

“Theology Not Religious Studies: Neo-Calvinism’s Defense of the Queen of Sciences’  
Apparent Subjectivity” - Article Review

This is a compellingly argued and clearly structured article that highlights the predicament of the academic study of theology in modern Universities against the tides of modernist thought that seek to discredit it as epistemologically biased. The article sets out by providing an overview of criticisms of theology in modernity, such as that of popular atheist Richard Dawkins, who doubts “theology has any real content at all,” and that of Donald Weibe, who posits that theology is dependent of the subjectivity of the religious adherents’ private assumption, which is an inadequate basis from which knowledge of public facts can be derived. Interestingly, the article does not choose to engage with the criticisms of the modern-day secularists directly, instead electing to illuminate the conflict with the historical precedence of the Dutch neo-Calvinists Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck when the Dutch government mandated in 1876 that universities must teach religious studies rather than theology. The article brings to light the fact that the problem in question is not novel, and that the neo-Calvinists’ responses to secularism a century and a half ago are still pertinent to the modern university.

The article highlights three arguments for the preservation of theology as a self-sufficient discipline: 1) That theology is far from unique in having metaphysical presuppositions unattainable by empirical observation 2) that theology’s objective revelation, such as scripture and church tradition, is observable by all, and 3) that theology’s secular counterparts, religious studies, is devoid of substantive content as an individual field of study. Among these, the first argument resonates most with a contemporary audience who is all too familiar with the myth of the natural sciences’ pure objectivity. The argument is an antidote to the misguided belief that the natural sciences operate on a mind-independent basis, as just like theology’s assumption of the validity of divine revelation, the natural sciences cannot function without the belief that laws of nature are eternally consistent and observable. As the article astutely points out, a deeply imbued Calvinist Protestant piety in fact helped consolidate Western civilisation’s faith in the value of the natural sciences because the doctrine of predestination ensured the cosmos’ eternal mechanistic functioning according to natural law. As such, there is no inherent epistemological conflict between science and theology, and the two should corroborate each other.