

**IN MEMORIAM:**  
**DIRK HENDRIK THEODOOR VOLLENHOVEN**

On June 6th of this year, prof. Vollenhoven deceased, having lived to the advanced age of over 85 years. The end was not unexpected, since in his last years he had not been spared debilitating old-age symptoms and progressive deterioration of both body and mind. For him death was a liberation from further suffering; for us his death means the definite loss of a singular man with singular talents. Though in the last decade he no longer appeared in public, many will remember him in the various offices of responsibility he so conscientiously held: the pastor, the professor of philosophy, the chairman of various organizations. He will be remembered for his noble and steadfast character, his capacity for hard work, his vast knowledge of philosophy and its history supported by an equally impressive memory, his perseverance in times of personal and public hardships. With these makings, and on superficial contact, he could perhaps be thought a fearsome man. But to the many who came to know him personally he was above all a man of simple piety, free of intellectual pride, thoughtful of others, plain in his lifestyle, direct and humble in his speech. His genuine concern for others and for their personal circumstances made one easily warm to him and open one's heart. He could listen and give wise council. He was a christian who knew from his own life that real blessings did not cancel out real struggles for uprightness and integrity in the faith. It was at this level that he could, to academics and non-academics alike, unobtrusively be of immense help.

Undoubtedly this pastoral predisposition was enhanced by his early theological training and through the experience of serving as minister of the Gospel to congregations of the Gereformeerde Kerken (Reformed Churches), first in Oost Kapelle, Zeeland, and then in The Hague, from 1918 to 1926. This characteristic of the man became also a motivating characteristic of his philosophical thought when the philosopher in him was given free reign upon his becoming professor of philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam in the fall of 1926.\* The challenge of [93]\_teaching philosophy on a regular basis in conformity with the Free University's christian charter, was singularly in tune with the philosophical development taking place in Vollenhoven's mind. Through stimulating contact with A. Janse, a christian school teacher, he had come to see that man's heart or 'soul' is 'pre-functional,' as he called it, meaning that what goes on there has a regulative influence upon all of man's functions, thought included, and that no function has meaning when divorced from it. Vollenhoven's understanding of this in its biblical anthropo-religious meaning –'man as living soul'- may be said to lie at the heart of his philosophizing. For it throws much light on (i) his rejection of any synthesis between the Scriptural content of faith and Greek-Hellenistic thought results, (ii) his opposition to viewing the soul as supratemporal, (iii) his method of treating and interpreting other philosophies and thus of writing philosophical history, and (iv) his view of 'the Law' through which, and in

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\* Vollenhoven promoted to doctor of philosophy at the Free University In 1918 upon submitting a dissertation on the philosophy of mathematics, entitled, *De Wijsbegeerte der Wiskunde van Theistisch Standpunt* (The Philosophy of Mathematics from a Theistic Standpoint). For further bibliographical detail, cf. *Perspectief* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), pp. 99-111, and K.A. Bril, 'A selected and annotated bibliography of D. H. Th. Vollenhoven' *Phil. Ref.* 38 (1973), pp. 212-28. From the Philosophical Institute of the Free University may be had: *Bibliographie D. H. Th. Vollenhoven*, compiled by A. M. Peterson and L. D. Derksen, 29 pgs. For biographical material on Vollenhoven cf. *Perspectief*, pp. 87-98.

terms of which, the heart may be said at all to have a directional or regulative meaning, summarized in his 'Calvinistic' sense of the sovereignty of God.

This cannot be the place, nor is it my task, to document this thesis scholarly. Yet so much of the joys and sorrows and concerns and misunderstandings of Vollenhoven's career are touched by it that a brief word is nonetheless fitting.

(i) His critical attitude towards any synthesis between biblically founded faith and the supposedly neutral thought patterns which stem from Greek-Hellenistic philosophy is perhaps best known. He saw in such a synthesis a merging which hides rather than reveals the prior relations which should hold here. Faith cannot be initially divorced from thought when the understanding, as a human function, is itself a channel of the deeper-lying issues of the heart, a form of the heart's outreach into life and the world. But when treating them as poles to be united, either thought becomes fideistic or faith is intellectualized. This position put Vollenhoven at odds with Scholasticism, also in its Protestant varieties, not un-influential at the Free University. He received much obloquy for it from some of the Free University's theologians, especially V. Hepp. Vollenhoven was not easily given to polemicize, but problems posed in terms of the scholastic synthesis could inwardly drive him to fury. For one then remained blind to the non-biblical religious determination of thought and the need of biblically reforming it. At the same time his deep and extensive knowledge of church history and Middle Age philosophies was indicative of how seriously he took this matter. It had beguiled the church he loved into wrong directions and was still far from dead.

The form his 'rebuttal' took on was characteristic of the man: in a calm and gentle way he proceeded to work out the implications of his own position, with clear indications of sources and motivation, thereby implicitly forcing his opponents to do likewise and compare. Vollenhoven appealed explicitly to the Calvinistic tradition of the Reformation, not in the first place for its theology, but for its advocacy of man's complete self-surrender to the Sovereign God, as revealed in the Scriptures. This surrendering to the Sovereign God, so central in his anthropo-religious attitude, was his touchstone for reforming the whole of philosophy. Only that thinking is legitimatized which arises from self-surrender to the Creator, for then its creaturely boundaries and possibilities can more clearly come into view.

(ii) Vollenhoven's systematic ideas developed in tandem with those of his brother-in-law, Herman Dooyeweerd. But definite and significant differences remained, both in content and in formulation. One cardinal point of difference was the question concerning the human heart. Dooyeweerd maintained (most strongly in the 1930's) it to be of a supra-temporal character. Whatever the exact interpretation of supra-temporality is, Vollenhoven held that it was contrary to Scriptural usage to interpret man in this way. (Cf. 2 Sam. 14:14) An argumentative rebuttal on a matter so deep could go only so far. Vollenhoven chose another way to get more clarity on this issue. Fearing the influence here of a pernicious anthropological dualism (between supra-temporal heart and temporal functions) whose roots lay somewhere in the past, Vollenhoven hoped that the way of historical analysis would enable one to see its character and origin, and especially its anti-Scriptural meaning.

The appearance of Dooyeweerd's trilogy, *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetidee* (1935-1936), was for Vollenhoven a sufficient reason now to lay less emphasis on the systematics of their joint philosophical position. But at the same time it must have given him - so I tend to think - an added motive to turn more explicitly to the study of the history of philosophy. In any case, at this time he launched the plan of charting the

whole development of western philosophy in terms of the primary distinctions suggested by the Scriptural references to the primary realities. God, Law and Cosmos. Vollenhoven hoped to be able to show the influence of all the main non-Scriptural philosophical themes by clearly laying out the lines of tradition in which thought of genuine Christian-Scriptural motivation could ensnare itself through not recognizing their non-Scriptural origins.

Throughout his career Vollenhoven was very chary to openly criticize people of like mind, mainly because the communal battle against non-Christian thought was so much more serious. Yet, to his mind, the anthropological problem within his own circle was not sufficiently resolved. In what has turned out to be his last article, a short publication entitled, 'Historische achtergronden en toekomst' (Historical background and future), in *Mededelingen* (no. 4, Dec. 1970, pp. 2-3), he explicitly stated that, through a lack of insight into the influence of questionable traditions upon the prior generation of the Free University's more important faculty members (J. Wolter; A. Kuyper), their influence in turn is hampering a unifying insight on central matters in the school of Calvinistic philosophy, and in particular on the view of man.

Vollenhoven's concern in this at the beginning of this decade was such that he wanted to make a final attempt to clarify his own idea of a [95] 'Calvinistic philosophy' and to discuss his differences with both Dooyeweerd and H.G. Stoker against the background of the differing traditions and influences he saw operative in their respective conceptions and in his own. A beginning was made, and some of his thoughts were committed to paper. But Vollenhoven was impeded by not being able initially to get the historical background clearly into focus. His mental strength, then already waning, proved to be just sufficient, after months of work, to get this background straight. (It involved a deeper interpretation of what he had called 'monarchianism,' which he now came to distinguish from Aristotle's final entelechistic thought.) It is regrettable that the article itself could no longer be completed.

(iii) The background work in the history of philosophy involved, of course, his 'problem-historical method'. It is here that Vollenhoven came into his own rhythm, and it is to this historical approach that his name has come to be distinctly bound. Yet for various reasons, it is also through this work that problems in communication arose, even with those spiritually akin to him. To many it was a mere 'problem' approach at the expense of the 'person' and the past actuality of such problems. This particular misunderstanding seems to be so ingrained that I cannot refrain from briefly indicating how Vollenhoven meant to conduct his historical analysis.

Each philosopher, he held, has or strives after a conception in which is formulated a cohering account of reality. That account will include many philosophical themes which, either, through the influence of study and education, may be taken over, whole or modified, from previous generations; or, from the analysis of an actual problematics within one's generation, be a new theme in the philosophical account. Vollenhoven now chose to order such philosophical conceptions in terms of those themes which are particularly ontological in character, though other themes could also be taken. Agreement of such themes (or thematized problems) gives rise to a line of tradition influencing a conception. Rather than leaving the matter with this bare agreement, at best classified into groups - monistic conceptions, dualistic conceptions - Vollenhoven goes on to indicate how, in a historical phase (which may be of no greater duration than a single generation), the truth of traditions is tested in terms of the certainties alive in the community of that time. Vollenhoven calls such fixing of

the certainties a response to the impingement of God's Law which, in ignorance or rejection of the Gospel, will be formulated in terms of things of reality itself, of which an account was to be given. Thus the global insight to be achieved by this approach is seeing how the historically accrued lines of competing traditions, as types of ontology or accounts of the structural side of reality, are (re)formulated in terms of the truth or certainties which philosophers, individually or collectively, are committed to within their own historical actuality.

While working under Vollenhoven in the late 1960's and early 1970's, I found that he could never feel any force in the charge of a person-problem dichotomy leveled at his work. The reason became clear. Whereas ontology types center around problems, the historical currents mean to indicate how the thinkers, as concrete historical creatures in a [96] geographical place and time of cultural development, founded their understanding of the structure of reality in terms of a subjectively held to (i.e. in subjection to a) source of normativity. Within each historic phase, the lines of tradition are not just taken over as given answers. They are, as he once explained to me, 'radically re-worked' so as to be expressive, in their meaning, of the sort of certainty one proceeds from in the new historical phase. That philosophers too are 'living souls' comes through particularly clear here, and I take it to be fundamental to Vollenhoven's entire procedure.

Vollenhoven took it to be scientifically irresponsible to generalize about historical phases or lines of tradition unless supported by detailed historical evidence. This is, I think, the main reason why he tended so often to dive more deeply into historical details rather than to step back and oversee his field of investigation and explain his approach more expansively than he did.

There can be no doubt that his investigation of the basic ontological themes and of the constantly renewed quests for truth and normed legitimation, led Vollenhoven to uncover the more important cosmonic conceptions, along with their most significant variants, that are inherent in western philosophy, and which function as historically competing and, in the main, non-Scriptural alternatives in today's philosophizing. On this score, Vollenhoven's work invites detailed comparison with Dooyeweerd's view of the history of philosophy with its 'cosmonic ideas' embedded in 'groundmotives'. No doubt, Dooyeweerd's more sweeping approach needs to be corrected and supplemented by something like Vollenhoven's more careful research. But the more important question here is how compatible a transcendental critique, as understood by Dooyeweerd, is with a problem-historical method, as understood by Vollenhoven. To both the very character of christian philosophizing is intrinsically involved. But this is an evaluative problem, which cannot be discussed here.

The development of Vollenhoven's method was made difficult and exhausting through unfortunate extenuating circumstances. He knew that the whole history of philosophy would be too much for him to handle, even were he unencumbered by his many academic duties. Apart from the volume on pre-Platonic thought, *Geschiedenis der Wijsbegeerte* 1 (1950) -which has subsequently been drastically revised -he did little more than lay out markers and trace the outlines for the writing of a history of philosophy. Initially he hoped to make it a team project, something like the project headed by Ueberweg in his *Geschichte der Philosophie*. But, among other things, the conception of the project and Vollenhoven's terminology were so unique to the man that cooperation required a prior close association of some years. When this proved unfeasible, Vollenhoven continued on his own as well as he could, characteristically reluctant to drop what he was convinced of as needed doing.

Vollenhoven had undoubtedly the greatest disappointment of his career when, because of adverse and to a large degree unfair criticism of the 1950 volume - the first of a projected 9 or 10 volume series -, the funds for the subsequent volumes were withdrawn. The volume remained the only one published of the series. Even more tragically, it also [97] proved to be his last book. We can but admire the unshakeable sense of purpose and great faith which supported him in still continuing with this work.

(iv) Vollenhoven's systematic work, like much of his historical work, he never considered ripe for publication. Was he too much of a perfectionist? His style might suggest it. It is precise and pregnant with meaning, sentences well balanced, phrases well chosen and not a word too much (though more would have been more than welcome). It is beguilingly simple, but it attains a depth of expression that may call for prolonged reflection. The style, however, was not the result of polishing work. It verbalized his terse and cutting mind almost directly, a mind that was more tuned to analysis than to synthesis, being concerned more with clarity through distinguishing than with generalizations. It was the drive towards clarity and analytic insight that never allowed him to consider work actually wrought as being more than provisional.

But his activity of mind proceeded not from any fundamental unrest. On the contrary, there was always a context within which the distinctions are made and in which the distinctions are integrated. Here the Scriptural character of Vollenhoven's philosophizing becomes particularly evident. The 'Calvinistic' re-emphasis of the Scriptures' message concerning the sovereignty of God and man's position of subjection to God's will give to thought a normative context within which its work is meaningful, but outside of which it must always restlessly seek or, by fiat, pronounce itself the source of meaning. That context is the creative character of the cosmos, which is nothing static, but is upheld and led dynamically by God the Creator, nor is it chaotic, for it is subject to God's Law. Thus the triad 'God-Law-Cosmos' was used by Vollenhoven as a summarizing expression of what, in a Scripturally determined faith, one is *led* to believe concerning reality, thereby providing thought the normative context in which to discover, by ways peculiar to itself, the interminable diversity of and coherences in the cosmos as creation, its unfathomable regularity and intrinsic subjection to law.

Understanding reality as creation implies understanding ourselves as creatures. This has, for Vollenhoven, a normative meaning. Man is called by God unto meaningful living, in obedience to His will. The called and obedient subject is the 'living soul' that is normed by God's law of love. In the subject's subsequent response, including that of understanding, the whole of reality attains directional development through man. It is in this sense that man is a living soul and that reality is subject to God's law of love.

In Vollenhoven's work the 'relations' between faith and thought are neither halting nor encroaching. Faith, Scripturally founded, provides for thought a context of warranted trust and normed expectancy - 'God is faithful to his promises,' he could disarmingly say - without making the Scriptures philosophically propositional, nor making thought fideistic. At the same time, in the man himself, his knowledge and experience of faith were very much enriched by a life-time of thoughtful reflection. [98]

Vollenhoven's systematic and historical work still deserve to be published. There is much in it of intrinsic value. Publication would make possible critical study of Vollenhoven's thought. But it will not be easy to get the full picture accurately into focus on account, in part, of his development. There is his early theism, the

terminology of which lingered on into the 1930's, even when he was helping to develop a cosmonomic philosophy. Then there is the shift to realism, in which the cosmonomic character of his thought becomes more prominently expressed. Yet, by the early 1950's this terminology is also dropped on account of his further distinguishing three senses of 'law': structural law, inherent in the cosmos; the imposed or proclaimed law of love, as the message of the Gospel in which Christ summarizes the teaching of Moses and the Prophets; and the positive laws, enacted from out of positions of responsibility, in which a situation is given more definite form, in accordance to the norming law of love, in the context of actual geographical and historical exigencies. In this last development, history is taken in the sense of encompassing the entire cosmos. There are successive emphases here, first to 'God', then to 'Law', then to 'Cosmos'. With each step the meaning of all three is deepened.

Then there is the problem of influences. Vollenhoven is beyond doubt a scion of the Calvinistic tradition of the Netherlands, of the line that goes through the two Protestant, 19th century renewal movements, the Afscheiding and the Doleantie. Yet there is in his early thinking close agreement with turn-of-the-century French thinking, most notably Poincaré and Bergson. (Around 1920 Vollenhoven had definite plans of writing a book on French philosophy). And what of Meinong, whose 'Gegenstandstheorie' was then also almost wholly accepted? Furthermore, it has never become clear what effect Vollenhoven's leave to Leipzig, to study under Felix Krüger, had on his further development. And what about his distinction between thinking and knowing, so central in his epistemological works of 1926, which more recently prof. Mekkes is re-emphasizing. Last, but not least, it may not be entirely academic to get more clarity on the relations of influence between Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd throughout the 1920's. At that time, Dooyeweerd was consciously getting into philosophy when Vollenhoven was already in the process of modifying his own first fruits.

Next to recalling Vollenhoven's individual philosophical endeavours I must mention an aspect of his career in which he exerted his greatest influence and had the joy of tasting definite success. I mean his organizational work. The reformation of thought could not stand in a vacuum. It required a pedagogical outreach and a forum for internal discussion. The latter was made possible through the *Vereniging* of which this journal is the organ. Vollenhoven was its first chairman, from 1935 till his retirement in 1963. Under his leadership the *Vereniging* has grown to over 500 members. Then he was also chairman of the *Stichting Bijzondere Leerstoelen*, from its inception in 1947 until 1961. Through this Stichting academic positions could be formed at State and Municipal universities for teaching Calvinistic philosophy. The pedagogical outreach was further conducted through the *Réunisten-Organisatie van N.D.D.D.* (alumni association of the Free University), of which he [99] was chairman from 1927 to 1948. Even beyond the Netherlands he had a definite organizational influence. He was the principal formulator of the Preamble to the Constitution of the Association for the Advancement of Christian Studies. The erection of this Association, in 1956, under the forceful and spirited guidance of Dr. H. Evan Runner, himself a former student of Vollenhoven, made it possible to expand the sort of work Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd were conducting onto the North American continent.

With Vollenhoven's demise, about one and a half years after that of Dooyeweerd, an influential and rich epoch comes to an end, closing off the work of the first generation of Reformational philosophers. As with any epoch, it contains the beginnings of new work for the following generations. But there are signs of the formation of differing 'lines of tradition,' beginning with either of these two thinkers at the exclusion of the

other and not looking beyond. Vollenhoven was certainly opposed to such a development because of the continuing importance of the communal work at hand. The last sentence of Vollenhoven's last published article may perhaps be taken to heart when reflecting on and working with *their* legacy: 'When on the contrary in our work we clearly recognize its historical background..., we shall not succumb to the opposition which divided a former generation but *together* overcome it.'

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