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NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD?

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I

Does natural knowledge of God, here taken in the broad sense of knowledge about God that somehow can be found outside Scriptural revelation, exist?

The importance of this issue can be seen in *Melancthon's* handling of the doctrine of God. Melancthon wrote about it in his most important dogmatical work, which he called *Loci Communes*, i. e. fundamental notions. This book can be considered as the first Protestant dogmatic theology. It has an interesting history, which here is recalled briefly, since it is important for the matter under hand.¹⁾

As a very young man Ph. Melancthon (1497~1560) came to Wittenberg (1519) to become a professor of philosophy. Here he came strongly under the influence of M. Luther. The result was, that in his *Loci Communes* (1521) he tried to give a systematic survey of the main points of Luther's thoughts. It is remarkable that this first edition did not contain a doctrine of God. Melancthon declared that we had better adore the mysteries of the Godhead, instead of examining them. In the same context he rejected the influence of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle which undermined the Christian doctrine.²⁾ In this rejection Melancthon shows himself to be a good pupil of Luther, who also speaks very negatively of philosophers.³⁾

But this all is radically changed in the third, final version (1543). Since 1527 Melancthon was no longer under the direct influence of Luther, because he accepted a post as a professor in Jena. Also he went back to his philosophical studies. Now the *Loci Communes* contain an extensive treatment of the doctrine of God.

A reminiscence of the first edition is the warning that with the being of God we must not judge on the basis of human thinking, but out of the Word of God. However, this do-

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- 1) The following is based on F. Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte*, Halle 4, 1906, pp. 782-794, 842-863.
- 2) Quotations in: Loofs, p. 784.
- 3) Quotations in: R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte IV/I*, Darmstadt 6, 1959 (reprint of the 4. edition), p. 75 f.

es not imply that all human knowledge has to be excluded from the doctrine of God. He places Plato's definition of God and the definition of the Church side by side. The difference between the two is: Plato's definition is mutilated, while that of the Church is complete. Plato describes God as "an eternal mind, the cause of all that is good in Nature." This description is so ingeniously constructed, that it is hard to tell what is missing. The first part ("God is an eternal mind") includes the fact that God is a being who is spiritual, intelligent, eternal. The second part ("the cause of all that is good in nature"), maintains that God is true, good, righteous, the almighty founder of all good things and of the whole order in Nature, and of the human nature ordained to a certain order, i. e. to a certain abedience. Although all these things are correctly said of God, it is not enough. It must be added how God revealed Himself. So the definition of the Church is more complete: "God is a spiritual being, intelligent, eternal, true, good, pure, righteous, compassionate, totally free, with boundless power and wisdom, eternal Father, who from eternity begot his Son as his image; and the Son, being coeternally the image of the Father; and the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from Father and Son."⁴

When we compare the two descriptions of God Melancthon gave, it becomes clear that in the part concerning God's being and attributes, only slight additions are given in the Church-definition, while the second part of the Church-definition, about the Trinity, is entirely new.⁵ Apparently Melancthon held the view that heathen philosophers knew much about the being and attributes of God, but nothing about the Trinity. Of course that does not mean that the revelation in Scripture about God's being and attributes is superfluous. Only Scriptural revelation gives absolute certainty. But in the case of the being and attributes of God, Scripture must only confirm what is already generally known.

Melancthon is important not only because he wrote the first Protestant dogmatic theology. He can be considered the teacher of the new generation of Reformed theologians.⁶ His views on the doctrine of God were generally accepted by them. Lutheran as well as Calvinistic theologians considered the knowledge about God's being and attributes as

4) The Latin text in: C. H. Ratschow, *Lutherische Dogmatik zwischen Reformation und Aufklärung* II Gütersloh 1966, p. 35 f.

5) Ratschow concludes that, concerning the content, the difference between the natural knowledge and the revealed truth consists "only" of the matter of the Trinity. p. 33.

6) Loofs, p. 792: "Melancthon ist der Schulmeister des neuen Theologengeschlechts geworden".

partly general,⁷ while they acknowledged the Trinity could only be known from Scripture.⁸

Now I want to point out that Melancthon's view of the natural knowledge of God has results in two respects, firstly concerning the content, and secondly concerning the order of the doctrine of God.

Concerning the content: Philosophical knowledge about God is included in the doctrine of God. Natural knowledge of God can be true knowledge. To make sure it was true knowledge, one had to give proof that it was in accordance with Scripture. But as Melancthon was convinced there exists true natural knowledge about God, especially with some Greek philosophers, he freely used it in his doctrine of God.

Concerning the order: The treatment of the being and attributes of God precedes that of the Trinity. Melancthon stated that the specific Christian knowledge about God must be added to the more general knowledge. Then it is only natural that the Trinity should be treated after the being and attributes of God. In this way the Trinity is only loosely connected with God's being and attributes, since people can have true knowledge of God's being, without knowing the Trinity. Soon after Melancthon, the Trinity was no longer included in the description of God, but became a separate subject. The integration of the Trinity in the being and attributes of God became a serious problem.⁹

II

There is no need to go into the theories, that were invented to explain how this natural knowledge in man could develop. Important for us is that the conviction that natural knowledge existed, was thought to be based of Scripture. Especially four texts were considered decisive: Acts 14:15 f.; 17:26 f.; Rom. 1:18 f.; 2:14f.¹⁰ Therefore I shall examine these texts. Do they prove, that outside Scripture there is some knowledge about God, that can be used in describing God?

In *Acts 14:17* Paul says to the inhabitants of Lystra, who think him and Barnabas to be Greek gods, that "God did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." Paul teaches us here that God did not hide Himself, but showed Himself. His hand

7) The Lutheran theologians in: Ratschow, p. 29 f.; the Calvinistic theologians in: H. Hepp, E. Bizer, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, Neukirchen 2. 1958, p. 38.

8) Ratschow, p. 84; Hepp-Bizer, p. 87.

9) The necessity of this connection was generally acknowledged: Ratschow, p. 59 f.

10) Ratschow, p. 32.

can be seen in the harvest of each year, and in the food of each day. But does that imply, that those heathen had some true knowledge about God, even before Paul came to preach the Gospel? That is not meant. On the contrary, Paul had to preach to them the living God, to whom they should turn (vs. 15).

In *Rom. 2:14 f.* Paul writes that "the Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature the things contained in the law". This passage can not be used as proof of a natural knowledge of God. The subject Paul deals with in these verses is not whether the heathens know God, but whether they know the law of God.¹¹⁾

In *Acts 17:22 f.* Paul's famous speech to the philosophers of Athens (vs. 18: Epicureans and Stoics) is recounted. Attention has always been focused on the issue of Paul's quoting Greek poets, Epimenides and Aratus (vs. 28). Does not that mean that Paul acknowledges some knowledge in non-Christian cultures? But we need not go into that question here. I want to draw attention to the much overlooked fact that Paul emphatically states that the Athenians had no knowledge about God. No less that three times is this said.¹²⁾ The theme of Paul's sermon is: The unknown God (vs. 23). He whom the Athenians worship without knowing Him, Paul declares unto them (vs. 23). The former life of the Athenians is described as the times of ignorance (vs. 30), for at that time they did not know God.

Acts 17 can not be used as a proof that the heathen have some knowledge about God. Rather the contrary, for Paul states that the heathen, and that includes the heathen philosophers too, do not know God.

The most important text with respect to our subject is *Rom. 1:18 f.* We can summarize Paul's argument in four points.

1. God reveals Himself to all people (vs. 19). That does not mean that everything concerned God is revealed, Paul limits that general revelation to God's eternal power and Godhead. They are clearly to be seen from the creation of the world (vs. 20). Indeed, this world, from the stars to the atoms, reveals to us the power of Him, who made all things. And not only in the creation, also in the preservation of the world does God make his Godhead known. The whole world shows the mark of its Maker. The same is

11) A recent discussion of this passage in: J. Douma, *Natuurrecht, een betrouwbare gids?*, Groningen 1978, p. 75 f.

12) K. J. Popma, *Evangelie contra evangelie. Joden en Grieken in het nieuwe testament*, Franeker, p. 43 f.; D. K. Wielenga, Paulus en Aratus, in: *De akker is de wereld*, Amsterdam 1971, p. 16, 26. By the way, Popma and Wielenga reject, that Paul agrees with the poets, he quotes.

poetically expressed in Ps. 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handwork," a text that is also sometimes quoted in the discussion around this subject.

2. From this man not only *can derive* some knowledge about God, he *actually receives* some knowledge. Paul teaches that which may be known of God is manifest in them (vs. 19). The invisible things of Him (i. e. his eternal power and Godhead) are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made (vs. 20). Although God can not be seen, everyone who sees around himself in this world can not fail to recognize the power, the more-than-human greatness of the creator of all this. That is why the people of this world are to be blamed. When they know God, they glorified Him not as God (vs. 21). The heathen really have some knowledge of God.¹³⁾

3. But people do not want that knowledge. They try not to think of it. They hold the truth in unrighteousness (vs. 18). They push aside the knowledge they have in their minds. People can deny what they do not want to know. They deny this knowledge, because they will not acknowledge such a God, nor worship Him. Instead, they make their own god, and worship these. Thus doing, "they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things" (vs. 23). That is what they speak about, think about, and that is what they profess to believe. It is a foolish thing to do, considering the knowledge they derived from creation. But man is corrupt, and this corruption becomes most evident in the religious attitude of mankind. Anything a heathen says or writes about God, bears the mark of his pushing aside his knowledge of the true God, and of his foolish behaviour to make God like (a part of) himself or of another creature.

4. That is why they are without excuse (vs. 20). They cannot say, either now or at the eternal judgement: "We did not know". For they did know, but they did not want to. The intention that Paul has in introducing the subject of the heathen knowledge of God

13) S. Greijdanus, *De brief van den apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Rome, I*, Amsterdam 1933, a. l. translated "noumena" (vs. 20) as if it were a condition: *If* they are understood. He seems to deny that the heathen receive some knowledge of God. His opinion may be caused by a justifiable reaction to an optimistic view of the knowledge about God among the heathen. Yet we can not agree with him. In vs. 21 "gnontes" can not be translated as a condition, Paul states the fact that they know God. The heathen could not be blamed if they did not really know God. See for this J. van Bruggen, "Is God onbeminde omdat Hij onbekend is?", article in *De Reformatie*, 46 (1971), p. 386. The conditional translation of "noumena" should be rejected as unlikely, and ill-fitting in this context.

is to show why the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.¹⁴

Now the question must be answered if Christian theology can use the heathen knowledge of God. For that purpose we must distinguish between the knowledge they *recieved from creation* about God (see (2) above) and the knowledge they *thought up* about God (see (3) above). The former is true knowledge, but it stays hidden deep in their hearts. The latter is brought into the open, but that is not true knowledge, it is the result of their sinfulness, and shown clearly their foolishness. The writings of the philosophers outside Christianity belong to the second kind of knowledge. Therefore these can not be used in the Christian doctrine of God.

III

During the ages the doctrine of God has been influenced by philosophers, especially by the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. As Paul's judgement in Rom. 1:22, 23 also refers to them, we must try to remove the traces of their influence. The following serves to point out some places where that influence has been found or can be found. At the same time it may become clear that philosophical knowledge is in fact not a help, but an impediment to the doctrine of God.

1. In the doctrine of the *Trinity*. Of course, traces of philosophical influence will mainly be found in the doctrine about the being and attributes of God, as the Reformed theologians wanted to base the doctrine of Trinity on Scripture alone. But I would want to draw attention to the use of the word "mystery" in the doctrine of God. There is a remarkable change in the use of this word. While in the first edition of Melancthon's *Loci Communes* the whole doctrine of God was considered a mystery, in later Reformed dogmatical theologies it is only used with respect to the Trinity.¹⁵ But does not such a use imply that the Trinity is more mysterious than the being and attributes of God? This use of "mystery" can be set against the background of the natural knowledge of God. Being and attributes of God are in that case not so much of a mystery, because they are at least partially accessible for human understanding.

I do not intend to dispute that the Trinity is a mystery. But that applies to the being and attributes as well. Both are revealed to us, and both are beyond our compre-

14) H. Berkhof, *Christelijk Geloof*, Nijkerk 1973, p. 79 f, draws attention to this.

15) See note 7, but also still in this century e.g. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Michigan 4. 1949, p. 89.

ension. A limited use of "mystery" would unjustly imply that God's being is more accessible to our understanding than the Trinity. Instead we could apply this word to *all* we know about God.

2. The *order* in Melancthon's description of God is a result of his theory of natural knowledge. First that which is more generally known, God's being and attributes, is treated, and then the specific Christian knowledge, the Trinity, is added. As this argument is not valid, this can no longer be the reason for maintaining this order in the doctrine of God. This order must be decided on the basis of other considerations.¹⁶

3. A third remark concerns the classification *being and attributes*. This is a classification derived from Aristotle, and is used to distinguish between a species and an individual. The species is defined by the being, e.g. living or not-living; material or immaterial. The individual is distinguished from other individuals of the same species by its individual attributes, e.g. round or square, black or brown, honest or dishonest. A stone is a stone and it may be black or brown. But it would no longer be a stone if it were living. So living belongs to "being", but a colour is only an "attribute".

The same classification is used with respect to God. But it has always caused difficulties. There is no species "God", for there is only one God. And He can not have other attributes than He has. A man is always a man, be he righteous or unjust. But God would not be God any more, if He were unjust. The classical Reformed theologians therefore said that all God's attributes were essential.¹⁷ But in fact that disposes of the use of this distinction in the doctrine of God. We would do better to remove the rema-

16) F. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik I*, St. Louis 1924, p. 524 simply declares that he placed the Trinity before the being and attributes, not as if that would be the only possibility, but to exclude the possibility of a natural theology. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek II*, Kampen 4. 1928, p. 119 f. states that, if the treatment of the attributes of God before the doctrine of Trinity purported to climb from natural theology to revealed theology, and from there to the Christian doctrine of God, it should be rejected. Then he gives some arguments why the attributes should be treated first. J. Kamphuis, *Katholieke Vastheid*, Goes 1955, p. 179 f. opposes Bavinck's arguments, without choosing a different order. G. C. Berkouwer, "Doctrina de Deo", in: *Weerwoord. Reacties op Dr. H. Berkhof's Christelijk Geloof*, Nijkerk 1974, p. 109 remarks that opposition is growing against the method to treat first the doctrine of God (in general) and after that the doctrine of Trinity. He refers to two articles by K. Rahner: "Über den Versuch eines Aufrisses einer Dogmatik", in: *Schriften zur Theologie I*, Zurich-Köln 1954, p. 9 f.; and "Theos im Neuen Testament", in *op. cit.* p. 91 f.

17) Heppe, Bizer, p. 45 f.

ins of this old philosophical scheme.¹⁸

4. Another matter is *the possibility to know God*. It is mostly treated at the beginning of the doctrine of God. Philosophers have written about the impossibility of knowing God. H. Bavinck made use of philosophers, and especially I. Kant in his argument concerning the unknowability of God.¹⁹ But this has rightly been contested.²⁰ That God can not be fully understood is not a conclusion drawn by reasoning. If this were so the basis of this doctrine would always be a theory of knowledge. But it is from Scripture that we know we cannot fully understand God. In other words: God has revealed that we cannot fathom Him. So we can be sure both that we have true knowledge about God and that we will never be able fully to comprehend Him. There is a methodological question connected to this. We must not start the doctrine of God with the unknowability, but with the knowability of God,²¹ because He has revealed Himself. He also has revealed, that we never can fully understand Him, so this has to be treated later on in the doctrine of God.

5. Concerning the *being of God*, very often a concept of being has been connected with the name Yahweh. God explained his name as: I am that I am (Ex. 3:14). Thomas Aquinas combined this name with the Aristotelian description of the highest being, which must in itself be immobile and unchangeable.²² But then all kinds of difficulties arise. How can God hate and love; how can God change from blessing to wrathful? The Aristotelian image of God is far from the living, active God in Scripture. Ex. 3:14 does not teach us a God who is the (highest) Being. Here God reveals Himself as the God that is as He is, in that He keeps his earlier promises, and therefore saves his people from Egypt.²³

6. This can be connected with the *spirituality of God*. In classical Reformed theology this is a consequence of the fact that God is the highest Being. Two kinds of being are

18) H. Bavinck, p. 87 f., does not distinguish between being and attributes. He treats only the attributes, which he calls determinations of God's nature.

19) Bavinck, p. 14 f.

20) F. H. Klooster, *The Incomprehensibility of God in the Orthodox Presbyterian Conflict*, Franeker 1951, p. 134 f.

21) Against Bavinck, who starts part II of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* with the unknowability, followed by the knowability. The use of philosophers seems to be interrelated with this order.

22) On this theme in Thomas, see e.g. P. den Otlander, *Deus immutabilis*, Assen 1965.

23) For a more Scriptural approach to the inchangeability of God, see J. Kamphuis, *op. cit.* On Ex. 3:14, p. 195 f.

distinguished: material and spiritual. Since in the ancient philosophical conceptions, spirit is a higher kind of being than matter, God necessarily has to be spirit. This theory is unbiblical, as the Bible does not teach us this superiority of the immaterial being. The concept of God's spirituality should be based on Scripture, e.g. Joh. 4:24.

7. The idea of *God's righteousness*, which worried Luther so much, was the Aristotelian idea: righteousness is to give everyone his own. If God should give us what we deserve, we all would receive the death-penalty. Luther hated the word about God's righteousness in Rom. 1:17²⁴ But how can then the Gospel be called the power of God unto salvation, if in that Gospel this righteousness of God is revealed? God's righteousness is not only connected with judgement over sinners, but also with salvation. Since Aristotle did not know the living God and his righteousness, his definition of righteousness can not be used in the doctrine of God's attributes.²⁵

8. We confess that *God is almighty*. But whoever applies his own concept of omnipotence to God, can come to strange results. In the Middle Ages the Scholastics discussed the question whether God, being almighty, could sin, or could annihilate Himself. But scripture teaches us that God, although He is almighty, cannot do some things; e.g. He cannot deny Himself.²⁶

All this also has consequences for the teaching and preaching of the ministers of Church. What non-Christians believe concerning (their) god(s), can never be applied to the living God. In every respect they have a wrong concept of God and of his attributes. Thus preachers of the Gospel cannot adapt their teaching of God to the ideas that are common in a certain time in a certain nation. They may not use the thoughts people have about God from themselves. There is only one way. Just as Paul in Athens taught the unknown God, we have to teach the unknown God.

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24) Loofs, p. 688.

25) Bavinck, p. 195 maintains this definition, although he notes that the Scripture speaks differently about righteousness.

26) L. Berkhof, p. 80.