

# **Cultural Pessimism**

Herman Dooyeweerd

*Translation of a radio address  
Monday 25 April 1938  
and as published  
Mededeelingen 3(1)  
May 1938 pp.1-4.*

**Prepared by:**

Bruce C Wearne Point Lonsdale

with thanks for assistance from:

Chris Gousmett, Dunedin, New Zealand,

Chris van Haften, Kampen, The Netherlands and

David Hanson, Horsforth, UK.

Special thanks to Jan der Nederlanden for making  
available a copy of the original 1938 article from  
*Mededeelingen*.

revised: Wednesday, 26 July 2023

# Cultural Pessimism

*Translation of a radio address given on Monday 25 April 1938  
by Prof. dr. H. Dooyeweerd, Mededeelingen 3(1) May 1938 pp.1-4.*

The spirit that dominates a cultural period is reflected<sup>1</sup>, so it is said, in its view of history.<sup>2</sup>

Being so concise, this is a proposition that the public will quickly take up. However, if you try to grasp its central meaning, it will take a while longer. Even Goethe made fun of the expression “spirit of the times”:

What you call the spirit of the times, that is the mind of the masters in which the times mirror themselves.<sup>3</sup>

But then, also, it is highly questionable whether any cultural period can exhibit such inner unity of style that one can speak of *the* spirit of that culture. Rather, what history shows us is a persistent power-struggle between spiritual currents that compete for the upper hand. Likewise it is far too naïve to speak of *the* historical perspective that belongs to a cultural period. Such formulations are very subtly infused with a kind of spiritual tyranny, proclaiming its own perspective as the one to set the tone, in an attempt to edge out dissenting views as backward or spiritually inferior. Take, for example, Oswald Spengler’s comment in his well-known “*Decline of the West*”. There he proclaims that our Western culture is staggering along in its final phase, in its wintertime. If you cannot understand this - so his judgement goes - you don’t count among your contemporaries; you are just a fool, a charlatan or a pedant.

Those who fall under the spell of Spengler’s opinion reveal merely a lack of character and of solid conviction. More to the point, it is such people who cannot be counted upon among their contemporaries because they have nothing to say and nothing to give. They let themselves be used as impersonal mouthpieces of a cultural pessimism that has been whispered in their ears by thinkers of a very particular stamp, as if that view is *the* cultural understanding of our time.

---

<sup>1</sup> *weerspiegelt*

<sup>2</sup> This opening sentence is crucial for the entire discussion. *De geest, die een cultuur-periode beheerscht, weerspiegelt zich in haar historiebeschouwing, zoo heeft men gezegd.* It is commonly said that the historical outlook of any period will reflect the dominant spirit of that culture.

<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd is here quoting Goethe’s **Faust**. It is also rendered in one other of his essays for public dissemination written immediately after World War II, collected together in **Vernieuwing en Bezinning** 1959/1963 and then translated into English and published in 1979 (2012 2nd edition). It is given as “*What spirit of the time you call, / Is but the scholar’s spirit, after all, / In which times past are now reflected.*” Herman Dooyeweerd **Roots of Western Culture** 2012 p.57.

But this pessimistic view of culture does not introduce us to *the* spirit of our time. Rather, it brings us face to face with the extremely tragic phenomenon of spiritual uprooting among the many who, in our day, have turned away from the Christian faith.

This cultural pessimism is announced in all kinds of ways. For Spengler, this final phase of Western civilisation, which he believes has already begun, leaves us with no other possibility for our thinking than a sceptical relativism. There exists no absolute truth enthroned serenely above the stream of historical relativity. Man, in the depths of his being, is at the mercy of historical emergence and dissolution. Everything that seemed to offer a firm foothold in earlier times - the Christian faith, science, the ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness - these are all just shifting quicksand, fading perspectives in time's relentless flow, dependent upon ever-changing cultural axioms. Our Western culture is on the verge of ruin. We did not choose this phase of decadence as an act of free will. It has fallen upon us like a fate, and anyone who, in his worldview, attempts to break free from the spirit of decline becomes guilty of naive self-deception.<sup>4</sup>

Modern man, according to another pessimistic philosopher of culture, Ortega y Gasset, is left with nothing but the memories of his historical past. He now asks himself what one thing might be left for him in his disillusioned life? And so, for the first time, he now finds himself forced to admit that he has nothing better to do than to give an account of what he *was* in the course of history, confronting his *historical* past, not from curiosity or a search for examples that can serve as a guideline for the future, but rather because it is *all that he has*.

\* \* \*

How did this cultural pessimism come about? What made that optimistic belief in the future which we meet in the 18th century Enlightenment

---

<sup>4</sup> Dooyeweerd seems to be formulating his own response as he engages, as if in face-to-face conversation, and does so by giving back to Spengler his own view. The term "spirit of decline" ("geest des vervals") anticipates Spengler's reply to any challenge from some Christian like himself, living in this "modern time". Spengler, in accommodation to "bourgeois civility" might "politely" avoid using the term "self-deception" of the Christian or other person who disagrees with him, but Dooyeweerd would tell him that though he may not have used the words, that this is his meaning. Dooyeweerd at this point develops his *reformatorische* apologetics to confront a "political correctness" that prefers politeness to saying what is actually meant. This is the apologetic that will confront an intellectual opponent "sub contrario" identifying the point in the argument where, contrary to an explicitly stated intention, adherence to God's creational-law is evident "in spite of themselves."

philosophy of history, give way to such a doomsaying mood<sup>5</sup> on the part of so many?

The Christian of today needs to account for this. He cannot stand untroubled by the changing currents of time, as if they would not touch him.

It may often be unconscious, but the Christian of today will still be influenced by these currents. We remain, even as Christians, subject to the great law of historical development; we are children of our time. Indeed, this has not been something we choose voluntarily. But as children of this century, we also have a vocation, with our own extremely responsible task to fulfil in this cultural period. For we are also citizens of the City of God, of the immovable Kingdom that must reveal its power in history, and so we continue on in an irreconcilable battle waged against the spiritual powers of darkness.

Modern cultural pessimism is a fruit of the so-called historicist way of thinking, which has developed more and more into a comprehensive life-and-world-view<sup>6</sup> since the last<sup>7</sup> century. As the term implies, historicism looks at human life exclusively from the point of view of historical relativity. The powerful explosion of historical research since the nineteenth century is quite unprecedented in the history of the human race. Our historical horizon, compared with those of earlier times, has expanded so dramatically that world history, when we look at it superficially, hardly seems to hold any more secrets for us. Where written sources fail, excavations will resurrect long-expired cultures from the dust. And, to the degree that world history opens up deeper perspectives for us, we see the more clearly the relativity of all cultural standards.

The ancient Greeks saw everything non-Greek as barbarian. Renaissance man believed that he found in classical Graeco-Roman civilization an imperishable standard for his own culture-formation. Enlightened man of the 18th century saw his own culture, with its incomparable development of scientific research, as the summit of history. In comparison with it, he saw the culture of earlier centuries submerged in the darkness of superstition and priestcraft.

---

<sup>5</sup> Dooyeweerd is asking: is there not a connection? How is it possible, given the optimism of previous times, that we now see the all too easy “giving way” to pessimism?

<sup>6</sup> *levensbeschouwing*

<sup>7</sup> i.e the 19th century

Such historical myopia<sup>8</sup> is no longer scientifically possible for us. We can no longer regard any phase of culture as an absolute standard for the assessment of earlier periods.<sup>9</sup> A genuinely historical way of thinking has learned to understand each culture on its own terms. That is an undeniable gain and, in spiritual terms, a deepening compared to any unhistorical way of thinking.<sup>10</sup>

But for someone who has built all his hopes on *temporal* existence, this deepening of historical consciousness must, at the same time, bring with it a spiritual crisis.

In the first half of the 19th century, the historical way of thinking in humanistic circles had not yet challenged the belief in the eternal value of the human personality. Belief in the sovereignty of human reason had by that time, not been seriously compromised.

The idea of humanity, of respect to be ascribed to everything that showed a human face, was still revered as an idea of eternal truth. The German idealism of the previous century had considered world history in its entirety to be implicated in the idea of mankind's self-liberation. Hegel regarded advancement in the realisation of freedom as the fixed pole star of historical development.

But the approaching crisis in the humanist world-and-life view was already at the gates. In the minds of many, Darwinism's evolutionary principle eroded the old dogma of the immutable uniformity of human nature. Human reason itself became, under its influence, merely a product of the development from an animal to human status. Marxism with its materialistic view of history and its doctrine of class struggle undermined the belief in eternal ideas and mocked the idea of humanity. All the ideologies of law, morality, art and religion had been ruthlessly derived from economic-historical motives. The mass revolt of the proletariat was

---

<sup>8</sup> Dooyeweerd is expounding the historicist view i.e. the myopia that has been superseded by history's "incomparable development of scientific research" which relativizes all world-views that have been dominant in former times. (see paragraph beginning "soon, Nietzsche ..." top p.6) And so, according to this historicistic "world-view", they are not only overcoming the mythic perspective inherent in the ancient Greeks, and hence the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as well as Christendom's centuries-long accommodation thereto, but have superseded the emergence of humanism from Renaissance and the Enlightenment with their philosophies by an inherent latter-day scientific superiority.

<sup>9</sup> The initial statement of the essay is still in mind here as Dooyeweerd develops his case.

<sup>10</sup> And so, the implication is that *now* we go forward, having finally after a long struggle, found the way to assert our true and everlasting sovereignty by the configuration of it from our own hand.

proclaimed against an idealistic kingdom of peace behind which nothing but capitalist interests lay hidden.<sup>11</sup>

Soon, Nietzsche, the prophet of the modern age, would sound the death knell over German idealism. He announced a new gospel, that of the blond beast, the “Ueberschensch”, who has shaken off the chains of a slave morality and, newly conscious of his power, strides forward over the prejudices of herd morality and religion.

Add to this the tremendous catastrophe of the world war,<sup>12</sup> in which all humanistic ideals of culture vanished in flames and rubble, and you will understand how the historicist way of thinking must necessarily drag the modern man into the maelstrom of cultural pessimism.

Modern historicism was now inwardly defenceless against the wisdom of Mephistopheles -

*all that exists deserves to perish.*<sup>13</sup>

What scholar today would dare to stand up for eternal norms of law and morality, that can be deduced with mathematical certainty from human reason? Who would still seriously expect the steady progress of mankind from the spreading light of science?<sup>14</sup>

All the pre-war ideals<sup>15</sup>: democracy, rule of law, *entente* between nations, that had been considered inviolable spiritual goods of Western culture,

---

<sup>11</sup> For Marx “ideology” was inherent in the oppression represented by capitalism.

<sup>12</sup> i.e the so-called Great War 1914-1918, World-War One, that had been dubbed by those taking up the conflict with hope that it would be “the war to end all wars.”

<sup>13</sup> This is said to have been a favourite aphorism of Karl Marx, presumably in his everyday exuberant articulation of dialectical materialism. It surely advertises an intention to bring about historical advance by confidently assuming that the honour ascribed to leading figures of an earlier time will evaporate with their work disgraced. See a later work on modernity and the salience of Goethe in the work of Marshall Berman **All that is Solid Melts to Air** 1982, exploring the tension between modernization and modernism.

<sup>14</sup> The development of military weapon engineering and technology had certainly played its part in the previous hundred years, but it is also good to note that this is a mere few months before nuclear fission of heavy elements was discovered on Monday 19 December 1938, by German chemist Otto Hahn and his assistant Fritz Strassmann in cooperation with Austrian-Swedish physicist Lise Meitner. see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear\\_fission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_fission)

<sup>15</sup> Dooyeweerd refers to the Great War of 1914-1918, years when he was busy with his doctoral study: **De Ministerraad in het Nederlandse staatsrecht** (1917). The Netherlands remained neutral in that war, and he is giving expression in this talk to what his own subsequent research had disclosed concerning the context within which he had obtained academic qualifications.

have been ruthlessly thrown into the melting pot<sup>16</sup>, revealing their historical relativity.

The free self-determination of human personality, basic to the humanist idea of autonomy, was indeed formally maintained by historicism, but now filled with entirely new content.<sup>17</sup>

While idealism held sway<sup>18</sup>, this idea was based on the belief in the immutable rational-moral nature of man.

Man's sovereignty is still being sought, but nowadays it is in historical thinking that has freed itself from any dogmatic belief, not only of an ecclesiastical but also of an idealistic nature. The intention is that thought should flow along without inhibition in the stream of historical emergence, and so be able to enjoy the cultural treasures of the past and present.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Josef L Hromadka: **Thoughts of a Czech Pastor** SCM Press, 1970. He describes the complex religious and ethnic-lingual rapprochements of this inter-war period as part of the inheritance of central European lands of the Czech Reformation, before being subjected to Nazi invasion and then, in 1968, to the Soviet take-over when Russian tanks rolled into Prague. Central Europe was indeed viewed as a "melting pot". But also note how "melting pot" in Europe is pessimistic in a Spenglerian sense, whereas across the North Atlantic the USA viewed itself after WWI, having "yanked the hyphen" to be the crucible of global optimism. For "yanking the hyphen" See Jean Bethke Elshtain "In Common Together: Christianity and Democracy in America" in John Witte (ed) **Christianity And Democracy In Global Context** Westview 1993 pp.65-84.

<sup>17</sup> ref. James W Skillen **With or Against the World? America's Role Among the Nations** Rowman and Littlefield 2005. This work was written to identify the freedom-idealism involved in President G W Bush's attempt to formulate a National Security Strategy that established the USA as the destination point in world history. This dialectic in "Western thought" indeed now needs to be understood historically in terms of long-term European "westward" migration. See also Herman Dooyeweerd **In the Twilight of Western Thought** Craig Press 1960, the collection of lectures delivered by the author during a North American tour in the late 1950s.

<sup>18</sup> Dooyeweerd's metaphor here is "hoog-conjunctuur". This indicates a view of humanistic idealism at "the top of its boom cycle", a use of words that may eerily remind us of the stock market fragility at that time, focused upon "movements" which help explain a philosophical myth on its way from its "boom" to its "bust". In that context, one is left with the troubling thought that the world-wide "Great Depression" of the 1930s had been overcome by the marketing of "futures" speculation in terms of another war arising to meet the demands implied by the military spending of Governments.



In modern existential philosophy, a dominating role is played by the motive of anxiety in the conscious confrontation of the inevitability of death.<sup>19</sup>

What we hear in the words of Prof. Jaspers, a leading figure in this modern school of thought, is deeply tragic: History is the fight of dead men, whose fate is not finally decided as long as they still find adherents now and again among the living. Those supporters may raise the torch of their seemingly lost cause for a while until the moment inevitably arrives, when they are finished forever.

Here, for sure, the flame of eternal light no longer pierces the darkness of time. World history is nothing but the singing of a funeral dirge over the grave of all human ideals.

The fact that this murderous historicism should deprive modern man of every creative impulse cannot deter those thinkers who have predicted the imminent demise of the Western world. After all, doesn't it closely match their view of culture?<sup>20</sup>

But since that world war, the drama of world history has continued to develop at a feverish pace with the demand for people of forceful action rather than of fruitless contemplation.<sup>21</sup>

Historicism had to be conquered. But how? For the vast majority of spiritual leaders, a return to the old idealistic faith in reason was no longer

---

<sup>19</sup> On July 16, 1945, witnessing the atomic test at the Trinity site, New Mexico, Robert Oppenheimer, the chief nuclear scientist, claimed to be citing the Hindu scripture of Shiva from the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds". <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/manhattan-project-robert-oppenheimer> There is controversy over the translation, and the meaning of this quotation which in its own way assists us in assessment of the extent of the West's "cultural pessimism". Then as stated by Albert Einstein "The splitting of the atom has changed everything, except for man's way of thinking, and thus we drift into unparalleled catastrophes. <https://thebulletin.org/2015/04/meeting-einsteins-challenge-new-thinking-about-nuclear-weapons/>

<sup>20</sup> Dooyeweerd seems to be pointing out that this "world history" is the historiography-in-the-making which will be written by those with such a pessimistic historicist world-outlook. But as he has suggested in the opening paragraphs, discussion about history becomes the occasion for competing spiritual perspectives, each claiming to be *the* historical perspective i.e. the prevailing *historiography* that has been rigorously imposed according to ideological demands.

<sup>21</sup> "onvruchtbare beschouwende mensen" - people of barren contemplation. There may be an echo here of Max Weber's 1918 "Wissenschaft als Beruf" where in conclusion he addressed "the person who cannot bear the fate of the times" and advises that "he rather return silent, without the usual build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him." But as well, Dooyeweerd is here in 1938 anticipating Heidegger's distinction of his 1955 "Memorial Address" between "calculative" and "meditative" thought. That, however, came *after* the war that was then threatening. Heidegger became a philosophical authority after World War II in the West despite his infamous accommodation to Nazism.

possible. An idealistic attempt to rise above the stream of world history into a world of immutable concepts of reason<sup>22</sup> could only be seen as a benign self-deception of unhistorical minds.

Human reason had failed. And so the ideals of the new age now had to be drawn from another source. *Myth* would have to take the place of rational ideas.

And the myth does not ask for eternal truth, but only for the chance of success in the moment. It conjures up in the masses a religious enthusiasm for the creative imagination of a leader who promises to realise a great dream about the future of his people. And it attaches itself to some motif from a distant but inspiring historical or more mythological past: the eternal Rome or even the historic calling<sup>23</sup> of the so-called Nordic race.

In his book, *The Myth of the 20th Century*, the well-known Dr. Alfred Rosenberg<sup>24</sup> begins his introduction as follows:

All present day struggles for power are outward effects of an inner collapse. All the state-systems of 1914 have already fragmented, even if in part they still formally exist. But similarly fragmented are the social, ecclesiastical theories and worldviews. No highest principle, no supreme idea any longer controls the lives of peoples in an unchallenged way. Group struggles against group, party against party, national values against international doctrine, rigid imperialism against rampant pacifism. Finance with its golden meshes entangles states and peoples, life is uprooted. The world war as the beginning of a world revolution on all fronts has brought to light the tragic fact that, although millions sacrificed their lives, this sacrifice advantaged powers other than those for which the armies were prepared to die. The war dead are the sacrifices of the catastrophe of an age that had become worthless, but at the same time the martyrs of a new dawn, of a new faith. The blood that died begins to live again. Under its mystical sign, a new cell structure appears in the soul of the German nation. Present and the past suddenly appear in a new light. A new task, a new mission, is revealed for the future. Its history and future task no longer mean the struggle of class against class, no longer a struggle between one church-dogma and another, but the struggle of one blood against other blood, one

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the comment on Spengler early on in his address (see pp.1-2 above) “There exists no absolute truth enthroned serenely above the stream of historical relativity.” And contrast this with the wisdom of Mephisto (ex. Goethe) that all that exists deserves to perish.

<sup>23</sup> i.e. the mythology that decreed that the Norse were the superior and conquering Aryan branch of the Caucasian race.

<sup>24</sup> Adolf Hitler’s propagandist. This quotation translates Dooyeweerd’s own Dutch translation of Rosenberg’s Preface. For a downloadable copy of Rosenberg’s book, see <https://archive.org/details/alfred-rosenberg-the-myth-of-the-20th-century>. At points it is extremely hard to follow.

race against another, one people against the other for supremacy. And that means the struggle of one nation's soul against the souls of other nations.

The understanding of history, inspired by the doctrine of race, is a science that will speedily become common knowledge ... that is the task of our century: to create a new type of human from a new myth of life. Courage is needed for that. Courage of every individual, courage of the whole generation that is now growing up, courage surely of many generations to come.

For chaos is never tamed by the despondent, and a world has never been built by cowards.

Those who want to move forward must therefore burn all the bridges behind them.

It could not be stated more clearly that this new mythology of life was born out of the crisis of modern cultural consciousness. And it is deadly serious about the destruction of the former ideals of culture.

But humankind is now anxiously wondering if the myth is not preparing the nations for another great Armageddon, from which the West will be awakened to no new dawn.<sup>25</sup>

Historicism, with its offshoots in cultural pessimism and its mythology-of-life, sets before us new and extremely urgent problems, that are as much theoretical as they are practical.

How we understand history is the question here, and with it the necessity of a positive choice of position with regard to the foundations of Western culture, threatened now with being undermined and destroyed by the emergence of the new mythology-of-life. So: what does God require of us at this turning point of history, where we have now arrived? The question cannot be evaded by any Christian who refuses to withdraw from the mighty cultural struggle of our day, and thereby to desert the ranks of the *militia Christi*, the struggling church here on earth. The armour of faith was not given to us for escaping conflict unscathed by pretending that Christians have nothing to do with the thoroughly sinful culture. That culture lies fully within our responsibility. It is to Christ our King that it belongs, and not the power of darkness.

Well now, it is important for us to recognise that, precisely on this cardinal point of historical perspective, Christian thinking has made little progress since Augustine.

---

<sup>25</sup> The West: the "avondland" which Spengler had said is in its fated decline. The literal translation is "land of evening".

Certainly, we have held fast the belief that Christ's appearance on earth is the centre of the world's history (*geschiedenis*), and that world history (*historie*) remains the great battlefield between the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* until the end of days, when all things will be subjected to the Son. Such belief protects us from the ruinous consequences of historicism that would extinguish the light of eternity over temporal life and lead us in its funeral dirge over human destiny.

But historicism has presented us with another problem, which has hardly been seriously considered in our circle.<sup>26</sup> It has reduced the whole of temporal human society in all its aspects to a historical emergence, and has made all abiding principles fluid and relative to a relentless stream of development. Science and art, law and morality, language, manners and economy, as well as ecclesiastical dogma, have been turned into mere historical cultural artefacts.

A historicist view of the temporal reality of human life lies at the foundation of this understanding.

And precisely on this fundamental point - the dissolution of all temporal life in the stream of historical development - we have left historicism undisturbed.<sup>27</sup>

German idealism thought this vision of reality could be safely accepted, but only provided it held on to an eternal world of rational ideas, which were to be realised in the course of world history.

Wishful thinking! The divine stronghold of humanistic ideas has also been razed to the ground of historical relativity. As we have seen, the historicism of our day has become preponderantly anti-idealist.

But even the Christian view of history has tragically seen the incursion of an historicist view of the reality of temporal life.

It was the great German anti-revolutionary thinker, Friedrich Julius Stahl, to whom we nevertheless owe so much in the struggle against

---

<sup>26</sup> *in onzen kring* - since this is the transcription of a radio speech and published in *Mededeelingen* of the Vereeniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte, it would be instructive to know about the radio station and whether it was a broadcast directed to a specifically Christian audience or for a "general" public audience. The phrase "in our circles" suggests Dooyeweerd is referring to the scholarly work yet to be attempted and it may be that he is suggesting that the criticism of historicism is under-developed by all schools of thought, whatever their religious basis, but also within Christian scholarly circles.

<sup>27</sup> Could it be that "we Christians" have done so, leaving it undisturbed because we wanted to have it in place to ensure the success of our apologetic? The logic runs like this: we cultivate our own "benefit", as we tell ourselves, by doing nothing in order to *strengthen* our nominalistic Christian argument.

revolutionary principles, who introduced it in his doctrine of law and the state.

He accepted without hesitation the basic premise of the so-called Historical School that law, like language, art and morals, initially grew unconsciously from out of the popular mind as a *product of historical development*. In doing so, he deliberately chose the side of the ir-rationalistic romanticism of his day<sup>28</sup> in preference to the rationalism of the eighteenth century. In principle, the unique historical character of the nation is exalted as law and its *subjective* character ignored. And the historical point of view absorbed all the other aspects of temporal society.

To be sure, Stahl himself saw the dangers of this historicist way of thinking. He strove to accommodate this view of reality to the Christian view i.e. a moral world-order, insulated as such from the perishability of what has become historical. He accepted the moral law as a corrective<sup>29</sup> to historical development. According to him, what had actually grown historically is only entitled to our respect, insofar as it does not conflict with an expressly revealed divine commandment.

However, this romantic view of history was not sanitised *intrinsically*. It was not of Christian but of humanistic origin, a fruit of German idealism from the first half of the 19th century.

The fundamental questions for the contemporary Christian view of history are these:

1. What place does history have in the world order that God has established for temporal reality?
2. Does historical development indeed truly, encompass the whole temporal reality of human life, as historicism teaches, or does it represent<sup>30</sup> only a certain side, a certain aspect of this life?
3. And then, what is the mutual relationship and coherence of that historical aspect with the other aspects of society, such as the moral and the juridical, the economic and the aesthetic and especially with regard to the temporal life of faith?

---

<sup>28</sup> i.e. the views of Schelling. See Dooyeweerd 1996 (see fn. 29 below) p. 88.

<sup>29</sup> See Keith C Sewell **The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity** 2016. Chapter 3 “Whatever happened to the reformation?” includes discussion of “*A Diversity of Views on How the Scriptures Are Authoritative*” in which Lutheran and Anglican “corrective view” of Holy Scripture is explained.

<sup>30</sup> *vertegenwoordigt*

4. And last but not least: is it right to see in history nothing but a factual process of development, which as such can set no norms for human action? Or has God subjected historical development to specific ordinances, from which we can derive intrinsic standards for the assessment of culture?

For one thing is certain: the view which claims an ability to derive all temporal rules of conduct from the moral law, as a kind of logical application of the moral commandment to the concrete circumstances of time and place, is untenable. In its rationalistic concept of the moral law, it offers no solution to the great problems which history poses to Christian thinking.

It has been attacked at its weakest point by the historicist way of thinking of our time (in its overestimation of logic) and cannot take a defensible position against historicism.

It cannot answer the great questions that trouble our times, whether we look at democracy and the rule of law, at world trade and freedom of cultural development, at degenerative phenomena or solid foundations of our modern civilization.<sup>31</sup>

Yet an answer *must* be found by a Christianity that lives not *outside*, but *inside* culture; that understands that its calling is to be found in history.

Since these questions are so very complicated, a *practical* answer also demands a more profound theoretical basis, that prevents Christian thought falling back into the old mistake of compromise with unbelieving philosophy.

Modern historicism's view of history cannot be adapted with a few corrections, to Christian revelation about the meaning of world history.

It is precisely this accommodation that has half-disarmed<sup>32</sup> some currents of Christian philosophical thought in the spiritual warfare of our day.

---

<sup>31</sup> In this and the former paragraph, "it" refers to Christian thinking that accommodates itself to a rationalistic conception of the moral law, trying to appeal to Scripture as a "corrective" to historicism's radical relativisation.

<sup>32</sup> The term "disarmed" is found in an article Dooyeweerd had then recently published in a volume **Geestelijk Weerloos of Weerbaar?** 1937 pp. 153-212, subsequently translated and published as "The dangers of the intellectual disarmament of Christianity in Science" in Herman Dooyeweerd **Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History** 1996 pp. 67-104. The section "A predictable compromise between Christianity and Humanism" pp. 93-94 shows his critical awareness of how "a semi-Christian, dualistic mode of thinking fought the Christian idea of science with all the weapons that unbelieving philosophy had forged against it up until that time" in the work of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.

When Spengler's book was published, Christian thinkers were immediately seen to be ready to reconcile this cultural pessimism with Christian revelation. In the announcement of a booklet "*Der Untergang des Abendlandes und der Christ*", one can read the statement:

Idealists turn bitterly against Spengler's relativism. But the Christian does not fear this relativism, indeed, he sees in it an advancement of his spiritual life. He knows a point that puts him beyond all relativity. It is sincerely demonstrated here how Spengler's book can help his numerous readers make further progress in a spiritual direction.

But I suggest that all those attempts at accommodation have, as appears from the history of Christian thought, proved to be the surest way of undermining any Christian influence in cultural development. Compromise between such radically opposed points of view has never yet led to a healthy and powerful outcome. For what communion has Christ with a mind that has shut itself off from the light of His Word?

The path of synthesis is a dead end for Christian thinking. The radical antithesis between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world cannot be silenced in a truly Christian philosophy of history. To it belongs the future, because it is of the Truth. And the Truth, also in this struggle, will *set us free!*