

A REHABILITATION OF SCHOLASTICISM?

A REVIEW ARTICLE ON RICHARD A. MULLER'S
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For decades the idea of scholastic theology has tended to raise very negative images, especially among Protestants. The very words 'Protestant scholasticism' or 'seventeenth-century Orthodoxy' conjure up mental pictures of decaying calf-bound Latin folios covered with thick dust. Of forced and inappropriate proof-texting inside, of abstract and boring syllogisms, far removed from the dynamism of biblical history and concerns of modern life, of harsh logic, a polemical spirit and an almost arrogant propensity to answer questions which the ages have had to leave open. The 'Biblical Theology' movement inspired by Barth and Brunner earlier this century, and the great flowering of sixteenth-century Reformation studies since World War II have given seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism very poor marks when compared with the theology of the original Reformers. The fresh emphasis on the dynamic development of the theology in the Scriptures among Evangelicals (post-Vos) and various approaches to the 'New Hermeneutics' among those in the more liberal camp have raised serious questions about the scriptural balance (if not validity) of the more traditional Protestant text-book theology. R. T. Kendall, for instance, has quite negatively evaluated the seventeenth-century Westminster confessional theology in light of the very Calvin whom the Westminster divines certainly thought they were following.¹ Can anything good, therefore, be said these days about Protestant scholasticism? Is it even legitimate to reopen this subject in a serious way?

Richard A. Muller in what is merely the first in a whole series of volumes on the subject of *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, answers these questions with a resounding 'yes'. Muller, a professor at Fuller Seminary in California, has – for one thing – read the original sources in massive proportions. His erudition and command of the material are remarkable. He combines with his broad and deep knowledge an histori-

* Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1987; 365pp., \$9.95.

1. See R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Oxford, 1979, and the answer to it by Paul Helm, *Calvin and Calvinists*, Edinburgh, 1982.

cally well informed and judiciously balanced critical spirit, which is in contact with major epistemological and scientific questions of our own day. It seems very likely that all competent future studies of the theological tradition lying between the close of the Reformation period and the beginning of the secularist Enlightenment will have to proceed by way of Muller. If Muller's succeeding volumes live up to this first one (he has already composed *A Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*), then negative evaluations of Protestant Orthodoxy which may be based on slight knowledge of the actual material will experience an ever decreasing likelihood of maintaining scholarly credibility. This, of course, is not to imply that scholastic Orthodoxy is – or should be – above criticism. But we will come to that later.

Muller's definition of scholastic theology merits an extended quotation, as it is useful in clearing away some misunderstandings of the subject:

The development of Protestant doctrine, therefore, in the great confessions of the mid-sixteenth century and in the orthodox systems of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not a development from kerygma to dogma but rather a development consisting in the adjustment of a received body of doctrine and its systematic relations to the needs of Protestantism, in terms dictated by the teachings of the Reformers on Scripture, grace, justification and the sacraments.

The term *scholasticism* well describes the technical and academic side of this process of the institutionalization of Protestant doctrine. The theology of the great systems written in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like the theology of the thirteenth-century teachers, is preeminently a school-theology. It is a theology designed to develop system on a highly technical level and in an extremely precise manner by means of the careful identification of topics, division of these topics into their basic parts, definition of the parts, and doctrinal or logical argumentation concerning the divisions and definitions. In addition, this school-method is characterized by a thorough use and a technical mastery of the tools of linguistic, philosophical, logical and traditional thought. The Protestant orthodox themselves use the term 'scholastic theology' as a specific designation for detailed, disputative system, as distinct from biblical or exegetical theology, catechetical theology and discursive, ecclesial theology. The term 'scholastic' is, therefore, applicable particularly to the large-scale systematic development of seventeenth-century Protestant theology. This approach to Protestant scholasticism, based directly on the definitions and the methods evidenced in the seventeenth century systems explicitly opposes the view of several recent scholars according to which *scholasticism* can be identified specifically with a use of Aristotelian

philosophy, a pronounced metaphysical interest and the use of predestination as an organizing principle in theological system.²

Throughout his volume, Muller takes pains to clarify what 'systematic' and 'scholastic' do not mean. In a discussion of the intentions of the seventeenth-century theologians, he states:

In the first place, the terms *system* and *systematic*, when applied to theology did not, in the seventeenth century, imply anything like the monistic syntheses designated 'system' by theologians and philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, *system* here simply indicates the basic body of doctrine in its proper organization, as found in a catechism: a seventeenth-century *systema*, like a *compendium* or a *medulla*, was likely to be a basic survey as distinct from an elaborate system. Second, and more important, the term 'scholastic' – contrary to the attempt of several modern authors to define it in terms of an allegiance to Aristotelian philosophy and a use of predestination as a central dogma – indicates neither a philosophical nor a doctrinal position but rather the topical approach of the *loci communes* or 'commonplaces' and the method of exposition by definition, division, argument and answer that we have already seen utilized in the Protestant scholastic theological prolegomena. . . .

It is also worth noting that, as evidenced by Leigh's description of methods, the term 'scholastic' could be used by Protestants in the mid-seventeenth century in a positive, nonpolemic sense which reflected the etymological meaning of the word – a method or teaching 'of the schools' – rather than the continued Protestant distaste for the metaphysical speculations of the medievals.³

But even if we place the best interpretation on the words 'scholastic' and 'systematic', questions may still be raised by many: why did Protestant scholasticism have to arise at the close of the great Reformation period? Even at best, was not Protestant Orthodoxy of the seventeenth century a cooling of the evangelical fervour of the sixteenth-century Reformation? Did it not serve to fossilize and domesticate a formerly vital and dynamic religious movement?

Some fifteen years ago, Professor John Leith answered these questions with clarity and brevity:

After the 1560's Protestant theology faced a new task, namely one of consolidation, clarification, and elaboration. The necessity of this task

2. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. I, *Prolegomena to Theology*, Grand Rapids, 1987, pp. 17-18.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

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arose out of the nature of the theology itself. During the initial religious experience, words may be used loosely and without careful definition, but if a movement is to survive, it must sooner or later formulate precisely what it is saying or believing. It must ask how one affirmation fits with other affirmations, how the total experience holds together. There are dangers in this process, for when any great experience of life is analyzed, precisely defined, and described, there is the risk that the living reality will be destroyed. But in many areas of life, as psychology demonstrates, this process is necessary for the sake of the health of living experience itself. The new task that theology faced after 1560 was inevitable and ought not to be judged as good or bad in itself, but as a necessary stage in the development of any community or theology.⁴

Muller feels that this necessity for more precise development within the Reformed (and Lutheran) communities has not been appreciated by many nineteenth-and twentieth-century scholars:

The changes and developments that took place within Protestantism in the two centuries after the Reformation need to be viewed as belonging to a living tradition which needed to adapt and to reformulate its teachings as the historical context demanded. Quite simply, the fact that theological systems in 1659 did not look like Calvin's *Institutes* of 1559, or even maintain all of the definitions provided by Calvin, does not in itself indicate discontinuity. The issue is to examine the course of development, to study the reasons for change, and then to make judgments concerning continuity and discontinuity in light of something more than a facile contrast or juxtaposition.

A fundamental misunderstanding of this set of historical relationships, particularly of the relationship between the theology of the Reformers and the theology of post-Reformation orthodoxy lies at the root of most of the contemporary complaints against both Protestant orthodoxy and its nineteenth and early twentieth century descendants. To very little purpose, a series of studies have set 'Calvin against the Calvinists' – as if Calvin were the only source of post-reformation Reformed theology and as if the theology of the mid-seventeenth ought for some reason to be measured against and judged by the theology of the mid-sixteenth century. Because the orthodox systems do not mirror Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*, they are labelled 'distortions' of the Reformation. The genuine historical and theological issue, of course, is one of development and change within a broad tradition, of continu-

4. John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making*, Richmond, Va., 1973, p. 65.

ity and discontinuity with the thought, not only of Calvin, but also of Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli.⁵

Muller deals openly and clearly with those interpreters of the last two centuries – in many cases world-renowned theologians – who, he believes, have fallen into this 'fundamental misunderstanding' of the relationship between the Reformers and the scholastics. He criticises the interpretation of such distinguished Reformation scholars as Heinrich Heppe and Ernst Bizer,⁶ Karl Barth,⁷ T. H. L. Parker⁸ and others. This part of his work is clearly controversial and will by no means command universal assent within the Reformed theological community. Nonetheless, even those who may strongly dissent from Muller's conclusions will be likely to agree that his arguments are weighty, and that an appropriate response to them will require serious research, hard thinking, and careful formulation.

Reformation scholars today will be far more likely to agree with Muller's critique of the nineteenth-century propensity (already pointed out by James Orr in *The Progress of Dogma* in 1897) to attempt to reduce the theology of Calvin (and the later Calvinists) to some one architectonic principle such as predestination or the sovereignty of God.

The analysis of prolegomena and *principia* in post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics provides a partial answer to the claim of much earlier scholarship that the Reformed, following the death of Calvin, ignored the essentially Christologically, soteriologically and epistemologically controlled doctrinal perspective of the *Institutes* and, in its place, introduced a *predestinarian metaphysic* as the controlling element of Reformed system, in effect, the 'central dogma' and fundamental principle of Christian doctrine . . . the doctrine of predestination is shown to be one doctrinal focus among others and not a central pivot of system or overarching motif controlling other doctrines

The attempt to describe Protestant scholasticism as the systematic development of central dogmas – predestination in the case of the Reformed, justification in the case of the Lutherans – was, at best, a theological reinterpretation of the Protestant scholastic systems by the constructive theologians of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they attempted to rebuild theological system in the wake of the Kantian critique of rational metaphysics The monistic systematizers of the nineteenth century – Alexander Schweizer, Gottfried

5. Muller, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 90-95, 101, 83-87.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 117-118, 119, 170, 185, 349.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

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Thomasius and Albrecht Ritschi – simply read their own method back into the Protestant tradition.⁹

Muller's work will certainly demonstrate that no fair reading of seventeenth-century Orthodoxy will allow it to be reduced to one overriding (and hence impoverishing and distorting) principle. But even granted that, perhaps a more crucial question arises concerning the validity of this kind of theological enterprise: is Protestant scholasticism (not to mention Roman Catholic scholasticism) ultimately rationalist, or is it exegetical (based on a fair interpretation of Biblical texts)? Muller argues strongly for the latter.

Predestinarianism and Rationalism are hardly identical. On the one hand, Reformed predestinarianism rests on an exegetical, not on a philosophical basis and has little in common with the development of a monistic or pantheistic Rationalism such as can be found in the seventeenth-century Rationalist system of Spinoza.¹⁰

The rationalization and intellectualization of theology into system characteristic of the orthodox or scholastic phase of Protestantism never set the standards of scriptural revelation and rational proof on an equal par and certainly never viewed either evidential demonstration or rational necessity as grounds of faith. Quite the contrary, the Protestant orthodox disavow evidentialism and identify theological certainty as something quite distinct from mathematical and rational or philosophical certainty. They also argue quite pointedly that reason has an instrumental function within the bounds of faith and not a magisterial function. Reason never proves faith, but only elaborates faith toward understanding

In other words, Protestant scholasticism was no more conducive to a truly rationalistic philosophy than were the Augustinian, Thomist and Scotist theologies of the later Middle Ages. . . .

Any use of philosophical concepts by the Protestant scholastics involved the rejection of views noticeably at variance with Christian doctrine. Just as their medieval predecessors had disavowed the Aristotelian notions of the eternity of the world and the destructibility of the soul, so did the Protestant scholastics refuse these particular tenets and any other rational deductions at odds with revealed doctrine – such as the curious cosmology of Descartes or the occasionalism of Geulincx.¹¹

9. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 94.

Not everyone will be prepared to agree with Muller's high assessment of the fair exegetical procedure of the Orthodox (as opposed to the artificiality of proof-texting of which they are generally understood to be guilty). He speaks of 'the accusation of 'proof-texting' typically levelled against the Protestant Orthodox by modern writers.'¹²

It is quite true that the orthodox systems cite *dicta probantia* for every dogmatic statement – and it is also the case that some of these biblical *dicta*, because of modern critical scholarship, can no longer be used as the seventeenth century orthodox used them. Nonetheless, it was never the intention or the practice of the Protestant scholastics to wrench biblical texts out of their context in Scripture or to dispense with careful biblical exegesis in the original languages. Many seventeenth century dogmatic theologians began their teaching careers as professors of Old or New Testament and virtually all of them, whether or not they taught exegesis, were well versed in the biblical languages

[T]he *locus*-method itself was designed to move from biblical and exegetical study of key passages to the collection of exegetical observations and dogmatic conclusions into a body of Christian doctrine. The *dicta probantia* appear in the orthodox systems, not as texts torn from their biblical context but as references to either the exegetical labors of the theologian himself or, as was more broadly and generally the case, to a received tradition of biblical interpretation. It was the intention of the authors of the orthodox systems and compendia to direct their readers, by the citation of texts, to the exegetical labors that undergirded theological system. The twentieth century may not accept all of the results of seventeenth-century exegesis, but it ought to recognize that the older theology, whatever its faults, did not fail to appropriate the best exegetical conclusions of its day.¹³

A careful reading of the seventeenth century orthodox writers will confirm Muller's point: these theologians were not, at their best, simplistic proof-texters. The way Turretin (in many *loci* of *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*) and John Owen (particularly in the second half of *Death of Death*) wrestle with Biblical passages in their context in light of the original languages is an illustration of their concern for faithful exegesis. Yet, in this reviewer's opinion, some important critical questions remain in this area that have not been dealt with by the author of this volume. Granted much faithful biblical work by the seventeenth century orthodox, is there not still all too much 'proofing' of theological propositions by texts that do not really apply? Is there not a tendency in a good deal of

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 94.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 274-275.

their writings towards abstraction (as T. F. Torrance, for instance, has suggested, in the area of predestination¹⁴)? Have not many of them tended to submerge the Biblical idea of covenant into the Western European concept of contract?¹⁵ Have many of these theologians of the seventeenth century dealt as adequately as did Calvin with the vital concept of union with Christ?¹⁶ Of course, in fairness to Professor Muller, a number of other volumes are planned in this series, and undoubtedly they will carefully address these concerns. This first volume is only intended to deal with the concept of the relationship of prologomena to the theological system as a whole, and it has accomplished that task with insight and precision. We gladly look forward to later volumes which will address such matters as covenant, election, union with Christ, nature and grace.

One of the many strong points of Muller's work is his sense of the catholicity of Orthodox Protestantism:

The language used by Paraeus here also reflects a crucial element of the orthodox theological enterprise: the desire for and emphasis upon catholicity. Protestantism had, from its very beginnings – as witnessed by Luther's stance as a *doctor ecclesiae*, a doctor of the church, bound to reform its doctrine, and by Calvin's profoundly catholic claims in his response to Sadoleto – assumed its identity as the true church. The Protestant orthodox systems, searching out and defending the proper formulation of 'right teaching', had as the goal of their formulation a universally valid statement of Christian truth.¹⁷

Muller helps place Orthodox Protestantism in its ancient catholic setting as he discusses the scholastic continuity between twelfth- and seventeenth-century Christian thought,¹⁸ specifically through the perennial influence of 'Christian Aristotelianism':

This continuity of Reformed orthodoxy with the Reformation in and through the use of modified medieval models for system was possible because of the continuity of Christian Aristotelianism, its dialectical method, and because of the training of many of the Reformers in the old systems . . . the Reformation cannot be seen as a total break with the Middle Ages. . . . Instead, we must think in terms of the larger

14. Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith*, London, 1959, pp. lxxvii ff.

15. James B. Torrance discusses this matter in an article: 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy' in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 34, pp. 225-243. Muller does mention the importance of the idea of the covenant of works in the theology of Cocceius (p. 264).

16. Muller argues, with considerable evidence, that the doctrine of predestination in the seventeenth century orthodox teaching is christological. See p. 85.

17. Muller, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-262. Muller, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-262.

18. *E.g. ibid.*, pp. 81, 94.

continuities of theological and philosophical method – the trajectory of scholasticism from the late twelfth to the late seventeenth century – and in terms of the doctrinal continuity, not without development and change, that took place within Protestantism itself¹⁹

We must also stress the genuine and positive relationship between Protestant scholasticism and the Christian Aristotelianism of earlier centuries. This relationship, as manifest in the Protestant scholastic use of medieval paradigms for the discussion of the genus and object of theology and, to a lesser or at least less explicit extent, for the establishment of a theological epistemology in which faith and reason both had a place, in fact provided a barrier to the use of seventeenth century rationalist philosophy in Protestant orthodox system.²⁰

After admitting that 'Luther and Calvin had argued pointedly against the use of philosophical concepts – particularly Aristotelian concepts – in the construction of theology',²¹ he adds:

This discontinuity, however, is not nearly as pronounced as the views of Luther and Calvin would make it seem. It is quite easy to trace a continuous flow of fundamentally Aristotelian philosophical training from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. Philip Melancthon, the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, as he was called, taught courses in Aristotelian logic and rhetoric at Wittenberg throughout the era of the Reformation On the Reformed side, the philosophical career of the Marburg professor, Andreas Hyperius was as noteworthy as his theological efforts. He not only wrote the influential *Methodus theologiae* but also a highly respected *Compendium librorum physicorum Aristotelis*. Examples like this can be easily multiplied to demonstrate the continuity of Aristotelianism in the sixteenth century.²²

Though stressing the continuities between medieval and Protestant scholasticism Muller certainly recognizes that there are also discontinuities. Some years ago, John Leith pointed out that the evangelical Protestant form of scholasticism was 'always qualified by the Protestant doctrines of Holy Scripture and justification by faith, which however modified by seventeenth century developments, also modify the method.'²³

The difference most frequently referred to by Muller is epistemological:

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-232.

23. Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

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These early Reformed statements concerning theological presuppositions focus, virtually without exception, on the problem of the knowledge of God given the fact not only of human finitude but also of human sin. In other words, the critique levelled by the Reformation at medieval theological presuppositions added a soteriological dimension to the epistemological problem. Whereas the medieval doctors had assumed that the fall affected primarily the will and its affections and not the reason, the Reformers assumed also the fallenness of the rational faculty: natural theology, according to the Reformers, was not merely limited to non-saving knowledge of God – it was also bound in idolatry. This view of the problem is the single most important contribution of the early Reformed writers to the theological prolegomena of orthodox Protestantism. Indeed, it is the doctrinal issue that most forcibly presses the Protestant scholastics toward the modification of the medieval models for theological prolegomena.²⁴

He also points other, perhaps less important, methodological differences:

Despite the relative infrequency of direct citation of the medieval scholastics in the early orthodox systems, the first Reformed prolegomena tend to appropriate and adopt medieval definitions while those of the high orthodox period tend to add topics that reflect specifically Protestant concerns, such as the identification of *principia*, the relationship of nonsaving natural theology to the Christian theological enterprise, and the identification of fundamental doctrines.²⁵

Whether one stresses the differences or the continuities between these two phases of scholastic theology pales into relative insignificance beside a more fundamental question: why are we modern Christians generally so antipathetic to our scholastic forefathers? Is it because we are more truly humble and open than they before the hard questions of life, revelation and the meaning of it all? or is it because we are more relativistic, eclectic and thus too unsure of ourselves to be comfortable with the bold precision of their all-encompassing system of thought? Or could our negative attitude be explained rather more simply (if unflatteringly) in terms suggested by Muller:

A similar emphasis, harking back to the medieval 'trivium', was laid on the mastery of grammar, logic and rhetoric prior to further theological (or philosophical) study. Part of the modern antipathy to

24. Muller, *op. cit.*, p. 72. See also pp. 126, 184, 189, 201.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

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scholastic method probably arises from a lack of education in and appreciation of these latter skills!²⁶

Well, who knows? The reasons are undoubtedly many: some good, some bad. Yet like it or not, seventeenth-century Scholastic theology is a rich resource of Christian truth which we neglect to our own impoverishment. And if Muller is even partially right, that our access to this rich resource is impeded by our lack of 'trivium' skills, then would we not do well to heed the surprising suggestion of Dorothy Sayers' 1947 essay which advocates a pedagogical return to the disciplines of the Trivium in order to retrieve 'the lost tools of learning'²⁷

26. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

27. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, London, 1948. This essay has been reprinted in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Valecito, California, Vol. IV, No. 1.