

Herman Dooyeweerd-Christian

Dutch professor and scholar Herman Dooyeweerd died in The Netherlands last month. His works and teachings have altered Reformed thought during the past 50 years while he served as a professor at The Free University of Amsterdam.

The name Dooyeweerd simultaneously created smiles and frowns within the Reformed community. A well-written article is being published here, written by Bernard Zijlstra, a lecturer at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, which looks at Dooyeweerd's environment and thoughts during his 80 years of life.

This article is not designed to stir controversy, nor to debate Dooyeweerd's philosophy, but merely to reflect on his life.

-editor

by Bernard Zijlstra

Professor Herman Dooyeweerd died on February 12, at the age of 82. He was a brilliant genius, a penetrating thinker, a learned scholar in many disciplines, a great teacher, and above all a Christian philosopher. Since he was the most outstanding exponent of Calvinist thought in the twentieth century, it is proper at the time of his death to reflect briefly upon the contribution, the legacy he leaves behind, and the challenge it presents to the world of Christian learning, not only within the various national Reformed communities but far beyond these in the context of ecumenical Christendom today.

The setting

Dooyeweerd was born in Amsterdam at the end of the nineteenth century, a century which had witnessed the revival of the Biblical view of human life as religion, as service to God, in the Protestant churches of The Netherlands which have largely been reformed churches, influenced by the Calvinian Reformation. At the edge of modern European culture, this revival was unique not in its breadth (because the influence of little Holland on western culture had declined to practically nothing since the "Golden Age" of the seventeenth century) but in its depth.

For the main leaders of this revival occupied themselves with the question that is crucial to our epoch: What shape can be given to biblically-directed faith, thought, and action in the modern age, that is, the age which in its radical secularity has rejected the relevance of divine revelation for human affairs?

The work of Groen van Prinsterer, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck - to name only the key figures - were attempts to deal with this question. When Kuyper and Bavinck died in the 1920s, the ecclesiastical, educational, and political life of Holland had been drastically transformed. This was not the case in the sphere of philosophy and the sciences, except in the discipline of theology, where the newly established Free University of Amsterdam and the Theological School of the Reformed Churches at Kampen had made a distinct impact. The classic *Gerelieerde dogmatiek* of Bavinck and the excellent exegetical works by a new generation of theologians testify to this.

The task

The task which Dooyeweerd, along with his brother-in-law Dirk Vollenhoven, accepted was almost unthinkable: the development of a Christian philosophy that was both biblically-founded and academically responsible.

What is so important about philosophy? Philosophy is the attempt to express in a theoretical way the answers to the most basic questions man encounters: What is man? What is society? What is the world? How does reality relate to God? How do we know? What is the truth? How does the world hang together? What is culture? How is the present related to the past and to the future? What is the meaning of human life? Is there meaning to it at all? If so, how do we know for sure?

Quite clearly, these questions are important. Quite clearly also, the way a particular philosophy answers them has a lot to do with the direction of the special sciences - physics, biology, psychology, history, sociology, political science and law, economics and ethics, etc. Philosophy is as it were the backbone on which each special science is grafted like a rib. Take the backbone away, and the ribs are scattered all over the place. It doesn't take too much to see that any attempt at Christian scholarship requires an underlying Christian philosophy. Any institution of Christian higher learning that lacks a Christian philosophy can't get its task accomplished. Its students may properly graduate, but they will lack a coherent picture of the world in which we live and their place in that world.

Antithesis

The development of a (Christian) philosophy never begins, so to speak, from scratch. There must always be some foundation stones on which to build. These were present for Dooyeweerd in the work of earlier Christian thinkers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Kuyper. But the special problem which he faced was a bit like the problem of the early Christian thinkers.

Since the time of the Reformation, at least within orthodox Protestantism, very little had been done toward the development of a Christian philosophy. Roman Catholics always could fall back on Thomas Aquinas, but Protestants, no matter how much they could learn from Calvin and Luther, lacked something vital here, since neither Calvin nor Luther had been philosophers, and their reformational impact in the realm of science was severely limited because humanism had taken the lead in this realm, all too quickly followed by the main Protestant thinkers.

This meant that questions about God, the soul, and eternal life would be dealt with in theology (which had the Bible as its guide), while the questions about nature, man's body, human knowledge, history and culture would be dealt with by philosophy and the sciences (which have human reason as their guide). In other words, almost the entire tradition of Protestant scholarship in the modern age had been one of dualism: you listen to the Bible here, and you listen to human reason there. In that way Protestant scholarship had made a compromise, a



Professor Herman Dooyeweerd

synthesis, with humanism in one of its many different expressions.

The first and lasting contribution of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven lies in their principal break with this compromise, this synthesis. Hence their insistence on the spiritual antithesis which lies at the basis of Christian and secular thought and their detailed explanation of the impossibility of religious neutrality in philosophy and science.

The right direction

Does this then mean that Dooyeweerd managed to escape all non-biblical influences? Of course not! Christian philosophizing is a task, the execution of which is always tainted by sin, like everything in the life of a Christian. No philosopher can escape the influence of his environment. One of the tasks that waits a new generation is a careful understanding of the variety of influences that have gone into Dooyeweerd's way of thinking. But that task can be the better pursued because of the way in which Dooyeweerd himself integrally related the revelation of the Scriptures to the manner in which philosophical and scientific problems are to be tackled in the first place.

Dooyeweerd helped Christian scholars get on the right track, but the end has not at all been reached! That track is the path of the inner reformation of philosophy and science. That path can be travelled because the Word of God shines upon it and shows us the way.

We have briefly shown how Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven broke in principle with the long tradition of synthesis in Christian scholarship, in which theology had the Bible as its guide but in which philosophy and the sciences have human reason as their guide. Further, we mentioned that Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, in quite different but mutually helpful ways, showed that non-Christian humanist philosophies also have a religious basis, that they are not really neutral at all.

As a matter of fact, Dooyeweerd threw out the challenge to humanist philosophers to frankly admit their pretheoretical, religious starting-points, so that, with the cards on the table from all sides, a real discussion between the conflicting schools of thought could get off the ground. But of course it is not enough to put your philosophical cards on the table. You have to be able to play them! In other words, Dooyeweerd had to do something else.

Philosopher until his death

In a positive, thetical manner he had to show what a Christian philosophy looks like. Without that, he would, of course, quite quickly lose, if you will forgive me the expression, the philosophical bridge game. How did he fare on this score? What was necessary to get the job started?

The Free University

One of the first things that strike me in looking back upon Dooyeweerd's long career - he became professor a half century ago! - is the role of the Free University in his life. Today there is a lot of criticism of the Free University, especially with respect to its spiritual direction. I think that much of this is justified. But it should not be forgotten that the Free University, established by Kuyper in 1880, provided a home in which many Christian scholars could do their work in freedom, without interference by the government, business, and the church.

I believe that without that freedom which the Free University offered, the work of Dooyeweerd would not have become what it is. It provided what is an almost absolutely indispensable condition for the development and growth of a Christian philosophy: a Christian scholarly community.

One of the main reasons why the task of Christian philosophy has been so poorly executed in the English-speaking world of culture lies in the simple absence of a Christian university where at the highest level of scholarship a community of the most gifted Christian thinkers can be granted the leisure to work together at the development of a Christian mind. In Holland the battle for such a free university, with its own degree-granting status and, like secular universities paid for out of public funds, was fought and won. Without it, the work of Dooyeweerd would have been impossible.

Vollenhoven

The Free University not only provided the freedom to do what had to be done. It also provided fellow Christian scholars. Of these the most outstanding was Vollenhoven. In this context I do not want to comment on the specific contributions of Vollenhoven, nor on the important differences between their ways of thinking, nor on the different kind of followers they appear to have gathered around themselves. What is important at this time, when we are faced with the fact that their own work has come to an end, is to realize how together they began what today is the most notable effort at Christian philosophizing in the orthodox wing of Protestant Christianity.

They were appointed at the same time in 1926 - Vollenhoven as the first fulltime professor of philosophy and Dooyeweerd as professor of legal and political theory. As philosophers, they developed their thought within the same frame of reference but with very distinct differences. In a certain sense they were each other's complements.

Vollenhoven did much work in the history of philosophy, while Dooyeweerd was the great systematizer, though this difference should not be exaggerated. Vollenhoven's interests in the special sciences was focused more on the natural sciences, while

Dooyeweerd's were in what today we would call the social sciences. Vollenhoven worked intensely within the reformed community, while Dooyeweerd - certainly not neglecting that - did his utmost to establish a dialogue with the Roman Catholic and humanist scholarly communities. Vollenhoven was president of the Society of Calvinist Philosophy, Dooyeweerd of the broadly based Society of Legal Philosophy.

Vollenhoven participated actively in the life of the Reformed Churches, especially in connection with the struggles concerning Professor Klaas Schilder; Dooyeweerd was an active participant in the life of the Antirevolutionary Party. Vollenhoven's publications were almost strictly limited to theoretical matters; Dooyeweerd was involved in a wider range of publication ventures, including the editorship of *Nieuw Nederland* which attempted to draw the main spiritual battle lines in the rebuilding of Holland after the Second World War.

Being professors at the Free University, they were able to reach a new generation with the 'challenge of Christian scholarship, in the classroom and at student conferences. Thus within a short time they were able to educate a younger body of scholars, several of whom were appointed as professors of Calvinist philosophy at the state universities in Holland soon after the war: Zuidema, Mekkes, K.J. Popma, and H. Van Riessen. Also, beginning with 1946, they began personally to influence students from abroad, who came to the Free University primarily because of their work. Several of these have in turn become professors at numerous institutions and in various countries. Here one thinks immediately of H. Evan Runner at Calvin College, of Robert Knudsen at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, and of Calvin Seerveld, who taught for years at Trinity Christian College near Chicago before assuming a position at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.

All of this indicates, I think, that the development of a Christian philosophy must meet the criteria for the growth of any philosophical movement: there must be community of scholarship and there must be a link to the new generation.

Publications

But all of this is of course meaningful only when there is philosophical "production." And that there was! The publication "output" of Vollenhoven but especially of Dooyeweerd in the three decades between 1925 and 1955 is phenomenal. The bibliography of Dooyeweerd lists more than 200 items, and nearly all of these are either substantial articles or books. The most important one is *De Wijsbegeerte der wetsidee*, first published in the mid-thirties and issued in an English translation in the fifties. Students have sweated over it, and commentators have been trying to explain it for forty years. This 2000-page book of Dooyeweerd is a bit like a huge painting, in which the artist depicts his grasp of a Biblical view of reality, at times with rough broad strokes of his brush, at times filling in the details with great precision, and always in dialogue with fellow artists of the past and of the

present. The best guide to it is, I think, Kalsbeek's *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought* (Toronto: Wedge, 1975).

In it Dooyeweerd explains the meaning of reality as creation, as ordered, coherent in Jesus Christ. He deals with man as God's imager on earth, in whose heart lie the issues, the direction of life - whose heart is therefore in need of spiritual regeneration by the Holy Spirit. He deals with

the nature of culture, the structure of society, and the process of knowledge. The greatness of Dooyeweerd does not only lie in his genius as a philosopher, but in his grasp of the essential problems of so many sciences outside of philosophy, in terms of which he could illustrate the impact of Christian reflection in the nuts and bolts of everyday scientific research.

So in that list of 200 publications one will find materials dealing with legal

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The kingdom of God and science

by Herman Dooyeweerd

For the children of the Calvinistic Reformation, there should be no question of wasting time in long scholastic discussions about whether science and philosophy also pertain to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ or whether they belong instead to a domain of natural reason. This discussion need not go on, because, as we have shown, there is no natural reason that is independent of the religious driving force which controls the heart of human existence.

For us there are only two ways open, that of scholastic accommodation, which by reason of its dialectical

unfolding results in secularization, or that of the spirit of the Reformation, which requires the inner, radical reformation of scientific thought by the driving power of the biblical motive.

Let us remember the words of our Saviour, "No man can serve two masters." And let us pray to God, that He will send faithful workmen into the harvest field, which is the entire earth, and which therefore includes also the domain of scientific knowledge.

(Closing comments of a speech presented in Montpellier, France, in 1953. See *International Reformed Bulletin*, July 1966, p.17.)

Het grondmotief der Christelijke Religie

door Herman Dooyeweerd

Gij hebt, lezers, het grondmotief der christelijke religie, dat van schepping, zondeval en verlossing door Christus Jezus, nu leren kennen als een geestelijke drijfkracht, die uw gehele kijk op de werkelijkheid in de wortel omzet, zodra zij inderdaad uw levens- en denkhouding volledig onder haar beslag krijgt.

Gij hebt gezien, hoe het ook in de historiebeschouwing doorwerkt en u een vaste maatstaf biedt om de wezenlijke vooruitstrevende en de verkapt reactionaire te onderscheiden.

Gij hebt gezien, hoe allesbeheersende betekenis dit grondmotief heeft voor de brandende vraagstukken van de "nieuwe tijd". Hoe het de gevaarlijke "gemeenschapsideologie" met haar totalitaire tendenzen ontmaskert, hoe het tegenover de zgn. "dynamische" tijdgeest, die van geen vaste grondslagen voor het leven meer wil weten en in de "beweging" alles ziet, de onwankelbare vastheid van Gods scheppingsorde stelt.

Gij hebt het goddelijk radicalisme van dit grondmotief leren kennen, dat de religieuze wortel van uw leven raakt. Gij hebt, naar ik hoop, moeten erkennen, dat het geen tweeslachtigheid, geen "hinken op twee gedachten" in uw levenshouding gedooft. Overreken dus de "kosten", die het ernst maken met dit radicale, wijl schriftuurlijke, christendom vergt en vraag u af aan welke zijde ge u in de benauwende geestesworsteling van deze tijd zult scharen. Want weet, dat

een compromis niet mogelijk is. Het grondmotief der christelijke religie zal radicaal in uw leven doorwerken, of ge zult "andere goden" dienen. Een tussenweg is er niet. Wie ons standpunt ten aanzien van de antithese te radicaal is, vrage zich af of een minder radicaal christendom niet gelijk is aan het zout, dat "smakeloos" is geworden.

Daarom, zo spreken wij en zo radicaal stellen wij de antithese, opdat het Woord Gods weer in zijn volle tweesnijdende scherpte en kracht voor uw bewustzijn sta. Als een geestelijk onweer moet u het weer ervaren, dat bliksemend inslaat in uw leven en de bezwangerde dampkring zuivert! Ervaart ge het niet meer als een geestelijke drijfkracht, waaraan ge uw hart ten volle wilt overgeven, dan zal het geen vrucht dragen in uw leven. Dan blijft ge ook buiten de grote strijd staan, die 't noodzakelijk ontkent. Gij kunt niet deze strijd voeren, maar de geestelijke drijfkracht van Gods Woord voert hem zelf in u en trekt u mee ook tegen uw "vlees en bloed" in.

Dit alles, wat wij niet moede worden onze lezers in te scherpen, was ook voor onze overtuigd christelijke lezers allerminst overbodig.

Want ik meen te mogen zeggen, dat, wanneer aan het grondmotief van Gods Woord, en aan dit grondmotief alleen, door heel de christenheid zou zijn vastgehouden, het nimmer tot die grote breuken en scheuringen in de kerk van Christus zou zijn gekomen. (Geschreven in 1946. Zie *Vernieuwing en bezinning*, blaz. 104-105.)

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theory, political science, industrial economics, nuclear physics, biology, sociology, history, ethics, and theology. Dooyeweerd left behind a great legacy of Christian scholarship. What has been done with it?

Freedom to think

By pointing to what I consider to be the major source of controversy concerning Dooyeweerd's philosophy I do not in the least intend to imply that there are no areas of legitimate critique. I'm really saying this: there should be no controversy among us about the religious foundation and direction of every philosophical endeavour. But beyond that basic assumption - which is not up for grabs - any theory of any philosophy should always be subject to critical review. Why? Because theory is a human and hence fallible effort at understanding the truth about reality. Theory is not that reality itself. It never escapes the limits inherent in tentative hypotheses. This is the humble predicament of all philosophy, Christian and non-Christian.

Here we reach the point of the basic difference between revelation and philosophy. Revelation authoritatively uncovers the truth about the world. Philosophy provisionally restates the truth revealed about the world. This is the message of Dooyeweerd, the believing philosopher, for western philosophy, which has denied its humble position and assigned to itself the place of (pseudo-) revelation.

Christian philosophy, if it accepts its legitimate but humble status, can be a much more dynamically on-going affair than non-Christian philosophizing. For the ultimate certainty and meaning of life does not depend upon the truth that reason supposedly uncovers via philosophy. As a result, the Christian philosopher in principle enjoys a much greater freedom in theorizing about reality than the post-Christian thinker. He stands in the freedom for which Christ has set us free. This freedom expresses itself in openness toward the world and its Creator. It also expresses itself in openness toward fellow thinkers and their critique.

The task ahead

We therefore do Dooyeweerd injustice if we do not consider his philosophy as one step in a dynamic process which we are called upon to keep alive. His was a great step forward - the greater because of Vollenhoven's presence on the same path. Their mutual contribution to Christian scholarship is of such a magnitude that their major writings should be extricated from the confinement of the Dutch language and published in English, the major vehicle of communication in the world. Such an undertaking ought to become the concern of the reformed scholarly institutions in North America, The Netherlands, and elsewhere. It can best be accomplished in cooperation, and thus should form an item on the agenda of the second International Conference of Reformed Institutions of Higher Learning to be held in Grand Rapids in 1978. An effort of this kind today is one of the best guarantees of keeping alive the dynamic, biblically-directed reflection of which Dooyeweerd was a profound exponent.

Professor Herman Dooyeweerd is dead. He leaves behind a Christian philosophy. Its Biblical moorings are plainly visible. Its inbeddedness in ordinary human experience, which is religiously directed, is explained in detail. Its theory of human personality, based on the Biblical notion of man as created in God's image, is impressive even in its unfinished shape. Its conception of reality as structured, coherent in Christ and subject to the law of the Creator, is one of the few outstanding positive contributions of philosophy in the twentieth century, which is the era of the decay of philosophical reflections. Its theory of culture, with its doctrine of the opening process, is a genuine effort to overcome the relativism that permeates nearly every effort at understanding history in our time.

Its theory of the social order escapes the numerous isms that becloud sociological reflection. Its conception of the dialectical tension in the history of philosophy outside of the harmonious view of reality that the Bible

**Dooyeweerd's
greatness lies
not in his genius
as a philosopher
but in his
practical application
of Christian doctrine
to everyday life**

presents is immensely suggestive especially with reference to the great sweep of historical periods - ancient, medieval, modern - even if it falls short in giving the clue to grasping detailed conceptions of individual thinkers.

Finally, the humble position which Dooyeweerd assigns to the place of philosophy itself is perhaps the most important message he leaves behind. Philosophy, says Dooyeweerd, cannot answer the ultimate questions of mankind. Only religion can. Philosophy's role is a humble reflection upon the answers implicit in religion. For a Christian philosopher, this means breaking with a very long unwillingness on the part of western philosophy to listen to God's voice in revelation, shedding its light on all things created. In short, Dooyeweerd struggled for the restoration of genuine philosophical reflection during a period which he himself described as the twilight of western thought. And in doing this as a Christian philosopher he added a distinctively new dimension to the long history of Christian thought itself.

Recognition

This manysided contribution did not go unnoticed. During the height of his career, between 1935 and 1955, he was acknowledged as the foremost thinker of the Free University. Whatever was done in philosophy in the Reformed

Churches of Holland during these decades bore his stamp. For years the policies of the Anti Revolutionary Party could not be recognized apart from Dooyeweerd's view of the limited sovereignty of each social sphere, no matter how badly misrepresented his view often was. An entire school of philosophy was named after his initial conception: *De wijsbegeerte der wetsidee* - the philosophy of the cosmic idea. In nearly every Dutch institution of higher learning, and in many colleges, seminaries and universities abroad, there were professors who, in varying degrees, adhered to his approach.

For 40 years Dooyeweerd gave leadership to this philosophical movement, notably through his editorship of *Philosophia reformata*. The publications by members of this "school" of thought number several thousand, and touch upon key issues in each major discipline. Dooyeweerd's own magnum opus, as we noted, was translated into English with the challenging but also forbidding title *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. Smaller publications of his were translated into German, French, Japanese, and Korean. Numerous books and articles have been written about him. Indeed, his work did not go unnoticed.

Controversy

However, it must immediately be added that controversy accompanied recognition. Why was this so? Did Dooyeweerd have such a controversial personality? Did he enjoy polemics? Of course, it would be ridiculous to suppose that Dooyeweerd's personality had nothing to do with controversy about his ideas. He was very much part of the picture. There is no use denying that genius brings with it a kind of aloofness that hinders person-to-person communication. Moreover, as a rule he neglected third-rate thinkers, also - perhaps especially - if they raised their critique at him in public.

Moreover, in a real sense of the word Dooyeweerd was a polemical philosopher. He fought philosophical battles. When he differed with a fellow thinker - ancient, medieval, modern, or contemporary - he stated the difference clearly. But the polemic would always deal with the issues at stake, for the sake of the truth; it did

not belittle the opponent. As a matter of fact, his polemics were carried on most intensely with the thinkers he regarded most highly - Plato, Aquinas, Kant.

Neither Dooyeweerd nor Vollenhoven engaged in controversy for its own sake. First they would state their position in a positive manner, and then they would draw its critical implications. A number of these critical implications were wrong, and Dooyeweerd's assessment of other thinkers requires reassessment! But the public controversy about issues with their contemporaries was always at a high level of principal debate. Even then Dooyeweerd was careful not to further disrupt the fragile community of Christian scholars when it was caught up in theological and ecclesiastical confusion. This was one reason why he did not publish volume two of *Reformation and Scholasticism* during his own life. He felt that its critique of accommodation to non-Biblical patterns of thought within the Christian church might only increase the tensions and misunderstandings.

Nevertheless, this matter of accommodation in Christian intellectual circles is the major reason for the controversies surrounding Dooyeweerd, in Holland and in North America. His opposition to synthesis implied a judgment of the major trends of Christian thought in the twentieth century, not only of the "official" position of Neo-Thomism in the Roman Catholic Church before Vatican II, but also of the easy adjustment of liberal Protestantism to the dominant direction philosophy happens to take, of neo-orthodox incorporation of existentialism, and of the defense of rationalism in the orthodox Protestant churches.

As long as the intellectual leaders in Christendom reject the possibility of Christian philosophy, as long as they suppose that Biblical revelation does not enlighten the ways we walk in philosophy and science, as long as they reject the integral imbeddedness of rationality within religion, as long as they consider the incorporation of the "best" of non-Biblical philosophies as stepping-stones to theology and even faith itself - as long as that predicament dominates Dooyeweerd's contribution will remain controversial. Not only that. It will be neglected and disregarded.

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