



Christian ethics, natural law, and Lutheran tradition

Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen

To cite this article: Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen (2021) Christian ethics, natural law, and Lutheran tradition, *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 75:2, 164-181, DOI: [10.1080/0039338X.2020.1868574](https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2020.1868574)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2020.1868574>



Published online: 30 Dec 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 432



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Christian ethics, natural law, and Lutheran tradition

Jeppé Bach Nikolajsen 

The Lutheran tradition places a pronounced emphasis on the universal aspects of theological ethics. The present article draws attention to particular aspects of the theological ethics of Martin Luther, which support the existence of a Christian ethics in several meanings of this concept. It argues that a Christian ethics exists in the sense that it presupposes Christian faith, is only for Christians, is realized as a consequence of receiving the Christian faith, is shaped by the Christian faith, and leads to a distinct way of life. Moreover, it concludes that there exists a remarkable convergence between natural law and what is identified as a Christian ethics in the theology of Luther. But it is still possible to argue that, according to Luther, something special is demanded of Christians: They must be willing to endure suffering and persecution because of their Christian faith.

Introduction

From its very beginning, the Lutheran tradition contained different theological emphases. For example, Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon not only represented different theological interests and expressed their viewpoints in different styles, they also differed on important issues. Nevertheless, the Lutheran tradition contains some fundamental insights and characteristic features by which it contributes distinctively to the ecumenical conversation concerning theological ethics. For example, this tradition's distinctiveness is expressed in a number of Lutheran confessional writings that are generally considered to be genuine expressions of Lutheran identity, and of which Lutheran churches approve in various ways.¹

Despite the fact that the Lutheran tradition of theological ethics is exceedingly diverse and a topic of much debate, it has very often emphasized the universal aspects of theological ethics.² The American theologian Roger A. Badham and the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson

write: "It is our contention that Protestant social ethics, as heir to medieval and Reformation theologies and Enlightenment moral theories, have continued to function under the rubric of universality."³ Numerous examples can be given of how theologians emphasize the universal aspects of theological ethics with reference to the moral theology of Luther. For example, the German theologian Paul Althaus has argued that no difference exists between *lex naturae* and *lex Christi* in the theology of Luther.⁴ However, Althaus has admitted that Luther occasionally differentiates between a natural law and a divine law. He also holds that, according to Luther, the natural law is written on the human heart, while the divine law is revealed in the biblical scriptures. Nevertheless, Althaus maintains that Luther does not differentiate between the natural law and the divine law with respect to their content.⁵ Similarly, the American theologian J. Daryl Charles states that Luther's position unambiguously is that moral norms apply to all people, are the same to all and that all sense the effects of the natural law.⁶ This is also noted by the American theologian Thomas D. Pearson, who believes that there exists no specific Christian morality in the theology of Luther:

Indeed, it seems that Luther would claim that doing the right thing as defined by the natural law is something anybody could do. Following the precepts of the natural law is not authentically distinctive of Christian morality and should not be pursued because it promises to achieve some particular Christian good.⁷

Furthermore, the Finnish theologian Antti Raunio states: "[I]t has been a common view, for example, in Nordic Lutheranism that there is no especially Christian morality."⁸ Moreover, Pearson goes so far as to dismiss entirely the existence of a Christian ethics in Luther's theology:

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 fuelled by natural desires, satisfied by practical arrangements, enforced by political structures, producing at its best the conditions under which each one may serve the neighbour and live in peace.⁹

As is evident from these statements, it is not uncommon within the Lutheran tradition to repudiate the existence of a Christian ethics.

This aspect of the Lutheran tradition has persistently appeared contentious to me. It has always been a mark of Lutheran theology that it should be rooted in the biblical scriptures, even though the implications of this have often been understood very differently. Nevertheless, one should note that a Christian ethics, and even a specific Christian morality, appears in the New Testament. Indeed, several of the statements made by Jesus, as they appear in the four Gospels in the New Testament, elucidate a Christian ethics. Jesus announces the breakthrough of the kingdom of God, calls humans to be his disciples and introduces them to a special way of living that reflects the laws of life in this kingdom. He instructs them on how to pray (Matt 6:9–13), fast (Matt 6:13–18), relate to wealth (Matt 6:18–21), deal with worries (Matt 6:24–34), and more. It is obvious that Jesus' preaching has implications for his disciples' way of life (Matt 4:18–22; 5:33–7.6; 19:16–30). Furthermore, a number of statements in Paul's writings also suggest a Christian ethics. He notes that when a person starts believing in Christ, this person's life will be changed (2 Cor 5:17–19 and Col 3:5), just as he warns them against accommodating to the wider society (Rom 12:1–2; 13:11–14; in Col 3:5, Christian congregations are encouraged not to live according to the surrounding society). Thus, he clearly presupposes that a Christian way of life deviates from the way in which the rest of society lives. As a biblical scholar and a pastor preaching over texts from the New Testament, it would be strange if Luther did not reflect this in his writings and sermons. Thus, I believe that it is not obvious that a Christian ethics does not exist in the theology of Luther, as this topic is brought up in many of his writings, and he provides numerous examples of concrete instructions on how Christians are to act and behave.¹⁰

In what follows, this article first argues that a number of aspects of Luther's theology support the idea that his theology depicts a Christian ethics in several meanings of this concept. Furthermore, the article investigates whether Luther operated with a Christian ethics that contains some special ethical commandments to Christians. Doing this, the desire is to stay close to the texts of Luther and thereby explicitly show how he expounds a Christian ethics.¹¹

Christian ethics in Luther's theology

Luther's notion of the existence of both a worldly kingdom and a spiritual kingdom is a key element of his ethical considerations. In his treatise, *Von weltlicher Oberkeit*, Luther clarifies that one should distinguish

between these two kingdoms, since each kingdom has its own nature and purpose.¹² The purpose of the worldly kingdom is to create peace, order, and justice in society, while the purpose of the spiritual kingdom is to create pious Christians.¹³ The distinction between the two kingdoms seems to be related to Luther's opposition between law and gospel. In the spiritual kingdom, God reigns through Christ and governs this kingdom through the Holy Spirit and the gospel. God governs the worldly kingdom through the worldly authorities and the political use of the law, which concerns society. The law in this sense is given with creation. Thus, the government of society should be based on creation and human reason. The gospel offers justification by faith alone and should not govern society.¹⁴ Luther writes that one must operate with "two kinds of laws, for each kingdom must have its own rules and laws, and without laws no kingdom can last".¹⁵ Thus, the worldly kingdom has its own laws, which are to regulate society. Luther similarly seems to indicate that the spiritual kingdom has a kind of Christian law, which contradicts several of his other statements in which he appears to state that there is no need for Christian laws because the Holy Spirit lives in Christians and will guide them ethically. Nevertheless, this fundamental distinction between the two kingdoms reveals that Luther differentiates between, on the one hand, a worldly ethics that does not originate from the church, and on the other hand, a Christian ethics that should be embodied by the Christian church.¹⁶ In an interesting appendix to the treatise, *Von weltlicher Oberkeit*, Luther discusses a concrete example of how a Christian prince should act as law enforcer.¹⁷ Luther states that if two quarrelling parties are not Christians and refuse to be judged according to Christian law, then a Christian prince should allow them to be judged according to the natural law, rather than Christian law. They should, however, be aware that the law of love and the law of nature teach the same in this case. The distinction between the Christian law and the natural law is noteworthy, but it is also remarkable, as the Danish theologian Svend Andersen points out, that Luther, in this text, expects Christians and non-Christians to be able to reach a consensus on ethico-legal norms within the worldly realm.¹⁸ Luther can also differentiate between a natural life (*natürlich leben*) and a Christian life (*Christlich leben*).¹⁹ He similarly differentiates between the road that the world follows and the road that Christians should follow. Luther mentions that he uses the metaphor of a *road* to illuminate human ways of being (*wesen*) and living (*leben*) in the world.²⁰ In the following, I will discuss a number

of important aspects of Luther's understanding of a Christian ethics – that is, his reflections on the ethical implications of being a Christian.

Firstly, it can be demonstrated that a Christian ethics exists in the theology of Luther in the sense that there is an ethics that presupposes a Christian faith, and the starting point of this Christian ethics is justification by faith alone. Thus, Luther writes about good works that: “[They] can only be found where faith is already present.”²¹ He ends *Von den guten Werken* by stating that faith is the creator of good deeds, that all good deeds are rooted in faith, and that all good deeds outside faith are death.²² Furthermore, it is Luther's conviction that the Christian life will spring out of Christian faith by necessity, and that Christians will naturally perform good works. Therefore, Luther believes that when a human receives the gift of grace and the forgiveness of sins, this person will begin to love others and fulfil the law.²³ Thus, he emphasizes that faith leads to an inability to be inactive.²⁴ Luther gives numerous concrete examples of what this Christian ethics entails. For example, he writes: “To serve one's neighbour means: to instruct the strays, to comfort the grieving, to strengthen the weak, to help others as far as possible, to bear with others' abusive customs and crudeness, to quietly endure mockery in the church and society, to endure inconvenience and humans' ingratitude and spite, to obey civil authorities, to honour one's parents, and to be patient at home with one's [stubborn] household and wife.”²⁵

Secondly, a Christian ethics exists in Luther's theology in the sense that it is an ethics only for Christians. It is not that Luther's ethical considerations have no concern for wider society. In fact, he operates with the first use of the law, which concerns the whole of society. For example, he can state that the society of his time has problems with voracious banquets, sumptuous dresses and unjust interest rates.²⁶ However, an ethics exists in Luther's writings that instructs Christians in particular. Even though Luther did not operate with a third use of the law, a Christian ethics still exists for Christians in his theology. There are numerous examples of this throughout his writings. In his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, he repeatedly mentions that its ethical instructions concern Christians alone, and not society as a whole. For example, he writes: “Therefore this sermon, as I have already told you, does not apply to the world, which will not follow it, because it sticks to its own.”²⁷ Moreover, Luther states: “He [Jesus] only preaches to the Christians, showing how they should act.”²⁸ Finally, he also writes that Jesus presented his Sermon on the Mount *only* to “his beloved Christians. It is also *only* they who want to hear

and act according to it ... If all humans 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".²⁹ In this way, Luther limits Christian ethics exclusively to the attention of Christians, although he specifically ensures that all Christians are included. The following statement is an example of the latter: "Christ does not talk to bishops, monks, and nuns but to all Christians in general, who would like to be his disciples."³⁰ Another example is: "For it is sufficient to say that Christ here is not talking about a public office, but about all Christians in general."³¹ Thus, it is clear that the Christian church and Christian ethics are closely related in Luther's theology. This becomes especially clear when one considers his definition and discussion of the church in his treatise *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*: "Even though it is possible to find numerous writings and discussions about the word *church*, we will stick to our childhood belief this time, which says: I believe in the holy Christian church and in the communion of the believers. This clearly explains what the church is, namely a communion of believers. In other words, it is a group or a gathering of people who are Christians and holy."³² Christ lives, works in, and reigns over a holy, Christian people: "For Christ has left them to be a clear sign and remedy, by which the Holy Spirit, because of the death of Christ, again sanctifies the fallen sinners and by whom Christians confess that they are a holy people living under the reign of Christ in this world."³³ Even though a Christian ethics exists exclusively for Christians, we can find examples in Luther's writings of this Christian ethics concerning in a wider sense to society in general.³⁴ It is possible that this should be regarded as an inconsistency in Luther's thinking, but I am more inclined to explain this by referring to the fact that an exterior identity existed between church and society during Luther's life, which is why he could do this.

Thirdly, it can be demonstrated that a Christian ethics exists in Luther's theology as an ethics that is realized against a backdrop of receiving the Christian faith. It is presupposed that when a person comes to faith, they will receive the Holy Spirit. Numerous times, Luther strongly emphasizes how the Holy Spirit contrives good works in the Christian person.³⁵ This new Christian person will walk in the Spirit, who will sanctify them: "Christian holiness or common holiness is when the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ in humans, thereby sanctifying them."³⁶ This happens when they are struggling against sin: "[The holy Christian people] have the Holy Spirit, who daily sanctifies

them, not by the forgiveness of sin alone, which Christ has obtained for them ... but also by the abrogating of, the sweeping aside, and the perishing of the sin, by which they are called a holy people."³⁷ In fact, Luther goes so far as to believe that without the Holy Spirit, there can be no holiness. Indeed, he considers the Holy Spirit, Christian faith, and Christian life to be inextricably related.

Fourthly, it can be proven that a Christian ethics exists for Luther in the sense of an ethics shaped by the Christian faith. It is possible to find examples of Luther referring to what common sense or nature teaches, when he is arguing ethically. For example, in his interpretation of the Decalogue in *Der Große Katechismus*, he writes:

We do it [obey the third commandment] first and foremost for the sake of the needs of the body, because *nature itself teaches and demands* that ordinary people, who have worked all week, are allowed to withdraw just for one day, in order to be able to rest and recover. We also do it because on such a holiday (and otherwise it would be difficult) it is possible to have time and opportunity to participate in the church service, where Christians come together to hear and engage with the word of God, and to praise God, to sing to his honour, and to pray.³⁸

However, in Luther's interpretation of the Decalogue in his *Von den guten Werken*, he states that it is dangerous to read or listen to readings from pagan books if one does not thoroughly understand God's commandments and the biblical scriptures. This is due to the fact that pagans are blinkered, and their books are characterized by a profound pursuit of honour, whereas Christians should honour God alone.³⁹ Also, in his treatise *Von den guten Werken*, Luther mentions that many of the passages in the biblical scriptures have been written to turn people away from acts which they consider to be good and rightful, and to help them focus carefully and diligently on God's commandments.⁴⁰ Moreover, Luther often refers to the biblical scriptures in his ethical arguments. His interpretation of the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and the biblical scriptures in general are, therefore, crucial to his idea of Christian ethics. This is evident in all of his writings, but especially in his sermons, which comprise a significant portion of his writings, in which he expounds texts from the biblical scriptures. It is also obvious that Luther applied a theological language when presenting his Christian ethics. Thus, it is possible to conclude that, in Luther's writings, Christian ethics is shaped by the Christian faith.⁴¹

In the following section, I will now explore whether Luther operated with a Christian ethics that contains some special ethical commandments to Christians.

Christian ethics as special commandments to Christians

Luther's essential understanding is that all humans have a fundamental knowledge of good and evil. This is the result of the fact that God implanted a natural law in the hearts of human beings at the creation of the world, so that human reason is filled with the natural law.⁴² Sometimes, however, Luther in fact states that because of sin, humans no longer recognize the natural law in its fullness.⁴³ Luther states that humans are blinded by sin, and therefore cannot fully distinguish between right and wrong: "So inconceivable and infinite is the blindness of human reason that it cannot make correct judgments about the teaching of the faith nor about good deeds."⁴⁴ Luther further argues that, "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."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is possible to find several examples of Luther having great confidence in the ability to make ethical discernments in humans.⁴⁶ Also, there is a substantial amount of evidence that Luther imagines an extensive, if not a congruent, convergence between the content of the natural law and Christian ethics.⁴⁷ This point of view, however, does not exclude the existence of a Christian ethics. If one allows the view that since sin hinders the recognition of the content of the natural law to play a role in the interpretation of the moral theology of Luther, then a Christian ethics can still exist.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the question remains whether Luther operates with an ethics that contains some special commandments to Christians. One theme in his theology especially suggests this.

Again and again, Luther suggests that Christians should expect to experience suffering and persecution because of their Christian faith.⁴⁹ But this does not mean that suffering is a goal in itself. Luther writes: "It is not the will of God that we should seek and select our own misfortune. If the cross comes when you live in faith and love, then you should welcome it. However, if it does not come, then you should not seek it."⁵⁰ Luther, nevertheless, believes that suffering and persecution are a normal consequence of living as a Christian. He questions why Christians must endure this, and he answers in the following manner:

How have the dear apostles sinned, who did not want to harm or hurt anybody, but under great poverty and trouble travelled around and taught people how they should be released from the kingdom of the devil and be saved by faith in Christ? This is the world not willing to hear or to bear, and therefore it screams with one voice: "These people must die. Away from the earth with them. No mercy." What is the reason for this? They want to help the world to get rid of its idolatry and condemnation, but the world cannot bear this. It wants to be praised for its evil doings. It wants God to say: "You hate, and that is right and pleases me. You are my devout children; just continue with the killing of all who preach my word and believe in it."⁵¹

Thus, Luther believes that the world lives in rebellion against God and that it persecutes Christians because they challenge the world on its self-understanding.⁵² Therefore, suffering and persecution are consequences of living as a Christian.⁵³ Luther, however, goes even further than this, suggesting that not only will Christians, as a consequence of their faith, suffer and be persecuted, but that Christians should also be willing to endure this suffering. There is a slight, but important difference here: Whereas the former expresses a consequence, the latter expresses a commandment. In Luther's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, both aspects are evident. The following quotation is an example of the former:

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 should know that you will have problems and that trouble and persecution will be a part of your life.⁵⁴

He states that, in addition to Christians suffering and being persecuted as a consequence of their faith, they must also be willing to endure this suffering. This same conviction is expressed several times throughout his sermons: "Therefore, *we must be prepared* to be patient when the world, in the most bitter ways, is hostile and antagonistic to our teaching and way of life, and derides, taunts, and persecutes us for it."⁵⁵ In another sermon, Luther also mentions that Christ is an example and model for Christians, stating that when Christians suffer and are being persecuted, they are like Christ.⁵⁶ In this way, the nature of both

Christ and the church is not expressed by power and might, but by fragility and humility.⁵⁷ At least in this sense, Luther suggests that something special is required of Christians – namely, that they must be willing to endure suffering and persecution in the world.

Luther gives an account of faith in a God who has created the world, who is concerned with humans and the world, and who overwhelms creation with all kinds of goodness. Since God wants to protect life, property, family, and so forth, the natural law has been inscribed into the hearts of humans. Thus, Luther's Christian ethics reflects a *creational ethics*, which guards the life that God has created and confirms creational values, such as life, wealth, and family. Additionally, his Christian ethics reflects a *Christological ethics*, which at times demands a voluntary sacrifice of creational goods for the sake of the faith, the gospel, and the kingdom of God (Matt 5:39–41; Rom 12:17–21; 1 Cor 6.1–7). When Christians hold on to their faith in God, other views on life and the world will be relativized. This causes resentment and resistance. For this reason, Christians must sometimes be willing to sacrifice a comfortable and honourable life for their Christian faith.⁵⁸ In this specific way, Luther seems to propose a Christian ethics that possesses special commandments to Christians alone.

The Christian way of life in a sinful world

When Luther refers to God having created the world, this means that God has given humans life, and that God provides the good that is experienced in life. God is the giver of everything good. God sustains human life and the created world. This means that humans owe God everything. Thus, creation has an ethical significance. Humans are guilty in a fundamental sense and are accountable to God. The fact that the world is created also means that human life takes shape in a divinely created framework and that human life must be understood in this context.⁵⁹

However, Luther often regards *the world* in a rather negative way. For example, in *Der Große Katechismus*, he writes that the world is full of adultery, misery, and murder, and that no one obeys others, no one pays attention to others, and all just follow their own will.⁶⁰ Luther also writes that: "It is obvious that the world is worse than ever. There exists no law and order and no decent morality in society; no one feels responsibility or shows faithfulness, but everywhere one just sees irresponsible people in abundance."⁶¹ Luther is especially upset about the adultery, drunkenness, and wastefulness he observes in society.⁶² Therefore, he writes that when a person becomes a Christian, they must not be

reconciled with greed, pride, and adultery: "Such a lifestyle and such behaviour does not suit a Christian, who must be called to be, and in truth is, another person than before ... Therefore, such a Christian must now live another way of life."⁶³ He similarly states: "Therefore, you must demonstrate that the resurrection of Christ is not an empty word among you, but a powerful word which is preached among you, so that you are now resurrected and live a different life than before – namely, in accordance with the will of God and the word of God."⁶⁴ Thus, Luther insists that becoming a Christian makes a difference:

Consequently, Christians are different from all other people on this earth ... solely by what is called loving Christ and keeping his word, whereby the faith and the love of Christ demonstrate and express themselves. Because others do not do this nor want to do it, they stand out. This cannot, as has been said, remain secret or hidden, but will be obvious in the actions of both parties. Therefore, one must not only hear or know the word, but also keep it. That is, one must openly witness in deeds and words to the world and stay firm, even if one has to let go of everything. Who is doing this, and who is not, will definitely be both seen and heard.⁶⁵

In Luther's writings, it is difficult to find a more vivid description of this view than the passage below:

This world is so evil that a devout person must live as a rose among thorns. He must endure all kinds of misfortune, spite, shame, and sin from the world. He must expect hostility from the world and take the cross upon himself. He must not be seduced, even though he must live alone as Lot in Sodom and Abraham in Canaan, among drunken, fornicating, unjust, false, and ungodly people. This is how the world is, and this is how it will remain. In this world, we must live a different life ... It is like being sober in a pub, disciplined in a whorehouse, pious in a lusty situation, and just among thieves.⁶⁶

Luther's writings provide many examples of Christians who are supposed to live different lives. In *Von Kaufshandlung und Wucher*, he further writes that although worldly laws allow Christians to take each other to court, Christians should not do this, because it conflicts with Christian ethics. Similarly, he writes that worldly laws allow whorehouses, but that Christians should not make use of them because it conflicts with Christian ethics.⁶⁷

To summarize his thoughts on a Christian way of living, he writes: "This life is nothing else than *faith, love, and the holy cross*."⁶⁸ He characterizes some important aspects of his understanding of Christian ethics with the help of three important concepts. Firstly, faith is the entrance to the Christian way of life, and Luther might also believe that faith aids Christians in understanding what is implied in a Christian way of life. Secondly, love provides content to the Christian way of life. Luther refers approvingly to Paul, who writes that love is the fullness of the law (Rom 13:10),⁶⁹ and further adds that love is the sum of all good deeds.⁷⁰ Therefore, love must determine everything that Christians do.⁷¹ Thirdly, the Christian life is characterized by the cross, so it is unavoidable that Christians will suffer and be persecuted.⁷²

Conclusion

Luther's theology is complicated because it is filled with tensions. Nevertheless, this article proposes the hypothesis that it is possible to identify five aspects of Christian ethics in Luther's theology. It argues that a Christian ethics exists in the sense that it presupposes Christian faith, is only for Christians, is realized as a consequence of receiving the Christian faith, is shaped by the Christian faith, and leads to a distinct way of life. I have argued that the natural law and Christian ethics converge to a great extent, if not fully. However, this does not exclude the existence of a Christian ethics, since sin hinders the recognition of the content of the natural law, and thus a Christian ethics can still exist, which leads to a distinct way of life. Moreover, it remains that something special seems to be demanded of and can only be expected from Christians: They must be willing to endure suffering because of their faith. If nothing else, this conclusion challenges the widespread stance that a distinct Christian ethics does not exist in Luther's theology.

Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, Gydass Vei 4, Majorstuen, Oslo 0302, Norway jeppe.b.nikolajsen@mf.no

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Emeritus Hans G. Ulrich for discussing a number of issues related to this article with me during a sabbatical I spent at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg in

Germany. I would like to thank the peer-reviewers for their valuable comments. The responsibility for the content of this article is, of course, solely my own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Stumme, "Introduction," 2.
2. Some key concepts and important expressions in this article should be defined. The British theologian Oliver O'Donovan writes that Christian ethics must arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ. See his *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 11. Similarly, the American theologian Paul Lehmann defines Christian ethics as reflections on how believers in Jesus Christ, and thereby members of his church, are to act and behave. See his *Ethics*, 25. In this article, by "Christian ethics" is meant reflections on the ethical implications of believing in the Christian faith. The expression "the universal aspect of Christian ethics" refers to what these ethical implications have in common with other ethical systems. The expression "the particular aspect of Christian ethics" refers to what distinguishes these ethical implications from other ethical systems. Finally, "theological ethics" refers to critical reflections on the ethical nature of Christianity.
3. Badham and Sigurdson, "The Decentered Post-Constantinian Church," 156.
4. Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*, 42.
5. *Ibid.*, 32–3: "Bisweilen scheint Luther freilich göttliches und natürliches Recht zu unterscheiden. Unter göttlichem Recht versteht er dann das in der Schrift, im Worte Gottes gegebene, im Unterschiede von dem ins Herz geschriebenen, ohne doch inhaltlich zwischen beiden einen Unterschied zu machen." See also Vogel, "A Third Use," 210.
6. Charles, "Foreword," xv–xvi.
7. Pearson, "Luther's Pragmatic Appropriation," 63.
8. Raunio, "Divine and Natural Law," 21.
9. Pearson, "Luther's Pragmatic Appropriation," 63.
10. I have presented a similar perspective elsewhere; see Nikolajsen, "Christian Ethics," 297–9.
11. Previously, I was more inclined to question the consistency of Luther's theology, while in recent years I have become more convinced that Luther's theology has a consistent, substantive content, which, however, also contains some significant tensions. Of course, the character of Luther's texts is different, his texts have different aims and address different contexts, but it is not always necessary to refer to these historical contexts to understand the content of his texts. In this article, I am not exploring a historical development within Luther's theology, but trying to uncover some key aspects of his moral theology.
12. WA 11,252 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*).
13. WA 11,251–2 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*).
14. The Swedish theologian Carl-Henric Grenholm discusses how modern Luther research has understood the distinction between the two kingdoms and its relation to a sharp differentiation between law and gospel in his article "Law and Gospel."

15. WA 11,262 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*): “zweyerley gesetz haben. Denn eyn iglich reych muß seyne gesetz unnd rechte haben, unnd on gesetz keyn reych noch regiment bestehen kann”. I have translated all quotations of Luther in this article myself, making use of an idiomatic translation methodology. The original text of the passages can be found in the endnotes.
16. Luther never considered his thinking about the worldly and the spiritual kingdoms as a proper doctrine (*Lehre*). Moreover, he was far from consistent in his use of central concepts in his differentiation between these two kingdoms. His thoughts also underwent substantial development; see Alfsvåg, “Christians in Society,” 15. Therefore, it is possible to find several rather different interpretations of his ideas about these two kingdoms. Above, I point to considerations in Luther’s *Von weltlicher Oberkeit* which seems to imply an ethics only for Christians.
17. WA 11,278–80 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*).
18. Andersen, “Two Kingdoms, Three Estates,” 198.
19. WA 8,382 (*Epistel am vierzehenden Sonntag nach Pfingsten*).
20. WA 22,66 (*Epistel am fünften Sonntag nach Trinitatis*).
21. WA 32,318 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “[den fruechten und guten wercken eines Christen,] vor welchen der glaube zuvor”.
22. WA 6,275 (*Von den guten Werken*).
23. WA 40II,80 (*Galatas commentarius*).
24. WA 7,25 (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*).
25. WA 40II,70 (*Galatas commentarius*): “Sic servire proximo, consolari fratrem, docere errantem, iuvare peccatorem vilissima res, ferre fratris impatientiam, passiones, mores, esse patientem in oeconomia, politia, cum uxore”.
26. WA 6,261–2 (*Von den guten Werken*).
27. WA 32,310 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “Darumb dienet diese predigt, wie ich gesagt hab, fur die welt nicht, schaffet auch nichts, Denn sie bleibt dabey”.
28. WA 32,382 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “Wir haben aber genug gehoret, das Christus hie gar nichts wil reden jnn das weltlich regiment und ordnung noch der oeberckheit etwas genomen haben, sondern allein den einzelnen Christen predigt, wie sie fur sich jnn jrem wesen leben sollen”.
29. WA 11,252 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*): “[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).
30. WA 32,406 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “[Aber hie horestu das] Christen nicht redet mjt Bischoven, monchen und nonnen sondern jnn gemein mit allen Christen, die seine schuler sein [und Gottes kinder]”.
31. WA 32,334 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*): “Denn es jst gnug gesagt, das Christus hie von keinem offentlichen ampt redet, sondern von allen Christen jnn gemein nach dem wir alle gleich sind fur Gott”.
32. WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): “Wolan, hindan gesetzt mancherley schriften und teilung des worts Kirche, Wollen wir dismal einfeltiglich bey dem Kinderglauben bleiben, der da sagt: Jch glaube eine heilige Christliche Kirche, Gemeinschaft der heiligen, Da deutet der glaube klerlich, was die Kirche sey, nemlich eine gemeinschaft der Heiligen, das ist, ein hauffe oder samlung solcher Leute, die Christen und heilig sind”.
33. WA 50,632 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): “Denn Christus hat sie darumb hinder sich gelassen, das ein oeffentlich zeichen und heilthum sein solt, dadurch der Heilige Geist

- (aus Christo sterben erworben) die gefallen sunder wider heiliget und die Christen damit bekennten, das sie ein heilig Volck sind unter Christo in dieser wel"; see also WA 50,625 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).
34. WA 30I,166–7.170 (*Der Große Katechismus*).
 35. For example, see WA 50,625 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*).
 36. 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".
 37. WA 50,624 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*): "darumb es ein Christlich Volck heist, und hat den Heiligen Geist, der sie teglich heiligt, nicht allein durch die vergebung der sunden, so Christus jnen erworben hat (wie die Antinomer nrennen), sondern auch durch abthun, ausfegen und toedten der sunden, davon sie heissen ein heilig Volck".
 38. WA 30I,144 (*Der Große Katechismus*): "Aber ein Christlichen verstand zufassen fur die einfeltigen, was Gott ynn diesem gepot von uns foddert, so mercke, das wir Feyertage halten nicht umb der verstendigen und gelerten Christen willen, denn diese durffens nyrgent zu, Sondern erstlich auch umb leiblicher ursach und notdurfft willen, welche die natur leret und foddert fur den gemeinen hauffen, knecht nnd megde, so die ganze wochen yhrer erbeit und gewerbe gewartet, das sie sich auch einen tag ein ziehen zu rugen und erquicken. Darnach allermeist daruemb, das man an solchem ruge tage (weil man sonst nicht dazu komen kan) rawm und zeit neme Gottes diensts zuwarten, Also das man zuhauffe kome Gottes wort zu hoeren und handeln, darnach Gott loben, singen und beten" (italics added).
 39. WA 6,220 (*Von den guten Werken*).
 40. WA 6,222–3 (*Von den guten Werken*).
 41. In another article, I have pointed out similar aspects of Luther's theology that may foster five characteristics of a contemporary Lutheran Christian ethics of relevance in a pluralistic societal situation (it presupposes Christian faith, is only for Christians, is realized as a consequence of receiving the Christian faith, is shaped by the Christian faith and leads to a distinct way of life); see my article "Christian Ethics," 301–6. The former article and this present article are related, even though they have two fundamentally different aims, the one having a historical aim and the other, a constructive aim. This present article was written first, and the former article builds on it.
 42. WA 11,279 (*Von weltlicher Oberkeit*).
 43. For example, see WA 16II,447 (*Predigten über Ex 20*); 17II,91.102 (*Epistel auf den 4. Sonntag nach Epiphaniis*); 18,80–1 (*Wider die himmlischen Propheten*); 40II,66–7.71 (*Galatas commentarius*); therefore, Luther believes that the Decalogue was given to reawaken the natural law. Philipp Melanchthon also believes that sin darkens natural knowledge about the will of God; see CR 21,399.401; 22,254.257–8.
 44. WA 40II,71 (*Galatas commentarius*): "Ideo ceci in ipsa vita, plus in fide".
 45. WA 40II,66 (*Galatas commentarius*): "tamen adeo corrupta et caeca est vitio diaboli humana ratio, ut illam cognitionem secum natam non intelligat aut".
 46. For example, see WA 16II,363–75 (*Predigten über Ex 19*); 32,494.495–6 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*); 51,242 (*Auslegung des 101. Psalms*).
 47. For example, see WA 45,669 (*Reihenpredigten über Johannes 14–15*).
 48. The Danish ethicist Ulrik B. Nissen is a good example of a theologian who allows sin to play a (significant) role in the interpretation of the natural law in the moral theology of Luther; see Nissen, *Nature and Reason*, 71–2, 80–4.

49. He refers to Jesus, who states 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); see WA 32,335 (*Wochenpredigten über Matthäus 5–7*).
50. WA 12,364 (*Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und außgelegt*): “Got will nicht, das wyr das unglueck suchen und selbs erwelen, gehe du hyn ynn glawben und liebe, kompt das Creutz, so nym es an, kompt es nicht, so such es nicht”.
51. WA 22,11 (*Epistel am 2. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*): “Was haben die lieben Aposteln an jr gesuendigt, die niemands leid oder schaden begeret, sondern in grosser armut und mit schwerer erbeit umbher gezogen, die Leut geleret, wie sie solten aus des Teufels Reich und ewigem tod erloset und selig werden, durch den Glauben an Christum? Das kan sie nicht hoeren noch leiden, Sondern schreien alle mit hauffen: Nur todt, todt und von der Erden mit diesen Leuten, on alle gnade etc. Was ist denn die ursache? Ey, sie wollen der Welt helffen von jrer Abgoetterey und verdampftm wesen, Solch gute werck wil sie nicht leiden und jr boese werck nur gelobet und gepreiset haben, Das Gott muesse sagen: Was jr thut, das ist recht und gefellet mir wol, Jr seid die frome Kinder, fart nur fort also und toedt getroest alle, die mein Wort predigen und daran glauben”.
52. See also WA 21,298–9 (*Epistel am 2. Sonntag nach Ostern*).
53. Nikolajsen, “Christian Ethics,” 304–5.
54. WA 32,340–1 (*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” (*italics added*).
55. WA 21,299 (*Epistel am 2. Sonntag nach Ostern*): “So müssen wir gedencken, das wir auch gedult haben, so die Welt unserer Lere und Leben auffs bitterst feind und gehass ist, und uns darob auffs eusserst schmehet, lestert und verfolget.”
56. WA 41,304 (*Epistel am 4. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*).
57. WA 22,277–8 (*Epistel am 16. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*): “Wolan, Es ist der Kirchen Regiment auff Erden also, das sich menschliche weisheit und Vernunfft daran stossen mus, und mancherley ergernis gehen wider den Glauben, Aber Gott ist auch ein solcher Man, der da lust dazu hat, nicht mit schwert noch sichtbarer gewalt und macht, sondern durch schwachheit zu regieren zu wider dem Teufel und der Welt und nicht anders sich dazu stellet, denn als wolte er seine Kirche gar lassen untergehen.”
58. This is also expressed by the Norwegian Lutheran theologian Ivar Asheim; see his chapter “Etikkens normative grunnlag,” 42–59.
59. WA 30I,183–4 (*Der Große Katechismus*).
60. WA 30I,154 (*Der Große Katechismus*): “[Waruemb meinestu,] das itzt die welt so vol untrewē, schande, iammer und mord ist, denn das yderman sein eigen herr und Keiserfrey wil sein, auff niemand nichts geben und alles thuen was yhn geluestet?”
61. WA 30I,142 (*Der Große Katechismus*): “wie ytzt fur augen, das die welt boser ist denn sie yhe gewesen, und kein regiment, gehorsam, trewe noch glaube sondern eitel verwegene, unbendige leute”.
62. For example, see WA 21,411–23; cf. 47,757–71 (*Epistel Am Sonntag nach der Himelfart Christi*).
63. WA 22,313 (*Epistel am 19. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*): “Solch leben und wesen wird sich bey einem Christen nicht leiden, der da nu sol heissen und warhafftig sein ein ander Mensch, denn er zuvor gewest, wie wir hoeren werden, und darumb auch einen andern wandel fueren”.

64. WA 21,268 (*Epistel am Sonntag nach Ostern*): “[Solchem jrdischen wesen (wil er sagen), nach dem die Heiden und ungleubigen trachten, die da Gottes Wort in den Wind schlahen und sich dem Teuffel nach seinem willen fueren und treiben lassen,] mustt jr abgestorben sein und damit beweisen, das die Aufferstehung Christi in euch nicht verbegliche wort, sondern lebendige krafft sey, so sich in euch erzeige, das jr auch aufferstand und nu anders lebt denn zuvor, nach Gottes wort und willen, [welches heisse ein goettlich, himlisch leben]”.
65. WA 21,465–6 (*Epistel am Pfingstag*): “Also sind hiemit die Christen gescheiden von allen andern Leuten [auff Erden nicht durch einige eusserliche weise oder werck, welche koennen alle Unchristen und Heuchler auch haben,] sondern allein nach dem, das da heisst Christum lieben und sein Wort halten, in welchem sich der Glaube und Liebe gegen Christum beweiset und scheineth, Welchs die andern nicht thun noch thun wollen, und sich also selbs absondern und auswerffen, Denn solches, wie gesagt ist, kan doch nicht heimlich noch verborgen bleiben, Sondern es mus sich in der that und im werck erzeigen zu beiden seiten, Darumb heisst es auch nicht schlecht das Wort gehoeret oder erkand, sondern gehalten, das ist, mit der that und dem bekenntnis oeffentlich fur aller Welt bezeuget und dabey gelieben, solt man auch alles darob lassen, Wer das thue oder nicht thue, das wird sich freilich wol muessen sehen und hoeren lassen”.
66. WA 10I1,40 (*Epistel Messe in der Christnacht*): “[Aber vill mehr sagt er darumb:] ynn dißer welt, anzuzeigen die krafft der heylwertigen gnaden gottis, das die welt so boeß ist, das eyn gotlich mensch gleych alleyn, on exempel, wie eyn roß unter den dornen leben muß unnd von yhr allerley ungluck, vorachten, schand unnd sund leyden. Alß sollt er sagen: wer nuchternn, rechtfertig, gotlich leben will, der muß sich [1. Mose 13, 12. 13] erwegen aller feyndschafft und das kreutz an sich nehmen; Muß sich nit lassen yrren, ob er gleych allein, wei Loth tzu Sodoma und Abraham ynn Canaan, unter eytteln, vollen, truncken, untzuechtigen, ungerechten, falschen, ungotlichen menschen sollt leben. Es ist die welt und bleybt welt, der muß er sich eußernn unnd widdersinnisch leben, sie straffen ynn yhren weltlichen begirden. Sich, das heyst mitten ym schenckhawß nuchternn, mitten ym boßen hawß tzuchtig, mitten ym tanzhawß gotlich, mitten ynn der mordgrubenn gutlich leben”.
67. Nikolajsen, “Kirke, øvrighed,” 130.
68. WA 15,502 (*Predigten des Jahres 1524*): “Denn diss leben ist nicht anders denn eyn leben des glawbens, der liebe und des heyligen creutz” (italics added).
69. WA 10I.2,393 (*Evangelium am 17. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*).
70. WA 40II,71 (*Galatas commentarius*).
71. WA 10I.2,393–4 (*Epistel am 17. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*).
72. If a contemporary Lutheran ethics is to operate with a Christian ethics, a number of issues will have to be addressed, such as whether it is possible to identify a fairly consistent Christian ethics throughout history or not. Also, if a contemporary Lutheran ethics is to operate with a natural law, I believe it is possible to conducting ethical discussions across different traditions and positions in contemporary society; this is discussed in my article “Christian Ethics,” 17–23.

ORCID

Bibliography

- Alfsvåg, K. "Christians in Society: Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms and the Three Estates Today." *Logia* 14, no. 4 (2005): 15–20.
- Althaus, P. *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1965.
- Andersen, S. "Two Kingdoms, Three Estates, and Natural Law." In *Lutheran Theology and the Shaping of Society: The Danish Monarchy as Example*, edited by Bo Kristian Holm and Nina J. Koefoed, 189–213. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018.
- Asheim, I. "Etikkens normative grunnlag [The Normative Foundation of Ethics]." In *På skaperens jord: En Innføring i kristen etikk [On the Creator's Earth: An Introduction to Christian Ethics]*, edited by Axel Smith, 42–55. Oslo: Luther, 1984.
- Badham, R. A., and O. Sigurdson. "The Decentered Post-Constantinian Church: An Exchange." *Cross Currents* 47, no. 2 (1997): 154–165.
- Charles, J. D. "Foreword." In *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, edited by Robert C. Baker and Roland Cap Ehlke, xiii–xviii. St. Louis: Concordia, 2011.
- Grenholm, C.-H. "Law and Gospel in Lutheran Ethics." In *Justification in a Post-Christian Society*, edited by Carl-Henric Grenholm and Göran Gunner, 91–106. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015.
- Lehman, P. *Ethics in a Christian Context*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Luther, M. D. *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (WA)*. Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883ff.
- Melanchthon, P. *Corpus Reformatorum: Philippi Melanthonis Opera (CR)*. Edited by Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider and Heinrich Ernst Bindseil. Halle: Schwetschke, 1823ff.
- Nikolajsen, J. B. "Kirke, øvrighed og pluralistisk samfund [Church, State, and Pluralistic Society]." In *Kirke og øvrighed i et pluralistisk samfund [Church and State in a Pluralistic Society]*, edited by Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, 117–136. Fredericia: Kolon, 2017.
- Nikolajsen, J. B. "Christian Ethics, Public Debate, and Pluralistic Society." *International Journal of Public Theology* 14, no. 1 (2020): 5–23.
- Nikolajsen, J. B. "Christian Ethics, Lutheran Tradition, and Pluralistic Society." *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 3 (2020): 295–310.
- Nissen, U. B. *Nature and Reason: A Study on Natural Law and Environmental Ethics*. Aarhus: Aarhus University, 2019. doi:10.7146/aul.334.226.
- O'Donovan, O. *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Pearson, T. D. "Luther's Pragmatic Appropriation of the Natural Law Tradition." In *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, edited by Roland Cap Ehlke, 39–63. St. Louis: Concordia, 2011.
- Stumme, J. R. "Introduction." In *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, edited by Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, 1–10. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.
- Raunio, A. "Divine and Natural Law in Luther and Melanchthon." In *Lutheran Reformation and the Law*, edited by Virpi Mäkinen, 21–61. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Vogel, L. M. "A Third Use of the Law: Is the Phrase Necessary?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69, no. 3–4 (2005): 191–220.