

# Christian scholarship within reformed circles

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This article analyses and evaluates a specific strategy for the elaboration of Christian scholarship which may be defined as “theology-based scholarship”, using a case study in the *Instituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione* (IFED) based in Padua, Italy. According to the theology-based approach, theology is the key factor for achieving Christian perspectives in various scientific disciplines. The basic tenets of this approach are explored and some of the shortcomings, tensions and paradoxes resulting from this model are indicated. It is also argued that the approach is integrated by a particular world view, unlike that underlining reformed thinking and culture. Several concrete negative consequences of this approach are also pointed out, and the article concludes that this approach needs considerable alterations.

## Christelike wetenskap binne reformatoriese kringe

Hierdie artikel analiseer en evalueer 'n spesifieke strategie vir Christelike wetenskap wat gedefinieer kan word as 'n “teologie-gebaseerde wetenskap” deur middel van 'n gevallestudie in die *Instituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione* (IFED) van Padua, Italië. Volgens hierdie teologie-gebaseerde siening word teologie gesien as die sleutelfaktor om 'n christelike perspektief in die verskillende wetenskaplike dissiplines te vestig. Die basiese stellings van 'n substrategie wat hierdie benadering daarstel, word verken. Verskeie tekortkominge, spanninge en paradokse wat deur die teologie-gebaseerde model veroorsaak word, word uitgewys. Daar word ook geargumenteer dat hierdie benadering geïntegreer word deur 'n spesifieke wêreldbeskouing wat nie die tipiese wêreldbeskouing van reformatoriese denke en kultuur is nie. Verskeie konkrete negatiewe konsekwensies van hierdie benadering word uitgewys en die artikel konkludeer dat hierdie benadering beduidende veranderings benodig.

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Calvinism is characterised by the belief that God is sovereign in “all spheres of life”. This fundamental principle distinguishes the reformed approach to life from other Christian approaches, often based on the nature-grace duality. In principle, the idea that God is sovereign in all human activities prompts an active and transformational approach to social and political issues, art, education, and so on. While some Christian circles do not even consider contributing to the educational or political debate, the reformed approach is supposed to be a holistic approach. Yet the concrete application of this ideal often presents considerable differences in reformed circles. In the academic sector, for example, while the classical reformational strategy emphasises “inner reformation” of science and scholarship, recent literature introduces a “transformational” approach (Klapwijk 1986) or an “integration approach” (Van der Walt 2005) endorsed by reformed authors. Do these different approaches still constitute sound holistic approaches according to a reformed understanding? Comparisons, dialogue and discernment are necessary.

This article attempts to explore and evaluate a particular approach to Christian scholarship which might be defined as “theology-based scholarship”. This approach, I believe, is internationally widespread, in particular among theologians and in many confessional traditions. For this reason, I trust that the issues raised in this article may be relevant beyond reformed circles. The present analysis, however, will focus on the adoption of this model by reformed circles and institutions, in particular by scholars in the “VanTilian” tradition.<sup>1</sup> My own analysis is offered from a reformational point of view, which

1 The “VanTilian” movement finds its roots in the work of the renowned reformed theologian and apologist Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987). He was a major figure in twentieth-century Dutch-American Calvinist circles and interacted fruitfully with reformed philosophers such as Dooyeweerd, the South African H G Stoker (cf Van Til 1971) and others. Stoker’s (1971) positive evaluation of Van Til’s theology was one of the factors stimulating interest for VanTilian ideas in South Africa. As this interest is still well alive today, I trust that this article will also be relevant for the South African context. Reference will often be made to John Frame, but authors such as Gaffin, Rushdoony and Poythress, quoted below, also represent this movement to various degrees. Some aspects of this movement have been explored in Coletto 2002: 49-69.

was first elaborated in the Netherlands by Kuyper, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.

The basic question of this article can be stated as follows: what are the basic patterns of thought informing the ideal of theology-based scholarship in VanTilian-reformed circles, and how should this approach be evaluated? This article focuses on a case study, conducted at the *Instituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione* (IFED),<sup>2</sup> which was established in Padua, Italy in 1983 and currently still operating. The choice of this institute as a case study is suggested by the fact that its approach to theology and scholarship vividly illustrates the theology-based model. Yet to avoid the impression that certain arguments or mechanisms constitute only local strategies, limited to the authors examined below, the consonance between IFED's approach to christian scholarship and the approach of VanTilian scholars operating in other countries will be highlighted.

My definition of "theology-based scholarship" should be clarified and related to IFED. As an institute, IFED aims at operating on the basis of a reformed world view (IFED: IFED's mission statement). The declared purpose of the institute is to equip the believing individual/community for Christian commitment "in all spheres of human existence" (IFED: Statuto dell'IFED, art 5). However, IFED aims at doing so mainly by promoting and elaborating a theological perspective. In fact, when the "history and purposes of IFED" are spelled out in more detail (IFED: Storia e finalita' dell'IFED) it is clear that the library, the journal *Studi di teologia*, the scientific, didactical and cultural activities are all theological in character. Though the contributions of other sciences are not excluded, theology appears to be the key factor for achieving not only theological but also "evangelical learning and documentation". It is hypothesised that this strategy leads to a subtle depreciation of the non-theological disciplines. We may therefore encounter at IFED some of the reasons why the ideal of a Christian reformation "in all spheres of life" is curtailed or not worked out according to a proper reformed understanding.

2 Italian: Institute for/of Evangelical Learning and Documentation. All translations from Italian are the author's.

In order to better understand and evaluate the approach of IFED, it is necessary to explore the role and nature of theology as presented by IFED's theologians. In particular, the different mechanisms leading to the "elevation" of theology to a mediating role, its task of providing fundamental insight to other sciences, and its inclination to include within theology several extra-theological disciplines will be explored. The ensuing section will point out that these mechanisms do not occur at random but constitute a coherent strategy, directed by a specific world view. In fact, it will be argued that the nature-grace world view produced similar patterns of thought in other intellectual circles and in other areas of reflection. Finally, a few undesirable concrete consequences of the strategy adopted by IFED will be pointed out, thus preparing the ground for alternatives that may be suggested in a separate article.

For the purpose of illustrating the abovementioned themes the contributions of two of the most authoritative theologians of the institute, Pietro Bolognesi and Leonardo De Chirico, will be consulted. Without excluding other sources completely, the analysis will focus in particular on their articles appearing in the official journal of IFED: *Studi di teologia*,<sup>3</sup> whose first volume was published in 1978. Unfortunately, besides a few specific articles (cf Bolognesi 1980), the issue of the nature and role of theology in relation to other sciences is not tackled very systematically, directly or specifically by IFED's theologians. For this reason, the present analysis will often depend on fragmentary pronouncements. The author is convinced that a sufficiently clear picture of theology and scholarship (according to IFED's views) will emerge even from those fragments.

3 The reader may notice that my way of numbering/quoting the issues of *Studi di teologia* is unlike that on IFED's website. The difference, however, is easy to clarify. The issues of *Studi di teologia* are divided into an old series (*vecchia serie*) starting in 1978, and a new series (*nuova serie*) starting in 1989. The journal publishes two monographs per year. On the IFED website, under the section "Rivista SDT", each issue is attributed a progressive number and a title (for instance, 38. Johannes Althusius). Both the new and old series start from number 1. After the title, the year of publication and the issue number are also given (for instance, 2007/2). The referencing style used in this article is the one required by the present publication.

## 1. The nature of theology and its place among other sciences

### 1.1 Theology as the most fundamental science or perspective

In his “Introduction to theology” Bolognesi (1980: 1) complains that theology is no longer acknowledged as the “strada maestra” (the “main road”), implying that theology should be regarded as the most fundamental science or perspective. In fact, the objects of theological enquiry are God (Bolognesi 1980: 8) and faith (Bolognesi 1980: 6). As the sources of knowledge about God and faith are given mainly in the Scripture, theology is also the science of the Bible (Bolognesi 1980: 4-7). More recently, Bolognesi defines theology as “an application<sup>4</sup> of what God teaches in his word” (Bolognesi 2001: 92). Theology is the deepest perspective a Christian (or non-Christian) person or community can have because it addresses the deepest issues of life: “our covenant (or its denial) with the creator of all reality” (Bolognesi 2001: 98). Theology<sup>5</sup> provides the fundamental ingredients of a world view and the basic starting points for scholarship in general.

De Chirico also supports the view that theology is the most fundamental science/perspective. In the published version of his doctoral thesis De Chirico (2003: 135) affirms that Roman Catholicism is in essence a theological system. Although this system includes philosophical, social and other dimensions, the basic core remains theological

4 Bolognesi’s definition of theology as application parallels Frame’s definition (1987: 76). One of the preoccupations behind Frame’s definition was to avoid the impression that theology can simply consist of an intellectual and academic exercise (Frame 1987: 81 & 85). Bolognesi (1980: 15 & 2001: 92) follows a similar path. The fact that theology should be “lived” and not only spoken makes it “not only science” (Frame 1987: 316). It is interesting to observe that many academic disciplines have practical implications, should be “lived” and not only studied, and so on. Yet I have never found a single instance in which they are considered “not only sciences” by vantiian theologians.

5 By “theology” Bolognesi often means systematic theology, in particular, which is considered as the theological discipline summarising in itself the results of other disciplines such as exegesis, biblical theology, and so on (Bolognesi 1980: 16).

and, in order to understand Roman Catholicism, it is necessary to understand its theology. De Chirico admits that the basic starting point of Roman Catholic theorising and culture is the ground motive of “nature and grace”. He borrows this idea from Dooyeweerd, yet contrary to the Dutch philosopher<sup>6</sup> he defines this basic motive as “theological” in nature (De Chirico 2003: 135, cf also Bolognesi 2006: 225). In the same vein he claims that the humanist ideal of autonomous freedom (which is, according to Dooyeweerd, one of the two poles constituting the humanist religious ground motive) is also “theological” in essence (De Chirico 1997: 10 & 43). Theology is therefore the most basic perspective even for non-Christian scholars and the most fundamental ingredient of all cultural developments.

According to Garrone & De Chirico (2002: 63), all cultures, including all human formative activities, are expressions of “a fundamental life-view”. Therefore it can be argued that “when theologies are different, cultures are different as well, inevitably so” (Garrone & De Chirico 2002: 63). Culture in its totality is regarded as the product of a basic theology. Different cultures are the inevitable result of different theologies. It is true that theology, in turn, is said to depend on a basic life view, but as the latter is characterised by “the gospel” (in the case of Christians, cf Garrone & De Chirico 2002: 58) or a certain “faith” (in the case of both Christians and non-Christians), all life views can be considered theological in essence. Therefore, the authors can simply argue that cultures are different because theologies are different, without mentioning the influence of world views or life views.

6 Dooyeweerd speaks of “religious” (not “theological”) ground motives. The difference is substantial and reflects the distinction between religion and faith. While faith is a modal aspect of our life, religion is not an aspect but a “concentration point” in which all aspects of temporal reality converge and co-exist. Religion, in a sense, “includes” all aspects of our experience, which has tremendous consequences for the present discussion. While De Chirico’s approach includes the religious ground motive within the domain of theology, Dooyeweerd situates the ground motive as a pre-scientific basis of all sciences, therefore accessible to all scholars and influencing all cultural endeavours.

Theology is not only the foundation of culture, in general, but also of, for instance, scholarship, in particular. On this point one might mention, for example, De Chirico's appreciation of the political works of Johannes Althusius. This famous German Calvinist scholar produced an excellent example of a Christian political approach which is currently still much valued. According to De Chirico (2007: 117), Althusius' political views are based on a "theology of the covenant".<sup>7</sup> This argument aims at suggesting that theology offers the most solid foundation for Christian scholarship, in this specific case for Christian political thinking.

This brief overview indicated that at IFED theology is not merely a science among others and is not to be placed on the same level with others. In this regard Bolognesi observes that Pannenberg is correct in reproaching theologians for not consulting the humanities sufficiently, but is wrong "when he places theological research and the other disciplines on the same level" (Bolognesi [*sa*]: chapter 1, footnote 5).<sup>8</sup> Theology should be placed on a higher level.

7 On this point De Chirico's assessment does not agree with Althusius' understanding of his own work. Althusius understood his political views as based primarily on the Bible (especially on certain texts) not on theology. Althusius distinguished the domain of Christian politics from the domain of Christian theology and law, though maintaining their common foundation on Scripture, not on theology. All sciences are nourished from Scripture according to their specific needs (Althusius 1961: 2-6). Of course it would be acceptable to say that Althusius' work is based on a religious ground motive.

8 An interesting side aspect of this approach is that, at least in some instances the terms "theology" or "theological" become synonyms for "biblical", "correct" or "accurate". It is interesting, for example, to read Bolognesi's (1995: 113-5) description of four Christian views concerning the state. The first view (which he calls "eschatological") relates the state to the order of future judgement. The second view ("amartiological") links the state to the order of sin, and a third one ("Christological") to the order of redemption. The fourth (and more correct one in Bolognesi's view) relates the state especially to the order of creation. Is the latter therefore called "creational"? No: as it is the most appropriate one for Bolognesi, he calls it "theological" (Bolognesi 1995: 115).

## 1.2 Theology as mediator

From a VanTilian point of view (cf Frame 1987: 73-5, 85-6), one of the reasons for placing theology on a higher level is that while theology deals with the Bible the other sciences deal with God's creation. Although creation is also God's revelation, there is a priority of God's revelation (in Scriptures) above God's general (created) revelation (Frame 1987: 137-8).<sup>9</sup> For the Christian, theology has a superior degree of authority and reliability, whence the superior status. In this respect Bolognesi (1994: 80) distinguishes between the "human sciences" (the humanities) and "the science of God" (theology).

At this point, however, it is necessary to observe that, being placed above the other sciences, theology is also placed as a mediator between the Bible and the other sciences constituting Christian scholarship. Theology has direct access to the Bible, whereas the sciences of creation do not possess the tools to access the biblical revelation.<sup>10</sup> They can do so indirectly, however, by consulting theology and theologians. In this way, the light of the revelation (as in Scriptures) can shine on their fields of study. Theology is supposed to mediate biblical doctrines, a biblical world view, a religious ground motive or faith (Bolognesi 2001: 93) to the benefit of other fields of study.

One interesting consequence of elevating theology to a mediating role is that theology becomes strictly associated with the realities that it is supposed to mediate (a Christian world view, for instance). Mediator and mediated are nearly considered to be one reality. For example, it is interesting to observe how Bolognesi (1980: 4) creates a strict link between theology and biblical "doctrine" (cf also Bolognesi 1980: 21). In his writings the biblical term "doctrine" is often regarded as a synonym of the term "theology" (which is not found in the Bible). On this basis, for example, he feels entitled to paraphrase texts from the first and second Epistles to Timothy while substituting "doctrine" with "theology". He writes: "the Scripture teaches us that sound

9 On this specific point reformational scholars have no reason to disagree (cf Wolters 1986: 33-4).

10 In De Chirico's words "those tools are to be found in the workshop of theology" (E-mail De Chirico-Coletto, 6/12/2000).

theology is useful to life and deeply intertwined with it”<sup>11</sup> (Bolognesi 1992: 2). This strategy creates the impression that when the Bible speaks of “doctrine” it indicates what is currently called theology.

Theology is also strictly associated with creeds. “What can be said of a creed is true of theology as well” (Bolognesi 1980: 5 & 21). A more important issue, however, is that theology is strictly associated with all types of pre-scientific presuppositions which it is supposed to mediate. For example, world views (Garrone & De Chirico 2002: 63, Bolognesi 2002: 55), presuppositional frameworks (Bolognesi 1991: 85-8), or religious ground motives (Bolognesi 1991: 87, De Chirico 1997: 10 & 43) become synonyms for (or parts of) theology. Alternately they are often defined as “theological”. As observed earlier, one of the reasons for this strategy appears to be that the content of faith or “the gospel” is the main ingredient of a Christian’s world view, ground motive or other presuppositions. Pre-scientific presuppositions are informed by such a faith, therefore they can be defined as “theological” (Garrone & De Chirico 2002: 63).<sup>12</sup>

One of the consequences of this move is that these pre-scientific presuppositions are no longer regarded as pre-scientific but as (pre-)theological. In other words, although they constitute the (necessary) background of all sciences, they nevertheless “belong” to the field of study of theology, are part of theology and are accessible only (or preferably) to theologians. Once again, the mediator (theology) and what is mediated (pre-scientific presuppositions) are strictly associated and even confused. This is not at all a peculiar problem of IFED. In fact, in the VanTilian tradition resistance against a clear distinction between scientific and pre-scientific thinking dates back to the 1970s (Poynthress 1976: 175-89). For some VanTilian authors the New Testament itself contains “theology” and some biblical authors are regarded as “theologians” (Gaffin 1971: 233-4). Even in this instance, the wrong impression is created that Christian scholarship depends/is based on “theology”.

11 “La Scrittura insegna che la sana teologia e’ qualcosa di utile alla vita e profondamente intrecciata con essa (1 e 2 Timoteo)”.

12 E-mail De Chirico-Coletto, 6/12/2000.

As noted by Vander Stelt (1989), the main problem with theological mediation is the elimination of a direct connection between the Scriptures and the (non-theological) sciences of creation.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, this approach to some extent automatically “secularises” the sciences operating on the “lower” sphere (Vander Stelt 1989: 16). In addition, when theology is conceived as both pre-scientific (identified with pre-scientific presuppositions) and supra-scientific (placed on a “higher” level with respect to “common” sciences) its scientific character is obviously jeopardised.

Likewise, this model presents clear similarities with the Thomistic view of theology as the “queen of the sciences”. The following section will explore the role of theology in its relationship with the sciences related to creation, in the approach proposed by IFED.

## 2. The interaction of theology with other sciences

### 2.1 The handmaids helping the queen

The first mechanism to be observed is that the sciences of creation are allowed to “serve” or help their theological queen. They have no direct access to the special revelation, but they can somehow become useful instruments for theological purposes.

In his “Introduction to theology” Bolognesi (1980: 15-6) argues that theologians should not reject the help of the humanities “in order to understand the context in which the christian message is going to be communicated”. In this context he mentions in particular the usefulness of philosophy and ethics. A similar idea is presented when Bolognesi (1996: 3) states that even the different artistic disciplines “must be at the service of a discourse with and about God”. The impression is that he is considering the theological discourse. In a letter De Chirico argues that theology can to a large extent be helped by other sciences.<sup>14</sup> His claim parallels Frame’s (1987: 215-318) conviction that logic, history or psychology are helpful “tools” for theology.

13 On the dangers of the mediating role of theology, cf also a lucid analysis by Dooyeweerd (1980: 135).

14 E-mail De Chirico-Coletto, 6/12/2000.

This aspect of the mutual relationship among sciences (the sciences supporting theological work) points towards at least one side of a positive cooperation among scholars and therefore towards the ideal of a common effort for Christian scholarship. In my opinion, however, this is not so simple.

For example, it would be important to ask the following questions. Is the service to theology only aimed at confirming what theology has already said or is it eventually open to the possibility of modifying theological opinions and positions? On this point, Bolognesi's (1980: 16) declaration that the humanities have no say regarding "the content of theological work itself" is not very promising. The impression is that what is proposed is not cooperation on the same level. That would not be possible, because there is no common level. What is proposed is a theological "use" of the sciences in the lower sphere. The impression is that theology decides the content and the extent of this service. When theology "serves" the "lower" sciences by applying God's Word on their behalf, it is again theology that controls the operation.

It would be equally important to ask whether the service to Christian theology should be rendered by Christian sciences or whether this is not important. For example, my impression is that from IFED's point of view theology can receive support from several (Christian or non-Christian) philosophies without incurring considerable risks. De Chirico (2000: 109) does not complain, for example, that the background of Vanhoozer's evangelical theology of interpretation is to be found in Austin's philosophy of linguistic acts (which is a rather secularised type of approach). De Chirico may regard this as a formal use of non-Christian philosophical tools. What matters to him is that Vanhoozer's approach is "theologically rooted" (De Chirico (2000: 109) in the doctrine of the Trinity, in particular. In other words, which philosophy (Christian or non-Christian) is used does not appear to be important, provided it is used under the control of theology. Like Frame (1987: 97, 314 & 318), De Chirico probably believes that, depending on the circumstances, the skilled theologian can utilise the services of non-Christian philosophies without entering into any particular commitment with them and without meeting particular

problems.<sup>15</sup> But no specific commitment means that no specific choice is made and that there is no solid philosophical backup to one's theology (or an eclectic backup composed of a collage of discordant approaches).

In fact, the dream of theological “promiscuity” – with respect to different philosophies – is often accompanied by an opposite dream of theological “celibacy”. Bolognesi illustrates this second attitude. In the 1980s, after delivering a few promising statements that a Christian philosophy is needed to support Christian theology, Bolognesi (1980: 13) hardly discussed which philosophy supports his theological work or that of IFED. When one issue of *Studi di teologia* was dedicated to the work of Herman Dooyeweerd,<sup>16</sup> Bolognesi (1994a: 101-2) declared that reformational philosophy presented several flaws and was therefore not suitable for the evangelical theologian. He never stated which philosophy, in his opinion, should constitute a preferable support for evangelical theology.

De Chirico tries to go a step further. Though he may accept a formal, non-committed and theologically rooted use of secular philosophy, he (De Chirico 2002: 84-5) criticises the theologians who are too influenced by postmodern philosophy. On the contrary, he (De Chirico 2002: 85) declares that his own theology is supported by the work of Cornelius Van Til. The problem is that Van Til has been a brilliant apologist and theologian but has not elaborated any philosophical system. As Van Til (1971: 73) himself wrote to Stoker, he had no intention of providing philosophical contributions. If De Chirico is not willing to adopt either a reformational philosophical backup or a secular one, he may be following Frame's (1987: 88) advice that theology should be based either on the word of God directly or on apologetics (on theology itself). My impression is that in these

15 On the illusory character of a merely “formal use” of philosophical ideas and categories for theological purposes, cf Dooyeweerd (1980: 153). In this section, of course, I am not opposing every type of interaction between Christian theology and secular philosophy. Yet the choice of one's philosophical approach in support of one's theology has serious consequences and is something that should not be made lightly.

16 *Studi di teologia (nuova serie)* 6(2) n 12.

circles a positive and non-instrumental relationship between theology and philosophy has not yet been developed.

## 2.2 The queen directing the handmaids

A second mechanism should be observed in this section. Not only do the *ancillae* help the queen; the queen also directs the ancillae. According to a “theology-based” approach, when scholars want to achieve a Christian understanding of their particular field of study, they need to be informed about biblical teachings and perspectives. As this is the field of theology, Christian scholars will have to accept the guidance of theology in their field of study. It is the responsibility of theology to direct them towards a Christian orientation.

Bolognesi (1991: 85, 2001: 91), for example, mentions that it is the responsibility of theology to provide a solid foundation for Christian ethics. In his opinion the shortcomings of evangelical ethics (as a science) are to a large extent due to a lack of proper theological insight. In fact, evangelical ethics was established on a rather dualist background, which is inadequate. Christian ethics needs to be based on “something unitary” (Bolognesi 1991: 87). He finds this unifying factor in the biblical motive of Creation-Fall-Redemption (suggested by reformational philosophy, cf his footnote 7). This is the “theological framework” which Bolognesi (1991: 85) recommends as allowing “the application of biblical principles” in ethics. In other words, ethics needs the guidance of theology.

De Chirico’s (2005: 122-3) introduction to the issue of *Studi di teologia* dedicated to the doctrine of the Trinity<sup>17</sup> (and published under the editorial direction of De Chirico) aims to demonstrate that the fundamental guidelines for a Christian ontology (Rushdoony 2005), Christian ethics (De Chirico 2005a), and Christian environmental studies (Williams 2005) should be derived from the doctrine of the Trinity. This is another attempt at showing that the Christian sciences should be directed by theology.

According to Bolognesi, theology should be the leading factor in the shaping of a whole “culture in the fullest sense of the

17 *Studi di teologia (nuova serie)* 17(2) n 34.

term”. It would be easier, according to Bolognesi (1998: 3), to limit the work to a single sector, but “doctrine and spirituality influence every sphere of existence”. I agree that theology deals with reality as a whole. What I miss in this type of argument is a reference to what Vollenhoven used to call the *grens* (the proper limit or border) of any scientific discipline.

### 3. Theological ‘invasion’?

As God should be honoured “in all spheres of life”, theology must deal with human life in its totality (Bolognesi 2001: 92). Theology is an “application entailing a 360 degrees commitment” which is expressed “a tutto campo” (everywhere, Bolognesi 2001: 93). It was pointed out earlier that in the “theology-based” approach theology is inclined to appropriate several pre-scientific presuppositional frameworks like world views or ground motives. In this section a similar mechanism should be observed: in this approach theology tends towards hypertrophy, a swelling in which it is tempted to include other sciences within itself.

Bolognesi (1980: 16) placed ethics and philosophy within the theological disciplines. Later Bolognesi 1991: 88) mentions that “theology doesn’t deserve its name if it is not ethics as well”. He continues: “theology is within ethics” (Bolognesi 1991: 88, cf also 1990: 219). In an unpublished document Bolognesi ([*s a*] chapter 1: 3) extends a similar operation to anthropology. First he suggests that Christian anthropology should be “anchored to the biblical revelation”. As Calvin stated, knowledge of man is strictly related to the knowledge of God. Therefore, Bolognesi ([*s a*] chapter 1: 3) concludes: “at the centre of anthropology there is theology itself”. Ethics and anthropology are also theological at their core.

In a discussion on hermeneutics De Chirico (2000: 109) endorses Vanhoozer’s view that “ontology, epistemology and ethics” are basic to interpretation. They are rooted into “religious presuppositions”. Yet De Chirico also declares that, as a consequence of this fact, when we interpret anything “we endorse theological choices”. In his view the question “is there meaning in this text? is an eminently theological

question” (De Chirico 2000: 109). The impression is that even “ontology, epistemology and ethics”, depending on fundamental theological choices, should be added to the list of “theological” disciplines.<sup>18</sup>

Another strategy to include non-theological perspectives within theology is labelling ideas and research produced by other disciplines as “theology/ical” concepts. For example, although Bolognesi (1995: 151-65) includes in section four of this article a discussion of several concepts (public justice, communalism, individualism) originally introduced by (reformed) politicians and philosophers of politics,<sup>19</sup> he states that he is presenting a “theology of the state” and a “theological orientation” (Bolognesi 1995: 151).

When theology is defined as an “application of the Word of God to all spheres of life” (cf footnote 4) the mechanism of “inclusion” or theologisation cannot be avoided in the long run. In fact, this definition of theology may correspond to a definition of Christian scholarship in its entirety.<sup>20</sup> Whenever biblical teachings are “applied”, for whatever purpose, to whatever “sphere of life”, one is meant to deal with “theology”. In the end one will have to reach Frame’s (1987: 128) conclusion that: “all theorizing is theologizing!”<sup>21</sup> Not only all theorising, but also all human activities amount to theology. For example, De Chirico (2007a: 2) recently wrote that every time “we link to the web we perform a theological act”. This attitude is more widespread than one may think and should not be imagined to represent only the unique views of the theologians of IFED.

18 On this point, once again, one has to notice a defective distinction between religion and theology. It would be very important to clarify the meaning of these terms. It is not clear, in addition, what De Chirico (2001: 66) means when he calls for a “theologisation of religions”.

19 In fact, in this section Bolognesi (1995, cf footnotes 64, 67, 68) often quotes works of authors such as Kuyper, Goudzwaard, Hebden-Taylor and Wolterstorff.

20 This definition includes, according to Frame, more than scholarship as “all human actions constitute responses to and applications [note the term] of the Word of God” (Frame 1987: 319-20).

21 For example, Frame (1987: 128) claims that the proposition “Sacramento is the capital of California” is theological in character! Why? Because it represents a true state of affairs, and the Bible insists that we should always speak truthfully!

It is now time, however, to provide a hypothesis concerning the possible background of the whole approach. The following section will argue that the mechanisms and strategies observed so far do not occur accidentally but are integrated by an underlying world view.

## 4. The world view behind the project

### 4.1 Grace above nature

It is my impression that, notwithstanding all the well-intended efforts, a nature-grace world view is still at work within IFED's theologising, in particular the version of this world view which is often labelled as "grace above nature" and is regarded as constituting the typical Catholic approach (Van der Walt 1994: 99). In simple terms, the sketch of the encyclopaedia of sciences promoted by IFED reminds one of the thomistic themes of the "queen of the sciences", the handmaids, theology as *scientia alternata* and so on.<sup>22</sup> When one focuses on the basic moves and mechanisms leading to this conception of theology and science, one acknowledges that they are similar to the mechanisms that shaped, for example, the catholic conception of the church. A comparison of the two strategies will prove helpful.

The basic "mechanisms" explored in this article, and leading to IFED's view of scholarship can be summarised as follows. First, a superior sphere of grace is created, in which one of the sciences (in this instance theology) is placed. As a consequence, theology becomes a mediator between a sacred sphere (God, Scripture, faith) and the lower sphere of sciences related to creation/nature.

Secondly, the relation between theology and non-theological sciences may be described by using the metaphor of the ancillae and

22 Though some basic similarities and analogies with the Catholic approach to ecclesiology have been sketched, it is not argued that IFED is simply adopting a Roman Catholic approach to Christian scholarship. In fact, other factors are shaping IFED's concrete approach to theology and scholarship, for example the influence of reformational and vantilian perspectives. As a consequence, though IFED's approach may still be characterised as a version of the nature-grace approach, it should not be taken simply to represent a Roman Catholic approach.

the queen. Theology has the queenly prerogative of directing the lay sciences. The latter depend on theology for their Christian direction, while they can also offer several services to theology.

Thirdly, a kind of “invasion” or “appropriation” occurs, in which whatever discipline or research is cultivated from a Christian perspective may be regarded as theology/theological. This mechanism concerns the “appropriation” of other scientific perspectives but should be observed in connection with the mediating role of theology, which also creates the conditions for a theological “appropriation” of all pre-scientific presuppositions and even of Scripture.

This section briefly explains why the same mechanism led to the elaboration of the Roman Catholic conception of the church. In fact, even in that area of reflection,<sup>23</sup> a sphere of grace was first created and assigned to the clergy constituted by sacerdotess or mediators. The lower sphere was assigned to lay members. The clergy has a privileged access to the area of grace, whereas the lay members (related to the sphere of nature) need a priestly mediation for their main spiritual acts. It is interesting to notice that in the Catholic conception, mediator and mediated are strictly associated and almost “confused”. One may, for example, consider the definition of the sacerdos as alter Christus (an alter ego of Christ). One may also consider how Mary, as mediator, is so strictly related to Christ that she has gradually received from the Catholic tradition all (and the same) titles or attributes of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, the clergy is of course supposed to direct the lay members of the church in all matters pertaining to faith. The lay members, in turn, provide services to the clergy in terms of, for example, political or economic support.

23 I am convinced that the “grace above nature” approach determines very similar patterns of thought in areas such as, for instance, anthropology and social theory. However, the exploration of these similarities is beyond the scope of this article.

24 Like Christ, she is supposed to be a mediator and (co)redeemer, to be born without original sin and ascended to heaven (cf the dogmas promulgated by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1854 and by Pope Pius XII on 1 November 1950).

Thirdly, the Christianisation of individuals, families and social institutions is often conceived as placing these entities in contact with the superior sphere of the church. In this instance, the mechanism should not be called “invasion”, yet it is interesting to observe that in the Catholic theology Mary, as mediator, represents the entire church. Likewise, the clergy, as mediator, is commonly called “the church” as if the “lay” section of the church was “included” in the mediator. Having realised the problems, the next question arises: what can be done?

## 5. Looking back at the Reformation

Although a detailed explanation of some pro-positive suggestions would require a separate article, an alternative world view leading to an alternative approach to scholarship will now be sketched. A strategy similar to the one used during the Reformation should be followed, when an alternative “model” was used to implement a more biblical conception of the church.

The distinction between a sphere of grace and a sphere of nature was eliminated, and with it the exclusive or privileged access of a clergy to a “sacred” area. In other words, all believers were declared to constitute a common priesthood. Likewise, all the sciences should be regarded as constituting the enterprise of Christian scholarship.

During the Reformation the Word of God was finally placed in the hands of the believing artisan, of the peasant and the mother, who were previously supposed not to have the “tools” to understand it. They finally had access to both the Scripture and the created revelation of God. Likewise, all Christian scholars in all academic disciplines should be encouraged to access both the Scripture and the created revelation.

The ecclesiastical role of pastors and elders was not eliminated by the Reformation, but it changed from a magisterial role to a ministerial one. The different ministries of the church have been placed “side by side”, without hierarchy, in a situation of mutual relationship, service and support. Likewise, theology should not be depreciated. It should merely cede its role of mediator and “director”

and take up its rightful ministerial place in the context of Christian scholarship.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of theology-based scholarship, integral Christian scholarship should be promoted. The latter should resemble a network in which Christian scholars working in different areas of research in the light of God's revelation are guided by a biblical ground motive or world view. They would be placed "on the same level" and they would contribute to a communal task through dialogue, cooperation and mutual service, without forgetting the necessary interaction with their non-Christian colleagues. Admittedly, such an alternative approach cannot be developed without first re-thinking the nature of scientific and pre-scientific thought, the nature of theology, a theory of the relationship between sciences and more. But this should provide material for another article.

Having explored the main lines of IFED's conception of Christian scholarship, one should ask what are the concrete consequences of this approach.

25 This alternative church model was based on a world view which, as Marshall (1991: 7) observes, has implications not only for implementing a reformed view of the church but for a view of society as well. In the following quotations Marshall summarises the basic "motives" of this world view. His examples refer to the relationship between different social institutions and are valid for the relationship between different sciences. He writes: "one motif is that God is sovereign over everything in the world. The second one is that, because sovereignty resides in God, no earthly institution can claim sovereignty for itself" (Marshall 1991: 7). "Calvin stresses that all human activities are 'callings' and are, as such, equal in the eyes of God. [...] Every part of life is to be lived in direct responsibility to God, and therefore no activity or institution can claim to mediate between God and man. Hence no institution has [...] a sovereignty which can override others" (Marshall 1991: 9). "They are not arranged in a hierarchical order reaching up to God, but are arranged side by side, supporting one another in their specific vocations, all equally *Coram Deo*" (Marshall 1991: 10).

## 6. Consequences of the ideal of theology-based scholarship

### 6.1 A summary of previous observations

It has been argued that the view of theology and Christian scholarship promoted by IFED leads to several tensions and paradoxical positions. The process of “invasion” should certainly be regarded as a paradox in itself. Supposing that the non-theological Christian sciences have no direct access to the revelation in Scripture promotes the secularisation of scholarship. Considering theology as both pre-scientific and supra-scientific constitutes a threat to its scientific character. The adoption of a nature-grace world view should also be regarded as highly problematic: reformed academic reflection cannot be conducted on a non-reformed basis. In addition: if the nature-grace world view has been rejected as non-biblical in the context of ecclesiological reflection, why should it be re-introduced in the context of a reflection on Christian scholarship?

Some people, however, may still regard the abovementioned issues as merely “abstract” problems. Are there negative consequences of this approach on a more practical or concrete level?<sup>26</sup>

### 6.2 Other consequences

The idea that theology should not be placed on the same level with other sciences hinders a true dialogue between theologians and other scholars. On the one hand, the theologian is afflicted by a “superiority complex” which is not conducive to good interaction. On the other, s/he has no sufficient resources to deal with the many specific challenges of non-Christian scholarship, which leads to frustration.

26 This distinction between abstract and practical consequences is used only for didactical purposes, trying to imagine possible questions and objections. I believe, however, that the undesirable consequences summarised in the previous paragraph are as “practical” and “concrete” as those illustrated in the following section.

It may also be pointed out that an excessive emphasis on theology hinders the enthusiasm for the development of multiple scientific competences in the Christian community. When it is believed that theology is the most important and crucial discipline, a community is inclined to devote to theology its best energies and resources, sometimes to the detriment of the cultivation of other sciences according to a christian perspective.

Theological studies are meant to be a task for all the members of the community who have adequate education and talents. These members may deal with other disciplines in their personal career or profession, yet this often remains something “apart”. In many instances it is not considered crucial that members make progress in a Christian understanding of their own professional field of study. What is crucial is that they contribute to the activities of the theological institute according to their capabilities. As a result, the engineer, the musician, the psychologist often make little progress in a Christian understanding of their own professional or academic field. Proposals about some members dedicating more time and energies to, for instance, specific philosophical or psychological studies are often received with irritation, unless the main approach is a theological one.

It may be argued that in the long run studying theology will pave the way for the cultivation of other disciplines according to a Christian perspective. This is only partly true. In fact, theology is not sufficient (and, in my opinion, no single discipline is) to create or to initiate a whole Christian “culture” or even Christian scholarship. What theology can provide is at best theological ethics, theological anthropology, theological hermeneutics or whatever other theological perspective one might have on history, society, politics or philosophy.

It is interesting to observe that wherever the theology-based approach is adopted, those who feel called to study non-theological disciplines often do not opt for studying at institutions where those disciplines are taught from a Christian or reformed perspective. They might rather register at prestigious universities (search for excellence), but the Christian character of their learning does not appear to be a big issue. This is due to the conviction that once they obtain a degree in, for instance, politics or psychology they can get the

Christian “part” of their learning from the local theological institute. It is also due to the conviction that Christian scholarship is a matter of integrating Christian theology and secular science.

Finally, one needs to mention the problem of the lack of concrete scholarly results/contributions outside the theological field, a problem which has already emerged in the VanTilian movement in the USA. Though theology is expected to pave the way towards the whole arena of Christian scholarship, the major contributions of the VanTilian school in North America are limited to theological studies, apologetics or theological politics. This is likely to happen at IFED, if its members do not opt for a different strategy.

While theology, the mediator, tends to absorb all the energies of a given community, it does not keep the promise of producing a reformation “in all spheres of human existence”.<sup>27</sup> In the long run, the practical outcome of expecting too much from theology is either disillusion or illusion. The former ultimately stems from the recognition that the expected results have not materialised, and the latter stems from the wrong impression that the achievements are nevertheless adequate.

## 7. Conclusion

The adoption of a dualistic world view counteracts the elaboration of an integral Christian scholarship and distorts its development. This article attempted to identify several mechanisms that contribute to a conception and practice of scholarship that does not help the implementation of an integral Christian scholarship “in all areas of life”. Finally, a few concrete consequences were pointed out.

This article does not aim to underestimate or depreciate the efforts of an evangelical institute and of the communities who value its contributions. The creation of IFED, the immense efforts dedicated to the project, the sacrificial giving of an entire community are amazing realisations that deserve to be known better among global-protestant circles.

27 The phrase is quoted from the Statute of IFED.

It is because I appreciate IFED's commitment to promote a Christian scholarship that I have offered the present criticism, which aims at being constructive. This contribution is by no means addressed only or even primarily to IFED. It is my belief that bits and fragments of the approach discussed in this article are present in many authors and institutions all over the world. Should this article help critical re-discussion of these crucial issues, it will have achieved its goal.

This article mainly focused on criticism, limiting the more positive suggestions to a sketch of how the Reformation dealt with Catholic ecclesiology. More positive guidelines towards an alternative approach to science, theology and Christian scholarship should be elaborated and offered. Additional research is necessary on this topic. From a reformational point of view, however, one should not forget the many contributions already offered on this issue by Vander Stelt (1989), Spykman (1991: 13-138 & 1992), Dooyeweerd (1980), Van der Walt (1994: 564-96) and others.

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