

Sola Scriptura and Western Hyperpluralism: A Critical Response to Brad Gregory's *Unintended Reformation*

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Abstract

This paper discusses Brad Gregory's claim that the Reformation era's principle of *sola scriptura* is the 'most important distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism'. After an explication of Gregory's argument, the paper employs three counter arguments to Gregory's claim. Firstly, it is argued that late medieval Europe was not a unified institutionalised society as Gregory suggests, but was characterised by doctrinal controversy, power struggles with the church and social discord. It would therefore be incorrect to regard the *sola scriptura* principle as the main historical origin of the fragmentation of Western society. Secondly, a series of intellectual revolutions from the 11th to 15th centuries played a pivotal role in the fragmentation of medieval Western society and the rise of individualist patterns of thinking. The rise of theological schools and universities, the discovery of printing and questions about the reliability of the Vulgate translation were three key factors that fractured medieval society. The *sola scriptura* principle was a partial phenomenon within this much larger intellectual environment. Lastly, it is argued that the *sola scriptura* principle was neither an invention of the Reformation, nor a novel idea, and that the Reformers did not employ the *sola scriptura* principle in the individualist sense that Gregory appears to believe. In the end it is a highly artificial and reductionist argument to describe the Reformation's *sola scriptura* principle as the 'most important distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism'.

Keywords: Brad Gregory, unintended reformation, *sola scriptura*, reformation, late medieval Europe

1. Introduction

Brad Gregory's book, *The Unintended Reformation*, is one of the most debated publications that appeared in the field of religious history in recent times. Some scholars describe the book as a possible classic, while others belittle it as polemic history and mythmaking (cf Findlen, 2012, Lilla, 2012, Storrar, 2012, Radner, 2012, Martin, 2012). This book follows the main argument of the celebrated works of Amos Funkenstein (*Theology and the Scientific Imagination* -1986), John Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory* – 1990) and Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age* – 2007) that suggest that a shift away from Thomism within Latin Christendom, together the rise of the Reformation, indirectly contributed to the surge of liberal modernity and modern secularism. Being the case, this book seems to be part of a larger body of a Catholic polemic against Protestantism.

According to Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* attempts to explain the makings of modernity (2012:20). Gregory (2012:2) states his main argument as follows:

The Western world today is an extraordinarily complex, tangled product of rejections, retentions and transformations of medieval Christianity, in which the Reformation era constitutes the critical watershed.

Two central premises follow from his central argument. First, the modern Western world in all its variance, plurality and complexity shares a common heritage with medieval Western Christianity, and secondly, the Reformation brought about a transformation that is responsible for the way that Western society is structured today. Gregory's argument, in short, is that late medieval Christianity was essentially 'an institutionalised worldview', but a discrepancy arose between theory and practice (2012:21). The Christian values that were proclaimed by the church did not pervade the actual lives of many Christians. A way had to be found to make the lives of people more 'genuinely Christian'. The Reformation addressed the problem by ascribing the deformation of late medieval Christianity to doctrinal heresy and proclaiming a return to *Scripture alone*. This created new

religious controversies and disagreements that culminated in religious wars. In order to stop religious conflicts modern states adopted legislation to privatize religion. The struggles within the Reformation on the true meaning of Scripture resulted in authority shifting away from theology to other natural and social sciences, while objective reason, science, technology and human rights became the basis for public life (Radner, 2012:49). However, 'within the liberal institutional framework of rights' secularization has led to 'the proliferation of secular and religious truths claims' that 'constitute contemporary hyperpluralism' (2012:21).

A central thread that holds Gregory's argument together, but that has received little attention from scholars, concerns the Reformation's use of the principle of *sola scriptura*. The Reformation, according to Gregory, has replaced papal and ecclesial authority with the principle of *sola scriptura* that allowed individual believers to interpret Scripture for themselves. This inaugurated an era of individualism and the proliferation of various truth claims that in the end contributed decisively to the hyperplurality of modern culture. The centrality of the *sola scriptura* principle in Gregory's thesis is manifested in his description of *sola scriptura* as the 'most important distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism' (2012:92). The aim of this paper is to analyze and evaluate precisely this claim: Is Gregory's claim that the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation is the 'most important distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism' valid? Note that the research problem posed does not investigate whether the *sola scriptura* principle can be regarded as one of the historical factors that contributed to Western hyperpluralism. Clearly, *sola scriptura* did have a considerable impact upon the common-people Christian consciousness and this accelerated the proliferation of pluralism. However, the question that this article poses concerns the intensity, reach and scope that Gregory attributes to the *sola scriptura* principle.

The first section of this paper will explicate Gregory's argument. An attempt will be made to understand his claim regarding the relation between *sola scriptura* and modern hyperpluralism within the context of his whole argument. The second section will evaluate Gregory's hypothesis regarding the *sola scriptura* principle using theological and historical analysis. Attention will be given to schismatic tendencies in late medieval Christendom that preceded the Reformation, the effects of the intellectual revolutions in Europe around the 1100' and 1500's, and the origins and theological content of the *sola scriptura* principle. The paper will conclude by attempting to offer a clear answer to the problem stated.

2. Gregory's Argument on the Historical Consequences of the *Sola Scriptura* Principle

To support his thesis, Gregory identifies and discusses six different areas of Western life that was transformed by events related to the Reformation namely the relation between religion, science and metaphysics; the moral basis of truth claims; the public exercise of power; moral discourse and behaviour; economics; and lastly knowledge.

In the first chapter Gregory discusses the supposedly profound impact that a change in the late medieval theological paradigm on the relation between God and his creation had on the Western worldview. Whereas the Thomistic worldview stated that created reality participates in an analogical sense in God, Duns Scotus separated God and creation by emphasizing God's absolute sovereignty. Scotus also suggested that God and humanity share in the same being, which means that we can speak in the same terms about God and creation (univocalism). God was no longer seen as *esse*, that is, act of - to be, but as *ens*, that is, a 'discrete, real entity' or the highest being among beings (Gregory, 2012:38). The separation between God and creation meant that the natural world could now be explained without any reference to faith. This eventually led to a separation between theology and natural philosophy and a compromise of God's transcendence (2012:37). According to Gregory (2012:38) metaphysical univocity was radicalised even further by Occam's razor. Occam's razor entailed the epistemological premise that 'plurality is not to be postulated without necessity', meaning that whatever can be done with fewer assumptions is better (cf Walker, 1986:35). Consequently it is not necessary to invoke the concept of God if he isn't needed to explain the 'causal explanations of natural phenomena' (2012:52). Eventually univocalism became with nominalism the 'principal intellectual framework for natural and moral philosophy' (2012:38). Gregory (2012:41) states the supposed disastrous effects as follows:

Metaphysical univocity in combination with Occam's razor opened a path that would lead through deism to Weberian disenchantment and modern atheism.

But what was the role of the Reformation in all of this? Gregory identifies two contributions of the Reformation. First, by embracing Scotist univocity and rejecting a Thomistic sacramental view of life, the Reformation accidentally marginalised theology, because it created a space for the concept of the natural world as an immanent self-regulating system (2012:28, 43). Secondly, the Reformation brought religious and doctrinal controversies about that 'obliterated the existing, shared frameworks of beliefs' and caused contestation to such a degree that the only means for understanding the natural world would be reason rather than 'contested Christian

doctrines' (2012:44, 47). Here, Gregory paves the way for his later argument regarding *sola scriptura*, which is the thread that holds his argument together. Gregory's argument in chapter 1 is that the Reformation is essentially a schismatic movement that uprooted medieval Europe. In later chapters he identifies the Reformation's employment of the *sola scriptura* principle as the source of the Reformation's schismatic nature.

In chapter 2 Gregory proceeds to sketch how the Protestant Reformation and modern philosophy, in their response to medieval Christianity, inaugurated an era of 'unintended pluralisms' through claims based 'respectively on the Bible and reason' (2012:22). The Reformation, according to Gregory, attributed institutional abuses and moral decay in the church to 'false and mistaken doctrines – that is, mistaken truth claims' (2012:86). Hence, they rejected the authority of the Catholic Church and emphasized the authority of Scripture as the only true and authoritative revelation of God's will. The shared principle of *sola scriptura* was a uniting force that bound the reformers together (2012:88). Gregory defines the principle of *sola scriptura* as the assertion that scripture alone is 'a self-sufficient basis for Christian faith and life – independent in principle of papal, conciliar, patristic, canon-legal and/or any other traditional authorities in conjunction with which scripture was understood in the Roman church' (2012:94). However, the notion of Scripture *alone* would eventually result in 'a vast range of conflicting and irreconcilable truth claims' that led to heated disagreements (2012:92). Gregory (2012:92) states it thus:

Unfettered and unconstrained the Reformation simply yielded the full, historically manifest range of truth claims made about what the Bible said.

Importantly, Gregory regards the Reformation's insistence on *sola scriptura* as the most 'distant source' of modern hyperpluralism, because the 'sorts of disagreements' on important life questions have never gone away but 'have only been transformed, modified and expanded in terms of content' (2012:92). The Reformation brought about unprecedented interpretative individualism and with it endemic forms of doctrinal disagreements and conflicting truth claims. Spiritualists attempted to transcend the doctrinal controversies and relativize appeals to Scripture by appealing to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This, however, only aggravated the problem of pluralism (2012:101). Through continuous doctrinal disagreements theology eventually marginalized itself from philosophical and scientific discourse (2012:93). The Enlightenment and later movements in the nineteenth century, according to Gregory, attempted to address the discordance that the Protestant Reformation brought by replacing the *sola scriptura* principle with the principle of *sola ratio* (2012:113). The only solution would be to divorce reason from religion and to establish a solid neutral foundation upon which knowledge could be built (cf 2012:114). However, this endeavour also failed because there was never a time in the history of philosophy when philosophers agreed on what reason alone dictates. Reason cannot provide 'self-evident truths' because it cannot avoid epistemological presuppositions (2012:123). Instead, *sola ratio* has only 'replicated' the problems 'that stemmed from *sola scriptura*' in a secular sense (2012:126).

Having stated the long term problems that the principle of *sola scriptura* engendered in Western history, Gregory turns in chapter 3 to the religio-political conflicts that emanated from the Reformation and the subsequent transformations of the Western political and religious environment. Underlying Gregory's argument, again, is the notion that the Reformation's use of the principle of *sola scriptura* is the real source of disagreement that caused a proliferation of Christian pluralism that eventually led to religio-political conflict.

According to Gregory (2012:130) secular control of the church finds its beginnings in the late medieval period, but the Reformation hastened the process so that it was 'essentially accomplished by the second half of the sixteenth century' (2012:130). The question is: How did the Reformation hasten the process? Gregory's thesis is that the Protestant Reformation, as the result of exegetical disagreements, fragmented the church into churches. The outcome was that ecclesiastical authorities 'whether Lutheran, Reformed Protestant, or Roman Catholic, were compelled to rely on secular authorities both to promote their rival views of Christian truth and to protect themselves against religio-political enemies' (2012:131). Opposing early modern confessional regimes entered into bloody struggles during the 16th and 17th century that resulted in religion being associated with 'coercion, oppression, and violence' (2012:160). Whereas ecclesial and secular authorities existed alongside each other during the medieval ages, albeit in a state of tension, the relationship between state and church altered significantly after the bloody wars of the Reformation era (2012:162). According to Gregory (2012:162) the "wars of religion" encouraged political philosophers such as Hobbes to define the state on a non-theological basis and to separate politics and religion. 'Christianity as an institutionalised worldview' would be abandoned while 'freedom of religion would triumph' (2012:166). In countries such as the Netherlands and United States confessional Christianity has been replaced by a 'publicly shared way of life' (2012:172). However, freedom of religion has become a freedom from religion that has secularised society. Gregory (2012:179) states it thus:

The control of the churches by sovereign states and the subsequent separation of politics from religion also meant the separation of politics from morality – or rather a transition from a Christian ethics of the good to a secular ethics of rights in combination with a distinction between public and private spheres in conjunction with the privatization of religion.

In chapter 4 Gregory discusses how disruptions during the Reformed era caused by the *sola scriptura* principle affected the transition from the medieval era's substantive ethics on the common good to the modern era's formal ethics of rights. Gregory argues that since disputes in the Reformation era centered around the issue of good, modern moral discourse chose to emphasize rights, while leaving the 'determination of the good up to individuals whose rights the state would protect' (2012:23). Underlying disputes in the Reformation era on the common good was 'Protestant rejections of the authority of the Roman church' that produced a variety of opposing truth claims about what Scripture exactly taught regarding the Christian good (2012:185). The socially divisive disagreements within the Reformation on the teachings of the Bible were 'morally disruptive' since morality cannot be separated from politics (2012:202). The 'rival moral communities' that originated during and after the Reformation era were a direct result of 'Protestants' discrepant exegetical and doctrinal claims' (2012:203). The Reformation thus ended 'efforts in the Latin West to create a unified moral community through Christianity' (2012:203). Eventually the 'social divisions derived from the divergent reading of the Bible' would be an important catalyst for the 'modern subjectivization of morality' (2012:204). For Gregory the Reformation's principle of *sola scriptura* is directly to blame for contemporary moral relativism:

From the outset of the Reformation to the present day, the insistence on *sola scriptura* and its adjuncts has produced and continues to yield an open-ended range of incompatible interpretations of the Bible, with centrifugal social and wide-ranging substantive implications for morality (2012:205).

The Reformation, according to Gregory, contributed to the origins of a formal ethics of rights by rejecting Aristotelian virtue ethics and canon law in favour of a biblicist covenantal ethics that follow moral laws based on God's revelation in Scripture, specifically the Ten Commandments (2012:209). However, since there was disagreement among individuals on the meaning of Scripture, individuals and not 'politically favoured churches' had to be bearers of rights (2012:215). This naturally entailed that individuals would determine the good for themselves based on 'the word before him' and 'the mind of Christ within him' (2012:216). The formal ethics of rights that originated in the Reformation would inform the modern state's approach to rights that protect citizens against coercion by the state. However, no-one could have foreseen that the ethics of rights would become detached from its Christian philosophical underpinnings (2012:219). Seventeenth and eighteenth century modern philosophy was deliberately launched as a separate autonomous discipline in response to the persistent doctrinal disagreements within Christianity (2012:219). Enlightenment philosophers made conscious attempts to ground morality and rights in natural law (2012:221), while 'millions' of people would exercise their rights, specifically the right to religious freedom to choose different beliefs and goods (2012:219). Since 'the subjectivization of morality demands it' the central moral virtue in Western modernity is no longer *caritas*, as in the medieval Catholic tradition, nor obedience as in the Reformation, but 'toleration' (2012:232).

In the chapter on economics Gregory describes consumerism as the 'cultural glue' that keeps together the 'heterogeneity of Western hyperpluralism' (2012:230). Though he rejects any direct connection between Protestantism and capitalism, Gregory argues that capitalism and consumerism colonized western society by providing an escape of the 'religio-political conflicts of the Reformation era' (2012:23, 243). Gregory (2012:272) states it thus:

Doctrinal disagreements, confessional intransigence, and mutual hostility understandably contributed to a reactive proliferation of social behaviors, the formation of institutions, and an articulation of ideologies that together created modern Western capitalism and consumption. Discord about the Bible subverted biblical teachings about human desires and material things. Antagonisms between Christian moral communities liberated market practices from traditional Christian morality and produced a market society.

This is in contrast to medieval Christianity where economics was never practiced independently of theology. Protestant discord, analogous to the separation between church and state, created a situation where economics and theology were disembedded in favour of an economical ethics governed by the logic of the neutral market (cf 2012:243, 244). Events in the mid-seventeenth century Netherlands would form the bridge from medieval economics to modern liberal economics. Dutch regents reinvented the Dutch economy by providing refuge for people fleeing from religious persecution, engaging in long distance commercial trade, creating a tolerant religious environment and replacing confessional priorities with the priority of maximizing profit (2012:273-277). Scottish Enlightenment philosophers soon realised that a market driven logic that recognises the

‘universal utility’ of money provided ‘more governable subjects’ than religious passions that make the state ‘internally unstable’ (2012:283, 285). In capitalist theory pursuit of wealth would become a virtue rather than a vice (2012:284). The Dutch example was followed by the United States from the end of the eighteenth century. The American experiment in capitalism led to an unprecedented ‘devotion to ever greater levels of consumption’ and the rise of neo-liberal economic theories that proclaimed the need for de-regulated markets and maximum profit seeking (2012:284).

In the last chapter Gregory traces the secularization of knowledge. His central argument is that the ‘secularity, specialized and segmented character of knowledge’ is inextricably linked to the doctrinal disagreements of the Reformation era and the ‘ideological and institutional responses they engendered’ (2012:304). Occam and his nominalist followers, utilising the univocal ontology of Scotus, already tended to pursue theology, metaphysics and moral philosophy without regard for the interrelatedness of knowledge (2012:318). However, the Reformation would finally obliterate ‘any shared framework for the integration of knowledge’ by ‘rejecting the authority of the Roman church’ (2012:326). By questioning the doctrinal underpinnings of classical theology the Reformation problematized ‘the relationship of theology to other kinds of knowledge’ and contributed to the notion that religion is ‘a matter of belief and opinion’, not knowledge (2012:326-327). The Reformation’s emphasis on *sola scriptura* contributed to this notion of the irreconcilability of religion and knowledge. It regarded the Bible as the only source for ‘genuine Christian experiential knowledge’, but because Protestants made divergent claims about Christian experiential knowledge ‘endless contestation’ was engendered (2012:327-328).

Gregory argues that the Reformation precipitated the control of states over churches and the accompanying confessionalization of universities that made researchers seek new knowledge outside universities (2012:23). However, disagreements on Christian doctrine, instilled by the *sola scriptura* principle, and ‘intellectual weakness born of political protection’ made theologians unable to cope with new intellectual challenges and innovations (2012:23). Research universities that were not confessionally restricted fared the best in accommodating new knowledge and eventually became the bastion of knowledge-making in the nineteenth century. Since it was impossible to arbitrate between the various truth claims of Christianity, and since scientific knowledge demanded ‘universality’ and objectivity’, theology was ‘progressively marginalised’ in the university sector, while knowledge became increasingly secularised (2012:24, 304, 355). At the end of the nineteenth century the epistemology of the natural sciences with its claims of universality and objectivity became the dominant paradigm for knowledge (2012:353).

In conclusion, Gregory’s theory regarding the long term effects of the Reformation’s use of the *sola scriptura* principle can be summarized as follows: The Reformation invented the notion that Scripture could be interpreted independent of ecclesial, conciliar, papal, patristic and other traditional authorities. However, the *sola scriptura* principle brought interpretative individualism that inevitably resulted in irresolvable disputes, doctrinal controversies and endless contestation. As these disputes proliferated, social structures and institutional responses appeared that devalued religion itself (cf Radner, 2012:49). The medieval relationship between church and state was radically altered through a non-theological definition of the state; theology and economics were separated; and the notion of an integrated framework of knowledge was obliterated. Furthermore, social divisions derived from a divergent reading of Scripture acted as catalyst for a modern subjectivization of morality. In the light of these developments, Gregory identifies the *sola scriptura* principle as the ‘most, important distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism’ (2012:92).

3. Sola Scriptura and Western Hyperpluralism

As stated earlier, the aim of this article is not to deny that the Reformation did contribute to modern pluralism, especially with regard to its contributions on democracy, human rights and liberty and its emphasis on the equality of human beings before God.

In this section I will, however focus on Gregory’s claim that the *sola scriptura* principle is the most ‘important distant historical source of Western hyperpluralism’. Three counter arguments will be employed. First, I will argue that the medieval Latin society was not as homogeneous a society as Gregory suggests. Medieval Christendom exhibited features of fragmentation in a doctrinal, institutional and social sense long before the Reformation. It would therefore be incorrect to regard the *sola scriptura* principle as the main historical origin of the fragmentation of Western society. Secondly, I will argue that a series of intellectual revolutions from the 11th to 15th centuries played a pivotal role in the fragmentation of medieval Western society. The rise of theological schools and universities, the discovery of printing and questions about the reliability of the Vulgate translation were three key factors that fractured medieval society. Lastly, I will discuss the *sola scriptura* principle itself and

argue that the *sola scriptura* principle was neither an invention of the Reformation, nor a novel idea, and that the Reformers did not employ the *sola scriptura principle* in the individualist sense that Gregory appears to believe.

3.1 The Doctrinal, Political and Social Fragmentation of Medieval Latin Christendom

Pre-reformational medieval Christendom was by no means a hegemonic, monolithic or homogeneous body in 'organization' or 'belief' (Swanson, 2000:9). It was, in fact, characterised by diversity and often afflicted by doctrinal controversy, power struggles within the church, and social discord.

With regard to doctrinal cohesion in the medieval period Swanson (2000:17) states:

Although the church proclaimed itself 'one, holy catholic and apostolic', it embraced a wide and constantly changing variety of religious and spiritual standpoints. United by the broadly shared definitions of the faith and under the organizational headship of the papacy, the actuality of religion differed considerably from region to region, and even within regions, between different bodies, perhaps right down to the atomized spirituality of the individual Christian.

Swanson (2000:17) furthermore observes that it would represent a 'gross misrepresentation' to treat 'Catholicism' as if it provided a 'single unified, coherent body of dogma or devotion'. Though there was consensus on core statements of faith and certain shared virtues, religion 'was extremely flexible and variable'. McGrath (2004:18) also notes that doctrinal controversies were, in fact, 'characteristic' of late medieval Christendom. These controversies can be attributed to the emergence of a number of theological schools in the 11th and 12th centuries that followed their own theological methods. The arrival of various theological faculties during the 13th and 14th centuries at medieval universities gave further impetus to the development of a wide variety of competing theological strands (cf Swanson, 2000:18). Religious orders, specifically the Dominicans and Franciscans, constituted competing schools of theological thought and often competed for university chairs in order to gain control of theological discourse and mold a certain intellectual identity at a university. Yet, the religious orders themselves were by no means homogeneous in nature, but exhibited a wide diversity of beliefs (cf McGrath, 2004:19). The rise of heretical movements such as the Petrobrusians, Henricians, Waldenses, Lombardians and Cathars who attacked key doctrines of the church enflamed doctrinal disagreements even further.

Doctrinal controversies ranged from issues such as the Eucharist, the authority of the pope, the sources of Christian theology, methods of interpretation, the precise teachings of the church, to the status of the Virgin Mary. The main and most bitter theological controversies, however, emanated from the collapse of scholasticism into two rival schools, namely the realist school of the *via antiqua* that was founded in Thomism and the nominalist school of the *via moderna* that generally followed the teachings of Ockham and to a lesser degree Scotus. These two schools differed on epistemological and methodological grounds, which naturally lead to disagreements about the main doctrines of the Christian faith, especially with regard to Christology, soteriology and the Eucharist. The logico-critical method employed by the *via moderna*, in particular, contributed to a 'plethora of new theological ideas' (McGrath, 2004:25). This method was essentially voluntaristic and dialectical in nature and entailed that God acts according to his free will, never out of external necessity. However, once God has acted out of his free will and absolute (*potentia Dei absoluta*) power, He remains faithful to his ordained decisions (*potentia Dei ordinata*). Because the present order of creation did not result from God acting out of necessity, the 'moral and physical ordering of creation' ought to be regarded as contingent in nature (McGrath, 2004:21). This standpoint contradicted the deterministic realist doctrines of Thomism that included God within a series of causes and postulated the existence of intrinsic 'necessities' and extra-mental universal forms that determine the order of things. The *via moderna's* voluntarism together with its dialectical understanding of God's ordained and absolute powers, in contrast, provided doctrines with less rigorous foundations and opened the way for doctrinal pluralism. It also started a shift away from High Scholastic ontological theology that was pre-occupied with 'being' and the structure of things, to a deontological theology that focused upon God's personal relationship with humanity through his covenantal ordinances.

According to McGrath (2004:16) the 'astonishing doctrinal diversity of the 14th and 15th centuries' is to some extent due to the 'reluctance' of ecclesiastical authorities 'to take decisive action against heterodox views'. Much confusion existed on what constituted the official teaching of the church and what was merely theological opinion, especially with regard to the doctrine on justification (McGrath, 2000:25). This in itself is a sign of the weakening of papal and ecclesiastical authority in the 14th and 15th centuries. McGrath (2004:28-29) describes the crisis of ecclesiastical authority in the late medieval period as follows:

There was an evident lack of clarity concerning the nature, location and exercise of *theological* authority at a time when rapid intellectual development led to considerable diversification of theological opinions, and confusion concerning the precise status of these opinions.

Besides doctrinal controversies, power struggles within the church greatly undermined papal authority and clerical control. The Avignon papacy (1305-77) and the Great Schism of 1378-1418 gave rise to various ecclesiologies. At stake in the Schism was not only a political and ecclesiastical struggle for power across national boundaries, but the ideological and theological foundations of the papacy itself. Monarchical authority derived from the commission of Peter clashed with Conciliarism that attempted to subject papal authority to a General Council that represents the body of the church and delegates authority to the head of the church (cf Gordon, 2000:32). Though papal authority eventually triumphed over Conciliarism; papal authority would increasingly be limited to the Italian Peninsula; and a new tide of reformed-mindedness, anti-clericalism and decentralization would emerge from the conflict. With the rise of national churches ties between Rome and local churches diminished; rulers attempted to exercise greater control over ecclesiastical matters, especially with regard to appointments and administration; cardinals gained a more important role; and 'power' in general started to 'drift' to the localities' (cf Swanson, 2000:13-15). The erosion and decline of papal authority thus preceded the Reformation and cannot be attributed to the Reformation alone.

Sociological and political factors also played a significant role in the fragmentation of medieval Christendom. From the eleventh to thirteenth centuries towns began to develop in medieval Europe, creating a growing division of labour and stimulating commercial activity that cultivated a new kind of pluralism. New classes and values emerged that undermined the traditional hierarchical societal order and did not always show respect to sacred positions or institutions. Class struggles and social clashes between rich and poor, common people and burgesses, often erupted in violent outbreaks. Conflict was not restricted to towns. In rural areas struggles between lords and peasants was prevalent and would find a bloody eruption in the peasant's revolt of 1381. According to Goff (1988:264) spiritual leaders attempted to preserve the notion of unity at all costs, but a 'dialectic grew up between theory and practice' in that the emerging diversity had to be tolerated in some way or another.

Papal conflicts with emperors and the rise of nationalism, specifically in the western kingdoms of Europe, weakened the power of the Holy Empire considerably. The 15th century, in particular, saw a heightening in national consciousness. Resistance began to grow against papal interference in temporal affairs, partly because of the spendthrift of the papacy and excessive taxes. An ever strengthening sense of national identity made people feel that they 'have common interests against all foreigners, even the pope himself' (Walker, 1986:370). Emperors exploited the situation by appealing to the national sentiments of their subordinates in struggles with the papacy (cf Walker, 1986:371). The arrival of national consciousness as a critical role player in medieval Europe was announced most explicitly during the Great Schism when England, France, Bohemia and Germany insisted on their rights (cf Walker, 1986:391). Increasing linguistic differences eroded social and religious unity even further. Though the church addressed the question of language by using Latin, Latin did not become the *lingua franca* of ordinary nor educated people. Instead, foreign languages progressively triumphed, largely because of the close relation between language and national identity (cf Goff, 1988:276-277).

From the above it becomes clear that neither the Reformation nor the sola scriptura principle was the exclusive source of religious pluralism, but that widespread religious plurality already existed within medieval Christianity. Political and doctrinal tensions within the Roman Catholic Church combined with the rise of nationalism contributed a great deal to the erosion of community and a seething plurality that was waiting to explode in full-blown pluralism. The Reformation movement emanated from this already existing plurality, rather than being the original cause thereof. The Reformation was not initially a homogeneous movement that fractured in various parts because of disagreements on what the Bible teach, but was from the start a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, consisting essentially of 'independent reforming movements with quite distinct agendas and understandings of both how theology was to be done, and what its role might be within the life of the church' (McGrath, 2004:182). This point is important, because it indicates that the *sola scriptura* principle cannot be regarded as the exclusive source or origin of the fragmented character of the Reformation. Before the *sola scriptura* principle came into play, others factors, such as personal, local, social, political, intellectual, academic and cosmopolitan factors played an important role in the heterogeneous nature of the movement.

Though Gregory swiftly admits the diversity of medieval Christendom (2012:366), he in general depicts medieval Christendom as an institutionalised worldview. However, medieval Christendom simply did not present a unified institutionalised worldview as Gregory claims. Mark Lilla (2012:49) rightly criticizes Gregory of not discussing the Catholic Middle ages that preceded the Reformation in any detail in his narrative. Instead he provides a 'single, static, rose-tinted image of the World that we have lost'.

3.2 Intellectual Revolutions and the Fragmentation of Medieval Latin Christendom.

Europe experienced in the 11th century onward an intellectual awakening as it came into contact with the knowledge of the Muslim and Eastern world. Up to 1130 the West only possessed fragments of Aristotle's work, but contact with the scholarship of the Muslim world exposed the West to the full corpus of Aristotle's work (Walker, 1986:332). A revival of interest arose in the liberal arts and Roman law, as well as the application of logical method and dialectical thinking to philosophical and theological problems. Scholasticism, a movement that used Aristotelian methods of inquiry to discover philosophical and theological truths, emerged (cf Walker, 1986:324). Lay schools, independent of church control and specialising in non-theological subjects, flourished in urban areas (cf Walker, 1986:323). The first universities came into existence at the end of the 12th century. They altered the nature of medieval education permanently through the standardization of teaching methods, textbooks, degrees and student associations (cf Walker, 1986:334). Non-theological universities were gradually formed, which loosened the hold of the church on the development of knowledge.

Gregory's (2012:326) claim that the Reformation, through its rejection of Roman Catholic authority, constitutes the source of the separation between natural and theological knowledge is therefore not correct. As Grendler (2012:511) rightly observes, Italian universities already practiced medical, legal and physical science separate from theology, and produced specialised knowledge, before the Reformation.

The 15th century also witnessed a 'remarkable growth of interest in education' largely due to the Renaissance that brought about a significant shift in outlook (cf McGrath, 2004:12). The Renaissance fashioned a 'new secular morality' that would address the 'commercial and political life' of the Italian upper classes without rejecting Christian doctrine (Walker, 1986:394). An increasingly literate, professional and urbanised class of people began to emerge in Europe that eroded the authority of the clergy who were often poorly educated. Sophisticated laity who were able to 'debate theology as effectively as clerics established a major tension at the heart of theology' (Swanson, 2000:23). Subsequently, the notion that ecclesiastical teaching could be imposed on the masses based on the authority of the church as the lone interpreter of Scripture and tradition became increasingly untenable.

The discovery of printing was a major critical factor in the formation of intellectual culture in the 15th century and contributed a great deal to the erosion of ecclesiastical authority. It made the dissemination of new knowledge to various regions quicker to such a degree that the ecclesiastical 'enforcement of intellectual conformity' became a difficult enterprise (cf McGrath, 2004:17). Not only did printing technology allow literature to cross previous existing social barriers and contribute to rising literacy, but it also rendered the Bible accessible to the laity through the printing of vernaculars. Soon questions surfaced on whether church doctrines really did conform to Scripture. Swanson (2000:27) states the effect of printing on religious life as follows:

Increasing literacy and the greater availability of vernacular Bibles reduced clerical control over the interpretation of Scripture and allowed untaught individuals to assert their own reading of the Bible against the authority of the Church.

Together with the discovery of printing, controversy arose in the 16th century regarding the trustworthiness of the Vulgate translation. Erasmus's Latin translation of the Bible exposed deficiencies in the Vulgate and undermined the credibility of ecclesiastical teaching. The notion that the Vulgate translation was inerrant and possessed an authority equal to Scripture in its original linguistic form was no longer tenable. Questions arose on the theological reliability and trustworthiness, not only of the Vulgate, but also of church doctrines based on the reading of the Vulgate.

From the above it becomes clear that it was not the formal principle of *sola scriptura*, as such, that engendered doctrinal pluralism, but the emergence of a broader intellectual climate that created greater individualism in thought patterns. The *sola scriptura* was essentially a partial phenomenon within a much larger intellectual environment.

3.3 The Origins and Meaning of *Sola Scriptura*

Gregory makes two stereotypical assumptions in his book on medieval Christendom's use of tradition and the Reformation's application of the *sola scriptura* principle. The first assumption is the idea that the *sola scriptura* principle was an invention of the Reformation, and the second is that the Reformers gave an individualist content to the *sola scriptura* principle by elevating private judgment above the authority of the church (cf Gregory, 2012:94). Both assumptions are extremely problematic.

3.3.1 Scripture and Tradition

The two sources theory that assigned an independent authority to tradition alongside the authority of Scripture was only accepted as church doctrine at the Council of Trent in 1574. Up to the fourteenth century, Scripture was universally regarded as ‘the sole material basis of Christian theology’, and tradition as subordinate to Scripture (McGrath, 2004:137, cf Oberman, 1963:373). Thomas Aquinas (2006:136), for instance, stated unequivocally that knowledge of God cannot be attained through natural reason, but only revelation:

Although in this life revelation does not tell us what God is and so joins us to him as if to an unknown, nevertheless it helps us to know him better in that it shows us more and greater works of his and teaches us things about him that we can never arrive at by natural reason, as for instance that God is both three and one.

For Thomas *sacra doctrina* and *sacra scriptura* was virtually synonymous, because theology could only consist of the true exposition of Scripture through the ‘appropriate use of the ratio’ (McGrath, 2004:120). Aquinas’ view was shared by most scholastic theologians, most evidently, by the *schola Augustiniana moderna* who used the slogan *scriptura sola* (cf McGrath, 2004: 145). Consequently, the doctrinal teachings of the pope were expected to agree with Scripture. Canonists, for example, recognised the possibility that a pope might be a heretic, in which case the community, had the right to defend itself against the demands of the pope (Gordon, 2000:33). Neither was the authority of tradition equated with Scripture or seen as a source of revelation alongside Scripture. Tierney (1972:16) states:

But, before the thirteenth century, there is little trace in their (medieval theologians) works of the view that Tradition constituted a source of divine revelation separate from Scripture and little inclination to set up a distinction – still less an opposition – between Scriptural revelation and church doctrine.

Up to the thirteenth century the teaching of the church and of Scripture was seen as ‘essentially one’. It was seen as ‘hardly imaginable’ that Scripture and tradition could contradict each other (Tierney, 1972:16-17). McGrath (2004:137) confirms Tierney’s evaluation, by stating that the notion that late medieval Christendom appealed to both Scripture and tradition, while the Reformation only appealed to scripture, is a stereotype that cannot ‘stand up to critical examination’. It is, according to McGrath (2004:138) clear from the reading of medieval sources that ‘Scripture, and Scripture alone was regarded as the materially sufficient source and norm of Christian theology’. Papal decrees were at no stage treated as ‘having anything even approaching the status of Scripture’ (McGrath, 2004:140). Tierney (1972:18, 28) also notes that ‘papal power was wholly subordinate to Scriptural revelation where matters of faith were concerned’ and that it would be hard to find in the works of Decretists ‘any evidence’ that they supported the view that the pope is ‘above scripture’. Obviously when it comes to disciplinary and liturgical matters the pope had more room to maneuver. Though canon law used both Scripture and Tradition as its sources, it also did not conceive of two sources of divine revelation, nor did canon law itself ‘purport’ to be ‘divinely revealed truth’ (Tierney, 1972:19). Canonists, furthermore, believed that ‘popes could err in their official capacity as supreme pontiffs’ (Tierney, 1972:38).

From the above it is clear that the *sola scriptura* principle, neither, found its origins in the Reformation, nor was it an invention of the Reformation. The pre-Augustinian church already maintained the *sola scriptura* principle (cf Oberman, 1963: 366). McGrath (2004:145) states with regard to the question on the novelty of the *sola scriptura* principle the following:

Neither the slogan *sola scriptura*, nor the polemical distance this slogan proposes with reference to unwritten traditions or other putative sources of doctrine, is therefore to be regarded as an innovation introduced by the Reformation, nor as an adequate distinguishing criterion of the movement in relation to late medieval catholicism.

The disagreement between the Reformation and medieval ‘Catholicism’ on Scripture was not so much about the authority of Scripture or the notion of Scripture *alone*, but with regard to the question whether the church could act as the patron of the proper interpretation of Scripture. Technical issues such as the need for translation, the hermeneutical methods used in the exposition of Scripture and the centrality of the Word in church life were also sources of disagreement. Hence, the question on the eve of the Reformation was not whether the principle of *sola scriptura* was acceptable, but too what extent the *sola scriptura* principle can be applied. Clearly, the Reformation applied the *sola scriptura* principle much more radically than medieval theology, but not in the schismatic and individualist sense that Gregory claims.

3.3.2 The Reformation and Interpretative Individualism

The Anabaptist use of Scripture was indeed individualist and literalist in nature, but the same cannot be said for the broader magisterial Reformation. The magisterial Reformers utilised various hermeneutical principles to

serve as caveats against interpretative individualism. The first caveat was the Christological approach. Huldreich Zwingli, who is often regarded as the most radical reformer with regard to his view of Scripture, did not equate the Word of God with Scripture. The Word of God is facilitated through the Scriptures, but is only actualised through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ, furthermore, is the living Word of God which implies that the Scriptures needs to be interpreted Christologically (cf Zwingli, 1953:70-72, De Gruchy, 2009:70-71). Luther understood *sola scriptura* in close relation to *solus Christus*, *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. *Sola scriptura* was a formal principle whereas *sola fide*, *sola gratia* and *solus Christus*, all related to Christology, were material principles that guided believers in their interpretation of Scripture (Westhelle, 2005: 374). Luther's basic hermeneutic principle was that the whole Bible is the proclamation of God's grace in Christ (Runia, 1984:129). He thus summarised what theology is about with the words: *homo peccatur et Deus Salvator*, which means, Christ and us (cf Westhelle, 2005:378). For Calvin too, Jesus Christ is the 'very center and scopus of scripture' (Runia, 1984:142, 144). In his commentary on John 5:39 Calvin (1959:138-139) for example states:

We must hold that Christ cannot be properly known from anywhere but the Scriptures. And if that is so, it follows that the Scriptures should be read with the aim of finding Christ in them.

In his *Institutes* Calvin, describes the Scriptures as 'summed up' in Christ who is the 'foundation' of both the Old and New Testament (cf Inst. 2.10.4, 2.11.1). His understanding is clearly that Scripture as the written word directs us to Christ, who is the 'essential Word' (cf Muller, 1979:19, 20). Through a Christological hermeneutical approach Zwingli, Luther, Calvin and other magisterial reformers attempted to provide an organising principle for the interpretation of Scripture that would serve as a safeguard against individualism and interpretative pluralism.

A second caveat was to relate interpretation to the corporate judgment of the church. The magisterial Reformation did not place individual judgement of scripture above the corporate interpretation of the church, as Gregory seems to suggest. McGrath (1999:156) states it emphatically:

it is totally wrong to suggest that the magisterial reformers elevated private judgement above the corporate judgment of the church or that they degenerated into some form of individualism.

Luther in general regarded the church as the institution of God that 'determines the limits within which the interpretation of Scripture may proceed' (McGrath, 2004:146). Scripture is after all the *regula fidei* of the church. Though some of the pronouncements of Luther on *sola scriptura* can be interpreted as individualist when taken out of context, it was never the intention of Luther to elevate 'the private interpretation of scripture to a purely subjective criterion of truth' (cf Hendrix, 2004:46). Luther (2010:92) states the relation between church and scripture as follows in his larger Catechism:

We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sin, which is wrought through the holy sacraments and absolution and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire Gospel. Therefore, whatever ought to be preached about the sacraments belong here. In short the whole gospel and all the offices of Christianity belong here.

While Calvin was adamant that the church rests on the Bible, not the Bible on the church, he equated the visible church to a 'mother' that sustains the faithful so that the individual can never isolate him or herself from the church. Calvin (Inst. 4.1.4) states it as follows:

Let us learn, from her (the church) single title of Mother, how useful, no how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of moral flesh, we become like the angels'.

According to McGrath (1999:155) the magisterial Reformation was 'painfully aware of the threat of individualism' and thus endorsed traditional church doctrines that did not contradict Scripture. The reformers viewed pronouncements of certain councils and works of theologians from the patristic era as genuinely authoritative. Melancton, for example, did not see a conflict between the supreme authority of scripture and the witness of the early church fathers who were to be valued as early expositors of scripture (McGrath, 2004:179). The Reformers were especially guided in their interpretation of Scripture by the Apostle's creed and the Constantinople Creed of 381 which they regarded as the rule of faith. Yet, the authority of the church and tradition was seen as derived from Scripture and subordinate to that of Scripture (cf McGrath, 1999:153). Though the Reformers did in many cases break from Scholastic and patristic teachings, their hermeneutics was nonetheless not individualist in nature, but a 'churchly hermeneutics' that took seriously the 'communitarian nature of knowledge' (George, 2011:32, 33). Clearly, the magisterial Reformers were not negative about

tradition, but had a positive view of tradition and the notion of a traditional interpretation of Scripture, as long as Scripture was not subordinated to tradition (cf McGrath, 1999:154).

The magisterial Reformation's demonstrated their devotion to ecclesiastical unity through the production of catechisms and confessions that had to fulfill the role of resolving the problem of interpretation and the danger of interpretative pluralism. Numerous Reformed and Lutheran confessions were produced since the sixteenth century in various parts of the world to serve as interpretative keys to Scripture and foundational documents of the church.

A third caveat that the magisterial Reformation utilised to avoid interpretative individualism was the principle that 'Scripture interprets itself'. This principle entailed that difficult passages in scripture have to be interpreted in terms of passages that are clearer on the issue at stake. Consequently, doctrines cannot be formulated on the basis of individual passages or texts, but must accord with the central themes in Scripture. Closely related to the aforementioned hermeneutical principle was the notion that Scripture is self-authenticated by the Spirit. This is only possible because the Spirit is not external to Scripture, but speaks to us through Scripture (cf Muller, 1979:18). The magisterial Reformation thus countered interpretative individualism by not allowing for a theology that separate the work of the Spirit from the Word. Claims of individuals to have received revelations from the Spirit from extra-scriptural sources were not accepted, and all teachings were evaluated in the light of Scripture (cf Calvin, Inst. 1.9.1).

All of the caveats that the magisterial Reformation used to counter interpretative individualism could of course not prevent doctrinal disagreements. This is clear from post-Reformation history. Yet, it would be simplistic to relate the problem of doctrinal diversity to the principle of *sola scriptura*, as such, while arguing that the principle of papal infallibility or of the church as the sole interpreter of Scripture would have prevented doctrinal disagreements. In fact, it clearly did not. As shown already, doctrinal disagreement was a feature of medieval Christianity too. In the end, religious plurality cannot be ascribed to a single formal source. It was not this or that theological method that brought about religious diversity, but human frailty. Plurality always was and will be a feature of human reality.

4. Conclusion

The question posed in this article pertains to Gregory's claim that the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation is the 'most important and decisive historical source of Western hyperpluralism'. Though this article does not contest the notion that the Reformation and the principle of *sola scriptura*, in particular, contributed to religious plurality, it challenges the reach and scope that Gregory ascribes to the *sola scriptura* principle through his description of *sola scriptura* as the 'most important and decisive historical source of Western hyperplurality'. Firstly, late medieval Europe was not a unified and institutionalised society as Gregory suggests, but exhibited features of severe fracture and plurality. Doctrinal controversy, power struggles within the church, and social discord due to the rise of nationalism characterised the age to a significant degree. To ascribe the origins of hyperpluralism to the Reformation therefore seems to be historically incorrect. Secondly, intellectual revolutions in the 11th and 15th centuries, particularly, the rise of theological schools and universities, the discovery of printing and questions about the reliability of the Vulgate translation, contributed to the fracturing of medieval society and the creation of an intellectual environment that cultivated individualist thought patterns. The principle of *sola scriptura* was only a partial phenomenon within this much larger intellectual environment. Lastly, Gregory's assumptions that the *sola scriptura* principle was an invention of the Reformation and that it elevated private judgment above the church are extremely problematic. Up to the 15th century the principle of *sola scriptura* was employed within the Roman Catholic tradition in the sense that Papal decrees and canon law was considered as subordinate to Scripture. The magisterial Reformation's hermeneutics, furthermore, was a church hermeneutics that was particularly aware of the danger that interpretation can degenerate into individualism. To ascribe the phenomenon of religious diversity to the formal principle of *sola scriptura* is clearly a reductionist and artificial description of a very complex phenomenon. No single formal method or principle was the cause of hyperpluralism, nor could any other method or tradition such as papal infallibility or ecclesiastical authority have prevented proliferation into hyperpluralism.

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