



## Methodological Musings on Historiography (A Rejoinder)

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### Keywords

Arminius; historical theology; methodology

I am grateful for the editors' invitation to provide this rejoinder to William den Boer's response to my review. As will become clear, Den Boer and I are unlikely to see eye to eye on all the specifics, but I hope to highlight some of the methodological challenges that we and all historians face. Approbation can be easily obscured in a critical review; thus, what I have written in the original review and elsewhere in print bears sincere repeating here. Den Boer's book is the most comprehensive treatment available of the doctrine of *iustitia Dei* in the writings of Jacob Arminius, interpreted within the framework of God's twofold love. In addition to his work on Arminius, he also provides a helpful summary of scholarship on The Hague Conference of 1611 and its reception of Arminius's theology. In these areas, as I wrote before, "the author has made positive contributions and moved the discussion forward."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Den Boer's book merits broad attention, and, regardless of any methodological disagreements between us, its attempt to examine the undeservedly neglected theology of Arminius is itself commendable.

Since Den Boer acknowledges that my review raised "important questions," which indeed was my primary intention, it seems only right to pursue some of these interesting methodological questions for the sake of the scholarly discussion with respect to Arminius and, I would add, any historical figure. Since most of the issues have been covered elsewhere, and these debates could go on

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<sup>1</sup> Keith D. Stanglin, 'Review of Willem Arie den Boer, *Duplex amor Dei. Contextuele karakteristiek van de theologie van Jacobus Arminius (1559–1609)* (Apeldoorn, 2008),' in *CHRC* 90 (2010), 420–425, there 425.

interminably, a point-by-point reply here is perhaps undesirable. Other scholars interested in Arminius and in these related questions are invited to engage the monographs and arguments in question and make their own assessments. Here I will focus on broad methodological assumptions and interact directly with Den Boer's critique only when it is most relevant. I will offer my comments under the four headings in his response.

### 1. The Search for a Leading Motive

Perhaps some would consider the debate about a leading motive or one central dogma as merely semantic. But a more fundamental issue is at stake. The quest for the central dogma of Reformed Protestantism, made famous in the nineteenth century by Alexander Schweizer, has been so roundly criticized in recent decades by Richard A. Muller and others that its demolition should need no rehearsal. This critique, though, does not preclude the search for important concepts and recurring themes in the thought of a particular theologian. It is vital, therefore, to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, dominant themes and motivations, and, on the other hand, the leading motive or the central dogma.

Recurring concerns combine to form part of the picture of any given theologian's thought. Certain themes may persist—even in a *central* way—in a figure's writings for a variety of reasons. For example, the recurrence of broad themes directly connected to the doctrine of God or Christ may simply demonstrate a thinker's continuity with Scripture and the Christian tradition. Other themes may recur because a particular theologian reckons these themes to be neglected, misunderstood, or misused by others. Or perhaps a certain doctrinal point truly captivates a theologian for its explanatory power and practical value.

Such captivating questions often become motivating factors that lead theologians to emphasize one doctrinal theme over another. These motivations are points of departure for polemical and constructive theology. Typical motivations such as the problem of evil (theodicy) or practical problems arising from pastoral ministry drive theologians to dig deeper and find answers, again showing continuity with centuries of Christian theology. In this way, these motivations may become *central* in the sense of their influence in particular, distinct directions.

When providing a secondary account of a theologian's work, the possibilities for understanding the complete picture increase when a greater number of recurring themes and motivations can be discerned. At the same time, regard-

less of how often certain themes may recur or how forcefully the motivations may impel premodern theologians, these factors do not supersede or supplant the traditional structure of theological system handed down from the early church and shaped by medieval scholastics.

How can a historian discern which themes and motivations are *more central* than others to a figure's thought? One can do a simple word count, but the repetition of terms such as 'grace,' 'Christ,' or 'justice' may only indicate one's continuity with the tradition. If showing this continuity is the goal, then this is a good starting place. A more reliable starting point, of course, would be to look for clues throughout the corpus, such as claims that "x depends on y." For instance, one could identify *fundamentum* language and analyze these foundations and their connections, as I did in my first monograph with respect to Arminius.<sup>2</sup>

Distinct from recurring themes and motivating factors in a theological system, what then is a central dogma? I mean by this technical term only what other historians intend who have written about this phenomenon. The nineteenth-century understanding of central dogma has been summarized as "the controlling element" or "fundamental principle of Christian doctrine."<sup>3</sup> It is a "deductive principle";<sup>4</sup> that is, a central dogma is a single principle from which the remainder of one's theology can be deduced. A central dogma is "the central, dominating thought" and "the fundamental or material principle" around which all other doctrines are constructed.<sup>5</sup> In this sense of the term, the notion of a central dogma is foreign to the thought of most premodern theologians, and the identification of such a dogma is therefore a modern imposition not supported by the primary sources.

In addition to these descriptions, the difference between important themes or motivations and a central dogma is sometimes reflected in the difference between the small but significant words "a/an/some" (indefinite) and "the"

<sup>2</sup> Keith D. Stanglin, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation. The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate, 1603–1609* [BSCH 27] (Leiden, 2007), pp. 89–93, 197, 213–221, and 227–234.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 2003), 1: 124.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin. Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* [Oxford Studies in Historical Theology] (New York, 2003), pp. 94–98, there 95.

<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Muller, 'The Problem of Protestant Scholasticism—A Review and Definition,' in *Reformation and Scholasticism. An Ecumenical Enterprise* [Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought], ed. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids, 2001), pp. 45–64, there pp. 48–50.

(definite and, in this case, singular). Thus, when I examined the problem of assurance of salvation and its connection to God’s twofold love in Arminius, I wrote that assurance is

one of the great motivating factors *behind Arminius’s doctrine of salvation*, [...] [of] central importance ... as *a* decisive factor, [...] *an* important foundation and driving force, [...] *a* point of departure and is *a* fundamental criterion for the orthodoxy of a predestinarian system, [...] *a* quintessential condition.<sup>6</sup>

From these statements, it is evident that I intended assurance to fall within the former category of recurring themes and motivating factors, one that had been overlooked in scholarship. In other words, assurance is one factor among many that drove not the entirety of Arminius’s theology, but his doctrine of salvation. At the beginning of Den Boer’s extended critique of my monograph, he quoted these phrases, but somehow managed to omit the context and indefinite articles (italicized above) in these cited cases and others, which, as one can see, makes all the difference. Instead, he wrote that I made assurance to be “determinative” and “*the* driving force behind [Arminius’s] polemics.”<sup>7</sup> These are neither my words nor my point.

Compare the descriptions above with the following statements from Den Boer: Arminius’s view of *iustitia* is

the theological motive that lay at its [his theology’s] very foundation, ... the leading motif of Arminius’s theology (p. 11), the defining characteristic or *Leitmotiv* of Arminius’s theology (p. 40), the determining motif (p. 42), structurally determinative (p. 80), the all-determining leading motive (p. 279), in the entire structure of Arminius’s theology the fundamental concept (p. 325).

Den Boer is not positing one leading motive among many or a recurring theme that directly influences *some* theological topics. As he reiterates in his response, he wants to identify “*one* central motive” (emphasis his). His descriptions are virtually indistinguishable from the descriptions of central dogma cited above. Although he takes exception to the term, Den Boer’s response has provided no help in distinguishing his view from the central dogma theories of old.

<sup>6</sup> Stanglin, *Arminius on Assurance* (see above, n. 2), pp. xiii, 10, 91, and 93 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> William A. den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love. The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559–1609)*, trans. Albert Gootjes [Reformed Historical Theology 14] (Göttingen, 2010), p. 170 (emphasis added). Subsequent references to this work will be noted parenthetically in the text. My former review was of the original Dutch version with different pagination.

At the risk of belaboring the point, it should be noted that Den Boer's thesis is accompanied by all the problems of the old views. Let two examples suffice. First, we may take as the major premise of a syllogism this admission from Den Boer: "For the thesis to hold, it must be shown that this motive is consistent with the entirety of Arminius's theology" (p. 42). But Den Boer has provided no evidence of how God's justice is consistent with, much less "structurally determinative" of, say, Arminius's doctrines of Scripture, divine attributes, Trinity, incarnation, ecclesiology, or eschatology, to name a few. Therefore, by his own criterion, his thesis does not hold.

For another example, in the same discussion of his thesis, Den Boer says that *iustitia* is "the dominant attribute of God in Arminius's thought" (p. 42). No one can deny its importance for Arminius, but what makes *iustitia* the one dominant divine attribute? In fact, the "supereminent modes" (as Arminius calls them) of simplicity and infinity dominate and structurally determine his discussion of divine attributes. Moreover, as Den Boer notes in his response, justice "demands that God's goodness be satisfied." Could not a case be made that simplicity and goodness are just as foundational or dominant among the divine attributes?

Whereas modest claims demand modest evidence, universal claims must be supported by comprehensive evidence. The identification of a central dogma demands a greater burden of proof than does a more modest claim. These examples show that the primary sources and the exposition in Den Boer's dissertation cannot bear the weight of his claims about the "all-determining" role of *iustitia* in the "entirety" of Arminius's theology.

## 2. Interaction with Secondary Sources

It is impossible for historians to count or name all the sets of shoulders on which we stand. It is likewise impossible to acknowledge all the historians with whom we agree or disagree. But, in the genre of technical historical essay or dissertation aimed at specialists (as opposed to more popular-level treatments or surveys), there are at least two occasions when we should: 1) when a scholar lends a unique and significant perspective to common primary texts, especially when the interpretation is not common knowledge; and 2) when a reported datum or interpretation is directly dependent on the work of another. In these cases, it is not only good form to cite the sources when noting these data and interpretations, but such citations also make readers aware of the larger scholarly conversation and guide them to supplemental discussions. Depending on the subject matter, an exhaustive list of everyone who has ever

discussed a subject may be unnecessary. Yet if that exhaustive list only includes a handful of recent works, or if there is clear dependence, then there is no excuse for omitting such references.

In some places, Den Boer's work fails to record such interaction with a variety of secondary sources. Examples were provided in my original review, but here are two additional instances corresponding to the two criteria above. First, his section on God's twofold love (pp. 154–166) never once acknowledges the only significant previous discussion of this theme in Arminius.<sup>8</sup> I did not accuse Den Boer of first discovering this important theme of Arminius via my work, but one would expect him to cite this important precursor to his own view. For a second example, the reference to M. Ahsmann's four arguments (p. 26) depends not on Ahsmann, who does not enumerate any discrete arguments, but on another summary of Ahsmann's evidence which is never acknowledged as the source of the summary.<sup>9</sup> One who only reads Den Boer's book would not detect the source of this summary without knowing these other works. Any of these individual examples alone would not be worth mentioning. But taken together, and along with the claim that this study is "entirely new,"<sup>10</sup> these and other instances at least raise questions, which Den Boer admits when he observes in his response that methodological procedures may be "disputed." The question is not whether more citations could be added *ad infinitum* to any given footnote. It is a question about due diligence in research and the usefulness of an essay in pointing scholars to further reading. Both dependent scholarship and independent scholarship are to be expected; failing to distinguish between the two is not.

### 3. Contextualization

A synchronic, or organic, model of history writing gives attention to as many relevant contexts as possible.<sup>11</sup> A synchronic approach surveys the scene, with all its cacophonous flurry of activity and causal factors, and provides a coherent account of the interaction of all these influences. It is impossible for a historical account to be exhaustive in every detail, and it is legitimate to limit the scope

<sup>8</sup> See Stanglin, *Arminius on Assurance* (see above, n. 2), pp. 219–231.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> This claim, appearing in the original dissertation, has apparently been dropped from the English translation.

<sup>11</sup> See the description in James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History. An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids, 1995), pp. 31–32.

of one's work. Even if socio-political and ecclesiastical influences are bracketed out of a discussion, though, a contextual intellectual portrait should include attention to antecedent and contemporary influences, as well as opponents.

Den Boer promises a “contextual” account of Arminius's theology, which is also made explicit in his original Dutch title. What dominates, though, is his intent “to draw as independent a theological portrait of Arminius as possible” (p. 42). I agree with Den Boer that later developments should not color one's interpretation of the historical data. My only question remains whether his theological portrait of Arminius is truly contextual. There certainly exists a place for offering a theological portrait of a figure that focuses almost solely on that person's writings. At the same time, however, such an isolated portrait only tells part of the story. It is admirable to attempt to view the theological issues, as he says, “through Arminius's own glasses,” but Arminius saw these issues through a lens that included constant engagement with his predecessors and contemporaries—that is, his intellectual context. The method of comparison, if misused, could lead to distortion, but, when used judiciously, it is an indispensable tool in discerning the context of theological debate. Historical contextualization is a challenging task, but the occupational hazards do not relieve historians of this duty.

In his response, Den Boer insists that he has provided contexts (“the context of [Arminius's] own development as a theologian”), but his response does not reveal what contextualization he has provided. Although he does refer to some primary sources outside Arminius, I stand by my claims in the original review about lack of direct interaction with other primary sources.

#### 4. Use of Primary Sources

My original review only mentioned Arminius's disputations in two passing sentences, but Den Boer devotes over one-third of his response to this issue. His contention is that, even if Arminius did compose the disputations, they are not representative of his views. It should also be noted that excluding the full range of disputations as representative of Arminius serves the narrow quest for a central dogma. As Den Boer observed, I have made a comprehensive case, expanded from my first monograph, that Arminius was the primary author of his disputations and that they are indeed representative of his views.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Keith D. Stanglin, *The Missing Public Disputations of Jacobus Arminius. Introduction, Text, and Notes* [BSCH 47] (Leiden, 2010), pp. 43–100.

Rather than attempt to summarize 58 pages of detailed research and nuanced argumentation in this rejoinder, interested readers should consult and assess the case for themselves.

Whatever one does with Arminius's disputations, though, it is not enough to dismiss them as primary source material on the basis of sheer assertion. Yet Den Boer has not presented any evidence or considered any caveat that I have not already raised myself and taken into account. His repeated appeal to "statements of Arminius himself," without actually citing any such statements that count against the use of disputations, is curious. The fact that disputation authors could, as he claims, "disguise their deepest motives and views," does not mean that an author has actually done this. Indeed, any genre could be a vehicle for deception.

Den Boer's only ground for dismissing disputations is the presumption that Arminius must have covered up his true opinions in such a controversial environment. As I have written before, the polemical context of Arminius has no more effect on his disputations than it has on any other genre or document of his. When Den Boer wishes to retain the primary use of some sources but not others, one wonders if he is willing to accept the consequences of his speculation. To be consistent with his line of reasoning, one must dismiss *every* work of Arminius. There is no disputation, no oration, no lecture, no letter that can survive this conjecture. I say this not "out of fear," as alleged, but in a call either to eliminate all the works of Arminius from consideration for the sake of consistency or to offer some kind of positive criterion by which we could trust any writing of Arminius. Without such a criterion, historians are left with nothing that can be considered representative of his thought. In my opinion, unless a good reason is given for thinking otherwise, an author's authentic composition should be taken as an accurate representation of his thought.

In conclusion, no historical account is perfect or perfectly exhaustive, but I do stand by the belief that a specialized contribution to historical theology should not be concentrated around a central dogma, should be as comprehensive as possible in contextualization, and should interact carefully with primary and secondary sources. The following methodological assumptions, which formed the basis of my original critique, seem to be the main issues in this exchange: 1) There is a greater burden of proof on the historian who seeks to identify the one leading motif of a premodern figure's theology. 2) Diligent interaction with and citation of secondary sources is a basic responsibility of the historian. 3) Despite the inherent pitfalls and limitations, a synchronic method of contextualization is vital to the historian's task. 4) The omission of

accessible and relevant primary sources undermines the validity of the historian's interpretation. Whatever methodological debate exists here, it appears to revolve around these principles and their implementation.

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## REVIEW SECTION



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