

LUTHER'S IDEA OF *DEUS ABSCONDITUS* AND THE APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

Alar Laats

Luther's idea of the hidden God, of *Deus absconditus* has not been very influential in the later Lutheran tradition. Luther himself has not elaborated it extensively either. And although the number of studies which treat this idea in Luther is not small, nevertheless the idea itself has remained for the students of Luther as mysterious as the hidden God himself. *Deus absconditus* is hidden from us and we cannot pry into him. At the same time, Luther's idea of it is somewhat elusive in the context of his theology.

I think that everybody who has read Luther's book "The Bondage of the Will" and the small treatise "The Mystical Theology" written by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a mysterious writer from the fifth or sixth century, has wondered whether there was something similar in the respective pictures Luther and Pseudo-Dionysius have painted about the unknown God. Looked at from afar, their colours seem to be similar. In both cases the God is hidden. In both cases he seems to contain opposite characteristics and antinomies. Both writers use negations and denials in portraying him. But does Pseudo-Dionysius and Luther share the vision? Are the pictures similar if we take a closer look?

In the current essay I am trying to answer this question. My aim is not to study historical connections between the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and Luther, i.e. I am not interested here whether Luther was influenced by him or by other mystical theologians who followed him.¹ I am interested rather in the theological compatibility of the two theologies.² My viewpoint is not one of a historian of

¹ There are a number of studies which deal with this problem, e.g., by Hellmut Bandt (1958), Walter von Loewenich (1982) and Karlfried Froehlich (1987).

² Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was one of the founders of the apophatic theology of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. This apophatic tradition has been quite a coherent movement through the centuries. In this essay I shall use occasionally some other representatives of the apophatic tradition as well, especially the modern Russian apophatic theologian Vladimir Lossky. They help to interpret the sometimes rather concise writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.

theology, but that of a systematic theologian. Trying to answer the question whether Luther's idea of *Deus absconditus* belongs to the apophatic theology as it is understood in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, I shall take into account the intrinsic logic of this idea and the intrinsic logic of the apophatic theological thinking. As the size of this essay is limited, I can only delineate the main features of the possible answer to this problem.

But before going on to the treatment of ideas of the hidden God, there is one question which belongs to the history of theology. My main sources for the treatment of Luther are two of his works: "Heidelberg Disputation" from the year 1518 and "The Bondage of the Will" from the year 1525. During these years Luther developed his theological understandings considerably. The question is whether the main theological principles, which are substantial for our problem, are the same in both writings. Are both works usable as equal sources? Here I have to trust other scholars, especially Walther von Loewenich. According to him the same principles are applied in both works. (von Loewenich 1982:13)

The Idea of *Deus Absconditus* in Luther's Theology

The assertion that God is hidden is not univocal in Luther's theology. In various contexts it has different meanings. There are at least three different meanings of this assertion, i.e. there are at least three different sorts of hiddenness of God in Luther's theology.³

We can find the first meaning of God's hiddenness in Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation". In the explanation of the twentieth thesis he quotes Isaiah 45:15: "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself."⁴ In this treatise Luther argues that we can know God only through what is revealed by God. These things are "visible and manifest things of God".⁵ But the "visible and manifest things of God" are something behind which God has hidden himself. For Luther those things are God's human nature (*humanitas*), weakness (*infirmitas*), and foolishness (*stultitia*). Generally speaking, God is hidden in suffering and on the cross. They are the opposites of the divine majesty and glory. God reveals himself through

³ Actually one can discern more different sorts of God's hiddenness in Luther. So as a creator God uses creatures generally as his instruments and masks "behind which he wants to remain concealed and do all things". (WA 31¹,436; LW 14,114) The concealment and hiddenness of God is one of the recurrent themes in Luther's theological thinking.

⁴ The original of the "Heidelberg Disputation" is written in Latin and here Luther uses the text of Vulgate: *Vere absconditus tu es Deus*. (WA 1,362)

⁵ In original: *visibilia et 'posteriora Dei'*. (WA, 1,362; LW 31,52) Literal translation should be: "God's visible things and back." The word *posteriora* seems to be taken from Exodus 33:23, according to Vulgate, where Moses is allowed to see only God's back – *posteriora*. Nobody is allowed to see God's face.

his opposite and therefore is also hidden behind his opposite. The way of suffering and of the cross is the right way to God. Or in other words: the right theology is the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) and not the theology of glory (*theologia gloria*).⁶ The theology of the cross paradoxically recognises God precisely where he has hidden himself. (Althaus, 1966:27)

There is another hiddenness of God according to Luther's theology. Here God is also hidden under his opposite. But the opposite is here different from the opposite of the first case, although these two opposites are in some way related. In this second case the God of grace is hidden under the God of wrath. Or in other words: God's "yes" is hidden under his "no". The God's "no" is most clearly expressed in his law, especially in its second function. The law says what we ought to do. (WA 18,681; LW 33,134) It is given us "in order that we may be made aware of our impotence and brought to the knowledge of sin". (WA 18,688; LW 33,144) Therefore the law "accuses him and delivers him up to God's wrath, to judgement, and to eternal death". (Althaus 1966:254) Through the law men experience God's wrath. But for Luther this wrath is actually in the service of God's grace. The law is in the service of the gospel. "Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell". (WA 18,633; LW 33:62)⁷ In the first kind of hiddenness the opposite of God is suffering and weakness, in the second hiddenness the opposite is wrath. For Luther there is an inner connection between these two as there is a connection between the law and the gospel. Both of them are connected in faith as Luther understands it. Through both of the opposites God actually reveals himself. "The word of God comes to men in the twofold form of law and gospel". (Althaus 1966:251) Although in each case God reveals himself differently.

Both these sorts of hiding of God are in some way alike. They have similar structures. In all these cases God hides himself under or behind something. There is a cover of God, which is in a certain measure distinguishable from God himself. But the believer can nevertheless, because of his faith, see through this cover, he can discern God behind this cover. The cover is a medium of revelation. The third sort of hiddenness is in principle different. There is nothing behind or under which God has concealed himself. The third concept of *Deus absconditus* points to naked God, to *Deus nudus*. And this *Deus nudus* is unknowable exactly because he is not covered, because he is not hidden behind anything. There is no medium through which one can reach *Deus absconditus*.

⁶ I shall treat the theology of glory later on pp. 179–181.

⁷ Sometimes it seems that Luther identifies the work of devil and God's activity in his hiddenness under the law. "God cannot be God unless he first becomes a devil. We cannot go to heaven unless we first go to hell. We cannot become God's children until we first become children of devil". (WA 31¹,249; LW 14,31f)

This idea of *Deus absconditus* emerged in the context of polemics with Erasmus about the free will of man concerning his salvation.⁸ The question was why the proclamation of the law touches some people and does not touch others. Why do some people turn and some do not? If man does not have free will in matters of his salvation as Luther argued, then why does God elect some and reject others? And both the elected and the rejected are sinful more or less in equal measure. Answering Erasmus' question, Luther asserts that God has two different wills. According to one will God offers mercy to men and by the other will which is hidden (*occulta*) and awful (*metuenda*) "he ordains by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy". (WA 18,684; LW 33,139) Luther finds that there are in the Scripture "together with statements about God's all-inclusive grace ... other statements which express another willing and working of God which stands with his willing and working of salvation". (Althaus 1966:275) Luther does not say that God has ontologically two separate and different wills. He says rather that God's will as it is revealed is not yet the whole will of God. God's word is not the same as God himself. In Christ God reveals salvation for sinners. But he does not reveal whom he wills to save and why he has chosen just these people. God is here not hidden behind something but he is hidden because he does not reveal himself. One can say that he is *an sich*.

Thus one can talk about God in two completely different ways. In the words of Luther: "we have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached (*praedicata*), revealed (*revelata*), offered (*oblata*), and worshipped (*culta*), and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshiped". (WA 18,685; LW 33,139) In the first case God is "clothed (*indutus*) and set forth in his Word". (Ibid.) In the second case God is naked (*Deus nudus*)⁹, he is "in his own nature and majesty" (*in sua natura et maiestate*). (Ibid.)

At first it seems that the revealed God and hidden God constitute for Luther a dual concept: *Deus revelatus et Deus absconditus*. One is the opposite of the other. They seem to define each other and belong together. One is what the other is not and vice versa. In reality it is not the case. Actually they do not belong to the same level. In some way *Deus revelatus* is only a "part" of God or it shows only a "part" of his will. Luther says that "God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word". (WA18,685; LW 33,140) The Word of God is his manifestation but behind this manifestation there is much more. For

⁸ The principal part in Luther's work "The Bondage of the Will" (*De servo arbitrio*) which deals with this question is in WA 18, 684–690. (LW 33:138–147) An earlier part WA 18,630–634 (LW 33:58–64) in some way prepares this topic and a later part WA 18,784–785 (LW 33:289–292) puts the problem into an eschatological perspective.

⁹ In this place Luther does not use exactly these words. But in some other place, e.g., in the lectures on Genesis he uses the expression "naked God". (WA 43,240; LW 4,145)

Luther, God “has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things”. (Ibid.) Thus God in himself is in a certain sense higher than the revealed God and therefore *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus* are not on the same level. They do not constitute a dual concept.

The fact that *Deus revelatus* is not the “other half” of *Deus absconditus* does not mean that it does not help us to understand the meaning of *Deus absconditus*, because Luther arrives to the notion of *Deus absconditus* through the concept of *Deus revelatus*, or more exactly, the former gives access to the latter.¹⁰ Generally speaking, *Deus revelatus* is the God of the law and of the gospel as he reveals both the law and the gospel. One may say that the law is the revelation of the wrath of God. The gospel is according to Luther the “divine comfort and promise by which nothing is demanded from us, but the grace of God is offered to us”. (WA 18,683; LW 33,135) *Deus absconditus* is awful as he elects some and does not elect others without any apparent reason. Therefore he is in some way similar to the God of wrath. On the other hand, as he saves some he is not dissimilar to the God of grace. But besides these similarities there are even greater dissimilarities. At least in some measure we can see some *ratio* in God’s wrath: he condemns sinners because of their sin. And as God is the God of love and as man is in principle not able to save himself, so God’s salvific will is not completely understandable for us, although it is miraculous. Thanks to the revelation of the law and of the gospel we can at least know something about the God of wrath and the God of grace. But the concept of *Deus absconditus* says that there is infinitely more in God. In some way he is behind both the God of wrath and the God of grace. Or to say it more precisely – he is above both of them. He is above the law and he is above the gospel. He is like a framework, which holds together the gracious and the wrathful God without identifying with either of them or with them taken together.

Although the God of wrath is a condemning God, he is nevertheless a speaking God. He reveals his demands. And the God of grace when he is promising, is also speaking. The Word of God talks to us and therefore we have at least some contact with him. But *Deus absconditus* is silent. He does not say anything. According to Luther “we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him”. (WA 18,685; LW 33,139) We cannot “measure” him with our ethics. For Luther “since he is the one true God, and is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible”. (WA 18,784; LW 33,290) And this hidden God is neutral at least according to our ability to understand. He seems to be indifferent towards human beings. One can say that he is above good and evil. “God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in

¹⁰ I shall treat this later on page 180.

all". (WA 18,685; LW 33,140) And in his silence, neutrality and indifference is his awfulness. He is *das ganz Andere*.

Time and again Luther insists that we should not inquire the hidden will of God. "It is not permissible for men to pry into the will of the Divine majesty". (WA 18,690; LW 33,147) It is impossible to penetrate into "these secrets of God's majesty ... because he dwells in light inaccessible". (WA 18,689; LW 33,145) Luther knows that there is a temptation "to pry into that awful will" and therefore even many years later in the Genesis lectures of 1535–1545 he warns against a brooding preoccupation with the idea of the hidden God. Speculation on the high majesty of God is repudiated as a dangerous, even devilish activity. (e.g., WA 43,458; LW 5,44)

The Hidden God in the Eastern Apophatic Theology

According to Pseudo-Dionysius and following him according to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there are two ways or two methods of doing theology – cataphatic and apophatic methods. Cataphatic theology treats God as he is in relation to the created world, beginning with the most universal names, such as "the Good", "Being", "Life" and "Wisdom". But the "analogies of God drawn from what we perceive" (MG 3,1033A; CW 139), i.e., the perceptible symbols belong to the cataphatic theology as well. Thus in cataphatic theology the names and symbols of God are taken from the realm of concepts and from the realm of sense perception. With the help of these symbols and names, cataphatic theology forms concepts about God.

On the other hand, the apophatic theology refuses to form concepts about God. (Lossky 1976:38f) This method of approaching God looks beyond all created categories of sensation and thought to the God who can in no way be conceptualised. To put it shortly: apophatic theology moves toward God asserting that he is not any of the things asserted by the cataphatic theology. The ontological basis of this epistemological approach is the assertion of "the radical lack of correspondence between the creatures and God". (Lossky 1985:38) For apophatic theology God is incomprehensible by nature. According to Lossky "it is precisely the quality of incomprehensibility which, in Dionysius, is the one definition proper to God – if we may speak here of proper definitions". (Lossky 1976:31)

According to the apophatic theology, negations triumph over affirmations. Thus speaking about God, Pseudo-Dionysius says that "since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings,¹¹ and, more appropriately, we should negate all these

¹¹ This is the task of cataphatic theology.

affirmations, since it surpasses all being".¹² (MG 3,1000B; CW 136) But we must not consider apophatic theology as a simple negation of the attributes known from cataphatic theology. The apophatic method is more complicated. An affirmation and negation of an attribute or characteristic of God are valid at the same time. Or it is even more correct to say that neither of them is valid. God transcends both affirmation and negation. (Lossky 1985:40) Thus in some way the God of the apophatic theology is beyond all opposition. (40) Pseudo-Dionysius says that "we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion". (MG 3,1000B; CW 136) The only possibility to say anything about God is to affirm and negate at the same time and to negate all this again. In the fifth chapter of "The Mystical Theology" Pseudo-Dionysius gives his famous description, or to say more precisely, non-description of God. God "is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity... It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being... Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial". (MG 3,1048AB; CW 141)

The Way of the Apophatic Theology

To understand the apophatic idea of the hidden God better, we have to look closer at the way or method by which one arrives at this concept. The apophatic idea of God is closely connected with soteriological ideas. More precisely, movement to the concept of God is the other side of the movement to the union with God. "Negative theology is ... a way towards mystical union with God, whose nature remains incomprehensible to us." (Lossky 1976:28) This is ascension and this process is "a transition from the created to the uncreated". In the traditional terminology of the Eastern Orthodox theology, it is the deification (θεώσις) of man. "The way of the knowledge of God is necessarily the way of deification." (38–39) In some way the theological knowledge is proportional to the deification of the theologian.¹³ One can say that the ascent of thought in the apophatic theology is parallel or even identical with the ascent of a human being towards God.¹⁴

¹² This is the task of apophatic theology.

¹³ "Gnosis, or personal awareness, grows in the measure in which nature becomes transformed by entering into an ever-closer union with deifying grace." (Lossky 1976:215–219) For the Eastern Orthodox theology the full deification of the creature will be realised in the age to come, after the resurrection of the dead. (196.)

¹⁴ For the apophatic theology, the ascent of Moses to the mount Sinai is a prototypical image.

Pseudo-Dionysius calls the ascent mystical contemplation, *μυστικὸν θεάματα*. (MG 3,997B; CW 135) In the words of Lossky it is “the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities to Him”. (1976:43) And the same author says earlier that the contemplation is “lifting up of the spirit towards God and away from creatures, which allows His splendour to become visible”. (41) Of course contemplation is in itself quite a complicated spiritual process. In this essay I am interested mainly in its intellectual dimension.

Lossky says that this contemplation is lifting up away from creatures. In another place he says that “in order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is”. (25) It is going forth from the realm of all created beings. It is a renunciation of the realm of created things in order to gain access to that of the uncreated. (38) On the level of intellectual activity it means the renunciation of “both sense and all the workings of reason, everything which may be known by the senses or the understanding, both that which is and all that is not, in order to be able to attain in perfect ignorance to union with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge”. (27)¹⁵ In his “The Mystical Theology” Pseudo-Dionysius says the same thing when he urges Timothy “to leave behind ...everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable”. (MG 3,997B; CW 135) As the union is beyond all intelligence (MG 3,592C; CW 52–53), the human person goes beyond all knowledge and transcends the *νοῦς*. (Lossky 1985:43)

The tradition of apophatic theology characterises the knowing of God as unknowing. (26) “If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him. It is by unknowing (*ἄγνωσσία*) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge. (1976:25)¹⁶ Our knowledge is always the knowledge of created things and therefore this knowledge can be only an obstacle for knowing God. One has to deny this kind of knowledge to gain a real knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is unknowledge in comparison with our knowledge of the things in our world. In “The Mystical Theology” Pseudo-Dionysius prays: “If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge”. (MG 3,1025A; CW 138)

But we can explicate the intellectual dimension or the dimension of knowledge in the apophatic ascent even more precisely. According to Lossky in the last analysis “a movement of apophasis ... deconceptualises the concepts which are ascribed to the mystery of a personal God in His transcendent nature”.

¹⁵ On the ascetical level, which constitutes another dimension of the ascent and contemplation, penitence, purification and perfection correspond to this renunciation of senses and reason. (Lossky 1976:27, 204)

¹⁶ Cf. MG 3,1065AB; CW 263.

(Lossky 1985:24) But what is the deconceptualisation, which is the main method of apophatic theology on the intellectual level? First of all it is a movement from the God of οἰκονομία to the God of θεολογία, from God as he acts in the world to God as he is in himself. Lossky¹⁷ himself explains the method of deconceptualisation so:

To speak of God in himself, outside of any cosmological link, outside of any engagement in the οἰκονομία vis-à-vis the created world, it is necessary for theology – the knowledge which one can have of the consubstantial Trinity – to be the result of a way of abstraction, of an apophatic decanting by negation of all the attributes (Goodness, Wisdom, Life, Love, etc.) which in the plane of economy can be attached to notions of the divine hypostases – of all the attributes which manifest the divine nature in creation. (16)

Thus the method of the apophatic theology consists in attributing the characteristics of God taken from the cataphatic theology together with their negations to God and then in negating this attribution as well.¹⁸ The typical attributes, which are denied in the apophatic theology, are such as goodness, being, life, wisdom etc. Pseudo-Dionysius treats these concepts in his work “The Divine Names”. Generally speaking, the divine names, i.e., the attributes of God refer according to Pseudo-Dionysius “to the beneficent processions of God”. (MG 3,589D; CW 51) One could expect that “the beneficent processions” would be connected with the redeeming and reconciling activity of God with its culmination on the cross. But it is not the case. For Pseudo-Dionysius, God is first of all the supreme cause of all that exists. Time and again he emphasises that God “is the Cause of the universe and its end”. (MG 3,697C; CW 74) “The beneficent processions” are first of all connected with God’s causal activity.¹⁹ The names of the supreme cause, i.e., of God are drawn from the effects. Pseudo-Dionysius himself says that “the names ... are fittingly derived from the sum total of creation”. (MG 3,597A; CW 56) Or in another place he says about the divine names that they “are derived from beings, especially the primary beings, and they are given to God because he is the cause of all beings”. (MG 3,953C; CW 124) Thus the attributes or the names in the cataphatic theology are predominantly cosmological.

¹⁷ Here Lossky explains how the method of apophatic theology works in the case of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. But in principle the same method is used *mutatis mutandis* in the case of the concept of the one hidden God. In his “The Mystical Theology”, Pseudo-Dionysius does not actually pay much attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. And neither does Luther in connection with his idea of *Deus absconditus*.

¹⁸ Of course this is an abstract schematisation. But I hope that this scheme helps us to compare the apophatic method with Luther’s method of approaching the idea of *Deus absconditus*.

¹⁹ It is true that “the beneficent processions” include the incarnation of the Word and redemption. (MG 3,644C; CW 63) But this act is one among others, perhaps the utmost but it does not seem to be qualitatively different from other acts of God. In some way there is continuity between the incarnation and other “beneficent processions”. The redemption through Christ does not play any special role in Pseudo-Dionysius for discussing the names of God.

If the cataphatic theology actually says that the effects are in some way similar to the cause, i.e., to God, then the apophatic theology emphasises that the effects are totally different. In a well-known and influential passage, Pseudo-Dionysius compares and relates the two methods:

It might be more accurate to say that we cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or of reason. But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out of him, and this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms. We therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities allow us and we pass by way of the denial and the transcendence of all things and by way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. (MG 3,869D-872A; CW 108f)

The cataphatic theology moves from effect to the cause and the apophatic way denies it because the cause is transcendent. But the latter way stops short of adding anything and thus it also remains in a manner at the concept of God as the cause of all that is.

Luther's Way to the Idea of *Deus Absconditus*

The question is whether Luther's idea of *Deus absconditus* is the product of *theologia gloriae* or of *theologia crucis*. The distinction of these two kinds of theology is made by Luther in his "Heidelberg Disputation". A theologian of glory is he who tries to recognise and grasp God from his works in the created world, "who looks upon the invisible things of God". (WA 1,361; LW 31,52) Luther uses the word "works" to describe God's works in creation. According to Luther, "the invisible things of God are virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth". (Ibid.) This is a cosmologically oriented theology, which tries to grasp God through causal links between the creator and creature. On the other hand, a theologian of the cross is he who knows God through Christ, "who comprehends the visible things and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross". (WA 1,362; LW 31:52-53)²⁰ One can say that the theology of glory is basically natural theology and the theology of the cross is grounded in the crucified Christ, i.e., in the revelation. For Luther the theology of glory is not in itself reproachable. But at best it is useless and at worst it could be misleading. Luther says that "it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognise God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognises him in the humility and shame of the cross". (Ibid.)²¹

²⁰ Cf. above pp. 171-172.

²¹ Speaking about Luther, Gerhard Ebeling says that "*die Grundbestimmung seines theologischen Denkens ist nicht die causa-Relation*". (Ebeling 1964:274)

If we look at the idea of *Deus absconditus*, then at first it seems to belong to the theology of glory. Here God is naked, he is not covered by suffering, he is "in his own nature and majesty". The image of the hidden God is not the image of the God on the cross. And if we think of Luther's assertion that the enigma of *Deus absconditus*, i.e. the question why God elects some and does not elect others without any understandable reason will be resolved at the end of time in the light of glory (WA 18,785; LW 33:292), then one would expect that this idea belongs at least in a certain measure to the theology of glory.

But if we look closer at the way, at least at the reconstruction of the way how Luther arrived at the idea of *Deus absconditus*, then this conclusion is not so certain. Luther presents his idea of *Deus absconditus* in the framework of polemics with Erasmus. As we saw earlier, the particular problem that led him to this idea was why the law touches some people and does not touch others, i.e., why God elects some people and does not elect others. Thus the presupposition of this question must be the acknowledgement of God's election. But this means that to be able to answer this question as Luther does, one has to acknowledge that only God can save a sinner, that redemption and justification is only from God. But for Luther this insight is possible only in the theology of the cross. Here man must abandon all his hopes to achieve acceptance by God through his own works. According to Luther's understanding the theology of glory is inevitably connected with the hope to gain righteousness and justification through man's own works, i.e. achieving justification is man's own ability. Therefore in the theology of glory the problem of election and thus the question of God's double will do not emerge. And thus the idea of *Deus absconditus* as Luther understands it does not belong to the realm of the theology of glory. Luther could arrive to this idea of the hidden God only through the theology of the cross.

Above I said that the ideas of *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus* were in some way related. And I said that they were not equal opposites, that they were not on the same level. Now we can see more clearly how are they related. One can move to the idea of *Deus absconditus* only through the idea of *Deus revelatus*.²² For the utmost manifestation of *Deus revelatus* happens on the cross. To know that God is hidden²³ one must first know that God is not hidden. Or using the word "hidden" in another meaning we can say that to know the existence of the naked God one has to know first the existence of the hidden God, of the covered God. Here the hiddenness means hiddenness on the cross, in

²² Werner Elert seems to assert the opposite when he says that "*aus dem Deus absconditus wird in Christo crucifixo der Deus revelatus*". (1958:95) In my opinion the variance is only apparent as for Elert *Deus absconditus* is always the God who is hidden behind his wrath. (e.g., Elert 1958:116) This of course does not allow him to discern the speciality of *Deus absconditus* as the naked God.

²³ Here is meant the third sense of this word.

the suffering. To know the existence of the God of majesty and glory²⁴ presupposes knowing God in foolishness and weakness.²⁵

Conclusion

Thus the ground of the idea of *Deus absconditus* in Luther's theology is in the *theologia crucis*, i.e. one can arrive at the unrevealed God, as much as it is possible to arrive at all, through the revelation. But this fact does not yet answer the question whether Luther's idea of *Deus absconditus* is in essence connected with the apophatic theology or not. In my opinion the answer is positive if the apophatic theology is somewhat compatible with the theology of the cross, i.e., if their principles are similar.

As we saw above,²⁶ the movement from the cataphatic theology to the apophatic theology occurs through the negations of the divine attributes. It says that the effects of the cause are different from the cause. Saying this, it on the one hand abolishes the cosmological link, which is in the cataphatic theology. But on the other hand, in transcending the causal connections the apophatic theology is nevertheless caught in the created world. Its negations are always negations of the characteristics of the world. In some way the apophatic theology is the reversed cataphatic theology. Speaking about God, it denies the cosmological and causal relations but it does not move away from them. According to its nature it has to carry along the cataphatic theology. To be able to say anything it always must have the cataphatic theology at hand. Although it says that the cause is in principle different from the effects, it nevertheless considers God as the cause of the world.²⁷ We can say that the cataphatic theology and the apophatic theology are in a certain sense on the same level.

As the cataphatic theology derives the names of God, i.e. his attributes from the creature then it fits quite well into Luther's concept of the theology of glory. And as the apophatic theology does not move away from the ground of the cataphatic theology, therefore the apophatic theology belongs also to the theology of glory. There is no way to classify it as the theology of the cross. Seen from the viewpoint of Martin Luther, the idea of *Deus absconditus* and the

²⁴ Here the God of majesty and glory is not the God of the theology of glory. This is the majesty and glory of *Deus nudus*. As he is *Deus absconditus* we cannot understand him but we know that he exists.

²⁵ One must first know the back of God and only then one can know the existence of the face of God.

²⁶ Above pp. 175–176.

²⁷ For Karl Barth, the apophatic method has not understood God's hiddenness radically enough. According to him the apophatic way is no less human than the cataphatic way. Cf.. Barth 1957: 193.

concept of the hidden God of the Eastern Orthodox apophatic theology are thus totally different.

Agreeing that the starting points of the two theologies are completely different and their natures are not compatible, one can still ask whether the method or operation of negation is not the same in Luther and in the apophatic theology. Are not they at least similar as they both use negations?

As we saw above, the negations in the apophatic theology are denials of God's attributes. God is neither being nor nonbeing etc. The apophatic method says what God is not. In a certain sense these negations are absolute and sheer. Negation is the last word. Nothing follows. It does not say who God is. The negator is the apophatic thinker or more exactly – the ascending and contemplating man. In the ascetic dimension purification accompanies the acts of deconceptualisation.

In Luther the negations are grounded in the fact that God has two different wills: the will which wills grace and the will which wills rejection. The coexistence of these two wills in God is the centre of his idea of *Deus absconditus*. This is the antinomy in God. And this means a negation of man's understanding of righteousness. God's righteousness is completely different from human righteousness. The negation is not introduced the first time in connection with the idea of *Deus absconditus*. Already the starting point contains negations. God on the cross, God's humanity, weakness and foolishness are negations of human ideas about God as the theology of the cross is a negation of the theology of glory. But this negation is not sheer and abstract negation. It is not limited by saying what God is not. Saying who God is not, it says at the same time who God is. The two wills of God are not empty and abstract concepts. The wills have concrete content. The antinomy of the idea of *Deus absconditus* lies in the fact that God is one and God is at the same time another. The conception of God's suffering and humanity and the idea of *Deus absconditus* say that God is different from man's idea of God and they say simultaneously who he is.²⁸ Instead of deconceptualisation, we have here a reconceptualisation.

There is another important feature in negations according to Luther's thinking. In the apophatic theology the negator is the ascending man who negates the names or attributes of God in his contemplation. In Luther the negation of human ideas of God is not man's own achievement. Understanding God's weakness, humanity and suffering on the cross is revelation. The new idea of God and thus the negation is revealed by God himself. Thus we can say that in Luther's theology the negator is not man but it is God. *Cum grano salis* we can say that if in the apophatic theology there is a human negation, then in Luther there is a divine negation.

²⁸ This does not mean that we have a complete knowledge of God.

The difference in understanding the nature of negation appears not only in the case of the ideas of God's hiddenness. The same kind of difference seems to be also in the doctrines of salvation of man. For the Eastern orthodox theology the salvation is first of all deification and union with God. To attain this, "one must abandon all that is impure and even all that is pure". (Lossky 1976:27) In other words, the union means transcending of the created world or negation of it. (MG 3,1001A, CW 137) It is "a transition from the created to the uncreated". (Lossky 1976:38) The ascension to God is in some way negation of man's creatureliness.

For Luther the core of salvation is justification. In some way here the concept of justification also contains negation. If we take the justification in its narrower sense, i.e., as imputation then it means a change of man's situation, a change of God's attitude to man. In relation to God-man relationship it is a radical change. We may call it an absolute negation of the previous relation. But the justification does not mean a radical negation of the created reality. At first sight nothing substantial happens with the justified man – he is *simul iustus et peccator*. According to the other sense, justification includes also renovation of man beside the forgiveness of sin. (Lohse 1995:278) Although here man begins to change he nevertheless remains a creature. Even the principle of *simul iustus et peccator* remains valid here. (280) Thus in the case of justification we cannot speak about the process of transcending but only about transformation. The act of negation or denial is here in principle different from the negation or denial in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The "no" of God is different from the "no" of man. God lets the creature be creature. Luther speaks about the humanity of God (WA 1,362; LW 31,52), the Eastern Orthodox apophatic theology speaks about the deification of humanity.²⁹

As we have seen, the pictures of Luther and Pseudo-Dionysius about the unknown God are in principle different, especially if we take into account the ways by which they arrive at their pictures. Already their starting points are different. Pseudo-Dionysius and the Eastern Orthodox apophatic tradition following him starts from the world and from God as creator and one of its main emphasises is on the difference and distance between the world and God. The unknowability of God is based on the distance. Luther's starting point is on the cross, i.e., in God's revelation. God himself says how he differs from man. And last but not least – in the apophatic theology the negator is man, in the theology of the cross the negator is God. Therefore the negations are also different.

The Private and the Public in the Negation

In general, before the rise of Athenian democracy, religious activities were mainly related to the personal sphere. The influence of wise old men's soul ex-

²⁹ Tuomo Mannermaa and some other Finnish Lutheran scholars have asserted that Luther also accepted the deification of man. (Peura and Raunio 1990) As far as I know, not all share their view.

References

Sources

- Dionysius Areopagita (1857) The Greek text in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (MG), vol. 3. Paris.
- Pseudo-Dionysius (1987) *The Complete Works* (CW). Translated by Colm Luibheid. London: SPCK.
- D. Martin Luthers Werke* (1883-) (WA). Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar.
- Luther's Works* (1955-1986) (LW) ed. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, H. T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress / St. Louis: Concordia.

Books

- Althaus, Paul (1966) *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia: Fortress
- Bandt, Hellmut (1958) *Luthers Lehre vom verborgenen Gott*. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
- Barth, Karl (1957) *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2.1. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark.
- Ebeling, Gerhard (1965) *Luther. Einführung in sein Denken*. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck.
- Elert, Werner (1958) *Morphologie des Luthertums*, vol. 1. München: C. H. Beck.
- Froehlich, Karlfried (1987) *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*. Introduction to Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (CW). London: SPCK.
- Lohse, Bernhard (1995) *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Loewenich, Walther von (1982) *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Lossky, Vladimir (1976) *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Lossky, Vladimir (1985) *In the Image and Likeness of God*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Peura, Simo and Raunio, Antti, eds. (1990) *Luther und Theosis. Vergöttlichung als Thema der abendländischen Theologie*. Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft/Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag.