
Until recently, and especially in the English speaking world, Gisbertus Voetius was a name relatively unknown to scholars of the European Reformation. Much of the work undertaken on him, especially Arnold Duker’s masterful and scholarly three volume biography completed in 1914, are in need of revision; and although earlier work has concentrated on the significance of his practical theology and more recently in Aza Goudriaan’s book on philosophy, Voetius’s theological concepts and his doctrine of God have been largely neglected. Therefore Andreas Beck’s new book is a very welcome contribution and a refreshing reassessment of an individual now becoming recognised as one of the most outstanding reformed theologians in seventeenth-century Europe. The aim of this book is “the analytical representation of the doctrine of God of the orthodox reformed theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), primarius theologiae professor of the University of Utrecht.” Thus Beck’s principal question, which is the central focus of the whole study, is to what extent Voetius conceives the relationship between the contingent and necessary dimension in the divine (God’s) attributes. Before tackling this question however, Beck provides a comprehensive contextual analysis of the historical and theological background to the Nadere Reformatie, of which Voetius was one of the most central figures. He introduces Voetius’s biography and corrects errors made in previous scholarship. He also discusses in some depth the well known disputes and clashes between Voetius and Descartes, Labadius, Cocceius, and Maresius, with a substantial section dedicated to the dispute with Descartes. This is done, not to be informative, but to present a clearer understanding and analysis of the theological doctrines and to provide a broader background to the context within which Voetius was active. This discussion is vital as it illustrates, and perhaps exemplifies, the different epistemological, philosophical, and metaphysical disputes of much of the early modern period in a European context.

The most important source used in this study are the five volumes of the Selecta Disputationes (1648–1689), a collection of 358 disputations comprising, among other things, an abundance of citations and references to theologians and philosophers from all disciplines in the history of ideas. To emphasize their significance Beck quotes the nineteenth-century German theologian Johann Ebrards who wrote: “They contain the most elaborate system of reformed dogma and morality, and whosoever wishes to write a reformed dogma will not be able to avoid working through these five volumes.
However, it is laborious to pick out the dogmatically important questions, somewhat like finding pearls in the dung-heap. But the effort will be rewarded, as one will obtain an incredibly astute definition of the reformed doctrinal concept, not to be found elsewhere.” Voetius never published a systematic theology but, as Ebrards indicates, these disputations contain an abundance of material and Beck utilises these together with other works such as the 1653 *Catechisatie over den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* to produce a judicious and comprehensive analysis. Thus, the first part of the book deals with the historical context, Voetius’s biography, and a discussion of the sources whilst the second and third parts address Voetius’s theology and doctrine of God.

In the section on theology Beck stresses that Voetius’s understanding of natural theology is a theology directed towards the highest good or what one might term a ‘lived theology’ directed towards faith, love and hope, and the salvation of souls. Therefore, theology is not a means to an end but a practical science and here Voetius departs from the thought of Thomas Aquinas who defined theology primarily as a speculative discipline. The third part, which forms the focal point of this study, concentrates exclusively on the doctrine of God with detailed sections, for example, on God’s teachings, knowledge of God, the attributes of God, and God’s decree and human freedom. One significant finding is the link between the Scottish medieval philosopher Duns Scotus and the theological ideas of Voetius. Here the issue is addressed about the continuity of the theology of the reformers and the medieval school and the continuity between the theology of the Reformation and the post-Reformation period. Beck aligns himself with the ‘positive school’ arguing for a continuity between the major Reformation thinkers such as Luther and Calvin and the reformed orthodox theologians on the one hand, and on the other hand between the theologians of the medieval period such as Aquinas and Duns Scotus, and the theologians of the Reformation and those of reformed orthodoxy. It is, however, (as Beck points out), important to note, that there are significant differences in the methodology and content, but there remains nevertheless, a long and common tradition between them: a *fides quaerens intellectum*. However, as Beck indicates, it would be false to brand in any way or form Voetius a ‘Scotian’ but Beck does identify a definitive continuity of the thought of Duns Scotus. Indeed he indicates that the structure of Voetius’s doctrine of God is prepared by Augustine and Anselm and it is possible to recognize a definitive and continuous line of thought from Johannes von La Rochelle, Bonaventura, Heinrich von Gent, and above all Duns Scotus.

It is difficult to find fault with this volume. It is a brilliant analysis of Voetius’s theological concepts and an in depth study of his doctrine of God. It