

PROTESTANT SCHOLASTICISM: SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE STUDY OF  
ITS DEVELOPMENT

Willem J. van Asselt

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This present issue of the *Dutch Review of Church History* brings together papers by European and American church historians presented during a colloquium at Utrecht University on June 6, 2001. All of them have in common that, in one way or another, they have contributed to the development of new directions in the research of scholasticism, in its medieval, Reformation and post-Reformation forms. One of the reasons for organising this colloquium was to present the book *Reformation and Scholasticism* edited by Eef Dekker and the present writer.<sup>1</sup> A second, more important, reason was to introduce the results of the new research on scholasticism — which some call 'the new school approach' — to a broader public. Let me explain this. For the adherents of this approach, it has always been a curious phenomenon that the post-Reformation period of Protestant theology is one of the least known in the history of Christian thought and, at the same time a period in the interpretation of which there are many hidden agendas. Post-Reformation theology is usually presented as a highly obscure period characterised by the return of medieval dialectic and Aristotelian logic to the Protestant classroom and, therefore a distortion or perversion of Reformation theology. For too long, this theology has been the victim of the attempt of modern theologians to claim the Reformers as forerunners of modernity. Time and again the theology of the post-Reformation period is read exclusively in the light of modern issues and not on its own terms and in the light of its own concerns and context.

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<sup>1</sup> Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (eds.), *Reformation and Scholasticism. An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids, 2001).

## Central research themes

Recent studies on Protestant scholasticism can be characterised as attempting to develop a new understanding of Protestant theology in the /266/ post-Reformation period, usually indicated by the term 'scholasticism'. The term 'Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy' is also sometimes used to place it in historical perspective, by referring to the period of institutionalisation and codification following the Reformation. The theology of this period is partly the result of a theological interpretation of the Reformation within particular, confessionally determined bounds. This theology was taught in the new Protestant academies and universities with the help of the so-called scholastic method, which involved drawing on medieval models. It is no simple matter to give a final definition of the term scholasticism. In fact, 'scholasticism' is a collective noun denoting all scholarly research and instruction carried out according to a certain method, which involves the use of a recurring system of concepts, distinctions, proposition analyses, argumentative strategies and methods of disputation.<sup>2</sup>

The most important of the theses put forward by the new research is that the term 'scholasticism' refers primarily to a method, rather than any definite doctrinal content. Medieval and Protestant scholasticism are distinct from other forms of theology in their methods of disputation and their argumentative strategies.

Historians have given this type of Protestant theology a very bad press. It was called a 'dry', 'rigid', 'dead' orthodoxy, which conceived of metaphysical systems with a kind of speculative lust, elevated the doctrine of predestination to a 'central dogma', and forced the Christian message into the cast of Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>3</sup> This orthodoxy was further labeled, in turn, 'biblicist', 'rationalist' and 'philosophical'. The result of these slurs was that Protestant scholasticism came to be interpreted in terms of a theory of decline. Thus, more than 150 years of the history of Protestant theology was consigned to the

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<sup>2</sup> For this view of scholasticism, see. L.M. de Rijk, *Middeleeuwse wijsbegeerte. Traditie en vernieuwing*, 2nd ed. (Assen, 1988), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of the older research and the value judgments concerning scholastic orthodoxy contained in it, see: Van Asselt and Dekker, *Reformation and Scholasticism*, pp. 11-43; Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark, (eds.), *Protestant Scholasticism Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, 1999), pp. xi-xix (Introduction). See also W.J. van Asselt et al., *Inleiding in de gereformeerde scholastiek* (Zoetermeer, 1998), pp. 18-30.

museum of historical curiosities that are no longer worth studying, of use only to conservative Protestants for the sake of legitimising their own dogmatic positions.

However, in recent decades the study of Protestant scholasticism has received a new lease on life. It has developed rapidly from an almost entirely neglected terrain to a broad and well-defined field of research. /267/ This development was stimulated especially by new approaches in the study of Reformation history, which pointed to the medieval background of the Reformation. Partly under the impact of the new approach in Reformation studies, a shift took place from a narrow dogmatic or theological interpretation of Protestant scholasticism to a more contextualised historical analysis.

Thus, in these two areas of research — the Reformation and the post-Reformation period — we find much methodological convergence. The work of H.A. Oberman drew attention to the continuities between the theology of the late Middle Ages and that of the reformers. David Steinmetz and Richard Muller pointed to continuities and discontinuities between the Reformation and Protestant scholasticism.<sup>4</sup> The study of the theology of the Reformation has been revolutionised, and a similar shift can be detected in the study of Protestant scholasticism. In both cases, the simplistic oppositions so characteristic of the older research (whether Roman Catholic or Protestant) are being subjected to devastating criticism.

In both disciplines, it is now argued that a study of these periods in isolation from one another belies the complexity of the historical and theological relations and connections between the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the post-Reformation period. This insight requires a number of methodological shifts in the study of Protestant scholasticism.

In contrast to the older research, which remained confined to a theological or even dogmatic approach, a strong plea is now made for an interdisciplinary approach. The study of Protestant scholasticism still displays major gaps in this area. A glance at the bibliography in the field confirms this. It is only very rarely that one finds a publication in which patristic, medieval, reformational and post-reformational sources are integrated. Studies in which church history and the histories of theology and philosophy overlap, are

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<sup>4</sup> H.A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); idem, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1986); D.C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids, 1995); idem, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford, 1995); R.A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1987); Vol. 2, *Holy Scripture. The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1992).

also rare. Many of the figures studied occur in only one of these categories. Nevertheless, through a gradually emerging interdisciplinary approach, some important results have been achieved. Let me mention these and point to some of their methodological implications. In my own publications I have attempted to give /268/ concrete shape to this new approach, and to make it fruitful for the study of Reformed Protestantism.<sup>5</sup>

### **Middle Ages — Reformation — Orthodoxy**

As I have already indicated, the most important dialogue partners in the study of Protestant scholasticism are those who have pointed to the medieval roots of the Reformation. They provide a research model that can also be applied to the study of the relation between the Reformation and post-reformational orthodoxy. In methodological terms, it means taking leave of the accepted division into clearly demarcated periods.

The observation that it is no longer possible to study Luther or Calvin without knowledge of the medieval background has by now been established as part of the *communis opinio* in Reformation studies. At the same time, insight into the medieval roots of the Reformation raises the question of the reception and use of medieval traditions in postreformational theology. Studying this reception history, one is struck by a complex pattern of continuity and discontinuity, which cannot be described in simplistic terms. Methodologically speaking, this implies at the very least that two specific positions are no longer tenable:

- a. a radical discontinuity model, which views the development of postreformational theology as a break with the reformers, and
- b. a simplistic continuity model, which assumes the identity of the Reformation and orthodoxy, while losing sight of the fact that orthodoxy drew not only on the theology of the reformers, but (like the reformers themselves) also had recourse to patristic and medieval sources.

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. W.J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (eds.), *De scholastieke Voetius: Een luisteroefening aan de hand van Voetius' Disputationes Selectae* (Zoetermeer, 1995); W.J. van Asselt, "De erfenis van de gereformeerde scholastiek", in *Kerk en Theologie* 47 (1996), pp. 126-36; idem, "Studie van de gereformeerde scholastiek. Verleden en toekomst", in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 50 (1996), pp. 290-312; idem, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 94-105.

## Scholasticism and Humanism

Apart from the attention of recent studies to the medieval context for the sake of an accurate grasp of the Reformation, a shift has also taken place with regard to the relation vis-à-vis the humanism of the Renaissance. In nineteenth-century historiography, humanism and scholasticism were portrayed as diametrically opposed intellectual movements. The classic /269/ formulation of this view can be found in Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860). The rise of humanism, and the process by which it earned its place in the university, is portrayed in this perspective as a brutal conflict.

However, Paul Oskar Kristeller has shown that the opposition of humanism versus scholasticism was never as sharp as is often thought. According to recent historiography, Christian oriented humanism should be seen in continuity with medieval, scholastic scholarship, rather than in opposition to it. In Kristeller's view, the opposition between humanism and scholasticism came to be exaggerated beyond all proportion in the light of the later appreciation of humanism, and under the influence of the modern aversion to scholasticism. The origin of the humanist movement is not to be sought in the spheres of philosophy and science, but rather in the areas of grammar and rhetoric. The humanists should be understood as continuing the medieval traditions in these areas, adding new impulses from their study of the classics. According to Kristeller, this influence was important, 'but it did not affect the content or substance of the medieval traditions in those sciences'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, from accounts of the history of universities in Germany and France around 1500, it would appear that there was hardly any question of a fundamental struggle between scholasticism and humanism. Here one should rather speak of the (more or less) peaceful co-existence of humanism and scholasticism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> P.O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources* (New York, 1979), p. 92. See also C.B. Schmitt, *Studies in Renaissance Philosophy and Science* (London, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. J. Overfield, *Humanism and Scholasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Princeton, 1984); M. Gielis, *Scholastiek en Humanisme. De kritiek van de Leuvense theoloog Jacobus Latomus op de Erasmiaanse theologiehervorming* (Tilburg, 1994), pp. 1-5.

So far, the influence of Kristeller's work on the study of the relation between the Reformation and scholastic orthodoxy has been negligible.<sup>8</sup> From a methodological point of view, the debate between the scholastics and the humanists should be seen primarily as a debate about the relation between logic and rhetoric within the arts faculties of the period. The most important implication for the study of Protestant scholasticism is that we need to expand our bibliography in this area significantly, in order to get rid of the idea that the Renaissance as a field of research has no relation to post-reformational Protestantism.

### **/270/ Diversity**

A third important methodological shift concerns the discovery of diverse trajectories within Reformed theology itself. It turns out that Reformed theology was never a uniform structure, and certainly no monolith. The typical procedure among students of Protestant scholasticism can be characterised with the words of Basil Hall: 'Calvin against the Calvinists'.<sup>9</sup> A comparison is made between the treatment of a particular doctrine by a later scholastic author and Calvin's treatment of the same doctrine. Such a procedure is guaranteed to yield the desired result, given the difference in genre between the works of Calvin and the scholastic writings of seventeenth-century dogmatics. Moreover, such research concentrates on the influence of a single theologian, who is then regarded as decisive for all later developments.

However, this procedure takes no account of the complexity and wide variety of (post-reformational) Reformed theology and its traditionhistorical *Sitz im Leben*. Research has shown that there were not one, but several trajectories — a whole series of Reformed theologies of the sixteenth century. Methodologically, this means that we can no longer contrast a 'non-scholastic Calvin' with the later 'scholastic Calvinists'. Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500-1562), an Italian monk (and a scholastic steeped in the Thomistic tradition) who converted to the Reformed religion, was older than Calvin, and died two

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<sup>8</sup> One exception is R.A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin. Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford, 2000), p. 75. "The assumption of a conflict between humanistic rhetoric and scholastic disputation may not apply at all to Calvin's work."

<sup>9</sup> B. Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists", in *John Calvin. Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology*, ed. G.E. Duffield (Appleford, 1966), pp. 12-37.

years before the Genevan reformer. We should study not only Calvin, but also his contemporaries: Vermigli, Girolamo Zanchi (1516-1590), Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), and Andreas Hyperius (1511-1564).

In this connection we should also note the untenability of the so-called 'Centraldogmen' theory, initiated by the Zurich dogma historian Alexander Schweizer (1808-1888), and taken over in the Netherlands by the Leiden professor Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811-1885) in his *De leer der Hervormde Kerk*.<sup>10</sup> Schweizer and those who followed him constructed, (unjustifiably) the theory of a 'central dogma' (predestination for the Reformed, and justification for the Lutherans), which was then used to /271/ 'show' either continuity or radical discontinuity between the Reformation and Reformed scholasticism.

Apart from the lack of attention to the diversity within post-reformational theology, the study of the interaction between Reformed scholasticism and post-tridentine Catholic scholasticism (R. Bellarmine, M. Cano, L. Molina, F. Suárez) has also scarcely been addressed. Studies by Richard Muller, Carl Trueman and Eef Dekker have shown that, in methodological terms, these two theological traditions resemble one another closely.<sup>11</sup>

Naturally, the diversity within the Reformed tradition, arising from diverse backgrounds and contexts, raises methodological problems of its own. How were the medieval and contemporary scholastic traditions received and employed in the context of concrete theological discourse? At this point a new field of research must be brought to bear on the discussion in order to determine the identity of Protestant scholasticism. For this purpose the following 'tools' are required:

1. Study of *florilegia* of patristic and medieval sources, bibliographies, auction catalogues, 'study guides' and descriptions of curricula from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Schweizer, *Die protestantische Centraldogmen in ihrer Entwicklung innerhalb der reformierten Kirche*, 2 vols. (Zürich, 1853-1856); J.H. Scholten, *De leer der Hervormde Kerk in hare grondbeginselen uit de bronnen voorgesteld en beoordeeld*, 2 vols. (Leiden 1848-1850). In 1861 and 1862, a fourth, revised and expanded edition appeared in Leiden; reprinted in 1870.

<sup>11</sup> C.R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, 1998), pp. 9-19; E. Dekker, *Rijker dan Midas. Vrijheid, genade en predestinatie in de theologie van Jacobus Arminius (1559-1609)* (Zoetermeer, 1993), pp. 157-61.

2. Semantic research. Such research focuses primarily on the origin, history and meaning of the conceptual apparatus of the scholastic tradition. Semantic research relates to the words, concepts, ideas and doctrines with which Reformed theologians carried on their work, and which gave a specific shape to the Reformed confessions and the ecclesiastical communities oriented on them at the time. It is becoming increasingly clear from such research that the study of the semantic fields of terms and concepts employed in theological discourse is an essential prerequisite for gaining insight into the question of continuity and discontinuity. Thus, Johannes Altenstaig's *Vocabularius theologiae* (1517), reissued in 1619 under the title *Lexicon theologicum*, was an important sourcebook for both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians. It contained an alphabetical survey of the most important scholastic definitions derived from the texts of Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Gregory of Rimini, Henry of Ghent, Pierre D' Ailly and Thomas of Strasbourg.<sup>12</sup> /272/ It will be clear that these bibliographical and semantic approaches require a much broader contextualisation of the Protestant scholastic tradition than has hitherto been the case. Moreover, through this 'resourcing', insights are developed that problematise the older research at several points. Thus terms like 'scholasticism' and 'Aristotelianism' can no longer be seen as referring to purely static entities. Unqualified references to 'the' Aristotelian philosophy or logic, or 'the' Ciceronian rhetoric is, historically speaking, inaccurate, because it disregards the contextually determined use of Aristotelian logic and classical rhetoric during the Renaissance, Reformation and post-Reformation periods. These are historical phenomena with a long tradition history.

Methodologically, this implies that researchers ought to take their point of departure in the meaning of 'Aristotelianism', 'logic' and 'scholasticism' as these are encountered in the scholarly writings of sixteenth and seventeenth-century authors. Such an approach further implies a radical revision of the way in which the older research defined the term 'rationalism'. On historical, philosophical and theological grounds, we need to make a sharp distinction between the rationalistic worldview of the Enlightenment, and the use of

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<sup>12</sup> Johannes Altenstaig, *Vocabularius theologiae* (Gratz, 1517); idem, *Lexicon theologicum quo tanquam clave theologiae fores aperiuntur, et omnium fere terminorum et obscuriorum vocum, quae s. theologiae studiosos facile remorantur, etymologiae, ambiguitates, definitiones, usus, enucleate ob oculos ponuntur, & dilucide explicantur* (repr. Cologne, 1619).



rational argumentation in matters of faith, as evidenced in Protestant scholasticism. Nowhere in their writings do post-reformational scholastics show any sign of regarding reason and revelation as on a par, or as two separate sources of knowledge.

### **Social context**

The institutionalisation of the Reformation in the century immediately following it was an important factor in the development of Protestant orthodoxy. Social historians like Heinz Schilling have used the term 'confessionalisation' to describe the social and political processes that occurred during the second half of the sixteenth century, when Protestant religion increasingly began to impose norms and life patterns on everyday and social life.<sup>13</sup> Sociohistorical research must be credited /273/ with the insight that abstraction of the social context cannot do justice to the origin and development of Protestant orthodoxy, including its academic profile in the form of scholastic theologising.

In methodological terms this means that we cannot study the theological views and ideas of Protestant orthodoxy in isolation from the cultural and historical context in which it emerged. These views cannot be approached in theological terms only, but should be situated within the debate that took place in the academic culture of the late Renaissance. They were partly the product of an ongoing religious, social and political confrontation between Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, they were rooted in the religious life and piety of every day, in which the academics also participated.

The implication of this for the research method is that explicit attention should be paid to the genre and context of theological discourse. The latter took place, not only at the academic level (in academic disputations, polemical tracts, systematic textbooks etc.), but also at the ecclesiastical and social levels (in catechisms, confessions, homiletic and devotional material, minutes of church council meetings, pamphlets etc.). These sources should also be used in the research. I am not pleading for 'social history' to be swallowed

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<sup>13</sup> Heinz Schilling (ed.), *Die reformierte Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland: das Problem der 'Zweiten Reformation'*. Wissenschaftliches Symposium des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 1985 (Gütersloh, 1986); idem, *Aufbruch und Krise: Deutschland 1517-1648* (Berlin, 1988); idem, *Civic Calvinism in Northwestern Germany and the Netherlands: Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries*. Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, 17 (Kirksville, Mo., 1991).

up by 'intellectual history'. Theological views from the past cannot be obtained in isolation, nor can they be reduced to the epiphenomena of political and social power relations hiding under a theological cloak. My ideal is that a fruitful dialogue should emerge between students of the history of theology and practitioners of social history. The remaining fences between the two disciplines need to be torn down, both by recognising the social context of ideas, and by tracing the influence of ideas on social developments.

### **Summary**

Proponents of the newer research on Reformed scholasticism wish to foster an interdisciplinary approach, and in so doing put forward the claim that the emergence of Protestant scholasticism was no 'regression' to medieval patterns of thought, but rather the result of a progressive development related to the impact of the Renaissance. Historically, it is incorrect to suppose that the Renaissance, humanism and the Reformation were by definition anti-scholastic. In this connection we may speak of a double continuity: not only with the theology of the reformers, but also with that of the Middle Ages. However, discontinuity can also be discerned. Reformed scholasticism was certainly no mere duplicate of the /274/ medieval systems, nor was it a repetition of the theology of the Reformers. Identification of reformational views and the positions of Reformed orthodoxy, insofar as it denies any historical, literary or methodological developments, and places the Reformed scholastics on some timeless and normative pedestal, must therefore be rejected.