

Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism

Willem J. van Asselt

With contributions by
T. Theo J. Pleizier, Pieter L. Rouwendal,
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Translated by
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Foreword by
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Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Reformation Heritage Books

2965 Leonard St. NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889 / Fax 616-285-3246

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America.

11 12 13 14 15 16/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Asselt, W. J. van.

[Inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek. English]

Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism / Willem J. van Asselt ; with contributions by T. Theo J. Pleizier ... [et al.] ; translated by Albert Gootjes ; foreword by Richard A. Muller.

p. cm. — (Reformed historical-theological studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60178-121-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Protestant Scholasticism. 2.

Reformed Church — Doctrines — History. I. Title.

BX9422.3.A8713 2011

230'.4209 — dc22

2010054326

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Table of Contents

Preface to the Dutch Edition	ix
Preface to the English Translation.	xi
Foreword	xiii
1. Introduction: What Is Reformed Scholasticism?	1
— <i>Willem J. van Asselt and Pieter L. Rouwendal</i>	
2. The State of Scholarship: From Discontinuity to Continuity — <i>Willem J. van Asselt and Pieter L. Rouwendal</i> . . .	10
3. “As the Philosopher Says”: Aristotle	26
— <i>T. Theo J. Pleizier and Maarten Wisse</i>	
4. The Teacher of the Ancient Church: Augustine.	45
— <i>Maarten Wisse</i>	
5. The Method of the Schools: Medieval Scholasticism	56
— <i>Pieter L. Rouwendal</i>	
6. “Open Hand and Fist”: Humanism and Scholasticism in the Reformation — <i>Willem J. van Asselt</i>	73
7. Distinguishing and Teaching: Constructing a Theological Argument in Reformed Scholasticism.	86
— <i>Willem J. van Asselt and Pieter L. Rouwendal</i>	
8. Scholasticism in the Time of Early Orthodoxy (ca. 1560–1620) — <i>Willem J. van Asselt</i>	103
9. Scholasticism in the Time of High Orthodoxy (ca. 1620–1700) — <i>Willem J. van Asselt</i>	132

10. Scholasticism in the Time of Late Orthodoxy (ca. 1700–1790) — <i>Willem J. van Asselt</i>	167
11. “The Abutment against Which the Bridge of All Later Protestant Theology Leans”: Scholasticism and Today — <i>Willem J. van Asselt</i>	194
Appendix 1: Reading Guide	211
Appendix 2: The Use of Reason in Matters of Faith	225

Foreword

An introduction to the study of Reformed Scholasticism has long been a desideratum in the field of early modern studies, and the present work supplies the need superbly. Apart from the work of Heinrich Hepp in the mid-nineteenth century, which, for all of its deficits, did at least offer both a useful finding-list of the writers involved in the early modern development of the Reformed tradition and a broad but selective survey of their thought in his famous *Reformed Dogmatics*, there has been no basic text that provided a suitable introduction to the field. There are, of course, a goodly number of technical studies, but until the appearance of this work by Willem van Asselt and his colleagues, we have lacked the basic introduction in which the era is concisely surveyed, the most significant thinkers noted together with the various trajectories or schools of thought, definitions of the phenomena of scholasticism and orthodoxy carefully presented, and the relevant secondary scholarship referenced. The present state of the question concerning the nature of the Reformed development is well presented.

Particular notice should be given to the chapters on backgrounds to Reformed Scholasticism, both Aristotelian and Augustinian; the discussion of the history of scholarship on the post-Reformation development of Reformed thought from its modern beginnings in the early nineteenth century to the present; and the several chapters surveying the course of Reformed thought from early through late orthodoxy. There is a helpful discussion of the Aristotelian understanding of such issues as forms logical argumentation, act and potency, and causality, together with comment on the ways in which Christian Aristotelianism absorbed and adapted Aristotle's categories. Likewise, the Augustinian backgrounds of the Reformed, including patterns of appropriation, are noted. The authors also offer a balanced perspective

on the interrelationship of humanism and scholasticism in the era of the Reformation. The discussions, found in several contexts, of the structures and patterns of scholastic argumentation are most helpful, and the historical chapters on the successive phases of orthodoxy offer valuable introductions both to the issues in debate and the major theological voices of the era. Each chapter, moreover, concludes with a bibliography basic to the field, and the entire volume concludes with a major resource or “reading guide” that identifies biographical resources and various libraries and Internet resources through which the often difficult-to-find works of the Reformed orthodox may be accessed.

Throughout the volume, the authors make the useful and necessary distinctions between scholasticism and orthodoxy, method and content, lack of attention to which has plagued the older scholarship. Scholasticism refers primarily to the method used by early modern as well as medieval thinkers when engaged in academic discourse, and, although it would be highly incorrect to assume that this definition of the phenomenon denies that method can and does affect content, it remains the case that scholasticism provided the form and structure for a series of academic disciplines, including philosophy and medicine; was not tied to a particular content; and was designed to facilitate rather than impede conclusions. As a method it was employed equally by Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers, often to deploy rather different assumptions and content and to draw very different conclusions. It is also the case that, understood rightly as primarily a reference to method, scholasticism also refers to a specific genre of writings. Not all of the works of Reformed orthodox writers of the early modern era were scholastic.

In short, this *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* provides a valuable resource for the study of the various trajectories of early modern Reformed thought. It is not merely an introductory survey. It is a significant guide for the further study of the era.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: What Is Reformed Scholasticism?

Willem J. van Asselt • Pieter L. Rouwendal

1.1 Why Reformed Scholasticism?

This book is an introduction to the theological method commonly known as Reformed Scholasticism. This reflection on and exposition of the doctrines of the Christian church is often considered forced and conjures up images of rigid seventeenth-century theologians after Calvin who cast the Christian message into Aristotelian forms so that nothing was left of the original fresh message the Reformers had bequeathed to them. Divinity students were sent out into the churches with a dead, inflexible system used to scourge the congregation from the pulpit each Sunday. The result was a cut-and-dried faith devoid of life and a theology headed on the path to death or, even worse, trapped in the clutches of rationalism.

The writers of this book believe that this image is based on a number of historical and systematic misunderstandings. First, scholasticism was not something practiced only by “rigid” Reformed theologians; Lutheran and Roman Catholic authors also made ample use of this theological method after the Reformation. In that respect, scholasticism was an ecumenical enterprise. Secondly, scholasticism was not used only in the seventeenth century. The entire Western church had done scholastic theology since the eleventh century. A scholastic approach was also applied in other academic disciplines. The term “scholasticism” thus should not so much be associated with content but with method, an academic form of argumentation and disputation.

This is by no means the only view of scholasticism. Our positive outlook is countered by those who argue that statements of faith ought not tolerate any scholastic method of reasoning or that scholasticism involves a rationalistic distortion of the biblical witness. Others wonder how scholasticism relates to the Reformers. Did they not break with scholasticism? What about their followers, who drew once again from medieval writers? Was this not simply a return to the “darkness” of the Middle Ages? Others ask what the value of scholasticism is for the present. Are we dealing merely with a relic from the past, or can it help break through various present-day theological and ecumenical impasses?

These are the questions that will be treated in this book. This introduction thus concerns questions of continuity and discontinuity. Was there a radical break between the message of the Reformers and the theology of the Middle Ages? And was the theology of Protestant Orthodoxy then a betrayal of the original message of the Reformation? In treating these questions, this book makes room for both sides of the debate.

Without jumping ahead to the conclusions of our study, we do want to touch on why we consider the study of Reformed Scholasticism to be very important: first, the catholicity of Reformed Scholasticism; second, its historical theological meaning; and, finally, its systematic-theological relevance.

By the *catholicity* of Reformed Scholasticism, we mean that those who practiced it explicitly aimed to stand within the tradition of the entire church. They made no pretense of originality or of developing the “true doctrine.” As students of the Reformers, they wanted to develop a theology in which there was wide reflection on the core of the gospel with all its implications. They placed themselves in line with theology of all ages and engaged in theological reflection “together with all the saints.” They looked not only to the past but also to the future. The Reformed Scholastics intended to contribute to the church’s continued existence into the future.

It is necessary to pay attention to Reformed Scholasticism from a *historical theological* perspective, as interest has only recently been shown in the history of post-Reformation Reformed theology. Different approaches can be taken, historical and systematic. The task of the historian is to delve into authors and their writings in terms of the relationship they have with earlier, contemporary, or later develop-

ments. Analysis and evaluation of the content and intention, as well as the coherence of the various points of doctrine, are more systematic in nature. The authors of this introduction believe that a combination of these two approaches is desirable, and at times even necessary. This period in the history of Reformed Protestantism connects current Reformed theology to the Reformation and to the theology of all times.

Finally, we are convinced that current *systematic theology* is served well by a thorough knowledge of the theology of this period. We mention three important factors: First, the attempt to connect theology systematically with the practice of faith as this came to the fore, to give one example, in the Dutch Further Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*). Second, we point to the argumentative quality of Reformed theology. As we will see, scholastically oriented theologians placed great emphasis on systematic and orderly argumentation and aimed at clear definition of the terms they used. With great care they explained in their theses the terms they used and noted also the various different meanings that a single term could have. The Reformed Scholastics did not limit themselves to one aspect of theology but saw each part in relation to the whole. Answers to one question could not conflict with those to another. What was argued in connection with the doctrine of God could not conflict with what was posited for the doctrine of providence.

Third, scholastic theology was practiced in close connection with other disciplines, such as philology, exegesis, philosophy, and so forth. Positions taken in this context were exhaustively defended. It did not suffice simply to reproduce the view of another. Room was given for counterarguments and objections. This was an explicit or implicit recognition that different methods could be followed to explain theological points of doctrine. Scholastic theology was neither doctrinal dressage nor a heresy witch hunt, but aimed at analyzing one's own position as well as those of others and at clarifying the implications of any given viewpoint. These three factors—the practice of faith, argumentative quality, and relationship to other disciplines—can likewise be fruitful for the practice of systematic theology today.

1.2 Purpose and Structure

Briefly stated, our goal for this book is to sketch a map with which the reader will be able to orientate himself through the landscape of

Reformed Scholasticism. To us, a mere description of the field appeared insufficient, and so we decided that concrete direction for independent research was also necessary. Both elements can be found in this book. Although the greater part of this introduction is descriptive in nature, at the end we have included a reading guide that illustrates how a scholastic text may be approached. Yet there is one condition for successful work in the field of Reformed Scholasticism that this introduction cannot provide: a working knowledge of Latin. For centuries the Latin language was the language of academia par excellence, much as English is today. The Reformed Scholastic thinkers used this language as well. They thought in Latin, spoke in Latin, and wrote in Latin. Anyone who wants to plunge into this field must have a working knowledge of this language. In the present book, however, the most important Latin terms have been translated and explained for the benefit of the reader.

This book is introductory in character. For that reason, a conscious attempt has been made to present the material in a manner that the interested non-theologian can follow. This means that in certain cases our exposition does not satisfy all the rigors of an academic publication. For that reason the reader will find very few footnotes, for example. Another feature is the division of the text into sections that use a larger typeface and those that use a smaller typeface. The larger typeface contains the primary lines of the argument, while the sections printed in smaller typeface support and elucidate these main lines more fully. Finally, a helpful tool is the bibliographical section that closes each chapter, containing references to relevant literature that can be used for further study.

The contents of this book can be divided into two main parts. First is an introduction to the development and contents of scholastic method as used in post-Reformation Reformed theology. The second part provides descriptions of the views, figures, and currents of Reformed Scholastic theology after the Reformation. Before the development of scholastic method is described, chapter 2 begins with an overview of the history of scholarship on Reformed Scholasticism.

Chapter 3 considers a figure from classical antiquity who was of great importance for the development of scholastic theology, the philosopher Aristotle. The scholastics used many terms and concepts developed by Aristotle. In order to understand Reformed Scholasticism, it is absolutely necessary to be acquainted with the technical terms that

came from the philosophy of Aristotle. The content of theology, however, was not determined by this philosopher, but was influenced above all by the thought of Augustine. This will be traced out in chapter 4. Chapter 5 lays out the development of scholastic method in the Middle Ages. After this introduction of the “protohistory” of Reformed Scholasticism, chapter 6 considers how humanist and scholastic methods related to each other in the period of the Reformation. Chapter 7 sketches the contours of the manner in which Reformed Scholastics worked with dogmatic material.

Part 2 of this book moves on to the three most important periods that can be distinguished within the history of Reformed Scholasticism. These three periods are described in chapters 8, 9, and 10, respectively. Each description follows a set pattern. First, attention is given to the historical context of the period. Next, the polemics from this period are introduced, followed by a short description of the most important centers of Reformed Scholastic theology of that time. Finally, one particular theologian is highlighted as a representative of that particular period.

The final chapter of this book addresses several historical questions for the study of scholastic theology today, as well as the systematic question of its current relevance. By way of a disputation from Voetius, two appendices illustrate, step-by-step, how a philosophical theological text from the seventeenth century should be approached for study.

1.3 Definition

Before entering into the topics outlined above, we must, in good scholastic fashion, first define a number of terms that are frequently used in this book: “orthodoxy” and “scholasticism,” as well as “Reformed Scholasticism,” which is a more narrow description of the subject of this book.

1.3.1 *Orthodoxy*

The term “orthodoxy” is used first of all to refer to a certain period in the history of Protestantism after the Reformation and pertains to both Lutheran and Reformed developments. This period extends into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In light of the original meaning of this word, it can bear several different nuances. As “correct doctrine” or “view” (Greek: *orthos* = correct, and *doxa* = view), the word points to certain content that must be defended in opposition to erroneous

views. As a result, the word orthodoxy also has a normative meaning in which a close connection is established with the teaching of the church throughout the ages. The term orthodoxy can also establish a close connection between systematic theology and the church's confessional documents. The term orthodoxy differs from scholasticism, in that the former pertains to correct content, while the latter has to do with an academic method. The meanings of these terms thus do not coincide.

In this book we use the term orthodoxy as the description of a period in the history of theology that stretches from the sixteenth century into the eighteenth century. When we speak of Reformed orthodoxy, we refer to that stream within orthodoxy connected to the Reformed confessions. In using this term, we do not make a statement as to whether or not a particular theologian in his work actually conformed to the Reformed confessions. We only wish to indicate that the theologian himself was convinced that his views were in line with the Reformed confessions.

1.3.2 *Scholasticism*

The term “scholasticism” is derived from the Greek word *scholè*, which originally meant “free time,” as instruction in philosophy was originally followed in one's own free time. From there, *scholè* came to be used for anything that pertained to education. The Latin word *schola* received the same meaning. In Roman culture, *scholasticus* referred to someone devoted to science (in the broad sense of the term), whom we today would call a scholar. In the early Middle Ages, the term *scholasticus* meant “a learned person” or “one who received instruction in a school.” Often the leader of a school was referred to with the same word. In the period of the Renaissance and Reformation, the term *scholasticus* was used in different ways. For example, the students at the academy (*schola publica*) instituted by Calvin in Geneva were called *scholastici*. Yet Calvin also used the word *scholastici* in a completely different, negative sense, there giving it a value in terms of content.

This ambivalence in the term “scholastic” can also be found in the writings of the representatives of orthodoxy. While in their dogmatic works writers from this period often rail against scholastic theology, in the same works and sometimes even in the same chapter one can find a defense of scholasticism. In the first case, the term scholastic is aimed at the content of (late) medieval theology; in the latter, the reference

is to theology as practiced at Reformed academies and universities. When orthodoxy lost its earlier place of prominence toward the end of the eighteenth century, the word scholastic was used almost exclusively in a negative way as a reference to content. This negative meaning has persisted up to the present.

However, it has been questioned whether the term scholastic can be rightly defined in terms of content. Lambertus M. De Rijk, in his *Middeleeuwse wijsbegeerte: Traditie en vernieuwing*, has convincingly shown that it is impossible to define scholasticism exclusively in terms of content. He proposed that scholasticism instead be used as a collective term for scholarly research and instruction carried out according to a particular method. With this proposal, De Rijk in effect went back to the original, medieval meaning of the word.

In the course of history, attempts have been made to define scholasticism, both historically and systematically. Scholasticism was often identified with medieval theology without taking account of the fact that scholastic method was used also in later times, and further, that not all medieval theology was scholastic. Other definitions identified scholasticism with a certain content, such as Aristotelian philosophy, and simultaneously made a value judgment. De Rijk opposed all of these definitions and emphasized the didactic and methodological character of scholasticism. He considered scholasticism primarily as “a method which is characterized, both on the level of research and on the level of teaching, by the use of an ever recurring system of concepts, distinctions, definitions, propositional analyses, argumentational techniques and disputational methods” (*Middeleeuwse wijsbegeerte: Traditie en vernieuwing*, 11).

De Rijk's critical attitude toward existing definitions of scholasticism was shared by Ulrich G. Leinsle. However, he was also critical of De Rijk. Leinsle considered it historically unwarranted to use the term scholasticism as a collective term for the medieval academic method. According to Leinsle, such a definition is useful only when that method can be carefully defined; but medieval theologians rarely ever addressed their own method. Only from the sixteenth century onward can one find systematic treatments of method (*de methodo*). Leinsle further pointed out that “method” in the Middle Ages was a very complex concept, depending entirely on the ever-changing concept of scholarship during the medieval period.

The most important thesis we will defend in this work is that the term scholastic refers above all to method, without direct implications for content. It pertains to methods of disputation and reasoning which characterize scholasticism in contrast to other ways of doing theology. What follows will make it clear that our own understanding of scholasticism is in line with De Rijk's definition.

1.3.3 Reformed Scholasticism

After defining orthodoxy and scholasticism, we still need to specify more closely what the subject of this study is, namely, Reformed Scholasticism. The word "Reformed" as opposed to "Calvinist" was chosen very deliberately. The Reformed stream within Protestantism does not find its origin only in the work of Calvin, but also in that of his contemporaries, such as Bullinger, Bucer, Vermigli, and Zanchius. If one intends to highlight the broad character of the entire movement, then it is not correct to suggest that only *one* person stood behind that tradition. It is for this reason that we do not speak of a "Calvinist Scholasticism," but rather of a "Reformed Scholasticism." Furthermore, the adjective Reformed ought not to be understood as suggesting that the Reformed developed their own scholastic method distinct from other forms of scholasticism. The difference between Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Scholasticism is not in method but in content.

From the above, the reader can see that the terms scholasticism, orthodoxy, and Reformed are not to be identified with each other. Scholasticism refers to a method, and must not be confused with a particular content. "Orthodoxy," in contrast, refers to a particular period in history, tied to a particular content, and has nothing to say about method. However, orthodoxy also may not be identified with the term Reformed, since one can also speak of Jewish, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic orthodoxy. "Reformed" refers to theological content tied to the Reformed confessions.

Further, "Reformed theology" may not be equated with "scholastic theology." The fact that Reformed, academic theologians used scholastic method does not mean that this was the only method they employed. Nor should only the theologians from the period of orthodoxy who used scholastic method be considered Reformed theologians. Scholastic method was used above all for engaging in theology on an academic level. In other works of Reformed authors one will rarely, if

at all, encounter elements of scholastic method such as Aristotelian or medieval distinctions. It goes without saying that this is true of non-scholarly works, such as works of piety or for catechetical instruction, but it is also true for works of an exegetical or philological nature.

In short: Reformed Scholasticism (1) refers to the academic theology of the schools (2) as practiced in the period of orthodoxy, (3) using scholastic method in the exposition of doctrine and (4) in content, is bound to the Reformed confessions.

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