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A Reformed Epistemology for Praxis

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Christian exegesis is based on philosophical positions comprising ontology and epistemology. Within different Christian denominations the views on what are acceptable sources for learning Christian truths varies, and with it the position on epistemology. This article presents a praxis oriented Reformed epistemology that draws on historical lines comprising the pagan philosophers of antiquity, Christian thinkers, as well as secular thinkers including the modern and postmodern paradigm. From this, a coherent yet not comprehensive systematic for the establishment of a Reformed practical interpretive exegetical platform is demonstrated. Core philosophical concepts are clarified and linked to the historical development of western philosophical thought. How these concepts are connected to systematic interrogation of scriptural sources is clarified and expressed in an exegetical context. Trajectories for scriptural interpretation based on biblical assumptions are outlined, and their application in connection with practical application among the human family for real-life use in the human experience is highlighted in a wider philosophical context. With the author's main research interests to be found within the theological fields of ethics and pastoral studies, the article makes clear that the presentation of a Reformed epistemology contextually is established within the realm of these academic disciplines. The article concludes that Reformed epistemology remains holistic, agile, in continuous conversation with human reality, and represents a model in a state of constant becoming open to influences whether they be informed by secular or ecclesiastical sources.

Keywords: Epistemology, exegesis, hermeneutics, Reformed paradigm, philosophy, ethics, pastoral theology

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Основы реформатской эпистемологии

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Христианская экзегеза основана на философских позициях, включающих онтологию и эпистемологию. В разных христианских конфессиях различаются взгляды на то, какие источники являются приемлемыми для изучения христианских истин, а вместе с ними и позиция по эпистемологии. В этой статье представлена реформатская эпистемология, ориентированная на практику, которая опирается на взгляды языческих философов античности, христианских мыслителей, а также светских мыслителей, включая современные и постмодернистские парадигмы. Отсюда демонстрируется последовательная, но не исчерпывающая систематика для создания реформатской практической интерпретационной экзегетической платформы. Проясняются основные философские концепции, которые связаны с историческим развитием западной философской мысли. Как эти концепции связаны с систематическим исследованием священных источников, разъясняется и выражается в экзегетическом контексте. Очерчены траектории толкования священных текстов. Освещаются в более широком философском контексте библейские взгляды и их применение в связи с их практическим внедрением в семью для использования в реальной жизни, основанные на человеческом опыте. Поскольку основные исследовательские интересы автора лежат в богословских областях этики и пастырских исследованиях, статья ясно дает понять, что представление о реформатской эпистемологии контекстуально устанавливается в рамках этих академических дисциплин. В статье делается вывод о том, что реформатская эпистемология остается целостной, подвижной, в непрерывном диалоге с реальной жизнью человека и представляет собой модель в состоянии постоянного становления и открытой для влияния, будь то информация из светских или церковных источников.

Ключевые слова: эпистемология, реформатская эпистемология, экзегеза, герменевтика, философия, этика, пастырское богословие

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Scope

Christian exegesis presupposes scriptural interpretations, which again will be founded in epistemological positions. Such epistemological positions may vary with denominational affiliations that typically demands allegiance to specific stances on validity of interpretation trajectories, which will be interlinked with group-based dogmatical theological consensus. Thus, all epistemological descriptions unavoidably become circle-argumentative, as epistemology decides exegesis, which informs theological stances, which again informs epistemological positions (Johnsen & Duberley 2000). This does however not entail that we as theologians should abstain from seeking the truth through exegesis and deem it futile, but, rather that it will be beneficial openly to reveal our epistemological stances and allow them to be exposed and shared among other participants in the theological conversation. The epistemological position to be presented is that of the Reformed tradition, which is the main tool of the author when mining out theological insights for extrapolating valid guidelines from Scripture and attendant sources pertaining to his field of ethics and pastoral theology. It will be clear from the text, that the author's research field makes for a praxis-oriented epistemology, to be used by Christian exegetes when gleaning biblical truths whilst seeking guidance for practical real-life application. It should be noted that at times, the author has been described as neo-Calvinist.

As guidance for responsible and coherent scriptural interpretation is sought, learning drawn from sources of traditional ecclesiastical authors are used, both within and outside the Reformed paradigm, as well as relevant secular philosophers, relating to learning, truth, scriptural inerrancy and interpretation. To establish a prudent philosophical scaffolding for Christian philosophical epistemology, it is initially drawn from sources from antiquity, then on to the important medieval thinkers, and from there sharpen the focus onto modern, Reformed theories, assisted by contemporary secular sources, in particular pertaining to hermeneutics. Following this idea, a responsible Reformed Christian epistemology is formulated, which will provide a basis for further investigation into what would constitute sound exegetical practices.

For those within the theological realm of ethics and pastoral studies, often seen under the joint term of "practical theology", the aim will be to reveal how contemporary human practices correlate with Christian-ethical and pastoral principles, and then, several strands of epistemological thought need to be examined, as the interpretation of Scripture cannot alone be expected to reveal how such real-life practices should be perceived. In other words, to interpret the reality presented in and among the human family could in itself prove a challenge, a challenge augmented when combined with the exegetical interpretive activity invited and undergirded by domain-relevant scriptural sources. In the following, some of the main relevant varieties of philosophical epistemology and ontology are described to explain how reality can be interpreted and understood, as well as an outline for an epistemological position espoused under the Reformed paradigm will be given.

1.2. The Concept

As the aim of exegesis is to examine scriptural sources for the revelation of the will of God, and to be able to extrapolate truths to be utilised in a practical contemporary setting connected to Christian life expression, to establish a sound epistemology is necessary. To advance an epistemology leading to responsible scriptural interpretations will entail a deeper understanding of the concepts of Christian philosophy and ontology, which are both attendant and adjacent concepts to epistemology. In the following, 'ontology' is understood as the study of reality, being, existence and becoming, what entities can be said to exist, and the possible connections and relations between such entities. The term 'epistemology' is understood as the study of the nature and scope of knowledge, and how it can be attained by humans. The term 'philosophy' will be related to both ontology and epistemology, and can be seen as a theoretical superstructure of any inquiry into the other two concepts. Assumptions on ontology and epistemology are seen to be of central importance, and even foundational in research within all academic fields, and these constructs cannot merely be seen as academic flatware playing only a minor part in research and academic pursuits. On the contrary, these assumptions have been of interest to thinkers from antiquity and onwards (Striker 1996; Davies 2004).

As will be evident from several of the sources referred to in the following, all three terms – philosophy, epistemology and ontology – are perceived as related to each other, and there is no strict delineation between them unless it is of contextual importance. In fact, most of the philosophical sources used do not relate directly to the theoretical aspects these terms evoke, as it is their contextual importance that is brought into light. For example, Foucault (2002) demonstrates how all concepts relate to context, which may be useful to illuminate how to interrogate scriptural sources in light of acceptable Reformed Christian epistemology. To be able fully to grasp faith and its expression in Scripture, it is helpful to understand the concept of faith as a cognitive metanarrative, and to grant human narrative practice its due place in the realm of faith (Bartholomew & Goheen 2006).

2. ANTIQUITY

2.1. Early Thinkers and Socrates

The assumption here is that, from the earliest times, humans have sought out the truth about the physical and spiritual world. In the context here, the Western thinkers are of interest, and the sparse and earliest sources of relevance point to the Greek thinkers of antiquity. These early thinkers existed in a period where the concept of one omnipotent God was not accepted in the West and where religious thought was not defined as different from or in conflict with secular thought. The early attempts at defining and understanding the outer physical and inner spiritual reality of the world showed that humans were seeking out the roots of knowledge, and despite a polytheistic religious backdrop, the aim seems often to have been reductionistic, pointing to fewer and increasingly global explanations. This would prove to be an early inspiration towards the later acceptance of a single source of all knowledge, to be found both in religious thought as God, and in secular philosophies through reductionism and attempts at comprehensive scientific theorising.

Of the early thinkers, a few can be mentioned, such as Thales (624–546 BC), who sought the truth about all matters in water, which he considered to be the primary element. He had observed that water was to be found in all living elements and considered it to permeate the world in all its facets. To him, God could be found in water; water was the most beautiful thing in existence, and he perceived the world to be floating in a vast expanse of water. Another thinker focusing on the notion of primary elements containing truth and God was Anaximander (610–546 BC), a student of Thales, who defined an all-encompassing matter he termed *apeiron,* which gave rise to all things in the physical world. This matter was the original substance and could not be experienced in the physical world; he thought it related to dichotomous effects between hot and cold, and air and soil. Following Anaximander came Anaximenes (585–528 BC), who posited that air was the core, seminal element, and that all things derived from there. Air was mythological, God was considered to be in air, it had dynamic properties akin to human breathing, and he considered it the source of all living things. More famous than the previous thinkers is Heraclitus (535–475 BC) who concerned himself with the changeable nature of the world, and famously stated that all things are in a constant flux. However, this flux and perpetual change was still considered orderly and in compliance with a divine law guiding all things. His idea that all things and incidents were governed by one universal law or principle, of divine character, would prove highly influential on subsequent Western thinkers; it is still discernible to this day in different explanations of natural law, and would be central to the formation of religious thought (Bartholomew & Goheen 2013).

Although the above pre-Socratic philosophers on the surface would seem unrelated to Christian epistemology, their contribution to Western thinking is of importance as they concerned themselves with understanding the surrounding world and sought the truth through an ontology where one overarching element, or god, was responsible for all natural phenomena, including human life. Even early, this way of seeking out metanarratives unrelated to the fragmented religious beliefs in multiple deities of the Greeks in antiquity could be said to represent a seminal realisation of a higher divine order of reality, or of one omnipotent God (Graves 1997).

With the sophists and Socrates, philosophy changed its centre of focus, from understanding the natural world to becoming an ontology concerning the individual's life ethically and in society, or politically. The sophists, such as the well-known Protagoras (490–420) and Thrasymachus (459–400), were humanists with a secular vantage point, and they did not consider any divinity to have authority in the life of humans. An important aspect of this stance was that to the sophists, a god could not be observed, and thus, it is not possible to determine a god's existence. From this position, the only source of truth could be humans themselves (Bremmer 2006).

For Socrates (469–399), this humanistic, atheistic and deeply utilitarian stance was not acceptable, as this would entail that, now, truth relating to human life, as individuals or in society, could be found. There are no written sources from the hands of Socrates to consult, as he did not write anything, but his philosophies can be understood from the writings of Plato and Aristotle (Kahn 1981). Socrates' project was to explore what it meant to live a good and happy life, concerning himself with what it meant to be human, and he perceived that at the core of this was the soul. The human soul he saw as inherently moral and logical or rational. The main concepts to be drawn from Socrates with relevance here are his emphasis on morality, the belief that moral principles are drawn from within,

with the soul as core, and that such ethical standards are universal and above societal conditions at any time (Long 1988).

From the early thinkers and Socrates, it is evident that foundations were laid to establish a more coherent epistemology pertaining to overarching metanarratives on truth, humanity and one god. Socrates' focus on the human soul could be seen as an important step in systemising a global understanding of realities not readily knowable to humans, but equally important in the ontology of the surrounding environment, society and the individual. The emphasis on truth, even though it systematically may pertain to ontology, would prove to make a lasting imprint on foundational epistemological understanding for centuries to come, and is as central in philosophy today as it was then (Sosa 2012).

2.2. Plato and Aristotle

Building on the work of antecedent philosophers discussed above, Plato (428–347 BC), himself a student of Socrates, and his student Aristotle (384–322 BC) further expanded the philosophical framework towards the peak level of Hellenistic thinking. Plato recognised that the world could be seen as divided into two realms, the visible and temporal on the one side, and the invisible and eternal on the other. This ontology reflects the scepticism Socrates harboured towards the pragmatic position of the sophists, and openly accepts realities beyond human observation and immediate cognition as valid and existing. To Plato, the world is organised in universal ideas or forms, existing outside the individual person or object, and it is necessary to move beyond what is individual and observable to understand what it entails, for example, to be human (Striker 1996). This concept of universality with regard to humanness and the creation and order of the world can be seen as a harbinger of Christian creation concepts, but it must be noted that to Plato, even if God existed, he would be subject to the same universal order as humans. Central in Plato's thinking is the notion of the soul and its different levels. For Christians, it is noteworthy that in what he deemed the third level of the human soul, lies the capacity for reason, distinguishing humans from animals also in that this part is immortal (Plato 1977).

Aristotle's endeavours in understanding the higher spheres of cognition have left Western culture a rich legacy. In his attempts at understanding the deeper insights, he established a non-reductionist hierarchical taxonomy important for his own studies, and for later ontology, wherein the world is divided into different levels pertaining both to physical and societal aspects (Aristotle 1992). In this hierarchy, which starts with inanimate objects at the bottom and ends with humans at the highest level, only humans have the ability to reason and think rationally. In his searching for deeper wisdom, Aristotle proposed the notion of essence, which in one of its forms reflected the philosophy of Plato, but in a form in which all things have an innate shape, existing within according to universal rules, and cannot be observed in the object directly (Davies 2004). Humans, then, need to act in certain ways to reach their full potential, and this behaviour is directed by the essence of being human (Aristotle 2009). A further important development in Western philosophy stems from Aristotle's search for a higher being, or a creator, which was seen as an unmoved mover. This supreme being for Aristotle consists of reason, existing for the sole purpose of explaining the world, and is not to be viewed as a divinity in a religious sense (Kelsen 1948).

Plato and Aristotle were both thinkers who left a lasting legacy in Western philosophy and religious thought, and their influence went well beyond their contemporary period and their express scope of study.

2.3. Stoics and Neo-Platonism

Following the high point of Greek society and philosophy, the final leg of Greek culture before being consumed by the Roman Empire is represented by the legacy of the previously described thinkers by way of the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists. Zeno of Citium (335–263 BC), who is reckoned as the founder of Stoicism, influencing the Western world for five centuries, and in creating a philosophical scaffolding for thinkers such as Seneca (4 BC–65 AD) and Cicero (106–3 BC), initiated the era of the Stoics. To the Stoics, the world was in a state of rational higher universal order, and the main goal of humans was to seek happiness through wisdom and knowledge aligned with this order. To obtain such wisdom would necessitate acceptance of a higher order or world soul, and to face its resultant outcomes with a calm (stoic) acceptance. Humans were seen as a part of the natural order, and there was no concept of a transcendental existence or after-life (Law 2007).

The final pagan school of philosophical thought to be described is that of Neo-Platonism. This school of philosophic thought was established by Plotinus (204/5–270), who ran a school in Rome, of which a notable student was Porphyry (235–305), Plotinus' biographer and editor. A central aspect of Neo-Platonism was that the whole universe, or cosmos, sprang from God, or the One. Unlike the creation described in Scripture, this is not a creation by the will of God, but rather an emanation of the One, to be compared to the elucidation rendered by light (Plotinus 1991). From this the divine intellect is created, which in its turn is the source of the world soul. This soul contains the souls of all living entities, including those of humans. According to the Neo-Platonists, humans are souls temporally residing in physical and perishable bodies. The point of human life is to be freed of the physical existence of the body and to be reunited with the Universal One (Rist 1964). Neo-Platonism as the final pagan philosophical influence is clearly inspired by Plato and influenced by the emergence of early Christian thinking. These aspects render this school of thought influential well into medieval Christianity and philosophy, as is explained in subsequent sections.

3. MEDIEVAL ERA

3.1. Augustine — Transitional Phase

Leading up to Augustine (354–430) were early Christian thinkers who synthesised Platonic and Christian philosophies, by way of keeping with the dualism of the physical and spiritual world as a cognitive philosophical framework. Proponents of such thoughts were Justin Martyr (103–165) and Irenaeus (125–202), who saw as their main goal the defeat of different pagan ideologies and the defence of Christianity. Justin held that *logos,* 'the word', was truth (John 1:14), that illuminates all humans of this world (John 1:9). This is a belief which still holds in large groups to this day (Bartholomew & Goheen 2013; Woods 2012).

Augustine's life story is widely reported, and his famously non-Christian academic beginnings are thoroughly addressed in other sources, so it will not be dwelled on here. Suffice it to say, however, that Augustine was a Christian

and Western thinker who left a gigantic legacy of unparalleled proportions (Hollingworth 2013).

With Augustine, the teleological aim for truth and spiritual wisdom is affirmed, and he sought it in the knowledge of the realm of God. His epistemological position resembles that of Plato, with the notion of *anamnesis,* or recollection, in that pre-knowledge is assumed, but not seen to be in conflict with how humans can access and obtain knowledge, as he maintained that the creator had given humans faculties to understand nature from conception. In other words, God has included the known in the knower (Mathewes 1999). The notion of God in Augustine's perception takes the Neo-Platonist position of Plotinus, in that God is one, unlike the Platonic dualism, but to Augustine, God is perceived in a highly personal manner. In this personification of God as described in Scripture, Augustine deviates from the Neo-Platonists, who perceived God as impersonal. Certain Platonic influences of duality can be observed in parts of the Augustine epistemology in that he understood human rationality as divided between what we understand of the physical world, *scientia,* and the transcendental spiritual world, *sapientia* (Bartholomew & Goheen 2013).

In *City of God,* Augustine (2003) sets out to defend Christianity against accusations that the Christian belief system was the root cause of the decline of Rome. The work can be seen perhaps in the context of establishing an alternative narrative to counter Roman intellectual accusations of Christianity's responsibility for the demise of the Roman Empire. In *City of God,* Augustine maintains the dualistic framework as in his earlier works, inspired by the pagan Greeks, and describes two worlds, one that is the City of God, Jerusalem, and the other, the city of the world, Babylon. The City of God is based on love and adoration of God, and the city of the world is permeated by self-centred self-love. Still within the Neo-Platonist influence, Augustine establishes a fluid sense of God, departing from the ancients' stale notions of godliness. In Augustine's ontological paradigm, God rules by his providence, and is above history, rather than ruled by it. As a summation, it is fair to posit that, with Augustine, Scripture is given a more prominent position compared to the tradition of the Neo-Platonist past, and the epistemology from this point moves in the direction of increased scriptural authority (Augustine 2003;1999).

3.2. Early Medieval

Following the death of Augustine, the West fell on hard times academically speaking and ancient philosophical tradition was continued through a mixture of pagan classical, Germanic and Christian paradigms, gradually forming European Western culture and Christianity.

Boethius (480–524) was an orthodox Christian with a central position at the Roman court of the ruling Gothic Theodoric. His most influential work was the *Consolation of philosophy,* wherein he describes his personal misfortune after being imprisoned, and also explains his philosophical position (Boethius 2003). His stance was that of Neo-Platonism, and was based on the concept of universal truths, in a realist ontology, assigning these truths to the mind of God. His interpretations were directed less by Scripture than by Augustine, and his most notable legacy is that of being one of the original Scholastics (Nauta 1999). This renown is due to him after he, in a letter to the Pope, urged 'as far as possible, [to] combine faith and reason', which has had a lasting effect on Christian doctrinal thinking, lately under the name of systematic theology (Gunton 1999:10).

The so-called Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. 500) included the Neo-Platonic stance of Boethius in his apophatic writings on philosophy. According to this school of thought, as the state of God's existence could not be understood, the apophatic focus was on what God is not, rather than to speculate on what God is. This philosophical technique demonstrates an epistemology blurring the lines between pagan philosophy and Scripture, where the object of knowing God exists in a fluid mixture of philosophy and religion (Fisher 2001).

The final thinker of this era to be mentioned is Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4–1109), a Benedictine ending his life as Archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm was prone to rationalism in his philosophical and epistemological stance, to such a degree that to some he is considered a Christian rationalist. Although a professed follower of Augustine, Anselm has an augmented dialectic epistemology, leading his legacy to be considered as an important seminal Scholastic (Novikoff 2011; Anselm 2008). His typical reasoning has scarce or no foundation in Scripture, and he is known to posterity for his ontological argumentative inquiries of God's existence (Adams 1971; Findlay 1948).

3.3. Thomas Aquinas — Late Medieval

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) built on the Neo-Platonist foundations of his predecessors described above and kept to a defined delineation between the physical and spiritual world in his philosophy. Aquinas' authorship stemmed from a theological vantage point drawing on Augustine, but his adherence to Aristotelian taxonomy and the philosophical aspects of his thinking permeate the writings, keeping the theology in a less salient location. For example, he views the creation of God as good in a classical Aristotelian perspective, while the existence of sacraments was perceived as a natural good in the physical sense (Aquinas 1998; Bartholomew & Goheen 2013).

A central aspect of Aquinas' writings is the bridging of the natural and supernatural realms of the world. His synthesis of the two worlds is an important ingredient of his epistemology and could be viewed as two different levels of the same structure. For example, his perception of the existence of God is based on a mixture of logical, rational and spiritual argumentation, as he perceived that reason can explain God's existence, but only faith can reveal who he is. This synthesised ontology is a central tenet of the epistemology proposed by Aquinas, and that in a traditional Aristotelian manner, where knowledge first appears through our physical senses, and thereafter is to be understood by the mind and soul. Aquinas, then, proposes an epistemology that draws the universal truth from the particular, and not the other way around as done by the ancients. This line of thinking is evident from Aquinas' proposal that all knowledge has its goal and source in God, and that human goodness stems from the partaking in the creation of God (Aquinas 1998).

In the academic tracks of the ancients and medievals, transitional thinkers such as John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) and William Ockham (1288–1347) proposed the defence of Christianity in relation to the secular philosophical currents. Both were writing and teaching from a Christian position but would be influential in the later development of important secular reductionist movements during the Enlightenment period and beyond.

Attempting to protect faith, Scotus adopts an ontology where the natural and spiritual worlds are separate and apart, clearly moving away from the synthesised position of Aquinas and the dualistic philosophies of the past. The starting point

is now that of the particulars and not the universal laws, and he proposes that humans have the ability of abstraction based on the knowledge derived from the particulars. This proto-modernist epistemology leads to an exploratory and inquisitive mode of human cognition, which would lead the way towards the reductionist empiricism espoused by future interpreters seeking inspiration from his writings (Pickstock 2005).

Ockham's aim – to lend authority to faith by diminishing the place of reason – included a nominalist worldview, where the only real knowledge of the world can be found through observation and sensing of the particular objects in nature. His aim was to delineate the natural from the spiritual, and in his view, religious truths could only be observed by faith, and nature and philosophy could only be known through scientific empiricist activity. His perhaps most famous theory is the so-called 'Ockham's razor', which posits that if a phenomenon can be explained by more than one explanation, it is not necessary to choose the most complicated version as the valid or likely one. This reductionist doctrine, paired with the strict division of faith and science proposed by Ockham, would be an important influence towards a scientific development where faith, mysticism and the supernatural were to be disregarded as non-scientific. This reductionist epistemological paradigm has a strong hold on large tracts of academia to this day (Karger 1999; Tornay 1936).

As will have been evident from this section, the epistemological positions of thinkers in the later medieval era were inspired by Aristotelian divisional taxonomy of natural phenomena and were gradually moving towards an epistemology of reductionist character. It would be appropriate to identify at least Ockham and Scotus proto-modernists, as their inspiration was of great importance to later thinkers. However, the paradigm of the philosophy of this era still is formally theological.

4. RENAISSANCE – REFORMATION

4.1. The Renaissance

With the Renaissance came increasing interest in the physical world, echoing proto-modernists like Scotus and Ockham. The dismantling of the synthesised epistemology of Aquinas spurred on further interest in nature and humanity, leading the way for the early humanist movement. With the rediscovery of Aristotle and Plato spawning a renewed study of the classics, and with the printing press invented in Germany, ideas could now be dispersed more widely than before and at unprecedented speed. Fascination with nature led to a philosophy of inquiry, which in the arts of the Renaissance is typified by the detailed depiction of nature and natural phenomena.

The most important philosophical development prior to the Reformation came with humanism in different versions. The most notable thinker in this school of thought was Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) or Petrarch, as he was also known. The aim of his scholarship was to protect and define theology by way of parting it from the Aristotelian taxonomic worldview, and he was in particular inspired by the theology of Augustine and the style and eloquence of Cicero (Cicero 1986; Seigel 1966).

Other writers of the humanistic school were inspired by the rediscovery of Plato; for example, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), who established an epistemology where the enigma of knowing God is central, and thus, his focus was on the

essence of knowledge. In his division of what can and cannot be understood, in reality, he developed a relativist, if not a nominalist epistemology, at least if read with modernist eyes (Hopkins 1985).

In addition to the above-mentioned Plato-inspired thinkers, a main strand of philosophy in the Renaissance related to different versions of Aristotelian thinking. The main tenet of this line of philosophy is the promotion of the division of philosophy and theology. In this continuum of philosophical/theological thinkers, Pietro Pomponazzi of Mantua (1465–1525) should be mentioned as a central philosophical exclusionist, where Scripture and gospel hold a privileged position, and philosophy is derided as having little value for the seeking of truth (Pine 1968).

As described in this section, the Renaissance was a period of showing great interest in nature, art and science, and the epistemological position is still concerned with whether gospel and philosophy should be part of the philosophical framework, or if they need be divided as incommensurate and even conflicting elements of truth-seeking. The possibility of such a dichotomous relation between nature and faith is important to understand as background for parts of the religious and philosophical discourse in the Reformation and beyond. To imagine the appearance of the Reformation without the advances and discoveries of the Renaissance would be difficult.

4.2. The Reformation

The Reformation as a period did not greatly influence the epistemological or philosophical development as it happened, but its ideas would become central to the subsequent development of Christian philosophy in the following centuries. The most notable reformers of the time, Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) had as their focus not to develop or advance the philosophical foundations of theology, but to partake in the political and theological opposition to the established Church, and the expression of Reformed theological alternatives.

Luther's view on vocation and calling was that all human activities were of equal value, and that even the most menial of chores entailed vocational sacredness. His perceptions then of the medieval scholastic rationalism and the humanism of the Renaissance were quite agonistic and his derision of philosophy as opposed to theology is well known through its harshness and choice of words. Such agonistic attitudes towards rationality and budding modernity should perhaps be viewed as much as part of the political agenda of Luther's Reformation activities as an attempt to weigh in on the philosophical discourse of the day (Nichols 2002). An important contribution to the philosophical discourse of relevance here is Luther's claim that humans cannot freely choose to know God, but that such knowledge can only be derived from God's redemption (Luther 2011). It could well be stated that this epistemological position affirms the supremacy of faith in our knowledge of the higher truths and remains sceptical regarding the Aristotelian interest in natural phenomena and Neo-Platonic dualism. This scepticism towards knowledge generated without faith would resonate in Reformed theology over the centuries to come.

As Luther's contemporary, the Strasbourg-based Martin Bucer (1491–1551), was protestant reformer who contributed substantial to the development of Reformed thought, not least through his authorship on pastoral theology. Despite his main focus on pastoral aspects, Bucer concerned himself with what he perceived as true knowledge, whether represented in philosophy or pagan thought, and he

only accepted such truths insofar as they were in concert with Scripture and general revelation. His main epistemological vantage point was that of biblical pneumatology centred on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, through which, in Bucer's cognition, is the only way Scripture can be fully understood (Schirrmacher 2014).

John Calvin's stance on philosophy was less dismissive than that of Luther, and he used Aristotelian systematics while remaining critical of medieval scholasticism. He viewed Plato favourably because of his acceptance of the concept of the eternal human soul. Calvin argued that Paul, in Colossians 2:8, does not denounce philosophical teachings, but rather warns against vain human attempts to understand the real truths, and that the verse is meant to explain how Christ is our sole and supreme teacher sent to us by God. It is interesting how this position of Calvin reflects the Christion philosophy of later eras and in particular of the 20th century, where Scripture is subjected to contextual interpretation for the revelation of theological truths. Calvin's epistemological stance on how humans understand and know God is that of *sensus divinitatis,* that in human nature lies the innate knowledge of God, our Maker (Calvin 2012:1:3:1). It could, however, be stated that even though Calvin had this position on knowledge of the divine, thus rendering this knowledge a privileged philosophical position, his teaching could still be seen to be close to the epistemological dualism of the past which he formally rejected, because the *sensus divinitatis* on the one hand and the fall of humanity on the other hand would imply a dualism – if nothing else, by negation (Bartholomew & Goheen 2013).

Pietro Martire Vermigli (1499–1562), who had a part in the English and Swiss Reformation, had a more positive view of philosophy than that of Luther and Calvin, and accepted it as a part of the gifts bestowed by God on humans, by way of the ability to know true virtue, goodness and justice (Gordon 2002).

It would appear from this section that the period of the Reformation was one of political and dogmatic upheaval rather than of great academic development; however, the works of Luther and Calvin were indeed great academic achievements both in the theological, ecclesiastical and social reformation. The influence of this period would be lasting and have important influences on present-day Reformed Christian philosophy and epistemology.

5. ENLIGHTENMENT – EARLY MODERNIST

5.1. Transition to the Secular

In the aftermath of the Renaissance and Reformation, the new developing balance between secular and ecclesiastical powers gave rise to a wide array of thinking that, on the surface, was unconnected to theology, and concerned itself with science, humanity, social fairness, and the place of the individual in society. In large parts of Northern Europe, the grip of the medieval church on philosophy was disconnected from the church in Rome, and the place of theology in philosophy was muted in the relatively newly Reformed areas. The term 'Enlightenment' is not universally agreed to, either in meaning or period, and to some, may carry negative connotations of an unenlightened past and atheistic influences (Israel 2002). However, the term will used here to delineate the period from those of the later modernists and post-modernists.

A notable early modernist is Francis Bacon (1561–1626), a prominent English jurist and philosopher. He is most known for his strong interest in the natural

sciences. In his thinking, all learning stems from extrapolating knowledge from the particulars, leaving any knowledge of the universals or God to be derived from such inquiry. In his *The New Organon,* Bacon makes no concessions related to his emphasis on the natural particulars, and it would be fair to point out the strong influence of naturalism in his epistemology. He posits that the goal of all science is to equip humans with new progressive knowledge from which new powers will emerge. Notwithstanding this modernist foundation, and its connotations of dualism, Bacon posits that science should be the loyal servant of religion, and that knowledge is the only way to God (Bacon 2000).

Rene Descartes (1596–1650) is one of the seminal modernist thinkers, and with his background from mathematics, his focus is on the supremacy of rationality and reason. To him, reason is the high road to knowledge, and in coining the famous *cogito ergo sum,* the very essence of being is found through cognition (Stone 1993). Despite this stance, he perceived himself a Christian, and ascribed his personal doubts to the imperfection of humans. From this, then, he argued that there must be a superior and perfect being, which he considered to be God (Descartes 2008). This position resembles the scholastic dualism of previous eras and is not how Descartes' teachings influenced contemporary and later thinkers. The position that human cognition is the very basis of knowing God inevitably leads to an epistemology where reason stands above faith, and where from reason, atheistic arguments can be drawn (Sailor 1962).

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is widely considered to be the father of British empiricism, and as a commentator contemporary with Descartes, shared many of the same influences of the era. His philosophy entailed a worldview based on materialism, proposing that sense is the source of all reasoning and experience, and is based on the particulars as the starting point of all cognition and knowledge acquisition (Hobbes 2008). His materialistic ontology and reason-based epistemology has left him open to the same criticism as Descartes, by way of being considered an early precursor of modern secular atheism. His position on this matter formally was that of a Christian, remaining in agreement with Scripture, but the conflicting positions of his nominalism and purported scriptural allegiance leave him open for doubting the efficiency of this claim (Geach 1981).

John Locke (1632–1704), building on the increasing acceptance of human reason as the source of knowledge, declared that this is the sole source of knowledge. To him, humans do not possess any *a priori* knowledge, and the epistemology presented relates to human perception and experience only. He does, however, claim that all humans have the innate ability to experience and reason, which is a position watering down the completely secular and non-dualistic position, which could otherwise be drawn from his theories (Locke 2004). In addition, Locke adhered to a theory of natural law, where after each individual had the right to fend for himself, and conversely, each individual had the obligation to respect the right of others to fend for themselves. Such a notion of human duties deriving from a pre-existing state, a natural law, would further dilute the mere secular aspects of Locke's ideas on human reason, and could lend merit to perceiving the existence of influences on humans residing outside their cognitive reasoning (Locke 1823).

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), who converted to Jansenism, engaged in sharp discourse with the Jesuits. His work, *Pensées,* asserts his philosophical position that led to his scholarly fame. Pascal is concerned with the limits of human reason, and posits that reason is a mere step in the ladder of knowledge, above which there is an abundance of knowledge about nature that humans cannot perceive.

He continues that if humans cannot gain full knowledge of the natural realm, neither can they perceive anything about the supernatural. Although Pascal places great value on reason and cognition, he claims that humans can only know God through Jesus, in a context of Christian faith (Pascal 1995). As is clear from Pascal's epistemological position, the place of religion was still not completely eradicated in the early Enlightenment period.

The final thinker to be mentioned in this section is Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677), who, being of Jewish descent, kept a consideration of biblical concepts and teachings. In his work, *Ethics,* he outlined his philosophical system where God, or nature, is the sole locus of all capacities for thought and extension. On the one hand, he saw the human mind as a mode of cognition and the body as the extension. It is through this cognition by imagination, reason and intuition that humans gain knowledge of the world and God alike. He deemed Scripture not to be subject to reason for interpretation, nor reason to be subject to biblical interpretation. His epistemology advocated a literal biblical interpretation by the application of reason. Spinoza (1996) made a clear division between theology and philosophy, so that he saw theology as narrow and limited in its scope, and philosophy as the tool of real knowledge and access to the truth.

As discussed in this section, the early modernists of the Enlightenment in the wake of the Reformation and religious wars in Europe made seminal philosophical attempts at either reconciling philosophy and theology or moving philosophy in a seemingly scientific and secular direction. It is noteworthy how the philosophers still saw themselves obligated to position their theories in a constructed and sometimes dichotomous relationship with theology, and whether this was by design or still necessitated by political considerations of the era is not completely clear. The newfound religious liberty experienced in the Reformed parts of the West would undoubtedly have been an influencing factor in the development of the epistemological theories of the period. The early modernist thinkers had an important legacy to bequeath to their academic successors of the future, as they opened up a wider scope for understanding the world, philosophy and Scripture than what had been possible under the heavy hand of the medieval church.

5.2. Early Modernist

Venturing on toward our time, the modernists of the 17th through the 19th centuries became increasingly preoccupied with secular philosophy, realising that the concepts of science, philosophy and theology had not been successfully reconciled in any of the disciplines. The scientific currents moved increasingly towards the realist ontology and positivist epistemology of the natural sciences and following Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the aim of all research was to reveal new insights, and the mere repetitious focus on classical truths was not considered a proper academic endeavour (Bourner & Simpson 2005). This movement was driven not only by the fact that the Church's hold on academia and society was slipping, but so was the centralist hold on society by the secular elites, and democratic movements of different kinds were emerging throughout the Western world. This led to the philosophers of the modernist era increasingly being preoccupied with societal questions pertaining to justice and democracy, and thinkers concerned with theological matters separated into their own academic camp, different from that of the reductionist-inspired philosophical modernists who came to dominate the era.

David Hume (1711–1776) was a Scottish empiricist who in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* outlined his philosophy with an epistemological position in which anthropology was the vantage point, and human observation was the privileged foundation for knowledge. He described a division between reason and emotions. Reason stemmed from impressions, or observations, and had a higher level of validity than knowledge derived from ideas. To Hume, the observed represented the pinnacle of learning, and human cognition and reasoning were to be met with scepticism. His stance on human emotions was that of a two-tiered system, in which the primary tier involved physically experienced sensations such as bodily pain and the secondary tier pertained to cognitively experienced phenomena like pride. Hume's position was clearly one of trusting the newfound enthusiasm for the secularly based sciences, but his doubt of human reasoning faculties means that the rational construct of the early modernists cannot be viewed as solid. Hume's stance on epistemology, then, is clearly one where religion is not regarded as relevant, and where human cognition itself is inadequate (Hume 1985).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) is an early proponent of romanticism and is most known for his political ideas and his work, *The Social Contract.* His political stance was that all humans were born free, and this would indicate a diversion from the strict rationalism of preceding philosophers of the late Enlightenment. He experienced evil as an existing reality, and believed humans had an inner voice rendering moral guidance. Although not theological in form, his epistemology indicates some form of *a priori* human ability for morality, and his thinking moves towards a romantic subjectivity (Rousseau 1968).

The philosopher of the Enlightenment who has had the greatest impact on philosophy and the history of thought is Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). His main opus, *Critique of Pure Reason,* was an attack on the rationality of the Enlightenment thinkers but would prove to further the establishment of reason as authoritative in knowledge acquisition. His proposition was that knowledge could only be obtained in a synthesis of reason and observation, and he introduced an epistemological division between what humans can know about the world and its objects in how they appear to humans, and how they are in reality. He called this method of human knowledge acquisition 'transcendental deduction' through which humans could reveal truths about how things are in reality. To Kant, there was no difference between how the world is and how we as humans perceive it. Any discrepancies between the two would emanate from interpretation alone. Kant placed high importance of human autonomy in cognition but would also posit in his moral teachings the existence of universal laws, connected to his categorical imperative. Although this implies the existence of *a priori* knowledge, which would ordinarily be connected with religious belief, for Kant, it was the other way around, as he saw religion leading to morality (Kant 2007). Reason, then, was given a privileged and superior position compared to theological assertions (Morgan 2011).

Emanating from the philosophy of Kant was the subjective idealistic movement. A central proponent of this school of thought was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) who placed history as a central aspect of understanding and creating philosophy. To Hegel, philosophy sprang from history as a manifestation; the philosophers alone could understand the superiority of reason in human cognition and knowledge; and logic was a dialectical result of history. His position on the supernatural was that there was a higher spirit, a self-knowing *Geist,* which resulted from all lived experience of humans and God, representing a superior reality. His principle of historical and philosophical development was that it was

a result of dialectic thesis and antithesis leading to synthesised progress (Taylor 2005; Hegel 2018).

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) with his interpretive hermeneutics focused on textual biblical studies. With him, philosophy arrived at a meeting point with religion yet again, and it could be stated that through his theological interpretations, theology was aligned with central principles of the Enlightenment pertaining to human autonomy and reason, and their place in theology. In the anthropocentrism of Schleiermacher, doctrinal principles and scriptural revelations could be viewed as the philosophy of religious thought, rather than as doctrinal Christian belief (Schleiermacher 1998).

The pivotal point of the Enlightenment and its promotion of human reason on behalf of religion must be said to come with Kant. The privileged place of reason would demote religion to the margins of philosophy, and casting light in that direction was only performed as a traditional philosophical pursuit. With Hegel, however, lies the seminal influence pointing towards modernity and postmodern phenomenology and logic, which can be said to deconstruct the overly self-assertive realist position of the Enlightenment and natural sciences, still dominating Western academia to this day. In the following section, the work of some modern thinkers is described leading up to the postmodern paradigm, to further elucidate philosophical positions relevant to the establishment of Reformed epistemology.

6. MODERNISTS

6.1. The Romantics

With the end of the Enlightenment, the modernist reductionist paradigm of science had taken a firm hold, and the philosophy would mostly be aligned with such academic positioning in its increasing preoccupation with secular societal matters. This said, the thinkers of this period are of interest for Christian epistemology, as the matters of interpretation and human knowledge generation are still on the table, and the Romanticists have contributed lasting inspiration towards contemporary interpretive techniques. Compared to their Enlightenment predecessors, the Romantic Movement was open to influences from art, classical learning and tradition.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) is mostly known as the foremost proponent of utilitarianism, where human good is expressed through actions that do not hurt others. The basis for such actions would be the free and unencumbered human will, for in the human mind, there is *a priori* knowledge of right and wrong. The utilitarian philosophy had lasting effects on Western philosophy and posed an epistemology where the universals are considered. A problematic aspect of utilitarian philosophy is its relative measure of what is considered good, in that if something is good for most, it is declared a good (Mill 2001).

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1850) should be mentioned among the romanticists and was one of the earliest thinkers to declare himself an atheist. To Schopenhauer, reality is a figment of human consciousness, and does not exist outside human cognition. This line of thought does not necessitate God or any *a priori* universal truths to be known, or the ability to acquire such knowledge. To Schopenhauer the source of all knowledge is human suffering and the force of will to escape this predicament, where the desired manner is through asceticism (Schopenhauer 1969; Cartwright 1984).

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) took a subjectivist approach in his thinking and presented an epistemology in which the self is the absolute centre of cognition and knowledge. He stressed the importance of the self to such a degree that he equated truth with the subjective self. Kierkegaard's project was founded within his Christian beliefs, closely observing Scripture, and the place of subjectivity aligns with the personal relationship with God explained in Reformed theology (Perkins 1973).

6.2. Reductionism Developed

With Charles Darwin (1809–1892) and his naturalistic inquiries, Western philosophy was taken further away from ponderings about the place of God, and the universals were further removed from philosophy. An important part of this development was the break Darwin's discoveries represented with the classical teleology of Aristotle. According to the Aristotelian teleological principle, natural development happened according to a plan, to reach an end, but Darwin's discoveries contradicted such designed natural developments (Darwin 1985).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is well known for his forcefully anti-religious position and an epistemological stance in which the supernatural, in the shape of God, has no place. His major works are littered with anti-religious argumentation, and he has become emblematic in wide circles in Western society as an atheist symbol, where the (super) human stands alone and is master of his destiny. What is less described is his stance against the reductionist realism of the Enlightenment, and his nod back to Heraclitus, with the 'everything is in flux' principle. For Nietzsche, all human societal accepted truths were in fact false, situational and prejudiced (Nietzsche 2003).

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) developed what was later termed pragmatism. According to his philosophy, truth could only be reached through scientific method. Furthermore, science is auto-correcting and aims at establishing truths through opinion formation. The ultimate aim of scientific endeavour according to Pierce is the furthering of love. From this scientific vantage point, one would expect Pierce to further the atheistic sentiments often permeating the natural sciences, but to him, love, the goal of science, originated in Christianity (Royce & Kernan 1916).

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), from an atheist vantage point, presented a reductionist secular perspective on human knowledge acquisition by holding that humans can only come to truths consisting of already known elements. There could be no knowledge except for that of immediate sensory recognition and observation, and human knowledge generation would be guided by logic alone (Russell 2009).

In his early works, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was a proponent of stark positivism, and purported that the world consisted of knowable facts, best expressed in synthetic representative language. His philosophy influenced other scientists and thinkers greatly, as positivism came to be utilised in all scientific disciplines. Later, Wittgenstein moderated his earlier views, and moved away from the notion that positivism allowed for a precise depiction of the world. Of particular interest here is the notion that language should be interpreted in its context, and that the ascribed meaning of a word should be viewed in connection with the circumstance in which it was used (Nubiola 1996; Wittgenstein 2016).

Another important direction of 20th century philosophy is phenomenology as initiated by Edmund Husserl (1858–1938). According to this school of thought, the

world can be known through human observation without reference to universals of *a priori* knowledge. Descartes was the father of phenomenology, but to Husserl, it is experience rather than reason that is at the centre of human knowledge generation. As an extension to the acceptance of experience as knowledge generator, Husserl placed trust in human intuition as a means of supporting experience, and through this we are able to describe attributes of the observed (Spiegelberg 1960; Husserl 1970).

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a student of Husserl, and developed phenomenology in the direction of hermeneutics. According to this brand of hermeneutics, interpretation is at the core of the relationship between the observed and the observer. It is through interpretations that a higher level of cognition appears, and mere observation does not lend adequate sensory feedback to bring cognition beyond that of primary conceptualisation (Davis 2014; Greaves 2010).

Building on Husserl and Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) made the final development of modern hermeneutics. Gadamer's work, *Truth and Method,* is the main source of his philosophical and epistemological teachings. To Gadamer, all interpretations are based on preconceptions and biases resting with the interpreter, and to posit, as natural scientists are expected to, that it is possible to attain an unbiased value-free observation platform, is vain. To Gadamer, all interpretations are situation-based and heuristically oriented, and refer to a broader historical context (Porter & Robinson 2011). Gadamer posits that truth can be found through observing art and that dialogue and heuristics are key to understanding art. Gadamer further contests the position of the Enlightenment that all prejudices should be shunned in science, as prejudice could be either negative or positive. The meaning to be derived from a piece of text should therefore not be decided conclusively at one point in time but should be allowed to appear through a situational dialectic approach (Gadamer 2004).

From the modernists, we take away central understandings related to epistemology and its philosophical development in a dialogue between secular and religious thought. The acceptance of context and human intuitive approaches in epistemology signals a budding appreciation of tacit truths, and scepticism towards the supremacy of reason and reductionist science. The period covered by the modernists involved great technological advances, but for the contemporary observers, the use of these advances to promote warfare, suppression and environmental devastation would have left marks dampening the science-optimism of the early part of the period. Coming out of two World Wars, Gadamer's hermeneutics points to these dark experiences, as a warning perhaps against unchecked human self-adoration.

To further the understanding of how Western philosophy has come to inform current Reformed epistemology, some aspects of the postmodernist movement are discussed in the following section.

7. POSTMODERNISTS

7.1. Reductionism Reversed

From the modernist philosophy there is the offshoot referred to as postmodernism. The term 'postmodernism' is ambiguous, and it is largely a matter of choice as to which philosophies should be connected to this school of thought. A few thinkers are mentioned that could prove relevant here, as their epistemological starting

point is open, conceptual and holistic, and well suited to inform any textual interpretation.

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) made major contributions to secular hermeneutics. A central tenet in his thinking is that scientific concepts and constructs should be perceived in context, and such contexts should be the basis of interpretation (Foucault 2002). Underlying the work of Foucault are the notions that power relations influence express meaning, and that the element of social control embedded in language is to be considered part of interpretive practice (Foucault 1994).

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) remains highly controversial, and his theories are widely contested. His main contribution to epistemology is the notion of deconstruction as an interpretive method. To Derrida, all expressions of meaning should be deconstructed, and the manner in which meaning is proposed and presented, would include expressions of meaning. The deconstructive hermeneutical method of Derrida entails the observation of all aspects of a text, including font, footnotes, and margins, and these particulars should be interpreted based on semiotics. The deconstructive approach is holistic in that it extrapolates meaning from textual expressions not ordinarily attributed or even sought (Derrida 1997).

7.2. The Tacit Revisited

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) is known for his combining of phenomenology and hermeneutics. His postmodern philosophy is constructive, and in his proposed epistemology he considers narrative and metaphor and includes mythology and biblical studies in his version of hermeneutics. Although he maintained the division of philosophy and religion, Ricoeur was active in biblical interpretive studies. Ricoeur's contribution to hermeneutics has been widely recognised, and his applied phenomenology in hermeneutics has resonated within both secular and theological academic communities (Porter & Robinson 2011; Ricoeur 2016). Among Ricoeur's contributions to hermeneutics, was his exploration of the apparent dialectic between understanding and explanation, and the theme of this dialectic was used in his interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (2015), where themes such as the connection between happiness and virtue, and the concept of hope as possibility to open what absolute reductionist knowledge purports to close, are central (Vanhoozer 1990).

The increased attention to religion among the postmodernists is evident in the writings of Slavoj Žižek (1949–), which are permeated by deliberations of religion, and in particular, core Christian subjects. Žižek's philosophy is centred on Christ, and significantly, the coming of Christ represents the end of God. Of interest from Žižek's writing is the epistemological position that religion exists, and that humans possess the ability to acknowledge this existence and to regain our human responsibility (Žižek 2003).

Concluding the postmodernists, it becomes evident that blind faith in reason and human rationality, as well as derision of the tacit and supernatural, have faded as elements of a viable philosophical position. This has led to developments in accepted epistemology, by way of seeking deeper into texts and expressions of power and control, allowing for an increasingly holistic and problematising interpretive practice. In the following section, major tendencies in current Reformed philosophy and epistemology are described and some of the inspiration passed on from the preceding thinkers and their means of knowledge generation is elucidated.

8. CONTEMPORARY REFORMED

8.1. Reformed Philosophy

In a tradition often termed neo-Calvinist are the influential Reformed philosophical works of Herman Dooyeweerd (1884–1977). Despite a background in law, his most notable philosophical and theological contributions are within Christian philosophy. His most influential work is his magnum opus, the *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought,* wherein he presents his foundational idea that all manner of theorising and philosophy is based on concepts of religion. He borrows the word 'transcendental' from the Kantian nomenclature, and this reflects the early influences that affected Dooyeweerd's initial mode of thinking. He explains the position that all theoretical thought is derived from abstraction. With abstraction, Dooyeweerd means the act of dividing reality and separating pieces of it as bases for further theorising. This theorising would be based on setting the separated element of reality up against another part of reality, while we as humans remain fully influenced in our hearts as religious beings (Marcel 2013a; Dooyeweerd 1969).

For Dooyeweerd, all philosophies rest on a transcendental foundation, deterring the thought trajectory embedded in the philosophy at hand. The transcendental aspects of any philosophy would, in his thinking, pertain to the Archimedean point, meaning the perception of the totality of reality, the view on creation, and how these two former aspects could be assembled coherently into the philosophy. Following this, all philosophy is governed by a lawfulness, on par with natural law, which forms a cosmonomic zero point of any philosophy from where the basis of the thinking could be understood. Dooyeweerd presents an epistemology that would be dialogic in its shape, based on the search for fundamental ideas in any thought-schema for further theorising (Marcel, 2013b; Dooyeweerd 1969).

8.2. Reformed Epistemology

Alvin Plantinga (1932–) proposes a Reformed epistemology that accepts religious beliefs as rational and logical; such belief is not conditioned on presenting proof of God's existence. In what he terms 'proper functionalism', Plantinga posits God's existence independent of evidence, and that religious belief is basic with humans. A further central tenet in Plantinga's epistemology is that the notion of 'warrant', which is connected to whether a belief follows from properly functioning cognition and mental faculties. Concerning belief in God, his epistemology of proper functionalism and warranted belief is evident in his philosophical work on the problem of evil, where he repudiates atheistic attempts to use the existence of evil to defeat belief in God (Plantinga 1974). It is his further contention that there is no contradiction between science and religious belief; contradictions appear only from atheistic argumentation, and whatever superficial differences that could appear, would stem only from the methodological constraints of naturalism (Plantinga 2011).

Nicholas Wolterstorff (1932–) proposes that Christian faith has an important place in academic scholarship, and that religion and academic pursuits fit well together. His epistemology distances itself from foundationalism and evidentialism, as he emphasises that Scripture cannot supply unquestionable truths to scaffold all theorising activity. He is sceptical about the theory of warranted beliefs, as knowledge cannot be accepted just by its resting on other

warranted beliefs, however logical and cogently argued. The stand Wolterstorff then takes is that all scientific activity rests on one belief or another, be it related to data interpretation, data background or control. To him, Christian scholarly activity should stem from belief in God and the Christian belief should be the basis of the necessary control aspect of theory building. In *Reason within the Bounds of Religion,* Wolterstorff (1999) develops this argument giving the following seven corollaries of the control aspect:

- The faith commitment of Christian scholars should not hold back their theories, as the Bible is not an answer book for all theorising, and although answers are given and theories presented in the Bible, the detailed answers may not be found or given.
- Regarding many matters, there may be more than one theory in existence acceptable to the Christian scholar, comporting well with the authentic commitment of the scholar.
- As with all other scholars, the faith commitment is not the only source of the Christian scholar's theory weighing, which also utilises observations of the surrounding world.
- The commitment of the Christian scholar should function internally to scholarship in weighing and searching for theories.
- Only rarely will the authentic commitment of Christian scholars contain all their control beliefs.
- Christian and non-Christian scholars may in some instances share the same theories.
- Neither data nor controls can be derived from certainties that are foundational.

Summing up, Wolterstorff (1999:106) states that:

> Christian scholarship will be a poor and paltry thing, with little attention, until the Christian scholar, under the control of his authentic commitment, devises theories that lead to promising, interesting, fruitful, challenging lines of research.

It has become evident that, with the postmodernist and the contemporary Christian thinkers, the one-sided lauding of reductionist perceptions of reality, promoted from the Enlightenment and onwards, is increasingly fading. The evolving philosophy, and thus epistemology, is characterised by increased scepticism towards realist positivist metanarratives, and necessitates a holistic acceptance of ontological influence from sources outside the realm of accepted natural science, with all its evidential limitations. From this defined philosophical point, it would be clear that the extraction of truths and the extrapolation of learning from Scripture could be performed under the Reformed paradigm, with biblical inspiration, applying to all topics of natural, sociological and societal importance. To establish a starting point to be used by the Christian exegete, a useful, prudent and responsible mode of scriptural interpretation is explained and developed in the next section, as founded in sound Reformed hermeneutical principles.

9. SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

9.1. Hermeneutics and Exegesis

For establishing a basis for interpretation, it is necessary to determine principles for scriptural interpretation that can extrapolate biblical meaning into useful guidance for the 21st-century Christian constituent. It is of importance to define the term 'hermeneutics' and the attendant 'exegesis'. Here, Grudem's definitions are helpful (1994:109), which read: 'Hermeneutics is the study of correct methods of interpretation (especially interpretation of Scripture). … Exegesis is the process of interpreting a text of scripture'.

A useful starting point to uncover principles of Reformed hermeneutics could be the statement of the Westminster Confessions (2010:5), which states:

> The infallible standard for the interpretation of the Bible is the Bible itself. And so any question about the true and complete sense of a passage in the Bible (which is a unified whole) can be answered by referring to other passages which speak more plainly.

This position of salient scriptural authority reflects Calvin's stance, as he strongly refuted notions of church supremacy in interpretive matters:

> The authority of Scripture derived not from men, but from the Spirit of God. Objection, that Scripture depends on the decision of the church' (Calvin 2012:1:7).

On a superficial level, the above statements accord full and sole authority to Scripture itself, as auto-interpretive, and thus Scripture should be able to render answers to any asked questions. The reality is quite obviously not so simple, as the language itself, be it in Scripture or not, is ambiguous and open to interpretation. It is worth noting that any word expressed in language does not have an independent meaning, but needs to be explained by other words, equally lacking in independent meaning. Therefore, it is the position here that all words expressed are defined by other words, and consequently that no word will ever have a clear and unambiguous meaning. Needless to say, such a perception of language's ability to convey meaning could only be the philosophical starting point for further inquiry. For philosophical and epistemological exploration within any field of research and learning, whether ecclesiastical or secular, the search for responsible interpretive practices has been a central tenet.

As an influential current scholar, Grudem (1994) has further developed the explanation of the place of Scripture in theology, defining its importance according to:

- *Authority:* 'The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God' (Ibid.: 73);

- *Clarity:* 'The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it' (Ibid.:108);

- *Necessity:* 'The necessity of Scripture means that the Bible is necessary for knowing the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for knowing God's will, but is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God's character and moral laws' (Ibid.:116);

- *Sufficiency:* 'The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly' (Ibid.:127).

Grudem's setting for explaining the place of Scripture is that of systematic theology, and his search for attaining composite doctrinal truths is helpful in exegetical interpretive activity. His definitions do not direct hermeneutical or exegetical activity, but merely describe the general importance of Scripture in these assumed and presupposed activities.

For scriptural interpretation, the Church has traditionally claimed supreme authority in matters of interpretation and exegesis, something that is represented in the Catholic institution of the Magisterium. Within Protestant and Reformed circles, there has been considerable lack of comfort with such a top-down interpretive practice as the Magisterium represents, yet the ecclesiastical leaders have exerted their influence none the less. It could be said that even without the Magisterium, there are what Jenson (1997:59) terms 'communities of interpretation' in lieu of solely church-derived interpretation. These communities will adhere to official church dogma, often expressed as 'dogmatic' or 'systematic' theology, rendering the individual reader not completely free in his scriptural interpretation. Therefore, it is the position here that within the Reformed paradigm, the 'officialness' of dogma, expressed and guarded within accepted communities of interpretation, plays a practical role not completely unlike that of the Catholic Magisterium.

9.2. Barth

Karl Barth (1886–1968) was a Swiss protestant theologian whose works are highly influential in Protestant theology and dialectical hermeneutics. Barth's theology, based on dialectical interpretations and exegesis, is sometimes termed neo-orthodox theology, and his philosophical stance was to create an answer to the liberal theology permeating the academic scene prior to World War I. His view was that the liberalism previously lauded needed to be revised in light of wartime experiences and would act in dialogue with contemporary theologians and secular thinkers, such as, for example, existentialism (Porter & Robinson 2011). Barth is most known for his magnum opus, the *Church Dogmatics,* which he spent several decades writing. The work is of substantial magnitude and encompasses several volumes.

To Barth, the Word of God is threefold, and is expressed through preaching, Scripture and revelation, explained in Barth (2009:6) thus:

> The presupposition which makes proclamation and therewith makes the Church the Church is the Word of God. This attests itself in Holy Scripture in the word of the prophets and apostles to whom it was originally and once and for all spoken by God's revelation.

Although Barth (2009:8) describes the Word of God divided among three modes of conveyance, he maintains that the message is coherent and that a unity prevails: 'It is one and the same whether we understand it as revelation, Bible, or proclamation. There is no distinction of degree or value between the three forms.'

Barth's hermeneutics included historical criticism with theological interpretation of Scripture, in an attempt to extrapolate the full meaning of the biblical texts. His hermeneutical method aimed at revealing anew the biblical message, through combining historical criticism and literary criticism. According to Barth, the Bible should be read in the historical context in which it was written, and be viewed as a piece of literature, to be interpreted without any outside defined meaning of language in use (Wallace 1988). Barth could further be said to adopt a referential perception of language that maintains a focus on the literal description of a text, interpreting without eliminating secondary semiotic aspects, the express goals of the interpreters, or specific choice of textual extracts. If only adopting a theoretical view on a situation, the hermeneutical aspects of the situation would not be complete (Webster 1998).

It would be clear that the hermeneutical direction of Barth would be of use for the modern-day exegete, as the wider contextual interpretations of any situation or scriptural element would be included in exegesis but allow for textual and historical criticality.

9.3. Berkhof

Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) has contributed a major influence on Reformed theology and principles of scriptural interpretation. In his *Systematic Theology,* Berkhof (1958:21) explains Scripture with the highest epistemological authority. For example, when introducing the discussion of God's existence through faith, he determines that…

> … this faith is not a blind faith, but a faith based on evidence, and the evidence is found primarily in Scripture as the inspired word of God, and secondarily in God's revelation in nature.

For Berkhof, then, the main source of knowledge of God and his message should be Scripture, but the quotation above does not point to how Scripture should be interpreted (hermeneutics) or applied (exegesis). Berkhof addresses these matters more thoroughly in *Principles of biblical Interpretation* (Berkhof 1950), which is a major work on the interpretation and application of Scripture within the Reformed paradigm. Berkhof (1950) gives a thorough account of his stance on principles of scriptural interpretation, covering most aspects of linguistic accuracy, inaccuracy, ambiguity, and interpretive modes. He confirms his stance that Scripture is divinely inspired, and most importantly, the principle of scriptural unity. This principle entails that even though there may be apparently conflicting messages in the Bible, this is just the case on a superficial level, and that through proper interpretation *(hermeneutica sacra),* the one unified meaning can be discovered. Therefore, Scripture should not be perceived as yielding several conflicting messages or rules, which then need to be harmonised, but if this appears, the unifying interpretation has not yet been completed. From this starting point, Berkhof explains different principles for interpreting Scripture towards the extrapolation of biblical truths from unified interpreted scriptural sources. Important aspects in this activity would be to

acknowledge grammatical meaning and word uses, both in current use and at the time of scriptural authorship, considering contextual circumstances, use of synonyms, et cetera.

In the above, I have outlined epistemological starting points pertaining to the validity and relevance of knowledge to be drawn from Scripture. In the next section, I explain how to understand some principles of scriptural interpretation, based on the above-described authors, as well as with inspiration from the full weight of the common Western philosophical development concerning epistemology and ontology.

9.4. Interpretation Principles

In the following is outlined some of the main principles to be used by the Reformed Christian when seeking to reveal truths as drawn from scriptural evidence. These interpretation principles are paraphrases of theories presented by the above thinkers, with particular attention given to Barth and Berkhof. The following outline may not be exhaustive but should describe a solid overview of the core principles to be used in on an overarching level.

9.4.1. Basic Assumptions

In interpretations, the following presuppositions related to the scriptural sources examined are adopted:

- The Scripture contained in the Old and New Testaments testify the true words of God, which state the sole rule of faith in, and obedience to, God.
- God is the divine authority who inspired humans to author what he intended to be written.
- God transfers the scriptural truth to our hearts when reading Scripture.
- As God is the supreme author, there is an innate, coherent and constant unity in Scripture, where a passage or part of the whole is explained through its contextual relation to the whole.

9.4.2. Normative Character of Scripture

Under the Reformed Paradigm, the Bible is normative, and thus its current-day influence needs to be determined. From the normative starting point, it is posited that large tracts of the Bible are binding today, as always. This pertains, for instance, to matters of soteriological and eschatological importance or the place of family in society, among others. Other parts of Scripture cannot be seen as normative today, such as Old Testament rules of hygiene, agricultural practices and ceremonial sacrifice. Decisions regarding current normativity would be dependent on interpretation of the main tenets of the written Word of God, as revealed through Scripture. Even though not normative, such passages are still a part of God's revelation through Scripture and cannot be dismissed outright.

To determine the normative expressions of Scripture valid today, certain principles are acceptable for interpretation:

- Some scriptural passages are poetic and hyperbolic and were never intended to be binding in a literal way.

- The specifics God has expected from his people through redemptive history have changed over time and must be determined in the context of this history.

- The social, societal and cultural changes within Scripture itself should be considered. For instance, consider norms of hairstyle: in Leviticus 19:27, short hair is shameful; in 2 Samuel 10:4-5, long hair is degrading.

- Accommodation to scriptural culture must be given – positively when, for example, Scripture advises practices that were morally neutral and common at one point in time, and negatively when God clearly condemns practices which would be non-permissible at another point in time. The accommodation could pertain to polemical thrust in Scripture, when divine instructions are given to people in one situation, clearly not meant to be universally valid, as for example in I Cor. 14:34-36, demanding silence of women.

- The recognition that in Reformed hermeneutics there is a clear difference between a principle and its application, as the principle states God's will for our lives, but the application may vary over time and place.

9.4.3. Scriptural Analogy

In Reformed hermeneutics, it is recognised that the Bible uses analogical logic, that different scriptural texts describe the same issues, and that they modify or reinforce each other in a unified message describing God's will. The totality of what can be learned from the Bible pertaining to a specific theme is dependent on what each specific textual expression contributes toward the unified message. In use of scriptural analogies, there are two accepted forms:

- Positive analogy, as when several texts clearly describe the same theme, such as, for example, God's providence.

- General analogy, as when extrapolating general themes that may not be expressly revealed in Scripture, but that follow from obvious interpretations of the message to be derived from the whole of Scripture. An example here could be slavery, which is nowhere expressly condemned in the Bible, but which is obviously contrary to central messages found in the Bible.

9.4.4. Textual Weight

When attempting to determine the unified message of Scripture pertaining to a topic covered apparently in several texts, the texts will have different relative weight in the interpretation. Some general hermeneutical guidelines pertaining to relative weight could be:

- What is stated in several scriptural passages has greater weight than what is affirmed in only one passage.
- A doctrine is firmer if it is described unanimously in several texts, than if it is deduced from mere similarities in the texts.
- The appeal of passages that are obscure and ambiguous is less certain than the appeal of those whose meaning is clear.
- A wider biblical distribution of a teaching augments its value compared to that which is only described in a single book.
- If a doctrine is obviously supported by analogy of faith, it cannot be contradicted by an obscure or contrary passage.
- One clear single textual passage can be accepted to support a doctrine, but doctrines supported by several unambiguous texts will have greater weight.
- When supported only by a single obscure passage, a doctrine should only be accepted with considerable reservation.
- If analogical interpretation leads to apparently conflicting doctrines, both (or all), can be accepted as scriptural, but the innate unity of the Bible should be trusted to resolve the apparent contradictions.

The above principles and guidelines are useful when performing biblical interpretations pertaining to the elucidation of Christian insights concerning a wide spectrum of individual, social and societal circumstances that preoccupies the human family.

10. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

As explained above, the development of Western philosophy has been substantial over the time we have known Scripture, and epistemological principles have evolved alongside this development. The full scope of this development is embedded in our common perceptions of how to know, interpret and accept reality, with the ongoing dualistic tension in secular philosophy, where the pendulum has swung from Plato to the Enlightenment, and perhaps some way back with the postmodernists. The postmodernists have proven more willing than their realist predecessors to accept tacit meaning in observable facts, and to interpret within the margins of stated expressions of reality.

Christian thinkers have certainly influenced the development of Western philosophy, and those proclaiming a different vantage point than that of Christian

faith have equally influenced Christian philosophy. As described above, the principles of hermeneutics presented by Barth and Berkhof would not have been possible without the long-standing Western philosophical search for truth about the physical and spiritual worlds and for sources from which such insights could be drawn. Ideas pertaining to context in interpretation are equally valid whether presented by adherents to doctrinal Reformed theology or by postmodernists like Foucault and his peers.

For the concerned Christian exegete, when the aim is to mine out teachings from Scripture to be applied practically in a real-life setting, typically those within the field of practical theology, mere scriptural interpretation in accordance with accepted hermeneutical norms will not fully elucidate the main topics to be covered. The hermeneutical principles that are used addressing Scripture are of guidance and inspiration when interpreting other sources but cannot be accepted as exhaustive. Our physical and social realities will not reveal themselves to us without in-context interpretation and sensemaking, and only through interpretative inquiry will we be able to match our findings on these realities with our scriptural conclusions. Such practical real-life sensemaking will not be performed in a vacuum, and to achieve a meaning which may be of use, it need be executed in context, which is what the human cognition will allow for (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). Therefore, in Christian praxis, it may be useful to apply postmodern deconstructive interpretation, semantics and semiotics when, for example, assessing what is the truth pertaining to the different areas of life which is relevant for the interpretative activity. Such a methodology will reveal the underlying reality of the studied practices pertaining to topics such as power and suppression, beyond what would easily be extrapolated from a semblant interpretation of how they are presented on a surface level. Only when the salient presented version is deconstructed, and the marginal and hidden information is taken into consideration, can we consider that reality is revealed and ready to be subjected to necessary exegetical subsumption.

In the interpretive process then, after having extrapolated scriptural principles by way of hermeneutical activity, and defined relevant real-life scope, it will be possible to subsume any human practice under the relevant scriptural principles or norms, representing a practical exegesis as defined here.

11. CONCLUSION

In the above is given a broad ranging overview of Reformed epistemology, with attendant fields of philosophy and interpretational theory. As will have appeared, what is widely accepted as a valid Reformed epistemology has developed over the millennia and offers a dynamic approach that has been open to outside, non-ecclesiastical influences. Furthermore, Reformed epistemological thought is still in development and remains in a constant dialogue with outside influences, be they of Christian or secular persuasions. As have been demonstrated, Reformed Christian thinkers establish doctrines by way of communities of interpretation, and in this, the establishment of acceptable interpretative principles is a unifying factor, which undergirds the formation of theological consensus. Reformed epistemology is a core content in the exegetical toolbox of the Christian exegete, and as such a core contributor in gleaning Christian teaching to be used among modern-day constituents. Exegetical activity has for the concerned Christian its core usage when seeking teachings and drawing principles for practical utilisation, and has its main value when the exegetical result is of use in real-life settings.

It has been demonstrated that Reformed epistemology allows for a holistic and open-ended sourcing of inspiration, taking influence whence it may be deemed useful. For the Christian exegete, Reformed epistemology renders contextual utility, which insures a lasting influence of Christian teachings among the human family, through its real-life adaptability and by remaining in a constant state of becoming. With such a dynamic and agile epistemology will the lasting relevance of Reformed theology be insured.

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