

Any Questions

DOOYEWEERD MADE EASY

by Colin Wright

Thanks for your excellent introductory article to Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy in the recent Christianity & Society [Vol. IX, No. 1, January 1999]. It was most helpful. I must admit to having had a somewhat sceptical view of Dooyeweerd, not because of Van Til and Frame, but primarily because of the criticisms of Clark and Nash. They claim, (1) that Dooyeweerd's choice of and relation between the various modal spheres is arbitrary, (2) that Dooyeweerd makes an unbiblical dichotomy between "religion" i.e. pre-theoretical thought, and the "faith-sphere," and (3) that Dooyeweerd limits the truths of theology-proper to its own small "sphere" when it should be allowed a more universal significance.

One matter I would like to ask you myself, however. You made it clear in your essay that, for Dooyeweerd, such social structures as the family, church, and state, are not created by man and therefore cannot be erased by man, but are rather a necessary part of the creation by God, and are there to be discovered and developed. I had never thought of this before. Does this mean that even in these days of anti-marriage and anti-family attitudes, our society will find out that, despite itself, it will never be able to shake these ordinances off? Or does it mean that society will seek to alter them into something different, something more "humanist," as it is doing with the Sabbath and adoption and education already? Is your point simply that non-Christian, or anti-Christian, social structures are doomed to failure in practice, just as non-Christian thinking is doomed to absurdity in principle, because it is not in harmony with or based upon the natural i.e. God-ordained, order?

MANY thanks for your kind words about my Dooyeweerd article. I have had more response about this than all previous articles put together. Fortunately, too, it has all been positive. There is a lot of bad feeling about Dooyeweerd in our circles, much of it unfortunately justified. Certain groups have used it as a justification for introducing the most awful ideas into their "Christianity." They have prompted Gary North to say, "When they are not Barthians, Dooyeweerdians are social antinomians." I don't think the generalisation in this condemnation is fair, but it does express a genuine element of truth. As far as I have been able to determine, it is not what Dooyeweerd himself taught and I don't see why he should be pilloried for other men's sins.

I have not read either Nash's or Clark's critiques of Dooyeweerd; not because I don't want to but because my purse is limited. In fact I have found negative critiques very useful in coming to a clear understanding of Dooyeweerd, so the more I can get the better.

If your conclusions from reading them are correct, however, I am very disappointed. Indeed I find their claim quite extraordinary in the light of my own reading of the *New Critique*. To say that the modes or aspects are "arbitrary" is totally unwarranted. I wonder how such serious and respectable scholars can make such mistakes. Now, I accept that they might disagree with Dooyeweerd's modal theory, they might disagree with the conclusions he draws from it, and they might disagree with the validity of his method of isolating the aspects. But to say that it was arbitrary is really not on.

Of course, I cannot at this time tell if you have rightly understood Nash's and Clark's criticisms but it is certainly the case that others have made such a criticisms. Take, for example, Vern Poythress in his *Philosophy, Science and the Sovereignty of God*. He opens Appendix 3 with the remark: "I have been troubled by the apparent arbitrariness of Dooyeweerd's list of fifteen aspects. Why these and only these? Why in this particular order? Dooyeweerd makes no attempt to build up to the aspects by argument, but simply hands them over full-grown on the first page of the *New Critique*."

I have to ask, Did he ever read past the first page of the *New Critique*? I suspect he didn't get much farther in any case. Did he never read Volume 2 of the *New Critique*? Even a cursory glance at the first chapter of 54 closely-reasoned pages would be sufficient to show that Dooyeweerd took his task of isolating them very seriously indeed as a matter of scientific principle. As I said, they might not agree with Dooyeweerd's method but to accuse him of not having one is just not fair, and at first glance looks dishonest.

The second point you make, concerning the faith sphere, has always been a problem and can hardly be resolved here. Many people within and without the circles of Dooyeweerdian philosophy are in profound disagreement with him on this issue. Some of them have cogent argument to put forward. Many people, however, automatically assume (as I did for some time) that the faith aspect is related solely to religion, whereas it is concerned with the idea of "certainty" and "belief," a much broader issue. This is not helped by the fact that faith and belief are no longer viewed as synonyms, the word faith having been elevated to some super-realm of religion and spirituality while belief must bear the burden of a more secular task (a Nature-Grace

dichotomy?). And many more, even of the highest intellectual calibre, persist in thinking of the aspects as the *what* of human experience rather than the *how*. We cannot emphasize often enough or forcefully enough that they are *abstractions*, and not the things or events of concrete empirical reality itself. In addition Dooyeweerd saw this aspect, the last in the line of fifteen, as having a special relationship to religion and the supra-temporal ego. This presented him with a number of problems that his critics have been quick to exploit. I have problems of my own with him here; nevertheless I believe he is, by and large, on the right track, and that improvement not abandonment is called for.

But if faith includes “religious” belief it is certainly not limited to it. Dooyeweerd believed, following Abraham Kuyper, that the faith function was an integral aspect of man’s existence *qua* man. To have faith is not a luxury appendage to the lives of some people only. Indeed, each and every man, in everything he thinks and does, in everything he experiences, functions in the faith aspect. Augustine made this very clear over fifteen centuries ago when he delivered his *Credo ut intelligam* (“I believe *in order that* I may understand”). In the eleventh century the great theologian-philosopher Anselm developed this idea in both the theological and epistemological areas. “This very thing I assuredly affirm,” he said, “that he who does not believe, cannot understand. *For he who does not believe can have no experience, and he who has no experience cannot understand.*” That is, says Anselm, there is a chain in our process of understanding. Firstly, we cannot understand anything unless we have some experience of it. We understand what colours are if we have fairly normal eyesight but it is *impossible* to explain colours to a blind person. Secondly, we cannot experience anything without belief in some form. To experience colours is to believe that they are there. To see a lamp-post is to experience it. Seeing it is believing it is there. We can experience it even more vividly by walking into it. It would be foolhardy, I would suggest along with Anselm, to suppose one could do this and have no certainty of its existence (unless one was a member of the Church of Christ Scientist, of course). Thus the old philosophical chestnut, “Which comes first, belief or knowledge?” is a *pseudo*-question. The act of knowing is an act of believing also. For Dooyeweerd, the act is never one of either this or that type but an act of the self, or ego or central I-ness in which the self *actually functions* in *all* the aspects integrally.

Having said that, some acts are qualified as specifically religious, and in these faith plays a *leading*, though never a solitary, role. Take, for instance, the reading of a passage of Scripture, say the 23rd Psalm. This reading is in a unique way an act of faith, unlike, say, the reading of Eliot’s *Wasteland*. It is distinguished from the reading of all other books by the fact that here we have a special and unique text that is God-breathed (Gk: *theopneustos*). For the regenerate, to read the Psalm is to exercise a special act of believing and trusting in the living God. For the unregenerate, to read the Psalm is to take precisely the opposite stance: to positively refuse credence and trust to God. Neither is neutral in the realm of faith; they both function in it. The problem with the unbeliever is not that he is unable to believe but that he is unwilling to do so. He is not metaphysically incapable of believing but rather ethically so, as Dooyeweerd’s opponent Van Til would say. If he was constitutionally incapable of believing how could his unbelief be accounted his condem-

nation? To say that a man does not function in the faith aspect here would be like saying a man does not function in the ethical aspect because he does not honour his parents.

However reading this Psalm is impossible without functioning in all the other aspects of human experience, albeit we do so implicitly. To mention just a few as examples: In the numerical aspect we grasp the plurality of the letters, words and verses. In the spatial we grasp it in the space it occupies on the paper. In the psychical (feeling) aspect our emotions are aroused in a positive/good or negative/evil way. In the logical aspect we experience the rational structure of the arguments; in the lingual aspect, the use of metaphor as symbolic meaning; in the aesthetical aspect, the beauty and harmony of the religious ideas as well as their lingual expression. In each aspect, too, there are analogies of the other aspects. For instance, in the psychical aspect we experience the Psalm as a short one. We do not understand short here in its original spatial sense however. For we could, by making the print much bigger, fill more column inches than a regular size Psalm 119. We feel it to be short in relation to others, whatever the print size. But I am digressing. Let me quote the excellent summary of the well-known scholar, James H. Olthuis, who has explained it far better than I ever could:

The *sui generis* quality of faith as a function also makes faith impervious to any and all efforts to reduce it to feeling, thinking, or imagining. Taking this more seriously would help us, I believe, to break through the impasse of the traditional discussions about the rationality or irrationality of faith. As one mode of being, faith is faith and as such it expresses at its core a character which is not properly touched by the question of whether it is rational or irrational. However, in a concrete human act of faith, even though the faith mode of functioning dominates and gives the act its special quality as an act of faith, all the other ways of human functioning are indissolubly present. It is in terms of such full human acts of faith that it is relevant to ask the secondary questions about faith, such as whether the act is rational or not and whether it is emotionally grounded or not. Thus, although good reasons are not the ground of faith, an act of faith ought to make rational sense to the believer. But it also becomes understandable that faith in God may be right even if, at this moment or at this juncture, it makes little rational sense to me. At the same time, the unity of a human act with its impetus for coherence makes clear that believing without good reasons is an uncomfortable and tenuous undertaking.

Likewise, although good feelings are not the content of faith, an act of faith ought to include and induce appropriate feelings. Dooyeweerd’s model is able to explain how my faith in God can be genuine and real even if my feelings about it are mixed or negative. At the same time it also explains why an experience of faith that is not grounded and reciprocated in our feelings is thin, inadequate, and tension-creating. (“Dooyeweerd on Religion and Faith,” in *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd*)

On the third point, Dooyeweerd does try to distinguish between a scientific theology and Christian dogma. I think he is correct in this. Theology is a reflection on Scripture (and other things!) and not Scripture itself. That is why we disagree about it among ourselves! Also, this error of equating all our reflections on Scripture with Scripture itself leads to a divisive spirit and an intellectual snobbery in the church. We cannot enforce on fellow believers as a test of their orthodoxy what are merely (!) our own personal reflections on God’s Word. Thus while we can insist from Scripture that Jesus is both God and man it would be intolerable to

require anyone to subscribe to the Nicene *language* (i.e. person, substance, etc) as a test of their orthodoxy. I am amazed that so many otherwise mature Christians do not appreciate this. In a recent case you will know that along with other Reconstructionists I have been accused of being a dishonest blasphemer engaged in gross sin who ought to be excommunicated from the Christian church. And this simply on the ground that we do not hold to *their* view of the relation of *ekklesia* (church) to *basileia* (kingdom)! Obviously either of us, or both of us, could be wrong, but neither denies either the actuality of the biblical ideas or their significance. They are perfectly in order to criticise views they disagree with; indeed they have a bounden duty to do so, as we do. In this way we should come to a better and clearer understanding of the faith. Indeed, it may be that it is simply a matter of our *perspective* on the truth rather than one of error on either side. Surely reading a document is as open to various perspectives—given our human as well as our sinful limitations—as looking at a mountain from different angles. Each perspective (even with or in spite of its sin-tainted expression) can add to the total picture of our understanding. But the argument is a *family* argument, to be conducted within the family (the church) not between some who are regarded as insiders and some who are regarded as outsiders.

This is what Dooyeweerd was getting at: the failure to recognise that in our sinful condition our (theoretical) reflections on what God has said cannot be identified with what he has said. All human reflection is *tentative* in its conclusions, to some extent or other. Sometimes we get close, but the ramifications of identifying the two are enormous and quite destructive. I think John Peck's phraseology is excellent and I have made it my own now. It is that Scripture is the only *irreducible dogma*. Theological systems (or parts of systems) must always be open to question and improvement. The dogma of Scripture never so. And indeed, as Christians, by the time we come to reflect on God's word, we have *already* believed it and accepted it, have we not?

At the heart of the error lies the basic humanistic Western idea that the only genuine knowledge is that of *knowledge by theoretical concepts*. So Scripture becomes meaningless until we extract from it and order it *theoretically*—systematically, scientifically—in our theological systems. We refuse to let God speak in his own words. It seems his words mean little or nothing without our re-ordering of them. So when you go to theological seminary you are taught *one* theoretical system as *The Truth*. You will never in this way come to an understanding of how your's, or anybody else's, system is/was constructed, what the principles of construction are, or what the limits of a system are. (In fact you will be taught that your system has no limits—it is the infallible truth.) Nor will you be able to account for any process of development in history in our understanding of Scripture. You will end up with an ossified system that is anachronistic and to all intents and purposes irrelevant to your culture. How can you witness in this way? How confess the faith to a lost world? Is repentance that we preach merely that of leaving off “dope and flesh” or do we need to tell men that in everything they do and say and think they need to *change their mind* (*metanoia*)? To do this, do we not have to tell them what Scripture has to say to the way *they* think and act, and not to the way that Tudor or Stuart man thought and acted? And is this not why man's training for the task of leadership in the church (as well as the world in general) is *family* based (1 Timothy 3:4–5) and not

seminary based? He must know his times from within his times and not from the ivory towers of an academic institution, particularly when that institution has succumbed to the humanistic dogma of knowing by (theoretical) concepts.

On the issue of societal structures Dooyeweerd says little that is specific about the consequences of distorting these structures in history. He was more concerned with emphasising the fact that they *were* God designed, God-ordained rather than mere historical, and thus historically relative, human creations. Nevertheless he often stated that they could not be ignored with impunity. There will be consequences. I can only say that I think the attempts to do without marriage, as in our society, will be disastrous. God has constructed us for a certain way of living. Family and marriage are not bonuses for our lives but part and parcel of what we *are*. To deprive a child of a family is as bad as to deprive him of arms or legs. We not only don't but *cannot* function as human beings without this institution. The morality of human sexuality is integrally bound up with the way we are structurally created. Thus God could have made a moral law that revolved around bigamy rather than monogamy. But this would not have been just a simple matter of changing the rules; man himself would have been built differently. Thus every attempt to live in violation of these laws is not simply a matter of disobedience to God's law; it involves a radical bifurcation between what we are and how we try to act. Everything becomes out of kilter. Try running a car on flat tyres, or at 60 mph in reverse; the vehicle is just not built for these things and although it seems possible for a while to get away with such absurd behaviour, it will eventually take its toll—even if the traffic police don't get you first for breaking the “rules.” Rushdoony has documented somewhere the physical and mental problems that afflict the long-term singles as a class (obviously not every individual in the same way or to the same extent).

No, I don't believe it's simply the case that “non-Christian social structures are doomed to failure” as you ask; in a sense the creational structures cannot be avoided. For instance, a report a few years ago detailed the disillusionment in Israel with the kibbutzim by the generation born into them. The pioneers had willingly gone down an unbiblical path and brought their children up in that system, only to find that the children rebelled against the idea. In Western cultures, most of those who abandon marriage for cohabitation are living to all intents and purposes as families. There really is no other long-term, stable way of getting through life. And every attempt to rebel will incur a toll on humanity frightful in its proportions. The problem is that unbelievers will not know the source of their problems; the church alone knows the truth and must issue a call to repentance or change of mind at this point. Right now however the church seems oblivious to the problem itself, for she does not understand that we are fitted into these structure as the very basis of our being and not simply members of them as we might be of a social club. And while society can withstand the strain of a few deviant individuals it cannot in my view stand the strain of a significant minority—let alone majority—being deviant. Since our culture is quite unique in the way it is abandoning family life I do not think we yet know the full consequences or are able to predict them. Also, failure to uphold the normative standards of human experience are quite different from the non-normative aspects. Jump off a 100 storey building any number of times and you

always get the same result: scraped off the pavement like goo. But God seems to deal with breaking norms in a less predictable way. How can you account for the tremendous growth of wonderful technology in such a godless age? OK so there's a Christian heritage—common grace. But why does God continue it so long after Christianity is all but gone from the culture? And how can it take effect in booming cultures like the far east? Then again, there are times when he forgives and times when he punishes; he refused to withdraw his punishment of Judaea despite Josiah's reforms

and Jeremiah's prayers but sent Jonah to bring about Nineveh's repentance so that they could be spared, even though they never sought it. I don't think there is a "scientific" law that will enable us to predict these things as in mathematical sciences. In the fifth century God wiped out North Africa despite the fact there was a strong church there. A thousand years later he sent his word to heal a Europe that had apostatised and whose population was infected by over 50% with STD. So how can we tell which way he will "jump" with our Europe? Or even America? *C&S*

RELIGION OF WORKS IN ARCHITECTURE

by Alan Wilson

THERE is a large housing complex near the Yorkhill hospital in Glasgow, which was built during the country's post-war optimism. When my son was ill in hospital I used to drive past this haunting impersonal beehive of optimism! It struck me back then and ever since that here was "the ruined blueprint of a great idea"; the thwarted plans of proud men.

Architecture is one discipline where the failure of humanistic salvation is visually evident. And it demonstrates how the religion of works manifests itself in every cultural activity; that it is not just a theological issue. Building houses and designing them *is* a religious activity. And no other art form has been so plagued with messianic dreams than architectural design, especially in the twentieth century. The architectural historian Henry Russell Hitchcock admits to the humanistic idealism that governed the early twentieth-century architects: "We were thoroughly of the opinion that if you had good architecture the lives of people would be improved; that architecture would improve people, and people improve architecture until perfectibility would descend on us like the Holy Ghost, and we would be happy ever after." Only foolish deceived sinners could believe such a lie. This was the same proud dream of deceived sinners in the land of Shinar (Gen. 11).

Architecture has failed to reform mankind just as politics, economics, art and education have failed. None of these cultural activities can regenerate sinners or bring true happiness to a sinful culture. Only God can give new life and until then man remains spiritually dead; no amount of environmental improvements will be able to change that fallen human nature. And to think that the arrangement of walls, roofs, windows and doors can make us more loving is the utmost stupidity.

In fact, because the motivation behind much of twentieth-century architecture has been salvatory, like our politics, God has judged these utopian plans. In his providence these architectural dreams have only made things

worse. The secular plans of the Bauhaus, the *de style* and the International style resulted in Beehive housing projects of the worst kind. The housing complex in Glasgow is just one of its failures. There, human pride lies in visual ruins with the decayed and vandalised walls; crumbling concrete with spray-paint graffiti written by gangs of thuggish youths. It is such an irony that this landscape of urban despair is the result of socialistic ideals spouted by visionary architects. Le Corbusier, the greatest of these socialist high-priests with a drawing-board thought he was creating the ideal community environment. It should not surprise us that he was your typical twentieth-century intellectual hypocrite—disliking children in real life but constantly blabbing on about "community."

God did not honour this man's pride and all his easily-led followers: their legacy has been a concrete jungle of monotonously regular buildings unfit for the joy of living. Rather, isolation and loneliness haunt this architecture of despair, and ironically it is the "working class" who have suffered, living out their existence in such ugly surroundings. (You can be sure these architects didn't reside in their own secular temples.) These are our modern towers of Babel found in every big city all over the world, striving to realise the same old communistic vision; towers designed without any thought for God. And because of this intellectual atheism, these terrible broken-down housing schemes have been given over to alienation—not community. In many ways God has judged our secular society by giving us such designers, just as he has judged them by ruining their utopian architectural plans. The urge to "create a name for themselves" was what motivated the builders of Babel thousands of years ago and it was what motivated the architects of modernist housing design—proving that "there is nothing new under the sun." What both forgot was the truth of Solomon's wisdom: "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it" (Ps. 127). *C&S*