

Arthur Prior: A Calvinist route to logic

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Abstract

Arthur Prior is best known for tense logic and recent interest has also turned to his work in philosophical theology. It is also well known that Prior was deeply interested in Scottish moral philosophy up to 1949. Prior was a theology student before he turned to philosophy and even when a philosophy student he continued to think about and write on theology, stating in a letter from 1936: "I have hopes of ending up eventually as the editor of a religious periodical." Prior's theology was strongly influenced by the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth- and also by the nineteenth century theologian F.D. Maurice. What is far less well known is that Prior was also influenced by the work of John Calvin. This paper traces the influence of John Calvin on Prior's thought via previously unknown (and recently published) letters and unpublished articles written by Prior. It argues that *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1948) is where Prior the theologian finally becomes Prior the logician, and does so because of the limits of Calvinist logic.

Keywords: Arthur Prior, Logic, Calvinism, Determinism, Pre-destination.

1 Introduction¹

While Arthur Prior (1914-1969) is known primarily for his discovery of tense logic (Copeland 1996/2020) recent interest has also turned to his work in philosophical theology². Following his BA in Philosophy at Otago University, in 1936 Prior became a Presbyterian theology student at Knox Theological Hall, Dunedin. However, a whirlwind romance and then marriage to the radical journalist Clare Hunter required him to leave theology and return to philosophy. Yet throughout all his studies, he continued to think about and write on theology, stating in a letter from 1936: 'I have hopes of ending up eventually as the editor of a religious periodical.' (Grimshaw 2018, p.3) The links between theology and philosophy were strong in New Zealand in the 1930s, with the Presbyterian theologian James Bates³ lecturing Prior in the Otago University Philosophy programme before the arrival of John Findlay⁴. Prior had a dual interest in Theology and Philosophy and was deeply interested in Scottish moral philosophy; when in 1949 a fire partly destroyed notes for a manuscript on Scottish theology⁵ he began to focus

¹ The unpublished Prior manuscripts are accessed either via *Prior Studies* <https://priorstudies.org/> or, within the site, in the *Virtual Lab for Prior Studies*.

² See variously, Per Halse, P. 2012. 'The problem of predestination: as a prelude to A. N. Prior's tense logic', *Synthese* 188 (2012), pp. 331-347; David Jakobsen, 'An Introduction to "Faith, Unbelief, and Evil"', *Synthese*, 188 (2012), 399-409; Sarah Uckelman, 'Arthur Prior and medieval logic', *Synthese* 188 (2012), pp: 349-366; Mike Grimshaw, 'Arthur Prior on James Joyce', *Philosophical Inquiries* 1:1 (2013), pp.193-202; Per Hasle & Peter Øhrstrøm, 'Prior's Paradigm for the Study of Time and its Methodological Motivation', *Synthese*, 193 (2016), pp. 3401-3416; David Jakobsen, 'An Illusion Close to Life', *Synthese*, 193 (2016), pp.3429-3439.

³ James Bates (1903-1981) M.A. LL.D. Otago, was Acting Head of Department of Philosophy at Otago University 1933, having previous been Assistant Lecturer in Philosophy 1928; he then studied under Emil Brunner in Zurich 1935-36; a parish minister, he was Moderator of Presbyterian Church of New Zealand 1965.

⁴ John Findlay (1903-1987); born South Africa, BA & MA Pretoria University, Rhodes Scholar Oxford, 1924-1927, PhD 1933 Graz. Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy, University of Otago, New Zealand, 1934-1944. Findlay then held Chairs at Rhodes University College, and University of Natal, South Africa. In 1948 he moved to Chair of Philosophy, Kings College University of Newcastle upon Tyne, then in 1951 moved to Kings College London. He was Gifford Lecturer 1964-1966, University of St Andrews. From 1966-1992, Findlay was Clark Professor of Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy, Yale University, then Borden Parker Browne Chair of Philosophy, Boston University 1972 until his death. Findlay was a major influence upon Prior.

⁵ This handwritten ms was partly destroyed by fire; the ms remained in Prior's archives and can be now accessed in the Virtual Lab for Prior Studies via <https://priorstudies.org/>

more explicitly on issues of philosophical logic – albeit always influenced by both the legacy of his theological thinking and his on-going interest in Philosophical theology.

Prior's theology was strongly influenced by the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth and also by the nineteenth century theologian F.D. Maurice. What is far less well known is the degree to which Prior was also influenced by the work of John Calvin. This article traces the influence of John Calvin on Prior's thought via previously both unknown and little-known letters and articles written by Prior. I am interested in examining the way Prior's engagement with Calvinism paved the way to his first published book, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1948), as well as how his writing on Calvinism exposes a central focus on logic and time; a focus that I argue enables the later development of tense logic.

2 Calvinism vs Arminianism

The earliest records of Prior's thought and writing come from 1931, when, aged 16-years, he wrote 3 long essays setting out his thought of religion, literature and science⁵. The essay on religion was an argument for Calvinism versus Arminianism (Prior, 1931/2020) (Prior 1931/2020, p.23)⁷, and in this we get an insight to the way Prior first approached Calvinism as a form of logic. Prior observes that because he had '...always been a Determinist of one sort or another – free will has always seemed to me to be logically inconceivable', he was able to decide 'that orthodox Predestination was quite as good as my unorthodox Determinism' (Prior 1931/2020, p.1).⁸ His Methodism was no barrier to

⁵ The essays and accompanying introductory chapters are in Peter Øhrstrøm, David Jakobsen, Martin Prior, and Adrienne Rini, (eds.), *Three Little Essays: Arthur Prior in 1931, Logic and Philosophy of Time*, Volume 3, (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press 2020).

⁶ The essays and accompanying introductory chapters are in Peter Øhrstrøm, David Jakobsen, Martin Prior, and Adrienne Rini, (eds.), *Three Little Essays: Arthur Prior in 1931, Logic and Philosophy of Time*, Volume 3, (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press 2020).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.23. Prior numbers among 'the modern Arminians': 'H.G. Wells, William James, James Martineau, W. Heisenberg and his school (Sir Arthur Eddington, A.H. Compton and others), and Bishop Barnes' and the 'less orthodox' and 'also less logical Arthur Schopenhauer, George Bernard Shaw and Henri Bergson'. It is also worth noting that in the dedication of the essay he includes his father as an Arminian he is writing against.

⁸ A.N. Prior, 'Essays Religious' (1931), in Øhrstrøm, Jakobsen, Prior and Rini, (eds.), *Three Little Essays: Arthur Prior in 1931, Logic and Philosophy of Time*, Volume 3, (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press 2020), p.1.

his Calvinism because he was ‘...in my small way, a follower of the Calvinistic branch of Methodism, founded by George Whitefield.’ (Prior 1931/2020, p.6)⁹ As an aside, soon after arriving in Dunedin to study at Otago University, amid the Presbyterian environment of Knox College, Prior converted to Presbyterianism – and Barthianism¹⁰. What seems to have attracted Prior to Calvinism was its internal logic regarding cause and effect: ‘I believe there is a Reason for all our choices and actions – that all our actions are the logical and necessary outcome of Causes; and further – a thing we should be careful never to forget – are themselves Causes which produce their logical and necessary effects on our lives and on the lives of others.’ (Prior 1931/2021, p.18) Prior reinforces the what he regards as the logical basis of his Calvinism observing: ‘...Salvation is not only the logical Effect of a Cause, but is itself a Cause producing profound Effects.’ (Prior 1931/2021, p.21) It is this focus on the internal theological logic of Calvinism that was to prove its central interest to Prior in the years that follow, but it is noted that over time Prior, quite understandably, turned against this singular Salvific focus of his pious youth. Yet as will be seen, it is what he discerns as what we can term the limits of theology for logic (that is, the limit of ‘belief’¹¹) within his particular reading and understanding of Calvinism¹² that initiate Prior’s

⁹ Prior (1931/2021) also includes a discussion on Jonathan Edwards in ‘Essays Religious’ (2020), commends his strict orthodoxy and notes that he will draw upon Edwards when he criticizes freedom of the will. Interestingly, five years later, despite noting in a letter to Ursula Bethell of Edwards, “there’s much in him that passes for ‘mysticism’ ” (Grimshaw 2018, p.117), the only other mention of Edwards in his letters to her is Edwards’ inclusion in those ‘lesser protestants’ whose Aristotelianism is “a vulgarized form” come to them “through Hobbes & Locke” (Grimshaw 2018, p.103.).

¹⁰ As a Swiss Reformed theologian Barth was Calvinist but developed his own form of Calvinist, Reformed theology that has become known as Barthian theology or Barthianism. Prior converted to Barthianism (see Grimshaw 2018) via the influence at Knox College of Lex Miller. Yet Prior was never ‘just’ a Barthian, he read back deeply to the Scots reformers and developed his own form of Calvinist theology that put Barth in conversation with the Scots reformers- and with other theological and philosophical interests and influences. Central to his thought are issues of time and logic, issues that sit central to Calvinist thought itself.

¹¹ By this I mean that within theology there is a point wherein ‘logic’ must give way to faith or ‘belief’, especially in Calvinism. One cannot logically think one-self to God; there is the gap between God and humanity, the gap caused by sin, that only God can cross by God’s self-action. Humanity may respond logically in response to the self-revelation of God, but cannot undertake logic to reach God.

¹² As a reviewer of this article noted “Calvinism is a huge tradition, and the more proper version of it, Edwards and later Barth, represent two extreme opposites in many ways” (anonymous reviewer 2022); my view is that this internal diversity and

refocusing from theologian to philosopher, from theological Calvinist logician to philosophical logician (who remained a Calvinist and practicing Presbyterian into the 1950s until he and his family permanently relocated to England).

3 Prior and Calvinism 1936 -1937

As well as these very early writings, a number of early Prior sources have recently come to light, including a collection of letters he wrote 1936-1940 to the New Zealand poet Ursula Bethell in which he set out his theology (Grimshaw 2018). These letters begin when he is a theology student, cover his transition back to philosophy (in large part because of his relationship and then marriage to the radical Clare Hunter) and then the time he and Clare spend in Europe and Britain seeking to make a life as journalists. We know from the letters that Prior included John Calvin and John Knox amongst his many books on his shelves and that his Calvinism was a sincere and deep faith and source of intellectual inquiry.

1936 was the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the publication of John Calvin's *Institutes* and Prior commissioned and edited a series of 5 articles for the New Zealand Presbyterian Bible class magazine *Foursquare*. Prior's Calvinism was both determinedly anti-Pietist and against any form of Natural theology, as he expressed in a letter in 1936:

You see I am in fundamental agreement with most of the anti-Roman polemic of the Reformers, tho I think it's important that their anti-Baptist polemic should be taken equally seriously (a point which modern Protestants who are keen about their Protestantism are inclined to forget).

(Grimshaw 2018, p.52)

The Prior of the 1930s and 1940s was very much both a reformed Churchman in his views and a Trinitarian, for example stating in 1936 his opposition to Wicksteed's *The Religion of Time & the Religion of Eternity* for both its Unitarianism and for having too much of Plato's *Banquet* in it. (Grimshaw 2018, p.66) Here Prior is concentrated upon questions of time and logic, for his Calvinism is that of 'the God who is active and makes

indeed tension within Calvinism made it increasingly difficult for Prior to align his theology and his philosophy. In the end, philosophy was chosen over and against Calvinist theology as both an academic and a personal choice.

himself known'. (Grimshaw 2018, p.66) That is, a God who is active in time – including human time – and therefore, the question of (broadly) theological and philosophical logic arises of how can and does this occur and, just as importantly, can there be a logical theological and philosophical response? In the 1930s, Prior also keeps his philosophy and theology separate, taking the side of the neo-Calvinist Karl Barth vs the neo-Thomists, stating:

It is impossible to give an account of our knowledge of God along purely epistemological lines – the only argument possible is a theological one, i.e. one which brings God into it from the start.

(Grimshaw 2018, p.67) [underlining in original]

This, I argue, also helps us understand why in the 1940s, while still a Calvinist, Prior the philosopher seeks to move into Logic, not Philosophy of Religion. For Prior at this stage, still being a committed Calvinist, proceeds in his thought from a belief in the gap between humanity and God which means 'knowledge of God' proceeds solely from God. That is, that God makes Godself known is the basis of all knowledge of God and for the Calvinist, epistemology cannot make any knowledge of God known. Therefore, as noted, for Prior in the 1930s and 1940s, theology and philosophy exist as two quiet distinct ways of thinking.

Prior's Barthian-derived Calvinism also demands an internal logic, a logic of time, for he recognizes that within Barthian Calvinism there is a possible atheism. For if Christian knowledge of God is abstracted from God making Godself known then for the Barthian Calvinist Prior, the Christian knowledge of God 'simply disappears'; resulting in the statement that 'a candid examination of my own thoughts and their content might quite easily lead to the conclusion that I am an atheist. Perhaps, from a Thomist point of view, I am an atheist.' (Grimshaw 2018, p.72) Here I will also argue that the later text *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is Prior the Calvinist moving towards Prior the formal atheist.

In 1936 Prior won third prize in the *Otago University Review* competition (Grimshaw 2018, p.100) with an essay on John Calvin that argued for 'the permanent significance of Calvin's thought and work'.(Prior 1936a, p.25) Prior identifies the central focus of the Reformers as opposing both a reduction of Christianity to either 'religion' and therefore open to syncretism, or an alternative reduction to 'an

intense narrowness and exclusiveness' which still treats Christianity 'as one religion among others.'(Prior 1936a, p.25) Critical of Catholics, Protestant sectarians, the Oxford Group Movement, liberal Protestantism, the Nazi-aligned German Christians and modern liberal Christianity, for all erring into varieties of the issues identified by the Reformers, Prior argues for the continuing relevance of Calvinism to guard against 'the dangers of pagan corruption'.(Prior 1936a, p.27) Prior also wrote, in 1936, an article for the *Otago Daily Times*, under one of his nom de plumes, Richard Bramley, extolling 'The Rediscovery of Calvinism' for offering 'a way out beyond the barren narrowness of Fundamentalism and the equally barren shallowness of Modernism'. (Prior 1936b) This Protestant rediscovery of Calvin – and Luther, as both theological and political force, was echoed by the contemporary Catholic return to Aquinas; similarly, by the Anglican return to the 16th & 17th century divines. As Prior approvingly quotes from the Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation, De. W.A Visser t'Hoof: 'However bizarre this may seem to the outsider, Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, and the great Anglican divines, are more up to date for our generation than Schleiermacher, Harnack, Troeltsch and their followers.' (Prior 1936b)

Prior's endorsement of Calvin occurs not only because of the political role to be played in opposing fascism, but also because it has given rise to the neo-Calvinist theology of Karl Barth, that occurs as confessions, pamphlets and Barth's *Church Dogmatics*; in particular Prior approves of the scholasticism in Barth that derives from Calvin. However, Prior's Calvinism, as expressed in a letter to Bethell in 1936, was also a critical Calvinism wary of any sign in Calvin and others of natural theology and this involved endorsing a desire in Calvinism to distinguish Christianity from both Platonism and Aristotelianism. (Grimshaw 2018, p.103) Yet in his Barthian Calvinism, in another letter to Bethell from 1936, he expresses another way in which we can identify how his Calvinism leads him into logic:

In a way, the whole of Barth's 'Doctrine of the Word of God' is devoted to precisely this problem of language; he does, in fact, define Dogmatics as the critical testing of 'the Church's language about God'.

(Grimshaw 2018, p.106)

It is this growing concern to engage with the logic and language of Calvinism that, as he notes by 1937, draws him back to the Scottish Reformers 'and many of the earlier Covenanters', to get past 'the later bigots... who have in general succeeded in giving Calvinism a bad name...'. (Grimshaw 2018, p.116) Further observing, that John Knox 'is a "Calvinist" after Barth's own heart.' (Grimshaw 2018, p.117)

4 Prior the Calvinist and Prior the Logician

Prior the Calvinist was however in early conflict with Prior the Logician, writing on Good Friday 1937, that he recognized, following being challenged in conversation, 'that if my belief in God was serious it should be ultimately possible for me to give an account of it that was intellectually satisfactory to another person.' (Grimshaw 2018, p.118) That is, he should be able to provide a logical defence of his belief in god, a defence that could be understood – in this case to the then-communist economics student Colin Simkin.¹³ Of course 'giving a proof' is not to be equated with 'Logic'¹⁴; but as a Logician and a Calvinist Prior was clearly troubled by his inability to provide a proof that was logically coherent – especially to a communist. Yet his logical proof here was still a Calvinist logic, not arguing to God via a natural theology or proofs but rather arguing from the act of God, stating: '...the kind of 'proof' I envisage is an intelligible account of just how the Revelation of God captures my mind and holds it.' (Grimshaw 2018, p.119) What is important here for discerning the link between Prior's Calvinism and logic is the emphasis on Prior's mind being captured; for his theology and Calvinism is a theology and faith that needed to make logical sense, rather than emotional sense. The question is whether it is the critical emphasis on Logic in Calvinism that inspires Prior towards Logic or whether he proceeds from his joy of Logic toward Calvinism?¹⁵ My sense is that he

¹³ Colin Simkin (1915-1998) went on to have a distinguished academic career as an economist. During his first academic appointment at Canterbury University College he came under the influence of Karl Popper, contributing ideas to what became Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*. A lifelong friend and correspondent of Popper, Simkin was also influenced by and became a friend of the economist John Hicks. Simkin also studied sociology and psychology at Otago which were offered under Philosophy and it is recorded that Findlay considered him one of his most able students. Simkin was also a regular contributor to the Otago University Philosophy Club in the 1930s. For an overview of Simkin's life see Hogan (1999).

¹⁴ I thank the anonymous reviewer (2022) for making me clarify this issue.

¹⁵ I thank the anonymous reviewer (2022) for raising this question.

moves through Calvinism to Logic not from Logic towards Calvinism and then back out again. To understand this move we need to remember that Prior sought to become a theological student and a Calvinist theologian (or at least a Calvinist religious journalist), not a Logician who was also a private Calvinist¹⁶. This becomes clear in a statement from 1937 on why his Calvinism also finds affinity in the work of the 17th century divine Richard Hooker:

Hooker is, I should say, the most logical theologian I've come across. It's supposed to be more characteristic of a Calvinist to be that; but a rather narrow notion of Logic seems to underlie this impression. I've been reading Knox too, & he's for the most part very illogical indeed. Not that I like Hooker the better for it, despite my profession – Knox has compensating virtues of a high order.

(Grimshaw 2018, p.121)

Prior then outlines what will become the driver of his theology that will in turn, I argue, send him toward philosophical logic:

Barth is the direct successor of the old Scottish dogmatists, but stands in as grave need of a thorough course in Logic as Knox did. The last part of which remark applies to contemporary theologians of all schools – a modern successor to Hooker, so far as I know, just doesn't exist.

(Grimshaw 2018, p.122)

In short, Prior's move into Logic arises from his work in theology – and from his engagement with Calvinism, which he alludes to when, in discussing his Master's thesis on 'The Nature of Logic' (Jakobsen 2020, p.72) he notes in 1937 he's 'had to read up a lot about Wittgenstein and certain kindred writers (Dr Popper is one of the group) and can't help noticing a resemblance in temper between their philosophy and Barth's theology' (Grimshaw 2018, p.133); this leading Prior to discuss (a decade before *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*) how Ethical statements 'are really concealed imperatives'(Grimshaw 2018, p.133), resulting in his wish 'to

¹⁶ I would argue that Prior aimed at being some type of Calvinist religious journalist from 1936 (when he met and married Clare Hunter) until 1941 (when the marriage broke down). It was from his 1942 atheist phase that he redirected himself to being a philosopher who (exiting atheism) was a Calvinist, rather than a Calvinist journalist who was also a philosopher.

apply the view of Philosophy as “analysis” to theology.’ (Grimshaw 2018, p.134)

5 Discovering the limits of theology

By 1938 the Priors were in Britain where one of Prior’s many odd-jobs was working at the 1938 Calvinistic Congress held in Edinburgh; this gave rise to a number of articles. In one written for the *Otago Daily Times* he notes that he first heard of the Calvinist Free University in Amsterdam via his philosophy lecturer John Findlay; and this is important for it the first clear and public expression by Prior that his Calvinism does have links with philosophy. What is also of interest is that Prior emphasizes that the Free University expresses a belief that Calvinism “is not merely a theological system, but a viewpoint which covers the whole range of thought and life, so that there ought to be, besides a Calvinistic theology, a Calvinistic jurisprudence, a Calvinistic politics, a Calvinistic philosophy, and even such things as a Calvinistic physics.” (Prior 1938) Prior does not dismiss such a viewpoint, and this fits in with what we have discerned as his desire to also express a Calvinistic logic, a view that also aligns with Prior’s endorsing the “wise warning” of Principal Curtis of New College, to the delegates “not to be too uncritical about their Calvinism.” (Prior 1938)

In another, unpublished paper¹⁷ “Calvinism as a Moral Revolution” (Prior1938/1939a) that Prior wrote on the Calvinistic Congress, he begins by emphasizing that “the Reformation was not merely a revolution in ideas, but a moral revolution as well” (Prior1938/1939a, p.1), noting with approval the Congress “considered “the Ethical Consequences” of the Reformed Faith” (Prior1938/1939a, p.1). This also arises from what can be termed the internal logic of Calvinism, because Calvin “believed that the Word of God alone could bind our conscience because the Word of God alone could deliver it.” (Prior1938/1939a, p.2) This inner logic positions Calvinism against all ‘religions’ (including Roman Christianity), against all views of the Lord’s Supper or Communion as a sacrificial mass attempting “to placate God by a sacrifice we offer to him” ((Prior1938/1939a, p.2) and then logically – or as Prior expresses it, as “a natural corollary” (Prior1938/1939a, p.3) – “that when Calvinism or Protestantism generally is true to itself it renounces every notion that the “religious” calling, the vocation of a

¹⁷ It is unclear just when this paper was written, but it can be narrowed down to late 1938 or early 1939.

“minister of religion”, has something “sacred” about it which does not attach to all vocations.” (Prior 1938/1939a, p.3) This fits in with Prior’s desired vocation as editor of a religious journal - and indeed his philosophical vocation that ran alongside his (increasingly declining) Calvinism up to the mid-1950s.

Other papers, often unpublished, from the late 1930s/early 1940s also help outline Prior’s engagement with Calvinism. An essay on “Robert Barclay, Quaker or Calvinist” helps us understand Prior’s position. In this paper Prior calls Barthianism “modified Calvinism” (Prior 1938/1939b, p.1); this is important because Prior begins as such a modified Calvinist and then, via reading and thought, makes his way back towards a critical Calvinism. His essay is a critical discussion of what he terms “a curious relationship of conflict and identity” (Prior 1938/1939b, p.1) between the Quakers and Calvinists, as expressed in the thought of the Scottish Quaker Robert Barclay (1648-1690). In the paper Prior quotes from and notes what he terms the “relentless logic” (Prior 1938/1939b, p.2) of the Westminster Confession. The logic of the Confession is one Prior often returns to – as in his paper from sometime between 1943-1945 “The Logic of Calvinism” (Prior 1943-1945) in which, setting out the contents of the Confession in numbering reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Prior emphasizes the logic of time within the Confession, a logic of divine time – and human time in response. As he notes, the Confession rests on a logic that emphasizes a “distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘life’” which for him “seems a very natural one and has its counterpart in the emphasis of the modern logicians on the distinction between “indicative” and “imperative” modes of speech.” (Prior 1943-1945, p.4) This Calvinist logic also acts as a process of distinction, such as the “distinction between the covenants of works and grace” (Prior 1943-1945, p.4) and in Prior’s mind modern logic aligns at least in part with Protestantism, in particular with Calvinism. This is what allows him to hold together, for over 20 years, Calvinism and Logic in a creative balance. That is, he could still be a Calvinist and Logician – or conversely, a Logician and Calvinist.¹⁸

In a fragment of a diary text (most probably from 1943) we can again glimpse the importance of logic in Prior’s Calvinism, wherein Prior notes of the Westminster Confession that “The Scots Confession

¹⁸ I have deliberately presented this balance in two ways to emphasize that, for over 20 years, it was not an issue of having to choose one over the other (that is between Calvinism and Logic) for Prior.

foreshadows the theory of logical contradiction” (Prior 1943, p.2). Similarly, there are limits to Calvinism when it slips into what Prior dismisses as ‘panentheistic mysticism’(Prior 1943, p.2); that is, when Calvinism attempts what I suggest Prior saw as a false logic regarding predestination and what are termed ‘the heathen’. On the final page of this diary fragment Prior notes how the Covenanters thought of history as divided in to “ages”, “times” and “dispensations”; for him there is both a theological and philosophical logic to be applied, in that such division of history cannot be applied to history before the creation of man. This combination of philosophical and theological logic – or rather, the moderation of theological logic by philosophical logic – is what I suggest leads (or is at very least part of the turn for Prior) to what becomes tense logic – whereby theological logic is in an engagement with philosophical logic which results in time, that is time after the creation of man: time as thought in new ways.

To return to the paper on Robert Barclay, central to the question of Calvinism is, for Prior, how to think through and past predestination. I would suggest that this question of divine logic and divine time, experienced (as the question of predestination) via what we can term a background to temporal logic results in what becomes, in time, tense logic. For Prior’s wrestling with Calvinism, predestination and questions of salvation result, I would argue, in tense logic as a type of post-theological thinking. The reason is that part of Calvinism is an attempt to express a logical response to predestination and to what is termed the Great Commission of *Matthew 28:19* where, post-resurrection, Jesus commands his disciples to “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (KJV). The question of logic arises because, if we are predestined for salvation or damnation, why would we seek to enact the Great Commission? Barclay, as an ex-Calvinist, was not for universal redemption, but also, like Prior, opposed to Arminianism on the basis that it was illogical. That is, if Christ died for all then they are saved, and not, as in Arminianism, not saved until they were aware of this act and believed in it.

In his discussion of Barclay, Prior finds himself, at times, logically agreeing with the Quaker, because a salvation of all by act of God logically cannot depend on humans communicating knowledge of that to others in order for it to be enacted. For Prior this results in the attempt to make logical sense of salvation and what, in the contrast between divine and human time, this may mean. Prior identifies that both Quakers and

Calvinists presume a type of logic to answer how and why humanity responds to God. In particular, for the Calvinist, the logic of salvation means one does not seek to convert but rather to discover the elect – and this is done by calling “them out from the lost mass of their fellows.” (Prior 1938/1939, p.7) For Prior as Calvinist, to conversion makes no logical sense – in either divine or human time. For if there is predestination inaugurated by God, then the Calvinist cannot presume to convert, for to convert makes no logical sense. It is God who converts people, you cannot convert or convert others. What Prior identifies in Barclay is that, as a Quaker, Barclay employs a similar logic whereby conversion is not the aim, but rather the aim is the awakening of that which is already there. Prior draws upon the Scots Reformer John Knox to emphasize his point:

... at bottom, Knox’s distinction between the Elect and the reprobate is essentially one between what men are ‘in Christ’ and what they are in themselves or ‘in Adam’. The question of whether all men or only some of them are ‘in Christ’ is in the end a matter of only subordinate importance.

(Prior 1938/1939, p.8)

The issue of logic is that if, via Knox, there is predestination, then the logic of this – and how to respond – is central. Therefore, the logic is one of response, not a logic of how or why. Prior’s theological logic is not yet one of a philosophical logic (for he is not undertaking a philosophy of religion argument), but rather a theological argument. In this the question of logic is the logic of time within Calvinism. That is, as he states:

God’s free Election means that there is nothing in ourselves that moves Him to love us, but the grounds of his love are all in Christ, and for that reason his love is absolutely dependable and unchangeable.

(Prior 1938/1939, p.9)

Prior also commends the logic of Barclay’s thought especially Barclay’s opposition to the Socinians or as Prior describes them “the ancestors of our modern Unitarians” (Prior 1938/1939, p.9). For Prior views Barclay (in the 17th century) as in agreement with Barth (in the 20th)

in opposition to those who claim there is any 'relic of Adam' – that is any relic of the divine image in Humanity that survived the fall. It is from this that Prior argues for a modern version of "Marrow Men" theology whereby, like some early 18th century Calvinists, he opposes "the view that before God's free forgiveness can be preached to man he must be "prepared" for it by being made to hear 'the thunder of the Law' and so put in a penitential receptive mood." (Prior 1938/1939, p.11) Prior, like the Marrow Men, found such a view illogical; rather, arguing, in line with Robert Riccaltoun of Hobkirk, that because of the act of God in Christ, "the one obligation to God which now lies upon all men – one cannot say the one obligation 'remaining' as it is a completely new one – is that of hearing the Gospel and living by the mercy there held forth." (Prior 1938/1939, p.1) It is from this position that it becomes clear that what Prior responds to in Barth, such as Barth's discussion on election in his Gifford Lectures¹⁹, is Barth's exposition of logic; that is, the internal logic of predestination that is also a logic centrally focussed on time. We can again see how the basis of tense logic lies in Prior's Calvinism.

What is fascinating in this article on Barclay is that it also becomes clear that Prior's lost 'Companion of Barth's Dogmatik' (Grimshaw 2018, p.195) (which dates from 1938 and while submitted to T & T Clark, does not seem to have survived the war) was primarily a commentary on the theological logic of Barth; just as Prior's critique of early Calvinists and Quakers is one arising from applying theological logic. That is, his logic is one that stresses predestination is an act of God's mercy which means therefore we cannot know if we are predestined for salvation or not and this means it is logical to not attempt to seek knowledge if one of the elect or not; rather it is logical – and Christian and Calvinist – to simply live in response to Christ. Therefore, the Quakers' stress on the inner light is logically not Christian, unless it is controlled by an outer light of Christ; alternatively, many Calvinists act illogically in stressing far too much the outward 'means of truth'; therefore, both deny what we can term the divine logic of Christianity.

Prior is also keen to ensure, drawing on Calvinism, that science and Christianity exist as distinct realms, as outlined in another paper from 1938/39, "A Modernist Stocktaking" (Prior 1938/1939c). In this, Prior emphasizes that Modernism as a movement should "be at least as ready to adapt itself to new needs and new conditions as, let us say, Catholicism

¹⁹ Prior notes especially, Barth's lecture 'The knowledge of God and the service of God according to the teaching of the Reformation'.

or Calvinism.” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.1) Furthermore, not only should any changes be undertaken by logical decision, but such changes should be critiqued; and in Calvinism one should always be in critical discussion “to the basic aims and principles.” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.1) Prior is clear that science should be allowed to exist as science and should not be held in thrall to any anti-scientific creed, which in the late 1930s “is unquestionably the new religion of nationalism and racialism rather than biblical literalism.” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.3) It is here that Prior’s Barthian Calvinism, with its opposition to the German Christians of Nazi Germany, takes a political expression, with Prior stating: “This religion of racialism and nationalism is one against which the Church as a whole has a very special call to protect scientists and historians.” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.4) Yet Prior emphasizes that scientists need protection not only in Germany, but also elsewhere “against “Modernist” varieties of theological intrusion and interference as well as forms of obscurantism”. (Prior 1938/1939c, p.4) Christians should not “turn scientific results to religious purposes” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.4); rather the duty of the Christian, arising from Calvinist logic, is to “pay complete and sincere respect to the disinterestedness of the pure scientist” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.4), because the scientist is following a vocation in this world. Yet Prior adds a caution, because while scientists often find “the theological systems around them unacceptable and incredible”, they retain that “ineradicable desire of men for a theology, religion or philosophy of life.” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.4) Therefore one of the roles of the church, and especially of the Calvinist, is to ensure that science doesn’t become a religion or a religion substitute – for either the scientist or the wider population.

Prior does state that one of the issues is the failure of theologians to properly theologize in a way that can gain the respect of scientists, and at fault here are those modernist theologians who are open to the anti-scientific nature of Fundamentalism and “the predominance of irrational and uncontrolled emotion.” (Prior 1938/1939c, p.5) As a Calvinist, Prior is opposed to emotionalist religion – this drives his opposition to the Buchmanites or Oxford Groupers, his opposition to British Israelites, and to all forms of mysticism and fundamentalism; rather his desire is for theology as “product of real thought”. (Prior 1938/1939c, p.5)

6 Thinking his way out of Calvinism

In the 1940s Prior continued his engagement with Calvinism. Of particular interest for Prior scholars is the "Dairy Entry, March 25 1942" (Prior 1942a) in which Prior expresses deep theological doubt, while still engaged with "the whole Calvinistic system", an engagement he views, at this time as "now like that of an art connoisseur – I collected theological systems as another man collects pictures." (Prior 1942a, p.1) Prior expresses his current attitude as: "Theology is an illusion, but it is an illusion that is somehow 'close to life', and the study of theological systems illuminates real problems in some way, and that's why I'm interested in it." Prior's view is that theology is "real history distorted" and that is why he is interested in it – but it has to be theology by "a 'pure theologian'" (Prior 1942a, p.2) like Barth.

Prior also notes that his interest in theology has been what he terms an 'aesthetic' approach, which involves "stressing the importance of the form and structure in theology, of seeing how the bits of a theological system fit together and contribute to the 'shape' of the whole thing." (Prior 1942a, p.3) Calvinism, with its different characteristics through time and place, is therefore of such interest to Prior, not only because of how predestination was thought, but also what can be termed the inner logic of Calvinism as expressed in its various confessions, catechisms and theological texts that occurs as a "loose ideological unity" (Prior 1942a, p.4) that regulated behaviour and thought in a legal and internally logical fashion. So even during what is known as Prior's crisis of faith in 1942 (a time when his marriage to Clare Hunter was going through the divorce courts) he could still hold onto and appreciate the inherent logic of Calvinism as a system – if not as a belief.

Prior's crisis of faith soon lapsed and he returned to Calvinism – while continuing also his philosophical thought. That he was beginning to see a way between his two thought systems is evident in a paper from probably later in 1942, "Determinism in Philosophy and in Theology" (Prior 1942b) tracing a line from Augustine "through Luther and Calvin and Pascal to Barth and Brunner" of those who "have attacked freewill in the name of religion". (Prior 1942b, p.1) Prior notes the internal variations and representations of Christian opposition to freewill and aligns himself with Barth and Brunner's contemporary attempt to expound "a quite paradoxical mixture of determinism and freewill." (Prior 1942b, p.2) Prior dismisses as "simply incomprehensible" any attempts by Augustinians to state that "all men were free 'in Adam' before the Fall" (Prior 1942b,

p.2), but he also mentions the issue of the absurdity raised by Barth and Brunner's attempts to express a theology of free will only occasioned by the grace of God.

Prior therefore sets out his own Calvinist-derived position that takes seriously not what lies behind our choices but rather that for us "they remain genuine 'choices' and genuine 'acts'" (Prior 1942b, p.3); which within a determinist framework means "we cannot say at such times whether our role in the chain of causations is that of cause or effect." (Prior 1942b, p.3) Prior likens this experience of being a part of "the causal stream" that flows in us "in an unimpeded and unbroken way" similar to what a sportsman experiences in a game or a writer in a composition. This enables Prior to state, via the Augustinian argument, that "our only acts of real freedom" are "acts which have their source not in ourselves at all but in 'divine grace.'" (Prior 1942b, p.3) Therefore feelings of responsibility and of helplessness – depending on the act undertaken – can be explained if, via a theological frame, they can be seen as containing within them "the possibility of future healing." (prior 1942b, p.4) That is, arising out of conflict within the self, this conflict can be overcome by grace of God. It is therefore not in times we believe that we experience free choice but rather it is when we feel conflicted by the choice made that determinism enables us to make sense of our choices. Religious determinism therefore deals with our "particular inward compulsions and dependences" and provides an "outside help" through analysis – whether the theological analysis of "St Paul's doctrine of sin and salvation" or the contemporary psychoanalyst's "general description of neurotic states and their removal." (Prior 1942b, p.4) This paper from 1942 is therefore central to enabling us to see the transition in Prior's thought, whereby theology describes *what was* the case and philosophy is now taken to be able to express *what is* the case today. In short, Prior's crisis of faith results in a reversal in his thinking: whereas before theology was his primary means of thinking and interpreting the world, now philosophy increasingly dominates.

Another paper 'Of God's Plan and Purpose' (Prior 1942c) from late 1942, continues this thinking his way out of the dominance of Calvinism and in this Prior begins by stressing that a focus on the singular expression of predestination as "Of God's Eternal Decree" in the Westminster Confession, should not be to the detriment of the Trinity, especially the place of the Son. (Prior 1942c, p.1) Yet Prior also notes "there must be an even sharper distinction made today than in made in the Confession, between the Christian doctrine of predestination and

philosophical theories of determinism”(Prior 1942c, p.2) and here he draws on Barth’s opposition to conceptions of God’s ‘unchangeableness’ which make God a dead god, not a living one. What follows is Prior’s attack upon what can be termed the internal theological illogicality of the Westminster Confession; the issue being an expression of predestination that has far too great a focus on a notion of the elect as represented by “certain qualities of character” rather than “God’s free love towards persons as person, even when He sees them as sinners”(Prior 1942c, p.3). Prior’s analysis of the confession commends the “skill and care throughout the Confession in manipulating words like ‘being’ and ‘and’”(Prior 1942c, p.5) which enabled the writers not to land in dogmatism “on purely speculative issues”.(Prior 1942c, p.4) Or as Prior states approvingly of the central theme of the confession: “Salvation is God’s doing but damnation is our own.”(Prior 1942c, p.5) The logic of this is that we cannot presume we are the elect, rather we must live by showing faith to what is revealed by God in the Word.

How Prior thinks through what this means is set out in another paper, most probably from the early 1940s, “Faith Unbelief and Evil. A fragment of Dialogue” (Prior 1940s/n.d.)²⁰ wherein the dialogue is set out between Historian, Theologian and Humanist. This, as discussed by Jakobsen (2012) and Jakobsen (2020), is a companion paper to Prior’s well known “Can Religion be discussed?” from 1942 in which Prior sets out a discussion between 5 characters: a Barthian Protestant, a Modernist Protestant, a Catholic, a Logician and a Psychoanalyst. In “Faith, Unbelief and Evil” (Prior 2012)²¹, it is apparent that the 3 in dialogue – the Historian, Theologian and Humanist – are far more 3 elements of Prior’s own thinking than the varied positions set out in ‘Can Religion be Discussed?’ In particular, the queries and challenges of the Humanist do seem to foretell Prior’s own later moves away from Theology, and as I have noted, express the reversal in the primacy of his thinking, to now privileging Philosophy over and against Theology. Theology is of course still centrally important to Prior’s thought, but now it would seem Christianity is able to accommodate Philosophy, and Theology accommodate Philosophy, rather than a previous secondary focus on Philosophy having to accommodate a dominant Theology. The Historian is the Prior who is writing what was to be an uncompleted manuscript of

²⁰ This should be read alongside the detailed discussions of this paper undertaken by Jakobsen (2012) and in (2020)

²¹ The article was written in 1943.

A History of Scottish Theology, while the Theologian is in many ways a Barthian apologist²²; it is the Humanist who articulates Prior's venturing towards Philosophy away from Theology. It is telling that in Humanist's first interjection he states that it "seems to me frankly, that the central affirmations of Christianity are self-contradictory and absurd" which means, if this is the case, that Christianity "attacks itself, negates itself" and so even Barth, by "thinking Christianly" does not see the "secret emptiness" of Christianity. (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.3) This is not an act of 'bad faith' by Barth, but actually an action undertaken "in good faith" arising out of the central paradoxical nature of Barth's writings and thought. Humanist also stress the illogicality of affirming at the same time God's goodness, God's omnipotence and the reality of evil (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.4); and when challenged, states because he denies the reality of all three of the factors claimed to be involved, that for him "the problem doesn't really exist." (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.5)

Here again – as an aside – we can identify the moves in Prior's thought that take him out of the logic of Calvinism (here expressed as Barthianism²³) into what becomes *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. For logically, for Humanist "terms like 'good' and 'evil', to my mind, do not really express properties of anything, but merely express our wishes" (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.5); and Historian notes this dismissal of the problem of evil resembles some of the thinking of the Scots Calvinists, especially that of Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), who Prior in his letters and elsewhere has invoked a number of times.

Humanist then notes, as he admits, at this point he has "no 'basis' of ethical judgment" – because, as he challenges Theologian, "the very idea of a 'basis' of ethics is meaningless" ; that is , "it is impossible to make any logical inference from a description of how things are , to a

²² Jakobsen (2012) states it is "valuable as a discussion of Barth's theology and, on a more biographical level, with regards to the tension Prior, as logician, felt was present at the roots of the his thinking." (p.402).

²³ Prior's Calvinism was in a constant creative tension between the 17th and 18th century Scots Calvinists and the 20th century reworked Calvinism of Barth. It could be said that ultimately Barth presented for Prior the limitations of updating Calvinism – of whatever form – in the 20th century, unless one became an atheist. Prior's later atheism from the 1950s was a philosophical atheism compared to the theological atheism of 1942; that is, 1942 was a Calvinist-derived and experienced atheism, which is why he could return to Calvinism for at least another decade. Whereas philosophical Logic – combined with being able to leave behind a deep-rooted Presbyterian social and cultural community in New Zealand when he went to England – took him out of Calvinism and then out of theology.

moral judgment or decision" (Prior 1940s/n.d, p.7) and so as he states, "Christians and humanists alike are driven back, sooner or later, to sheer decision, decision without any 'basis'" (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.7). That Prior is himself wrestling with this question, which is, as is clear, will lead him to *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, is demonstrated by the way Theologian attempts to draw Humanist back into agreement with Rutherford and with Barth. But of note is also the way Theologian acknowledges "that the more satisfactorily a 'Christian' theory appears to have 'solved' the problem of evil, the closer that theory is to atheism." (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.7) Here we can conjecture that the logic of Calvinism, pushed to extremes, opens the door to atheism because one reaches a logic that does not have a Christian God as its answer or its basis. That is, the internal logic of Calvinism reaches an endpoint where logically, as Theologian notes "To claim no solution...that is the only Christian position" (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.7) and this means the mystery remains a mystery and the problem remains a problem. Humanist finds this position and Theologian's recourse to "the grace of faith" nothing "but a systematic self-stultification" (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.7).

Prior's growing issue with Calvinism then gets expressed via Theologian's description of the argument that convinces no one but only divides those who participate as "more secretly, predestination in action" (Prior 1940s/n.d, p.8) and here he also commends the inevitability of Barth's chapter on Predestination being followed by one on Ethics. (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.8) Humanist continues to tackle Theologian for what we can term a central failure of logic in Calvinism whereby apparent descriptions are realised to be absurd and yet are followed by a series of moral demands. This is not to say that Prior's Humanist does not find "the essential moral demands that come from Christianity very compelling" (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.8); it is just that there is no "basis" for his decision to attempt to live them out in his life. There follows a discussion between Historian and Theologian wherein Spinoza is invoked as expressing a vision of God often close to what is termed the "slide into a practical pantheism" (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.10) that Calvinists sometimes experience and as perhaps, as noted, is best expressed in Jonathan Edwards. Theologian here observes that Christians must continuously fight for a revealed theology and against a natural theology, and so God's "unchangeableness" is, as noted in Barth, God's constancy in answering faithfulness, not an immutability – for the Christian God must be a living God. This issue becomes a question of ethics for Humanist who rejects any notion of a doctrine of God that asks us to 'be willing to be damned'

for God's glory – and Theologian agrees; yet he counters Humanist by stating that the dereliction of the cry of the abandoned Christ upon the cross, wherein Christ takes “damnation lovingly” does provide – unlike Humanist's philosophy – “a foundation for ethics” (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.12). Yet this foundation is an internal Christian logic of the illogical act, it is not a philosophical logic – and Prior's book to come is in fact concerned how to move *from* the logic of the gospel as the basis of ethics. And for Humanist, what is centrally important is that the goal is liberation of individuals, not – as in the “evil and retrograde thing” (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.13) that is the perversion of the German Christians – liberation only “in the family, the race, the nation”, or as is also critiqued, the reduction to God and salvation as a tribal event and offer.

7 Conclusion

Prior does leave the final statement to Theologian who argues for a Christian ethics whereby Christians are called to love the world and its unbelief, to risk their faith there and “sometimes be badly battered, and battered by those to whom we are tied by love” and this may give rise to “a kind of parable” of Christ's “taking damnation lovingly.” (Prior 1940s/n.d., p.13) Prior's Calvinism has therefore led him through belief into unbelief and back into a belief increasingly aligned with the question of humanism. The absurdity of the logic of faith is finding its limits, yet an ethics that does not rely on the absurdity of faith within a system determined by predestination is yet to occur. Prior's Calvinism, with its wrestling with the issues of the logic of predestination and divine time and what one can and should do as ‘act in response’ is what enables, I would argue, not only *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* but also, as he leaves Calvinism behind, tense logic. So, I want to conclude with a couple of provocative questions: Is tense logic a type of post-Calvinism? Is tense logic a secular theology as well as a philosophy?

These questions deserve more discussion and thought and are the subject of ongoing work. But what is clear is that Prior the Logician arises from Prior the Calvinist and 1942 is when the Logician begins to take precedence over the Calvinist as Prior's primary way of thinking.

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