

# Kuyper's razor? Rethinking science and religion, trinitarian scholarship and God's eternity

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This article explores three research fields in contemporary Christian scholarship and argues that the way they are approached is often questionable due to the basic assumptions, the methods or the implications. The following allegations are proposed. Research on the relationship between religion and science is based on a framework of assumptions which does not reflect the biblical standpoint properly. Trinitarian scholarship expects too much from the presumed correspondence between Trinity and created reality, whilst it tends to neglect other resources available to Christian scholarship. Scientific reflection on God's eternity is speculative in as much as it tries to transcend the modal horizon of knowledge. In these three cases (other cases are also briefly mentioned) it is argued that 'Kuyper's razor' (an approach promoted in the Kuyperian reformational tradition) would help rethinking research in these areas.

**Kuyper se skalpel? 'n Heroorweging van wetenskap-en-religie, trinitariese navorsing en God se ewigheid.** Hierdie artikel verken drie navorsingsterreine in die kontemporêre Christelike wetenskap en voer aan dat die manier waarop hulle benader word dikwels bedenklik is weens basiese aannames, die metodes of die implikasies daarvan. Die volgende kritiek word voorgestel. Navorsing oor die verhouding tussen religie en wetenskap is op 'n raamwerk van aannames gebaseer wat nie 'n behoorlike weerspieëling van die skriftuurlike standpunt is nie. Trinitariese navorsing verwag te veel van die veronderstelde ooreenkomst tussen die Drie-eenheid en die geskape werklikheid, terwyl dit neig om ander hulpbronne wat vir die Christelike wetenskap beskikbaar is, te verwaarloos. Wetenskaplike besinning oor God se ewigheid is spekulatief vir sover dit poog om die modale horison van kennis te transendeer. Dit word aangevoer dat 'Kuyper se skalpel' ('n benadering wat in die Kuyperiaans-reformatoriese tradisie bevorder word) sal help om navorsing in hierdie drie gevalle (ander gevalle word ook kortliks genoem) te heroorweeg.

## Introduction

In this article, I use the metaphor of 'Kuyper's razor' to indicate the Kuyperian reformational approach to scholarship. I am going to discuss several problems in three research areas which worldwide enjoy and foster discussion in Christian circles. The three areas are the compatibility of religion and science, trinitarian scholarship, and God and time or eternity. Despite the established reputation of these research areas and the massive amount of literature produced, I argue that the mainline approaches in these fields are legitimately questioned by reformational scholars. Together with the objections and refutations I also present several alternative proposals and directions. Many of the objections and proposals are philosophical in nature. Accordingly, this article has a definite philosophical approach as well.

The three fields mentioned above are not the only ones in which Kuyper's razor was or could be used. In the field of apologetics, for instance, one may think of the proofs of the existence of God. In Van Til's presuppositional approach God's existence is not something that can be proven, but should rather be presupposed by the Christian apologist. Van Til believed that, according to the Bible, the fact that God exists, is always and already known by each human being. This is a religious type of knowledge which is repressed and removed in several ways. The so-called non-believer, the interlocutor of the Christian apologist, is always and already a religious being who forges and believes his own divinities. Proving God's existence thus becomes a pseudoproblem which is not pursued in Van Til's apologetics.<sup>1</sup>

1. From this point of view it is equally implausible to try to disprove the existence of God or to 'calculate' its scarce probability (as Ostrowick 2013 recently does, in response to Swinburne 2004, by using Bayes' theorem).

'Kuyper's razor', however, is not always and only used to sever Christian scholarship from whatever is perceived as a pseudoproblem, theme or method. It is also used to 'cut' the discussion differently. It can also be used as a surgeon's razor: to reopen or to reshape. As a consequence, the various problems discussed in this article will not always be 'cut off'; in most cases, the proposal of an alternative approach will at least be attempted.

I should also specify that this razor is not the exclusive property of Abraham Kuyper. It is rather a property inherited by authors and movements inspired by Kuyper. The razor was passed to the next generations and this is why Dooyeweerd and other reformational scholars are included in this debate. Of course the Kuyperian tradition includes other 'families' as well, but I will limit my discussions to the reformational school (started by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven). One reason for this choice, is that I regard this school as the one in which Kuyper's razor was used with more expertise and consistency; a second reason, however, is that I regard it as one of the most genuine expressions of the reformed worldview. The debate will commence from the relationship between science and religion.

## The relationship between science and religion

### The main assumptions

This field of study concerning the relationship between science<sup>2</sup> and religion counts amongst its researchers world-famous authors like Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, Ernan McMullin and so forth. The prestigious Templeton Foundation has been busy for decades promoting the dialogue between theologians and scientists.

In reformational circles, this research area is often referred to as the 'integration' of religion and science.<sup>3</sup> Yet integration in principle is not the only type of paradigm that is adopted by Christian scholars in this field. According to Barbour (1997:77–105), the paradigms are at least four: integration, dialogue, independence and opposition. The term *integration*, therefore, should not be used as an umbrella term. In practice, however, three of the four paradigms share the idea that there is a kind of agreement between the two *partners*, with slightly different degrees of intensity or closeness. Only the fourth approach (positing a conflict between religion and science), does not participate in the religion and science dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, even if *integration* may not be the best umbrella term to define the variety of approaches in the field, similar

terms (like *compatibility*, *correspondence*, *consonance*) should be acceptable.

Different authors in this field often mean different things when using the term *religion* or *faith* (doctrine, tradition, theology and so forth). In this article, when referring to their different notions, I use religion in an inclusive (and admittedly a bit vague) way. When referring to my own arguments and proposals I use religion as a synonym for 'religious groundmotive'. In this sense, religion is for life, culture or scholarship what the roots are for a tree, namely the fundamental feeding system. Faith can be regarded as one of the branches.

Of course the relationship between religion and science is discussed far beyond Christian circles, in Islam, Buddhism and so forth, but my present exploration is limited to the Christian approaches. As far as Christianity is concerned, this type of research is often based on the following presuppositions.

1. Some persons, some types of activities and some knowledge are religious whilst others are non-religious.
2. Modern science is not connected to any type of religious belief, commitment or faith.
3. Theology, on the other hand, is a religious activity and constitutes the main (or only Christian) interlocutor in the dialogue between religion and modern science.
4. By pursuing this dialogue and integration, (Christian) faith and theology can become more relevant to the modern man, being connected to his culture and mentality.
5. Science can also benefit from the interaction with religion, by learning to transcend narrow boundaries and by being reconnected to a dimension in which it was rooted in the past, when most scientists were Christians.
6. No real conflict is possible between religion and science; they are compatible and can become partners in a dialogue.

The question is to know whether this framework of assumptions is adequate from a consistently Christian point of view.

### Questioning the main assumptions

This type of project is rooted especially in Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic circles. I think from a Kuyperian point of view one has several difficulties accepting the six premises listed above. Concerning the first one, for example, it was part of Kuyper's genius to realise that religion is not just a possible attitude that some people adopt, but a universal human condition (Kuyper 1931:20, 44–45; cf. Dooyeweerd 2013:54). And it was Dooyeweerd's (1984, 1 v) prerogative to discover the religious roots of philosophy and science, which he found in the so-called 'religious groundmotives'. Religion is not an option that some people take whilst others leave. Humankind is not divided in two groups of human beings: religion is a universal condition and permeates, as a consequence, all

2. The term *science*, in this field, refers mostly to the natural sciences. I use *science* as the old term *scientia*, thus including all sciences (natural, social, human). In other words, I use *science* as a synonym for *scholarship*. The use of the term *religion* is clarified later on.

3. In two contributions by Van der Walt (2007) and Sinnema (2005) this reference to *integration* is present already from their titles. This does not mean, of course, that these two authors support the integration model.

4. Creationism (in the natural sciences) or Yoder's (1994) political proposals, for example do not aim at establishing any consonance between (Christian) religion and (secular) scholarship. Some versions of the *independence* model may also not participate in the religion and science dialogue.

human activities. With this, the first assumption in the list above is radically questioned.

The second assumption, viz. that science is religiously neutral, should be questioned as well. Modern scholarship shows deep links with the religious groundmotive of humanism, namely the nature and freedom groundmotive (cf. Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:169–495). The concrete examples are too many to start even mentioning them, and it would be unnecessary as well, as authors like Dooyeweerd (e.g. in 1984), Strauss (e.g. in 2009) and many others have abundantly explored and explained these links. The connection between science and philosophy is usually recognised without particular problems in modern academia. Reformational philosophy has provided one extra step to uncover the connections between scholarship and religious groundmotives. Such links can be traced not only in the human and social sciences but in the natural sciences as well.

Thirdly, we should consider the assumption that theology constitutes an indispensable or privileged (Christian) interlocutor in the dialogue with secular science. Here some confusion emerges regularly, as theology is often not properly distinguished from religion, worldview, Christianity or faith and is regarded as both scientific and pre-scientific. Failing to distinguish between (modal) faith and (central) religion, the door is opened to regard theology (the science dealing with faith) as the only or main discipline influenced by religion. Failing to distinguish between scientific and pre-scientific, the door is opened to regard theology as the owner of the pre-scientific sources of Christianity. As a consequence, theology is perceived as the only inherently Christian science and is regarded as the main or the only possible Christian partner in the dialogue between religion and science.

This set of assumptions needs to be rejected. First of all, theology is not inherently Christian, as it can be practised from many other religious standpoints, for example from an Islamic or even a secular position. In addition, the study of non-theological disciplines can be conducted from a Christian starting point as well. As we have Marxist, Islamic or ancient Greek scholarship, Christian scholarship is equally possible (actually, it is a *fait accompli*). The fact that the latter may not be a priority for most Christian denominations only demonstrates that certain paradigms prevent such circles from realising the possibility and the necessity of Christian scholarship.

To complete the present section, I will supply only two more notes on the next two assumptions (4 and 5) stating the advantages of the project for both science and theology. The last assumption will be discussed separately, in the next section.

It should be noticed, firstly, that the better reputation that theology would eventually enjoy would hardly be granted, nowadays, on the basis of its presumed association with science. In fact, in postmodern times, science itself does not

always enjoy the solid reputation that it used to have under the hegemony of scientism or rationalism in modernity. In addition, it is not so clear to what extent in the past, science was connected to the Christian religion. Those who argue for this hypothesis often mean that the scientists of the past were Christians. This, however, does not grant that they produced Christian theories or Christian scholarship; in most cases they simply did not. It should also be remembered that the type of mentality prevalent in Christian circles was affected by the synthesis with Greek or humanist philosophy and in any case it missed a properly Christian philosophical infrastructure. The supposed close link between Christianity and science was not as solid as some researchers presume.

We should now pay special attention to the last assumption, as it allows us to identify the main worldview operating behind the whole project of reconnecting Christianity and science.

### The main worldview

The last assumption is that religion and science are not in conflict but are compatible and can become partners in a dialogue. The only acceptable views are those recognising and promoting such a partnership. And yet, not all theories are acceptable from a Christian standpoint. Some theories may flow from the absolutisation of an aspect of reality. If we broaden for a moment the discussion to include the social and human sciences it is clear that there are political, economic or juridical theories that are not acceptable to Christians. Is it plausible to imagine that in the natural sciences all antithesis is magically suspended?

At this point we may start recognising that most of the time, religion and science are related according to the same patterns that are used to relate nature and grace. The project of a dialogue between secular science and Christian theology is especially important in Catholic, Liberal and Lutheran circles. Each group adopts a particular view of the relationship between nature and grace (and therefore of religion and science). What they all have in common is the nature and grace motif. Yet full consensus is prevented by the adoption of different versions of this groundmotive.

The liberal approach is the most positive about nature (science) and tends to identify the Christian approach with the full acceptance of one of the scientific theories, trends or philosophical approaches available at a certain stage. In Catholic circles grace perfects nature by way of integration. In the process, grace remains above nature as a superior realm, but nature is not ignored. Nature is the *preambulum* to grace, and as such it constitutes the natural support of grace. As a consequence, the sciences of nature (and the knowledge they supply) must not be simply controlled, but also recognised and integrated into an overarching construction, a synthesis in which, nevertheless, the priority is retained by theology, as the science of grace. In Lutheran circles religion and science

parallel each other, either in a form of independence or in a form of concordance.

In all these cases, the approach is shaped by the specific paradigm (worldview) adopted, which is simply a subversion of the nature-grace motif. The four approaches mentioned by Barbour (1997; integration, dialogue, independence and opposition) correspond to four ways of relating nature and grace (or Christ and culture, in the words of Niebuhr 1956). The only ‘paradigm’ that is missing from Barbour’s scheme, is the last approach in Niebuhr’s list, the reformed one, in which ‘Christ transforms culture’.

This approach can be characterised by the term *reformation*. A transformation or reformation of scholarship is not conceivable on the basis of the four nature and grace approaches mentioned by Barbour. The reason lies in what these four approaches have in common, viz. the belief that scholarship (natural reason) is to a certain extent autonomous and neutral with respect to religion. The fact that scientific theories are at present already and always integrated with and shaped by a certain type of religion (in the sense of a groundmotive), is not recognised (cf. Clouser 2005:111ff.). As a consequence, these worldviews can only lead to an external correlation between secular scholarship and Christian theology (with all the tensions that this can imply). If there are different theories or trends available in the secular store, of course the Christian scholar will select the options which are more compatible with his Christian worldview. In any case Christians will have to adapt to what is provided by the secular market.

The whole project remains therefore highly problematic, not simply because it is at odds with reformational philosophy, but because, as Clouser (2005:94–95) shows, it is at odds with scriptural testimony, which places all things in subjection to and dependence on God’s will. And all things, avers Clouser, include theoretical reason. Though the nature and grace motif is often called Christian because it is widely adopted in Christian circles, as Dooyeweerd (1979:111) explained, it is the result of a synthesis of biblical themes with (either) Greek or humanist themes, conceptions and ideals. The result is a thorough undermining of the biblical framework of ideas.

By adopting a framework of plausibility that does not correspond to the biblical framework, the question of the relationship between religion and scholarship is placed on the wrong track from the start. It is at this point that Kuyper’s razor should be used, not to solve the infinite problems created by the different approaches, but to identify the fundamental scheme behind those approaches and by replacing it with the biblical framework of plausibility. This is briefly sketched in the next section.

### Sketching an alternative model

What happens when the paradigm-generated assumptions are questioned and replaced by a reformational approach?<sup>5</sup>

5. In this section I am going to sketch only a few consequences of shifting the paradigm in a reformational direction. A more detailed discussion can be found in Coletto (2013:135ff.)

Then religion and scholarship appear as always and already *integrated* (to borrow a term from Barbour). Modern science is well integrated with a religious groundmotive giving direction to its fundamental conceptions. Of course even here we find different versions of the nature and freedom (humanist) motif, and this creates rival approaches, paradigms, schools in the different sciences. Yet modern scholarship is not neutral with respect to religious foundations, being rooted in a secular type of religious groundmotive and groundidea (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:88).

A reformational point of view would help realising the possibility of alternative paradigms and research programmes, on the basis of different groundmotives articulated in diverse transcendental groundideas. What we already have, is the existence of a plurality of paradigms for research and the creation of different directions in scholarship. We have *rival* types of scholarship in dialogue between them, trying to account for the states of affairs which are encountered in the various research fields.

The main concern then, for Christians, should *not* be the integration of different paradigms, as if plurality were something to avoid at all costs. The main concern should also *not* be the consensus between different disciplines, as if the conflict between religion and science were due to the difficulties of interdisciplinary dialogue. The main concern should rather be the pursuit of Christian scholarship in all academic areas. This is a pursuit in which all Christian scholars are supposed to participate, not only or especially theologians and philosophers. And of course this can be done in dialogue with all types of scholarship.

Disentangled from the independence project, Christian scholars would not place themselves in closed compartments cultivating their discipline in isolation from their religion. Disentangled from the integration project, Christian scholarship would also not be under pressure to constantly endorse, or adopt at least one amongst the most fashionable scientific trends or paradigms. I think the dialogue would be much richer if it included the possibilities of rejecting, endorsing or criticising theories, depending on their specific merit. In addition, the door would be open to Christian scholars for devising new theories. Participation into a real dialogue requires different but *full* identities, not a situation in which (presumably) one party has science without religion whilst the other one has religion without science.

## Trinitarian scholarship

### A brief introduction

Once again, the calibre of the authors involved in trinitarian thinking should discourage any questioning of the accepted paradigm: they range from Pannenberg to Moltmann and Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI). Yet I must clarify from the start that the target of my arguments is not the theological reflection on and sound application of the doctrine of God, but the trinitarian model for Christian *scholarship*. In fact,



in some cases trinitarian theology shows a tendency to become trinitarian scholarship. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity has been increasingly used as a foundation to handle a wide range of problems in a wide range of scientific disciplines. After all, one might argue, is not Christian scholarship based on God? Is not the doctrine of the Trinity perhaps the one doctrine that all the Christian traditions share? Differences come about concerning the nature and role of the church, the sacraments, even the way of salvation. But when it comes to the Trinity, this is what all Christians agree upon.

Trinitarian scholarship thrives on the assumption that the solutions for many philosophical, ethical or even social and economic problems can be found by exploring several important aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity (e.g. the relationship between the three Persons). Many topics have already been handled in this way, for example issues and problems related to ecology (Williams 2000), gender studies (Coakley 2006), sociological themes (Volf 1998), secularisation (Williams 2000), political economy (Meeks 2006) and even town planning (Venter 2006)! Poythress (2013) articulates a trinitarian type of logic (cf. Jongsma 2014). Ivo (2012) offers a trinitarian 'reconstruction of the reformational philosophies of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd'. Polkinghorne (2004:61) even ventures to say (perhaps a bit provocatively) that the doctrine of the Trinity could be regarded as a 'theory of everything'.

Take for example the philosophical question concerning the unity and diversity of created reality. One could also call it the problem of individuality and universality: everything in creation is uniquely individual and at the same time has something in common with similar individual entities. Now, which trait should one regard as more important: unity or diversity? During the centuries, different philosophical trends have answered this question differently. In any case, we are touching on one of the fundamental issues in philosophy, with huge implications for all scientific disciplines.

How should the Christian scholar answer the question concerning the 'one and the many' in created reality? Why not look at the unity and plurality of God to find an answer? This is the solution devised by Cornelius van Til (1960), and a solution praised by Rushdoony (1971) as an eminently biblical way of handling the problem. According to them, in the Trinity unity and diversity, individuality and universality go hand in hand and this means that they are correlated in concrete reality as well. Secular thinking often accentuates one trait (individuality or universality) to the detriment of the other, thus creating all sorts of tensions and discrepancies. But, according to Van Til and others, here is a Christian solution to the problem; a solution, one might add, in agreement with the analysis of reformational philosophers. Do they too not conclude (e.g. Hart 1984:72–83) that individuality and universality are correlated traits of everything that exists in the cosmos?

## Basic principle and historical developments

In a sense, one can say that the trinitarian model for Christian scholarship follows an opposite road than the model used by natural theology. The latter tries to deduce truths about God from the observation of created reality. Trinitarian scholarship, on the contrary, starts from God and argues about the created world. In this way God's revelation comes first and sheds light on the path of scientific inquiry. This should reassure the scholar who, following Calvin, rejects the possibility of natural theology.

Yet the two strategies (trinitarian scholarship and natural theology) also have something in common: both have to assume that there is some kind of correspondence, of analogy between God and the world. This, I would say, is the main premise behind trinitarian scholarship. Applying aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity to creation, history or culture requires that they show traits of the Trinity (of its attributes, works, or of the relationships between the three persons). Arguing that unity and diversity go hand in hand in creation on the basis that they go hand in hand in the Triune God, requires that creation is constituted as reflecting the Trinity at least somehow, somewhere, to a certain extent. Some will say that there is a sort of common denominator between creation and Creator, others will say that the footprints of the Creator can be traced in *creation* which is, after all, one of the forms of revelation. This is the principle on which trinitarian scholarship stands or falls.

Where does this principle come from? Its origin is a very ancient idea, originating in Greek philosophy and accommodated to Christian doctrine since the Church Fathers. It is the idea of the *logoi spermatikoi*: traces of the Logos ordering the cosmos can be found in the creatures. The world shows traces of the divine ideas once contained in God's mind and now embedded in his creation.<sup>6</sup> This idea, according to Dooyeweerd (2013:68–79), finds its roots in the ground motif of ancient Greek culture (matter and form) and was deeply shaped by it. Its accommodation to Christian doctrine was not without cost. The first consequence was a thorough logicisation of the created order (2013:83). In fact, as Plato's *demiourgos* shapes the uncreated matter, he does so by following a rational plan and for a rational purpose. The rational modality, therefore, is both the foundation and the goal of the creative activity (2013:82). In Dooyeweerd's language, it is 'absolutized'.

This tradition was so entrenched in Christian circles that not even Kuyper and some of his colleagues could resist its power. In fact, they made use of it to choose between realism and nominalism from a Christian point of view (Klapwijk 2013:24ff.). They adopted a form of realism ('critical realism') in order to resist and oppose Kantian idealism, which was

6. Concerning the ancient forms of trinitarian thinking one may also remember the idea of the *vestigia Trinitatis*. The idea that in creation we find many instances of 'threeness'; reflecting the nature of the creator can be found already in Augustine and is continued for example by Theillard de Chardin. It constitutes, however, a rather rudimentary form of trinitarian thinking which is not prominent in contemporary trinitarian theology.

indeed perceived as an anti-Christian solution. Kant, in fact, placed the origin of the logical relations in the knowing subject itself. The subject imposes its own categories on nature. This was intuitively perceived as an underestimation of the role of created reality. Kuyper and others were determined to avoid placing the ordering principle in the human logos. Here the doctrine of the Trinity came to their rescue: does not the Bible indicate the second person as the divine Logos? From the divine logos, rationality is impressed in nature, where the human subject can recognise it and access it. (The object of knowledge is then regarded not only as logically accessible but also as logical in itself).

Although Kuyper (1931:25) (incautiously) started his analysis from the classical distinction between subject and object, he could nevertheless conclude that a harmony between the two had been achieved. This is a result that should not be underestimated. Was the tuning of the subject to the object (and vice versa) not a thorn in the flesh of traditional realism? In this Christian 'critical realist' conception, by contrast, it can be concluded that the object and the subject are finally tuned to each other by bringing in the role of the second Person of the Trinity. Bringing God into the picture seemed to Kuyper (and others) the perfect solution.

And yet, Klapwijk (2013:25) observes that whilst all this helps understanding Kuyper's position, it does not constitute a real solution to his initial problem. I think he means that Kuyper affirms a belief without demonstrating that (and how) the subject is tuned to the object *in philosophical terms*. In addition, is there any clue from the biblical revelation that may even faintly support the kind of construction brought forward here?<sup>7</sup> What about its obvious links with the Greek (pagan) tradition?

These might be some of the reasons why Kuyper himself, later on, started creating the premises for the abandonment of the logos-speculation. In fact, in his *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931 – original 1889) he sets forth the very ideas that will later help overcoming what Dooyeweerd (2013:90ff.) calls 'the scholastic line' in Kuyper's thought. Space constraints prevent us from introducing and exploring this additional topic. It is sufficient to know that, on the basis of Kuyper's work the next generations could recognise and creatively respond to the problems generated by the speculative scholastic tradition.

These cursory notes should help realising that the reformational tradition is by no means exempted from pseudo problems and also that Kuyper's razor was and is helpful to be used in the reformational school as well. It should also help realising that trinitarian thinking is a very ancient and powerful tradition.

7. In dialogue with Bavinck and others, Oliphint (2010:377ff.) shows that the biblical texts traditionally quoted as evidence, do not support critical realism or the Logos theory.

## Two main critiques

Not all the authors engaged in trinitarian scholarship adhere to critical realism and not all of them might be aware of the long philosophical heritage behind their approach. Most importantly, not all of them argue along the lines of the logos-speculation.<sup>8</sup> Some researchers are simply fascinated by the promising project of finding answers to contemporary dilemmas on the basis of the Christian understanding of God. The fact that these solutions might be provided in a wide range of disciplines and problems, surely creates an understandable dose of enthusiasm in many Christian circles.

And yet, we must come back to the fundamental thesis. Is it always true that there is some sort of correspondence between the Trinity and the created world? Is there any scriptural reason to believe that what is true of the Trinity must be true for creation as well? We have seen the example of individuality and universality, but are there perhaps counter-examples to show that what is the case for the Trinity is not always or necessarily the case for creation? I would like to propose the following argument.

In creation, everything remains constant (has a certain identity and duration) and everything changes, at least to a certain extent. From a Christian (reformational) point of view, constancy and change go hand in hand being respectively rooted in the kinematic (movement) and physical aspects of reality (Loubser 2013; Strauss 2009:164–167), which are correlated. Can the doctrine of the Trinity be invoked to confirm this state of affairs? The classical elaboration of the doctrine is found in the famous doctrine of the immutability of God. We do not have a correlated doctrine of the changefulness of God! Sure, immutability does not amount to impassibility or immobility, but it seems to me that the biblical emphasis, in this case, lies in God's constancy, faithfulness and steadfastness. In the Trinity, change and constancy are not 'equally ultimate'.

This is a counter example to the thesis that there is some sort of correspondence between the Trinity and the created world. I suspect that similar counter-examples are available in ethics, anthropology<sup>9</sup> and also in other disciplines. If creation and its norms do not always reflect the Trinity, there is no guarantee in applying the trinitarian approach.<sup>10</sup>

8. Traces of this approach are still persistent, however, even in reformed circles. Though impressed by Dooyeweerd's critical analysis of the 'logos-speculation', Jaeger (2012b:206ff.) insists that it is not necessary to abandon it. Notoriously, Van Til (e.g. in 1947:28) regards human knowledge as 'thinking God's thoughts after him'. Tol (2011:195–201) shows that even Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, between 1919 and 1921, adopted a form of realism related to trinitarian themes. It took them a few years to disentangle their philosophy from those schemes.

9. The triune God is morally good even after ordering the slaughter of the Canaanites: how closely should this be reflected by Christian ethics? In anthropology, should we adopt a trichotomist view of human nature because it reflects the nature of the Trinity better?

10. I have granted, for argument's sake, that the distinction between 'the one and the many' is the same as the distinction between particularity and universality, as Van Til (1960) and Rushdoony (1971) argue. Yet whilst unity and multiplicity are both rooted in the numerical aspect, particularity and universality are respectively rooted in the numerical and in the spatial aspects. These two issues are therefore different. The correlative of 'the one and the many' in the spatial aspect is 'the whole and the parts'. I mention this issue to suggest that there are (philosophical) problems that cannot even be acknowledged from the standpoint of trinitarian scholarship.

In my opinion a Christian approach should strive to liberate theoretical inquiry from inadequate references to the Trinity and disentangle the doctrine of the Trinity from inadequate projects.

Strauss (2009:189ff.) argues that in many cases, what is allegedly inferred from the characteristics of (and the relations within) the Trinity, is in fact derived from creational experience. It is then projected onto God and from there it is finally 'applied back' to ontological or other debates concerning creation. This is what Strauss calls theo-ontological thinking. My first critique, therefore, is that it is not possible to argue about ontological (or psychological, or biological) issues on the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity, because the correspondence between creation and the Trinity cannot be established.

My second critique is that trinitarian scholarship is often inclined to overlook or neglect some of the resources available to Christian scholarship. In fact, by placing primary emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity, other doctrines, themes or resources become secondary and often tend to be neglected. I rather propose that Christian scholarship should be opened up and made free to use all types of suitable resources, without fixed priorities. We should utilise a wide range of biblical teachings, far beyond the borders of the doctrine of the Trinity.

In addition, we should not regard the *theological* resources as the only available resources. We should not exclude resources provided by a Christian groundidea, worldview, philosophy or special science. We should not deem it impossible to have a Christian philosophy, Christian economics and so forth. Theology should not be condemned to try and provide all possible Christian insights for all the disciplines. Can Christian theology ever hope to solve, for example, ontological problems? Should it try to do so, or should it leave those problems to a Christian philosophy? Finally, is theology condemned to use the services of secular *ancillae* or is there hope for mutual service between Christian disciplines? These are some of the questions that trinitarian scholarship should consider. As anticipated, let's move to the third field of research.

## God's eternity, timefulness or timelessness

### Some Lutheran voices

The third field of research has to do with the relationship between God and time. Once again, formidable authors contribute to the topic, from Ernan McMillan to Wolfhart Pannenberg, to Jürgen Moltmann, to name only a few. The scope of this reflection will be rather limited. A recent article by Verhoef (2011) summarises the position of two Lutheran theologians on the matter, viz. Robert Jenson (e.g. in 1999) and Antje Jackelén (e.g. in 2005). For them, the reflection about time and eternity is clearly related to trinitarian theology as

well, but this is not the main focus of our exploration. I will also leave aside another major problem often emerging in these discussions, namely that God is declared to be to some extent temporal, with all the problems that this position entails (cf. Verhoef 2011:108). I will rather focus on the following. Both Jenson and Jackelén share the preoccupation that Greek philosophy might have infiltrated Christian theology giving a picture of God living outside and above time and therefore quite disengaged from creation and from human beings. The Greek conception of eternity, it is argued, is one of timeless present. But does God live in a timeless eternity? Jenson and Jackelén remind us that the God of the Bible is involved in time and cares about his creatures. In order to reorient the Christian reflection on these issues, they argue, it is necessary to regard eternity not as absence of time, but as a continuous recreation of time. God 'makes time' and therefore 'makes room' (Jenson 1999) for a dynamic *relationship* with human beings (Jackelén 2005).

Yet, in this regard one might ask a question concerning a fundamental assumption in this discourse. Is it really true that a God living in a timeless present would be less involved with his creatures than a God that 'makes time'? The question can be rephrased in terms of immanence and transcendence. Intuitively perhaps, we might be inclined to grant that a transcendent God is less involved with creation than an immanent God. And yet, in the African religions, for example, God is both immanent and fairly indifferent to the vicissitudes of human beings. This systematic possibility is important to avoid confusing the ontological and the religious levels of discussion. God's ontological immanence does not necessarily exclude religious distance whilst God's ontological transcendence does not necessarily exclude religious closeness.

### Thinking beyond the border?

There are other important questions. Is there, for example any border, any limit to scientific knowledge? According to reformational philosophy, scientific theorising can only take place within the modal horizon of experience. It is within this horizon that it makes sense to try and obtain theoretical knowledge, because the latter is always subjected to (modal) laws. The law is the boundary between earthly creation and God. Therefore God and God's time are beyond the reach of scientific inquiry. Any theology that does not agree with this assumption should clarify where the limit to human knowledge, if any, should be placed. And if there is virtually no limit, it should be said that the idea that we can apply scientific conceptual thinking beyond the modal boundary, has a definite Greek and not a biblical origin.<sup>11</sup> Scholars who are concerned with the influence of pagan philosophy on Christian scholarship, should not be indifferent to this problem.

11. Although it is not the only possibility, it remains a most plausible etymological hypothesis that the Greek term *theoria* is a combination of *Theos* [God] and *oraō* [to see]. It points to the idea that scientific thinking allows a *vision* of God.



Does this mean that we know nothing of what lies 'beyond the border' and that we should not try to say anything about it? Not exactly – from a Christian point of view, we are informed about some of these issues through (the biblical) revelation. If it is true that we cannot investigate what lies beyond the boundary of the law, it is also true that God can reach us with his revelation. We can then investigate the Scriptures scientifically or simply be happy with a pre-scientific type of knowledge (which is not necessarily less correct than theological statements).

Yet not everything is revealed to us (Dt 29:29). Does the Bible or any other type of revelation reveal anything about the characteristics of eternity? Is it linear, timeless, or everlasting? Can reflection on this issue be conducted on the basis of biblical exegesis? I believe Kim (2010:60) is right in concluding that biblical exegesis is not decisive on this point. On these issues, the biblical material does not point us towards a clear direction. And yet, instead of realising that we have reached a limit, at this point many (2010:60) invoke the input of philosophy (and other disciplines). Note that up to this point the discussion is usually strictly reserved for *Christian* theology. Yet from now on, the necessity or even the possibility of a Christian philosophical reflection on the topic is suddenly given up and the Christian theologian prepares for a ride through all types of (secular) philosophical adventures. Even worse, he prepares to fall into the arms of speculative thinking.

According to Dooyeweerd (1984, 2:38–42), speculative thinking occurs when one tries to apply modal concepts beyond the modal boundary. In his opinion speculative thinking is also necessarily antinomic thinking, in other words it creates a (theoretical) clash between the different norms or laws which are valid for earthly reality (but are now extended beyond it). We will see that this is exactly what happens in the reflection about God and eternity. But should we be willing to use a Christian philosophy to assess the problem, would we get some clues?

## A reformational appraisal

In the reformational tradition there has been some interest in this research field.<sup>12</sup> According to reformational philosophy, time is reflected in all modal aspects. In fact, time can be described from all the modal points of view (Dooyeweerd 1984, 2:85, 100, 102–103, 127, 193; Hart 1973:33–35; Strauss 2009:208–211). Apart from the often mentioned clock time (measurable, physical) and the sensitive time (subjective, psychological), the following expressions point toward other modalities of time. Think for example of phrases like *wasting time, after you, now is the time, timeless beauty, till death do us part* and so forth. Our definitions of time are always related to the modal aspects.

12. See for example Ouweneel (1986) and Popma (1949; 1957). A more complete list of Popma's writings on God and time can be found in Steen (1979:147). Unfortunately, on this topic Popma wrote only in Dutch. In relation to the present topic, it would be of course interesting to re-examine Dooyeweerd's notion of 'cosmic time' (including the controversies about its supratemporal or supramodal character), recently redefined as 'timefulness' by Troost (2012:40, 144ff.). These are possible contact points for a dialogue between reformational philosophers and the scholars mentioned above.

**TABLE 1:** Numerically and spatially-based ideas of eternity.

Numerical aspect	Spatial aspect
Pythagorean	Hellenist
Successive infinite	At once infinite
Eternal flow of time	Eternal present
Timefulness	Timelessness

How do we form our idea of infinite time, or eternity?<sup>13</sup> The first intuition of infinity comes from the numerical addition of  $1 + 1 + 1 + 1$ . Our intuition tells us that we can continue adding numbers *ad infinitum*. This is a numerical point of view on infinity. It has a Pythagorean flavour and it may be called *successive* infinity. In relation to infinite time (eternity) it denotes the idea of successive infinite. Jackelén and Jenson are especially fond of this version of infinity.

There is, however, another point of view related to the spatial modality. We can also conceive of infinite time as a totality. In fact, the spatial point of view introduces in reality the idea of *everywhere, at the same time*. This point of view gives us an intuition of infinity as something completed. We have then the idea of *at once infinity*, referring to an idea of eternity as eternal present, or timelessness. To summarise the two points of view we can use the following scheme (Table 1).

We cannot avoid using modal terms, even when speaking about topics transcending the modal horizon of our experience. Even when speaking about God, we (and the biblical authors) say that God is omnipresent, living, almighty, loving and so on. All these are modal terms, and we need to do the same when speaking about eternity. When seen from the numerical point of view, eternity is an infinite succession of moments. When seen from a spatial point of view, eternity is an eternal present. Instead of opposing the two intuitions and deciding to choose one to oppose the other, it would be wiser to accept them both as fragile, creaturely expressions pointing to what lies 'beyond the border'.

In fact, not even Jenson and Jackelén seem to be able to avoid referring to the spatial modality when dealing with God's time. For example Jenson (1999:25–26, 40) speaks of God's 'roominess' or the fact that he takes time by 'accommodating' the created other in himself. Jackelén's (2005:198ff.) relational view of time refers back to and requires the idea of (spatial) closeness. In doing so, these authors are trying to distil the antidote to static eternity by resorting exactly to the spatial modality, which is the source of the point of view that they want to oppose.

One should not suppose that one modal option is more Greek than the other (and therefore more harmful to Christian scholarship). As Steen (1979:136) observes (and as illustrated in Table 1) in Greek philosophy one does not only find the idea of eternity as absence of time (eternal present) but also the idea of eternity as a continuous flow of time. The two views are compatible. As indicated by Dooyeweerd, the (artificial) antinomy created between discrete quantity and

13. The following discussion is indebted especially to Strauss (2009).



space is simply a result of speculative thinking. It should ring the alarm to indicate that the modal border of experience has been exceeded (cf. Troost 2012:162–163).

## Summing up and concluding

The three case studies proposed above illustrate three research areas in Christian scholarship that are affected by several problems. The first one (the integration of science and religion) uncritically adopts a nature-grace duality as a starting point for its theorising. I have argued that such a framework places the issue on the wrong track by assuming the (relative) autonomy of theoretical reason. In the second case study, concerning the trinitarian approach to scholarship, properties and relations attributed to the Trinity are projected back onto creation, in the belief that the cosmos must reflect divine characteristics, ideas or relations. In so far as the third field of study (God and eternity) requires conceptual theorising beyond the modal boundary of human experience (which is impossible), it leads to speculative and antinomic thinking.

In some cases some of the above-mentioned strategies are combined to handle the study of other popular Christian topics. Jaeger (2012a:301) notices that most scholars studying 'God's action in the world' uncritically base their Christian theorising on a framework which is incompatible with the Christian position; and are guilty of theorising beyond the modal horizon of human experience (speculation). Her bold conclusion (2012:302) is that the problem of God's action in the world cannot be solved but should be *dissolved*. It is interesting to notice that Jaeger too reaches her conclusions by appealing (though not exclusively) to Kuyper's and Dooyeweerd's insights.

Yet not all problems should simply be dissolved. Jaeger herself (2012a:303ff.) proposes alternatives in her article and I have tried to do the same here. This article does not aim at terminating the discussion on these issues, but invites further debate. Fortunately I had more than one opportunity to show that Kuyperian circles are not immune from speculations, illegitimate projections and pseudoproblems. As I pointed out, Kuyper himself, in some cases, had to use his own 'razor' to prune some scholastic branches growing in his own theology. I therefore hope that these recognitions of mine will be 'considered in mitigation' by those who might perceive my article as somewhat pretentious.

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