

Jurist, professor, author

Philosopher Dooyeweerd dies at age 83

by Rosanne Lopers

Dr Herman Dooyeweerd, internationally recognized and esteemed as an original thinker within and without circles of Christian conviction, died Saturday, February 12, in Amsterdam, halfway through his 83rd year. As a jurist, professor, and author of countless publications, it cannot be doubted that he will be remembered for his great contributions to the renewal of philosophy.

Dooyeweerd forms a definitive part of a strong Calvinistic tradition existing in the Netherlands for several centuries. In the lineage of John Calvin, Johannes Althusius, Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, Dooyeweerd can be seen as the culminating theoretician. "The central thought of his philosophy is that all philosophy has non-theoretical, religious presuppositions which it cannot do without." Dooyeweerd deepened the whole understanding of man's way of life because he has seen man as a religious being, and works from the biblical concept of heart.

"Most people think of him as a philosopher or theologian," commented Dr. H. Evan Runner, former student, follower, and long-time friend of Dooyeweerd, "but he was a lawyer." It was in his pursuit of legal theory that he came to realize that the dominant philosophies of his time (neo-Kantianism and phenomenology) were not adequate for him to express his Christian faith in. He felt the need for a philosophical development of his own in dealing with the foundations of the law sciences, said Runner.

Dooyeweerd was born in Amsterdam on October 7, 1894, into a family which followed Calvinistic convictions and the leadership of Abraham Kuyper—a statesman, educator, and journalist who revitalized the evangelical wing of Dutch reformed Protestantism. Runner stated that Dooyeweerd's father was in the habit of reading Kuyper's editorial "Driesterotjes" at the table for discussion. Dooyeweerd himself was a child of the early 19th century Réveil, and one to whom Kuyper left the challenge of carrying out the philosophizing of the Christian foundations he had set down. Runner noted that Dooyeweerd and his constant associate D.H.T. Vollenhoven, when they were teenagers at the gymnasium, would lay out sections of paper and in columns figure out philosophers.

Dooyeweerd pursued his study at the Free University founded by Kuyper, and earned his doctorate in jurisprudence at that university with a dissertation on "The Cabinet in Dutch Constitutional Law." After completing his study, and while working in various capacities for the government, Dooyeweerd became increasingly interested in the sources and foundations of law. This drove him back to the larger and deeper philosophical questions at the roots of jurisprudence. It was on the beaches of Scheveningen with Vollenhoven, who complemented Dooyeweerd's interests in law and ethics with his interests in the natural sciences, that they combined their efforts and lit upon the idea of the modal scale.

In 1922 Dooyeweerd was invited to serve as Assistant Director of the Abraham Kuyperstichting, the research institute for the Antirevolutionary Party, located in The Hague. Here he was able to engage in systematic reflection on the nature of Christian political theory. The institute's main



Herman Dooyeweerd

service was of a practical kind, to furnish advice on legal and politicoeconomic issues to the members of the Antirevolutionary Party. Before he accepted the position, Dooyeweerd outlined what he considered necessary for the proper and responsible development of a political party, in particular, a Christian political party which had no political expertise to rely on up to this time.

At the institute in 1923 he led the establishment of a new journal for this organization, the *Antirevolutionaire Staatkunde* (Antirevolutionary politics) to which he contributed some of his earliest political and legal studies.

In 1926 he was appointed professor in the juridical faculty at the Free University, a position he held until he retired in 1965. During his years at the university he was instrumental in founding another journal, *Philosophia Reformata*, in 1936. Together with his brother-in-law Vollenhoven, appointed in 1926 to the philosophy faculty at the Free, Dooyeweerd laid systematic foundations for a Christian philosophy. Landmarking this date was the 3-volume publication of *The Philosophy of the Cosmogenic Idea*. This book contains the pith of Dooyeweerd's system and in the 1950's he spent great effort to publish it in English under the title *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.

Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd were together constantly but were always open to rethinking their ideas, says Dr Gordon Spykman. They wrote separately, as an historian and a systematic theologian. Spykman remembers Dooyeweerd as an "absolutely congenial Christian gentleman who always had time to talk to students and have them over to his home." Spykman has "only thankfulness for the treasures of Christian thought that Dooyeweerd has been able to introduce to us all." Few professors at Calvin actually followed Dooyeweerd's courses, but all who attended the Free University sat in on his lectures. "He was the

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greatest Christian philosopher of our generation and apart from details that we can all quarrel about, there is an irresistible rightness about all his insights," said Spykman.

His career has been one of scholarship and more scholarship, the quality of which eventually brought him the honor and distinction of appointment as a Fellow of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences. He lectured in a variety of countries both in Europe and beyond. A lecture tour in 1958 brought him to the United States and Canada, resulting in the publication of the English introduction to his thought *In the Twilight of Western Thought*.

Throughout his life Dooyeweerd's wife, Jantiena Fernhout, was a great help to him, especially in classical texts. She died in 1963. They had nine children. Up to the time of his death Dooyeweerd lived in the same part of Amsterdam in which he was born, editing, corresponding, and "perfecting" the volumes of articles he continued to write. It is hoped that these may be compiled and published soon.

Alvin Plantinga spoke for the philosophy department when he stated his gratitude to Dooyeweerd for leading the way in how to be a Christian in philosophy, as he led the way in every special science. "We need a Christian root to have any idea on the workings out of a special science anyone may be involved in," he said.

On this Runner also stated that "we've reached a time where the situation requires more than one man, but a team of men, working in the special sciences but aware of the foundations; they must advance within the general Christian perspectives. It is a very complex interlocking of general philosophy, and philosophy dealing with the foundations of special sciences, with practitioners of special sciences." That is the only way to work out Dooyeweerd's thought at the present time, he said. Dooyeweerd himself was too humble to want a school of thought based on his philosophy; He declared that he merely pointed to the foundations of Christian thinking. He always distinguished the particular results he arrived at at any particular moment, from the dynamic liberating power of God constantly at work, which would drive him beyond his own results.

The influence of Dooyeweerd is powerful; so powerful, said Runner, that "it brings changes everywhere, even in theology, eccle-

siastics, and mission. Everything is much more affected. Everything is much more integral." He added that French scholars at Reformed Churches in Germany see Dooyeweerd's thought as the "basis of renewal."

G. E. Lungemeijer, a left-wing socialist jurist, gave an assessment of his contemporary in Kalsbeek's *Contours of a Christian Philosophy*: "Without any exaggeration Dooyeweerd can be called the most original philosopher Holland has ever produced, even Spinoza not excepted. . . . It is my conviction that the philosophy of Dooyeweerd can expect to have great effect in years to come. . . . In this process this philosophy itself will quite likely not remain unchanged. It would certainly not be in the spirit of Dooyeweerd as I know him to expect this to wish it."

As Runner pointed out, "People cannot understand Dooyeweerd if they look at him statically. . . . It is a dynamic pilgrimage that never ends."

NOTE: Resources and direct references compiling this article include L. Kalsbeek's *Contours of a Christian Philosophy* and J. V. Skillen's *Development of Calvinistic Political Theory in the Netherlands*.



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