

I have finally realized that, when Luther says such things as that "human reason does not know that unbelief and despair of God is sin," indeed, that "it knows nothing about man's duty to believe and trust in God" (*LW*, 35: 242), he in no way intends to deny that, as he also says, "the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did" (164; cf. also 168: "Nature also has these laws [*sc.* that we should have one God, that we should trust and believe in him, that we should not swear by his name; that we should honor father and mother; not kill, steal, commit adultery; not bear false witness, and not covet]. Nature provides that we should call upon God. The Gentiles attest to this fact. For there never was a Gentile who did not call upon his idols, even though these were not the true God. . . . [T]he Gentiles, who have no law, have the law written in their heart. . . . Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature, etc.").

Luther's point, rather, is that, although God's law—including the first commandment that we shall believe and trust God, as well as all the other commandments pertaining to our responsibility toward our neighbors—is natural, in that it is written in our hearts, our reason, being the reason of sinful human beings, nonetheless fails to recognise it, or recognizes it only partially, inadequately, and mistakenly. This is why he can say, "[W]e read Moses not because he applies to us, that we must obey him, but because he agrees with the natural law and is conceived better than the Gentiles would ever have been able to do" (172). Because Moses speaks, not on the basis of reason, but on the basis of God's special revelation, what he teaches agrees exactly with nature, and in that sense is "conceived better than the Gentiles would ever have been able to do," lacking as they do the divine revelation correcting the errors and misunderstandings of human reason.

"[W]here there is no [revealed] law of God, there all human reason is so blind that it cannot recognize sin. For human reason does not know that unbelief and despair of God is sin. Indeed it knows nothing about man's duty to believe and trust in God. . . . Besides reason does not know either that the evil inclination of the flesh, and hatred of enemies, is sin. Because it observes and feels that all men are so inclined, it holds rather that these things are natural and right, and thinks it is enough merely to guard against the outward acts" (242).

My guess is that Reinhold Niebuhr is trying to get at the same truth, in a somewhat happier, less paradoxical way, by distinguishing between reason and reason, i.e., reason as capable of grasping the truth and as, in fact, grasping it, and reason as rationalizing actions contrary to the truth. In this connection, Niebuhr also suggests, of course, that perfection before the fall is perfection before the act, from which it follows that reason in theory is one thing, reason in praxis, or in act, something else.

2 March 2001