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The Problem of the Relationship of Nature and Grace in the Calvinistic law-idea.

by Herman Dooyeweerd

Preliminary note: *In the 1920's, when Dooyeweerd was beginning his -philosophical writings, he wrote a number of articles in which he stressed the Calvinistic roots of his thought, and was not reluctant to enter into some of the issues which had been debated by the theological tradition. Later, after his clashes with the theological faculty at the Free University, he became increasingly less willing to engage in theological debate, and in the fifties self-consciously dropped the adjective "Calvinistic" from his philosophy, preferring it to be known as simply "Christian. " Whatever the pros and cons of this move may be (it is significant that Vollenhoven and Stoker never felt moved to follow him in this), it is clear from the following extract that there is a very intimate connection between the foundations of Dooyeweerd's philosophy and certain basic structural features of the Calvinist tradition: the positive appreciation of law, the unlimited extension of sin and grace, and the conception of salvation as re-creation.*

*Some of Dooyeweerd's terminology in this early essay may require explanation. By "law-idea" (wetsidee) he meant at that time the underlying paradigmatic structure (usually oriented to some notion of "law") of any system of thought. "World and life view" refers to a non-theoretical overall perspective, comparable to the technical sense of *WeItanschauung* in Neokantianism, which is distinct from both theology and philosophy (A. W[olters]).*

Just as the Christian law-idea differs *toto coelo* in its basic structure from the humanistic one, so its fundamental problem has also been framed completely differently. Whereas the fundamental problem of the humanistic law-idea is formulated in its insoluble form as the quest for the harmonious relationship between the science-ideal and the personality-ideal, the Christian law-idea has from the beginning put in the centre of its attention the relationship between nature and grace in God's cosmic plan.

Indeed, a law-idea which ignores this fundamental problem of the Christian world and life view, and has a completely *diesseitig*, an entirely "natural" orientation, as in the case of humanism, can make no claim to the title "Christian."

The Fall into sin and the redemption through Jesus Christ are facts of cosmic and universal significance; to exclude these all-important matters from the purview of one's philosophy, deigning to grant them at best a place in the science of theology, is to understand nothing of the very core of Christianity as world and life view.

Through Augustine's *lex aeterna*, the first universal and worked-out formulation of the Christian law-idea, there runs as a golden thread the Christian antithesis between *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena*; in the Thomistic law-idea the *natura praeambula gratiae* constitutes a predominant element which cannot be eliminated.

As for Luther's world and life view, although it fails to bring the problem of nature and grace to a satisfactory solution, yet its personalistic and soteriological character takes its origin completely from the Christian concept of grace.

Is it possible, then, that the Calvinistic law-idea should be indifferent towards this all-important fundamental problem? Far from it! The agonizing tension between nature and grace has been resolved in this law-idea, not by the elimination of one of the two, but by a harmonious reconciliation. It is this which gives the Calvinistic world and life view its balanced and imposing character. Everything, even the apparently least significant of natural phenomena, is here viewed in the light of eternity.

Redemption has a cosmic meaning; it makes all things new. Regeneration embraces all of life; it is indifferent to nothing; everything is taken up into the service of God. This is the attitude to life which Max Weber and Troeltsch have called *innerweltliche Ascese*. The term is debatable, but there need be no objection to its meaning, if it is understood to signify that nothing has existence or value in itself, but that every creature stands in a profound dependency relationship to God.

Whence comes the marked orientation of Calvinism to the law? Whence comes the radical rejection of all subjectivism, whence the irreconcilable antithesis to all personalism and immanence thinking? It is the characteristic stamp of God's creational sovereignty, on the one hand, and the sense of sin's far-reaching destructive effects, on the other, which has cut off at the root every autonomy of the subject in the Calvinistic law-idea.

In the midst of all error, in the midst of all distortion by sin, the universal legislation of God abides as the only constant, like a rock amidst the waves. In every law-sphere the holy, almighty and sovereign will of God the Creator holds sway immediately, without *Vermittlung*, without mediation of other laws. In every area grace impels toward loving submission to God's laws; it changes servitude to sonship.

But that grace is exclusively God's work and is not subjected to laws. Religion in its active sense is not one law-sphere alongside others, such as those of jurisprudence, morality and Logos, since in an entirely primary and universal sense it is foundational to all law-spheres. It is this as a *passive* bond to God's creative and sustaining power, insofar as we look to the law-spheres in which *irrational* nature serves God, and as *active* bond to God, insofar as we look to those law-spheres in which *rational* nature serves God.

Sin ruptured the active religious bond and plunged man into apostasy from the law and into a state of enmity to God and deep moral ruin. But that bond was restored by the cross of Christ, and redemption manifested its universal regenerating power everywhere that this religious attitude to life, made possible only in Christ, was adopted once again. In every area of life God's creature submitted himself once more in loving obedience to God's ordinances, not as a slave under his Master, but as a child of the Father who is in heaven.

God's work in man's heart is not subject to laws. For that very reason the Christian religion cannot be enclosed in a single law-sphere, but impels the regenerated person out into the sinful world, in order to do battle everywhere for the recognition of the divine ordinances and against the abstraction disease of the humanistic science-ideal. It impels us to point out again and again the organic unity of all law-spheres, as this is expressed in our law-idea.

Nature and grace! How is their relationship viewed in our law-idea?

Not nature as a preliminary to grace as in Roman Catholicism—no pagan foundation under a Christian roof. No unreconciled break between nature and grace, as in Lutheranism, but nature and grace in indissoluble, harmonious connection!

True nature is the obedience to God's law, in accordance with the meaning of the law, i.e. out of childlike love to the Father. And it is the grace in Christ Jesus which restores true nature in the creature.

The operation of God's grace does not mean a new legislation, nor the establishment of a separate law-sphere, but a divine operation in the human heart which in Christ Jesus redirects all of life internally to the law. He who points only to the impassable boundary between God and creation isolates the law from religion, in which God enters into the most intimate fellowship with his creature, and in which he has been pleased to reveal himself to us.

By his common grace God has restrained the destructive effects of sin throughout the world; he has restrained the complete demonization of what he had created. In this way it was possible for science, art, society, jurisprudence and statecraft to continue to exist in the domain of common grace. But God's special grace also has its effect in this domain, making for division and separation between Christianity and humanism. The irreconcilable antithesis in the basic structure of the Christian and humanistic law-idea, or (to use the language of Augustine) the struggle throughout the ages between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, between *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena*, will not come to an end before the consummation of all things. Then God the Judge will speak the last word, and the time of common grace will come to an end.

Science and religion are no longer opposites in the light of the Calvinistic law-idea. For behold, science *is* religion (*Godsdienst*) in Christ Jesus, just as life in every law-sphere is equally service of God (*dienst van God*) in him who has prepared for us an eternal redemption from the power of sin, which is rebellion against God and his law.

—*Excursus II in the article "The problem of juridical causality in the light of the law-idea, " Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde, Driemaandelijksch Orgaan 2 (1928): 25–28.*