CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN POST-REFORMATION REFORMED THEOLOGY: AN EVALUATION OF THE MULLER THESIS

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Richard A. Muller has formulated an important thesis concerning the relationship between the post-Reformation Reformed dogmaticians and the Reformers themselves. He argues that although the theologians of the post-Reformation period used a scholastic methodology to clarify Reformed theological system they remained in essential agreement with the first generation of Reformed thought in content. This important interpretation recasts the entire period and portrays essential continuity in theological organization in the west from the introduction of Aristotle in the twelfth century to the decline in orthodoxy in the eighteenth century. Muller does for the post-Reformation period what Heiko Oberman has done for the Reformation era in pointing out the aspects of continuity with medieval antecedents. Oberman resurrected late medieval nominalism from the doldrums of its reputation as a decadent system deviating from the heights of Thomistic clarity. Muller illustrates the rich vitality of the post-Reformation theological system, one that had hitherto been considered arid and devoid of practical piety.

Muller, trained at Duke University in the tradition of Oberman by one of Oberman's prize students, David Steinmetz, views the anti-scholastic biases of Luther and Calvin as mere short-term abandonments of the medieval scholastic *locus* method. The followers of Luther and Calvin, responsible for systematizing and defending the theology of the first generation of the Reformation, relied on the only model that they had available, that of the schoolmen. Their dependence upon such an approach to formulate systematic theology does not mean that they agreed with the content of medieval scholasticism but merely used its organizational structure.

Muller has contributed a host of articles focusing on the contributions of individual Reformed theologians of the period. In his articles he attempts to place each particular theologian within his overall framework of the post-Reformation period.[1] He has also written two recent books in which he

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[1] See R. A. Muller, "Scholasticism Protestant and Catholic: Francis Turretin and the Object and Principles of Theology," *CH* 55 (June 1986) 193-205; "*Vera Philosophica cum sacra Theologia nusquam pugnat*: Keckermann on Philosophy, Theology, and the Problem of Double Truth," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15 (Fall 1984) 341-365; "'*Duplex cognitio dei*' in the Theology

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lays out his thesis in more complete form. The first[2] is a revision of his dissertation written under Steinmetz, while the second work[3] is the first of a proposed three-volume series analyzing the theology of the Reformed orthodox of the post-Reformation period.

Muller's main contention is that the post-Reformation Reformed scholastics were the codifiers and perpetuators of the Reformation. They were responsible for organizing the theology of such founders as John Calvin, Wolfgang Musculus, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Andreas Hyperius and Heinrich Bullinger. It is important to note here that Muller advocates the multiple origin of the Reformed faith and dismisses the notion that Calvin was the sole or even the principal founder of the movement. One should speak, therefore, of a Reformed movement rather than of Calvinism *per se.*

Muller divides the post-Reformation era into three periods. (1) Early orthodoxy from 1565 to 1630/1640 was the era of the internationalization of Reformed theology highlighted by the Synod of Dort. This was the era of such influential theologians as Theodore Beza, William Perkins, Amandus Polandus von Polansdorf and Jerome Zanchi. (2) High orthodoxy fully modified and developed the system of theology. It concluded at the end of the seventeenth century and contained the works of such theologians as François Turrettini, John Owen and Benedict Pictet. (3) Late orthodoxy, which developed after 1700, was philosophically eclectic and less acrimonious in its attacks on other orthodox Protestant groups than the earlier periods. This was the era when rationalist philosophy overcame orthodoxy, leading to the dethronement of theology as the queen of the sciences.[4]

One of the most confusing aspects of this era has to do with terminology. The affinity between medieval and Reformed scholasticism has led to a great deal of confusion as to the definition of "scholasticism" and, in particular, "Reformed scholasticism." Muller takes issue with the traditional definition espoused by such historians as Brian Armstrong, who describes Reformed scholasticism as characterized by "an extensive use of Aritsotelian categories in logically, rationally defensible systems" in which "reason assumed at least equal standing with faith in theology."[5] Muller disagrees with Armstrong's contention that the scholastics emphasized "a more philosophically and metaphysically oriented theology grounded on a

of Early Reformed Orthodoxy," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 10 (1979) 51-62; "Perkins' *A Golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System or Schematized *Ordo Salutis?*", *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9 (April 1978) 69-81; "Christ in the Eschaton: Calvin and Moltmann on the Duration of the *Munus Regium*," *HTR* 74 (1981) 31-59; "Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology: Three Variations on a Seventeenth Century Theme," *WTJ* 42 (1980) 308-334; "The Debate Over the 'Vowel Points' and the Crisis in Seventeenth Century Hermeneutics," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (Spring 1980) 53-72; "The Spirit and the Covenant: John Gill's Critique of the *Pactum Salutis*," *Foundations: A Baptist Journal of History and Theology* 24 (January 1981) 4-14.

  [2] R. A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

  [3] R. A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 1: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

  [4] Ibid. 28-40.

  [5] Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 11.

Reformed scholasticism was therefore not at all a negative development but a necessary one designed to protect the essence of the reform. The issue for Muller is not one of comparing Beza or Zanchi's treatment of predestination to Calvin's but rather of analyzing "the influence of Calvin and his contemporaries upon a developing Augustinian theology the roots of which extend into the middle ages, indeed, back to Augustine."[9]

The key point of Muller's analysis is that the Reformed scholastics employed medieval models for systematizing theology but retained the basic doctrinal content of the Reformation. For Muller, a change in method by no means implies a change in dogma. He admits that the theological systems of the seventeenth century differed markedly from Calvin's 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, but he cautions that one must first evaluate the development of such changes and then analyze why they occurred. Only at this point can one judge whether Reformed scholasticism was really faithful to the heritage of the Reformation.[10]

In his analysis of the issue of continuity, Muller raises two important questions concerning the theology of high orthodoxy: Is it a predestinarian system, and is it a form of rationalism? If one answers affirmatively, one must admit sharp changes from the Reformation period. Prolegomena, he argues, serves as a key topic for answering such questions because it was "designed specifically for the purpose of presenting and defining the presuppositions and principles controlling the system of theology as a whole."[11] Muller contends that predestination is nowhere presented as a controlling theme in the prolegomena of the Reformed scholastics but rather serves as one among several doctrinal foci.

On the issue of rationalism, Muller asserts that scholars have mistakenly believed that reason and revelation were on equal footing in Reformed scholasticism primarily because of the simultaneous development of the Protestant system and philosophical rationalism. This is a false assumption, he argues, because the Reformed scholastics generally opposed both Cartesian deductivism and Baconian inductivism. Eventually, by the mid-eighteenth century, the triumph of reason over revelation paved the way for the dismantling of the scholastic method. This by no means indicates that the orthodox theologians rejected the use of reason. They used it as a means of understanding revelation. In cases where revelation did not meet the standards of reason the scholastics followed the example of the Reformers and accepted the revealed mysteries of the faith as suprarational.[12]

On this score Muller takes on the traditional analysis of the "Calvin against the Calvinists" approach of such scholars as Basil Hall, Ernst Bizer and Hans Emil Weber. These historians argue that rationalism served as the primary principle of explaining the will of God. Bizer in defense of

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[9] Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 13.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics* 83.
[12] Ibid. 96–97.

this approach redefines rationalism as a "system assuming both the standard of Scriptural revelation and the standard of rational proof to the end that faith rests upon demonstrable evidence and rational necessity" rather than as a system that elevates reason as the sole norm of truth.[13] Muller prefers the latter definition and disagrees with Bizer's distinction because it allows for two very different meanings for the same term. In addition Bizer's definition denies the law of noncontradiction in areas where reason and revelation conflict. Muller concludes, therefore, that the Reformed scholastics were not rationalists.[14]

Muller contends, however, that reason was very helpful for the Reformed scholastics. It helps in describing the doctrines of Scripture, in making the faith understandable to unbelievers, and in illustrating Biblical mysteries such as the Trinity and the incarnation. In addition Muller points out that reason cannot properly judge such mysteries, which are "incomprehensible," but it can judge Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrines such as transubstantiation and the ubiquity of Christ that the Reformed deemed self-contradictory.[15]

Muller concludes then that the Reformed scholastics used reason more freely than did either Calvin or Luther. The scholastics needed to use reason in their construction of a carefully defined theological system in order to combat an increasingly sophisticated Roman Catholic apologetic. They were not, however, rationalists.[16]

Having dealt with the relationship between reason and revelation, Muller goes on to assert that the structure of Reformed prolegomena of this period indicates that Reformed scholastic theology, as a whole, was primarily soteriological rather than speculative.[17] The resulting conclusion is that the similarities between Protestant and medieval scholasticism are primarily in method of presentation. The Protestant variety adopted what they considered the best part of scholasticism, its organizational brilliance and its precision. It did so while avoiding excessive speculation in epistemology and metaphysics. This allowed for the preservation and protection of the thought of the Reformation.[18]

Of particular importance to Muller's analysis is Theodore Beza. Historians such as Bizer have blamed Beza in particular for introducing a

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[13] Ibid. 93. See E. Bizer, *Früorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich: EVZ, 1963) 6. I take the phrase "Calvin against the Calvinists" from B. Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin* (ed. G. E. Duffield; Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1966) 18–37.

[14] Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics* 93.

[15] Ibid. 94–96.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Muller cites five reasons for this as follows: "(1) from the definition of our theology as a theology in *via*, searching out its salvation between the fall and eschaton; (2) from the limits placed on natural theology; (3) from the redefinition of a natural theology of the regenerate as belonging to Christian praise rather than to 'fundamental theology,' as it were; (4) from the emphasis on the object of theology as God revealed and covenanted in Christ; and (5) from the stress upon the character of theology as theoretical-practical with the emphasis upon *praxis*." Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics* 309–310.

[18] Ibid.

rationalistic spirit into the faith as well as for moving the doctrine of predestination out of soteriology where Calvin had put it and into the doctrine of God where it became a necessary corollary of divine sovereignty. Muller takes issue with this approach, arguing that Beza's treatment of predestination in the *Tabula praedestinationis* (1555) is primarily pastoral, providing assurance for the elect. Instead of focusing on the specific aspects of reprobation, Beza emphasizes inviting all people to a saving knowledge of Christ.[19]

The second major point that Muller makes concerning Beza is that Beza did not replace a Christological focus in his theology with a causal structure. Instead, Beza "argues the relationship of Christ and the decree in terms of a formula of limited redemption."[20] Christ's work as the Mediator reveals both God's love and righteousness in order that the elect might be sanctified.

Furthermore, Beza's *Tabula praedestinationis* is not a systematic theology but rather a short description of "the order of causes in predestination." Historians, Muller argues, have wrongly treated it as a system. Even so he points out that the work is still primarily Christological in focus. It does include a strong adherence to a double-predestination, supralapsarian position, but the deterministic side of Beza's work always exists "in tension with a christocentric piety." Muller concludes that Beza clarified Calvin's thought and enhanced its precision. He did not formulate a "necessitarian system" based solely on predestination but remained true to the essential nature of Calvin's theology.[21]

Muller goes on to place Ursinus and Zanchi as fundamentally within the same schema. They were more systematic and more clearly defined in their theology, but their scholasticism clarified and preserved the orthodoxy of the first generation of the Reformers. Polanus and Perkins, for their part, clarified the causal priorities of predestination, but they did not make predestination the sole controlling principle for systematizing theology. Predestination served merely as one among several "boundary concepts" such as the Trinity, *sola gratia*, God not being the author of sin, and the role of Christ in salvation. Muller argues that both Polanus and Perkins remain strongly Christological in their discussions of the divine will that becomes effective through Christ.[22]

One of the most important aspects of Muller's framework is the scholasticism of Turrettini, who is one of the more famous of the so-called scholastics especially because of the use of his *Institutio theologica elencticae* as the standard theological text at Princeton Seminary in the nineteenth century and because many scholars believe that the nineteenth-century Princetonians based their doctrine of Biblical inerrancy on Turrettini's definition. The question of continuity becomes essential here because advocates of Biblical inerrancy point to substantial accord between their own

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[19] Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 95.
[20] Ibid. 82.
[21] Ibid. 96.
[22] Muller develops these arguments at length; see ibid. 97–173.

definition of inerrancy based largely on the Princetonian conception and that of Calvin.[23]

In light of the contemporary significance of Turrettini's scholasticism, several issues are of tremendous relevance. Did Turrettini create the doctrine of inerrancy, or did he agree substantially with Calvin on the issue? Did he depart from Calvin's position on the role of the Holy Spirit in confirming the authority of the Word of God? Lastly, did he emphasize the form of Scripture over its salvific purpose?

Muller argues for basic continuity between Calvin and Turrettini in theological content by noting that Turrettini was not an extreme rationalist who ignored the role of the Holy Spirit in confirming the divine nature of Scripture upon the heart of the believer. Muller portrays Turrettini as a theological moderate who attempted to maintain such distinctive forms of Reformation doctrine as *sola Scriptura*[24] and the salvific purpose of Scripture.

Muller writes that Turrettini attempted to answer two major questions in building his theological system. First, he asks whether theology is a science. Second, he questions whether theology is primarily speculative or practical. In answer to the first question Turrettini noted a distinction between theology and science by observing the difference between the Aristotelian methodology of gaining knowledge and that of Christian theology.[25] Turrettini argues that theology is a *habitus credendi* rather than a *habitus sciendi*. It is God himself who provides the wayfarer with the predisposition to believe. Muller explains that for Turrettini "all true intellectual dispositions are natural, while theology is supernatural, a result not of human *ratio* but of divine *revelatio*." [26]

To the second question, Muller points out Turrettini's position that theology was partly speculative but primarily practical.[27] This is not surprising, considering the Cocceian influence on Turrettini. Muller defines a speculative discipline as one whose "truths are grasped in and of

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[23] See J. D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers-McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). Timothy Phillips has argued that Turrettini did not hold to full Biblical inerrancy but believed that the Bible could err in areas such as chronology. In addition Phillips criticizes the contemporary evangelical position of full inerrancy as being too rationalistic, thereby missing Turrettini's emphasis that true theology is a *habitus* or an "attribute of the soul, that is an apprehension of a specific reality, the *sui generis* reality of divine wisdom." Furthermore he asserts that contemporary evangelicals have overemphasized the influence of Turrettini on the Princetonians and suggests that one should point to the common sense realist tradition for the source of the contemporary notion on Biblical inerrancy. This argument directly challenges Woodbridge's assertion that the full inerrancy position was not a nineteenth-century innovation but is the position that the Church has always held. Phillips' case is much stronger than that of Rogers and McKim because it is grounded on a thorough examination of Turrettini's published writings while Rogers and McKim based most of their analysis on secondary sources. T. Phillips, *Francis Turretin's Idea of Theology and Its Bearing Upon His Doctrine of Scripture* (dissertation; Vanderbilt University, 1986) 8-9, 801.

[24] Muller, "Turretin" 195.

[25] Ibid. 197.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid. 198.

themselves when the knowledge it conveys is an end in itself." [28] A practical discipline, on the other hand, emphasizes a form of knowledge that "does not end in itself but directs the knower toward an exercise or activity." [29]

In the second half of Muller's article he addresses the question of continuity, arguing that Turrettini needed scholastic philosophy as an aid to teaching theology in an academic curriculum. Muller argues, however, that Turrettini recognized the danger of allowing philosophy too much latitude in theology. Turrettini sought to protect the cardinal doctrines of the Reformation while using philosophical speculation on a limited basis.[30]

Muller concludes that Turrettini allowed reason to play only a small part in establishing the divine origin of Scripture. Reason could not serve as the foundation of the faith because it was marred by the fall. Reason could, however, be used to deduce doctrines that logically follow from clear Biblical passages. By using this methodology, Turrettini was able to avoid the rationalistic tendencies of the remonstrants as well as the extreme fideism of the enthusiasts.[31]

Muller's treatment of Turrettini is just one example of a key figure who does not fit so neatly into the traditional framework of Reformed scholasticism. Muller's contribution is to recast the post-Reformation period in terms of continuity with the Reformation as well as with aspects of medieval scholasticism. He convincingly argues that Reformed scholasticism is primarily a method of organizing theology for teaching in the academies. Theology in the post-Reformation era becomes more precise, but it continues to focus on Christ's mediatorial role in the *ordo salutis*. Muller has therefore presented a powerful argument in favor of a continuity of theological presentation from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, a continuity that places both the Reformation and the post-Reformation eras in a different light, a continuity that encompasses much of the medieval tradition.

The major difficulty with applying Muller's thesis to the entire post-Reformation period is that it assumes that all of the post-Reformation theologians were cut out of the same cloth. Certainly Muller himself would admit that there are many differences between individual theologians and that some displayed more of a speculative approach than others. Brian Armstrong makes this point with respect to Pierre du Moulin (1568-1658), one of the major leaders of the French Reformed Church, arguing that he was a thorough advocate of the speculative, metaphysical form of theology that the traditional interpretation finds normative. Armstrong cites du Moulin as saying, "I will boldly state that theology is more contemplative than practical, inasmuch as contemplation is the reason for action, for by good works we aspire to the vision of God." [32] Armstrong points out

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[28] Ibid. 199.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid. 200.
[31] Ibid. 203.
[32] B. G. Armstrong, "The Changing Face of French Protestantism: The Influence of Pierre Du Moulin," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of John Calvin* (ed. R. V. Schnucker; Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988) 148.

that some Reformed theologians were more practical than others, some more speculative. In du Moulin's case a host of influences, primarily his privileged-class orientation, contributed to his scholastic framework. Here Armstrong asserts that with du Moulin "reason became at least an equal partner with revelation; mystery became more an embarrassment than a profound aspect of one's relationship with an infinite deity; careful, precise definition and distinction replace an emphasis on only the central teaching in as simple and uncomplicated a manner as possible; and a logical system became an essential, indispensable part of theology." [33] What Armstrong has provided here is at least one example of an influential theologian that does not fit precisely into Muller's model. In addition Armstrong argues that du Moulin's scholasticism was not as strong as some of his predecessors, most notably Zanchi, and Vermigli or his contemporaries, Sibrandus Lubbertus, Johannes Maccovius and Franciscus Gomarus. The difficulty in assessing the presence of scholasticism in a theologian's system, according to Armstrong, is the host of varied influences upon the individual. Du Moulin, he argues, "surely reveals the strong influence of mysticism, of apocalypticism, of hermeticism, of humanism, of rationalism, and even some influence of the skeptical tradition." [34]

In response to Armstrong's objections, one can say that du Moulin was the exception rather than the rule primarily because of his haughty demeanor and aristocratic upbringing. Obviously the question of whether an individual theologian was a "scholastic" or whether one theologian is more "scholastic" than another demands both a careful definition of scholasticism and careful study of each individual theologian's work. In any case, Muller has provided an important starting point for evaluating a host of individual theologians of the Reformed tradition over a period of almost two centuries. Already many historians have contributed fresh insights through such studies. Among them are Jill Raitt and John Bray on Theodore Beza, Olivier Fatio on Lambert Daneau, John P. Donnelly on Peter Martyr Vermigli, Timothy Phillips and Steven Spencer on François Turrettini, and Don Sinnema and Robert Godfrey on the Synod of Dort.[35] Much work remains, but all who venture into this area must interact with Muller's thesis concerning the continuity between Calvin and his successors and the rich theological vitality of the post-Reformation period.

[33] Ibid. 145–146.
[34] Ibid. 145 n.
[35] The majority of these studies have claimed that the rationalizing trend in Reformed scholasticism did not develop until the era of high orthodoxy in the seventeenth century and should not be blamed on theologians such as Beza. Phillips makes a strong case, agreeing with Muller, that true rationalism did not enter the Reformed tradition until the eighteenth century when such theologians as Jean-Alphonse Turrettini began to use the evidential approach of the remonstrants and the Socinians as a defense of what they considered to be the fundamentals of the faith against the rising tide of deism and atheism. See M. I. Klauber, *The Context and Development of the Views of Jean-Alphonse Turrettini (1671–1737) on Religious Authority* (dissertation; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987).