AOSIS

By Scripture and Plain Reason: A historical retrieval of the relationship between faith and reason to better engage with present-day secularism

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Author:
Daniël J. Maritz[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Daniël Maritz,
dan.jacobus.maritz@gmail.com

The formal principle of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, has sometimes been thought to imply that the Reformed minister and church member need not concern themselves with the use of reason and philosophy in matters of faith and theology. This misconstrued understanding of *sola Scriptura* led to a low regard for reason in matters of faith among Reformed folk. A low regard for reason, in turn, gave anti-intellectualism and fideism a foothold in local Reformed churches and left secularism and its progressive ideas unchallenged as it infiltrated the minds of Reformed church members, especially at churches in bigger cities and close to universities. This phenomenon can be addressed by establishing apologetics training platforms at local Reformed churches where church members can be trained to better defend the truth against secularism. To establish apologetics on a local church level, however, one must first retrieve the correct role of reason in matters of faith. This article accordingly embarked on an historical retrieval within the broad Reformed tradition. Different Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians were examined to retrieve the proper relationship between faith and reason. This was accompanied by a focus on other relevant themes such as the concept of *common notions* and the *three acts of the intellect*. Through an historical retrieval, this article consulted the primary sources of figures in the Reformed tradition spanning from the early 1500s to the early 1700s. Additionally, modern interpreters of these figures have also been introduced for their insights. It became evident that reason plays a ministerial role in matters of faith. Moreover, the concept of *common notions* establishes a grounding for the undeniable role of reason in dialogues with secularism. By introducing the *three acts of the intellect*, the discussion also moved on to function as a critique of mainstream secularism, as it pertains to its disordered approach to reality in the form of *expressive individualism*. Although this article is the first of two in a series, it nevertheless accomplished its own end to emphasise the need for apologetics on a local church level and to retrieve the role of reason in matters of faith.

Contribution: As a historical retrieval within the Reformed tradition, this article fits perfectly within the scope of *In the Skriflig*. It reminds the Reformed minister of the rich heritage within the Reformed tradition regarding the relationship between faith and reason, and brings it to bear on the challenge of secularism.

Keywords: apologetics; common notions; faith and reason; philosophy; progressive ideas; reformed; secularism; three acts of the intellect.

Introduction

> Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason[1] – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe.

These are the words of Martin Luther (1483–1546) at the *Diet of Worms* in 1521 as he sought to describe the importance of Scripture in matters of doctrine, faith and life (as cited by Sproul 1993:126–127). Ever since the 16th century Reformation, the concept of *sola Scriptura* has been used in Protestant circles to express the final authority of Scripture. Historically, this concept was

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1. Some scholars use a translation which, instead of 'plain reason', translates Martin Luther's words as 'evident reason' (see Geisler & MacKenzie 1995:178). This is relevant, as it may also indicate the value of reason in the context of providing evidence in favour of some or other position. Moreover, the fact that he did not accept the authority of 'popes and councils' precisely because they have 'contradicted' one another, shows Luther's high regard for logic, and per implication, natural reason. It is a well-known notion that Luther, unlike many of the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians, had an 'anti-Aristotelian schema'. However, despite his rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics, physics and ethics, he always 'assumed the necessity of logic and rhetoric not merely in secular discourse, but in theological discourse as well' (Muller 2003a:364). It must be acknowledged, however, that despite his seemingly positive reference to the use of 'plain reason' at the *Diet of Worms*, later in his life Luther made negative utterances regarding the nature of reason. This article therefore only uses Luther's words at the *Diet of Worms* as a departure point and does not rely on his views in any other way.

especially used to challenge the Roman Catholic view which expressed itself in the 'coequality of Scripture and tradition' (Muller 2017:338). Although the phrase, *sola Scriptura*, was never explicitly used by the earliest Reformers, the principle that all matters of doctrine, faith, and life must ultimately be resolved *by Scripture alone*, was not foreign to them. For them there simply was no higher 'court of appeal' when doctrinal disputes needed to be settled (Geisler & MacKenzie 1995:178; Muller 2017:338).

Unfortunately, however, the principle of *sola Scriptura* was not immune to being misunderstood by present-day Roman Catholics and Protestants alike. Many, either implicitly or explicitly, concluded that any adherence to *sola Scriptura* automatically excludes knowledge, or the use of any truth found *outside* of Scripture (Geisler & MacKenzie 1995:178).[2] For them, any commitment to *sola Scriptura* necessarily also entails a rejection of church tradition as well as a neglect of the use of 'plain reason' and good philosophy in matters of faith and theology (Barrett 2016:55; Ortlund 2019:32).

The Reformers never meant for the principle of s*ola Scriptura* to be misconstrued in this manner (see Muller 2003b:345; Vanhoozer 2016:111). In fact, this author holds that it is precisely the neglect, and in some cases, even the denial of the legitimate role of sound reason and good philosophy in matters of faith which allowed secularism and its progressive ideas to gain a foothold in many Protestant churches of South Africa.[3] The fact that Luther clearly

introduced 'Scripture *and* plain reason' as his criteria for conviction must cause one to reconsider, and as we shall see, *retrieve* the important and undeniable role of 'plain reason' in matters of faith and theology. As Geisler and MacKenzie (1995) remind us:

> Good reason can and should be used apologetically (to defend against attacks on orthodoxy from without), polemically (to defend against attacks on orthodoxy from within), and theologically (to define orthodox doctrines within). (p. 178)

This article, as the first of two in a series, will seek to argue that, in its grappling with secularism and progressive ideas, Protestantism in South Africa, particularly the Reformed churches, must realise the need for apologetics on a local church level.[4] To do this, the rich heritage within Reformed theology must be *retrieved*, especially regarding a proper understanding of the relationship between faith and reason.[5] This article will end by examining the so-called *three acts of the intellect* as an extended investigation into the proper use of one's reason. The discussion will function both as a clarification of how one comes to know reality as an intelligible gift from God using sound reason, and as a critique of the broad secular approach to reality, as it is manifested in *expressive individualism*.

The need for Christian apologetics to face up to the challenge of secularism and progressive ideas

William Wilberforce (1759–1833), the British politician and leader of the movement against slavery in England, was once

2.One can think, for example of a scientific truth such as the discovery of heliocentrism in the 16th century. This is clearly a truth external to Scripture, which, as Lennox (2011: 15–36) argues, has changed the way certain Scriptural passages should be interpreted (see 1 Chr 16:30; Ps 93:1; 104:5; 1 Sm 2:8; Ec 1:5). Before this discovery, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians were convinced, on the grounds of Scripture, that the earth was fixed on pillars while the sun orbited around it. Heliocentrism, of course, proved this view to be false and today, despite these Scriptural passages indicating that the earth is fixed on pillars and that the sun is moving around it, theologians accept the metaphorical and/or phenomenological interpretation of these passages. Furthermore, one can also think of biblically external philosophical or metaphysical truths such as the laws of logic or the so-called substance and accident, matter and form, potentiality and actuality, and essence and existence distinctions (see Bavinck 2004:176). Scientific and certain philosophical truths that are external to Scripture would typically be grounded in God's general revelation. It should be noted, however, that because all truth originates with God, and ultimately points back to him, any truth found in either general or special revelation, will not be contrary or contradictory to one another (Corduan 1997:21–22). Lennox (2011) helpfully explains that:

> [*i*]f … we can learn things about God as Creator from the visible universe, it is surely incumbent upon us to use our God-given minds to think about what these things are, and thus to relate God's general revelation in nature to his special revelation in his Word so that we can rejoice in both. After all, it was God who put the universe there, and it would be very strange if we had no interest in it. (p. 36)

3.The words *secular* and *secularism* can have many different connotations. As he clarifies one of these connotations, Taylor (2007) explains that a:

> shift to secularity … consists … of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. (p. 3)

While belief in God was once an 'axiomatic' starting point in a society, secularism made sure that it can no longer be assumed. In a more apologetic context, Sproul et al. (1984:7) uses the term *secularism* as an umbrella term to include 'positivism, humanism, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism, and existentialism'. All these different *isms* share:

> the central axiomatic thesis of secularism, the leitmotif that defines secularism: *All possible knowledge is restricted to the temporal*. The temporal is all there is or all that can be known. The metaphysical quest is dead, consigned to the junkyard of skepticism. There is no transcendent, no eternal – only the phenomenal bounded by the steel door of time and space. (Sproul et al. 1984:7)

Following these insights, the way in which the word will be used here is mainly to refer to a sceptical position towards an outright denial of the existence of God, and the supernatural beyond the natural world. The word *secular* would therefore typically refer to positions such as atheism, agnosticism and scepticism. In this sense, 'secularism' will also have devastating effects on one's view of the person and the works of Jesus Christ and the authority, reliability and relevance of the Scriptures. In its turn, the phrase *progressive ideas* is the author's way of referring to the liberal moral values of modernity, especially as it pertains to issues regarding sexuality, the nature of manhood and womanhood, and the value of life in the

abortion debate. To be sure, this liberal and progressive ethic is, to a large extend, based on a secular understanding of reality.

4.This article will not argue for the validity of apologetics as an important Christian endeavour. Instead, it will assume that the witness of certain New Testament passages (1 Pt 3:15; Jud 3; 2 Cor 10:3–5; Ac 14:8–18; 17:16–34; 26:24–32) are clear enough regarding the biblical mandate for apologetics. It is therefore, in the words of Sproul (2003:13), 'a mandate that every Christian must take seriously'.

5.The 'rich heritage within Reformed theology' includes John Calvin as well a wide range of subsequent Reformed theologians spanning from the early 1500s to the early 1700s. It therefore starts with Calvin as a magisterial Reformer, but also moves past him to include Reformed theologians from the so-called era of Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism. Accordingly, this article rejects the so-called 'Calvin against the Calvinists' theory which seeks to radically dichotomise Calvin with 'even his most immediate successors' as well as subsequent Reformed theologians. This theory has been greatly challenged during the last four decades and certain scholars has offered a more 'balanced, historically couched' approach to the theologians of the Protestant orthodox and scholastic era (Muller 2003c:3). Accordingly, without dismissing the presence of some discontinuities between the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians of the orthodox and scholastic era, nor dismissing the notion that within Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism there was a variety of approaches and controversies, this article will nevertheless view Reformed orthodoxy and scholasticism as 'a doctrinal development resting on a fairly diverse theological heritage' similar to the way the Reformation itself stood within the 'broad tradition of Western theology and in continuity as well as discontinuity with the patristic and medieval heritage' (Muller 2003a:46). Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism planted itself 'in continuity with the great theological insights of the Reformation', while implementing the scholastic method of the 'thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries' (Muller 2003a:28). Reformed orthodoxy was a 'Dutch, Swiss, German, French, English, and Scottish' enterprise and consequently a wide range of theologians contributed to this development as they 'consistently dialogued with each other across national and geographical boundaries' (Muller 2003a:28). These developments therefore serve as a beautiful example of how 'the church both moves forward in history, adapting to new situations and insights, and at the same time retains its original identity as the community of faith' (Muller 2003a:29). Moreover, what the Reformation started 'in less than half a century, orthodox Protestantism defended, clarified and codified over the course of a century and a half'. The major continuity between the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians in the era of Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism must therefore be maintained, especially because the 'Protestant orthodox held fast to [*the*] Reformational insights and to the confessional norms of Protestantism' (Muller 2003a:28). For a much more detailed discussion of this stance towards the development of Reformed theology during the Protestant orthodox and scholastic era see Muller (2003a; 2003b; 2003c), Van Asselt (2011), and Van Asselt and Dekker (eds. 2001).

very concerned about the consequences of a mere *cultural* Christianity as one of the fruits of secularism. He particularly blamed the Christian parents who only taught their children a superficial version of the gospel. They never instructed their children in the principles of the Christian faith, nor furnished them with arguments to rationally defend that faith. He warned that:

> [W]hen Christianity is viewed in [*a hereditary*] way, intelligent and energetic young men and women will undoubtedly reach a point where they question the truth of Christianity and, when challenged, will abandon this 'inherited' faith that they cannot defend. They might begin to associate with peers who are unbelievers. In this company, they will find themselves unable to intelligently respond to objections to Christianity with which they are confronted. Had they really known what they believe and why they believe it, these kinds of encounters would not shake their faith one bit. (Wilberforce & Beltz 2006:20)

With these words, Wilberforce diagnosed a phenomenon in the 18th century that would resurface again and again in different places and different contexts. Simultaneously, he also emphasised the church's need for apologetics in its calling to defend the truth and to stop the trend of young people leaving the Christian faith due to the challenges of secularism. One could say that, in our own struggle against secularism and progressive ideas in the 21st century, we must still heed Wilberforce's warning, even here in South Africa.[6]

The rational defence of the Christian faith, also known as *apologetics*, has always been part of the Christian heritage. Unfortunately, the 20th century was marked by a 'decline in the belief that apologetics serves any healthy purpose' (eds. Edgar & Oliphint 2009:2). One of the reasons for this decline of apologetics at local Reformed churches in South

Africa, if it was present at all, is due to a 'divorce between evangelism, apologetics and discipleship'. In this sense, apologetics must be reunited with evangelism and discipleship on a local church level (Guinness 2015:17, 18, 211).

However, a deeper reason still for the decline of apologetics, is a failure to love God with all our minds (Mt 22:37). This failure on the part of Reformed folk led to the rise of 'anti-intellectualism' and 'fideism' in many Reformed churches (see eds. Edgar & Oliphint 2009:3; Moreland 2012:15). Anti-intellectualism has been defined as 'a disposition to discount the importance of truth and the life of the mind'. It is typically characterised by 'superficial or bad theology, the lack of a serious apology[7] for faith', and 'the lack of a constructive public philosophy' (Guinness 1994:9, 15, 18).

Fideism maintains that instead of using reason and a persuasive argument, which is central to apologetics, people should rather maintain that 'faith and religious belief are not supported by reason'. In this sense, 'one must simply believe' and have faith because reason and faith will ultimately contradict one another (Geisler 1999:246). Fideism defaults to an appeal to one's personal subjective experiences as a test for truth which, accordingly 'undermines the role that reason, and knowledge may play in challenging unbelief and encouraging faith' (Van Heerden 2019:81).

This author's experience in the Reformed Churches of South Africa leads him to believe that the way anti-intellectualism and fideism has manifested itself among Reformed folk in South Africa is through the constant appeal to 'just have faith like a child'. The moment a difficult question arises in conversation, or someone levels an objection against some or other truth of Christianity, this saying is introduced as a supposed satisfying answer. Moreover, there are few church members who have given some serious thought as to how to rationally challenge unbelief, defend the truth claims of Christianity, or how to think constructively about moral issues in the public square.

It is the author's sense that the local Reformed church in South Africa is 'no longer a major participant in the war of ideas' (see Moreland 2012:15). On the face of it, factors like secularism, individualism, a decline in church members' understanding of God, an increase in unbelief, the fracturing effects of postmodernism, and absent parents in Christian homes have indeed been able to cause, and at the same time, further capitalise on the church's anti-intellectualism and fideism (De Klerk & Van Helden 2011:3, 5). This has led to the local church's withdrawal from the public marketplace of ideas and the loss of boldness to engage false and dangerous ideas (Moreland 2012:21–27).

When an anti-intellectualism and fideism are allowed a foot in the door of the local church, both the 'possibility and desirability of apologetics' will soon be under attack. With it,

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6. Consider, for example, a recent study which documents some statistics in South Africa from 2015. While 86% of South Africans would identify themselves as Christian, only 52.5% of this percentage participates in a weekly public Christian event. A further 22.5% of this percentage attend a public Christian event only once a month. A quarter of this percentage only attend Christian activities a couple of times per year (Venter 2019:10–11). Moreover, a study which focussed on the sharp decline of membership in the traditional Reformed denominations of South Africa mentioned, among other things, secularism, individualism, a decline in people's understanding of God, an increase in unbelief, and the fracturing effects of postmodernism as reasons for this decline. To be sure, just like Wilberforce warned, parents have also become largely absent in the Christian homes of South Africa. Due to a materialistic tendency, parents began to neglect their responsibility to instruct their children in the Christian faith, and in the process, allowed them to become victims of ideologies that are being poured out through electronic entertainment and social media (De Klerk & Van Helden 2011:3, 5). Since 2015, this author has been involved in students' apologetics ministry on different campuses of South Africa (Stellenbosch University, North-West University, Rhodes University, University of KwaZulu-Natal). He has also, under the supervision of Reformed Church Brooklyn, started an apologetics student ministry at the University of Pretoria in 2018 and has been hosting weekly discussions on various apologetic, moral and cultural topics since then. The last 3 years, he and his colleague has started to provide weekly logic classes to students and the last year he started a philosophy club for Christian students to work through the history of philosophy. These events are attended by students and other interested parties from the Reformed church, the Dutch-Reformed church, the Anglican church, the Roman Catholic church, charismatic churches as well as other independent Protestant churches. During this time, he has also been involved in arranging national apologetic conferences with local and international speakers which included the arranging of public debates between Christians and non-Christians. He has also spoken on the topic of apologetics and apologetic orientated themes in many different local churches. During all this time and at all these events, it is not uncommon, on the one hand, to regularly meet young people who were raised in a Christian home and had once identified as a Christian. However, at some point they rejected the Christian faith as irrational, superstitious and false. This new stance of theirs would typically also entail the embrace of a progressive ethic regarding sexuality. On the other hand, it is also not uncommon to meet people who identify as Christian; however, they see no conflict between Christianity and progressive ideas such as, for example, homosexuality and transgenderism.

7. The use of 'apology' in this context should not be confused with the modern use of the word which would be 'to say sorry' for something. It is rather used here in the context of apologetics and would thus refer to the act of giving a rational defence for the Christian faith.

the influence of secularism and progressive ideas will be allowed to spread in the minds and hearts of Reformed church members (Sproul, Gerstner & Lindsley 1984:12). Accordingly, local Reformed churches, especially those in some of the bigger cities and those in the vicinity of universities, must realise the importance of apologetics when grappling with the challenges of secularism and progressive ideas. As Moreland (2012) asserts:

> Apologetics is a New Testament ministry of helping people overcome intellectual obstacles that block them from coming to or growing in the faith by giving reasons for why one should believe Christianity is true and by responding to objections raised against it. *Local church* after *local church* should be raising up and training a group of people who serve as apologists for the entire congregation. (p. 20, [*author's emphasis*])

To do this, however, the Reformed minister must first retrieve the true relationship between faith and reason, as it has been historically maintained in the Reformed tradition. This discussion will start with a short exploration of how the relationship between faith and reason is misconstrued today.

Retrieving the true relationship between faith and reason
What the relationship between faith and reason is not

The atheist, Boghossian (2013:24), defines faith as 'instances of pretending to know something you don't know'. According to him, faith is something which creates a barrier between one's mind and reality, and accordingly, causes one to pretend to know something which one in fact does not know. By separating faith from reason and reality, Boghossian is enhancing a fideistic notion of faith which has absolutely nothing to do with reason and public evidence.

Faith, misconstrued in this manner, portrays the Christian position as irrational and absurd. This kind of misconception might remind one of Festus' words to the apostle Paul in Acts 26:24 when he was confronted with the public evidence for Jesus' life, death and resurrection: 'Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind' (English Standard Version [ESV]). He was accusing Paul of being irrational and even insane.

One wonders, however, if this is true, why the apostle Paul, in his response to Festus' claim, said 'I am speaking true and rational words' (Ac 26:25 – ESV)? The two keywords, *true* and *rational*, indicate that the things of which he is speaking here 'are objectively true as they correspond to reality' and are subsequently 'impending on all people regardless of their own personal beliefs, wishes, and motives'. Moreover, Paul is saying that his words and claims 'can be rationally understood and tested for truth' (Van Heerden 2019:68–69). This does not sound like someone who is irrational or insane, especially because he later reminds Festus that the ministry of Jesus, including his resurrection, was a public event which 'has not been done in a corner' (Ac 26:26 – ESV).

Given this kind of misunderstanding of the role of reason in matters of faith, this discussion will now turn to the proper relationship between faith and reason. We will begin by learning a valuable lesson from church history.

A lesson from church history

During the so-called *Counter-Reformation* in 16th-century France, the Roman Catholics were desperate to stop the spread of Calvinism on an intellectual level. Determined to accomplish this end, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) steered the Counter-Reformation in France to the point of using an ancient theory of scepticism called *Greek Pyrrhonism* against the Protestants. Popkin (1960) explains that this source of *Greek Pyrrhonism* attempted to prove that:

> [N]o human science could resist the onslaught of the arguments that can be proposed against it. The sole thing that is certain is God's revelation to us. All the moderns who try to measure matters beyond them by their reason can be overthrown. And this group includes the modern pagans … and the Calvinists, who, presumably, are trying to theorize about God, who can only be believed in, not understood. (p. 60)

The idea was to show that the Reformers' position, in their rejection of the authority of the church and the infallibility of the magisterium, will sooner or later lead them 'to several of the classical Greek skeptical puzzles' and 'insoluble difficulties'. The moment the Calvinists claimed that the 'criterion of faith was Scripture alone', the Catholics would force them to a different criterion against which the Scriptures must in turn be measured. Each criterion would then be shown to be inadequate, and the Calvinists will inevitably be labelled as 'Pyrrhonists' (Popkin 1960:62, 64).

On the one end, the Catholics used it in the context of the canon of Scripture by asking the question how one knows that the books of the Old and New Testaments are from God. The Reformers answered that one knows it by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. This raised the next question: What would be the 'standard of the veracity of inner persuasion' (Popkin 1960:64)? On the other end, the Catholics also used this method in the context of mere Scriptural interpretation. Given that '[t]he text doesn't come with a built-in interpretation' or any 'statements about how various collections of letters are to be read', it meant that any decision which one draws will inevitably not be 'contained in Scripture itself' and is precisely why one needs an infallible teaching apparatus (Popkin 1960:63, 65; Rose 2014:79–80, 99–100).

The Reformers, however, did not allow the Catholics in France to have the final say in the matter. They responded with a *reductio ad absurdum* to show the Roman Catholics how deadly their own sceptical stance was towards their own position. Popkin (1960) strikingly points this out:

> The Catholic who appealed to the church fathers would be beset with the same difficulties … How do you know which books are those of the church fathers, how do you know what they say?

The appeal to papal authority would be met with another application of [*this*] argument. How does one tell who is the pope, what he has said, whether one has understood it correctly? If the believer is possessed of fallible faculties, and cannot trust them in reading Scripture, can he trust them any better in locating the pope, in hearing him, in interpreting him? (p. 68)

The weapon of the Counter-Reformation in France thus turned out to be a 'two-edged sword' (Popkin 1960:86). However, through this attack on Calvinism, the Reformers in France were forced to become not only defenders of the Protestant project, but also of *natural reason* which, ironically, has a long, rich and positive history in the Roman Catholic church.[8] The Calvinists accordingly maintained that the standard for judging inferences is the unavoidable, undeniable and self-evident 'rules of logic' (Popkin 1960:64). Pierre du Moulin (1568–1658), the French Calvinist, subsequently countered the Roman Catholics by saying that 'there is a natural logic, which men make use of naturally without applying any art. Even the peasants make syllogisms without thinking about it' (as cited by Popkin 1960:66).[9] The lesson in this regard is therefore that the Protestants never thought of natural reason as unnecessary or useless. No, they cherished and defended it as a gift from God.

This should not be taken to mean that natural reason is a higher authority than Scripture.[10] The *natural light of reason* is the God-given ministerial instrument one uses not to judge what Scripture is able to say, but to find out what it does say. Natural reason, used soundly, therefore does not decide what is true in Scripture, but discerns the truths in Scripture and consequently submits to it (Goudriaan 2006:52; Turretin 1992:26; Van Mastricht 2018:156). As the Reformed philosopher, Corduan (1981:18, 97), reminds one: 'the Christian theologian contrives a theology; it is not given to him. What is given to him is revelation, but not theology'. In this sense, reason, as a natural faculty of the soul, is the organic instrument necessary to 'contrive' a theology from God's objective revelation in nature *and* Scripture.[11]

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8. To be fair to Roman Catholicism, it is worth mentioning that this gravitation towards *Pyrrhonism* was and still is not the mainstream Catholic approach to the relationship between faith and reason. Catholic author and cardinal, Dulles (1999:Loc. 2820), for example, refers to Michel de Montaigne's method as an 'extreme' position which called for 'blind faith to compensate for the feebleness of human reason'. According to Dulles, *Pyrrhonism* exploited scepticism and was consequently 'playing with a dangerous instrument that could easily be turned against faith itself'. For a more balanced and historically accurate approach to the relationship between faith and reason in Roman Catholic circles, see Kreeft and Tacelli (1994:27–46).

9. Muller (2017:305) explains that natural reason is 'the human rational faculty' as well as 'principles and axioms that are either self-evident or gathered by good and necessary conclusion from self-evident principles'. Natural reason can therefore be recognised for its 'organic, instrumental, or ministerial use', as it is inherent to humanity and must consequently be used 'as a tool or aid to logical or rational discourse' (Muller 2017:386).

10. To claim that one's reason is situated authoritatively over and above the Scriptures just because it is unavoidably necessary to interpret the Scriptures is like saying that one's sensory faculties of hearing or seeing has a higher authority than Scripture, because one needs them to either *hear* the Scriptures being read or to *see* the letters on the pages of Scripture to read it for oneself. One's sensory faculties like one's natural reason, and per implication, logic is just a natural aspect of what it means to be human and are thus used naturally and organically. This, of course, does not mean that, after the fall of man into sin, one's reason cannot be used in a corrupt and wrong way, especially when an unregenerate mind abuses reason to oppose the truths of Christianity.

11. Dolezal (2017:37) remarks that the Reformed theologian must gather all 'the various truths about God that are spread throughout nature and Scripture', after which he must 'intelligibly' arrange 'the doctrines so as to form a single coherent doctrine of God'.

To be sure, many of the themes which surfaced in this lesson from history will be revisited and clarified during the rest of the discussion, especially as we now move on to consider the correct role of reason in matters of faith.

What the relationship between faith and reason is

The Genevan-Italian Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin (1623–1687), rightfully cautions about two extremes as we ponder the role of reason in matters of faith. On the one extreme end, there are those 'who sin in excess attributing too much to reason, and regarding it as the rule of religion and faith'. On the other extreme end there are 'those who err in defect, who (lest they might appear to consider reason as the rule of faith) attribute little or nothing to it' (Turretin 1992:28). The Reformed apologist, Sproul (2003), summarily says that:

Christianity is based on far *more* than naked human reason, but by no means upon *less*. Though divine revelation carries us beyond the limits of rational speculation, it does not sink below the bar of rational intelligibility. (p. 18)

The proper question to ask at this point is the following: *What is faith?* When one follows the Reformers in their answer to this question, the organic role of reason and the intellect in matters of faith strikingly reveals itself. Although the Reformers and later Reformed theologians maintained that 'faith is an activity of man as a whole, and not of any part of man', they nevertheless, in their adherence to Augustine of Hippo (354–430), introduced three different elements thereof (Berkhof 1938:503; Sproul et al. 1984:21):

- The first element is called *notitia* which refers to the intellectual side of faith. It was a way of saying that knowledge of specific content plays an undeniable role in faith. One can think, once again, of the apostle Paul in Acts 26 busy proclaiming the gospel to King Agrippa and Festus. He is introducing them to the content of the Christian faith in a coherent and intelligible way. As one scholar notes:

  Before we can actually call people to saving faith, we have to give them the information or the content that they're asked to believe, and that involves the mind. It involves communication of information that people can understand. (Sproul 2003:23)

This element of faith would typically be what Jude had in mind when he mentioned 'the faith' and deliberately placed the definite article in front of the word faith (Jd 3 – ESV). Stated in this manner, it is a reference to the body of truths which together constitute the content of Christianity. Here we can see the so-called 'primacy of the intellect, for one cannot worship a God with his heart if he has no prior mental awareness of Him'. The primacy of the intellect does not mean that the intellect has any primacy over faith as such, but only that it has primacy of order (Sproul et al. 1984:21). It is worth noting that the knowledge of these truths by a believer should never be thought of as being any less certain and firm than knowledge of other things in the world (Berkhof 1938:504).

- The second aspect of faith is called *assensus*. This is referring to the intellectual assent to the truth claims of Christianity as being firm and certain (Muller 2017: 42–43). The Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius (1636–1708) explains that:

  > Faith itself, considered as knowledge and assent, is an operation of reason, or understanding; and this is so clear that he who doubts of it ought not to be considered as a rational being. (Witsius 1795:10)

  While the *notitia* element is a more 'passive and receptive' side of faith, *assensus* is 'more active and transitive'. The point to recognise here is that 'it is axiomatic that the heart cannot truly embrace what the mind repudiates' (Sproul et al. 1984:21). This element of faith happens when someone intellectually assents 'under a deep conviction of the truth and reality of the object of faith' (Berkhof 1938:505). This aspect of faith clearly still lies in the operations of the intellect and therefore involves one's reason in the act of assent. These first two elements of faith can consequently be described in the sense of saying one has 'faith *that*' to indicate that it is a facet of human knowledge (Corduan 1981:72–73)[12].

- The third element of faith is called *fiducia* and is the 'crowning element of faith' which can only be brought about by the internal work of the Holy Spirit. This element would typically be expressed with the phrase to have 'faith *in*', for example Jesus Christ (Corduan 1981:72). Faith in this sense presupposes knowledge, but is not only a matter of the intellect, but also a matter of the will which determines the 'direction of the soul' (Berkhof 1938:505). *Feducia* is therefore a matter of deep and true trust entailing a 'genuine affection for Christ that flows out of a new heart and a new mind' (Sproul 2003:22). This means that knowledge of the correct content (*notitia*), and even an assent to its truth (*assensus*) is not enough to save someone's soul. James, for example, asserts that even the demons have knowledge of certain truths about God such as his oneness, and yet, we know that they, as rebellious demons, are not saved (Ja 2:19). Therefore, for salvation through the means of justifying faith, *fiducia*, as a deep and trusting relationship with Christ, is needed. This element can properly be referred to as saving faith and is, according to the gospel, 'the most crucial' (Corduan 1997:17). This element of faith, however, is not even just a matter of the will, but also of the heart, for 'the seat of faith cannot be placed in the intellect, nor in the feelings, nor in the will exclusively, but only in the heart' (Berkhof

1938:505). Accordingly, this is where we see the 'primacy of the heart', as the heart has primacy of *importance* (Sproul et al. 1984:21).

It should be noted at this point that reason, according to the Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians, did not remain unaffected by the fall of man into sin.[13] The magisterial Reformer, John Calvin (1509–1564), notes how reason has been 'partly weakened and partly corrupted' by the fall (Calvin 2011:270). Witsius (1795:7) asserts that reason in its current state 'is perfect in no one; but is much blinded, corrupted and prone to error'. Turretin (1992:24) maintains that reason after the fall is 'corrupt and blind'. Also, the English Reformed theologian, John Flavel (1627–1691), describes reason before the fall as 'the bright lamp or candle of the Lord', until it was melted down by the noetic effects of sin after the fall (Flavel 1820:473). Because of the fall, reason has indeed been corrupted and can undoubtedly be abused in various ways and for various ends.[14] Although the self-evident principles of reason such as the laws of logic, remain certain; the fallen mind can and indeed does use those principles to oppose 'the axioms of faith', both doctrinally and morally (Turretin 1992:31).

Despite the fall it is, however, still the case that, by 'the mercy and the forbearance of God, certain sparks of light in the mind' remains. These 'sparks of light' helps reason to form for itself 'certain principles, or axioms, of truth so evident, that they compel any one attending thereto, by their own light, to assent to the same' (see Pictet 1876:59; Witsius 1795:10). Even though someone might try to 'extinguish', 'obscure', and 'daub' it to make it 'illegible', 'the light of nature shines too vigorously for the power of man totally to put it out'. Like a 'candlestick', one's conscience 'must hold it' in place (Charnock 1864:129). These 'sparks' that 'still gleam' in the rational faculty of man, indicates that humanity, after the fall, is still 'endowed with understanding' (Calvin 2011:270). The natural light of reason as a natural gift from God is therefore still present and operative to some degree in both believers and unbelievers. The fact that *all* people 'are endued with reason and intelligence' and able to distinguish 'between right and wrong', is precisely what puts them 'above other animals' (Calvin 2010:38).

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12. The first two elements of faith are also reflected in the following words from Augustine of Hippo (1887a):

    For no one believes [*faith*] anything unless he has first thought [*reason*] that it is to be believed. For however suddenly, however rapidly, some thoughts fly before the will to believe, and this presently follows in such wise as to attend them, as it were, in closest conjunction, it is yet necessary that everything which is believed should be believed after thought has preceded; although even belief itself is nothing else than to think with assent (p. 499).

    This, however, is only initially the case, because Augustine also holds that faith precedes *full* and *proper* understanding. He therefore maintained a view which suggests that, although reason confirms, and in some sense, precedes faith, faith nevertheless fulfils, rewards, informs and transcends reason. He, for example, states that 'in order that we may understand [*reason*] it, let us first believe [*faith*]. For, "unless ye believe", says the Prophet, "ye shall not understand"' (Augustine of Hippo 1888:390). This insight from Augustine became known by the phrase '[b]elieve in order that you may understand' (Muller 2017:84) or 'faith seeking understanding' (Fesko 2019:21).

13. According to Duby (2019:100) humanity's fall into sin resulted in a 'holistic corruption of the human subject and therefore a corruption of the human subject's natural knowledge of God'. Moreover, the fall 'also involves a rejection of the supernatural knowledge of God initially made available to Adam and Eve'. In this sense, the natural gifts from God such as the light of reason are corrupted while the supernatural gifts from God are lost and must now be specially revealed by God. Calvin (2011:270) documents this notion as follows: '[T]he natural gifts were corrupted in man through sin, but ... his supernatural gifts were stripped from him.' The 'supernatural gifts' include 'the light of faith' and 'righteousness'. After the fall, these gifts can only be recovered through the 'grace of regeneration'. The 'natural gifts' include, among other things, the natural light of reason, which has not been stripped by the fall, but 'partly weakened and partly corrupted'.

14. This is why there is a distinction between reason used properly, and reason used in a distorted way. Muller (2017) explains that *right* or *sound reason* is:

    true and proper understanding, referring to the human faculty of reason or to its proper use; thus also *right* or *proper rationale*, *right* or *proper method*. *Recta ratio* is to be distinguished from the corrupt or distorted faculty and from rash or ungrounded assertion. (p. 307)

    Reason will be used in a corrupt way, for example when it 'presumes to teach theology its contents' instead of allowing theology to rest 'solely on revelation'. It will also be used wrongly when it is used to undermine the doctrinal and moral truths of Christianity (Muller 2017:386).

Calvin, for example, insists that 'secular writers' who express some or other 'admirable light of truth' in their works, ought to 'teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed with God's excellent gifts'. He adds that the work and the ministry of the 'ungodly' in 'physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines' must be used for our assistance and the 'common good of mankind' (Calvin 2011:273, 275). Flavel (1820) notes that humanity's use of reason, even those who are 'without saving grace', have produced 'civility, sobriety, and other moral virtues', and unbelievers, by 'the only light of reason', have:

> [D]iscovered so much odiousness in vice and immorality, and such an amiable beauty in justice, temperance, and the other moral virtues, that their praises for them are sounded throughout the world. (p. 475)

The pagan Greek philosophers, to pick one example, accordingly 'did arrive at truths, some concerning God and quite a view concerning the nature of humanity and of the world order' (Muller 2018:269). This, of course, means that natural reason and the *right* use thereof will always have its proper place in matters of faith and public discourse surrounding theology and philosophy (Calvin 2011:273; Flavel 1820:472).

Therefore, instead of neglecting the role of reason, the Reformed minister must retrieve it to its proper place of being an undeniable, unquestionable and inescapable organic *instrument* which serves faith. While unregenerate reason will be utilised to oppose Christian truth, the Reformed scholar, Duby (2019:102–103), clarifies that once reason is '[r]enewed and healed by supernatural grace' it can be used *ministerially* 'in the practice of dogmatic theology' to draw 'conclusions from principles', to clarify 'the teaching of Scripture', and to level 'arguments against opponents of orthodoxy'. Just like 'grace perfects nature', faith supposes reason in the perfection and utilisation thereof (also see Turretin 1992:30).

The Dutch Reformed theologian, Peter van Mastricht (1630–1706), explains that reason will always help the Reformed theologian as 'an instrument' and 'as an argument'. As an instrument, reason is 'necessary in every inquiry of truth', which includes those truths pertaining to Scripture. As an argument, reason is useful 'so that the truth derived from Scripture, as from its own first and unique principle', can be confirmed with natural reasons. He reminds one, however, that reason can never function as the *norm*, *principle* or *source* in an authoritative sense over truths concerning faith, for that would replace reason with Scripture as God's infallible Word (Pictet 1876:59; Van Mastricht 2018:156).[15]

Van Mastricht's predecessor, Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), similarly emphasises that:

> [N]o human reason is the principle by which or through which, or because of which or why we believe, or the foundation or law or norm of what should be believed (Voetius, 2011:230; see Goudriaan 2006:37).

Nevertheless, Voetius (2011:228) also acknowledges the important instrumental and organic role of reason as the 'receiving subject of faith'. The nature of reason is such that it alone 'has the capacity for faith' and must therefore be fulfilled by it. Moreover, reason is what is needed to attack 'false theology' because such an attack will clear away 'impediments and prejudices' to pave 'the way to truth' (Voetius, 2011:229). The Genevan Reformed theologian, Benedict Pictet (1655–1724), aligns himself both with Voetius and Van Mastricht by describing reason as the believer's instrument by which the objects of faith can be examined. Reason is useful for 'vindicating the truth', for using it 'against those who deny revelation altogether', and for using it against those who might admit of revelation, but 'endeavour to corrupt it with false interpretations' (Pictet 1876:59).

When it comes to the mysteries of the Christian faith, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of predestination, reason still has its role, for 'if the mysteries of religion be known, it can be no other way than by reason' (Witsius 1795:10). This does not mean that natural reason *produces* or *dictates* these mysteries, or even discovers it *outside of* or *apart from* special revelation. This also does not mean that these and other mysteries of Christianity are accepted on the *grounds* of reason. Instead, they are accepted 'on the *basis of faith*' (Corduan 1981:73, [*author's emphasis*]). Natural reason, as it is 'informed by a higher light' (Voetius, 2011:228), only comes to know them *as* mysteries *from* the source of special revelation in Scripture. In this context, *right reason* does not:

> [I]ntroduce into the text of Scripture a meaning that is not present there, but rather serves faith by drawing out legitimate conclusions from the text, by making explicit those truths which are presented implicitly. (Muller 2003a:401)

Therefore, by implication, the mysteries of the Christian faith will always contradict *abused* reason; however, they are 'only above and beyond *right* reason' (Turretin 1992:27, [*author's emphasis*]). In this sense, there is a difference between something that contradicts or is contrary to natural human reason, and something that transcends it (Voetius, 2011:228–229). Consequently, we are warned not to accept anything, 'even in religious matters, which is contrary to right reason' (Pictet 1876:59). The English Reformed theologian, John Owen (1616–1683), explains that anything regarding 'the nature, being, or will of God' which pretends to be 'the exercise of reason', but is 'contradictory' with 'the inbred principles of natural light' cannot be considered to be 'divine revelation', but only a '*paralogism*' (Owen 1858:85).[16] If God is

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15.Turretin (1992:25) accordingly explains that one must distinguish between an 'instrument of faith' and the 'foundation of faith'. Reason should therefore not function as a *foundation* of faith, but as an organic *instrument* which serves faith. Reason is nevertheless poor without faith and must therefore be fulfilled by faith.

16.This notion can be grounded in the apostle Paul's words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:20: 'Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge"'. Paul warns Timothy to avoid 'contradictions'. The literal Greek word used here by Paul is where the English word *antithesis* arose from. This word indicates a situation where a statement involves a 'direct contradiction or is logically inconsistent'. This assumes the importance of logic as a *test* for truth and per implication the *organic* use of one's natural reason (Louw & Nida 1996:439). According to Paul one must 'avoid' contradictions, even in theological and doctrinal matters, as it can only lead to absurdities.

God, one should expect him to be clouded in mystery, because the divine essence cannot be known exhaustively and is incomprehensible to the finite human mind. However, as mysteries only transcend natural human reason in its correct use, it would be an abuse of reason to reject or classify mysteries of the faith as irrational or illogical. This is especially because those mysteries can still be shown to be consistent with the first principles of reason, and by implication, rationally defended (Witsius 1795:17; Voetius, 2011:229).[17] When discussing the doctrine of the Trinity, Brown (1988), a historian of theology, for instance explains that even when labouring to theologically define the Trinity:

> God does not require a *sacrificium intellectus*, a 'sacrifice of the intellect' as part of faith. Because the sacrifice of the intellect is a violent affront to the integrity of one's soul, it is always dangerous and certainly is a poor way to begin to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind. (p. 152)

Mysteries, including other revelational truths only available in and through special revelation, are therefore properly referred to as the 'higher truth', but nevertheless because of the ultimate unity of truth, it still 'respects the truths of the rational order' (Muller 2003a:403). This implies, in the words of the Reformed scholar, Sutanto (2021:271), that all truth is God's truth, because he is the 'gracious source of all that is natural and supernatural'. Accordingly, the Reformed minister ought never to sacrifice his intellect in matters of faith and theology. A sacrifice of the intellect in the service of apparent piety can never be a 'criterion of theological truth'. For the Reformed theologian, the question should never be to be 'pious but to be right'. In fact, when it comes to the mysteries of the faith, 'there is nothing pious in being wrong about God!' (Gilson 1964:41–42).

This explanation of the *organic* and *ministerial* role of reason in matters of faith, even in divine mysteries, has led to the formulation of *pure* and *mixed* articles to establish the principle that, although faith and reason are different in nature, they nevertheless are not opposed to each other (Pictet 1876:59; Turretin 1992:30; Vos 2012:157). In this context, the English Reformer, John Davenant (1572–1641) points out that 'natural knowledge of spiritual things is obscure and feeble' and can therefore only extend 'to the *existence*' of certain spiritual truths such as, to pick one example, 'that there is a God' (Davenant 1831:393). In other words, natural reason can tell one *that* there is a God; however, it cannot rise to the discovery of the great mysteries of the faith which entails the *what* about God. Nevertheless, just like 'light does not oppose light', the 'revealed truth' of Scripture will not oppose 'natural truth' from nature (Muller 2003a:404); hence, the necessary distinction between *pure* and *mixed* articles.

A *pure article*, accordingly, would be a truth which can only be arrived at through the discipline of revealed or supernatural theology, as it is based on special revelation in Scripture. A *mixed article* is a truth which can be arrived at either by virtue of Scripture or through the distinct, but in no way separate discipline of natural theology, as it is properly based on God's general revelation in nature.[18] Pure articles would typically refer to articles which are exclusively revealed in Scripture and alone sufficient to make one wise unto salvation. Mixed articles, however, are those things such as the existence of God, or the historicity of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, which can be concluded from faith as far as it is 'proved from Scripture' as well as from knowledge of reality as far as it is 'demonstrated by reason' (Muller 2017:41; Turretin 1992:26). Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), the English Reformed theologian, for example illustrates that:

> [T]here is a natural as well as a revealed knowledge, and the book of the creatures is legible in declaring the being of a God, as well as the Scriptures are in declaring the nature of a God … For God, in regard of his existence, is not only the discovery of faith, but of reason. God hath revealed not only his being, but some sparks of his eternal power and Godhead in his works as well as in his word … In his works, by the things that are made; it is a discovery to our reason as shining in the creatures, and an object of our faith as breaking out upon us in the Scriptures; it is an article of our faith, and an article of our reason. Faith supposeth natural knowledge, as grace supposeth nature. Faith indeed is properly of things above reason, purely depending upon revelation. What can be demonstrated by natural light is not so properly the object of faith, though in regard of the addition of a certainty by revelation it is so. (Charnock 1864:130)

Building further on the notion of natural reason having a *ministerial* role in matters of faith, it is also important to point out that one of the weapons against secularism is the right use of natural reason, given that reason, and per implication, logic is common to all people.[19] According to Turretin (1992:28), secularists can be dealt with either by 'arguments founded on Scripture', or by virtue of 'the principles of reason' with the goal of removing their prejudices against Christianity which is the result of abused reason. Somewhat like Turretin, Charnock (1864) holds that people who:

> [W]ill not listen to Scripture, as having no counterpart of it in their souls, cannot easily deny natural reason, which riseth up on all sides for the justification of this truth. (p. 130)

Despite the noetic effects of sin, on this account, sound reason must still be implemented to point people to the truth of things, especially pertaining to the existence and attributes of God, and moral truths for the common good of society (see Calvin 2011:273; Flavel 1820:472).

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17. On the grounds of passages like Titus 1:2 and 2 Timothy 2:13, it is maintained, on the one hand, that no mystery of God can ever be irrational and hence illogical. On the other hand, it can also not be dictated by human reason. It is rather 'suprarational' which means that it is a truth that lies 'above and beyond … human discovery and comprehension', but does not contradict human reason at the same time (Campbell 2020:297–298).

18. See Muller (2017:315, 358) for a proper clarification of *general revelation* and *natural theology*, and *special revelation* and *supernatural* or *revealed theology*. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that natural theology must remain 'inseparable [*though distinct*] from the whole system of supernatural theology'. In this sense, natural theology is 'enfolded within revealed theology' (Sutanto 2021:266).

19. Geisler (2002) is helpful in explaining logic as the 'rational precondition'. Logic, as the method of:

> valid thinking … is a prerequisite of *all* thinking, including all theological thought. Logic is such an inescapable tool that even those who deny it cannot avoid using it, for it is built into the very fabric of the rational universe. (p. 81)

In this context, logic has a rightful place in the area of prolegomena.

The explanation why the natural light of reason is so undeniable to all people and can be used with such force in healthy dialogue, is because it forms part of what is known as *common notions*.[20] Common notions are all those things which 'belong by nature to all people' and is 'assumed to be universally true in the traditional philosophy, whether Aristotelian or Platonic, of the Middle Ages and early modern era'. Common notions coupled 'with the assumed reliability of sense perception, provided a solid foundation for learning and argumentation' (see Bavinck 2003:225; Muller 2017:235; see Muller 2019:22–23). These common notions typically include, in the words of the Canons of Dordt (Chapter 3/4, Article 4), 'some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral'. Common notions cannot make anyone wise unto salvation and is still subject to the noetic effects of sin.

The category of *common notions* is very helpful, as it explains why the apostle Paul in Acts 17:16–34 could appeal to his 'pagan audience' and remove 'the erroneous elements that were obscuring their view of the truth' (Fesko 2019:125). When Calvin (2010:157–158) comments on this passage of Scripture, he, for instance states that, because Paul had 'to deal with profane men, he draweth proofs from nature itself; for in vain should he have cited testimonies of Scripture'. The Reformed tradition therefore maintains that '[a]ll human beings possess God-given common notions'. Even though the 'noetic effects of sin twist humanity's faculties so that they refuse to submit to the authority of divine revelation', it does not mean that 'believers and unbelievers are epistemologically severed from one another' (Fesko 2019:205).[21]

Christians and non-Christians therefore 'possess a shared knowledge of the world and even God's existence'. By 'God-given common notions', the believer and unbeliever are linked to a rudimentary knowledge of God and bound 'to the same moral standards' (Fesko 2019:18, 99). Accordingly, the Reformed theologian, Payne (2018), summarily notes:

> Common experience shared by all human beings … yields a commonly realized world. This world is full of things that we all know (and know in agreement) to have meaning … The world comes to us, and we know it … Insofar as both the Christian and the non-Christian have experience, they may reason about what is known. (p. 21)

The goal of discussing the three elements of faith and the subsequent themes is for the Reformed minister to realise the undeniable role of, in Luther's words, 'plain reason' in matters of faith. The Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), remarks that although the use of reason in providing proofs and evidence for the veracity of the Christian faith and its moral implications is insufficient to 'move someone to believe in Christianity', belief in that truth 'would certainly have no right to exist' if Christianity's 'revelation could be proved to be unhistorical'. The reason, according to Bavinck, why this is the case, is because 'faith is not only trust', but 'also knowledge and assent and cannot' therefore 'live by cunningly devised fables' (as cited by Fesko 2019:209). Reason can and therefore ought to play a *ministerial* role, as it is able to serve faith in various ways. While reason, as something *common* to all humans, can confirm, clarify and defend many aspects of faith, one must nevertheless remember that the ultimate *telos* of reason is faith which, in its turn, will perfect, fulfil, reward and inform reason.

As this discussion continues, it is now necessary to contemplate and discuss the so-called *three acts of the intellect*. This is relevant, because the use of one's reason will always be tied to existing things in reality, and how one's intellect apprehends them. It is also relevant, as secularism has, as we shall see, warped this order of knowing. In this sense, the following discussion serves both as a further clarification of the proper use of one's reason as well as a critique of secularism, as it is nuanced in the phenomenon of *expressive individualism*.

The three acts of the intellect and its implications for secularism

Bavinck, (2003) defines the natural light of reason as:

> [T]he permanent property or power of the human mind enabling human beings, at the very moment of perceiving things, to form the basic concepts and principles that would guide them further in all perception and reflection. (p. 232)

Hence, it becomes evident that the use of one's natural reason is inevitably tied to existing things in reality. As 'the capacity of the rational soul' one's natural reason is the faculty by which intelligible things in the world are comprehended and judgements are made (Voetius 2011:226).

For all the uses of reason, one's philosophy can never take its starting point from reason itself, for the mere fact that the

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20. In *The City of God*, Augustine of Hippo (1887b:149) mentions the 'Stoics' whose minds have conceived of 'the notions'. These common notions among the pagans referred to 'logic, rational philosophy, and bodily senses, which are … things that all testify to the existence of God who has given them to humans' (Fesko in the *Introduction* of Vos 2022:xix).

21. Fesko (2019) relevantly describes how this kind of situation will manifest itself in practice:

> The unbeliever has access to the facts, since they are part of God's natural revelation; they are universally available to all … The unbeliever also receives the facts of supernatural revelation (Scripture) when believers press scriptural claims in the presentation and defense of the gospel. Unbelievers can also have a certain degree of comprehension of the facts. They understand, for example, that Christians present Christ as the only way of salvation. But apart from the sovereign work of regeneration by the Spirit, the unbeliever will never trust in the message and will ultimately reject the presented arguments and evidence that corroborate the Christian's gospel defense. In Pauline terms, in unrighteousness they will suppress … the truth that they have comprehended (Rom. 1:18). (pp. 212–213)

Moreover, Corduan (2020:140) also rightly makes the point that the role of apologetics for the apologists is not that they are busy to 'uncover new truths' when they attempt to argue from nature for certain truths of Christianity, but rather that they are showing how 'these truths could be rationally inferred from some given information' which is shared by all people. Furthermore it would be unthinkable that 'apologists would advance arguments without believing in the gospel as revealed in Scripture'. According to Corduan (2020), apologetics 'stands in the service of evangelism', as Christians:

> don't evangelize without believing what we preach, and, to pick one example, we do not let arguments for the existence of God replace the gospel. The truth we presuppose in our hearts and minds is not intentionally hidden, but neither is it a premise which is intended to pull itself up by its own bootstraps. (p. 140)

At the end of the day the apologist must meet the unbeliever where he or she is at. Corduan (2020) summarises this notion by affirming that he believes that:

> it is possible and profitable to demonstrate the truth of Christianity by lining up various issues, from the very fundamental philosophical ones to the very specific historical ones, and on from there to the personal need for redemption in Christ. However, which issue one addresses depends on which questions are relevant at the moment. (p. 141)

process of reasoning is about intelligible *things*. Any philosophy which therefore 'takes its start from reason' and neglects 'the real world' will 'do violence to the reality of life and resolve nature and history into a network of abstractions' (Bavinck 2018:23). Philosophy, for Christians, must accordingly take its starting point from reality, especially because it is self-evident, and also because the Christian will hopefully profess that the doctrinal and moral claims of Christianity is 'grounded in reality' itself (Howe & Howe 2004:24).[22]

Reality, by virtue of being revelation,[23] is known by the human mind according to the *three acts of the intellect*. These three acts of the intellect 'indicates all those subjective and personal acts of our intellect by which we discover, understand or seek to demonstrate truth' (Howe & Howe 2004:25). The first act is called 'simple apprehension' which is 'whereby the mind lays hold of a thing'. The mind is not yet engaged in affirming or denying some or other aspect of reality (Howe & Howe 2004: 25–26). By apprehending reality, it 'furnishes the intellect with its many various and sundry concepts' (Payne 2018:9). One could say that simple apprehension is 'laying hold of or grasping what something is' (Howe & Howe 2004:26). In this sense, the act of apprehension entails the forming of concepts which can be expressed in terms.

The second act of the intellect is known as 'judgment' whereby 'we affirm or deny that the thing apprehended is or was or will be'. This differs from the first act of the intellect in that 'the act of judgment involves knowing the thing we have apprehended in terms of affirming or denying its existence' (Howe & Howe 2004:26). In the second act, concepts are formed into 'propositions and the truth or falsity of the claims of the propositions' are judged (Payne 2018:9).

The third act is 'reasoning' which is 'whereby the mind proceeds from known truth to new truth'. This does not only involve a 'logical movement from premises to conclusion', but also 'a movement from question to answer' and 'a movement from rhetoric to persuasion' (Howe & Howe 2004:26). The point to recognise is that 'knowledge is firstly derived from experience' which seems to be intuitively true, as 'one must first have something to reason about if one is to reason at all' (Payne 2018:9).

Following the three acts of the intellect, it becomes clear that reality is *received* by the intellect and not *constructed* or *dictated* by it.[24] The Reformed theologian, Nerness (2020:21), for

example explains that the act of apprehension is participation in the 'essences revealed in reality'. The act of judgement deals with 'existence claims about reality', and the act of reasoning focusses on arguments pertaining to 'causes found in reality'. One might wonder why there is such an emphasis on reality. There is, of course a reason why reality is so important to Christians. As Bavinck (2019) reminds one:

> The Christian religion thus shows its wisdom primarily in this, that it knows and preserves truth as an objective reality, which exists independent of our consciousness and is displayed by God for us in his works of nature and grace. Accordingly, each person proceeds spontaneously on the basis of the conviction that the objective world exists outside him and that it exists as he has come to know it in clear perception.[25] (p. 33)

Christianity is not interested in leaving the 'terra firma of reality' behind to build 'castles in the sky' (Bavinck 2019:39). No, Christianity calls one to participate in and cherish reality with all the meaning and purpose that is built into it. In many ways, reality 'is a gateway to a deeper mystery' (Nerness 2020:85). It is 'a mirror… of invisible things' (Calvin 2010:70). It is 'a school for attaining the knowledge of God' for through 'visible and perceptible objects it provides guidance to the mind for the contemplation of the invisible' (Basil the Great as cited by ed. Bray 1998:37). Reality is therefore God's revelation of himself and is accordingly known to be a revelatory gift mediating knowledge of God's invisible attributes.[26]

Whether he is right or wrong about this is up for dispute. However, Bavinck attempts to go deeper into man's self-consciousness by claiming that, beneath both 'thinking and willing', lies a deep and irreducible 'feeling of absolute dependence' on God which is 'concurrent with God's created order' in reality. For Bavinck, this 'feeling of absolute dependence' is equivalent to Calvin's category of the *sensus divinitatis*. Moreover, this 'affective' category is 'both internal and external to the human soul, as humans feel themselves dependent on the world'. This language of '*feeling* and *affection*' is what 'underlies cognitive forms of knowing' even that of *common notions* and 'brings out humanity's utter dependence upon God really and existentially' (see Bavinck 2018:57; Sutanto 2021:269, 270).[27]

22.This would also include the truths revealed through Scripture. In fact, Scripture is true, because it corresponds to reality. Moreover, Scripture as a written text existing *in reality*, will accordingly also be known and read according to the three acts of the intellect (see Howe 2015).

23.The first part of article 2 of the Belgic Confession of faith is relevant here:

> We know God … by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God's eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict humans and to leave them without excuse.

24.Note that this order of knowing, presupposes the intelligibility of reality as well as the discovery of meaning and purpose which comes with it. Nerness (2020:5) explains that 'God created persons to be moving towards the world in a disposition of humble reception.'

25.The brothers, Howe and Howe (2004), additionally makes a valuable observation how the question of truth and reality can play an important role in evangelism:

> If unbelievers do not understand what we are saying when we say Christianity is true, this confusion can hamper our ability to effectively communicate the claims of Christ. What they need to understand is that when we as Christians maintain that Christianity is true, we are not merely claiming that it fulfils a certain function in our lives. Our contention is that religion is more than something to give us peace of mind, a purpose for life, and happiness. It should certainly do this, but there is something more. We believe that true religion must be grounded in reality, that it must make true claims about reality – who we are as human beings, who God is, and how we relate to God. The religion that cannot truthfully answer these questions is false, not because it fails to give one peace of mind, but because it makes false claims about the way things are. (p. 24)

26.The knowledge of God, which is mediated through general revelation, will always be insufficient for attaining salvation. Salvific knowledge is only attainable through special revelation as it attests to the person and works of Jesus Christ. The Reformers and subsequent Reformed theologians referred to the knowledge of God, which is mediated through general revelation, as *cognitio insita* (see Muller 2003a:285; 2017:67; Sudduth 2016:4).

27.The reason why Bavinck's concept (2018:57) of the 'feeling of dependence' is up for dispute, is because the category of 'affection' already 'underscores the need to affirm its cognitive character as well'. Feeling or affection accordingly 'presupposes some intellectual apprehension of an object' and consequently the claim that 'feeling' lies beneath 'thinking and willing' might not be the best way of approaching this discussion. Although Calvin's category of the *sensus divinitatis* precedes ratiocination, it is still located in the mind and therefore does not precede

Be that is it may, the apostle Paul, in Romans 1:19–20 (ESV), seems to assume that every human being inevitably has direct and undistorted access to, at least, certain aspects of reality. He claims that the 'invisible attributes' of God are 'clearly perceived' by all people 'in the things that have been made'. According to Paul, it is precisely this knowledge of God's invisible attributes mediated through reality, which leaves everyone 'without excuse'. Sproul (1994:31–32), for example, explains that Paul is here 'stating as clearly as he could possibly have stated … that the invisible qualities of God are clearly seen in the created order'. Just like, by analogy, one can look at a beautiful painting and know that there had to be a painter, one can also 'look at this universe and know that there is a Creator'. In other words, '[s]omething of the nature of that Creator can be discerned from the visible things of his creation'. Thus, as we, through our senses, participate *in* reality, we come to know God's invisible attributes. Therefore, reality is also the medium by which the non-Christian 'knows God and suppresses this truth in unrighteousness'. Consequently, one could say then that 'even in unbelief, the senses play a role' (Nerness 2020:5).

Given that truth, as it corresponds to reality, is the *telos* of one's mind, the act of loving God with our minds will result in a wilful pursuit of truth with all the theological, metaphysical and moral purpose and meaning that comes with it. Under the influence of secularism and progressive ideas, especially as it has been influenced by *existentialism*, *truth* has lost its objective authority as existing 'independent of our consciousness'. The philosophy of *existentialism* emphasises:

> [L]iving over knowing, willing over thinking, the concrete over the abstract, and the dynamic over the static, love over law, the personal over the propositional, the individual over society, the subjective over the objective, the non-rational over the rational, and freedom over necessity. At the heart of existentialism is the belief that existence has precedence over essence. (Geisler 1999:234)

The Roman Catholic philosopher, Taylor (2007), makes this impact practical by using the phenomenon of 'expressive individualism' and unpacks it as the:

> [U]nderstanding … that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside. (p. 475)

That is, even if that model is dictated by *reality*. People are now encouraged to 'find their own way' and 'discover their own fulfilment' despite what the real external world reveals (Taylor 2007:300). Amid this, an 'ethic of authenticity' is present which allows each person to 'do their own thing' and no one has the right to 'criticise each other's "values"'. This authentic ethic is, to be sure, 'predicated on a firm ethical base'. Everyone has the right to be free from criticism, even if

that criticism is based on objective reality, and '[t]he sin which is not tolerated is intolerance' (Taylor 2007:484).

Notice how truth is no longer a matter of *correspondence* to reality, but rather an existential search which is *imposed upon* reality. The Reformed scholar, Trueman (2020:39), echoing Taylor, explains that society and culture is now in a state of *poiesis* where the world is seen as 'raw material out of which meaning and purpose can be created by the individual'. Reality is no longer regarded according to *mimesis* which knows the world 'as having a given order and a given meaning' wherein 'human beings are required to discover that meaning and conform themselves to it'. In this sense, *expressive individualism* functions under the illusion that 'reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desire, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to' (Trueman 2020:41).

Once reality is no longer *received* through the three acts of the intellect, it will end in the abuse of natural reason. The gift of reality and its revelatory notes will consequently be rejected and suppressed. This will inevitably result in so-called *mal-conceptions*,[28] *mal-judgements*, and *malicious* or *pseudo-arguments*. A mal-conception is a distortion of the nature or essence of things in reality; mal-judgements confuse and fabricate reality by putting together subjects and predicates that do not correspond to reality, and finally mal-arguments put together false statements either in a valid or invalid manner (Nerness 2022). To be sure, the result of this rejection and suppression will have consequences on theological, philosophical and moral levels.

Taylor (2007:773) rightfully attributes this 'new turn inward' to find one's authentic self which then also serves as 'a base for a triumphant grasp of the world, intellectually and practically' to the rise of *nominalism*. Nominalism holds that 'objectively created essences do not exist' and are instead 'subjectively constructed by autonomously naming reality' (Nerness 2020:23). In other words, essences or 'universals have no extramental existence' but is 'merely a term, or name … used in the identification and classification of individuals by the mind' (Muller 2017:381). This act of subjectively naming reality, however, 'is done groundlessly' and the result is that 'these concepts and words do not represent reality' (Bavinck 2003:231). This view, to some extent, paved the way for societies, cultures and Reformed church members to embrace secularism and its progressive ideas. Under nominalism, reality loses its objective and inherent purpose concerning knowledge of God, objective and purpose driven morality and true theology.[29]

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cognition. The Latin reference of *sensus* is not referring to the category of volition, but rather cognition, and one must accordingly not confuse pre-cognitive with pre-scientific. The Latin term *sensus* can consequently be described as *notitia* indicating 'basic awareness or apprehension of something that requires no ratiocination'. At the very least, however, Bavinck's input does indeed underscore the fact that something important is happening within the human person when realising one's dependence on God (Duby 2021:310; also see Muller 2019:23, 27, 30)

28.Notice that instead of labelling this a *mal-apprehension*, it is rather called a *mal-conception*. The reason for this change in terms is because the first act of the intellect cannot fail in any normal functioning human. Reality is truly *apprehended* by everyone; hence, everyone is accountable to God for this apprehension of reality (cf. Rm 1:20). Therefore, it is rather called a *mal-conception*, because reality is apprehended after which the mind forms a true concept. However, because of the noetic effects of sin, one does not want nor like the true concept gained from reality, and accordingly, by the second act of the intellect, redefines reality contrary to the true concept originally apprehended. This redefinition is then a *mal-conception*. However, the *mal-conception* is prompted by the initial truth which one apprehended (Nerness 2022).

29.This author understands a critique of *nominalism* deserves more input. However, given the limited space and specific purpose of this article, he will leave it to the reader to consult other sources for more details in this regard.

Geisler (1999:543) warns that nominalism will lead to *scepticism*, because 'there is no basis in reality for our general ideas' and if this is true, our 'words tell us nothing about reality'. True knowledge of God mediated through reality also disappears in this context. Nominalism also leads to *moral relativism*, in view of the fact that 'universals have no basis in the real world' and therefore also universal moral values loses its grounding. Moreover, as nominalism rejects objective essences, it robs real essences of its *teleology* which is necessary for the grounding of morality. Finally, nominalism also leads to *heresy*, because in both the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation of Jesus, God is believed to have 'one essence or nature' and Jesus is believed to have 'two natures'. However, in nominalism, God cannot have a nature and Jesus cannot have 'both a human and a divine nature', because natures in this sense do not exist in the real world.

The Christian call, however, is always to return to *reality*, as it has come to be received and known through the three acts of the intellect which entails the undeniable *organic* use of natural reason in matters of faith and theology. Gustav Portig (as cited by Bavinck 2019) effectively describes the duty of a Christian in this regard:

> Reality does not have to make itself comply with our reason [*or emotions*], but rather, on the basis of the whole experience of the whole age, our thinking must seek to lay bare the metaphysic that God has woven into reality. (p. 47)

Conclusion

To be sure, anti-intellectualism and fideism has left members of Reformed churches vulnerable to the influences of secularism and progressive ideas. However, the establishment of apologetics training opportunities on a local church level can help to equip church members to be more aware and think more critically about the challenges presented by secularism. To establish apologetics on a local level, the proper role of reason in matters of faith and theology must first be retrieved. Reason plays an undeniable, unquestionable, and organic *instrumental* and *ministerial* role in matters of faith. It must therefore be cherished and developed in the service of faith and theology. Moreover, the concept of *common notions* provides the necessary grounding for the right use of one's reason as one engages in dialogues with non-Christians and also participates in discussions on other matters pertaining to faith and theology. Importantly, the *three acts of the intellect* show how reality, by virtue of being revelation, is received and only then consequently reasoned about. While secularism, as it is manifested in the phenomenon of *expressive individualism*, imposes its existential yearnings onto reality, the Christian is called to receive reality as an intelligible gift of revelation providing true knowledge of God and natural insights pertaining to one's moral conscience.

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