AOSIS

By Scripture and plain reason: A historical retrieval of the relationship between theology and philosophy to better engage with present-day secularism

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The formal principle of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, has sometimes been thought to imply that the Reformed minister and church member need not concern themselves with the right use of reason and philosophy in matters of theology. Perhaps based on a misunderstanding of Paul's warning to beware of philosophy (Col 2:8), many have supposed that the local Reformed church's struggle with secularism and its progressive ideas could be resolved on purely exegetical grounds. This misconstrued understanding of *sola Scriptura* led to a low regard for reason and philosophy in matters of theology which also paved the way for fideism and anti-intellectualism in local Reformed churches. In time, this condition in the church left enough room for secularism and progressive ideas to infiltrate the local church. Before secularism can be thoroughly refuted, a historical retrieval within the Reformed tradition must take place. Fittingly this article commenced a historical retrieval within the broad Reformed tradition. Different Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians were examined to retrieve the proper relationship between theology and philosophy together with other relevant themes such as *natural theology* and *natural law*. Through an historical retrieval, this article consulted the primary sources of figures in the Reformed tradition spanning from the early 1500s to the early 1700s. Modern interpreters and representatives of these figures have also been added to the study. Importantly, philosophy serves theology by defending it and assisting it in clarifying theological truths. Philosophy is also useful to prepare the unregenerate mind for the reception of higher theological truths. Certain philosophical insights, which are manifested in both *natural theology* and *natural law*, were also utilised to, on the one hand, demonstrate God's existence against secularism's rejection of the supernatural and, on the other hand, critique progressive ideas pertaining to sexuality and the differences between the sexes. This may be approached in the context of both *insita* and *acquisita* knowledge of God and reality. Although this article is the second article in a series of two, it nevertheless accomplished its own end to retrieve the role of philosophy in matters of theology, especially regarding natural theology and natural law.

Contribution: As a historical retrieval within the Reformed tradition, this article fits perfectly within the scope of *In the Skriflig*. It reminds the Reformed minister of the rich heritage within the Reformed tradition regarding the relationship between theology and philosophy, and brings it to bear on the challenge of secularism.

Keywords: apologetics; faith and reason; natural theology; natural law; philosophy; progressive ideas; Reformed; secularism.

Introduction

After Martin Luther (1483–1546), in 1521 at the *Diet of Worms*, paved the way for the concept of *sola Scriptura*, it would later be known as the *formal principle* of the 16th-century Reformation. This label was used to express the idea that *Scripture alone* contains the knowledge to make one wise unto salvation, *Scripture alone* communicates this knowledge clearly and effectively, *Scripture alone* impels one's conscience by virtue of this knowledge, and *Scripture alone* demands the church's submission to its doctrinal truths and supreme authority (Geisler & MacKenzie 1995:179–180; Vanhoozer 2016:111).

As the tradition of the Roman Catholic church was compromised by outright contradictions between popes and councils, the time was ripe for a return to Scripture as the highest 'court of appeal' when doctrinal disputes needed to be settled (Geisler & MacKenzie 1995:178; Muller 2017:338). Regrettably, however, the principle of *sola Scriptura* was not free from being misconstrued. For many today, *sola Scriptura* entails a rapid dismissal of knowledge sourced from

outside of Scripture (Geisler & MacKenzie 1995:178).[1] This misunderstanding of *sola Scriptura* includes an implicit or explicit disregard for reason and good philosophy in matters of faith and theology (Barrett 2016:55; Ortlund 2019:32).

This author suggests that it is a neglect and even denial of the proper role of right reason and good philosophy in matters of theology which allowed secularism and progressive ideas to gain a foothold in many Protestant churches of South Africa.[2] The point is that *sola Scriptura* was never meant to function as a slogan to altogether dismiss tradition, or the use of reason and philosophy in matters of theology. According to Barrett (2016:23), a view which utterly rejects church tradition and other sources would rather be known as '*nuda Scriptura*' or, in a somewhat similar context, according to Mathison (2001:237), as '*solo Scriptura*'. Vanhoozer (2016:111) explains that an adherence to *sola Scriptura* 'does not eliminate other sources and resources of theology altogether'. It only states that Scripture is the 'primal and final' authority, but not the 'sole' authority.

Given that good philosophy flows forth from *right* reason, Luther's use of the words '*Scripture and plain reason*' as his criteria for conviction must cause one to rethink, and especially, *retrieve* the important and undeniable role of good philosophy in matters of theology (as cited by Sproul

1993:126–127 [*author's emphasis*]).[3] Perhaps, because of a misunderstanding of Paul's warning to *beware of philosophy* (Col 2:8), many have supposed that the local Reformed church's struggle with secularism can be resolved on purely exegetical grounds. Moreover, the rise of anti-intellectualism and fideism in local churches has established a contentment with 'superficial or bad theology', a 'lack of a serious apology[4] for faith', and 'the lack of a constructive public philosophy' amongst church members (Guinness 1994:15).

South African Protestantism, especially the Reformed churches, need to realise the role of philosophy in its grappling with secularism and progressive ideas. This article, as the second of two articles in a series, will therefore argue that the rich heritage within the Reformed tradition, especially pertaining to the proper understanding of the relationship between theology and philosophy, must be retrieved.[5] Given the principle of *sola Scriptura*, Paul's words in Colossians 2:8 will first be exposited to identify Paul's intention in this verse.

Was the apostle Paul against philosophy (Col 2:8)?

The British writer and Anglican, C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), once remarked that:

1. The discovery of heliocentrism in the 16th century is a scientific example of a truth which is located outside of Scripture and have even impacted the way Scripture is interpreted. Before this discovery, both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians understood passages such as 1 Chronicles 16:30, 1 Samuel 2:8, Psalm 93:1 and Psalm 104:5 to mean or imply that the earth is fixed on pillars while the son orbits around it. This view, however, have been proven false by the discovery of heliocentrism and today theologians interpret the abovementioned Scriptural passages in a metaphorical and/or phenomenological way (see Lennox 2011:15–36). Furthermore, one can also think of biblically external philosophical or metaphysical truths such as the laws of logic or the so-called substance and accident, matter and form, potentiality and actuality, and essence and existence distinctions (see Bavinck 2004:176). These kinds of scientific and metaphysical truths are typically grounded in God's general revelation. It must, however, be mentioned here that, because all truth is God's truth, any truth found in either general or special revelation cannot be contradictory or contrary to one another (Corduan 1997:21–22). Lennox (2011) accordingly encourages Christians to study both God's general and special revelation:

   [i]f … we can learn things about God as Creator from the visible universe, it is surely incumbent upon us to use our God-given minds to think about what these things are, and thus to relate God's general revelation in nature to his special revelation in his Word so that we can rejoice in both. After all, it was God who put the universe there, and it would be very strange if we had no interest in it. (p. 36)

2. The words *secular* and *secularism* can have many different connotations. Taylor (2007) explains one of these connotations as follows:

   [a] shift to secularity … consists … of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. (p. 3)

   The point, according to Taylor, is that belief in God was once an 'axiomatic' starting point in a society; however, due to secularism's influence, this starting point can no longer be assumed. Sproul et al. (1984:7) uses the term *secularism* as an umbrella term to include 'positivism, humanism, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism and existentialism'. In this more apologetic context, all these different -*isms* share …

   … the central axiomatic thesis of secularism, the leitmotif that defines secularism: *All possible knowledge is restricted to the temporal*. The temporal is all there is or all that can be known. The metaphysical quest is dead, consigned to the junkyard of skepticism. There is no transcendent, no eternal – only the phenomenal bounded by the steel door of time and space. (Sproul et al 1984:7)

   This author will accordingly use the word *secularism* to refer to a sceptical position towards, or an outright denial of the existence of God, and the supernatural beyond the natural world. The word *secular* would therefore include positions like atheism, agnosticism and scepticism. These positions will naturally have devastating effects on one's view of the person and the works of Jesus Christ as well as the authority, reliability, and relevance of the Scriptures. In turn, the phrase *progressive ideas* is this author's way of referring to the liberal moral values of modernity, especially as it pertains to issues regarding sexuality, the nature of manhood and womanhood, and the value of life in the abortion debate. To be sure, this liberal and progressive ethic is, to a large extend, based on a secular understanding of reality.

3. It is a well-known notion that Martin Luther had an 'anti-Aristotelian schema'. However, despite his rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics, physics and ethics, he always 'assumed the necessity of logic and rhetoric not merely in secular discourse, but in theological discourse as well'. His rejection of many aspects of Aristotelianism placed him out of step with many of the other Reformers (Muller 2003a:364). It must additionally be acknowledged here that despite his seemingly positive reference to the use of 'plain reason' at the *Diet of Worms*, later in his life, Luther made negative utterances regarding the nature of reason. This article, however, only uses Luther's words in this regard as a departure point and does not rely on his views in any other way.

4. Surely Guinness (1994:15) is not using the word *apology* in a modern sense here. In other words, the word *apology* as used here should not be understood in a way as to suggest that one is saying 'sorry' for one's faith. Rather, he is using the word *apology* in an apologetic context and must therefore be taken to refer to the rational defence of the Christian faith.

5. The 'rich heritage within Reformed theology' includes John Calvin, as well as a wide range of subsequent Reformed theologians spanning from the early 1500s to the early 1700s. It therefore starts with Calvin as a magisterial Reformer, but also moves past him to include Reformed theologians from the so-called era of Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism. Accordingly, this article rejects the so-called 'Calvin against the Calvinists' theory which seeks to radically dichotomise Calvin with 'even his most immediate successors', as well as subsequent Reformed theologians. This theory has been greatly challenged during the last four decades and certain scholars has offered a more 'balanced, historically couched' approach to the theologians of the Protestant orthodox and scholastic era (Muller 2003c:3). Accordingly, without dismissing the presence of some discontinuities between the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians of the orthodox and scholastic era, nor dismissing the notion that within Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism there was a variety of approaches and controversies, this article will, nevertheless, view Reformed orthodoxy and scholasticism as 'a doctrinal development resting on a fairly diverse theological heritage', similar to the way the Reformation itself stood within the 'broad tradition of Western theology and in continuity as well as discontinuity with the patristic and medieval heritage' (Muller 2003a:46). Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism planted itself 'in continuity with the great theological insights of the Reformation', while implementing the scholastic method of the 'thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries' (Muller 2003a:28). Reformed orthodoxy was a 'Dutch, Swiss, German, French, English, and Scottish' enterprise and consequently a wide range of theologians contributed to this development as they 'consistently dialogued with each other across national and geographical boundaries' (Muller 2003a:28). These developments therefore serve as a beautiful example of how 'the church both moves forward in history, adapting to new situations and insights, and at the same time retains its original identity as the community of faith' (Muller 2003a:29). Moreover, what the Reformation started 'in less than half a century, orthodox Protestantism defended, clarified and codified over the course of a century and a half' (Muller 2003a:29). The major continuity between the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians in the era of Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism must therefore be maintained, especially because the 'Protestant orthodox held fast to [the] Reformational insights and to the confessional norms of Protestantism' (Muller 2003a:28). For a much more detailed discussion of this stance towards the development of Reformed theology during the Protestant orthodox and scholastic era, see Muller (2003a; 2003b; 2003c), Van Asselt (2011), and Van Asselt and Dekker (2001).

[*I*]f all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were educated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not … *Good philosophy* must exist, if for no other reason, because *bad philosophy* needs to be answered. (Lewis 2001:58, [*author's emphasis*])

This realisation for the need of *good* philosophy, however, has been implicitly or explicitly rejected or neglected by many Reformed ministers. Sometimes this neglect has been motivated by Paul's words in Colossians 2:

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (v. 8 – English Standard Version [ESV])

In this passage, philosophy is seemingly associated with 'empty deceit' and described as something which is 'according to the tradition of men'. This verse, however, can literally be translated as '*[t]hat* philosophy which is vain and false/misleading'. Moreover, Paul uses a definite article when referring to 'philosophy' to indicate that he has a very specific philosophy in mind (Fulford & Haines 2018:14, 15, [*author's emphasis*]). Paul is therefore dismissing a particular *kind* of philosophy 'which was a threat to the church in Colossae' (Fulford & Haines 2018:15).

The Protestant philosopher, Howe (2016:237), explains that it is 'unlikely' that Paul was using the word *philosophy* in the same way we understand the discipline today. In ancient times formal distinctions between different disciplines such as philosophy and science did not exist. In some sense, 'knowledge was knowledge' while still recognising 'different subject matters' and 'different methods of inquiry'. Consequently, Paul is here rather 'warning the Colossians about an insidious legalism that threatened their liberty in Christ' (Howe 2016:237).

Besides a *Jewish legalism*, others have also mentioned the presence of a *Jewish mysticism* in Colossae given that the pursuit of visions and the worship of angels, to pick two examples, were mandatory for someone to reach divine mysteries (Fulford & Haines 2018:15). To be sure, Paul had *a* philosophy in mind, but not philosophy in the sense of it not being a worthy pursuit for Christians. In fact, as Moreland (2012) argues:

[*O*]ne of the best ways to avoid hollow and deceptive philosophy is to study philosophy itself, so you can learn to recognize truth from error, using Scripture and right reason as a guide. (p. 69)

In this sense, '[*w*]e cannot properly *beware* of philosophy unless we be *aware* of philosophy' (Geisler 1999:17). This is precisely what Paul was doing in the context of Colossians. He was *aware* of the 'proto-Gnostic philosophy' which threatened the Colossians, and therefore had the 'ability to point out its inadequacy' (Moreland 2012:69). The apostle Paul was not against the use of philosophy in matters of theology, but, accordingly, saw it as a helpful instrument. The Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians adopted a similar approach to the use of 'good philosophy'.

Retrieving the true relationship between theology and philosophy

The Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians on the use of philosophy in matters of theology

Although John Calvin (1509–1564) is not known for his formal development of philosophy in matters of theology, he clearly 'leaned towards Platonism', and made eclectic use of the Roman statesman and philosopher, Cicero (106–43 BC) (Muller 2003a:366). Generally speaking, however, Calvin had little 'interest in elaborating a positive relationship between faith and philosophy' (Muller 2003c:122).[6] It was only with the establishment of new Protestant universities that subsequent Reformed theologians felt the need to develop and define the relationship of Reformation theology to the other academic disciplines (Muller 2003c:123).

For many of the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians, the passage from the apostle Paul in Colossians 2:8 never caused them to, therefore, reject philosophy, but only to distinguish between the *use* and the *abuse* thereof (Muller 2003a:365). The Italian Reformer and contemporary of Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) was one of the first major Reformers to deal positively with the question about theology and philosophy (Muller 2003c:122, 126).[7] He describes philosophy as:

[*A*] capacity given by God to human minds, developed through effort and exercise, by which all existing things are perceived as surely and logically as possible, to enable us to attain happiness. (Vermigli 2018:7)

In this sense, philosophy must be viewed as a gift from God. *True* philosophy, says Vermigli (2018:14), is derived 'from the knowledge of created things', and from these created things in reality, it 'reaches many conclusions about the justice and righteousness that God implanted naturally in human minds'. Accordingly, good and sound philosophy cannot be criticised, because it 'is the work of God'. He explains that Paul, in Colossians 2:8, was therefore rather referring to philosophy which has been 'corrupted by human invention' and became 'polluted and spoiled' in the process. Moreover, *true* philosophy, according to Vermigli (2018:15), has, as its goal, to 'reach that beatitude or happiness which can be acquired in this life by human powers'.

The English Reformer who served as a delegate at the Synod of Dordt, John Davenant (1572–1641), expresses his regard

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6. This does not mean that Calvin did not hold to a positive relationship between theology and philosophy. Bavinck (2003:70) for example notes that Calvin 'assumed this high position [*of philosophy*] from the start', and that he 'saw in philosophy an "outstanding gift of God", and was followed in this assessment by all Reformed theologians'.

7. In Lutheran circles, it was not Luther himself who formalised the relationship between theology and philosophy in a positive way, but rather Phillip Melanchthon. What Melanchthon was to the Lutherans, Peter Martyr Vermigli was to the Calvinists (Muller 2003c:123). Moreover, both Melanchthon and Vermigli had influence on Zacharias Ursinus, in view of the fact that Ursinus studied under Melanchthon in Wittenberg and in turn stayed with Vermigli in Zurich. Ursinus therefore maintained an explicit positive relationship between theology and philosophy, and handed it down to Bartholomäus Keckermann who studied under him in Heidelberg (Muller 2003c:125–126).

for philosophy by saying that 'philosophy is the offspring of right reason: and this light of reason is infused into the human mind by God himself' (Davenant 1831:390). Davenant (1831:396) additionally holds that philosophy is necessary for 'the clear understanding and perspicuous elucidation' of many passages in Scripture. 'The use of reason and logic in sacred things' must, moreover, be employed by Christians for the discernment 'of truth from falsehood, certainty from uncertainty', and 'consequential from inconsequential'. Importantly, Davenant (1831:398–399) emphasises philosophy as valuable for Christians, because it prepares their minds for 'the treatment and reception of a more sublime science'. In this sense, the 'sayings of philosophers' and 'all polite literature' can 'enrich our dissertations on sacred things'. Consequently, Paul was not condemning 'true and genuine philosophy' (Davenant 1831:391).

The Genevan-Italian Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin (1623–1687), likewise claims that Paul did 'not condemn true philosophy considered in itself', but rather the 'false philosophy held by the philosophers of that age by whom the doctrines of the gospel were corrupted' (Turretin 1992:46). He continues to list some of the abuses of *false* philosophy which typically happens when philosophy is used to argue against the mysteries and miracles of Christianity, when errors in philosophy is assumed and also defended, especially as the 'errors of philosophers are not the dictates of philosophy', when philosophy claims ownership over matters of faith and theology, and when philosophical distinctions in theology can lead to 'new and dangerous errors' (Turretin 1992:45–46).[8] Despite these potential abuses of philosophy, Turretin (1992:44) went so far as to say that those who 'hold that philosophy is opposed to theology and should therefore be altogether separated from it, not only as useless, but also as positively hurtful' are guilty of *sin*. For Turretin (1992:45), philosophy therefore helps one in 'perceiving things clearly', and in 'rightly distinguishing between … that which is true and false'. It also provides the intellect with the principles to know 'how the parts of the heavenly doctrine cohere and mutually establish each other'. Moreover, through good use of philosophy 'the mind may be furnished and prepared' for the 'reception and management of a higher science' as it is manifested in theology.

Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), the German Reformer and co-author of the Heidelberg Catechism, maintains that. although '[*t*]rue philosophy' is different from the 'doctrine of the church', it nevertheless does not stand against it but rather 'contains truth' and 'a certain ray of the wisdom of God, impressed upon the mind of man in his creation'. True philosophy therefore 'has been drawn out from the light of nature, and from principles in themselves clear and evident, and reduced to a system by wise and earnest men'. Consequently, it 'is not only lawful, but profitable' for Christians 'to devote themselves to the study of philosophy' (Ursinus 1888:4). Moreover, when he comments on the *Eighth*

8.Incidentally, John Davenant (1831:394–395) also lists the abuses of philosophy.

Lord's Day of the Catechism, Ursinus (1888:123) lists *11* arguments for God's existence which he says is 'common to both philosophy and theology'. Ursinus goes on to say that God can be described philosophically according to the *light of nature*, and, theologically, according to *special revelation in Scripture* (see Sudduth 2016:200–201).

Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), the Dutch Reformed theologian, explains that any 'solid work in theology' demands some acquaintance with philosophy. He illustrates that '[*t*]he light of nature does not fight with the light of grace, nor philosophy with theology' (as cited by Goudriaan 2006:30, 32). Anyone who condemns philosophy is therefore 'doing injury to God and His truth'. Paul is merely warning Christians against 'pseudo-philosophy' and not *true* philosophy (as cited by Goudriaan 2006:30, 32). According to Voetius 'the common philosophy of Reformed schools that is adjusted to and working for (*ancillans*) the Christian faith' can rightly be called '*philosophia Christiana*' (as cited by Goudriaan 2006:32). Voetius furthermore believes that philosophy is a great tool for interpreting the Bible and a valuable instrument to defend the truths of Christianity (Goudriaan 2006:44–45). Following this model, Voetius' successor, Petrus Van Mastricht (1630–1706), concluded that the scholastic method, which was highly philosophical in nature, is helpful, given that it can assist one in debates against the Catholics, it can refute 'pagans and atheists', it can build 'up souls concerning revealed truth itself', and it is useful 'in those questions that border on theology on one side and philosophy on the other' (Van Mastricht 2018:86).

Of particular interest, when it comes to the Reformed approach to theology and philosophy, is the case of Bartholomäus Keckermann (1571–1609), the German Reformed theologian and philosopher. He found himself in the academy in the late 16th century as the 'rector of the gymnasium at Danzig'. For him, the issue about the role of philosophy in matters of theology 'was not merely an abstract issue but a concrete question of the reception of tradition, the creation of curriculum, and the conduct of the Protestant academy' (Muller 2003c:124). Before his arrival at Danzig, certain voices had already begun to negate the positive role of philosophy in the context of the so-called question about 'double truth'.[9] 'Double truth' entails 'a theory of "false" philosophical truth set overagainst "true" theological truth'. This meant that something can supposedly be *true* according to philosophy and *false* according to theology, or vice versa. Keckermann, in his attempt to defend the rightful place of philosophy in matters of theology, countered with logical syllogisms based on the assumption of the unity of truth as dictated by the law of non-contradiction:

9.The so-called question on 'double truth' goes back to the 13th century when the …

… Latin Averroists, attempted to balance Aristotelian philosophy in its own right over against the Christian revelation by arguing a distinction between correctly enunciated philosophical teaching and theological truth – in short, a theory of 'double truth' according to which something might be true in philosophy and false in theology, and vice versa (Muller 2003a:382).

It was revived during the 'development of Protestant scholasticism in the debate between the vitriolic Daniel Hoffmann and his colleagues on the philosophical faculty of the University of Helmstedt' (Muller 2003a:384).

The gifts of God do not conflict with one another. But philosophy ... is a gift of God; Exodus 31:3; Psalms 94:10; Sirach 1:1; II Chronicles 1:12; Daniel 2:21, 'he gives wisdom to the wise'; Romans 1:19; James 1:17. Therefore it does not conflict with the gifts of God, which is to say, with theology. (as cited by Muller 2003c:127)

To make his case philosophically robust, Keckermann also penned down the following syllogisms:

VII. That which is one and simple cannot be contrary to itself. Truth is one and simple, whether conveyed by theology or by philosophy, and is true consistently wherever it is presented (for indeed the distinction of disciplines does not multiply truth). Therefore truth is not contrary to itself whether presented in theology or in philosophy. VIII. That which is one and simple is not multiplied. Truth is one and simple. Therefore truth is not multiplied, and by consequence not divided, as one thing in theology, another in philosophy. IX. Good does not conflict with good, but stands in perpetual concord. Philosophy itself is good and deals with a double good, the natural and the moral. Therefore it does not conflict with sacred theology, which is itself good and which deals with spiritual good (as cited by Muller 2003c:127–128).

Keckermann's arguments were very influential and succeeded in defending the *handmaid* of theology at the Protestant universities of the time. He safeguarded the notion that, even though philosophy and theology are different in terms of materials, they nevertheless belong together. While philosophy, for example, can deal with 'God as *Being* (*Ens*)' and theology with 'God as *Creator* and *Redeemer*', it does not 'necessarily point toward disagreement' but are instead 'methodologically compatible' (Muller 2003a:390).

For all the potential abuses of philosophy, it has its rightful place in matters of faith as far as it originates from *right* reason and, accordingly, *serves* theology. Through the centuries of church history, theology, given the nature of the discipline, has always been known as the 'queen of the sciences' while *true* philosophy rightfully functioned as the 'handmaid of theology' (see Bavinck 2003:607–608; Muller 2017:26). In this sense, one could say that theology will always be contrary to *false* philosophy; however, *true* philosophy can confirm and defend many of the truths of Christianity. In turn, however, philosophy will only reach its own *telos* in the rich truths of Christianity itself (see McGrew 2016:124). Philosophy is therefore not the 'rule of faith'; however, in the words of Benedict Pictet (1655–1724), the Genevan Reformed theologian, given the 'wonderful harmony between sound philosophy and divinity', it is 'of no little use' (Pictet 1876:60).

It is clear that the Reformed tradition holds philosophy in high regard and encourages the use of *true* philosophy in matters of theology. The Reformed scholar, VanDrunen (2019:460), summarily highlights four characteristics in the 'Reformed approach' to the use of philosophy. Firstly, philosophy was considered to be a '*servant* to theology' with a subordinate role. Secondly, philosophy was used 'eclectically' in the sense of using 'anything that was helpful,

without being committed to any one particular philosopher or philosophical system'. Thirdly, the Reformers and Reformed orthodox were 'generally *realist*' in their philosophical starting points by 'acknowledging the objective reality of God and the world and the subjective capability of human intellectual faculties to know them'. Finally, Reformed theologians were broadly Aristotelian in the sense of their 'general sympathy with a long-standing and constantly developing Christian Aristotelianism'.[10]

Viewing philosophy as the *handmaid* to theology is especially helpful for what we refer to as *philosophical theology* and is important, as it pertains to the field of *dogmatics*. Corduan (1981:10), the Reformed philosopher, for example notes that '[*p*]hilosophy permeates theology' and that the 'theologian cannot ever get away from the fact that philosophical thinking is an integral part of the way that we understand and disseminate revealed truth'. The theologian will have certain philosophical starting points before doing theology and even later in the theological endeavour, he will be 'confronted with the need for clear philosophical categories'. Corduan (1981:15) also adds that some of the most striking controversies in theology 'have their origin to a large extent in differing philosophical starting points of the disagreeing parties'.

The positive uses of philosophy can accordingly be summarised as philosophy's use to 'train the reason, analyze arguments, and serve theology', to 'adduce ancillary arguments to support theological proof', and to 'refute error and find logical gaps in argumentation' (see Muller 2017:385). The Reformed theologian, Nerness (2020:48), as he echoes Schumacher, makes a valuable contribution to insist that 'good philosophy is a "pro-theology philosophy"' which can 'accommodate dogmatics in order to develop theology but also challenges many of the assumptions of unbelieving philosophy'. Philosophy, in this sense, is not deemed to be 'limited to the finite', as viewed in a secular framework, but rather serves theology, supports theological proofs, refutes theological and philosophical errors, and challenges the assumptions of corrupt philosophies (Bavinck 2019a:53).

Van der Kooi and Van den Brink (2017:21–22) also align themselves with this posture to philosophy, especially as it pertains to apologetics as the rational defence of the Christian faith. According to them (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017:21–22), there is 'ample evidence that the Christian community continues to need a voice with an apologetic orientation'. As societies become more and more secular and Christianity is exposed to more and more criticisms, 'there is a heightened sense that Christians need to know how they can best respond with good arguments'. The nature of apologetics is such that it demands good philosophical insight without which it will be poor. Therefore 'good dogmatics' will need 'an apologetic nature' which is, in turn, supported by good philosophy. This realisation of the need

10. Take note that the philosophical systems of both Plato and Aristotle was never used by the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians 'without criticism'. It was, however, preferred by many Reformed theologians, as 'these systems best lent themselves to the development and defense of truth' (Bavinck, 2003:608).

for philosophy and apologetics is especially necessary at local Reformed churches which is situated in some of the bigger cities and close to universities.

As a final remark, it must be mentioned that philosophy serves *evangelism* by preparing 'the gentile world for the Christian faith'. This is done 'by confirming and clarifying truths known by the light of nature' (Muller 2003a:389). Philosophy, as a lower discipline, paves the way for an unbelieving mind to receive 'theological truths' as a higher discipline (Muller 2003a:389; see Pictet 1876:60; see Turretin 1992:45). In this sense, philosophy serves the purpose of instructing 'those who have not yet placed themselves under Christ'. Philosophy, as 'the opinions and expressions of nature itself' which are 'perceived and understood' by unbelievers can accordingly be employed in evangelism (Davenant 1831:397, 378). The Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians, as they followed the early church, assumed that 'there are truths concerning God common to all human beings' which serve as 'common principles known to philosophy'. These principles can rightfully be used as steppingstones in conversations with unbelievers surrounding natural as well as supernatural realities (Davenant 1831:398; Muller 2017:280). In this context, it must, however, never be used to exact revenge on the unbeliever or merely to win an argument, but to cause 'doubt in the mind of those in error – doubt that paves the way for truth' (see Sire 1980:20; see Voetius 2011:229).

At this point it is necessary to consider two areas where *true* philosophy can be helpful to the Reformed minister and church member as they grapple with secularism and progressive ideas. The discussion will accordingly move to the areas of *natural theology* and *natural law*. VanDrunen (2019:457, 469) reminds one that when 'Christians engage in serious theological reflection', questions surrounding philosophy inevitably arises. The moment when philosophical questions arise, it inevitably 'prompts questions about natural theology', *and*, one could add, natural law.

Natural theology, natural law, and the Reformed tradition

The Reformed theologian, Machen (2009:48), explains that humanity not only becomes 'acquainted with God' through Jesus. Reducing knowledge of God to knowledge mediated through Jesus Christ is, according to Machen (2009:48), 'derogatory to [*Jesus Himself*]'. Jesus 'plainly found God's hand in nature' and 'in the moral law; the law written in the hearts of men'. Machen ends by emphasising how God is also plainly found in the Scriptures. To dismiss these ways of God's revelation as 'invalid', or as 'useless to us to-day', is to turn one's back on truths 'that lay closest to Jesus' mind and heart'.

Machen is here referring to the distinction between *general* and *special* revelation. General revelation refers to God's revelation of himself in his created order, that is, nature, while special revelation refers to God's revelation of himself

in Scripture.[11] This twofold revelation of God also leads to the so-called *duplex cognitio Dei* whereby God is known in the created world as the *Creator*, and in Scripture as the *Redeemer* (Bavinck 2003:302; Muller 2003a:271; VanDrunen 2019:459). In other words, by virtue of general revelation, humanity receives 'knowledge about the existence and attributes of God', and by virtue of special revelation, humanity can receive 'knowledge concerning God's plan for fallen humanity' (Haines 2021:144).

At this point, however, important distinctions are warranted. Reformed theologians typically distinguish between 'forms of theology based on modes of divine manifestation' (Muller 2017:364). In this sense, *natural theology* is based on the mode of *general revelation*, including the light of nature, and yields only a 'nonsaving truth'.[12] *Supernatural* or *revealed theology* is based on the mode of *special revelation* and contains 'saving knowledge of God' (Muller 2017:315, 358; see VanDrunen 2019:459). Importantly, natural theology must remain 'inseparable (though distinct) from the whole system of supernatural theology'. In this sense, natural theology is 'enfolded within revealed theology' and God remains the 'gracious source of all that is natural and supernatural' (Sutanto 2021:266, 271).

The point to recognise here is that many Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians 'affirmed that human beings', despite their fallen nature and tendency to 'distort natural revelation', … may still gain truth from it. Accordingly, 'philosophical insights' may be utilised to engage in natural theology, especially pertaining to the use of 'evidence from nature' in 'apologetics', albeit for 'limited purposes' (VanDrunen 2019:457). God's effects in nature may therefore be used to remove 'escape mechanisms' created by unbelievers to 'avoid the theistic reality' they would 'prefer to negate' (Kelly 2008:167).

To be sure, even though Calvin (2011:282) uses the term *natural law* favourably,[13] he never uses the term *natural theology* and 'consequently, neither explicitly affirms or denies its possibility' (Muller 2003a:273). He does, however, make many remarks as to suggest that all people, both regenerate and unregenerate, inevitably gains a certain *natural knowledge* of God. Following Cicero, he, for example holds that everyone has knowledge of God by virtue of what he called an 'awareness of divinity' by natural instinct. This 'awareness of divinity' reveals and establishes 'a certain understanding of [*God's*] divine majesty' within his image

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11. This distinction between *general* and *special* revelation is also summarised in the Belgic Confession of Faith, article 2.

12. The validity of natural theology will not be argued as a Christian endeavour. Instead, we assume that the witness of certain Old and New Testament passages (Ps 19:1–4; Ac 14:16–17; 17:26–27; Rm 1:19–20, 32; 2:14–15) are clear enough regarding the possibility of natural theology. It is therefore, in the words of Duby (2019:59, 67) 'a positive element in the divine economy in which God leads us as rational creatures to our appointed end: the blessedness of loving fellowship with himself'. Additionally, natural knowledge of God must also be situated within the context of 'God's own purposeful self-revelation' and is not something 'humanity obtains of its own initiative or by following a pathway never opened or authorized by God' (also see Duby 2019:60–72; Haines 2021:21–45; Vos 2022:5).

13. Calvin (2011:282) defines the natural law as 'that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony'.

bearers. For Calvin, the fact that there are other religions besides Christianity is proof that this natural knowledge of God is 'suppressed … in unrighteousness' by sinful man (Rm 1:18–20; Calvin 2011:43; see Fesko 2019:61–62). Furthermore, this 'awareness of divinity' causes all people to 'perceive that there is a God and that he is their maker' (Calvin 2011:44, 47).

Calvin (2011:52) moreover maintains that God 'daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe' to such an extent that 'men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him'. These 'marks of his glory' is so clear that 'even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance' and that 'wherever you cast your eyes' you 'cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory' (Calvin 2011:52). Accordingly, there are 'innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth' which declare God's wisdom. Through scientific studies, philosophical investigations, and one's mere apprehension of created reality, 'knowledge of God' can be attained (Calvin 2011:53; Haines 2021:161).

As he comments on Psalm 19, Calvin affirms that 'from beholding and contemplating the heavens' one can be 'brought to acknowledge God' (Calvin 2010:308). Additionally, as he comments on the book of Acts, he observes that Paul and Barnabas showed God's existence 'by natural arguments' in Acts 14 (Calvin 2010:19). In Acts 17, Paul drew 'proofs from nature itself' (Calvin 2010:157–158). These references are not 'pointing toward a Scripturally-founded knowledge of God's handiwork in nature', but rather assumes the use of 'rudimentary arguments drawn from nature' and contains the necessary 'elements of what later Reformed writers called "natural theology"' (Muller 2003a:274). All these insights from Calvin (2011:53) make sense given the fact that he thought there is a 'way of seeking God' that 'is common both to strangers and to those of his household, if they trace the outlines that above and below sketch a living likeness of him'.[14]

Although Calvin's category of the 'awareness of divinity' is much more framed in the sense of *insita* knowledge of God, he nevertheless also adhered to *acquisita* knowledge of God when referring to the 'innumerable evidences' and 'natural arguments'. In this context, *insita* knowledge of God is not a result of reasoning. It is rather a spontaneous emergence of knowledge of God 'in the human mind' upon 'experience of the world' (Sudduth 2016:4). Explained differently, it assumes that 'the beginning of knowledge' is in 'the intellect's most rudimentary apprehension of God's work in creation and providence'. It is as if the mind 'intuitively or immediately' grasps God's revelation of himself in nature (Muller 2017:67). Note that this knowledge of God is not *unmediated*, but rather a 'fundamental sense of the divine *mediated* by the created order and known by the mind's apprehension of externals' (Muller 2017:66, [*author's emphasis*]). *Insita* knowledge is

therefore 'spontaneously generated by human encounter with the created order', and importantly for the purpose of *natural law*; *insita* knowledge also arises upon an encounter with the 'conscience' (Duby 2019:98) by which 'behavior is either vindicated or reproached' (Grabill 2006:107).[15]

It is typically held that *insita* knowledge is included in what is called *common notions*. Common notions are all those things which 'belong by nature to all people' (see Bavinck 2003:225; Muller 2017:235) and includes 'some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral' (Canons of Dordt, Chapter 3/4, Article 4). *Insita* knowledge therefore not only entails knowledge of God's existence, but also of certain moral truths.

Recall that Machen (2009:48) emphasises the notion that Jesus found God's hand 'in the moral law'. 'In this connection, the human person is created with a natural law written on the conscience' and accordingly also gains knowledge of God as the 'lawgiver' (Duby 2019:99; Turretin 1992:7). Natural law as part of *common notions* is therefore also available to unbelievers as 'things either to be done or to be avoided' (Muller 2017:197). According to *insita* knowledge one therefore knows God indirectly through a direct apprehensive knowledge of oneself and the world as well as one's conscience which entails knowledge of God's law through a direct apprehension of predefined natures in reality (Grabill 2006:120; Muller 2017:197). This knowledge is 'neither a purely noncognitive feeling nor a body of theological propositions built into the mind'. Moreover, it is not separate from 'common human experience of outward reality', and cannot be isolated from the acts of the mind in coming to know reality. To be sure, this knowledge is 'intelligible' and will 'exert cognitive and moral pressure' (Duby 2019:100).

In turn, *acquisita* knowledge is knowledge of God which is 'a discursive knowledge of God obtained by inferring true conclusions about God from the existence and characteristics of the created order' (Duby 2019:98). It moves from premises to conclusions through a deliberate 'use of the faculties' (Muller 2017:66). As he ponders the insights of Calvin, the Reformed theologian, Dowey (1994:74–75), for example explains that through an 'immediate experience of the world … the mind of man says "therefore" about God'. Through man's experience of the world, revelation is received and, on the basis of that experience, 'man is compelled (except that he sinfully resists) *a posteriori* to draw conclusions concerning the One who thus is'. Given that the 'commonest phenomena of the world are not self-explanatory', one can, through a combination of 'empirical observation and ratiocination' rise 'above them to their Author'.

Even though Calvin never explicitly mentioned 'natural theology', for him '[k]nowledge of God, attained through the contemplation of creation, is … available to all men,

14. Haines (2021:13), a French Canadian, translates the French of this saying from Calvin as follows: 'I just wanted to note here that there is a way to seek God that is common to pagans and to believers of the church, by following in his footsteps, as they are outlined in the heavens and on earth, as paintings of his image.' This serves to show that *regenerate* and *unregenerate* reason can and indeed does ascertain knowledge of God from nature.

15. Although the word *implanted* is sometimes used to describe this *insita* knowledge of God, it is only 'implanted' as far as it is described as knowledge of the divine that 'arises spontaneously from human contact with the world and the divine law written on the human heart, without any need of ratiocination' (Duby 2021:309).

everywhere, regenerate or not' (Haines 2021:160). Calvin, however, did rightly emphasise that 'saving knowledge' can never be drawn from nature and that unregenerate reason is always in danger of abusing the natural knowledge of God gained from creation (Muller 2003c:275; 2018:511).[16]

Vermigli (2018:18) also makes room to discuss the *natural knowledge* of God. The ideas, which were 'naturally engrafted in us are daily confirmed and refined by the observation of created things' and, accordingly, 'it is clear that we may be taught many things by creatures' (Vermigli 2018:20, 21). Even though God cannot be observed with one's senses, the 'signs which have declared God to us from the beginning are themselves creatures'. The pagan philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle have indeed correctly observed the 'series of causes' in the world and concluded 'that there is a God'. However, the evidence for God's existence, which was traced 'exceedingly well' by the pagan philosophers, has also been divinely described in the pages of Scripture. Vermigli (2018) therefore brings to memory the notion that:

> Christ sends us to the birds of the air, to the lilies and grass of the field, that we may acknowledge the singular providence of God in preserving those things which he created. (p. 21)

Vermigli (2018:22) emphasises the depth of God's revelation found within human nature. Ultimately, for him, 'nothing may be found in the world so abject or lowly that it gives no witness to God', and if this truth is discovered 'through inquiry and knowledge of nature, God will be revealed to us'. Vermigli, given his comment on the pagan philosophers, 'certainly assumed that the proofs were valid' and therefore also admitted 'the fact of natural revelation and the ability of human beings to discern it' (Muller 2003a:277). Moreover, Vermigli emphasises the relevance of natural law, as the 'observation of created things', coupled with 'the law written on the heart', provided 'publicly accessible and culpable knowledge of God's will to guide right conduct' (Grabill 2006:120).

Although some Reformed theologians attempt to use citations from the Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck, to dismiss natural theology, it is not useful, because 'the greater number of dogmaticians in the Reformed tradition between the Reformation and the twentieth century leave place for both' natural theology and the proofs for God's existence (Muller 1992:17; see also Muller 2019:19–32).[17] The Reformed theologian, Muller (2018:515), observes that natural theology was developed by many Reformed theologians from 'the

conviction that God is revealed in creation', as an apologetic against atheism among other parties, and also 'in tandem with related disciplines in the curricular encyclopedia of the early modern academies and universities'. According to Haines (2021:169), the Reformers used natural theology 'both as an incentive for sanctification and personal holiness, and as a powerful reason to believe'. Muller (2018) additionally explains that ultimately it was:

> [*A*] Christian natural theology that the early modern writers endeavored to propound, all the while recognizing an element of common ground between the pagan and Christian forms, given that both are rational exercises based on the same sources, namely, the natural light of reason and the Book of Nature. (p. 518)

Muller (2018:518–525) identifies and expounds two of the earliest works from Reformed theologians on *natural theology*. One from Georges Pacard (d. 1610) and the other from Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638). Pacard's work was largely focused on the presentation of 'highly rhetorical' arguments to show why the Epicureans, Deists and atheists were wrong. In turn, Alsted presented an apologetic case against the atheists, Epicureans and Sophists. He developed a framework for natural theology in the sense of placing it in the context of faith where it is a 'natural theology "clothed" and "exalted" in the illumined mind of the regenerate believer' (Duby 2019:103). It is noteworthy that Alsted identifies two functions for natural theology. Firstly, 'it might lead toward the higher truths of revealed theology', and … secondly, 'it might be the basis for debate with pagans and atheists' (Muller 2003a:272–273).

The Reformed theologian, Franciscus Junius (1545–1602), defines *natural theology* as 'that which proceeds from principles that are known in relation to itself by the natural light of the human understanding, in proportion to the method of human reason' (Junius 2014:145). He richly implements the Aristotelian causes to explain the nature of natural theology and establishes the role of principles 'known *per se* by the light of nature' (Junius 2014:145-146). These 'unmoved and immutable' principles 'orders everything that it acquires knowledge of all those things which the reason of a person can trace down and follow' (Junius 2014:146). Accordingly, Junius maintained that God can be known 'from natural principles … as well as by reasoning *a posteriori* from the works of God in creation' (Muller 2003b:178; Sudduth 2016:19). He does, however, remind one that in comparison with supernatural theology, natural theology 'can lead nothing at all to perfection' for which grace is needed (Junius 2014:157).

Voetius illustrates that philosophy assists in providing 'arguments to *natural theology*' and as it exposes *false* philosophy it serves an apologetic function (Goudriaan 2006:31). According to Voetius, natural theology is possible:

> [*N*]ot only because of [*its*] first principle, which is the Word of God, where its truths are presented, but also because of the second principle, which is natural light and reason, from where the same material truths are derived (as cited by Goudriaan 2006:43).

Natural theology is supported in 'the Bible, in experience and also in human reason' (Goudriaan 2006:74). In this sense, philosophical thought as manifested in natural theology is ultimately 'subject to a biblical norm' and cannot function to 'the disadvantage of theology or in contradiction of the Bible'. While non-Christians may also practise natural theology, for them it is sourced from 'natural light and reason' while, for Christians, it is sourced from reason only as a 'secondary principle' (Goudriaan 2006:74–75). Voetius assumes a 'common area' between the Christian and non-Christian and 'accepted and defended natural theology as a legitimate form of theological thinking'. For him, the 'causal argument for God's existence' was 'the most important' proof (Goudriaan 2006:76).

Voetius significantly makes use of the 'medieval concept of *synderesis*' in the context of natural law (Goudriaan 2006:274). *Synderesis* referrers to 'the innate habit of the understanding that grasps basic principles of moral law' (Muller 2017:351). It typically had two capacities: natural and acquired. In its natural sense, it is 'a resident light in the understanding that assents to principles known by nature', and in its 'acquired *habitus* it is an assent to more developed understanding'. As it was linked to natural law, it entailed that, while natural law is 'the law of God universally written in the human heart and the object of a person's apprehension or knowledge', *synderesis* functions as the 'inward apprehension of the object' (Muller 2017:352). For Voetius (as cited by Goudriaan 2006:274) both *synderesis* and natural law is part of humanity to the extent that no one is 'without the law of nature, synderesis, and natural conscience'.

Van Mastricht (2018:83) lists four things which refutes those who deny that natural theology is possible. According to him (Van Mastricht 2018:83), 'Scripture', 'conscience', 'the consent of the nations', and 'experience' testifies to the legitimacy of natural theology. Furthermore, '[t]he Reformed certainly accept both innate and acquired natural theology'. Concerning the uses of natural theology, Van Mastricht (2018:78) makes another list of four. Firstly, natural theology 'renders the impious without excuse'. Secondly, natural theology powerfully refutes 'the pagans and atheists'. Thirdly, revealed theology is 'confirmed to an amazing degree when we discover that it agrees completely with natural theology'. Finally, it allows Christians who root themselves 'chiefly in the recognition of revealed truth' to 'discern that nature itself applauds it'. This aspect is also relevant to morality in one's 'pursuit of the good', as 'nature itself calls us in the same direction as revelation' in the sphere of morality.[18]

As Pictet (1876:21) introduces one to the theme of the 'knowledge of God', he mentions that '[t]he *innate* notion of the Deity is that which is so peculiar to man' and that those who are able to use their reason 'cannot avoid very often thinking of God'. He also refers to '[t]he *acquired* notion' which is 'the careful observation of created things'. Pictet

(1876:22) consequently also links the knowledge of God with 'common notions' and states that together they 'make up a system of natural theology'. Moreover, the 'Gentiles' were capable of attaining certain truths like '[t]hat there is a God, and but one God – that God is none of those things which are visible and corruptible', including certain moral truths which also links up with his comment that 'from the time when [*God*] created man, he had engraven the natural law upon his heart' (Pictet 1876:226).

Turretin (1992:6) answers the question about the legitimacy of natural theology by insisting that '[t]he orthodox … uniformly teach that there is a natural theology'. This natural theology is 'partly innate', as it is 'derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions', and 'partly acquired', as it is 'drawn from the book of creatures discursively'. Natural theology shows 'the goodness of God towards sinners' and also holds a certain 'subjective condition' intact through which one may be prepared for the 'admission of the light of grace because God does not appeal to brutes and stocks, but to rational creatures' (Turretin 1992:10). This statement in and of itself assumes that God's 'rational creatures' own certain 'presupposed articles' by virtue of their natural reason which may function as a 'medium' through which people can be 'drawn to faith' (Duby 2019:101; Turretin 1992:24). Besides his favourable approach to natural theology, Turretin (1992:7) also maintains that there is 'in man a natural law written upon each one's conscience excusing and accusing them in good and bad actions'.

The basic model concerning natural theology for many Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians was therefore an acknowledgement that '[p]agan philosophy knows something of God as Creator from the order of nature'. However, because of sin, these pagans failed 'to move from that knowledge to true religion'. Therefore, special revelation is necessary for saving knowledge of God, especially as it is relevant to knowledge of the gospel and its promises of salvation (Muller 2003a:289). In no way does this render natural knowledge of God false or of no use, but *only* insufficient for salvation. Natural theology furthermore 'exists as a result rather than as a basis for Christian doctrine' (Muller 2003a:308; see Sutanto 2021:265–266).[19] It clearly has an 'apologetic function' as 'a form of Christian philosophy' which is engaged in 'from an avowedly Christian perspective'. As a 'rational exercise … it attempted to debate with non-Christian theistic philosophies on the common ground of reason' (Muller 2018:527; Vos 2022:5).

Both natural theology and natural law has always been cherished within the Reformed tradition as something 'which represents a continuity with the theologians of the patristic era and Middle Ages' (Fesko in the *Introduction* of Vos 2022:xvii). The Reformed scholar, McNeill (1946:168), for

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18.See Van Mastricht (2018:78) for his list of the potential abuses of natural theology.

19.Muller (2003a) insists that:

> … [w]e must object strenuously … to the all-too-frequent and utterly erroneous claim that orthodox or scholastic Protestant theology generally viewed natural revelation and the natural theology drawn from it as a foundation on which supernatural revelation and a supernatural theology can build. (p. 309)

example begins his article by emphasising that there is 'no real discontinuity between the teaching of the Reformers and that of their predecessors with respect to natural law' (also see Grabill 2006:3).

Staying true to the eclectic nature of the way the Reformers approached the use of philosophy in matters of theology, this discussion will now utilise helpful sources from various theological traditions to engage secularism's rejection of the transcendent and its progressive ideas pertaining to sexuality (see Bavinck 2003:608–609; see Muller 2003a:376–382).

The use of philosophy in the church's grappling with secularism and progressive ideas

It is no secret that the impact of secularism is such that '[*a*]ll possible knowledge is restricted to the temporal'. Metaphysics has been cut off from the transcendent and, in the process, 'consigned to the junkyard of skepticism'. According to secularism, '[*t*]here is no transcendent, no eternal – only the phenomenal bounded by the steel door of time and space' (Sproul, Gerstner & Lindsley 1984:7). Needless to say, this approach to reality established what the Roman Catholic philosopher, Taylor (Smith 2014:141) refers to as an 'immanent frame' where people live their lives 'entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order' and therefore 'precludes transcendence'. Meaning and significance are now attempted to be accounted for without 'any appeal to the divine or transcendence'. This, for the most part, leads one to the question about God's existence which 'must be posed again and again in the course of any life that is truly rational' (Hart 2013:94).

Harking back to Ursinus (1888:121), he mentions that God's existence 'is proven by many arguments common both to philosophy and theology'. Van Mastricht (2019:45) explains that God, as 'the absolute first being', can be demonstrated by *reasons*, 'because once atheists are convinced by reasons, they can be remarkably confirmed by testimonies of every kind'. Similarly, Turretin (1992:169) affirms that 'the existence of God' can be 'irrefutably demonstrated'. Despite some of his negative comments on natural theology, Bavinck (2003:307) does remark that 'the proofs for the existence' of God 'are rising in value' and that the 'sound idea inherent in the old natural theology is gradually gaining more recognition'. These demonstrations and arguments are based on *general revelation*. Sproul et al. (1984:25) reminds one that 'natural theology … does not stand in contradiction to divine revelation nor does it exclude such revelation. In fact, natural theology is *dependent* upon divine revelation for its content'.

Reality, by virtue of being God's revelation in nature, inevitably establishes a rudimentary *insita* knowledge of God in people. No matter how much one wants to be cut off from the transcendent truth of God, aspects of his revelation cannot fail to be apprehensively known. The Catholic philosopher, Przywara (as cited by Betz in Przywara 2014:54),

explains, for example, how one might 'ascend from the perfection of finite things to the infinite source of all perfection'. One might see 'a glimpse of the majesty of the immutable shining through the flitting back and forth of mutable things'. As one experiences other persons, it may lead to a 'sense of the personality of God as the fulfilment of everything we intimate in personal greatness'. This sounds similar to what the Lutheran sociologist, Berger (1970:52–53), calls 'signals of transcendence'. These signals are 'phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our "natural" reality but that appear to point beyond that reality'. These revelational signals 'belong to ordinary everyday awareness' and have a twofold effect: 'it acts as a contradiction and a desire. It acts as a contradiction in that it punctures the adequacy of what we once believed' and as a desire in that it 'arouses in us a desire or longing for a new answer that is surer, richer and more adequate' (Guinness 2015:134).

Because of an *insita* knowledge of God, as entailed by *common notions*, 'one may [*therefore*] start with any area of reality in order to start with and move towards the transcendent truth of God's existence' (Nerness 2020:195). In other words, a discursive movement based on the apprehension of the *effects in* creation to the *cause of* creation.[20] This is then where *insita* knowledge is further developed into *acquisita* knowledge as part of the apologetic function of natural theology in the Reformed tradition (see Sudduth 2016:4).

One such an approach which can be unpacked in both an *insita* and *acquisita* way is based on the so-called *essence* and *existence* distinction. This distinction maintains that 'there is a real distinction in a created thing between its essence and its existence' (Howe 2017:3). Howe (2017:3) explains that a 'thing's essence is *what* it is' and '[*i*]ts existence is *that* it is'. As a human being, for example, '[*y*]our essence is what makes you a human. Your existence is what makes you a being.' Moreover, one can know *what* something is without knowing *that* it is. This serves to show that this distinction can indeed be discovered *in* reality.

Bavinck (2019b:26–27) provides some insights here as one investigates the essence and existence distinction in a way that, according to some scholars, lays even deeper than *insita* knowledge. When reflecting on the 'sense of Divinity' or, in the words of Paul, 'an ability to see the invisible things of God … in the visible things of creation', he prefers to call it 'a

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20. This order, however, can never be turned around. Vos (2012) states that:

Articuli puri [pure articles] are those that cannot be derived both from reason and from revelation but depend entirely on revelation. *Articuli mixti* [mixed articles] flow from both reason and revelation. The question then is whether creation can be proven by reason. That has been attempted by starting from the concept of God. God, one says, could not remain shut up within Himself. He needed a world in order to love it, etc. Such reasoning is not legitimate. As far as we can judge, had the creation remained nonexistent, God would have been all-sufficient, as He is now. We can certainly reason from the world up to God, but we cannot by logic descend from God to the world. (p. 157)

Bahnsen's formulation (1998) of the so-called transcendental argument for God's existence is also phrased in the same way in order to allow for a *demonstratia quia*, i.e., a type of demonstration from effect to cause in order to ground something:

A transcendental argument begins with any item of experience or belief whatsoever and proceeds, by critical analysis, to ask what conditions (or what other beliefs) would need to be true in order for that original experience or belief to make sense, be meaningful, or be intelligible to us. (p. 501–502)

sense of absolute dependency'. Elsewhere he (Bavinck 2018:64) calls this 'an absolute feeling of dependence'. He explains that humans experience their existence as a consciousness of 'ourselves as created'. In an absolute sense everyone is dependent 'on God, who is the one, eternal, and real being'. For him, this is equivalent to Calvin's notion of the *sensus divinitatis*. *Bavinckian* scholars like Sutanto (2021:269–270), understand this as a pre-cognitive 'feeling and affection'. This 'feeling' is accordingly what 'underlies cognitive forms of knowing' and 'brings out humanity's utter dependence upon God really and existentially'. Elsewhere Brock and Sutanto (2022:75) clarifies this as an 'affection that lies beneath all of our cognitive and volitional activity'. Properly speaking, for Bavinck the notion of 'feeling' is, according to Brock and Sutanto (2022:75), a 'specific activity within the knowing faculty in the human psyche'. It is 'knowledge without concepts' (Brock & Sutanto 2022:78, 79). Instead of a precognitive *feeling* or *affection* as something which is still somehow a subset of knowledge, Nerness (2022) refers to Bavinck's notion of the 'sense of absolute dependency' as 'primal knowledge' which paves the way for *insita* knowledge of God. It is a 'primordial revelation' which results in the recognition of one's 'creatureliness' where existence is 'the most primal gift (*act*) God gives to a creature' (Nerness 2022). Accordingly, in the context of the essence and existence distinction, Nerness (2022) uniquely combines this 'sense of absolute dependency' with the realisation that, as human beings, humans do not *predefine* their own *essence* as humans, nor do they *uphold* their own *existence* as beings. In this manner, the essence and existence distinction is richly brought into conversation with Bavinck by Nerness (2022).[21]

The Reformed theologian, Payne (2020:251), discusses the knowledge of God derived from nature in the context of Calvin's *sensus divinitatus* in an *insita* way. He couples Calvin's notion of the *sensus divinitatis* with the 20th century Thomistic scholar, Jacques Maritain's notion of the 'intuition of being'. The category of the 'intuition of being' is when 'the individual surveys his own existence and is led by it to a realisation that God exists and is the sustainer of each and every other existing thing'. Knowledge of God's existence

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21. To be sure, some ways of phrasing Bavinck's notion (see 2018:57; 2019b:26–27) of the 'sense of absolute dependency' or 'feeling of dependence' is up for dispute. The reason for this is because not all scholars would view this notion as *insita* knowledge, but rather as a *feeling* that is underneath *thinking* or *willing* (see Sutanto 2021). This category of 'feeling' would then be clarified as something which is still supposedly a 'knowing faculty' (Brock & Sutanto 2022:78). Accordingly, the reason why this notion of Bavinck's (2018:57) 'feeling of dependence' is up for dispute, is because the category of 'affection' or 'feeling' already 'underscores the need to affirm its cognitive character as well'. Feeling or affection 'presupposes some intellectual apprehension of an object' and, consequently, the claim that 'feeling' lies beneath 'thinking and willing' might not be the best way of approaching this discussion (Duby 2021:310). Even though Nerness (2022) prefers the word 'primal' to indicate that it paves the way for *insita* knowledge of God, he still locates this in the mind as a cognitive operation, albeit deeper than *insita* knowledge. Muller (2019:23) contributes to this discussion by still linking Bavinck's insights to 'the traditional understanding of knowledge as rooted in sense perception' which found common ground with 'the nineteenth-century understanding of consciousness and its interconnectedness with the world order'. Duby (2021:310) takes one back to Calvin himself as it is his use of the notion of a *sensus divinitatis* that lies at the root of this discussion. The point is that although Calvin's category of the *sensus divinitatis* precedes ratiocination, it is still located in the mind and therefore does not precede cognition as such. The Latin reference of *sensus* is not referring to the category of *volition*, but rather *cognition*. One must accordingly not confuse *pre-cognitive* with *pre-scientific*. The Latin term *sensus* can consequently be described as *notitia* indicating 'basic awareness or apprehension of something that requires no ratiocination'. At the very least, however, it must be said that Bavinck's input does indeed emphasise the fact that something important is happening within the human person's psyche when realising one's dependence on God (Duby 2021:310; see Muller 2019:22, 23, 27, 30).

accordingly 'is known in an instant, before an act of reflection'. The implication that is realised in an instant upon one's confrontation with existence is that '[w]e are not our own creators' and that '[i]t is not I who bring myself forth out of nothing; it is Another'. Moreover, it is 'His very action that makes me to be'; in other words, to *exist*, and it is also his action that makes 'me to be in the way in which I am'; in other words, according to the *essence* of humanness. Notice how Payne implicitly makes use of the essence and existence distinction. This might be 'fairly straightforward to a Christian way of thinking'; however, it depends 'upon a rather complex metaphysical system – one also referred to in natural theology' (Payne 2020:252).

These fundamental metaphysical realities, which is realised in an *insita* way, have also been used in an *acquisita* way to argue for God's existence 'as the one in whom essence and [*existence*] are conterminous' (Van Til 1979:218). Howe (2017) uses a helpful analogy to exposit this argument.

> Suppose … you were hearing music … you would not ask where did the music came from or how did the music come to be. Rather, you would ask what *is causing the music to be right now*. This is so because … you realize that music is music only as it is being caused to be music at every instance that it is music. As soon as the cause of the music stops causing the music, the music goes out of existence. Music as music must constantly be caused to be music if it is to be music at all. (p. 12)

In this sense, the existence of creatures is that which 'actualizes an essence' and that 'essence exists only as it is being caused to exist at every moment of its existence' . This implies that the moment 'the cause of the existence of the essence stops causing the existence of the essence, the essence goes out of existence' (Howe 2017:12). The Eastern Orthodox philosopher, Hart (2013:91) insists, in this context, that the 'physical order confronts us at every moment not simply with its ontological fortuity but also with the intrinsic ontological poverty of all things physical'. This is so, because of its 'total reliance for their existence, in every instant, upon realities outside themselves'. Every finite thing is composed 'of an essence (its "what it is") with a unique existence (its "that it is")'. One's essence and existence, however, 'come from elsewhere'.

The source of our essence and existence can therefore only be traced to a being whose 'existence is its essence, which is to say a thing that exists because its very essence is existence'. In such a being there would be no essence and existence distinction and would mean that this being is 'substantial existence itself' (Howe 2017:19–20). The implication of this argument is that the composition of *essence* and *existence* in finite things 'has to be composed by the gift of the Uncomposed-Composer' (Nerness 2020:226). Against 'existential inertia', the Roman Catholic scholar, Feser (2017) explains that this argument, among others, establishes the truth that:

> [T]he world would be instantly annihilated in the absence of divine causation. Creation is not a onetime event that occurred at

some distant point in the past. It is occurring at every moment. (p. 233)

If some of these truths were to be grounded in Scripture, they 'seem to fit the revelatory latitude' of God's 'invisible attributes' according to Romans 1:20, as well as Paul's appeal to 'the unknown god' in Acts 17:23 (ESV) (Nerness 2020:144). Moreover, as Howe (2017:22) suggest, 'this is how God identified Himself to Moses in Exodus 3' where He made Himself known as 'I am who I am' (Ex 3:14 – ESV).

To be sure, the question about the existence of God will never disappear. However, it would seem as if popular dialogues inside and outside the church have been dominated by questions surrounding sexuality. With the rise of *expressive individualism* and *emotivism*, progressive ideas pertaining to sexuality, as they are motivated by a secular stance towards reality, has made inroads into large parts of society, including certain Protestant churches in South Africa. This is especially where the need for *natural law* arises.

Expressive individualism is characterised by the illusion that everyone has their own way of realising their humanity and that 'it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside' (Taylor 2007:475). Objective reality as God's revelation 'is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desire, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to or passively accept' (Trueman 2020:41). *Emotivism* is furthermore defined as:

> [T]he doctrine that evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character. (MacIntyre 2007:11)

The combination of these two seculars 'doctrines' has proven to be highly influential. It created an 'ethic of authenticity' in which everyone is allowed to 'do their own thing' and no one may criticise someone else's values (Taylor 2007:484). This scenario has made it extremely difficult to address issues surrounding sexuality. Although Christians are called to speak the truth when it comes to issues about sexual morality, they must nevertheless do so with love, wisdom and discernment. Of course, a compromise on *truth* for the sake of *love* will end in the loss of both.

According to the Reformed theologian, Fesko (2019:18), natural law, as it is entailed by *common notions*, is that part of reality that binds both the believer and nonbeliever 'to the same moral standards but leaves the unbeliever far short of true faith and saving knowledge'. Natural law furthermore assumes that 'created essences' or natures exist and that these 'essences' can be known (Haines 2017:23). Given that natural law is biblically grounded in Romans 2:15 as 'the work of the law' (ESV) which is written on all peoples hearts, and subsequently also anchored in reality as designed and upheld by God, it 'assumes the existence of a superior being' and the supposition that the 'idea of each and every thing is to be found, as that thing is meant to be, in the mind of God'

(Haines 2017:13, 22). Calvin (2011:281) accordingly affirmed 'natural law' and stated that there 'is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law'.

The 'nature' in *natural* law 'refers to that metaphysical constituent of a thing by virtue of which it is the kind of thing that it is' which would be its *essence* as already referred to. This undoubtedly includes the *telos* of the 'thing' under consideration as its final cause which defines the 'reason for its existence' or the 'end towards which it naturally tends' (Haines 2017:33; Howe 2021:153). For the most part, although not exclusively, natural law 'defines morality … in terms of human nature' (Howe 2021:153). Consequently, this moral theory has bearing on sexuality, especially pertaining to the differences between the sexes as they are fixed in human nature. In this sense, there is a reason why Paul calls homosexuality 'contrary to nature' (Rm 1:26 – ESV).

Morse (2018:27), a Roman Catholic scholar, identifies '[t]he Gender Ideology' as a fundamental characteristic of the *sexual revolution*. This ideology entails that 'all differences we observe between men and women are socially constructed' and must therefore be deconstructed. This ideology is not only about equal dignity between men and women, but the insistence that 'differences between men and women are evidence of injustice'. When the differences between the sexes are upheld, however, it is 'considered a social heresy'. Given the self-evident truth of the differences between the sexes as '[n]ature teaches this distinction', Bavinck (2012:25, [*author's emphasis*]) observes that 'no science or philosophy is needed to acquaint oneself with' these differences. Because man and woman 'differ in physical structure and physical strength, in psychological nature and psychological strength', they 'naturally enjoy different rights and are called to different duties'. Although nations were different from each other during history …

> … [T]he man has always been a man and the woman has always been a woman. There is nothing mutable about this fact; we have only to accept it. It is not a work of the devil to be destroyed, but a work of the Father to be acknowledged. (Bavinck 2012:65)

These truths delivered to the human mind by virtue of natural law, however, are now being suppressed and rejected as sexuality has been more and more politicised. During the last 100 years, 'sexual desire' has emerged 'as a primary category for understanding identity'. Sex is no longer something humans *do*, but what they *are* which is currently why there is the 'notion of sexual identity and the ever-expanding letters that make up the LGBTQ+ [*lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer*] alliance' (Trueman 2022:71). Anderson (2019:158), the Roman Catholic scholar, therefore, reminds one that, given 'a personal bodily nature', some things 'are good for our nature, and other things are not'. While some 'activities contribute to our wellbeing and perfect our nature … others detract from our flourishing and defile our given nature'. Healthy cultures accordingly stand upon 'a sound understanding of what human nature is' and

because 'these truths are universal and inescapable' the truths, which arises from reality concerning the sexes and gender, can influence 'behavior and [*give*] structure to social relations'.

After deeply reflecting on the ideological antecedents of the sexual revolution in figures such as Karl Marx (1818–1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), the Reformed scholar, Trueman (2020:405) encourages Protestants to 'recover both natural law and a high view of the physical body'. 'Natural law', he says, 'is something that died away in the last two centuries' among Protestants and must therefore be retrieved to assist theologians in formulating a 'theology of the body' (Trueman 2022:182). He adds that his fundamental concern is not for the persuasion of the 'wider world' by a robust application of natural law. Even though this is necessary, Trueman's concern is mainly 'for the church herself'. Reformed ministers will sooner or later be confronted with 'congregants asking questions about matters from surrogacy to transgenderism' and in those circumstances 'the biblical position on natural law and the order of the created world will prove invaluable'.

The call for Reformed ministers is therefore to reintroduce church members to natural law, as it is part of the historic Reformed tradition. As the Protestant scholar, Mauser (2020), reminds one:

> Insofar as we can reintroduce this way of thinking into our society, we can start restoring justice to evil places and evil practices. Of course, we know that true peace and happiness will not come until the King of Kings returns. But, for now, we are called upon to stand for justice and use all the tools God has given us, including natural law, to point people to truth, goodness, and beauty. (p. 293)

Conclusion

While a present-day misunderstanding of the concept of *sola Scriptura* leads to an anti-intellectualism and fideism, which, in turn, leave members of Reformed churches vulnerable to secularism and its progressive ideas, a recovery of philosophy in matters of theology can assist the Reformed minister and church member to better engage with secularism and progressive ideas. As philosophy is the *handmaid* to theology, and definitely not condemned by the apostle Paul in Colossians 2:8, it can confirm many of the theological and moral truths explicitly taught or implicitly assumed in the Bible. Philosophy, especially as it is manifested in both *natural theology* and *natural law*, must therefore be pursued by the Christian as it serves one's faith and will prove helpful to navigate different discussions. *Natural theology* will help to establish the existence of God against secularism's rejection of the transcendent. *Natural law*, in turn, will prove invaluable to point people to the truth of their nature, as it is fixed in reality, especially pertaining to recent discussions surrounding sexuality and the differences between the sexes.

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