



Strategies towards a reformation of the theology-based approach to Christian scholarship

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Abstract:

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This article tries to offer an alternative to the theology-based approach to Christian scholarship, which I have critically presented in a previous contribution. A demarcation criterion between science and non-science is provided, then attention is drawn to a few other distinctions which are often missing or neglected in the theology-based approach. Furthermore, an alternative view of theology is sketched, and the role of the Bible in Christian scholarship is discussed. Finally, a few characteristics of the proposed approach to Christian scholarship are clarified and a few advantages of this model are highlighted.

Opsomming:

Strategieë tot 'n reformatie van die teologie-gebaseerde benadering tot Christelike wetenskap

Hierdie artikel poog om 'n alternatiewe perspektief van teologie geskets en die rol van die Bybel in Christelike wetenskap word bespreek. Ten slotte word 'n paar karakteristieke van die voor-

gestelde benadering tot Christelike wetenskap verhelder en 'n paar voordele van hierdie model word uitgelig.

1. Introduction: problem statement and basic orientation

In a recent article¹ I have critically evaluated the ideal of “theology-based scholarship” by focusing on a study-case, the *Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione*² (Institute for/of Evangelical Learning and Documentation³ – from now on IFED) operating in Padua, Italy.

I would summarise the basic characteristics of the theology-based approach as follows. Theology is the most basic science or perspective, on which Christian culture and scholarship should be based. In the context of academic work, theology is elevated above the other disciplines, a move which places theology as a “mediator” between the written revelation and the non-theological sciences. Theology is therefore regarded as the key-factor for the development of Christian scholarship. It is responsible for providing the Christian foundation to disciplines like ethics or ontology, while it can avail itself (like the “queen” of the thomistic tradition) of the services of other scientific disciplines. In this approach, theology sometimes includes within itself the (Christian) pre-scientific⁴ presuppositions (e.g. a worldview or a religious ground motive) and even non-theological (scientific) perspectives when the latter are informed by a Christian perspective. As a consequence such disciplines and pre-suppositional frameworks are regarded as “theological” or as “parts” of theology.

I have argued that this model leads to several paradoxes and tensions. For example theological knowledge is often regarded as

1 See my article “Explorative notes on the ‘theology-based’ approach to Christian scholarship within reformed circles” (*Acta Academica*, forthcoming).

2 This institute was chosen as a case-study because it offers a vivid illustration of a reformed (more precisely: vantiian) version of the theology-based approach. In the article mentioned above I have focused in particular on the writings of Pietro Bolognesi and Leonardo De Chirico, especially on their articles appearing in *Studi di teologia*, the official journal of IFED.

3 All translations from Italian in this article are by the author.

4 Although I realise the difference in emphasis, I will use the term *pre-scientific* as synonym of *non-scientific* and *theoretical* as synonym of *scientific*.

being simultaneously scientific, pre-scientific, suprascientific, and “practical”. The theology-based approach, in addition, is dependent on a nature-grace worldview (see Section 2), which is certainly not the most promising starting point for a reformed reflection on scholarship. This model also entails several undesirable practical consequences. The most important one, in my opinion, is that (although promising a Christian approach to “all areas of life”), this model supports especially the production of theological research, while in the extratheological fields the contributions are much less frequent and relevant.

Of course the theology-based approach is not exclusive of the theologians of IFED. In fact, I have quoted several other reformed authors, especially from the United States, who support such a model. The latter, as a matter of fact, constitutes an accepted pattern of thought in many confessional traditions and theological circles all over the world. I therefore trust that the present discussion might be relevant for the South African reader as well.

At the end of the above-mentioned article I have also suggested that further research would be necessary to propose a more satisfactory approach from a more consistent reformed point of view. In this article my aim is to attempt a presentation of an alternative model concerning the nature of theology and its place or role in the context of Christian scholarship. I am encouraged in this task by the realisation that, in some instances, germinal insights pointing towards a re-formulation of the theology-based approach are present in the pages of *Studi di teologia* as well. I will be glad to point out and acknowledge some of these instances.

The main question underlying this article can be expressed as follows: having criticised the ideal of theology-based scholarship, which strategies may be suggested to promote a more Biblical understanding of Christian scholarship and of the role of theology within it? Likewise the theology-based approach, the proposals I am going to suggest do not constitute a set of random strategies. I will rather propose an integrated approach based on a reformational worldview. The purpose of this article is more pro-positive than the aim of my previous article, in which criticism had to play a prominent role. Occasionally, however, I will have to return to criticism to illustrate why certain proposals of mine (e.g. my definition of theology) are preferable to the proposals offered from a theology-based approach.

In the next section I would like to start providing a few pro-positive suggestions by referring to the worldviewish sketch I have briefly outlined in my previous contribution (see Section 5.2). After this, in order to spell out my alternative proposal more in detail, it will be necessary to deal with several crucial issues. The first one will be distinguishing between scientific and non-scientific thinking (Section 3). The next step will consist in implementing a few other distinctions which help recognising some over-simplifications often afflicting the theology-based approach (Section 4). Then I will sketch an alternative view of theology (Section 5) and of the role of the Bible in Christian scholarship (Section 6). Finally, I will discuss a few characteristics of the approach to Christian scholarship that I have proposed (Section 7) and a few of the advantages it offers (Section 8).

Perhaps an explanation is due on the fact (some will find it curious) that a philosopher dares to enter a debate concerning theology and to make proposals. Although we are dealing with the nature and role of *theology*, the problem of the relationship among sciences is a philosophical issue as well. In addition, the distinction between scientific and non-scientific thinking and other themes discussed below have clear connections with philosophy. It is in this respect that my modest contribution is offered, in a spirit of Christian interdisciplinary cooperation.

2. Sketching an alternative approach, based on a reformational worldview

The theology-based approach is inspired by a nature-grace type of worldview. In fact, the basic moves and solutions adopted to arrange the relationship among sciences present close analogies with e.g. the way in which the relationship between clergy and lay members was developed in the Roman Catholic Church.⁵ However, the same basic patterns of thought that have shaped the reformed reflection about the institutional church (starting from the Reformation) can open liberating avenues for the reflection about Christian scholarship, in particular concerning the relationship between theology and other sciences.

5 See Section 5.1 of the forthcoming article mentioned above (footnote 1).

Referring to Marshall (1991:7-10) the basic “motives” of a reformational worldview can be summarised and related to the specific topic of scholarship as follows.

- Because sovereignty resides in God, no scientific discipline can claim sovereignty for itself or above others.
- All scientific disciplines represent “callings” and are, as such, equal in the eyes of God.
- Every part of life is to be lived in direct responsibility to God. As a consequence the sciences should not be seen as arranged in a hierarchical order but as arranged side by side, supporting one another in their specific vocations, all equally *Coram Deo*.

If we follow the guidelines sketched above, the basic changes that need to be implemented with respect to the theology-based approach are the elimination of any superior sphere of grace and the mediating role of any scientific discipline; the access of all scientific disciplines to both created and inscripturated revelation; and the mutual, non-instrumental interaction of all Christian scientific disciplines. The dialogue with non-Christian scholarship should not be left to theologians or philosophers only, but should be regarded as a responsibility of all Christian scholars.

The model I propose highlights the basic similarities between theology and all other sciences, places them on the same “level” and eliminates the supposed suprascientific and prescientific status of theology. Christian theology is a science: like all other sciences it is indispensable to Christian scholarship and it is open to God’s revelation, both written and created. In order to implement this model it is necessary to deal with a few important systematic distinctions. The first one is a distinction between scientific and non-scientific thinking.

3. Distinguishing between scientific and non-scientific thinking

In the theology-based approach the desire to make theology more “valuable” leads to consider it as prescientific, scientific and “practical” at the same time. This desire has suggested the view that the border between science and non-science is rather blurred, a view which emerged quite early within vantilian circles (cf. Frame, 1972:6-14). The lack of clarity on the distinction between science and non-science, however, causes several anomalies. For example if theology is regarded as both scientific and pre-scientific its scientific

status is jeopardised. In addition, pre-scientific presuppositions are erroneously called “theology/-ical”, giving the (wrong) impression that Christian scholarship is ultimately based on “theology”. This places an excessive emphasis on theology with the consequences that I have already mentioned above. In order to eliminate these undesirable consequences, a clear distinction (which doesn’t amount to separation) between science and non-science should be implemented. This distinction will help us understanding the difference between theology and pre-scientific presuppositions or frameworks.

Is there any valid and clear criterion of demarcation between science and non-science available to the reformed theologian? Contemporary humanist philosophy of science has struggled considerably upon this apparently simple question. Popper (1963:37-39) has proposed falsifiability as demarcation criterion: theories are scientific when they can be proved false. Kuhn has rejected this solution and has proposed “puzzle solving” (Kuhn, 1970:7-9) as the basic characteristic of normal science. Feyerabend has rejected Kuhn’s proposal by saying that even a gang of criminals may use “puzzle solving”, for example for planning and realising a robbery (Feyerabend, 1970:200).

This observation, though provocative, is not without good reasons: puzzle solving (and falsification too) can be applied to both scientific and non-scientific theories, ideas or projects. Though Feyerabend (1970:211-212) does propose his own demarcation criterion (the “interaction between tenacity and proliferation of theories”), in his anarchistic approach the emphasis is rather on the close links between science and “life” (Feyerabend, 1975:18-19). His philosophy, therefore, does not help us much in our specific search.

On the Christian side of the debate, however, Dooyeweerd’s analysis of the structure of theoretical and pretheoretical thought may be considered a viable proposal. According to Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:18), science is characterised by the opposition between the logical aspect of our experience and the aspect(s) constituting the perspective of a particular discipline. These aspects are abstracted from the cohesive relationship with the other modal aspects and thus become the object (*Gegenstand*) of scientific enquiry (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:38-39). According to Dooyeweerd, therefore, science is characterised as thinking along modal lines, it requires abstraction and it aims at the universal. As the modal aspects correspond to

modal laws, science explores laws and is therefore aimed at the universal and structural order for creation.⁶

A similar perspective is developed by Hart. In his opinion “rational knowing” is about “our understanding of structures, our grasp of general patterns, our insight into laws, kinds and properties” (Hart, 1985:155). Stafleu (1981:165) too distinguishes between theoretical (i.e. “artificial”) and “natural” thinking. Although he would like to improve on the dooyeweerdian view of theoretical thinking, he acknowledges that the latter is “abstracting thought, by forming concepts it focuses on a limited number of aspects of concrete things” (Stafleu, 1981:167). Without entering into the complex meanderings of this discussion within philosophical circles, the previous few examples aim at demonstrating that scientific thinking is about knowing the universal side of reality and has to do with abstraction and modalities.

On the other hand, according to Dooyeweerd everyday experience is an experience of individualities. In naive (i.e. non-scientific) thinking there is no abstraction of a particular aspect of our experience in order to make it a *Gegenstand* (object) of scientific thought (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:34). In our naive experience we freely move through the ample variety of modal aspects, without concentrating on a specific one in particular. We rather deal with structures of individuality. According to Stafleu (1981:166), “the logical objects of natural [i.e. pre-scientific] thought are concrete things, events and relations”. Knowledge of individualities is therefore accomplished by pre-scientific thinking (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:41).

The above section may result a bit “technical” to the theologian who is not familiar with philosophical issues. Yet my simple aim is to demonstrate that a sound distinction between scientific and non-scientific thinking is both necessary and possible. The usefulness of this distinction, for the present discussion, lies in the fact that it allows us to distinguish between theology as a scientific discipline and pre-scientific presuppositions or frameworks. When this distinction is accepted, a worldview (for example) will no longer be regarded as “theology” or “theological”. It is precisely because pre-scientific thinking does not occur along modal lines that pre-

6 Dooyeweerd’s views on this topic have undergone serious discussion by several reformational thinkers, for example Hart (1985:150 ff.), Geertsema (1995) and Strauss (1984). For the present purpose, however, it is not necessary to go into the depths of those philosophical discussions.

suppositional frameworks cannot be called “theo-logical” (or even “psycho-logical” or “bio-logical”). By respecting this distinction, the misunderstanding will be avoided that theology includes in itself the pre-scientific presuppositions on which Christian scholarship is based.

4. Excursus: further clarifications about faith, religion and beliefs

Unfortunately, the introduction of a demarcation criterion will not automatically extricate all the confusions created by the theology-based approach. For example in this tradition terms like *faith*, *world-view* and *religion* often are not properly defined and distinguished.⁷ In addition, one notices the presence of several over-simplifications. Whatever is somehow related to “faith”, belief or religion, for example seems to belong automatically to the study field of theology. A patient work of fine-tuning is needed, which is not allowed by the present limits of space. Nevertheless, in this section I would like to offer a few corollary-distinctions that might integrate the discussion of the previous section and help recognising (and possibly avoiding) over-simplifications and confusions.

Firstly, one should distinguish between the different meanings of the term *faith*, namely faith as the content of what is believed (e.g. a confession of faith), faith as a modal aspect of our experience and reality, and the human faculty of believing.

Secondly, it is important to distinguish between faith and religion. Briefly stated, in the reformational tradition they are differentiated as follows. The term *faith* (as I argued above) refers to a certain modal aspect, a certain function or to certain (devotional) beliefs, therefore it has to do with a “sector” of our reality and experience. Religion, on the other hand, is not a modality or a sector of life. Religion is an all-encompassing human response in which all the modalities of our experience are included and co-exist (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:55-57). To grasp this distinction better, we may use the classical example of the Biblical idea of the “heart”. The latter refers to the religious com-

7 These pre-scientific frameworks are different and play different roles within scholarship. For a distinction between worldviews and religious ground motives see for example Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:68-168). Klapwijk (1989) and Wolters (1989) discuss the respective roles of these two frameworks in philosophy and the type of influence they exert. For the difference between *worldpicture* and *worldview* see Venter (1992:189 ff.).

mitment of a person/community and should not be identified with (i.e. restricted to) our rationality, emotional life or even with our faithlife (it rather includes all these dimensions).

Thirdly, worldviews are not shaped only by a “faith” or “the gospel” as it is sometimes suggested in the theology-based approach,⁸ but are the result of a complex interaction with concrete experience in a specific cultural context. Furthermore, even if worldviews were simply derived from “the gospel”, it would not mean that they are “theological”. In fact, it should be noticed that what is “derived from the Bible” is not always particularly linked to (or part of) theology (I will return on this point in Section 6.2). Also the distinction between scientific and pre-scientific (introduced in Section 3), prevents this simplistic connection between worldview and theology. It should be observed, in addition, that the beliefs and convictions we derive from Scripture are not always and necessarily elaborated into theological doctrines or views. Often they may be directly embedded into Christian philosophical, juridical, biological, political (and so on) perspectives.

Fourthly, the term *belief* sometimes generates confusion. We often speak of a “belief” to indicate a conviction that cannot be fully proved, not necessarily something particularly linked to theology. In other words, not all beliefs are “theological” (or devotional). One may consider for example a belief like: “state intervention in monetary problems is helpful and preferable to other strategies”. A more Biblical example might be: “children are raised better when appropriate discipline is applied”. Such non-devotional beliefs may be derived from the Biblical revelation and are often fundamental in the development of extratheological scientific theories. In other words, theology is not the only science that deals with beliefs and beliefs are not always about faith or devotional issues.

Finally, a more general observation: the feeling that Christian scholarship will never develop to its full potential without (Christian) theological backup is justified, provided it is also realised that Christian theology will never develop fully without a proper (e.g.) Christian philosophical, sociological or historical backup, which should not be regarded as only optional or instrumental.

At this point, however, I am glad to point out that De Chirico (2001) repeatedly speaks of a “religious principle” (instead of a theological

8 See e.g. Garrone and De Chirico (2002:58).

principle) when indicating the origin of Van Prinsterer's political views. In his article dedicated to the Dutch precursor of neo-calvinism De Chirico abandons his usual terminology and adopts a truly reformational perspective. Although it has been only a temporary choice in the writings of De Chirico, it should be commended.

Having explored a few important issues concerning especially the demarcation criterion and pre-scientific presuppositions, let us now move to the scientific level. For our present purpose, the nature of theology as a science should be analysed with particular attention.

5. What is theology? Looking for a definition

5.1 Problematic definitions of theology

In my previous article on the theology-based approach I have not discussed the definitions of theology that I have mentioned. I have limited myself to noticing that they point towards a view of theology as the most fundamental science. But in the present context, before providing the definition of theology that I favour, criticism of those definitions should be useful.

The traditional understanding of theology as "science of God" (Bolognesi, 1980:8) or "science of the Bible" (Bolognesi, 1980:4-7) is to be regarded as inadequate. Theology should not be defined as a science that studies God, simply because God cannot be reduced to the object of study of any theoretical discipline. All our scientific efforts are limited by the modal horizon of our experience and apply only within this limit. In other words, science is supposed to explore the created world, not something transcending this world. In fact, the modal categories which delimit science and are essential for theoretical thinking would not apply outside of creation. God transcends the laws of logic, mathematics, physics (and so on) and therefore cannot constitute an object of scientific investigation.

The idea that theology studies the Bible is somehow more plausible. The Bible is given to us within creation and presents itself in human language, which can be studied. It should be noticed, however, that identifying the field of study of a discipline means indicating something uniquely studied by that discipline. In other words, we should be able to identify its specific and unique field of enquiry, which no other science deals with. It would be in fact futile to indicate as a field of study an area which is also the field of research of several

other sciences.⁹ In principle, defining theology as the science of the Bible means that the Bible should be approached only or especially by theologians, thus promoting the secularisation of extratheological scholarship.

There is an additional problem: theology does not seem to study only the Bible. In fact it deals with the history of dogma, church history, with the writings of church fathers and other prominent Christian writers. Theology is also busy with pastoral counselling, homiletics, economic issues, church law and much more. This is not simply found in the Bible. There must be a more precise way of defining the actual work of theologians.

The definition of theology as an “application of what God teaches in his word to every sphere of life” (Frame, 1987:76; Bolognesi, 2001: 92) might very well constitute a definition of Christian *religion* as well, and therefore it is not sufficiently precise. As a matter of fact, this definition might be appropriate for Christian life in its totality. In addition, this definition (like the two previous ones) does not take into account non-Christian theologies sufficiently.¹⁰ The definition might be modified and broadened to include non-Christian theologies, but then we should most probably eliminate the phrase “word of God” (in some theological traditions there are no gods or “words”). We might also need to alter the concept of “application”, and the scope of this application (i.e. “every sphere of life”) would be questionable as well. In other words, the definition should undergo considerable modifications before reaching a presentable formulation.

9 For example defining psychology as the study of human behavior is not precise enough. In fact, there are other sciences who study human behavior from a social, economic, historical point of view and so on. A definition of psychology should identify its unique field of study (like e.g. the emotional behavior/ life/dimension).

10 The definition betrays the confused feeling that theology is inherently Christian, an idea surfacing often in Christian circles. For Bolognesi (1980:7), for example “theological reflection makes sense only within the church”. What about theologies deviating from Christian orthodoxy or orthopraxis? On this point Bolognesi (1980:18) argues that this is not “true theology”. This, however, seems to be true only for theology. In fact I have never heard from Christian authors the argument that non-Christian philosophy (or any other discipline) is not true philosophy, true politics and so on. This uneven approach is due to the confused feeling that theology is an inherently Christian perspective.

5.2 Theology as a scientific study of faith-life

My own proposal is that theology studies created reality (not only the Bible). It does so (like any other Christian scientific endeavour) *in the light* of the written revelation. The field of study of theology is delimited by the faith-aspect of created reality. Theology studies reality through the perspective of the faith-aspect, the pistic modality of reality. For this reason Vander Stelt (1989:19-21) has suggested the name *pistology* as a more appropriate definition of the discipline studying the faith-aspect of created reality. During a seminar in Hoeven (The Netherlands) Abraham Bos has suggested that *pisteology* would constitute a more elegant term and I think his recommendation should be welcomed. The name *theology* has the etymological disadvantage of insisting on a discourse *about God*, which does not give an appropriate account of what this science is busy with.

However, my aim is not to promote a semantic dispute. There are other terms (for example “theory” or “philosophy”)¹¹ which sound rather alarming from a Christian point of view, and are nevertheless maintained simply because they are of common and traditional use. Whatever terms we use, it is crucial to develop a proper understanding of the realities they indicate.

It is crucial, for example to realise that theology is not structurally different from other sciences: it studies created reality through one of the modal aspects of reality,¹² which are at the same time aspects of our experience. As a consequence it is not necessary to label Christian ethics, epistemology, ontology or anthropology as “theology”.¹³ These scientific disciplines are not transformed into

11 The word *theory* is a combination of the Greek terms *theos* (God) and *orao* (to see), pointing to the idea that rational thinking allows a “vision” of God. Philosophy of course means love for wisdom, as if wisdom could be achieved especially through philosophical reflection or may not be cultivated by historians or botanists.

12 In the case of some sciences the modal aspects through which reality is observed are more than one. Skillen (1988), e.g. observes that politics studies state relationships from more than one point of view, or modal perspective.

13 This attitude is unfortunately widespread among vantilian theologians. For Frame (1987:xv), e.g. Christian epistemology is a synonym of “theology of knowledge”. Christian philosophy is “a subdivision of theology” (p. 85). The scientist “will be doing theology (i.e. applying Scripture) much of the time” (p. 86). Apologetics “can be considered a subdivision of theology” (p. 87) and so on.

theology when they follow a Christian direction. In addition, on the basis of the above discussion theology is finally provided with a clear scientific identity. Frame would like to make theology a kind of superscience. In his opinion “it uses not only the methods of science but also those of art, literature, philosophy, law and education. Indeed, since theology must be lived as well as spoken, it uses all of the methods by which human beings accomplish things in God’s world” (Frame, 1987:316). It is worthwhile warning that when a science tries to be everything, it becomes nothing.

A better approach is adopted by Bolognesi in a pronouncement in which he realises that it is necessary to delimit the field of investigation of theology. The context of his statement is the recognition that a theological journal like *Studi di teologia* should also delimit its appropriate area of publication. “Although everything is related to God and his law” he writes, “we must recognise our limits” (Bolognesi, 1992:1). Indeed, Bolognesi’s pronouncement goes in the right direction. In fact, no single science can deal with whatever is related to God and his law, i.e. with everything in the world! It is not only a matter of our limitations, it is how scientific thinking works in God’s world.

Of course, the initial impression of those who are accustomed to a theology-based approach might be that in our model the importance of theology is somehow “diminished”. But after giving up its presumed magisterial role theology will be enabled to play a meaningful ministerial role in the context of Christian scholarship. Indeed, in our model theology has a necessary role to play and a unique task to perform. I would define this task as the exploration of the pistic dimension of life, in the light of the revealed word of God. In addition, the specific contribution of theology to the enrichment of other Christian scientific disciplines cannot be dismissed or replaced. Furthermore, theology is called to a meaningful dialogue with non-Christian theologies on the basis of the written revelation. It is to the latter that we now turn our attention.

6. The role of the Bible in Christian scholarship

6.1 The Bible and the non-theological disciplines

A reforming attitude towards the theology-based approach should aim at granting access to both the created and inscripturated revelations of God to all scientific disciplines and all scholars (see Section 2). It is precisely at this point, however, that we face an important set of questions: does the Bible have something to say to

other sciences, or is it meant to speak only to theology? Does it perhaps speak to other sciences via theology?

Here we are compelled to face the question concerning the *purpose* of the Biblical revelation and the *extent* of its authority. Although even in reformational circles there have been early attempts (e.g. Olthuis, 1976:15) at limiting this purpose to a soteriological scope, Duvenage correctly points out that:

A redemptive historical or soteriological narrowing of the scopus of the Inscripturated Word to our mind, goes against the line of thought of the Reformational tradition, as disseminated especially by Calvin, Kuyper and Bavinck, but what is more important, it is also against the testimony of the Scriptures. The over-accentuation of the redemptive work at the cost of the creational and upholding work of God leads to a new sort of dualism, viz. that the inscripturated word does have to do with faith, but that the intellect of man should be directed to creation. (Duvenage, 1985:10.)

Duvenage supports, in alternative, a definition of the purpose of Scripture which is provided by Helberg: "the aim of revelation is that man has to take note of God's sovereignty and of his communion with man" (quoted in Duvenage, 1985:10). Duvenage continues with an overview to show that, at least in principle, Calvin, Kuyper and Bavinck did maintain a view of Scripture that does not curtail its authority and scope.

If we accept that the focus of the Bible is religious (and not only pistic), we will admit that its message addresses all the dimensions of our life (e.g. ethical, juridical, social) not only the faith-dimension.¹⁴ These different perspectives are rooted into the religious focus of the Bible. If this is true, then the Bible (although not offering any scientific theory) does indeed have something to say to the different sciences. In van der Walt's words:

[The Bible] does not speak in economic categories, but it addresses economics. It does not speak political language, but it definitely addresses politics. It does not use educational concepts but it indeed addresses education. It addresses all spheres of life including our scholarly activities, but in its own unique way. It focuses on the deepest, the core of our existence (...) our relationship with God. (Van der Walt, 1994:88-89.)

14 See my notes on the distinction between faith and religion in Section 4.

If this is the focus and intention of the Biblical revelation, why should it be restricted to theological studies only? When scholars working in community receive the Biblical message from this religious focus, they will receive fundamental prescientific guidelines functioning at different levels of their research and shaping their understanding of a field of study in significant ways. Although the theology-based approach insists especially on the usefulness of theological doctrines,¹⁵ these pre-scientific insights are absolutely necessary to Christian scholars in the various disciplines.

6.2 The Christian scholar and the Bible

In the previous section I have defended the idea that the Bible is relevant to a scholar, even when she/he is a non-theologian. There is, however, another question which might create reservations towards our model. The question is to what extent Christian scholars (those involved in the non-theological disciplines) are equipped to interpret the Bible. How will they understand the Biblical text and avoid arbitrary or incorrect interpretations? It is often doubted that non-theologians may have the required skills to accomplish this task.

On this point, however, one should consider the emphasis of the Reformation on the *Perspicuitas Sacrarum Scripturarum*,¹⁶ and on the common priesthood of all believers. According to the reformers the Scripture is not suitable only for theologians or understandable only by a clergy. The Bible is clear enough to be understood by the community of all believers, including the scholar, whatever his field of research is. The distinction between scientific and pre-scientific approaches (see Section 3) should be taken into account as well. The Bible is not only open to scientific investigation. It is also open to a pre-scientific understanding, and prescientific does not necessarily mean less correct.

15 De Chirico's introduction (2005a:122-123) as well as the articles published in the issue of *Studi di teologia* (17(2), new series) dedicated to the doctrine of the Trinity, suggest that the fundamental guidelines for a Christian ontology (Rushdoony, 2005), Christian ethics (De Chirico, 2005b) and even for Christian environmental studies (Williams, 2005), can and should be derived from the doctrine of the Trinity.

16 The presupposition that the Holy Scriptures are understandable, sufficiently clear in their main teaching.

Christian scholars, therefore, can obtain information and direction from the Bible on the basis of their pre-scientific reading. It might be argued that the influence of theological (i.e. scientific) knowledge will in turn influence a non-scientific reading as well.¹⁷ This may be granted. But then the influence of other Christian scientific perspectives (e.g. philosophical, historical, etc.) on the same pre-scientific level, should be realised as well. In other words, it is not possible, once again, to reduce pre-scientific reading to “theological” reading.

The value of a pre-scientific reading/approach to the written revelation should not be underestimated. It was this approach that allowed Johannes Althusius to access the Bible as a Christian politician. It allowed Dooyeweerd to access the Bible as a Christian philosopher and so on. I believe at this point we have already achieved the result of opening up the inscripturated revelation to all scientific disciplines. There are, however, further possibilities that should be explored. We may ask the question whether a pre-scientific reading of the Scriptures is the only way for non-theological sciences to approach the Bible. What about a scientific reading/understanding (which I will define as “exegesis”)?

Dooyeweerd (1980:148) simply followed the traditional opinion that philosophy does not deal with Biblical exegesis. At this crucial point, however, we have to remember the difference between the modal aspects of created reality. Theology performs its own exegesis, which focuses on the pistic modality. Theology aims at solving faith-problems and reads the Bible from the perspective of faith. But this might not prevent other sciences from reading the Bible from other perspectives, to find guidelines for their particular fields of study. Therefore the politician, for example can consult the Scriptures according to his own focus, having in mind political questions.

Klapwijk (1987:106) has asked whether this strategy would not eliminate the difference between Christian theology and, e.g. Christian philosophy (eventually other sciences). In the following passage Klapwijk (1987:106) discusses Vollenhoven’s hypothesis of a “scrip-

17 In fact, not only pre-scientific knowledge influences scientific theorising, but the opposite is true as well, to a certain extent. Scientific knowledge does influence for example our non-scientific experience of sickness. We experience sickness in a different way from, e.g. primitive people, just because we have somehow absorbed notions of modern medical science. In the same way, theological doctrines influence our naive reading of the Bible.

tural” philosophy. “Let us suppose for a moment”, he writes, “that Christian theology may be described as theoretical reflection on the Biblical revelation (...) where then remains the difference between such a scriptural philosophy and Christian theology?”

It should be noticed that Klapwijk’s question is based on the hypothesis that it might be plausible to define theology as “theoretical reflection on the Biblical revelation”. He doesn’t explore sufficiently the possibility that this definition may not be appropriate (as I have argued in 5.1). Secondly, he does not reflect on the fact that all sciences investigate reality according to a specific perspective. Why should this not be possible when they investigate the Bible? As a reformational scholar he does not, in this case, profit enough from a few themes that are crucial in reformational philosophy, namely the distinction between different modalities and their relation to theoretical thought. Exploring these themes may show that sociology, for example will never be transformed into theology simply because it consults the Bible. In fact sociology approaches the Bible from its own perspective (the social aspect of experience) and with its own questions. For this reason I believe that Vollenhoven’s conception of a “scriptural philosophy” is legitimate.

To add a final consideration, there is no reason why non-theological exegesis should be accomplished in isolation from theologians and theological exegesis. Probably this is one of the areas in which theology, having historically developed a solid competence in this field, can offer important contributions in the context of a cooperation among Christian scholars.

It is now time to look at the general characteristics of the model emerging from the previous pages.

7. A comprehensive look at our model for scholarship: what about mediators?

When we lift up our eyes from the details and have a comprehensive look at the model sketched above, I believe there are reasons for satisfaction. In fact, this model eliminates any superior sphere of grace and avoids placing any science in a superior position. Secondly, it allows the access of all scientific disciplines to both created and inscripturated revelation. Thirdly, it enhances the mutual support and interaction of all Christian scientific perspectives in the context of Christian scholarship and in their dialogue with non-Christian scholarship. Instead of insisting on each of these charac-

teristics in detail, however, I would like to focus on the issue of mediation and mediators, thus anticipating a possible objection.

In the theology-based approach to Christian scholarship, theology plays a mediating role. When it comes to *Christian* scholarship theology has the role of reforming the other disciplines by supplying the fundamental Biblical teachings. When it comes to an interaction with *non-Christian* scholarship theology seems to represent the whole of Christian scholarship. I have tried to show that mediators, having a “monopoly” on the Bible and constituting the only possible bridge of access to it, usually end up hindering, instead of promoting, the relationship between Scripture and each science. These mediators may be defined as *monopolistic mediators*. Our alternative model aims at eliminating such mediators, but does it succeed in doing so? Does it not, for example substitute the mediation of theology with the mediation of a worldview, which would be the necessary and inevitable “bridge” between science and its Christian roots?

I will respond first of all by saying that mediators are not all the same. In fact, the mediating role may be assigned to a scientific discipline (e.g. philosophy) or to a non-scientific presuppositional framework (e.g. a worldview). A pre-scientific mediator is somehow less “dangerous” than the scientific one, in the sense that it is not “monopolistic”. The arguments that Dooyeweerd (1959:66; 1980:135 ff.) provided against the mediation of theology are well known. Such mediation would “block” the direct access of philosophy (or any other science) to the Biblical revelation thus preventing the reformation of philosophy according to truly Biblical guidelines. On this point I agree with Dooyeweerd: the mediation of a particular (scientific) discipline tends to exclude the direct access of other disciplines to the Bible.

But the mediation of a pre-scientific framework, like a worldview or a religious motive, does not block the access to Scripture in the same way. The reason is that, e.g. a worldview may be considered as the pre-scientific basis of each discipline and it should be regarded as connected to all disciplines. All sciences, in other words, have equal access to a worldview and the latter is part of the “equipment” of every scholar. Of course the same is true for religious ground motives as well. Finally, it should be noted that our model does not prescribe only one specific pre-scientific framework as the only

“mediator”¹⁸ between the sources of Christian scholarship and science. On the contrary, it recognises that a plurality of such frameworks is normally operative in scholarship. This is an additional reason why the threat of monopolistic mediation should not be considered a danger for this specific model.

8. A few advantages of this approach to Christian scholarship

Before concluding, I should also highlight some advantages of our approach. Let us summarise a few of them which emerged from the sections above.

- This approach stems from a reformational worldview, not from a thomistic one, thus offering a reformational view of the encyclopaedia of the sciences.
- It is supported by sound philosophical distinctions.
- It places theology in the context of Christian scholarship (not above it or after it).
- It allows to avoid the particular problems related to the theology-based approach, which I have already indicated in my previous article.

Let us now mention a few advantages that were not mentioned above and are more “practical”. Once the “superior sphere” of theology is eliminated, the necessity of an inner reformation operating within all scientific disciplines becomes more evident. This may have the effect of mobilising more energies for the promotion of an integral Christian scholarship in extratheological fields. The main purpose of scholarship, in this perspective, is not trying to “theologise” the non-theological sciences or bringing them under the influence of theology. It is rather to create a whole concert of Christian sciences in cooperation between them, namely the ideal of integral Christian scholarship.¹⁹ In other words, this approach discloses

18 The term *mediator* is in fact inadequate to describe the role played by pre-scientific frameworks in this model. In a dissertation on the topic I have preferred the term *reference point* (Coletto, 2002:112 ff.).

19 One of the most appreciated theologians of IFED, Paul Finch, realises that a dialogue with non-Christian cultures requires many more competences than theologians can have. After analysing the contribution (to a bio-ethical debate) of evangelical experts in several (extratheological) disciplinary fields, Finch

better than others the necessity of communal and integral scholarship dealing with all spheres of life. In addition, this approach paves the way to a better cooperation between Christian scholars and leads to a broader and more effective dialogue between Christian and non-Christian scholars.

In our approach, theology is also restituted a proper position among the sciences, without over-estimations but also without underestimations of its role. As a consequence, this approach eliminates the excessive expectations from theology and helps selecting more proper, realistic and suitable projects. In other words, it helps theologians endorsing appropriate plans, aims and ambitions. The ideal of theology "promoting a whole culture" (Bolognesi, 1998:3) or challenging all alone non-Christian cultures, or equipping Christian believers for service "in all spheres of life" should be abandoned and substituted by the ideal of communal Christian scholarship.

The latter ideal is indeed a more complex project, involving a much broader spectrum of scholars, and going beyond the purposes and possibilities of theological institutions. What institutions like IFED can do, is endorsing more viable tasks like, e.g. "theological learning and information" and theological dialogue. For a theological institute, this would constitute a more appropriate and legitimate ambition. The long-term ideal of integral Christian scholarship, however, does not have to be simply ignored by theologians. For a beginning it would be enough to recognise that such a project is legitimate and desirable, and the opportunities for such developments should be welcomed and supported in various forms when they present themselves.

9. Conclusive remarks

I believe in the specific case of IFED the adoption of a theology-based approach has been favoured by a series of contextual reasons. In the 1970s many sectors of Italian evangelicalism were characterised by a considerable dose of pietism and by an anti-intellectual attitude. Theology was mostly considered unnecessary, a kind of threat to the purity of the gospel. The preparation of the pastors was definitely insufficient and Christian life was limited to personal piety and church attendance, with very limited interests in

(1997:113) says: "Here we become aware of the necessity of a common strategy among evangelicals in the context of the bio-ethical field, in view of a systematic and global approach".

social, academic or cultural issues in general. In this situation, it has been the merit of IFED to insist on the need for sound theological preparation and the promotion of a reformed worldview.

It was in this spirit that IFED has proclaimed to the Italian evangelical public that Christian life has to do with “every sphere of life”. As it happens often, unfortunately, in the effort to promote important truths we may incur into some exaggerations or distortions. The constant reformation of our ways, however, is a task that should not discourage those who accept the motto *semper reformanda*. In this spirit, I believe, it is time to reconsider the legitimacy and viability of the theology-based approach.

The present proposal towards a reformation of the theology-based approach remains a sketch and has no ambition of representing a final picture. Its value is not in its completeness but in its suggestiveness. Nevertheless, I trust it is sufficiently elaborated to be taken into account (and further refined) by whoever recognises the necessity of a sound reformational approach to scholarship.

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Key concepts:

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demarcation criterion
encyclopaedia of the sciences
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