Abstract and Keywords

This chapter charts some of the ways in which the prolegomena have traditionally been drafted and discussed in Reformed theology. First, we will examine the two Reformers who arguably most deeply influenced most of the later trajectories of Reformed theology: Philip Melanchthon and John Calvin. Next, we will turn to the movement of post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy, mapping some of its complex and intricate intellectual trajectories. We will then turn to Schleiermacher as the great nineteenth-century Reformed theologian who reinvented the prolegomena after Kant had given short shrift to their classical form. Subsequently, we will show how the tradition of Reformed prolegomena from Calvin to Schleiermacher received a surprising update in philosophical quarters by the end of the twentieth century, in circles of what has come to be called ‘Reformed epistemology’. Finally, in a brief prospect we will suggest some of the tasks and functions which any future (Reformed) prolegomena may fulfil after the demise of classical foundationalism.

Keywords: prolegomena, method, natural theology, revealed theology, general revelation, special revelation, reason.

23.1 Introduction

WHEN we open an academic book, one of the first things we usually find is an introduction. Even shorter texts such as essays (like this very piece) often start with a preliminary section in which the theme, method, and/or intention of the paper is introduced. In many cases such introductions are completely innocent; it cannot be disputed that they are helpful, and sometimes even essential, in that they offer us a first orientation of the field we are entering when we start to read the book or paper in question. Not so, however, in systematic theology. The question whether a systematic theologian (or someone else, for that matter) should add an introduction when he sets about to write a coherent account of the contents of the Christian faith is one of the most disputed in contemporary theology. Especially in the Reformed tradition, important reservations and even criticisms can...
be observed with regard to the propriety of adding an introductory section to a survey of Christian doctrine.

Why is this such a sensitive issue? Is it another example of the dreaded *rabies theologorum*—the fury of theologians against one another on issues that everyone else takes for granted? It does not seem so; rather, a serious problem is involved that touches the nerve of what the Christian faith is all about. Of course, nobody thinks that anything is wrong with introducing a survey of the Christian faith by telling one’s readers what they may expect and by making some other prefatory comments. Literally, however, the verb ‘to introduce’ (which is taken from the Latin) means ‘to lead into’. The image conjured up is that of a space or spatial object—such as a building or territory—with which we are unfamiliar. In order to help us become familiar with it, the author adopts the role of a guide who shows us how we can enter the field or the building in question. In doing so, she starts from a place with which we, as outsiders, supposedly *are* familiar, in order to show us the route from that spot to the field or building she would like us to enter. Without such an introductory road map (the idea is), it might be impossible for us to understand what sort of phenomenon the Christian faith is, to what class or category it belongs, how it can be comprehended from generally accepted premises—let alone to consciously *enter* the building of the Christian faith.

It is precisely here, however, that the controversy starts: is it really the case that we can only understand the Christian faith by approaching it as a special instance of some other, more generally known phenomenon (e.g. religion)? Would we not end up with a highly distorted picture in this way? According to some, when we try to explain the nature and content of the Christian faith, we should rather take our starting point directly in God’s revelation, since this is the one and only ground on which the Christian faith rests. Indeed, if we examine the New Testament, faith in Jesus Christ as Lord does not introduce itself as a peculiar instance of some more generally accessible phenomenon, but as a special gift of the Holy Spirit and a fruit of divine election (Berkhof 1986: 1). It originates in the experience of being caught up by the Son in the Father through the Spirit. As Paul says, speaking of the knowledge of Christ (and not, as is often thought, of the eschaton): ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived […] God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9). Isn’t this experience so unique that it cannot be reduced to some more mundane, generally known human phenomenon? If so, it becomes unclear how it can be—let alone why it *should* be—introduced from some external point of view. Such an external starting point, one might surmise, easily, if not unavoidably, slants one’s take on the issue, in that it does not let the Christian faith stand on its own feet. It threatens to transform it into some construct that is more palatable to our pre-established intuitions, wishes, and in the worst case even ideologies.

In the tradition of Reformed theology no one voiced this concern more seriously and consistently than Karl Barth (‘the most consistent Protestant’, as Hans Urs von Balthasar called him). In Barth’s view, an introduction to the Christian faith can only be conceived of as part of the exposition of the faith. Only in that way can the danger of misrepresenting and, in fact, domesticating the Christian message by using it for one’s own purposes...
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be avoided. Barth discusses the problem in the very first sections of his *Church Dogmatics* under the heading of the term ‘prolegomena’. This Greek word, retrieved from ‘*die Al­ten*’ (i.e. sources from Post-Reformation Orthodoxy), literally means: ‘things that have to be said in advance’. Barth does not oppose the possibility and appropriateness of prolegomena altogether; his own *Church Dogmatics* also opens with an introductory chapter (*Einleitung*) in which the presuppositions of his project are made explicit. He insists, however, that in Protestant dogmatics prolegomena should themselves have a dogmatic rather than a pre-dogmatic character. That is, like the entire body of theology, they can only draw their materials from the Word of God. Thus:

Prolegomena to dogmatics are only possible as a part of dogmatics itself. The syllable pro- in the word prolegomena is to be understood figuratively. What is in question is not the things that must be said previously, but the things that must be said first.

(Barth 1955: 45)

From this perspective, Barth opens his magnum opus with ‘the doctrine of the Word of God’, since what must be said first is that the Christian church derives all her faith in God and talk about God from the Word of God that has been spoken to her. ‘In the prolegomena of dogmatics, then, we inquire into the Word of God as into the criterion of dogmatics’ (Barth 1955: 46).

Although the doctrine of scripture took pride of place in most Reformed accounts of Christian doctrine (and Barth insists that his prolegomenon is obviously no other than what the older Protestant theologians had discussed under the heading *De scriptura sacra*), not every representative of Reformed theology had taken this course. In what follows, we will chart some of the ways in which the prolegomena have traditionally been drafted and discussed in Reformed theology. First, we will examine the two Reformers who arguably most deeply influenced most of the later trajectories of Reformed theology: Philip Melanchthon and John Calvin. Next, we will turn to the movement of post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy, mapping some of its complex and intricate intellectual trajectories. We will then turn to Schleiermacher as the great nineteenth-century Reformed theologian who reinvented the prolegomena after Kant had given short shrift to their classical form. Subsequently, we will show how the tradition of Reformed prolegomena from Calvin to Schleiermacher received a surprising update in philosophical quarters by the end of the twentieth century, in circles of what has come to be called ‘Reformed epistemology’. Finally, in a brief prospect we will suggest some of the tasks and functions which any future (Reformed) prolegomena may fulfil after the demise of classical foundationalism.
23.2 The Reformed Reformers

In the course of the history of theology accounts of Christian doctrine have often started with sections in which preliminary questions were discussed. Such prolegomena included (but were not limited to) issues such as the following:

What exactly is theology? What are its basic principles and presuppositions?
What is religion, and how is theology related to it?
How does theology relate to other academic disciplines, especially to philosophy?
How should an overall survey of Christian doctrine be structured and divided?
Where does our human knowledge of God come from? How do natural sources (such as creation) relate to supernatural ones (such as God’s special revelation in the Bible)?
What is a dogmatic statement and how can it be justified?
What method(s) does theology use, and what is the proper role of human reason in constructing a theological system?

Over the course of time, there has been little development in the type of questions discussed in theological prolegomena; though the emphasis may change depending on cultural conditions, issues such as those listed above belong to the ‘perennial questions’ which everyone who attempts to provide a systematic account of the Christian faith should be aware of and take into account. Indeed, even when they were not explicitly discussed, as in the patristic era and during the first stage of Protestant thought, they often received implicit answers that could be deduced from the body of the expounded theological views. It was only under the pressure of external pressures and educational demands in emerging theological schools—the cathedral schools and monasteries in the medieval period and the budding Protestant universities in early modern Europe—that they were made explicit and discussed in a detailed way.

Even those who emphasize the essential continuity between the theological thought of the Reformers and their post-Reformation successors admit that there is a clear difference between the two when it comes to the issue of prolegomena. With some exceptions (e.g. Heinrich Bullinger’s Ratio studiorum, 1527), the Reformers did not write any prolegomena, whereas their successors reintroduced them (Muller 2003: iv.397). Their strong orientation towards the bible as the sole source of Christian theology, and oftentimes their joy about the grace of God they had experienced personally, led them to plunge in medias res when giving an overview of Christian doctrine. Moreover, especially Reformed Reformers such as John Calvin were wary of what they called ‘idle speculation’: asking questions and building up thought systems about God that have no clear basis in the divine self-revelation. Therefore, when they had to unfold in a more or less consistent way the contents of the Christian faith for academic purposes, they tended to prefer the ‘local’ method of theological presentation to the classical ‘questional’ method. The latter consisted in long series of all sorts of (sometimes speculative) quaestiones that were answered with a clear judgement or sentence after protracted discussions of the various pros and cons.
It was especially Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) who, drawing on a methodological renewal in the art of rhetoric by the early humanist Rudolf Agricola, introduced the use of topics (from Greek *topoi*; Latin equivalent: *loci*) as an organizational principle in theology. Though a Lutheran, Melanchthon had strong Reformed leanings (e.g. in his understanding of the Lord’s Supper), and hugely influenced later Reformed theology—which justifies his inclusion in this survey. According to Melanchthon, it was the task of theology to bring together and discuss in a coherent manner the various ‘general topics’ or *loci communes* that can be found in scripture, such as sin, law, and grace. Melanchthon especially had in mind Paul’s letter to the Romans as the primary template for presenting these topics in the right order. Thus, Melanchthon’s *Loci communes theologici* (1521) ‘prepared the way, from a methodological perspective, for the fundamentally biblical and exegetical model, centered on the message of Romans, that became one of the most significant for both Lutheran and Reformed dogmatics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ (Muller 2003: i.101). This new principle of structuring systematic theology could also, following Melanchthon’s terminology, be referred to as ‘historical’ or, later, ‘covenantal’, since God’s dealings with humankind according to the biblical narrative, from creation through fall to redemption, became the basic pattern within which theological doctrines were placed and discussed (Muller 2003, vol.1, 206; cf. 100, 110). Given such an overall scheme, clearly there is no place for external prolegomena.

Still, Melanchthon offers quite a lot of considerations that pertain to the presuppositions of his theological thinking. He starts doing so in the preface to the first edition of his *Loci Communes*, where (in line with Luther) he is very critical of the role of philosophy and speculation in traditional dogmatics. In later rewritings for further editions, however, Melanchthon’s tone becomes more moderate, his style increasingly comes to resemble the scholastic method, and traditional dogmas reappear in his system. Also in his doctrine of God as expounded in these subsequent editions of the *Loci*, Melanchthon makes comments of a type that would later be placed in the prolegomena of systematic theologies (Muller 2003: i.100; cf. Reeling Brouwer 2009: 178–207, who identifies Melanchthon’s *Loci* as ‘the most widely read dogmatic work of the Reformation period’, 179). Eventually, both in his *Commentary on Romans* (ed. 1540) and in later editions of his *Loci Communes*, Melanchthon even comes up with series of arguments for the existence of God.

Like Melanchthon (and possibly drawing on him), John Calvin adopted the *loci* method when rearranging and expanding the catechetical materials of his 1536 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in preparation for its enlarged second edition in 1539. Although the older scheme of the traditional catechetical manuals—with expositions on the Law, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Sacraments—remained transparent in the structure of the *Institutes*, it was blended with a more historical division, moving from our knowledge of God the Creator to that of God the Redeemer. More than some of his more scholastically inclined colleagues and successors, Calvin elaborated this division in a discursive and narrative way. Perhaps as a result of this, he did not feel a need for including theological expositions that *preceded* the treatment of the general contents of scripture; discussing scripture’s detailed contents in his exegetical works, he intentionally relegated his more
general observations to the *Institutes* so as not to overload his commentaries, as Calvin himself indicated in the ‘Letter to the reader’ that he added to the 1539 and later editions of the *Institutes*.

Still, it is interesting to see how in the successive editions of the *Institutes* we find a growing preoccupation with preliminary issues, such as the right method of teaching theology and the sources of our knowledge of God. Calvin was especially puzzled by the question of where to start the exposition of sacred doctrine. In the first sections of the second edition of the *Institutes* (1539), Calvin carefully weighs the Lutheran option to start with human self-knowledge against the pros and cons of starting with the human knowledge of God. He concludes that, although both are inextricably linked, the right order of discussion requires beginning with our knowledge of God—and he would remain faithful to this decision throughout his life, as can be seen in the final revision of the *Institutes* in 1559, where he still follows the same order.

But where does this human knowledge of God come from? Is God’s special revelation in the Bible its only source, or is there also a more generally available ‘natural’ knowledge of God, dispersed among all properly functioning human beings? Although we must be careful not to narrow down the theme of prolegomena to this single issue, it cannot be denied that Calvin had a special interest in it. Meanwhile, the question brings us into a territory of heated debate and controversy ever since Karl Barth had rebuked Emil Brunner for his endorsement of a limited natural knowledge of God and for his appeal to Calvin in this connection (Brunner and Barth 2002). Calvin indeed made a distinction between two types of human knowledge of God. In the beginning of the *Institutes* he wrote:

Here I do not yet touch upon the sort of knowledge with which men, in themselves lost and accursed, apprehend God the Redeemer in Christ the Mediator; but I speak only of the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright. In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or as favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us.

(Calvin 1960: i.2, 1; emphasis added)

Calvin continued this train of thought in subsequent sections by discerning within the human mind ‘by natural instinct’ an awareness of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*), implanted by God himself in all human beings, along with a certain understanding of the divine majesty (Calvin 1960: i.3, 1). Next to that, drawing on Romans 1:19–20 Calvin argued that God had revealed himself and continued to disclose himself on a daily basis ‘in the whole workmanship of the universe’. As a result, ‘men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him’ (i.5, 1). We do not even need ‘toilsome proof’ to demonstrate the existence and majesty of God, but like Paul we may use ‘natural arguments’: simple inferences from empirically observable factors in the natural world (cf. Sudduth 2009: 17).
Thus, Calvin seems to have acknowledged a twofold natural knowledge of God, situated in the human mind on the one hand and triggered by creation on the other (cf. van der Kooi 2005: 63–86). Quite a number of twentieth-century Reformed theologians, however, including Karl Barth and G. C. Berkouwer, have concluded from the italicized words in the first quotation (si integer stetisset Adam—‘if Adam had remained upright’) that, in Calvin’s view, for us, humans living after Adam’s Fall, this natural knowledge of God has become only a theoretical possibility. As a matter of fact, in their reading of Calvin, it has vanished and come to nothing by our sinful perversion (Brunner and Barth 2002: 106; Berkouwer 1955: 30–31, 46–7, 152–3; cf. Sudduth 2009: 113–18). Therefore, the only means through which we can still come to know God is God’s special self-disclosure in the Bible, and most especially in the Bible’s centre: the person of Jesus Christ.

Neither here nor, as far as I know, anywhere else, however, does Calvin write that we no longer have any natural knowledge of God because of the blindness and perversion that resulted from sin. Nor does he say that, although God continues to reveal himself to us in nature, these signals are no longer received by us (pace Steinmetz 2010: 23–39, 32). What he does say is that our natural knowledge of God no longer leads us to salvation, since we do not use it in the appropriate way, namely to seek and honour the only true God. The fact that our natural knowledge of God is soteriologically deficient does not imply that it is absent. In fact, it is implausible that Calvin thought it had totally vanished as a result of sin, since in that case it could not fulfil the main function Paul had ascribed to it: leaving us, post-Adamites, without an excuse when we do not seek and worship the only true God (Muller 2003: i.274, with reference to Calvin’s following the order of nature and scripture as the two means of divine revelation in his commentary on Psalm 19). It seems that Calvin’s pupil Guy de Brès captured the thought of his master (p. 379) well when he drafted the second article of what came to be called the Belgic Confession (1561), the first authoritative Reformed confession in the Low Countries:

We [not: Adam only] know [not: knew] God by two means. First [not: Second], 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 convince humans and to leave them without excuse’. Second [not: First], God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.

(Billings et al. 2013: 26–7; cf. van den Brink 2011)

As Michael Sudduth has pointed out, in Calvin’s view as well sin distorts our knowledge of who and how God is, but does not annihilate our intuitive knowledge that God is, leaving us with an awareness that there is some Creator who ought to be worshipped (Sudduth 2009: 117). This awareness is so vague and limited, however, that in order to come to know God in the full sense of the word we need God’s special revelation in Jesus Christ.
In brief, whereas Brunner may have made too much of the natural knowledge of God in Calvin’s thinking (treating it as a kind of substructure on which Calvin’s proper theology was supposedly built), Barth and his sympathizers were definitely wrong when denying any actual functioning of it.

23.3 Reformed Orthodoxy

Moving to the period of Reformed Orthodoxy now, we should keep in mind that the chronological order is not as tight as is often suggested. Early Orthodox Reformed theologians such as Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) and Andreas Hyperius (1511–64) were contemporaries of John Calvin (1509–64), but all three of them wrote extensively on prolegomenal issues. Hyperius, a Flemish theologian from Yper, inherited from his spiritual father, Melanchthon, a strong interest in the right method of doing theology. He wrote a separate treatise on how to study theology (1556), which was in fact the first Protestant encyclopedia of theology and by far the most extensive prolegomenal work at the time. It was to be followed by a ‘revealed theology’, published posthumously as *Methodi Theologiae* (1568). Musculus devoted extended sections to the natural knowledge of God in his *Loci Communes* (1573). Though he admitted that its primary function was to make humans inexcusable for their unbelief and impiety, he also argued that especially its philosophical elaboration yielded important truths for theology. In Peter Vermigli’s highly influential *Loci Communes* (published posthumously in 1576), essays on the natural knowledge of God and on theology’s relationship to philosophy were also included. Though in basic agreement with Calvin on its non-saving character, he came to a more positive appreciation of natural revelation, especially valuing the use of philosophical argumentation in theology as exemplified in classical arguments for the existence of God.

Although all these publications saw the light of day only shortly after Calvin had passed away (and many parts of them had their origin in his lifetime), it is clear that we enter a new stage in the development of Reformed prolegomena here. In his landmark monograph on the theme, Richard Muller discusses the post-Reformation Reformed prolegomena under seven headings:

1. The Meaning of the Terms Theology and Religion
2. Theology as a Discipline
3. The Parts or Divisions of Theology
4. Natural and Supernatural Theology
5. The Object and Genus of Theology
6. The Use of Philosophy in Theology
7. Fundamental Articles and Basic Principles in Theology

We can easily recognize in this list most of the themes enumerated in the first section above. In the limited space available, however, we cannot deal with each of these topics separately; therefore we will restrict ourselves to drawing some main lines, focusing most of all on issue 4. In relation to issue 5, however, it is important to note that the majority of
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the Reformed Orthodox writers considered theology to be a form of wisdom (sapientia) rather than a science (scientia). Though its theoretical aspects were not denied, theology was primarily seen as an eminently practical discipline, directed to the honour of God and the salvation of human beings (Muller 2003: i.324–59). Further, in relation to issue 7 there was a widespread consensus that theology has two principia or foundations that determine its material content: Holy Scripture as its principium cognoscendi or noetic principle and God as its principium essendi (principle of being) or objective foundation. These principles correspond with the two loci that were usually treated immediately after the prolegomena, the doctrine of scripture and the one on God. For example, in Herman Bavinck’s dogmatics (1895–1901), we still find the same basic pattern (Bavinck 2003).

As noted, however, by far the most attention in post-Reformation prolegomena went to issue 4 (often in combination with the closely related topic 3). One of the main focal points of the Reformation had been the retrieval of a ‘dark’ Augustinian view of human nature and will as the counterpart of its sola gratia principle. Along with this emphasis came a radical doctrine of the Fall and sin, which in turn, as we saw already in Calvin, raised questions concerning the remaining human capacity to know God. Indeed, the ‘early Reformed statements concerning theological presuppositions focus, virtually without exception, on the problem of knowledge of God’, and it is here that their ‘single most important contribution’ is made, since their radical view of human sin forced them to reconsider and modify the medieval patterns of theological prolegomena (Muller 2003: i.108).

Just like Calvin, the early Orthodox theologians held that despite the noetic effects of sin a limited natural knowledge of God is retained, consisting of an inborn propensity of the human mind to sense God (cognitio insita) and a vague knowledge which is acquired from experiencing the wonders of creation (cognitio acquisita). In the course of time, the Orthodox theologians gradually came to make more of this natural knowledge, developing it into a full-blown ‘natural theology’ which was often discussed in the first locus of their theological system. When we examine the influential 19th century compendium of Reformed Orthodox voices assembled by Heinrich Heppe (1820–79), it is telling that Heppe opens this work with a locus (preceding the locus on Holy Scripture) entitled ‘Natural and Revealed Theology’ (De theologia naturalis et revelata; Heppe 1978: 1–11). It has been argued that Heppe is misleading here, since he ignored the fact that both revealed and natural theology were discussed by the Reformed Orthodox within the broader epistemological framework of theologia archetypa and ectypa—‘archetypal theology’ referring to God’s perfect knowledge of himself and his works, and ‘ectypal theology’ comprising the various forms of finite human knowledge of God. All ectypal theology was supposed to be dependent on ‘the communication of grace from Creator to creature’ (Muller 2003: 235, paraphrasing Franciscus Junius here). Thus, being part of ectypal theology, natural theology could never be seen (as Barth, reading the Reformed Orthodox authors through Heppe, thought) as an external prolegomenon—or more bluntly, a pagan foundation—which was assigned a preparatory function to theology proper (cf. van Asselt 2002).
Indeed, the days are gone when the development of Reformed Orthodoxy after Calvin could be seen as a process of gradual theological decline leading step by step towards Enlightenment rationalism. During the past decades it has been convincingly demonstrated (e.g. by the indefatigable efforts of Richard Muller and Willem van Asselt) that the historical trajectories were far more nuanced and variegated, displaying both continuities and discontinuities between the Reformed Reformers and later Reformed scholasticism. Still, the discontinuities cannot be denied and should not be downplayed. It is interesting (to say the least) that, whereas Calvin never used the term ‘natural theology’, it was not uncommon for Reformed (as well as Lutheran) Orthodox theologians to open their disputation cycles—and subsequent publications of these—with a disputation on the difference between natural and revealed theology; in doing so, they apparently considered natural theology to be unrevealed (cf. van den Belt 2015). Therefore, Heppe did not do something completely alien to post-Reformation Reformed theology when he started his compendium with a *locus* on this division of theology in a natural and a revealed part.

If we examine the material contents of post-Reformation Reformed expositions on natural theology, the balance once again is mixed rather than uniform. On the one hand we find theologians like Lambert Daneau (c.1535–90), who in a new, scholastic key reaffirm Calvin’s emphasis on the disastrous consequences of human sin, thus limiting its actual significance over against more optimistic Thomistic views:

> First of all, this knowledge, derived only from God’s visible works or from this world, is true enough; but it is insufficient for salvation, because a peculiar knowledge of redemption is required for salvation. Secondly, this general knowledge does teach that God exists and that He is to be worshipped […]. But it does not recognize either who this God is or how He is to be worshipped.

(Daneau, quoted in Heppe 1978: 3)

On the other hand, authors like Trelcatius and Alsted were less reticent. Lucas Trelcatius (1542–1602), for one, equalled the natural knowledge of God with ‘natural theology’. Thus, he suggest that it is not just a limited variety of the human knowledge of God but an entire branch of theology! Further, Trelcatius argues that natural theology proceeds ‘from principles that are known by the light of […] human reason’. Elaborating on this, he rehearses several arguments for the existence and providence of God that he may have found in later editions (from 1543 onwards) of Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes* (cf. Suddduth 2009: 20–21).

Only some years later did Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638) publish a separate volume, *Theologia naturalis* (1615), exhibiting in more than 800 pages ‘the most august school of nature, in which is utilized the common language of God’s creatures for teaching all equally; against the atheists, Epicureans, and sophists of our age’ (subtitle; see https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10008101_00007.html). In this work, Alsted introduced arguments for the existence of God, expanded on God’s essential attributes and providence, and discussed the various classes of creatures. Alsted identified the foundations or *principia* of natural theology as human reason, universal experi-
ence (e.g. of nature), and Holy Scripture. This triple nature can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, we might highlight that Holy Scripture belonged to the sources and criteria of natural theology, thus controlling its contents and preventing it from becoming an alien, non-theological substructure of sacred doctrine. Arguably, in Alsted’s view, reason was offered only an ancillary role, not a principal one (Muller 2003: i.303). On the other hand, since a glass that is half-full is also half-empty, we might conclude with equal warrant that Alsted’s biblical references were only ‘confirmatory of arguments that are independently developed on rational grounds’, thus suggesting that as a matter of fact unaided human reason took the lead in his thinking (Sudduth 2009: 22; contrary to what is suggested by the title of his book, Sudduth shows from the relevant sources that there was no ‘Reformed objection’ to natural theology).

In any case, we discern a rationalizing tendency in post-Reformation dogmatics, as a result of which the prolegomena of theology gradually became both more extended and more important. Basically, they had to fulfil two functions. First, as is clear from Alsted’s subtitle, they had an apologetic role, articulating and defending the faith over against newly emerging movements such as Anabaptism, Socinianism (according to which the natural knowledge of God might be sufficient for salvation), and Arminianism (according to which natural theology forms a solid basis for the truths of revealed theology). In order to do so effectively, authors like Alsted used the conceptual categories of their contemporaries, and they were stimulated in doing so by the institutionalization of a Protestant academic culture which required a proper curriculum including disciplines like logic and metaphysics. Second, the prolegomena served to strengthen and deepen the Christian’s faith, and even to lead those who seek God to the higher truths of revealed theology, thus fulfilling a pedagogical role. Even so, however, natural theology always served as an adjunct, not as a precondition for revealed theology—let alone as theology’s most important part (Muller 2003: i.303).

It is precisely here that a crucial transition occurred in the eighteenth century, during the period of what is sometimes called Late Orthodoxy. Influenced by new approaches such as Descartes’ philosophy, Reformed academic theologians started to incorporate rationalist philosophy into their Protestant theological systems, using reason as its primary criterion and fundamental norm of truth. As a result, the entire weight of Christian theology came to rest on the rational foundations laid out in the prolegomena, which as a result tended to become more and more long-winded. The balance between reason and revelation we found in a writer like Alsted has now been ousted at the expense of the obedience to Scripture. It is here that the real watershed in the theology of the Reformers is to be found. The difference can be seen in a stunning way when one compares the theology of Francis Turretin (1623–87) during the era of so-called ‘High Orthodoxy’ (c.1640–1725) with that of his son Jean-Alphonse (1671–1731) in the waning phase of Reformed Orthodoxy. To the younger Turretin, it is axiomatic that revelation cannot teach us anything that goes against the grain of reason. In this way, natural theology, as informed by the deliverances of reason, soon came to be seen as the most important—if not the only...
relevant—part of Christian theology, which could be shared by all rational people (see Muller 2003: i.3057 for a brief overview).

This type of theology, however, closely resembling contemporary forms of deism and natural religion as instantiated for example in the work of Herbert of Cherbury, could hardly be recognized any longer as Reformed—let alone as Orthodox Reformed. As to Reformed theology, meaning here the theology of the Reformers and of their post-Reformation successors, we can conclude that the legitimacy of theological prolegomena was not denied. Even the classical arguments for the existence of God were deemed to have a certain relevance. But the house of the Christian faith was never built on foundations laid by human reason. In that sense, Reformed prolegomena were always internal rather than external to the Christian faith, or dogmatic rather than pre-dogmatic. In the end, it was scripture that was—either on its own or next to reason—regarded to determine their proper meaning and content.

23.4 The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: From Schleiermacher to Reformed Epistemology

Immanuel Kant is usually credited as the one who in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) struck a deadly blow to all Enlightenment attempts at developing a natural theology from the generally available data of nature and human reason. Kant argued that human reason cannot transcend the limits of sense experience and therefore cannot lead to any knowledge of God. Thus, he invalidated theology’s *principium essendi*: God as an object of knowledge, leaving only a place for God as a postulate of practical reason or morality. Next to that, the rising tide of historical-critical Bible scholarship undercut the second foundation of theology as distinguished in post-Reformation orthodoxy: its *principium cognoscendi*, Holy Scripture. These developments put a sudden end to the Protestant prolegomena traditions. And given the way in which supernatural or revealed theology had become totally dependent on the substructure of natural theology, the entire building of Christian theology as a sound academic enterprise collapsed along with the prolegomena.

It required the genius of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) to find a new avenue out of this gridlock into which Christian theology had manoeuvred itself. Although, as the ‘father of theological liberalism’, Schleiermacher perhaps stood ‘outside the Reformed movement doctrinally’ (Allen 2010: 92), his thinking displays many continuities with classical Reformed theology and would deeply affect later Reformed giants like Bavinck and Barth—so there is reason to consider his Reformed affiliation as more than just a formality and to include him in our discussion (for a delineation of Reformed theology, see van den Brink and Smits 2015). Schleiermacher accepted Kant’s barring of the way from human reason to God, but he did not agree with Kant’s de facto reduction of religion to morality. Instead, he argued that religion ‘has its own province in the mind in which it reigns sovereignly’—a province which he first called intuition (*Anschauung*) and...
later (in 1806) ‘feeling’, meaning by this a form of pre-reflective self-consciousness (Schleiermacher 1996: 17). As such, religion—or piety, as Schleiermacher more often says (reflecting his upbringing in the pietist climate of the Moravian Brothers)—need not be grounded in either speculative metaphysics or morality, but is a category sui generis. Thus, Schleiermacher embedded religion deeply in human subjectivity, making the human being rather than God the starting-point of theology.

In his culminating dogmatics The Christian Faith (1821–2), Schleiermacher further specified this feeling as one of ‘absolute dependence’ (schlechthinnige Abhängigkeit). Before any conceptual reflection comes in, we are conscious of ourselves as absolutely dependent, that is, Schleiermacher explains, as in relation with God—God being the name for the ‘whence’ of our feeling of absolute dependence. This consciousness is common to all normally functioning human beings, though it is expressed and reflected upon in highly different conceptual frameworks depending on one’s cultural tradition, according to Schleiermacher. Clearly, we are not far here from Calvin’s view of a universal sensus divinitatis! In his prolegomena (simply called ‘Introduction’) Schleiermacher further argues that Christianity—obviously, for him and his age—should be considered the highest level of development of this feeling of absolute dependence. Thus, he gave Christian theology a new, anthropological basis in the phenomenon of religion as based on human experience. This way of reconceptualizing theology’s prolegomena was adopted and adapted by many subsequent theologians, both within and outside the Reformed community. In this way Schleiermacher shaped the tradition of what came to be called ‘modern’ or ‘liberal’ theology, i.e. all forms of theology that find their starting point in human experience rather than in divine revelation.

Interestingly, however, Schleiermacher himself was not satisfied with the way in which he had restructured the foundations of Christian theology in his The Christian Faith. In particular, he realized that there was, in fact, no coercive connection between his prolegomena and his material dogmatics. Therefore, in a letter to his friend Friedrich Lücke (1829) he contended that nobody should think that he had wanted to derive Christian piety from a general human pious consciousness (Schleiermacher 1981). Rather, there is a gap between the two; although we can, for example, deduce the concept of redemption from general religiosity, the identity of the Redeemer (Jesus Christ) is irreducible and unique. Thus, what Schleiermacher had said in his prolegomena allegedly (p. 385) was not intended to substantiate the Christian faith from an external perspective, but rather, as he further explained in the second edition of The Christian Faith (1830), presupposed the internal perspective of the Christian believer. Christianity is not the highest step of religion in an objective way, but it is so from the perspective of the Christian faith. In this connection, Schleiermacher conceded: ‘Für die christliche Glaubenslehre ist die Darstellung zugleich die Begründung’ (‘The presentation of Christian doctrine is at the same time its foundation’; cf. Berkhof 1986: 2).

It was exactly this insight that Karl Barth was to turn from a concession into a confession in the next century: prolegomena to dogmatics are only possible as part of dogmatics itself, thus from the perspective of faith. Barth stuck to this maxim so consistently that lat-
er observers admired the fabulous house he had built in his *Church Dogmatics*, but wondered where they could find its door. Barth’s approach, however, led many subsequent Reformed theologians (and not only so-called ‘Barthians’) to renounce the search for sound prolegomena altogether. Fortunately, there were important exceptions to this rule, as is clear from the theology of T. F. Torrance (1913–2007)—who was a Barthian in many respects but not when it came to Barth’s rigorous attitude towards prolegomena. Other theologians, such as the Dutch Reformed H. M. Kuitert (b. 1924), stubbornly continued Late Orthodoxy’s search for adequate external prolegomena, but not being able to find any foundations that were strong enough to bear the weight of the entire house, in the end abandoned the faith. All in all, as a result of theology’s difficulties in dealing adequately with the topic of prolegomena many believers found it hard to connect their faith to the conceptual categories of their culture and the world at large.

It seems to me that the bottom line of Reformed theology, which we can trace from Calvin through Reformed Orthodoxy to Schleiermacher and beyond, is to appreciate prolegomena but not to ask too much of them. We should not expect them to lay the foundations of Christian dogmatics in a rationalist way, as if we were only entitled to enter the house of the faith when we have enough arguments. As we saw above, the Christian faith does not emerge from sound arguments, but originates in the experience of being brought to the Father by the Son in the Spirit. On the other hand, we should not discredit the role of prolegomena either. We need them to see why it is not idiosyncratic or even stupid to believe in God, and to connect the Christian faith with the thought categories of our culture. Also, they can rebut all-too-easy arguments or sentiments that are brought forward against the Christian faith.

Remarkably, from the final quarter of the twentieth century onwards a couple of Reformed philosophers did what many of their theological fellows had failed to do ever since Barth, namely to elaborate theological prolegomena along these lines. What came to be called ‘Reformed epistemology’, and as such became a much discussed and influential perspective in contemporary philosophy of religion, is in fact a new and full-fledged conceptual elaboration of the Reformed take on prolegomena. Reformed epistemologists such as Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932) and Nicholas Wolterstorff (b. 1932) have forcefully argued that Christian belief does not need a foundation in natural theology in order to be warranted (Plantinga 1997: 383–9; Wolterstorff 1997: 165–70). Rather, belief in God can justifiably be one of our ‘properly basic’ beliefs, that is: beliefs we do not reason to but reason from (there is a remarkable concurrence with Barth here; cf. Diller 2014). In this connection, Plantinga explicitly refers to Calvin’s notion of a pre-reflective *sensus divinitatis*, explaining this as ‘a kind of faculty (like sight or hearing) or a cognitive mechanism […] which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs in God’ (Plantinga 2015: 33). Just as we are entitled to trust the deliverances of other cognitive faculties, provided that they are functioning properly, there is no a priori reason why we should distrust the outcomes of our religious sense. By extension, Plantinga argues, something similar holds for more specifically Christian beliefs, such as belief in the Trini-
Prolegomena

At the same time, however, this does not mean that the use of theistic arguments is entirely worthless. For it is not the case that anything goes when it comes to religious (and other) beliefs. If we are aware of important defeaters for our basic beliefs, it is irrational to ignore these; rather, we should do the best we can to appropriately evaluate such counter-arguments. It is here that arguments for the existence of God just as counter-arguments to proposed defeaters, have an important role to play. As in Melanchthon, Calvin, and later Reformed theologians, this role is additional and ancillary rather than foundational. Here again, we find a thoughtful way in between rationalism (or ‘evidentialism’ or ‘scientism’) on the one hand, according to which we need universally acceptable arguments in order to be entitled to believe, and fideism (according to which arguments are of no use at all) on the other.

23.5 Prospect

By way of conclusion, it seems to me that a Reformed theology that remains faithful to its roots will also need prolegomena in the future. These prolegomena cannot be fixed to a particular set of arguments, however. For what kind of defeaters come up against the Christian faith largely depends on the context in which one lives. Thus, the contents of theology’s prolegomena cannot be determined in a decontextualized, one-size-fits-all pattern. Arguably, in the science-imbued Western world systematic theologians will use prolegomena to account for the relationship between the Christian faith (and Christian theology as the structured reflection on it) and the sciences. Indeed, a lot of work has been and is being done in this territory, both inside and outside the Reformed tradition (see e.g. Pannenberg 1976; Murphy 1990; Van den Brink 2009). In other contexts, however, it is much more pertinent to show the ways in which Christian faith and theology are relevant from the perspective of a specific society’s social needs and challenges (cf. e.g. Venter and Tolmie 2012). Thus, prolegomena can and should be elaborated in a variety of ways. They should not focus exclusively on the epistemological question (‘How do you know?’) as in modernity, but should also include thoughtful reflections on the task of Christian theology in the changing cultural and intellectual climate of our age (cf. Ford 2011; 2013: 169–76). Prolegomena can be quite extensive and rigorous, requiring detailed monographs rather than just a chapter in a survey of Christian doctrine. In cultural conditions in which it is far from self-evident to be a Christian, such as in the contemporary Western world, they may even take the form of what is called ‘fundamental theology’. Until recently, this label was mainly used in Roman Catholic theology, but today it is becoming more and more recognized in Protestant circles as well (see Maddox 1984; Becker 2015).

This designation should not seduce us, however, into thinking that prolegomena are foundational to Christian faith and theology, since from a Reformed perspective only God and scripture are its foundations. Instead, their function is to relate the contents of the Christ-
ian faith—either constructively or critically, but usually in both ways—to the conceptual
categories and thought forms of the world (for a contemporary attempt, see van der Kooi
and van den Brink 2017: 33–74). Thus, they may prevent Christianity from becoming sec­
tarian, help believers to connect their faith to the intellectual and cultural world in which
they live and move and have their being and—yes—properly introduce ‘seekers’ and those
who have not the slightest idea of what it is all about to the riches of the Christian faith.

Suggested Reading

Barth (1955); Calvin (1960); Plantinga (1976); van der Kooi (2005); van den Brink
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