

The Use of Philosophy in Early Modern Reformed Theology

David S. Sytsma

Throughout the history of the church, the relation between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, divine and human wisdom has always caused controversy. In the early church, some theologians such as Tertullian blamed philosophy for the growth of heresy, while others such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria saw good in philosophy and sought to make it serve theology. Clement famously allegorized philosophy as the handmaiden to theology, comparing their relation to Hagar and Sarah. In modern times there are still strong disagreements over how to relate faith and reason. Modern disagreements over apologetics and other doctrines often resolve into more fundamental issues about faith and reason. It is not my purpose today to rehearse 20th century Reformed battles such as the classical apologetics of R.C. Sproul and the presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til. Instead, I want to discuss the way early Reformed theologians in the 16th and 17th centuries addressed the relation between theology and philosophy. Specifically, I want to address the way a new philosophical paradigm associated with modernity, namely Cartesianism, altered the relation between philosophy and theology. The 17th century marked a major turning point on this issue, and I believe both the philosophical changes and the theological response contributed to the larger decline of Reformed orthodoxy during the late 17th and 18th centuries which we know as the early Enlightenment.

The thesis for today's lecture is fairly straightforward: I will argue that during the period of Reformed orthodoxy, Reformed theologians taught that philosophy should play an integral but subordinate role in theology; however, with the rise of Cartesianism, Reformed theologians under the influence of Descartes's philosophy, reconceived the relation between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, as independent and separate. This separation expressed itself in various ways, and I will illustrate it with two concrete examples: the doctrines of creation and natural theology. In the doctrine of creation, Cartesian theologians entertained theories of world origins difficult to reconcile with traditional Reformed readings of Genesis 1. With regard to natural theology, Cartesian theologians separated natural theology from supernatural revelation. In both cases, there was a noticeable change of approach from earlier Reformed orthodoxy.

1. Reformed Theologians on the Use of Philosophy

The use of philosophy in the Reformation, particularly in the thought of John Calvin, is already a well-researched area of study. From the time of John Calvin, Reformed theologians consistently argued against the false conclusions of philosophy while insisting on the usefulness of true philosophy for theology. Yet even when Reformed theologians were integrating philosophical categories into their theology, they did not entirely accept any one authority, and they remained critical of Aristotle. There were also varying degrees of acceptance and intramural disputes over philosophy among post-Reformation theologians.

One of the key texts for discussion of philosophy was Colossians 2:8, which reads in the authorized version, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." This passage clearly requires that philosophy be judged and corrected by theology. Reformed theologians typically were careful not to reject philosophy in its entirety, but took Paul's warning as directed to specific teachings that would conflict with Christian doctrine. John Calvin, for example, remarks that although "many have mistakenly imagined that philosophy is here condemned by Paul," what Paul condemns is the "false conceit of wisdom" – i.e. false philosophy.¹

One of Calvin's contemporaries, Peter Martyr Vermigli, discusses Colossians 2:8 in the introduction to his Commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Like Calvin, Vermigli restricts Paul's condemnation to philosophy that is "corrupted by human invention."

¹ Calvin, Comm. on Col. 2:8.

Vermigli contrasts such false philosophy with true philosophy, which is derived from divinely implanted knowledge and creation. Vermigli argues that if there are skills and areas of knowledge such as fishing, hunting, and legal studies that not in themselves against piety, how much more so the knowledge of oneself? Philosophy helps to clarify human acts, choices, virtue, vice, etc. Moreover, philosophy is useful to Christians because by comparison with philosophy we can better understand how Scripture surpasses matters of philosophy. Through comparison Christians can “more easily avoid the mistakes” of philosophy. Vermigli mentions a number of specific mistakes from philosophy:

- eternity of the universe [Aristotle];
- composition of universe from random atoms [Epicurus];
- Stoic fate;
- Academic doubt;
- idle deities of Epicureans;
- community of wives [Plato];
- pleasure as the highest good [Epicurus].²

Vermigli’s Commentary on Aristotle’s ethics in fact practices the comparison of Scripture and philosophy. At the end of each exposition of a chapter of Aristotle’s ethics, Vermigli includes comparison to Scripture, showing how Scripture either agrees with Aristotle, surpasses Aristotle, or contradicts Aristotle. These comments by Vermigli’s on philosophy were integrated into his *Loci Communes* which was widely read in the post-Reformation era.³

In the seventeenth century, the Reformed scholastics continued to make the same points as the Reformers – that Paul condemns false philosophy, but allows for true philosophy subject to correction by Scripture. At the same time, Reformed scholastics refined their discussion of philosophy with more details and distinctions. This more detailed discussion of reason and philosophy was due in part to debate with adversaries such as Lutherans and Socinians. The Gnesio-Lutherans, in polemic over the Lord’s Supper, accused the Reformed of subjecting Scripture to the standard of reason. This accusation elicited replies from the Reformed side. One reply to the Lutherans came from Zacharias Ursinus in the work *Admonitio Christiana* (1581), which Ursinus wrote on behalf of theologians under Duke Casimir. In reply to the claim that Reformed theologians interpret Scripture – in particular, “This is my body” – according to the judgement of reason, Ursinus replied with the standard distinction between the use and abuse of reason. But he added a distinction between principles known by nature and principles revealed beyond nature. He argued that as long as philosophy uses true principles of nature for understanding natural things, there is a legitimate use for philosophy. However, in constructing theological doctrines, the theologian must use principles beyond nature.⁴

John Davenant’s Commentary on Colossians provides another good example of post-Reformation refinement on the use of philosophy.⁵ Davenant’s Commentary was praised as among the best commentaries on Colossians by Gisbert Voetius, so we know Reformed theologians were reading it. Richard Baxter had read it and repeats some of the same points. Like his predecessors, Davenant begins by making the point that Paul does not condemn true philosophy, since it is the “offspring of right reason” and thus a gift of God. Taking a page from Clement of Alexandria, whom he cites, Davenant argues that whatever is true from any philosophical sect should be called philosophy.

² Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 13.

³ Vermigli, *Common places* (1583), 300-302 (II.iii).

⁴ Donald Sinnema, “Johann Jungnitz on the Use of Aristotelian Logic in Theology,” in *Späthumanismus und reformierte Konfession*, ed. Christoph Strohm, Joseph S. Freedman, and Herman J. Selderhuis (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 127-52, here 137-39.

⁵ John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, trans. Josiah Allport, 2 vols. (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1831-1832), 1:387-399.

By vain and deceitful philosophy, Davenant understands philosophy that goes beyond the limits of reason and pronounces on matters of faith above reason. It is important to note that Davenant draws on a distinction associated with Thomas Aquinas that divides matters according to reason from matters above reason. Davenant notes that when it comes to spiritual matters above reason, reason is able to perceive the existence of those spiritual things, but not able to perceive beyond them.

The natural knowledge of spiritual things is obscure and feeble, extending only to the existence of those things. As, for instance, that there is a God, that there is a worship of God, that there is a blessedness for souls, reason and philosophy perceives; but how God is to be worshipped, how happiness is to be obtained, it discovers not: whilst, therefore, it attempts to determine respecting these things and the like, it is vain and deceitful. This knowledge may render a man inexcusable, but it cannot render him a competent teacher, unless knowledge infused by grace be added.⁶

Davenant outlines three main abuses of philosophy in matters of theology:

1. When reason tries to deduce fundamentals of Christianity from its own principles, it abuses its own authority. For example, reason cannot of itself determine doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, justification, and worship of God. All these are taken from higher principles – God’s will as revealed in his word.
2. When reason posits a contradiction and opposition between its principles and those of theology. Davenant cites Aquinas that theology does not contradict true reason, but is above it even though it may appear to be opposed. Davenant gives some examples here:
 - a. From principle “out of nothing, nothing can be made” – philosophers might oppose creation.
 - b. From principle “dissimilar species cannot be predicated of each other, and cannot unite in the same subject” – philosophers might oppose incarnation.
 - c. From principle “there is no return from privation to possession” – philosophers might oppose resurrection of the dead.
 - d. The solution to each of these is that they are true as far as finite power is concerned – e.g., normally out of nothing, nothing comes – but it is not true absolutely.
3. Finally, when philosophy teaches errors that are in themselves untrue even according to reason. The Christian needs to be careful, in Davenant’s estimation, because all major ancient philosophical sects introduced errors. “Thus the Stoics, Epicureans, Aristotelians, and as many as come under the denomination of philosophers, do not always teach the dictates of right reason, but the dreams of their own fancy.”⁷

So, to summarize, philosophy can come into conflict with theology either by (1) attempted to derive theological content from rational principles, (2) taking a true principle in the rational order and supposing a contradiction or impossibility in relation to theology, or (3) introducing an error of a particular philosophical sect into theology.

Davenant attributes this third abuse of introducing philosophical error into theology as the reason by the church fathers so often attacked philosophy. According to Davenant, this is why Tertullian complained about philosophy as a source of heresy. The third abuse is very important for Reformed interaction with philosophy. Davenant sets a high standard for theological use of philosophy. In effect, he demands that the theologian evaluate philosophy not only according to whether it contradicts theological principles, but also evaluate philosophy according to reason itself. He says this because he takes seriously the potential for philosophical errors to corrupt theology.

Having warned about the abuses of philosophy, Davenant sets forth five major uses of philosophy:

⁶ Davenant, *Colossians*, 1:393.

⁷ Davenant, *Colossians*, 1:394-395.

1. Understanding Scripture – “The knowledge of philosophy is useful, nay, necessary to the clear understanding and perspicuous elucidation of many passages which everywhere occur in the sacred Scriptures.” As examples, when Scripture mentions motions of the heavenly bodies, knowledge of astronomy is needed.
2. Rules of reasoning (logic) – “Philosophy, especially that which teaches the rules and the art of reasoning rightly, is particularly necessary, and to be employed by all, in discriminating between, and treating all controversies relating to religion.” In this category as the “laws of good and necessary consequence”.
3. Responding to unbelievers – both for instruction prior to faith (on model of Paul in Acts 17:24), and defense to those who resist theological truth. “The knowledge of philosophy is necessary, as well for the instruction of those who have not yet enrolled themselves under Christ, as for resistance, if they should obstinately oppose our Religion.”
4. It sharpens the mind in general – “The use of philosophy and of literature is also valuable among Christians.”
5. As something enjoyable, as a seasoning to spiritual food – “...that it may even be employed to the moderate and useful delight of the hearers, as a certain seasoning, as it were, drawn from polite literature.”

We can gather from the example of Davenant that Reformed theologians took an active interest in philosophy not only for its use in understanding Scripture and drawing conclusions, but also to avoid corruption of theological doctrines. Reformed theologians were alert to the possibility that a philosophical error, once accepted in theology, would overturn theological doctrines. An underlying assumption for Reformed theologians was an adherence to the unity of truth in the domains of reason and faith. They asserted that reason and faith should harmonize, and they argued for the necessity of correcting erroneous philosophy.

2. Corrections of Philosophical Errors Before Modern Philosophy

It is well known that during the 16th and 17th centuries, before the rise of modern philosophy, Aristotle’s philosophy generally dominated university education. Reformed theologians also promoted the usefulness of Aristotelian philosophy to Christian education. However, it is important to take note of the fact that Reformed theologians had been actively identifying and correcting philosophical errors in various areas of thought. It is not as though post-Reformation Reformed theologians adopted Aristotelian philosophy without question. In fact, Reformed scholastics often criticized medieval scholastics for relying too easily on philosophical premises and Aristotle. One of the influential Reformed theologians on this matter was Antoine de Chandieu (1534-1591), professor at Geneva from 1585 to 1591. Chandieu said that false philosophy was a trojan horse brought in to destroy the church by medieval scholastics. He argued that medieval scholastics often based theological conclusions on logical principles and philosophical axioms rather than Scripture.⁸ This charge was repeated in the seventeenth century by Protestants generally. John Weemes, in discussing the use of medieval scholastics, advises that they should be selectively appropriated precisely because many of their premises are taken from principles from non-theological sources. Gisbert Voetius likewise accused the medieval scholastics of inappropriately basing theological conclusions on philosophy. Voetius wrote, “most [of the scholastics] are guilty of confusion of categories [metabasin eis allo genos], and continually attempt to demonstrate the mysteries of faith by reason and the natural light, or by philosophy and philosophical authority.”⁹

The purging of philosophical errors applied not only to the medieval scholastics, but also to specific philosophical disciplines. The disciplines of ethics and physics were taught at Reformed schools from the sixteenth century, and Reformed theologians made significant efforts to reform the existing disciplines in light of Scripture and theological doctrine. This could take the form of either a running

⁸ Donald Sinnema, “Antoine De Chandieu’s Call for a Scholastic Reformed Theology (1580),” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 159-90, here 174.

⁹ Voetius, SD I, 23-24. Cited in Thomas A. McGahagan, “Cartesianism in the Netherlands, 1639-1676: The New Science and the Calvinist Counter Reformation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976), 57.

commentary on an authoritative text or the construction of a systematic work. A good example of the genre of commentary is Peter Martyr Vermigli's commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Throughout his commentary, after every chapter, Vermigli includes points of comparison with Scripture in which he highlights both similarity and difference between Aristotle and Scripture. Later, Lambert Daneau worked on systematic treatments of physics and ethics. Daneau's *Christian Ethics* and *Christian Physics* were widely read and had a large influence on the Reformed tradition in the seventeenth century. In these works Daneau drew selectively on philosophy while identifying problematic philosophical doctrines and replacing them with doctrines informed by Christian theology.

After Daneau, works appear with titles such as *Christian Ethics*, *Ethico-theological System*, and *Christian Moral Philosophy*.¹⁰ These works still incorporate ancient philosophical ethics, but seek to correct errors in moral philosophy by Christian theology.¹¹ These works on Christian ethics are thus characterized by extensive integration of biblical and philosophical material on ends, law, and virtues.¹² Daneau recognizes, for example, that an account of the virtues is found "partly in Sacred Scripture, partly in the philosophers," but insists that the virtues pertaining to the first table of the Decalogue should be taken from Scripture rather than the philosophers.¹³ What Daneau and others have in mind with their systems of *Christian Ethics* is in effect an ethics that broadly follows the method of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* – with its discussion of the highest good, human action (faculties and choice), and the virtues – but deepens and corrects this material by Christian reflection on such matters as eternal life, the fall, the conscience, revealed law, and Christian virtues.

The same effort to correct natural knowledge by means of Christian theology and Scripture is present in the Christian physics of Lambert Daneau and others. In his prefatory letter to his Christian physics, Daneau complains about the dangers of theologians appropriating the errors of philosophers. He says this kind of thing happened in the early church, where teachers of the church learned philosophy at a young age and then became accustomed to error, such that even after their conversion to Christianity their philosophical errors remained. In this work, says Daneau, he took inspiration from the early church fathers themselves – Daneau claims to have read many such early Christian works: "I have briefly comprehended whatsoever I could read to have binne disputed by the auncient and holy Fathers, either against the Philosophers, or Heretikes."¹⁴

Despite the appearance that Daneau derives his physics basically from Scripture, it is actually a carefully constructed hybrid between philosophical and theological sources that takes into consideration multiple epistemic sources – sense, reason, and faith. In order to correct errors regarding the foundations of natural philosophy, Daneau distinguished between the general and particular part of physics. The general part consists of the "origin, nature, and causes" of the world in general, along with the preservation and growth of things in general. The particular part consists of the "natures, powers, properties, and effects" of all the particular kinds of creatures such as plants, animals, and humans. According to Daneau, while Genesis 1 deals with the general part of physics, the particular part is derived from the observations of

¹⁰ Lambert Daneau, *Ethices Christianae libri tres* (Geneva: Eustache Vignon, 1577); Otho Casmann, *Ethica theosophica sive de vita hominis naturali* (Frankfurt: Zacharias Palthenius, 1602); Moïse Amyraut, *La morale chrestienne*, 6 vols. (Saumur: Isaac Desbordes, 1652-1660); William Colvill, *Philosophia moralis christiana* (Edinburgh: George Swintoun, & Jacob Glen, 1670); Adrianus Cocquius, *Ethica sacra*, in *Observationes critico-sacrae in sacrum Novi Testamenti codicem* (Leiden: Arnold Doude, 1678); Johann Rudolf Ott, *Ethica christiana iuxta decalogi praecepta ex disputationibus publicis enata & in compendium contracta a Job. Rodolpho Ottio* (Zürich: David Gessner, 1692); Jacques Abbadié, *L'art de se connoître soy-meme, ou, La recherche des sources de la morale*, 2 vols. (Rotterdam: Pierre van der Slaart, 1692); David Constant, *Systema ethico-theologicum viginti quinque disputationibus in Academia Lausannensi habitis absolutum* (Lausanne: David Gentil, 1695); Johann Heinrich Heidegger, *Ethicae Christianae prima elementa* (Frankfurt/Leipzig: Fuhrmann, 1711); Bénédicte Pictet, *Medulla ethicae christianae* (Geneva: sumptibus Societatis, 1712).

¹¹ Colvill, *Philosophia moralis christiana*, fols. B3v-B5r, lists four main differences: 1) means of knowledge (revelation), 2) matter (different virtues and vices), 3) end (ignorance of the highest good and ultimate end), 4) kinds of habits (infused vs. acquired). Cocquius, *Ethica sacra*, 20-26, includes sections, "Imperfection of Moral Philosophy" and "Use and Abuse of Ethics."

¹² Sinnema, "Discipline of Ethics," 24.

¹³ Daneau, *Ethices Christianae*, 331.

¹⁴ Daneau, "The Epistle Dedicatory,"

things (natural histories) and the writings of natural philosophers. Thus, Daneau sought to make Genesis 1 a rule to understanding the most general aspects of the world, while drawing on sense and reason to fill in the details about particular creatures.

After Daneau, a number of works discuss Christian or Mosaic physics, and the intention is the same as with Christian ethics. Otto Casmann (1562-1607), a professor of philosophy at Steinfurt (1591-1594), wrote many works expanding on the concept of “true Christian philosophy” that encompassed both natural philosophy and ethics.¹⁵ Like Daneau, he taught that true philosophy is based on three sources, namely the Word of God, right reason, and unerring experience.¹⁶ According to Casmann, Scripture provides the most reliable knowledge of nature because there the Creator speaks about his own creation, whereas the philosophers frequently disagree.¹⁷ While he holds that Scripture is the touchstone of natural philosophy, Casmann also recognizes that Scripture does not discuss many things that we know to exist, and draws on a theory of accommodation to explain why Scripture passes over aspects of reality.¹⁸ In practice, Casmann’s natural philosophy discusses pagan philosophy at length and is highly Aristotelian. In his *Somotologia, General Physis* (1598), Casmann discusses “traditional peripatetic topics such as matter, form, substance, and accidents related to natural bodies.”¹⁹ Casmann is therefore an example of a Reformed philosopher who sought to bring human knowledge and the Bible together into a unified theory of reality.

So Reformed theologians sought to reform philosophical knowledge. What specific doctrines did they reform? We have many examples of Reformed theologians correcting specific philosophical doctrines in physics and ethics. First, regarding physics, since the medieval period, theologians had made a point of rejecting Aristotle’s opinion that the world is eternal, and such discussion continues among Reformed theologians. In addition, Daneau disagrees with Aristotle’s definition of nature as the principle of motion and rest that belongs primarily and intrinsically (*per se*) to things. This definition leaves out God as the first and intrinsic cause of all things and actions. Daneau echoes Calvin that secondary causes should be understood as instrumental in relation to God, while resisting any hint that secondary causes would have an independency from divine causality.²⁰

Another example of Reformed theologians and philosophers correcting philosophy can be found in the discipline of ethics. In ethics, Reformed authors frequently rejected the Stoic doctrine on the passions – the idea of *apatheia* – as incompatible with both true philosophy and Scripture. Instead, Reformed theologians, drawing on the Bible and Augustine, argued that the passions were fundamentally a good part of creation. Here Reformed theologians took the side of one philosophical sect (Aristotle) against another (Stoics) as closer to the Bible. Vermigli not only attacks Stoic teaching on the passions, but also gives theological support for Aristotle’s view: “The words of holy scripture marvelously agree,” he says, with Aristotle’s opinion that “virtues break and mitigate the passions rather than abolish them.”²¹ In contrast to the Stoics, writes Antonius Walaeus, “we confess with the Peripatetics that affections in corrupt nature often exceed their limit, yet we deny that they are evil as to their entire genus, and hence they should be regulated not eradicated.” Walaeus gives six reasons from both reason and Scripture for this position, which show, he says, that “the opinion of the Stoics is false.”²² Thus, these Reformed theologians

¹⁵ Jan Čížek, “The ‘Christian Natural Philosophy’ of Otto Casmann (1562-1607): A Case Study of Early Modern Mosaic Physics,” *Folia Philosophica* 49 (2023): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.31261/fp.15474>

¹⁶ Čížek, “Christian Natural Philosophy,” 4.

¹⁷ Čížek, “Christian Natural Philosophy,” 6.

¹⁸ Čížek, “Christian Natural Philosophy,” 6-7.

¹⁹ Čížek, “Christian Natural Philosophy,” 9-10.

²⁰ Sytsma, “Calvin, Daneau, and Physica Mosaica,” 465-66.

²¹ Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 312. On Stoic opinion, see pp. 317-18.

²² Antonius Walaeus, *Compendium ethicæ Aristotelicæ ad normam veritatis christianæ revocatum* (Leiden: Elsevier, 1620), 65-66: “Hoc affirmabant Stoici; nos quidem fatemur cum Peripateticis, affectus in natura corrupta saepe modum excedere, & iudicium mentis pervertere: tamen toto suo genere malos esse negamus, ac proinde componendos esse, non eradicandos. Rationes pro hac sententiæ hae sunt. Ex quibus argumentis invicte demonstratur, sententiam Stoicorum esse falsam.”

basically argue that human emotions are a good part of created human nature, so philosophies that entirely suppressed or eliminated emotions should be rejected as incompatible with the Bible.

Although Reformed theologians agreed that we should reject philosophical doctrines that are incompatible with theological doctrine, not everyone agreed on whether a specific philosophical doctrine did contradict theology. So there was debate over whether this or that particular doctrine actually did contradict theology. In such cases, some theologians chose to argue harmonization between a philosophical opinion and theology, while other theologians argued a contradiction and thus rejection of the philosophical doctrine.

One prominent example of a Reformed disagreement over a philosophical doctrine was the Aristotelian doctrine of happiness. Aristotle clearly viewed happiness as fulfilled in this life. Meanwhile, according to Augustine and most western theologians following him, Christian theology requires that happiness is fulfilled in the next life in union with God. So should the theologian argue a contradiction between Aristotle and theology – i.e. one can only be truly happy in union with God in the next life? Or rather harmonize Aristotle and theology by following Aquinas in bifurcating happiness into two kinds – happiness this life and happiness in the life to come? From the time of the Reformation, theologians divided over how to reconcile Aristotelian happiness with the Augustinian vision of happiness as union with God. Martin Luther, Otto Wermüller, John Calvin, Lambert Daneau, William Ames, and others argue a fundamental incompatibility between Aristotle and theology. On the other hand, Vermigli, Bartholomäus Keckermann, Clemens Timpler, William Pemble, Marcus Friedrich Wendelin, and others argue along the lines of Aquinas for a twofold happiness, with earthly happiness shadowing the heavenly.

Lambert Daneau, for example, critiques a specifically Aristotelian view of *eudaimonia* or “happiness”. According to Daneau, the “Aristotelians” (*Aristotelici*) – and here he may have in mind Christian Aristotelians such as Aquinas and Vermigli – set forth a doctrine of “twofold” *eudaimonia*, one “in this life” consisting in the continuous action of virtue, the other “after this life” consisting in the enjoyment of perfect contemplation. Daneau rejects this opinion because, first, it places an end of human action besides the glory of God, and second, it places the supreme good in the nature of humanity itself. Moreover, Augustine said that the happiness of humanity should be sought entirely beyond humanity itself.²³

Whereas Daneau argues incompatibility between Aristotle and theology, other Reformed authors argue that Aristotle’s definition can be harmonized with theology. Clemens Timpler observes that with respect to the question of happiness in this life, some deny the thesis while others affirm it, and after presenting four arguments for and against, concludes that we should distinguish between “earthly and heavenly, [or] temporal and eternal happiness.”²⁴ In his *Moral Philosophy*, Marcus Friedrich Wendelin presents the objection “Can humanity be happy in this life?” and observes that “quite a few” deny it with various arguments. After listing eight arguments for their denial, which includes the Augustinian contrast between supreme good in the next life and human misery in this life, Wendelin remarks, “this opinion should not be admitted” and argues for the affirmative: “in this life there is also civil happiness.”²⁵ These examples show that a division existed among Reformed theologians on the nature of happiness. Some sided with Augustine that happiness only exists in union with God, while others allowed a secondary earthly happiness in this life.

What can we learn from the way Reformed theologians responded to philosophy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? First, it was generally recognized that Aristotle’s philosophy provides the best dialogue partner for theology. Vermigli, and Melancthon before him, explicitly says as much – that the sect of Aristotelians contains the fewest errors. Second, and at the same time, theologians did seek to correct the errors of all philosophers, including Aristotle, and either reject particular doctrines or argue that they could be accommodated in some way so as not to conflict with theology. This means, third, that philosophy holds the position of a handmaiden. And thus, in the post-Reformation we encounter an interesting period where the Aristotelian philosophy taught in universities is described by theologians as the best available option, or the option with the least number of errors. In this context, Reformed theologians and Reformed

²³ Lambert Daneau, *Ethices Christianae libri tres* (Geneva: Eustache Vignon, 1577), 80-81.

²⁴ Timpler, *Philosophiae practicae systema methodicum*, 86-87.

²⁵ Wendelin, *Philosophia moralis*, 1059-60. See also Goclenius, *Disputatio philosophica*, fol. B4v.

philosophers actively worked on identifying problematic aspects of Aristotelian philosophy and either subjecting it to criticism or harmonization. In sum, Reformed theologians worked with an eclectic Aristotelian philosophy as a support for their theological systems.²⁶

3. The Cartesian “Separation Thesis”

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the philosophy of Rene Descartes grew in popularity, spreading first across Dutch universities and then spreading to other Reformed centers of learning in Europe and North America. Whereas Aristotelian philosophy started from a basic trust of the senses and ordinary experience, Cartesian philosophy started from a doubt of the senses and ordinary experience. For Aristotle, the qualitative and living world described by ordinary language was trustworthy. For Aristotle, the philosopher started from the same assumptions as the ordinary person. By contrast, Descartes believed the world was best understood through mathematics, and the qualitative world of ordinary experience was deceptive. Cartesian philosophy thus separated the task of philosophy from other forms of knowledge that relied heavily on ordinary knowledge. Of course, the disciplines like law, medicine, and theology were more closely related to ordinary language and experience.

Reformed converts to Descartes’s philosophy, the so-called Reformed Cartesians, sought to reconcile Cartesian philosophy with theology by positing a strict separation between philosophy and theology. This is the so-called “separation thesis.” The separation thesis was advanced by Dutch professors who proposed a strong division between philosophy and other ways of knowing relating to “common experience,” which included theology, law, and medicine. Since Cartesian philosophy had no relation to theology, they reasoned, there was no danger that it would corrupt theology.²⁷ We should note first that Descartes did not strictly develop such a separation thesis, but rather some of his Dutch followers in the 1650s. Descartes, of course, recognized that with Aristotelian philosophy taken up in matters of theology, it was impossible to promote an alternative philosophy “without it seeming initially contrary to the Faith.”²⁸ However, as even Cartesian critics such as Petrus van Mastricht and Reformed philosopher Gerardus de Vries recognized, Descartes’s views on faith and reason were more traditional than later Cartesians. Van Mastricht pointed out that Descartes was still willing to accommodate philosophical opinions to theology, while De Vries noted that Descartes himself exempted matters of faith from the judgment of reason.²⁹ Descartes recognized that there were topics, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, that were purely matters of belief, other topics that were purely matters of human reason, and still others that overlapped between reason and faith and could be investigated by both (e.g. God’s existence).³⁰ Descartes also assumed a harmony between the truths of philosophy and theology, and asserted that truths in one could not contradict truths in the other.³¹

Despite these traditional affirmations, Descartes seemed to be aware that at least on certain points his philosophy was not easily reconcilable with traditional theology or traditional readings of Scripture. In a letter evaluating the philosophy of Comenius, Descartes expressed opposition to the “mix[ing] sacred and profane things” that was typical of Mosaic physics. Descartes wrote:

It is true that we are obliged to take care that our reasonings do not lead us to any conclusions which contradict what God has commanded us to believe; but I think that to try to derive from the Bible knowledge of truths which belong only to human

²⁶ Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625-1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht, and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 54-55; Aza Goudriaan, ‘Theology and Philosophy’, in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 27-63.

²⁷ Alexander X. Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism: Philosophy and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 36-37.

²⁸ AT 1:85-86; cf. Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 74.

²⁹ Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625-1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht, and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 58; Garber, “*Cartesius Triumphatus*,” 249-250.

³⁰ Descartes, *CSM* 1:300.

³¹ Descartes, *CSM* 2:392; Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 75.

sciences, and which are useless for our salvation, is to apply the Holy Scripture to a purpose for which God did not give it, and so to abuse it.³²

In his *Conversation with Burman*, it is reported that Descartes once attempted to write a commentary on the Genesis creation account, but he abandoned the project because “he preferred to leave it to the theologians rather than provide the explanation himself.” Descartes interpreted the days of creation as “perhaps metaphorical.”³³ A metaphorical interpretation would have departed sharply from existing interpretations, but it makes sense given his philosophical account in *Le Monde*, which looked quite different from the days of creation interpreted literally.³⁴ When it came to philosophical topics that overlapped with theology, he also ignored theological opinions as irrelevant. For example, in dismissing proofs for God’s existence, Descartes pointed out that others also criticized Aquinas’s proofs.³⁵ He also expressed opinions on controversial doctrines such as freedom of indifference, free will, and predestination from a philosophical perspective, and explained the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation according to his own philosophical principles, claiming to give a better explanation than scholastic philosophers.³⁶ In general, rather than adapting his philosophy to theological doctrine, Descartes proposed the contrary. In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes wrote, “There will be no difficulty, so far I can see, in adapting theology to my style of philosophizing.”³⁷ He also spoke of “reconcill[ing] the doctrine of the Councils about the Blessed Sacrament with my own philosophy.”³⁸

The early promoters of Descartes’s philosophy chaffed against theological interference in philosophy. This new attitude differed from the traditional subordination of philosophy as a handmaiden to theology. Adriaan Heereboord was a philosophy professor at Leiden who encouraged a new generation of students to study Descartes. While integrating Reformed theology in his philosophical work, Heereboord still complained about theological interference in philosophical opinions. Heereboord wrote,

It is not for theologians to exercise the censor’s role in philosophy or the other sciences. . . they have enough to do in their own house, and they fulfil their task, if they faithfully shepherd the flock committed to them, show it the way of salvation, imbue the youth of the Academy with the holy dogmas of divine truth, and excel all others in zeal for peace and concord.³⁹

As an example of such theological interference in philosophy, Heereboord mentioned “certain disputations on atheism.” This was in reference to Voetius’s censure of Descartes’s philosophy. Regarding such remarks, Thomas McGahagan writes, “Heereboord insisted on the need for orthodoxy, but refused to grant the clergy the right to interfere in philosophical affairs in defense of orthodoxy.”⁴⁰ Considering that the separation thesis came especially from Leiden professors, these early remarks by Heereboord suggest some connection between Heereboord and the later separation thesis.

One of the early proponents of the separation thesis was Abraham Heidanus, a Reformed professor of theology at Leiden. Notably, Heidanus’s views seemed to have shifted from the 1640s to the 1650s as he became involved in debates over Cartesianism. Before

³² Descartes, CSM 3:119-120; Del Prete, “Accommoder la Théologie,” 248.

³³ CSM 3:349.

³⁴ J. A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, nature, and change* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 257.

³⁵ B. Hoon Woo, “The Understanding of Gisbertus Voetius and René Descartes on the Relationship of Faith and Reason, and Theology and Philosophy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 75 (2013): 45-63, here 61.

³⁶ Del Prete, “Accommoder la Théologie,” 250.

³⁷ CSM 3:349-350; Del Prete, “Accommoder la Théologie,” 251.

³⁸ CSM 3:177; Del Prete, “Accommoder la Théologie,” 252.

³⁹ Adriaan Heereboord, *Meletemata*, Ep. ad Cur., cited in Thomas A. McGahagan, “Cartesianism in the Netherlands, 1639-1676: The New Science and the Calvinist Counter Reformation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976), 230.

⁴⁰ McGahagan, “Cartesianism in the Netherlands,” 230-231.

he was appointed professor of theology at Leiden in 1648, Heidanus had argued against the Remonstrants that Scripture and theology should judge natural knowledge and philosophy. In the mid-1650s, however, Heidanus not only sharply criticized Aristotelian philosophy (which is continuous with his older views), but defended the “freedom of philosophizing,” argued against confounding philosophy and theology, and criticized the traditional idea of philosophy as a handmaiden of theology. In place of theology as a handmaiden or servant of theology, Heidanus wrote, “[Philosophy] should rather be seen as a friend, whose counsel we can use at our own discretion without making ourselves subject to him, or him to us. And oftentimes such a friend is better and more faithful in his service than the most subservient slave.” This expression of the relation between philosophy and theology imagines philosophy as an independent discipline.⁴¹

Johannes de Raey, a Reformed philosopher, and Christopher Wittich, a Reformed theologian, further articulated the separation thesis. Both of them contrasted philosophy with ordinary experience, and on this basis separated philosophy from both ordinary experience and Scripture. According to De Raey, Aristotelian philosophy agrees with how common people see the world. Likewise, Wittich argued that Scripture speaks in the manner of ordinary people. But De Raey and Wittich argue that philosophy gives an account of nature that only few understand and is at variance with the understanding of common people. According to Wittich, Scripture summarized its purpose in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which boils down to faith and morals. Wittich writes, “But nowhere do we find an end of Scripture to be the instruction of natural philosophy. Nor even when theologians review the ends of Scripture do they ever refer among them to philosophical knowledge and wisdom.” Since the end of Scripture is not the instruction of natural philosophy, and when it touches on natural philosophy it speaks in the manner of ordinary experience, Scripture does not teach truths about nature that should be incorporated into natural philosophy. De Raey similarly argued that there is no need for natural philosophy to correct Scripture, because they are understanding nature at different levels.⁴²

Wittich supported the separation thesis with the Reformed tradition’s doctrine of accommodation. Specifically, Wittich supported his view with citation from Calvin’s comments on Genesis 1:16. In that place Calvin had contrasted Moses’s account with that of philosophers and astronomers. Whereas the astronomers show that there are greater lights than the moon, Moses speaks of the moon as one of the two great lights. Calvin contrasted Moses’s popular style which instructs ordinary people with the knowledge of astronomers. Wittich elaborated that the Bible discusses natural things by accommodation to “the appearance of the senses and the common people” and “not according to truth.”⁴³ Historians of Cartesianism have assumed a continuity between Wittich’s and Calvin’s views on accommodation, but Wittich understood accommodation to sense perception as something materially false. This is arguably different than Calvin, who interprets the days of creation in a literal way and did not posit a strong separation between faith and morals on the one hand, and natural truths on the other hand.⁴⁴ Antonella Del Prete observes that Wittich departed from Calvin by lifting accommodation out of a purely theological context and making it dependent on philosophy for correct understanding.⁴⁵ It is more historically accurate to recognize that both Reformed proponents and opponents of new philosophy held to a doctrine of divine accommodation and cited Calvin’s interpretation. They differed, however, in their assessment of whether this accommodated language is materially false and should be governed by philosophy, as Wittich asserted.

The Reformed orthodox responses to Cartesian accommodation theory basically asserted that while God does accommodate himself to a popular manner of speaking, this should not be considered false or erroneous. Samuel Maresius argued that when Scripture accommodates to ordinary language of natural things, this is not erroneous but plain and phenomenological language.⁴⁶ In his *Vindiciae Veritatis* (1655), Petrus van Maastricht responded to Wittich’s association of ordinary sense perception with error. Wittich, as a Cartesian,

⁴¹ Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 77-82.

⁴² Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism*, 39-41.

⁴³ Hoon J. Lee, *The Biblical Accommodation Debate in Germany: Interpretation and the Enlightenment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 29-30.

⁴⁴ Lee, *Biblical Accommodation Debate*, 27-28; David S. Sytsma, “Calvin, Daneau, and *Physica Moscovica*. Neglected Continuities at the Origins of an Early Modern Tradition,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 95, no. 4 (2015): 457-476.

⁴⁵ Del Prete, “Accommoder la Théologie,” 257.

⁴⁶ Lee, *Biblical Accommodation Debate*, 38-39.

assumed that sense perception is erroneous and quite different from a true understanding of reality. Against this view, Van Mastricht declares, “The opinion of the people, which is dependent upon the appearance of the senses, very often agrees with the truth of the matter itself.”⁴⁷ This is a significant point. From God’s accommodation to ordinary sense perception, Cartesians had drawn the added conclusion that common descriptions based on sense perception were far removed from the truth. If one assumes with Van Mastricht that sense perception for the most part presents reliable knowledge of reality, then the popular language of the Bible cannot be strictly divorced from a true account of reality (in both philosophy and theology). The Bible speaks popularly about not only the sun, moon, and stars, but also about general divisions of reality, and specifics such as the nature and powers of living things and humans. On Van Mastricht’s account, these matters would convey truth, albeit in a popular manner.

In his *Vindiciae Veritatis* (1655), Van Mastricht presented two main objections against Wittich’s accommodation theory. The first was that God reveals things that have the appearance of truth but are materially false. The second was that philosophy should become the judge of Scripture in natural things. Van Mastricht writes,

1. Can the Holy Spirit, in order to avoid offending the common people with His words, express things that are false in themselves and only bear the appearance of truth, in the same way He usually expresses His opinion?
2. Has the Holy Spirit entrusted the judgment of common expressions about natural things to philosophers, so that they might examine such expressions in the light of reason and thereby discern whether Scripture speaks accurately (i.e., truly) or popularly (i.e., falsely)?

We deny both questions; Wittich affirms them.⁴⁸

The second objection is important because Van Mastricht notices that once one sets popular speech and a true account of reality in strict opposition, then philosophy is given a normative role in deciding the accuracy of Scripture.

Many years later, in his *Gangraena of Cartesian Innovations*, Van Mastricht began that work with a critique of the Cartesian separation thesis in which he describes “a gradual secularisation of philosophy in Cartesianism.” As Aza Goudriaan summarizes, “This move away from theology in Van Mastricht’s view starts with denying to philosophy the status of ‘handmaid of theology,’ and it ends in ascribing to philosophy superiority over the Bible.”⁴⁹ In other words, Van Mastricht asserts that the initial separation thesis Heidanus, Wittich, and De Raey leads to the more radical triumph of philosophy over theology as seen in Spinoza. Van Mastricht argues that various Cartesian concepts lead to a more radical superiority of philosophy. First, Cartesians assert that philosophy should not minister to theology as a handmaiden. Next, Cartesians claim just as much certainty for their philosophy as theological doctrines. Other assertions tend to make philosophy superior to theology. They say the Bible “speaks in natural matters in accordance with the erroneous opinion of the people” (*Gangraena*, 62-73). Then they leave the judgment about these natural matters to philosophers (*Gangraena*, 74-82). They also conclude that the Bible should not be a sourcebook for physical knowledge (*Gangraena*, 82-91). Then they say that “Scripture, in practical and moral matters, speaks in accordance with the erroneous opinion of the people” (*Gangraena*, 91-96). This ends with the claim that even in matters of faith, the Bible speaks in the

⁴⁷ Petrus van Mastricht, *Vindiciae veritatis et auctoritatis sacrae scripturae in rebus philosophicis adversus dissertationes Christophori Wittichii* (Utrecht: Johannis a Waesberg, 1655), 7 (1.6); trans. in Jan Adriaan Schlebusch, “Cartesianism and Reformed Scholastic Theology: A Comparative Study of the Controversy between Christoph Wittich and Petrus van Mastricht” (M.A. thesis, University of the Free State, 2013), 71.

⁴⁸ Van Mastricht, *Vindiciae veritatis*, 13: “1. Anne Spiritus Sanctus, ea quae in se sunt falsa, & nudam tantum veritatis speciem prae se ferunt possit efferre ut sua (id est, eodem modo quo suam sententiam alias solet proferre) eum tantum in finem, ut vulgus ejus sermonibus non offendatur. 2. Anne judicium de locutionibus vulgaribus circa res naturales Spiritus Sanctus commiserit philosophis, ut scilicet locutiones tales, ad lumen rationis explorent, indeque discant, loquatur ne scriptura accurate (id est vere) an vulgariter (id est false.) Utramque quaestionem nos negamus, D. Witt. affirmat.”

⁴⁹ Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy*, 57-58.

erroneous opinions of the people (*Gangraena*, 96-105). Finally, it culminates with the claim “philosophy is the infallible interpreter of Scripture” (*Gangraena*, 105-148).⁵⁰ It is obvious that Van Mastricht saw the separation thesis as a slippery slope to heterodoxy.

Oponents of the Cartesians not only objected to Cartesian accommodation theory, but also asserted the interrelated nature of knowledge. Theology presupposes principles from other disciplines, so it has an interest in maintaining their integrity. Writes Voetius,

They [the Cartesians] may protest that Scripture and supernatural theology are not the first object of their attack. Not directly, perhaps, but indirectly and by implications, certainty in these would be extinguished or shaken in the minds of many. For supernatural theology cannot be properly defended and explained without principles, axioms, logical connections, and rules of logic, which are illuminated by the natural light in [all] arts and sciences, especially logic and metaphysics.⁵¹

While anti-Cartesian Reformed authors generally assumed a methodological separation of the disciplines for the sake of pedagogy, they also held that the various disciplines were interrelated. Since disciplines including theology shared logical and metaphysical categories, a total separation was not possible.⁵²

Despite the theory of separation proposed by the Cartesians, in practice the Cartesian theologians often did make use of philosophical arguments. Goudriaan notes that Abraham Heidanus and Frans Burman both utilized Descartes’s arguments for God’s existence from the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Cartesian theologians also integrated into their theology such philosophical items as the criterion of clarity and distinctness, Descartes’s laws of nature, and a dualism of mind and body, which affected doctrines of God, humanity, and angels.⁵³ Based on these observations, Goudriaan suggests,

The actual philosophical impact upon the theology of Cartesians suggests that their distinction between philosophy and theology was not meant to make sure that theology remains free from all philosophical influences. What rather seems to have been envisaged is an emancipation of philosophy from theological supervision—from being *ancilla theologiae*—in general, and from the heritage of eclectic Aristotelianism in particular.⁵⁴

Although Cartesians argued against the need for philosophy as a handmaiden to theology, in practice they made use of Cartesian philosophy to help elucidate theological topics.

In his mature *Theologia pacifica* (1671), Wittich in fact clarified how Cartesian philosophy could be integrated with revealed theology. In this respect, he went beyond his fellow Cartesian De Raey, who remained committed to a complete separation of theology and philosophy.⁵⁵ Wittich admitted that there are “matters common to philosophy and theology, which can be demonstrated by the light of reason and known through revelation.” He identified these topics as the existence of God, His attributes, power, operations concerning creatures, the nature of the soul, including its freedom, passions, immortality, and the nature of body and place. He also argued that in matters that “depend solely on revelation, concerning man, angels, or God,” philosophy can elucidate their meaning via clear and distinct concepts.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy*, 58-60.

⁵¹ Gisbert Voetius, *Selectae disputationes theologiae*, 5 vols. (Utrecht, 1648-1669), 1:187; cited in Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism*, 54.

⁵² See Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism*, 56.

⁵³ Aza Goudriaan, “Theology and Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 27-63, here 52-53.

⁵⁴ Goudriaan, “Theology and Philosophy,” 53.

⁵⁵ Del Prete, “Y-a-t-il une interprétation cartésienne de la Bible,” 118-119.

⁵⁶ Christoph Wittich, *Theologia Pacifica* (Leiden: Arnoldus Doude, 1671), 13 (I.16). Cf. Cellamare, “A Theologian Teaching Descartes,” 600-601.

Once one has learned from Scripture a matter of fact (τὸ ὄν), philosophy can explain using clear and distinct perception the reason why (τὸ διότι).⁵⁷ So while Wittich taught a separation of philosophical knowledge from Scripture in the sense that Scripture only teaches about matters of salvation from the perspective of ordinary experience, he still allowed for philosophy to play a role in expounding many theological topics. For Wittich, philosophy had ceased to be a handmaiden in the traditional sense of controlling specific philosophical concepts, but it continued to play a large role in the formulation of theological topics.

4. Reformed Theology Correcting Descartes on Origins of the World

One of the major points of debate over new philosophy, especially Cartesianism, concerned the origins of things. In general, both Cartesianism and atomism sought to explain that the variety of things in the world by means of simpler material parts. They supposed that the size, shape, and local motion of the unobservable material parts could account for the observable phenomena in nature. Both Cartesians and Christian atomists such as Pierre Gassendi supposed that God directed the motions of material parts, and in this way denied the atheistic and Epicurean assumption that our present world is the result of mere chance and the blind collision of atoms. In book 3 of his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes set forth a speculation about the origin of things that turned out to be quite influential. He admitted that according to faith we must believe that God created the world as already mature as we now experience it. The sun, earth, moon, and stars existed at the beginning, the plants were created not as seeds but as plants, and Adam and Eve were created “as fully grown people.” However, having admitted this, Descartes went on to imagine – as a deliberately false hypothesis – that all things could be explained as originating merely from matter and motion:

Thus we may be able to think up certain very simple and easily known principles which can serve, as it were, as the seeds from which we can demonstrate that the stars, the earth and indeed everything we observe in this visible world could have sprung. For although we know for sure that they never did arise in this way, we shall be able to provide a much better explanation of their nature by this method than if we merely described them as they now are.⁵⁸

Descartes speculated that his laws of nature could provide an explanation for deriving our present world from the initial creation of the “primeval chaos”:

It may be possible to start from primeval chaos and deduce from it, in accordance with the laws of nature, the precise organization now to be found in things; and I once undertook to provide such an explanation [in *The World*, chapter 6]. . . . And there is scarcely any supposition that does not allow the same effects (albeit more laboriously) to be deduced in accordance with the same laws of nature. For by the operation of these laws matter must successively assume all the forms of which it is capable; and, if we consider these forms in order, we will eventually be able to arrive at the form which characterizes the universe in its present state.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Del Prete, “Y-a-t-il une interprétation cartésienne de la Bible,” 134. See Wittich, *Theologia Pacifica*, 119 (XII.149): “De statu animae separatae non egit, cum is debeat cognosci per scripturam, qua lecta, potest tamen ipsius Philosophia Theologo praebere suum usum, u tea quae ex Scriptura cognovit, quoad τὸ ὄν, distinctius quoad τὸ διότι intelligat. Atque hic primo qui recte philosophantur, & student claris & distinctis conceptibus, juxta quos judicium formant, attendentes ad naturam singularem. . .”

⁵⁸ Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* III.45, in CSM 1:256.

⁵⁹ Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* III.47, in CSM 1:257.

This sounds very much like a proposal for an evolutionary account of things, and Van Ruler has referred to it as an “evolutionary reconstruction” of the world.⁶⁰

Although Descartes presented this evolutionary speculation as a false hypothesis contrary to faith, he also suggested that it provides a “better explanation.” Later Cartesians took the further step of assuming the truth of Descartes’s speculation and then accommodating Scripture and theology in various ways to fit such speculation. One strategy to accommodate a Cartesian account of origins to the biblical creation account involved interpreting the days of creation as bringing about creatures gradually by motion rather than instantaneously by a new creation. Petrus van Mastricht summarizes this Cartesian strategy:

The Cartesians, so that it may be easier to explain the fabrication of the world as mechanical, a fabrication which introduced to subtle matter produced from nothing a motion which in the succession of twenty-four hours brought forth of its own accord all the phenomena of this world, judge that twenty-four hours were suitable for this task, though meanwhile they freely grant that God devoted one moment, or at most a few, to the works of the first day.⁶¹

Christoph Wittich argued that God created the things of each day successively through motion, rather than instantaneously, by drawing on the scholastic concept of conservation as continuous creation.⁶² Wittich supported this non-instantaneous understanding of creation with three arguments: God rested on the seventh day, which implies that he was continuously creating throughout the previous days; if creation was instantaneous, God did not need to take six days to complete it; there are some aspects of creation, such as separation of water, that could not have happened instantaneously.⁶³

Another way of accommodating Scripture to Cartesian origins was to interpret the creation account non-literally or allegorically. Henry More and Thomas Burnet took this position.⁶⁴ Burnet admitted that Moses wrote in a popular way and according to human senses, but working from the Cartesian separation thesis, contended that this popular way of writing had nothing to do with philosophy or a true account of reality. The literal sense of the six days, wrote Burnet, is “absolutely contradictory to the Nature of Things, as well as to all Philosophical Reasons.”⁶⁵ In a similar manner to the Reformed Cartesians, Burnet argued in general that when Scripture discusses natural things, it should not be followed in a literal sense, and “it was not improperly said, that Philosophy is the Interpreter of Scripture in natural Things.”⁶⁶ Burnet also appealed to Augustine’s interpretation of creation as one individual act as coming close to the truth.⁶⁷ Both strategies of Wittich and Burnet enabled one to suppose that God formed the world not through special creation of new kinds of creatures, but rather through an initial creation of matter *ex nihilo* combined with a process of formation based on laws of nature.

⁶⁰ J. A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, nature, and change* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 237, 256; Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625-1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht, and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 106.

⁶¹ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3: *The Works of God and the Fall of Man* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 133 (III.vi.14).

⁶² Christoph Wittich, *Theologia Pacifica* (Leiden: Arnoldus Doude, 1671), 49-59 (VII.67-82); cf. Kuni Sakamoto and Yoshi Kato, “A Trojan Horse in the Citadel of Orthodoxy: Samuel Maresius’s Critique of Cartesian Theology,” *The Seventeenth Century* 38, no. 5 (2023): 813-831, here 825; and Antonella Del Prete, “Y-a-t-il une interprétation cartésienne de la Bible? Le cas de Christoph Wittich,” in *Qu’est-ce qu’être cartésien?*, ed. Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine and Denis Kambouchner (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2013), 117-142, here 133-134.

⁶³ Sakamoto and Kato, “A Trojan Horse,” 825.

⁶⁴ Peter Harrison, “The Influence of Cartesian Cosmology in England,” in *Descartes’ Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton (London: Routledge, 2000), 168-192, here 180-181.

⁶⁵ Thomas Burnet, *Archaologiae Philosophicae: Or, the Ancient Doctrine concerning the Originals of Things* (London: J. Fisher, 1736), 29; cf. 51-52

⁶⁶ Burnet, *Archaologiae Philosophicae*, 58.

⁶⁷ Burnet, *Archaologiae Philosophicae*, 45.

Reformed theologians raised both theological and philosophical objections to this picture of the world. Since both Cartesians and their opponents, with the exception of Spinoza, adhered to an initial creation of matter *ex nihilo*, the controversy focused on how the differentiation of creatures came to be in the subsequent days.⁶⁸ For Reformed theologians, one of the main barriers to accepting the Cartesian hypothesis on origins came from the six days of creation. The Reformers understood the six days of creation as narrating a temporal sequence of literal days. This interpretation of Genesis 1 opposed the non-literal interpretation of Augustine, which argued a non-literal interpretation of the days and an instantaneous creation of all things.

Calvin argued that Augustine's use of **Ecclesiasticus 18:1** to justify a nontemporal, instantaneous reading of Genesis 1:1-2:3 rested on a mis-translation of *κοινῆ* in Latin as the temporal *simul* rather than to all things in general.⁶⁹ By contrast, Calvin recommended Basil and Ambrose as those who interpret the biblical creation account "faithfully and diligently."⁷⁰ According to the literal reading of Calvin and later Reformed theologians such as Franciscus Junius (1545-1602), David Pareus (1548-1622), and Johann Piscator (1546-1625), God accommodated the creation account to a popular audience and spoke according to human senses and eyes.⁷¹ Petrus van Mastricht, repeating the same argument as Calvin against Augustine's reading of Ecclesiasticus 18:1, built upon this literal, accommodated interpretation. He argued that God created over the space of six days with the intention of displaying "his wisdom as it were by parts" and "before our eyes." From a progression from "less perfect to the more perfect" in material things, God leads humans to expect a similar progression in spiritual things.⁷²

One consequence of this literal reading of the six days was that God creates with not only one act of creation, but rather multiple acts. Instead of making the variety of creation all at once, God intentionally separated out the creation of different kinds of things. The Reformed tradition distinguished between immediate creation, whereby God made the original matter out of nothing, and mediate creation, whereby God made new forms out of existing matter.⁷³ Johannes Wollebius put it this way: "Creation is not only a production of something out of nothing, but also out of matter altogether unapt for such production naturally."⁷⁴ Reformed theologians produced several arguments in favor of the mediate and instantaneous creation of things. Petrus van Mastricht argued that creation had occur not just on the first day but on the following days, because Scripture says God made all things in six days (Ex. 20:11) and uses the verb "create" on the following days (Gen. 1:21, 27). Moreover, once one admits that God can create things instantaneously on the first day, there is no reason to deny that he would also create instantaneously on subsequent days. Additionally, the forms that God made throughout the six days did not exist in the potency of matter, so they needed to be created from nothing.⁷⁵ In response to Wittich's reasons for denying instantaneous creation during the six days, Samuel Maresius and Van Mastricht argued that God's rest on the seventh day should be understood as a rest from creating new kinds of things; God spread out his work over six days not because he was unable to create all at once, but because for his own reasons (even

⁶⁸ See Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy*, 103-104.

⁶⁹ Calvin, Comm. Gen. 1:5: "Ad hoc commentum stabiliendum impetite citatur locus ex Ecclesiastico (18, 1): Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul. Graecum enim adverbium *κοινῆ* quo utitur, nihil tale sonat: neque ad tempus refertur, sed rerum universitatem." (CO 23:18). Cf. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 30; Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory*, 10-11, 15; Howell, *God's Two Books*, 33; Williams, *The Common Expositor*, 43.

⁷⁰ David S. Sytsma, "Calvin, Daneau, and *Physica Mosaica*. Neglected Continuities at the Origins of an Early Modern Tradition," *Church History and Religious Culture* 95, no. 4 (2015): 457-476, here 468.

⁷¹ Sytsma, "Calvin, Daneau, and *Physica Mosaica*," 473

⁷² Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3, 131-132 (III.vi.12).

⁷³ See, e.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992-1997), V.i.6 (1:432); Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. Donald Fraser, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: A. Fullerton & Co., 1823), 1:193-194 (VIII.37).

⁷⁴ Johannes Wollebius, *The Abridgement of Christian Divinity*, trans. Alexander Ross (London: John Saywell, 1657), 47 (I.v.1).

⁷⁵ Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3, 133 (III.vi.14).

if they are hidden from us); and although the motion of the waters on the third day was not instantaneous, God's creative act of giving motion to the waters was instantaneous.⁷⁶

In agreement with Maresius and Van Mastricht, Francis Turretin also defended instantaneous creation on during the six days, however without any mention of Cartesians. Turretin defends this the position using the same arguments as Maresius and Van Mastricht. He notes that such phrases as "He spoke and it was done" (Ps. 33:9) and "Let there be" (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14) imply instantaneous creation. This was also how Ambrose interpreted Genesis 1. Moreover, if the resurrection will take place "in a moment" and "in a twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52), reasons Turretin, then why not the creation of other individual things?⁷⁷

Herman Witsius, in contrast to other anti-Cartesians, disputed the significance of instantaneous creation. While affirming multiple acts of creation over the course of the six days, he thought the question of whether God created in an instant or over some period of time was a matter of secondary importance that could be doubted.⁷⁸ Witsius's own opinion was that God created some things instantly (e.g., highest heaven, chaos of the earth, angels, human souls), others by motion (drying the earth, collecting the waters), and others fully mature in a short space of time (vegetation and animals).⁷⁹

In addition to defending the instantaneous creation of things over the course of the six days, Reformed theologians attacked the hypothesis of Descartes that God produced the variety of the present world through matter and laws of motion. The 1676 Leiden condemnation seemed to describe this aspect of Cartesianism when censured the proposition, "The world takes its origin from seminal states [*ex seminibus*]."⁸⁰ Descartes admitted that his hypothesis was false according to faith, but had nonetheless proposed it as useful for philosophy. Van Mastricht attacked this assumption and stated that things that are known to be false and against Scripture should not be proposed. By proposing the hypothesis as something contradictory to Scripture, it implicitly undermines the sufficiency of Scripture. Whereas Scripture says that God made all creation in wisdom (Ps. 104:24), Descartes's hypothesis encourages people to imagine a scenario that reduces God's wisdom and power, and therefore also praise for God, since it supposes that matter and motion bring about effects that Scripture attributes to God's creative acts.⁸¹ Maresius and Van Mastricht both argue that Descartes's hypothesis contradict the nature of creation, as well as the account of Genesis, for there would be no need for God to create forms beyond the initial chaos. They also dispute an identification of conservation and creation. Whereas Cartesians wish to understand subsequent creation as merely conservation, Maresius and Van Mastricht argue their essential difference. Maresius recognizes that some scholastics identified creation and conservation but thinks that the opinion of scholastics who distinguish creation and conservation are "fare more certain."⁸²

The criticism of Maresius and Van Mastricht were shared by many other Reformed theologians. Herman Witsius called repeated the same point that Descartes's hypothesis, by supposing that "all natural things *could* by degrees have been produced out of chaos," carries the consequence that "there was no necessity for that miraculous work which is called creation." Witsius said such sentiments have a "dangerous tendency" and gradually lead to rejection of the doctrine of creation.⁸³ John Edwards (1637-1716) argued that recent authors such as Thomas Burnet and William Whiston assume the starting point of mechanical explanation in the formation of the world, and then

⁷⁶ Samuel Maresius, *De abusu philosophiae Cartesianae, surrepente & vitando in rebus theologicis & fidei, dissertatio theologica* (Groningen, 1670), 35-37; Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3, 134 (III.vi.14); cf. Sakamoto and Kato, "A Trojan Horse," 825.

⁷⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, V.v.5-6.

⁷⁸ Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, 1:208-209 (VIII.65-66).

⁷⁹ Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, 1:211-213 (VIII.69-73).

⁸⁰ McGahagan, "Cartesianism in the Netherlands," 344-345.

⁸¹ Petrus van Mastricht, *Novitatum Cartesianarum Gangraena* (Amsterdam: Jansson, 1677), 342-343; Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy*, 107-108.

⁸² Maresius, *De abusu*, 37-38; Van Mastricht, *Novitatum Cartesianarum Gangraena*, 347-350; Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3, 134-135 (III.vi.15); Sakamoto and Kato, "A Trojan Horse," 826; Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy*, 109.

⁸³ Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, 1:195-197 (VIII.40-42).

“seeing *Moses* represents it not as such, they give no credit to his Writings about this matter.” Edwards counters that such reasoning is wrong, for it evaluates the act of creation according to a conception of second causes. “We must not think that the Origin of all things was in the same manner with the After-productions,” writes Edwards. “An Immediate and Extraordinary Hand set things on work at the first erecting of the World, and consequently no *Mechanical* Laws can explain it.”⁸⁴

5. Reformed Theology and Natural Theology

The topic of natural theology illustrates well the impact of the topics discussed so far on the larger construction of theology. Natural theology traditionally bridged the domains of theology and philosophy, as the knowledge of the existence and (at least some) attributes of God among the Gentiles was something that seemed to be affirmed by Scripture (Rom. 1:19-20; Acts 17:23) and the example of such wise men as Aristotle and Cicero. Moreover, in Scripture this knowledge is clearly related to the observation of creation by means of the senses (Ps. 19:1-2; Rom. 1:19-20). Cartesianism introduced at least two major changes to Reformed thought on natural theology. First, Descartes attempted to argue from one’s idea of God to his existence while ignoring or dismissing the *a posteriori* proofs from created effects. Second, later Cartesians reconceptualized the topic of natural theology as separate from revealed theology.

On the topic of natural theology, Reformed orthodoxy affirmed both an innate (or implanted) and an acquired natural knowledge of God. As Francis Turretin summarizes, “The orthodox . . . uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions [*koīnos ennoias*]) and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively).”⁸⁵ He proves innate and acquired natural knowledge of God from such passages as Psalm 19:1; Acts 14:15-17; 17:23; and Romans 1:19-20. According to Turretin, Paul refers to innate knowledge in Romans 1:19a (“that which may be known of God is manifest in them”) and to acquired knowledge in Romans 1:19b (“for God has showed it to them”).⁸⁶

Descartes set forth an argument for God’s existence from a clear and distinct idea of God in his third meditation.⁸⁷ Since Descartes argued from innate knowledge, it was possible for Reformed theologians to assimilate or accept his argument into their larger framework of innate and acquired knowledge. In this respect, his argument was not entirely objectionable. Revius pointed out that the argument from the human subject is old and already used by Augustine.⁸⁸ Turretin downplayed the differences between traditional affirmations of innate or implanted knowledge and Descartes’s “idea of God.” He writes, “It makes little difference whether we explain this sense [of God] by a natural knowledge of God implanted, or a common notion, or a conception of the mind, or (as more recently) by the idea of God as the most perfect being impressed upon our minds.”⁸⁹ Even so, the Reformed also criticized Descartes’s proof from the idea of God as weak and ineffectual.⁹⁰ Much of this criticism was an extension of the general problem with clear and distinct perception. Revius argued that based on clear and distinct perception, fictions are also possible. Moreover, it seems to be impossible to have a clear and distinct perception of an infinite being and also contradicts the Apostle Paul when he writes that we know in part and as in a mirror (1 Cor. 13:9).⁹¹ Van Maastricht argued that Descartes’s proof from an idea of God was ineffectual to refute atheists since they could argue that many hold false ideas about God such as Anthropomorphites who believe that God is corporeal.⁹²

⁸⁴ John Edwards, *Brief Remarks upon Mr. Whiston’s New Theory of the Earth* (London: J. Robinson, 1697), 26-27.

⁸⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.4; cf. I.ii.7. For historical support to Turretin’s claim, see John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575-1650* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982); Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza 1519-1605*, 107.

⁸⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.6.

⁸⁷ CSM 2:31-36.

⁸⁸ Goudriaan, *Jacobus Revius*, 38.

⁸⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.18 (1:175).

⁹⁰ Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 22.

⁹¹ Goudriaan, *Jacobus Revius*, 40, 174-175. See similarly, Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 22.

⁹² Van Maastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:61 (Li.22).

In addition to their objections to Descartes's proof from God's idea, Reformed theologians objected to Descartes's dismissal and neglect of traditional *a posteriori* proofs from creation. In his *Letter to Voetius*, had seemed to dismiss Thomas Aquinas's five ways. Descartes mentioned that the Jesuit theologian Gregory of Valencia had refuted Aquinas's arguments.⁹³ Descartes obviously ignored Aquinas's proofs in his own arguments, but Revius interpreted his remark from *Letter to Voetius* as a complete rejection of Thomas's five ways. Says Revius: "Descartes rejects all of Thomas's arguments for the existence of God."⁹⁴ Revius argued that the Romans 1:20 teaches that God's existence is proven *a posteriori* from God's effects or works in creation, and Aquinas supplies such proofs. Revius described innate and acquired knowledge as two "eyes" by which we know God, and the denial of *a posteriori* proofs from creation removes one of these eyes and leaves only the eye of the innate knowledge of God.⁹⁵ Although Revius and other Reformed theologians drew on Aquinas's proofs, Revius noted that the issue of the *a posteriori* proofs is not simply a matter of following Aristotle or Aquinas, but rather the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1.⁹⁶ On this point, Voetius was of exactly the same opinion, as he claimed that the scholastics including Aquinas defended a method of proof from effect to cause that is found in Romans 1:19-20 and elsewhere in Scripture.⁹⁷

The second way Cartesianism altered natural theology was through a reconceptualization of its relation to revelation. Reformed orthodoxy approached the topic of natural theology as a unified body of knowledge taken from both reason and Scripture, with Scripture as the more certain source. Since Reformed orthodoxy attributed natural knowledge of God to one mode of God's revelation, they compared this revelation with the supernatural revelation contained in Scripture about the same matters.⁹⁸ Moreover, Franciscus Junius, Richard Baxter, and others often followed Aquinas in teaching that supernatural revelation teaches that which by reason could be known "only by a few, and after a long time, and with an admixture of multiple errors."⁹⁹ Since the natural revelation given to reason exists in a corrupt state, on its own it produces only a "false theology," whereas when guided by supernatural revelation, natural theology falls under "true theology."¹⁰⁰ In this way, natural revelation and reason knows obscurely and imperfectly what supernatural revelation and faith knows in a clear manner without error.

Reformed Cartesians proposed a new model of natural theology that harmonized with their separation of theology and philosophy. They opposed the intermingling of natural theology, conceived as a philosophical discipline, with revealed theology. Thus Wittich wrote:

Thus, the distinction between theology and philosophy is primarily based on the difference of principles, so that the principle of theology is the divine word and revelation, but that of philosophy is the light of nature or reason, and this as plain and clear as possible. For although the word 'theology' can also be used to designate every knowledge we have about God, and therefore theology is usually divided into revealed [theology] which is the knowledge of God and divine things from divine oracles, and

⁹³ AT 8.2:175-176, cited in Igor Agostini, "Descartes's Proofs of God and the Crisis of Thomas Aquinas's Five Ways in Early Modern Thomism: Scholastic and Cartesian Debates," *The Harvard Theological Review* 108, no. 2 (2015): 235-262, here 242. Gregory of Valencia in fact defends Aquinas's five ways.

⁹⁴ Goudriaan, *Jacobus Revius*, 160; cf. Agostini, "Descartes's Proofs," 256.

⁹⁵ Goudriaan, *Jacobus Revius*, 20-21.

⁹⁶ Goudriaan, *Jacobus Revius*, 55.

⁹⁷ Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectae disputationes theologiae*, 5 vols. (Utrecht, 1648-1669), 1:172.

⁹⁸ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:282.

⁹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1 a. 1; Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 150-151; Sytsma, *Richard Baxter*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:281-282.

natural [theology] which refers to what we know about God from the light of reason; nevertheless, the latter is more appropriately returned to Philosophy and should be considered to be part of it, as it were.¹⁰¹

Here Wittich clearly conceives of natural theology as derived from philosophy and opposes this to revelation. This conception is different from preceding Reformed orthodox opinion, which supposed that natural theology derives from two modes of revelation – natural and supernatural. In effect, Wittich relegated natural theology to the domain of philosophy. Burman and Heidanus made similar remarks to Wittich. However, in practice they did not achieve a complete separation of natural theology from theology, as they both Burman and Heidanus continued to employ arguments from philosophy for God’s existence within their theological systems.¹⁰² Against Wittich, Petrus van Mastricht argued that the position of separation was inconsistent – Cartesians should either remove all discussion of theological topics available to reason, or allow for mixing theology and philosophy.¹⁰³

A further innovate step was taken at Franeker University in the 1680s. Hermann Alexander Röell, a Reformed Cartesian was appointed professor of theology at Franeker University in 1686. On October 8, 1686, Röell’s nephew Gisbert Wessel Duker (1666-1736) defended a disputation on titled *Disputatio philosophica inauguralis de recta ratiocinatione*. Duker’s disputation, which reflected the thought of Röell and was probably also drafted by Röell, argued the controversial position that the “divinity of Scripture, on which its whole authority is based, cannot be demonstrated except by reason.” Duker also criticized the notion that one should continue to believe a proposition from Scripture if it seems to contradict Scripture. He reasoned that it is impossible for reason to contradict Scripture.¹⁰⁴ Duker was opposed by Ulrik Huber (1636-1694), a jurist at Franeker who appealed to Calvin’s doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit against Duker’s rational basis for the authority of Scripture. Huber argued that Calvin and the larger Reformed tradition held that the divinity and authority of Scripture was based on supernatural light of the Spirit, which is far more certain than arguments from reason.¹⁰⁵ In the ensuing controversy, Huber’s position was supported by Herman Witsius, Melchior Leydecker, and Gerardus de Vries. Reformed Cartesians Johannes van der Waeyen (1639-1701), Ruardus Andala (1665-1727), and Campegius Vitringa (1659-1722) on the other hand, defended Röell.

Whereas earlier Reformed Cartesians Wittich and Burman had only separated natural theology from revealed theology, the argument of Duker made reason and natural theology a basis on which to establish the credibility of Scripture. In the eighteenth century, many theologians began to argue along these lines that natural theology was a necessary prolegomenon to revealed theology.¹⁰⁶ Jean-Alphonse Turretin provides a good representation of these tendencies. In his published works Turretin not only ignored the testimony of the Holy Spirit in establishing the authority of Scripture,¹⁰⁷ but he also called natural theology the “very basis and foundation of revealed [theology].” This does not mean simply that one is presupposed for the other (as the older tradition held), but that natural theology is necessary to proving the truth and credibility of supernatural revelation. Revelation, writes Turretin, “must be confirmed by the test of truth, before we can receive it, and it cannot be proved by any principles except such as are derived from the light of nature. For how can I be certain, that what God has revealed is credible, unless I have first learned from the light of nature that he is a being of veracity, and therefore

¹⁰¹ Christoph Wittich, *Theologia Pacifica* (Leiden: Arnoldus Doude, 1671), 1-2, cited in Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 110.

¹⁰² Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 111-112.

¹⁰³ Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 112, discussing Van Mastricht, *Novitatum Cartesianarum Gangraena*, 154-155.

¹⁰⁴ See Aza Goudriaan, “Ulrik Huber (1636-1694) and John Calvin: The Franeker Debate on Human Reason and the Bible (1686-1687),” *Church History and Religious Culture* 91, no. 1-2 (2011): 165-78, here 167-168 (with translation of the relevant part of the disputation).

¹⁰⁵ Goudriaan, “Ulrik Huber,” 169-173.

¹⁰⁶ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:306.

¹⁰⁷ Martin I. Klauber, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 107-108, 141, 190.

cannot possibly deceive me?”¹⁰⁸ This justification for natural theology appears similar to Dutch Cartesian theologians who argued that the divinity of Scripture must be established by reason.

Because Jean-Alphonse Turretin integrates new philosophy in his natural theology, he has often been described as abandoning the separation of philosophy and theology found in Cartesians such as Chouet.¹⁰⁹ However, Turretin’s conception of natural theology is in fact separated from his concept of revelation. Whereas Reformed orthodox authors spoke of two kinds of revelation – natural and supernatural – Turretin divides theology into “two branches, natural and revealed.”¹¹⁰ Natural theology, therefore finds a place *outside of* revealed theology. Moreover, Turretin describes the sources of natural theology as either the light of nature or philosophers.¹¹¹ This relegation of natural theology to philosophy was typical of Reformed Cartesians who wanted to avoid intermingling philosophy with revealed theology.¹¹² In this respect, Turretin’s basic division between natural theology (conceived as based on philosophy) and revealed theology is similar to Salomon Van Til’s *Compendium theologiae naturalis* (1704), which likewise divides “natural theology” from “revealed theology” and conceives of natural theology as a philosophical discipline based on reason.¹¹³ However, unlike Descartes, Jean-Alphonse Turretin followed English physico-theology in producing arguments for God’s existence from creation.

Concluding Thoughts

In this lecture we have explored the use of philosophy in the Reformed tradition and the impact of Cartesianism in the 17th century on this relationship. I have argued that the Reformed tradition during the 16th and 17th centuries consistently integrated philosophy into theology while subordinating it to revealed doctrines. This was summarized with the traditional idea of philosophy as the handmaiden of theology. However, with the rise of Cartesianism, a significant element within the Reformed faith – the so-called Reformed Cartesians – turned away from the model of philosophy as handmaiden in favor of a model of independence. According to the Cartesian separation thesis, Scripture no longer functioned as a source of knowledge or judge for matters relating to the philosophy of nature. Reformed orthodox theologians such as Petrus van Mastricht accused the Cartesians of introducing a secularization of philosophy that led to heterodoxy and more radical views of Spinoza.

I have also explored two specific topics to illustrate the impact of the changed approach to philosophy. In the doctrine of creation, Cartesian philosophy supposed that all things in the world could have originated gradually by matter, motion, and general laws, so there was no need of special or secondary creation during the six days of Genesis. Reformed orthodox theologians, by contrast, defended secondary or instantaneous creation on each of the days of creation. In the doctrine of natural theology, Cartesian philosophy privileged proofs for God’s existence from innate knowledge. However, here also Reformed orthodox theologians countered that Scripture should guide our thinking about proofs. Since Romans 1 does not only direct Christians to look inward but also to look the effects of creation, they argued against Cartesianism for retaining traditional cosmological proofs associated with Thomas Aquinas. Likewise, whereas the Reformed Cartesians conceived of natural theology as separate from revealed theology, Reformed orthodox theologians argued for their integration, with natural theology being constructed from both natural and supernatural revelation. These two examples from creation and natural theology therefore illustrate for us how a large change, or rather break, occurred during the second half of the 17th century and prepared the way for a new era of Enlightened orthodoxy associated with the generation of Jean-Alphonse Turretin.

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Alphonse Turretin, *Dissertations on Natural Theology*, 12; ET from *Theses de theologia naturali*, thes. 22, in *Cogitationes*, 70.

¹⁰⁹ Heyd, *Between Orthodoxy and the Enlightenment*, 198-202.

¹¹⁰ Jean-Alphonse Turretin, *Dissertations on Natural Theology*, 1; ET from *Theses de theologia naturali*, thes. 2, in *Cogitationes*, 63.

¹¹¹ Jean-Alphonse Turretin, *Dissertations on Natural Theology*, 26; ET from *Theses de theologia naturali*, thes. 39, in *Cogitationes*, 78-79.

¹¹² Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 110-112.

¹¹³ Mangold, *Towards a Reformed Enlightenment*, 88-89.