est lex, quae transit per omnia secula, omnibus nota hominibus, scripta in omnium cordibus, nec excusabilem relinquit ullum ab initio usque in finem, licet Iudaeis accesserint caeremoniae, tum aliis gentibus suae propriae leges, quae non uniuersum mundum obligabant".

⁴⁰ WA 32,335 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*).

saddened in your heart. Pastors especially will experience this, and they will be exposed daily to all kinds of envy, hate, and insults as well as ungratefulness, contempt, and taunts, by which their heart and soul will be stabbed and unceasingly tormented.⁴¹

Later in the same text Luther writes:

The conditions are these: If you do not want to have the gospel and be a Christian, then go and side with the world; then no one will persecute you and you will have friendship with the world. But if you would like to have the gospel and Christ, then you better know that you will have problems and that trouble and persecution will be a part of your life.⁴²

Luther believes that living a Christian life implies persecution, but the world does not want this and, therefore, the world seeks to live “a kind of life, by which it can have good days and does not have to suffer.”⁴³ According to Luther, the world believes that success and an abundance of material belongings characterize a good life. He points out that this is a common and widespread belief in the world. Therefore, Luther regards the Sermon on the Mount as a “different and new sermon for Christians,” which leads to a different life and holds out prospects of a different conception of human life.⁴⁴ Therefore, the cross is also a mark of the church.⁴⁵ In this sense, Christian faith leads to a Christian life which is characterized by a peculiarity too rarely highlighted in discussions about the moral theology of Luther.

41 WA 32,313-314 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “Darumb hebe nur an und werde ein Christen, so wirstu wol lernen was trawren und leid tragen heisse. Kanstu nicht mehr, so nym ein weib und setze dich und neere dich jm glauben, das du Gottes wort lieb habest und thust was dir jnn deinem stand befohlen ist, so soltu bald erfaren beide von nachbarn und jnn deinem eigen haus, das es nicht gehen wird, wie du gerne hettest, und sich ublich hindern und hemmen, das du gnug zu leiden kriegst und sehen must, das dir jm hertzen wird wehe thun. Sonderlich aber die lieben prediger müssen solchs wol lernen und teglich damit geubt werden, das sie allerley neid, has, hon und spott, undanck, verachtung und lesterung dazu müssen jnn sich fressen, damit jr hertz und seele durchstochen und on unterlas gequelet wird”.

42 WA 32,340-341 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “Es heisst aber also: Wiltu das Euangelion nicht haben noch ein Christen sein, so gehe hin und halt es mit der welt, so verfolget dich niemand und bleibst wol jr freund, Wiltu aber das Euangelion und Christum haben, so mustu dich des erwegen das es ubel zugehe, unfriede und verfolgung angehe”.

43 WA 32,314 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “[Die welt aber wil solch trawren odder leid tragen nicht haben,] darumb suchet sie solche stende und leben, darinn sie gute tage habe und von niemand nichts leiden durffe”.

44 WA 32,306 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “[Darumb bringet er hie gar] ein andere newe predigt fur die Christen”.

45 WA 50,641-643 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).

As seen above, numerous ethical reflections can be found in numerous works of Luther and also in numerous of his sermons. Upon this basis, I believe that it is possible to identify a Christian ethics distinct from the natural law in the writings of Luther.⁴⁶ However, it has not been my intention to show this here. More modestly, I have pointed out some aspects of Luther's theology that might foster an understanding of Christian ethics where the particular aspects of this ethics are acknowledged. This leads me to present five central characteristics of such a Christian ethics. First, justification by faith is the premise for a Christian life and, therefore, it is *only* out of Christian faith that a Christian life springs. Thus, this is a Christian ethics in the sense that it presupposes Christian faith. Second, as a consequence of Christian ethics being grounded in Christian faith, it is thus also a Christian ethics in the sense that it is only for Christians. Third, when a person is justified by faith alone, the Holy Spirit is given to and sanctifies this person. Thus, it is a Christian ethics in the sense that it is realized as a consequence of having received the Christian faith. Fourth, when Luther reflects ethically, he very often refers to the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount and other important ethical passages in the biblical scriptures, plainly making use of theological language. Thus, it is a Christian ethics in the sense that it is fashioned by Christian faith. Fifth, Luther gives a number of examples of what Christian ethics implies for a Christian way of living. He seems to imagine an extensive, if not a congruent, convergence between the *content* of the natural law and what I identify as a Christian ethics in his theology. However, because sin weakens the recognition of the natural law, it was not unfamiliar to him that a Christian life deviates in some ways from the kind of life lived by the rest of society.⁴⁷ Thus, it is a Christian ethics in the sense that to some extent it leads to peculiar way of life.

V. Christian Ethics in a Pluralistic Society

The Lutheran tradition is not a fixed tradition. It is renewed, and it is passed on again and again. When the Lutheran tradition is carried on, it can be helpful to return to Luther's writings in order to root and orient one's endeavors. However, it is also important to deal critically with Luther's theology. Accordingly, I have stated that there are good *theological* reasons to emphasize the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics to a greater extent than Luther himself did. I have also stated

⁴⁶ In another article, I have argued that a number of aspects of Luther's writings support what is often termed Christian ethics today; see Jeppe Bach NIKOLAJSEN, "Christian Ethics, Natural Law, and Lutheran Tradition" (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ For example, see WA 1011,40 (*Epistel zu der Messe in der Christnacht*); see also footnote 63.

that *empirical* reasons can be given for this.⁴⁸ In what follows, I present some perspectives that can help moving Lutheran ethics in a direction that will allow its particular aspects to be more clearly articulated.

One consequence of the pluralization of Western societies is that it is now an empirical fact that the church is a distinct social entity in the West. Even though this is clearer today than at the time of Luther, he nevertheless writes that there “exist many people in the world, but the Christians are a distinctly called people.”⁴⁹ Moreover, he believes that this distinct people can be identified throughout the world by some particular marks. For example, the Christian church is identified by the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, the use of prayers, and the fact that Christians will always – more or less – be a persecuted people. When these signs are visible, according to Luther, there should be no doubt that we are dealing with a Christian church.⁵⁰ For centuries, the church has sung hymns, performed baptisms, celebrated communion, and preached on passages from the biblical scriptures. Thus, Christian ethics are woven into and determined by this tradition. The church encompasses a distinct group of people – namely Christians – who are called to embody a Christian ethics. This ecclesial or particular aspect of Christian ethics has been emphasized only to a small extent in the Lutheran tradition. I suggest that a new societal situation makes it more reasonable to operate with this particular aspect of Lutheran ethics. I have also shown that, for Luther, there seems to exist a Christian ethics, which is faith-based and thus only for Christians. I have given examples of Luther stating that the Sermon on the Mount is only for Christians and not intended as an ethical instruction for the whole of society.

In contemporary democratic societies, Christians participate in common public debate with their fellow citizens concerning pressing societal problems. With the strong Lutheran notion of humans being created by God and living in a world created by God, there exists a common foundation for public debate. This shared foundation consists of elements such as dialogue, experience, language, and reason. This means that the possibility exists for conversations across different traditions and between different positions. By making use of common experience, common language, and reasonable arguments, dialogue can take place between different viewpoints concerning ethical problems in a pluralistic society.⁵¹

48 See footnote 11.

49 WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): “Nu sind in der welt mancherley Voelcker, Aber die Christen sind ein besonder beruffen Volck”.

50 WA 50,643 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).

51 Jeppe Bach NIKOLAJSEN, “Christian Ethics, Public Debate, and Pluralistic Society,” in: *International Journal of Public Theology* 14, 1 (2020) 5–23, here: 20.

This resonates with statements in *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*. For example, Luther writes: “All humans can be divided into two groups: One group which belongs to the kingdom of God and one group which belongs to the kingdom of the world. The first group is all who have a real faith and are in and under Christ.”⁵² The second group is all who do not belong to Christ. In the same text, Luther again confirms the idea of these two groups: “the one group is in the kingdom of God under Christ and the other group is in the kingdom of the world under worldly authorities.”⁵³ Moreover, he writes that each group has a law of its own and that, therefore, one has to operate with “two kinds of laws, for each kingdom needs to have its own laws, because without law no kingdom or any form of governance will endure.”⁵⁴ Thus, there are two forms of governance in the world. The one form of governance is Christian, concerns Christians, and is intended to regulate the life of Christians. Therefore, Luther writes that this governance is to create not just Christians but pious Christians through the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ In this way, the Christian church is a *locus* for Christian ethics. The other form of governance is worldly and regulates society with the purpose of creating peace, order, and justice in the world. According to Luther, both of these forms of governance are necessary, but it is important to distinguish between them given that each has its own nature and purpose.⁵⁶

One reason why it has been difficult for Lutheran theologians to operate with a Christian ethics is the strong notion of natural law within the Lutheran tradition. Larry M. Vogel explains how far Luther goes in his understanding of the natural law: “Luther (ever the most radical), as we have already seen, consistently asserts that it is all there – all the commands of God are there, from the first to the last, in

52 WA 11,249 (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*): “[Hie muessen wyr] alle menschen teylen ynn zwey teyll: die ersten zum reych Gottis, die andern zum reych der welt. Die zum reych Gottis gehoeren, das sind alle recht glewbigen ynn Christo unnd unter Christo”.

53 WA 11,262 (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*): “der eyns ynn Gottis reych unter Christo, das ander ynn der welt reych unter der uberkeyt ist”.

54 WA 11,262 (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*): “zweyerley gesetz haben. Denn eyn iglich reych muß seyne gesetz unnd rechte haben, unnd on gesetz keyn reych noch regiment bestehen kan”.

55 WA 11,251-252 (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*).

56 Jeppe Bach NIKOLAJSEN, “Kirke, øvrighed og pluralistisk samfund,” in: Kirke og øvrighed i et pluralistisk samfund, ed. by Jeppe Bach NIKOLAJSEN (Fredericia: Kolon, 2017), 117–136, here: 120–135. According to Per Frostin, there exists a tension between two main emphases in Luther’s so-called two-kingdom doctrine. The first emphasis is two aspects of one and the same person and the other emphasis is the two different empirically existing groups of human beings. I intentionally stress the latter emphasis in order to stress a collective and even communitarian perspective on Christian ethics. This is mainly due to the fact that in the New Testament scriptures I find a Christian ethics with a clear communitarian character. Per FROSTIN, *Luther’s Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Critical Study* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1994), 58.

the Natural Law.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, Luther often expresses great confidence in humanity’s ability of ethical discernment. The natural law is knowable to all people. Nature teaches humans what is right and wrong.⁵⁸ The human heart tells and the human conscience commands humans how to act.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is natural not to lie, murder, or steal, because the natural law is implanted in all humans.⁶⁰

However, there are reasons to question the coherence of Luther’s theology of natural law. One must question whether Luther sufficiently takes his own hamartiology into account when he claims that humans can easily discern what is right and good. Is he not neglecting the consequences of the profoundly sinful nature of human beings when at times he expresses strong confidence in the human ability to discern what is right and wrong?⁶¹ According to Luther, all humans are born in sin and humanity is curved in upon itself (*incurvatus in se*). Should this serious matter not have serious consequences for the human ability of ethical discernment? Apparently, human beings can do nothing for their own salvation, whereas Luther often states that they are impressively capable when it comes to ethical discernment. But is this really so? Is it so easy to reach ethical conclusions on which all can agree?⁶² From a historical perspective, it is clear that ethical positions that were accepted by many people a couple of hundred years ago are now vehemently condemned. For example, this is the case with slavery. From a global perspective, one also finds immense diversity in terms of what are regarded as legitimate ethical viewpoints, as, for example, concerning the death penalty.

However, it must be made clear that Luther at times indicates that sin weakens the recognition of the natural law.⁶³ Yet it would have been more persuasive if

57 Larry M. VOGEL, “A Third Use of the Law: Is the Phrase Necessary?” in: *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69, 3-4 (2005), 191-220: here, 210.

58 WA 11,279 (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*).

59 WA 32,494; see also 495-496 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5-7*).

60 WA 16,363-375 (*Predigten über Ex 19*).

61 Hans Tiefel thinks so; see his article “The Relationship Between Salvation and Ethics in Luther’s Theology,” in: *The Lutheran Quarterly* 25, 3 (1973), 284-294, here: 293.

62 Alasdair MacIntyre is not of this opinion. As a matter of fact, he is very critical of the possibility of obtaining ethical agreement in the Western world today.

63 For example, see WA 16,447 (*Predigten über Ex 20*); 17II,91.102 (*Am Vierden sonntag nach Epiphannie*); 18,80-81 (*Wider die himmlischen Propheten*); 40II,66 (*Galatas commentarius*): “tamen adeo corrupta et caeca est vitio diaboli humana ratio, ut illam cognitionem secum natam non intelligat aut” [human reason is so corrupt and blind because of the devil’s wickedness that it does not comprehend the knowledge that it is born with]; see also 40II,66-67 (*Galatas commentaries*); therefore, Luther believes that the Decalogue was given to recall the natural law. Philipp Melancthon also believes that sin darkens the recognition of the natural law; see CR 21,399.401; 22,254.257-258.

he more consistently and more clearly had stated that sin weakens the availability of natural law to human judgement, and that natural law is, to some or a great extent, outside the range of human reason.⁶⁴ By so doing, Luther could have gained a more realistic expectation regarding the human ability of ethical discernment. This could then elucidate the extensive ethical disagreement in many contemporary societies and would, in turn, promote the existence of a Christian tradition holding specific beliefs and ideas about what living a good life entails. Thus, if one concedes that Luther more consistently should have drawn out the consequences of his strong hamartiology in his assessment of human ethical discernment, this might help one both to discern and to operate with the particular aspects of Christian ethics.

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued for the necessity of developing a more apparent articulation of the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics. Thus, it has presented important features of Luther's ethics, that might help foster an understanding of the particular aspects of Lutheran ethics. Knut Alfsvåg has stated that it remains to be seen how the theology of Luther can be helpful for the Christian church as it is confronted by pluralism and thus exists in a profoundly different societal situation than Luther's own.⁶⁵ I believe this article has shed light on exactly this matter. Thus, this article has reflected constructively on the development of a Lutheran ethics which can be of relevance for a pluralistic societal situation. Thus, the article has argued in favor of an adjustment of the course of Lutheran ethics by demonstrating that this ethical system can be profitably developed in a direction where its particular aspects are acknowledged and appear more clearly.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ VOGEL (see above, n. 58), 210.

⁶⁵ Knut ALFSVÅG, "Natural Theology and Natural Law," in: *Martin Luther, Vol. II*, ed. by Derek NELSON and Paul R. HINLICKY (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 667–681, here: 675.

⁶⁶ Finally, I would like to thank Professor Emeritus Hans G. Ulrich for discussing an early draft of this article with me during a sabbatical I spent at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. The responsibility for the content of this article is, of course, solely my own.