
John V. Fesko. *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019.

Reforming Apologetics is a challenging book for any who follow Cornelius Van Til in apologetics. John Fesko aims to retrieve a classic Reformed approach and, with it, the need to recover the value of the “book of nature.” This goal involves not simply arguing in a transcendental way, as Van Til and his disciples propose, but also returning to the classical arguments from the facts of nature and common notions embedded in man from the time of his creation. Fesko presents an overview of the classical method of apologetics, showing firstly how Reformed theology has never abandoned the light of nature. For this task, chapter 1 deals with the idea of the “light of nature” in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In chapter 2, Fesko goes deep to define and defend the common notions that all human beings share. However, Fesko identifies the need not to argue merely from the tradition of Reformed thought in the seventeenth century, so in chapter 4, he presents John Calvin’s theology about the common notions and how he never departed from scholasticism. At this point, Fesko demonstrates the importance of Thomas Aquinas, which leads to a critical discussion in chapter 5 of the concept of worldview used by contemporary Reformed thinkers. Chapters 6 and 7 criticize Van Til’s and Herman Dooyeweerd’s thoughts, respectively, and show how they based their thoughts on modern autonomous thinking. Finally, in chapter 8, he returns to the central theme of reforming apologetics, that of retrieving the role of the “book of nature” and common notions in defending biblical faith.

After teaching at Westminster Seminary California, Dr. Fesko is now a professor of systematic and historical theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi. His ability in academic research is evident throughout his book. He proposes to write his book from a systematic and historical perspective, given his training in these areas, although he has training in philosophy as well. Undoubtedly, Fesko is erudite with a comprehensive experience and knowledge in the theme of the book. The bibliography is copious, covering a wide range of apologetic subjects. Thus, Fesko is aware of the main discussions surrounding this topic and displays a pastoral concern to furnish a coherent Reformed method of apologetics to aid Christians in defense of their faith.

We now turn to Fesko’s manner of arguing and highlight certain points worthy of further comment. His criticism of the apologetical method of Van Til, which permeates the whole book, is not the focus of this review;

suffice it to note that Fesko displays some misunderstandings about Vantilian apologetics and recommend James Anderson's website, which provides a detailed commentary on each chapter of Fesko's book.¹ I have more familiarity with Dooyeweerd's thought, which also receives a vigorous refutation. However, I will also not dwell on that one side because Rudi Hayward supplies a critical view of the chapter dedicated to Dooyeweerd in an article on his website, which demonstrates the imprecisions of Fesko's book as well.² My point is not to defend Van Til or Dooyeweerd but to note that Fesko does not accurately describe their positions. Fesko's criticisms of both in his claim that they depended on modern philosophy makes it worthwhile to consider the chapters dealing with Aquinas's philosophical theology and Calvin's appropriation of scholasticism. Here Fesko's appreciation of Aquinas's philosophical theology comes strongly to the fore.

Unfortunately, Fesko's critical position misses the brilliant analyses of Van Til and Dooyeweerd in their identification of the major problem with Aquinas's natural theology, that is, its dependence on the Pseudo-Dionysian triple way, *causalitatis-excellentiae-remotionis* (causality-excellence-removal). For Aquinas, the knowledge of God can be acquired three ways: by causality, that is, the perfections found in creatures have their causes in God; by excellence, that is, the perfections found in creatures are found in God in their highest degree; and by removal, that is creaturely limitations. For Aquinas, there is an ontological difference only in degree between God and creation; otherwise, the knowledge of God would be impossible. God can be known by this triple way since the process of knowing is not only intellectual but also sensorial. Theoretical thought must retrieve images from the senses (*specie intelligibilis*, intelligible species). This is why Aquinas can be considered not a rationalist, but a mystic: knowing God requires no sensorial data, and Aquinas adopts a mystical approach that draws on Pseudo-Dionysius's mystical theology. Theoretical thought (*intellectus agens*) is capable of knowing God from reality because, according to Aquinas, there is an analogy of being. The conclusion, then, is obvious, as Van Til has seen: to support this method of knowing God, Aquinas has to deny or at least seriously compromise the difference between Creator and creature. Thus, Fesko has assumed nonscriptural content when accepting Aquinas's

¹ James N. Anderson, "Reforming Apologetics (Transcendental Arguments)," *Analogical Thoughts*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.proginosko.com/2020/01/reforming-apologetics-transcendental-arguments/>.

² Rudi Hayward, "Dooyeweerd among the Reformed Thomists," *Intermezzo*, November 22, 2019, <https://reformationalintermezzo.blogspot.com/2019/11/dooyeweerd-among-reformed-thomists.html>.

method and his five ways to prove God's existence. It seems that these trends of Aquinas's epistemology have influenced Fesko's argumentation about common notions and the book of nature. He tries to advocate an analogical way of thinking from nature to arrive at God; however, the link between them is filled by metaphysics.

Van Til saw that the way of removal is entirely metaphysical and without any support from Holy Scripture. If it is accepted in theological reasoning, as in Aquinas's system of thought, a mystical presupposition becomes the foundation that sustains the whole theological elaboration of the knowledge of God. Indeed, it is an uncritical and unproven assumption that the God of the Scriptures can be known from reality by a deductive process. In this way, Aquinas must presuppose an autonomous reason capable of knowing God by itself since he accepts the concept of rational soul (*anima rationalis*) from Aristotle. Classical metaphysics becomes the structure of thought that achieves God. Thus, Aquinas's epistemology is not a simple relation of cause-to-effect reasoning but a metaphysical dependence on a mystical way of thinking completely foreign to Scripture. Calvin, Van Til, and Dooyeweerd, in their own ways, have all been aware of this, which is why they could not follow Aquinas's propositions. In Calvin's thought, there is a rupture with the scholastic way of thinking due to this strong dependence on metaphysics. Fesko has unfortunately miscomprehended this rupture by arguing that scholasticism is simply a method. To sustain his appreciation of scholasticism, Fesko creates a Thomist Calvin, forgetting a significant difference between the two theologians: Calvin maintains the *sola Scriptura* principle while Aquinas does not.

In conclusion, probably an audience inclined to Reformed scholasticism or a classical method of apologetics will appreciate Fesko's book. Although Fesko has raised some critical issues concerning Van Til's apologetics and Dooyeweerdian thought, he misses his target in many aspects. At the end of the book, we cannot find a more developed approach to apologetics that overcomes the limits of the classical method. What Fesko is proposing here as a toolkit for doing apologetics is more a return to classical apologetics based on Aquinas's thought. However, to present a more accurate picture of the book, it is worth highlighting again the pastoral concern and the high level of academic references in Fesko's book, even if the quality of engagement with these sources varies according to his appreciation of them.

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