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A Study on the Characteristics of the Christian Philosophy of Johan P. A. Mekkes

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Abstract

This paper provides a systematic analysis of the Christian philosophy of Johan P. A. Mekkes (1898–1987), a leading figure of the second generation of Dutch Reformational philosophy and examines how he inherited and further developed the philosophical framework of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977). While acknowledging Dooyeweerd’s structural approach, Mekkes criticized the deep-seated problem of “abstraction” in Western philosophy and sought to place “concrete life” and “responsibility” at the centre of philosophical reflection. This study analyses the core of Mekkes’s thought in three dimensions. First is the concept of “*scheppingsopenbaring*” (creation revelation). Mekkes emphasizes divine revelation—not merely the creation structure—as the driving force of history and interprets humanity’s

historical journey as a pilgrimage toward the kingdom of God. Second is the dialectical structure of “antithesis and solidarity.” While recognizing the spiritual antithesis arising from fundamentally Christian motives, he stresses solidarity, highlighting the importance of genuine dialogue with humanistic philosophers. Third, he underscores “present thinking,” which goes beyond abstract theorizing. For Mekkes, philosophy must not remain at the level of structural analysis but must move toward the practice of love and responsibility before God and one’s neighbour. Finally, he offers a critical evaluation of historicism. In conclusion, this paper argues that Mekkes’s philosophy advances an existential turn within Christian philosophy and offers significant insights into the cultural vocation and responsibility of Christians in a technologically driven and rationalistic society. Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to the maturation of Christian philosophy in Korea by encouraging an approach that goes beyond the mere imitation of Western philosophy and instead develops a uniquely Christian alternative through open dialogue with other intellectual traditions.

Keywords: Johan Mekkes, Christian Philosophy, Creation Revelation, Antithesis and Solidarity, Present Thinking

I. INTRODUCTION

Johan Peter Albertus Mekkes (1898-1987) is a thinker representing 20th-century Dutch Reformed philosophy and is evaluated as a second-generation Christian philosopher succeeding Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). While faithfully inheriting Dooyeweerd's philosophy of the cosmonomic idea, he reinterpreted its structural and systematic limitations from existential, historical, and dialogical perspectives, presenting his own unique Christian philosophy. However, since most of his writings were published only in Dutch and English-language research was also limited, his thought has hardly been introduced in Korean academia.

The core thesis of this paper is as follows. Mekkes is not merely a successor to Dooyeweerd's philosophy but a thinker who expanded Reformed philosophy into existential and historical dimensions through original concepts such as "creation revelation" (*scheppingsopenbaring*), "antithesis and solidarity," and "present thinking." His thought provides important insights into contemporary Christian philosophy and discussions on the Christian worldview. This study aims to systematically analyse the unique directionality and contributions of Mekkes's thought, beyond merely introducing it.

The necessity of this study is as follows. First, in Korean academia, research on first-generation Reformed philosophers such as Dooyeweerd and Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) has accumulated, but there is almost no research on second-generation philosophers like Mekkes. Second, Mekkes presented important insights into the critique of technicism, the philosophy of responsible existence, and dialogical thinking for analysing modern society and culture, but his thought has not been sufficiently discussed in Korean Christian philosophy and worldview studies. Third, his philosophy expands the horizons of Christian philosophical inquiry by emphasizing human existence, history, responsibility, and relationality beyond Dooyeweerd's structure-centred approach.

The research method of this paper is as follows. First, it examines the background of his thought formation through Mekkes's life and ministry. Next, it overviews Dooyeweerd's philosophy of the cosmonomic idea and the Reformed philosophical tradition to confirm the philosophical context in which Mekkes thought. Afterward, it analyses his Christian philosophy centring on his core philosophical concepts—creation revelation, antithesis and

solidarity, present thinking, and critique of historicism. Finally, it reviews evaluations by contemporary and later scholars and presents the implications of his thought for Korean Christian philosophy today.

This study has some limitations: due to the lack of domestic research, securing secondary literature was difficult, and since Mekkes himself preferred lectures and essays over systematic writings, reconstructing his thought into a complete system is challenging. Nevertheless, this paper aims to contribute to the development of Reformed philosophy and the expansion of modern Korean Christian philosophy by initiating full-scale research on Mekkes, which has been almost untouched in Korea.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF MEKKES'S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

1. Mekkes's Life and Ministry

Mekkes was born on April 23, 1898, in Harderwijk, Netherlands. He served as a Dutch army officer from 1915 to 1940. At age 17, in 1915, he received officer training in Kampen and was commissioned as an officer in the 20th Infantry Regiment in 1920. From 1928 to 1931, he was educated at the Higher Military Academy in The Hague (Den Haag), and from 1933 to 1940, he served as adjutant to Lieutenant General W. Roëll, commander of the Dutch field army.

Even while serving as an active-duty officer, Mekkes continued his academic pursuits. From 1917 to 1923, he studied law at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. At that time, the Dutch army encouraged officers' humanistic studies, and law and philosophy were particularly advantageous for positions, making it possible to combine military service and studies. During this process, he encountered Dooyeweerd's Christian law philosophy and developed a deep interest in the status and authority of the state. He later recalled that through this experience, he was able to escape from "the suffocating atmosphere of traditional Reformed life and childhood thought."¹

On April 19, 1940, just three weeks before Germany's invasion of the Netherlands, he obtained his doctoral degree at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam under Professor Dooyeweerd's guidance. His dissertation was *Proeve eener kritische waarneming van de ontwikkeling der humanistische rechtsstaattheorie* (A Critical Examination of the Development of Humanistic Constitutional Theory), a study that critically analysed humanistic theories of law and the state from Dooyeweerd's perspective.²

However, in 1942, he was captured by German forces along with other Dutch officers and detained for three years in the Langwasser, Stanislau, and Neubrandenburg camps. Notably, even during his imprisonment, he lectured on philosophy to fellow inmates. Among those who attended his classes were Michael R. H. Calmeyer (1895-1990), who later became a member of parliament for the Christian Historical Union (CHU) and Minister of Defence; Hendrik R. Rookmaker (1922-1977), who became a professor of art history at the Free

University; and naval officer A. Deddens. Deddens recalled this experience as a turning point in his life.³

After liberation and return to the Netherlands, Mekkes worked at the Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst (Domestic Security Service) and in 1947 was appointed as a philosophy lecturer at Rotterdam University with support from the Stichting tot Oprichting en Instandhouding van Bijzondere Leerstoelen voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte aan Openbare Universiteiten en Hogescholen (Foundation for Establishing and Maintaining Special Chairs for Calvinistic Philosophy at Public Universities and Colleges). He lectured there until 1972, and simultaneously, other Reformed philosophers were appointed at various universities, continuing the academic tradition. The professors appointed at other universities at that time were his colleagues, the second-generation Reformed philosophers from the Free University of Amsterdam following the first generation centred on Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven: Hendrik van Riessen (1911-2000), S. U. Zuidema (1906-1975), and K. J. Popma (1903-1986).

From 1949 to 1968, he served as a philosophy professor at Leiden University, and from 1963 to 1970, he also lectured at Eindhoven University of Technology. Bernard Zylstra evaluated Mekkes during this period, writing that "although he did not engage in extensive writing activities, he developed an in-depth analysis of the structure of Western culture and its cohesive force, reason."⁴ Mekkes passed away on July 26, 1987, at the age of 89.

2. Mekkes's Christian Philosophy

This chapter overviews the intellectual background necessary for understanding Mekkes's philosophy and then analyses the core concepts of his unique philosophical development. In particular, while respecting Dooyeweerd's structural and cosmonomic approach, he reinterpreted it in terms of existential responsibility and historical concreteness. This point allows us to evaluate Mekkes not as a mere successor but as a thinker who led the "existential turn" in Reformed philosophy.

(1) The Reformed Philosophical Tradition and the Formation of Mekkes's Thought

(1) Continuity and Differentiation with Dooyeweerd's Philosophy

Mekkes is often described as one of Dooyeweerd's most faithful advocates, but he also presented critical views on his thought. A representative example is the paper "Wet en subject in de Wetsidee der Wijsbegeerte" (Law and Subject in the Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea),⁵ an early important work that critically examines Reformed philosophy, especially Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy, the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea).⁶ In this paper, he discusses criticisms raised against Dooyeweerd by Vincent Brümmer (1932-2021) and C. A. van Peursen (1920-1996), but ultimately defends Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique.

(2) The Formation and Core Framework of Dooyeweerd's Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea

Therefore, understanding Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy is prerequisite to understanding Mekkes's philosophy. Dooyeweerd is a representative thinker of 20th-century Reformed philosophy, who sought to explain the created world based on a biblical worldview. After receiving his doctorate in law from the Free University in 1917, he served as director of the Kuyper Institute, a research centre for the Anti-Revolutionary Party⁷ in The Hague from 1922 for four years, where he immersed himself in applying Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) neo-Calvinist worldview to law, economics, and politics, developing his core Christian philosophical concepts. Serving as a professor of legal philosophy at the Free University for over 40 years from 1926, he systematized his Christian philosophy and, together with his colleague and brother-in-law, philosophy professor D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978), established the *Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte* (Association for Calvinistic Philosophy)⁸ in 1936 and founded the journal *Philosophia Reformata* (Reformed Philosophy), serving as editor until 1976. His three-volume *De wijsbegeerte der wetsidee* (Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea), published in 1935-1936, is evaluated as a masterpiece that philosophically elaborated a biblical worldview.

In the preface to the first volume, he states: "The greatest turning point in my thought was the discovery of the religious root of thought itself. It was understanding the central meaning of the 'heart' that the Bible speaks of as the religious root of all human life."⁹ Initially, he called

his philosophy a thorough "Calvinistic philosophy," but later preferred the universal term "Christian philosophy."

(3) Dooyeweerd's Understanding of the Concept of Law (wet) and Creation Order

One of the core concepts of Dooyeweerd's philosophy is "law (wet, law)" as the boundary between the Creator and the created. He understood law as the creation order established by God, to which all created things are subject, and grasped Christ as the centre in a cosmic sense, viewing the entire created world as ultimately unified in Christ. He states:

"The origin of individual subjects following temporal diversity within the coherence of law and its religious identity and meaning is God's holy and sovereign creative will. The universe is God's equal creation in both the law sphere and the subject sphere. The law sphere is the absolute boundary between God and creation, and all creation is inherently subject to the law, with God alone as the 'sole lawgiver'... Christ is the root and fullness of the universe's meaning. Christ fulfilled all laws, and in Him, the fullness of meaning for all subject entities is concentrated; our temporal universe cannot escape Him in anything... In the modal diversity of meaning, the law is the universally valid determination and limitation of the entity structures subject to it. The subject is *sujet*¹⁰ subject to the laws of modal diversity. There is no law without a subject, and vice versa."¹¹

(4) Mekkes's Critique: From Structure-Centred Thinking to Emphasis on Existence and Historicity

However, in the aforementioned paper, Mekkes expressed opinions differing from Dooyeweerd. First, for Dooyeweerd, law is the cosmic law set by the Creator, meaning the structural order of creation, but Mekkes criticized Dooyeweerd's view as overly structural and objective. He pointed out that by understanding the concept of law as an abstract and static structure, Dooyeweerd did not sufficiently consider the more concrete and historical "subjective life." Furthermore, he criticized that the subject, which Dooyeweerd sees as subordinate to the cosmic law, is too bound to structural and objective law. According to Mekkes, humans are not merely beings subordinate to the legal order but responsible subjects who encounter, interpret, and practice the law in the concrete process of life. Therefore, he

viewed law as a given structure, but humans live existential and temporal lives within it in responsibility.¹²

(5) Contrasting Interpretations of the Heart (hart) and Religious Centrality

Additionally, Dooyeweerd understood the human "heart (hart, heart)" as the religious centre of all life. In 1932, he first used the word "heart" in connection with Proverbs 4:23 in the Bible, claiming that the supratemporal root of creation is neither in temporal reality nor in human rational function but in the heart, the religious root of humans. Therefore, for Dooyeweerd, the "heart" can be called the concentration point or focus transcending all modalities. This heart means the central "relation" in human life, namely the relation (religio) with the human origin (Origin), which is the meaning of religion. It is in the human heart toward this absolute origin that the "direction" of all human life is determined. This thought on the heart is foundational in Dooyeweerd's anthropology and is the part that makes his philosophy a unique biblical philosophy.

However, Mekkes saw a problem in Dooyeweerd understanding the heart or religion as a suprahistorical concept outside of time. He viewed seeking an Archimedean point that transcends time to obtain a universal perspective as too close to neo-Kantian methods.¹³ Such methods criticize the disregard for the temporality and historicity of human existence and their transformation into a suprahistorical perspective. Furthermore, he claimed that Dooyeweerd mistakenly interpreted the creation order as a static structure functioning as a framework for cultural development.¹⁴ Because he thought the creation order was not static but fundamentally fluid and dynamic from the beginning.

Nevertheless, Mekkes aligned with Dooyeweerd in the fundamental intent of Reformed philosophy, namely the "rejection of autonomous thought" and "understanding truth through faith." Dooyeweerd's cosmogenic idea emphasizes the createdness of all reality, and Reformed philosophy "rejects all autonomy ... and follows structure in the process of exploring its meaning, which is exploration according to understanding under the light of integrated truth through faith, not the light of intellect," Mekkes argued.¹⁵

(6) Comparison of Transcendental Critique and Ground Motive Theory

Furthermore, Dooyeweerd developed transcendental critique to argue that theoretical or academic thinking can never be religiously neutral, while also developing the idea of the religious ground motive (*religieus grondmotief*). According to him, this basic motive not only serves as the starting point of theoretical thinking but also determines cultural development and direction. He developed this idea not only to reveal the roots of Western culture but also to reform modern secularized culture from a biblical perspective and propose alternatives, thereby attempting transcendental critique on Western philosophy as well as culture in general.¹⁶ Dooyeweerd diagnoses the religious basic motive of Greek philosophy and culture as "matter and form," the Christian motive as "creation, fall into sin, redemption," the fundamental motive of medieval philosophy and culture as "nature and grace," and the basic motive of modern Western humanistic philosophy and culture as "nature and freedom."

Here, he argues that the three motives except for the Christian one inherently contain dialectical contradictions, inevitably implying conflicts and problems in theoretical thinking and cultural phenomena. Therefore, the ancient Greek and Roman world based on the dualistic motive of matter and form could not continue to develop and was replaced by medieval philosophy and culture. However, the medieval motive also synthesized the Greek motive of "nature" represented by Aristotle and the biblical motive of "grace" represented by Augustine through Thomas Aquinas, dominating for nearly a thousand years, but this too eventually transitioned to the modern era through the Reformation and the Renaissance. The former sought to return to the biblical motive, while the latter aimed to revert to the Greek worldview. However, as represented by Immanuel Kant, humanistic modern Western philosophy and culture coexisted with the "nature" motive that absolutized natural science and the "freedom" motive that emphasized human personality ideals, but ultimately failed to harmonize, leading to conflicts. Dooyeweerd analyses this as the crisis of modern Western culture. Ultimately, he emphasizes that the only solution is to return to the biblical basic motive. In other words, the unfolding of academic thinking and culture by all humanistic motives ultimately fails to bring true harmony, but theoretical thinking and cultural development by the Christian worldview motive proceed in the right direction.

(7) Mekkes's Reinterpretation: Critique of Technicism and the Concept of 'Antithesis'

Mekkes, who inherited this thought, principally agreed with Dooyeweerd's basic motive but criticized modern Western philosophy and scholarship as being dominated by 'technicism' or

autonomous reason, analysing that this is because humans have degenerated into an alternative faith structure expecting salvation from technology and reason.¹⁷ In this regard, it can be said that he influenced Egbert Schuurman, who later showed more interest in 'technicism' and researched and developed Christian philosophy of technology.¹⁸

Furthermore, Mekkes generally agreed with Dooyeweerd's philosophy but sometimes used different terms. For example, Dooyeweerd used "antithesis" to mean the conflict between the "Christian fundamental motive" and other fundamental motives, but Mekkes meant the conflict between revelation and pseudo-revelation. In this way, Mekkes faithfully inherited Dooyeweerd's philosophy of the cosmonomic idea while placing greater emphasis on concrete life and responsibility, historical and existential dimensions rather than abstract structures.

(8) Influence on Later Christian Philosophers

Through this, he developed Reformed philosophy into a more existential and dialogical philosophy and influenced the next generation of Christian philosophers such as Johan van der Hoeven (1932-2015), Bob Goudzwaard (1934-2024)¹⁹, Schuurman²⁰, etc.

(2). Characteristics of Mekkes's Christian Philosophy

This section summarizes the central ideas of Mekkes's philosophy into four aspects: creation revelation, antithesis and solidarity, present thinking, and critique of historicism.

(1) Creation Revelation

One of the starting points and core themes of Mekkes's thought is the relationship between creation (*schepping*) and revelation (*openbaring*). He named this "creation revelation" (*scheppingsopenbaring*) and emphasized that the power driving history lies not in creation itself but in revelation.²¹ In this sense, he says, "The path of creation is the path of the kingdom of God."²² In other words, he saw that humanity's historical journey passing through the earthly created world to heaven is not accidental, and in this process, it advances toward the kingdom of God.²³

Additionally, Mekkes basically sympathized with Dooyeweerd regarding the dynamism of temporal reality but showed differences in emphasis. Examining Dooyeweerd's theory of the directionality and referentiality of meaning, as well as his view of time, reveals that his philosophy is highly dynamic. Van Peursen, a Dutch Christian philosopher who was on par

with Dooyeweerd, acknowledged this as one of the most important strengths in Dooyeweerd's philosophy.²⁵ Dooyeweerd distinguishes two basic structures in the created world: 'individuality structure' and 'modal structure.' The former means the legal order of concrete things given by creation, and the latter refers to the moments of each meaning, i.e., anticipation, retrocipation, and specific aspects with the nucleus of meaning. The dynamism of meaning refers to the mutual horizontal referring (*verwijzing*) and vertical expressing (*uitdrukking*) movement of the modal structure and individuality structure, which are in the process of realizing potentiality. The mutual horizontal referring of the modal structure means that each aspect does not exist independently but anticipates later aspects while retrocipating previous ones. And the vertical dynamism means that the diversity of meaning directs toward the unity (*eenheid*) of meaning and again toward the Origin (*Oorsprong*).²⁶ Dooyeweerd calls this dynamic progression the opening process (*ontsluitingsproces*). In short, the opening process means the realization of all potentiality hidden in creation through human cultural activities. For example, at creation, there was the Garden of Eden (Gen 2), but its fully opened form can be seen as the New Jerusalem (Rev 21). It developed 'from garden to city.' Of course, this direction also includes negative openings due to the fall, a representative example being the Tower of Babel (Gen 11). This is a very important concept for understanding Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy of culture. According to him, true cultural development and opening occur only when obeying the Creator's Word (Wort), which is the correct human response (*Antwort*). Whether giving a wrong response or a correct one, humans are beings who cannot not respond (we cannot not respond), and all humans must take responsibility (*Verantwoordelijkheid*) for their responses. Etymologically, 'responsibility' means 'response+ability.' Therefore, if defining the entirety of human life broadly as culture, the essential aspect of humans can be said to be beings who respond to the speaking Creator (*Homo Respondens*).²⁷ This is also a very important concept for understanding Dooyeweerd's view of humanity.

In response, Mekkes believed that the creation order should be understood not as a static structure but as fundamentally fluid and dynamic from the beginning. He did not view human existence simply as creatures subordinate to the law but as responsible subjects who interpret and practice revelation in history. Such emphasis led his Christian philosophy to have an existential and historical character. Furthermore, he sees the principle of opening not as something secondary like how aspects can be dynamically related later, but as "the structure is fluid from the beginning."²⁸

(2) Antithesis and Solidarity

The second core concept in Mekkes's Christian philosophy can be said to be antithesis and solidarity. He believed that since God's revelation (*openbaring*) is given to all humanity, all areas of culture must be critiqued based on this. At the same time, he presents the concept of fundamental solidarity of all humanity along with the antithesis between true revelation and false revelation. These terms likely drew inspiration from legal terms indicating joint responsibility, and as "solidarity" implies responsibility, his use of this "responsibility" primarily points to the mandate that we must respond to God's revelation. In his 1972 retirement lecture at Rotterdam University, he emphasized this point as follows: "Even the deepest antithesis occurs within one humanity sharing responsibility, that is, within the common domain of pursuing science. Whether in conflict or alliance, we must think together with others."²⁹

In this sense, Sander Griffioen, who retired after lecturing on social philosophy at the Free University, views "thinking together with others, whether in conflict or alliance" as the most common and characteristic sentence in all of Mekkes's writings³⁰, and this attitude was an important feature defining Mekkes's philosophy as dialogical.

(3) Present Thinking

Thirdly, Mekkes emphasized "present thinking (*presente denken*)."³¹ This is a critique of the abstract, fixed way of thinking that has dominated the Western metaphysical tradition, meaning that human thought must operate concretely within time and history. The term "present" traces back to a critique of German philosopher M. Heidegger's (1889-1976) "*vorstellendes Denken*" (representational thinking), which is the attitude of the mind "representing (*vorstellt*)" the object of thought to itself, fixing them into enduring presence. Heidegger saw the entire Western metaphysics as based on this present thinking, and Mekkes agreed with this view. In the aforementioned 1972 retirement lecture, he likened "present thinking" to movement created through a series of photographs. "The story starts and ends right at that point, and the person behind the camera is completely detached from the photographing," he says.³¹ Just as the photographer hides behind the camera, the thinker disappears behind the act of thinking to take their place in the audience's gallery. However, Mekkes argued that the subject of thought should not disappear behind the act of thinking but responsibly intervene in time.

Furthermore, Mekkes's critique of this present thinking initially targeted the core of Western thought, but later his critique also targeted the Reformed philosophy school to which he belonged. The trigger for this critique was the term "Archimedean point." For Dooyeweerd, this point is where the thinker can theoretically explain while having an overall view of the diversity and coherence of reality.³² Mekkes also initially used this term in the same sense³³, but when this critique turned inward, it became controversial. That is, as Mekkes's critique of present thinking intensified, he was convinced that Dooyeweerd's philosophy critiqued theoretical thinking, but the theoretical attitude of the mind itself remained unaffected. Of course, Mekkes could understand Dooyeweerd's intention to provide a Christ-centred foundation for his philosophy, but he pointed out that justifying such a position to secular philosophers through critique means that thinking can never occur from a suprahistorical position.

Mekkes principally agreed with Dooyeweerd's methodology of "transcendental critique." The term "transcendental" means "preceding," i.e., what is presupposed in the sense of "what makes possible." This form of critique was intended as a form of dialogue where interlocutors lay their cards on the table and bring the most profound differences into discussion. Furthermore, transcendental critique requests the interlocutor to disclose their fundamental presuppositions in a way that reveals all thinking stands on religious presuppositions.

Dooyeweerd's fundamental motivation for attempting such transcendental critique was to maintain and develop a "thinking community" (*denkgemeenschap*) through this method. Mekkes sympathized with this, as he also based his thought on the aforementioned fundamental 'solidarity.' Therefore, his theme of "thinking with everyone" was also conceived along this line. However, later Mekkes raises a problem.³⁴ At that time, Dooyeweerd had academic discussions with van Peursen, whose position was somewhat different, and Mekkes's junior Christian philosopher van Riessen (H. van Riessen, 1911–2000) broadly critiqued the liberal theologian Harry M. Kuitert (1924–2017), who was teaching at the Free University's theology department. But Mekkes was skeptical about whether their attempts were successful. To him, it was clear that the two people Dooyeweerd and van Riessen dialogued with had no intention to listen to their opinions. Afterward, Mekkes claims that present thinking can never have the final say, and therefore "the platform for discussion for transcendental critique cannot be built on a controversial foundation."³⁵ Furthermore, in his contribution to the book "What is Normal?" (*Wat is normalaal?*), Mekkes even says, "There is hardly a 'thinking community' here."³⁶ Because he saw that it is difficult to think together

with people who do not try to listen to the other party even for a moment. In other words, he emphasized the need for effort to seriously listen to the other party's opinion even if opinions differ.

(4) Critique of Historicism

Finally, Mekkes's important concern was historicism. Two dimensions are mentioned here. In *Creation Revelation and Philosophy (Scheppingsopenbaring en wijsbegeerte)*, he evaluates philosophy in two dimensions. First, the dimension where antithesis operates—that is, the dimension where Christian thinkers do their best to think together, whether in solidarity or opposition with others. In this dimension, he chooses transcendental critique as the methodology. However, in the second, deeper dimension—namely, the dimension where revelation leads us all forward in our shared history—he viewed philosophy as playing the role of a mirror reflecting this. The mirror allows us to see "dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12) but nevertheless provides important clues about how far we have progressed in our pilgrimage toward the end times. Therefore, if we wish to know the signs of the times, ignoring modern philosophy means taking a great risk, according to him. In this second dimension, Mekkes's philosophy gained significant persuasiveness. However, at the same time, the approach he took at this stage carries the risk of prioritizing his own philosophy over others.

In summary, Mekkes's Christian philosophy developed around the themes of creation revelation, antithesis and solidarity, present thinking, and critique of historicism. While inheriting Dooyeweerd's structural and systematic philosophy, he strengthened its existential, historical, and dialogical character to develop a unique Christian philosophy.

(3) Evaluation of Mekkes's Christian Philosophy

Mekkes's philosophy has been evaluated as somewhat difficult and unsystematic, but at the same time, it has received positive assessments for enriching the practical dimension of Christian faith as a "living philosophy" and "philosophy of responsible life." Griffioen introduces Mekkes as a noteworthy scholar who, while being Dooyeweerd's disciple, occupies a unique position within Reformed philosophy.³⁷ He evaluates Mekkes's writings as dense and challenging, written in an inspiring style, and argues that despite the lack of much research, his intellectual depth deserves more attention.

Furthermore, Griffioen analyses that three themes consistently appear in Mekkes's Christian philosophy. First, the "principle of antithesis," which signifies the fundamental separation and

opposition between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. Second, "creation and revelation," where he emphasizes that human existence and philosophy should not merely remain in the order of creation but be situated within God's revelation and history. Finally, "present thinking," where he values thinking that lives and moves within time and relationships, rather than abstract theory.

In this regard, Griffioen views Mekkes's philosophical originality and direction as an attempt to critically reconstruct Dooyeweerd's thought from the perspective of "present thinking." As a result, Mekkes inevitably became somewhat isolated even within the same academic community, but nevertheless proposed a new methodology called "thinking along." This method involves thinking together in a posture of empathy as much as possible, even toward heterogeneous thoughts, and responding to them. Griffioen evaluates that Mekkes's approach can provide new momentum for the renewal of Christian philosophy.

Additionally, Griffioen explains the method Mekkes developed using the term "*sub contrario*" (contrary), derived from Lutheran theology. This expression means that truth is sometimes revealed in its opposite, a concept that well captures Mekkes's philosophical insight. In simple terms, it is a method characterized by the phrase "despite oneself," and Griffioen presents four examples as follows:³⁸

"Nevertheless, Heidegger unknowingly pointed out the superior power (*overmachtigheid*) that acts in the unfolding of creation within (heteronomous) history."³⁹ "What does it mean for humans to act? Responsibility is inevitable in human action."⁴⁰ "Here too, the necessity of distinction is imposed on him, despite his refusal to incline unavoidable knowledge toward knowing the truth."⁴¹ "However, he cannot avoid choosing direction (*richten*). Because he cannot avoid dynamism. Dynamism is not a premise but a power—a comprehensive power that leads creation to its destination."⁴²

Griffioen sees Mekkes's thinking as unfolding in the dimensions of "unavoidable choice" and "responsibility," reminiscent of Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (G. Groen van Prinsterer, 1801-1876). Groen pointed out the irony that the French Revolution marched under the banner of liberty, equality, and fraternity but ultimately succumbed to the power of the dictator Napoleon, perverting human intentions to the opposite.⁴³ Similarly, Mekkes sought to show that the dynamism of creation continues to be revealed in the dialectic where present thinking intertwines, and the light of truth emerges precisely at the point where human intentions pervert into opposite results. For instance, Heidegger attempted to rescue present thinking, as for him, thinking has the first and last word. However, this attempt caused a

crisis in the power of human freedom. And in this very crisis, Mekkes saw the dawn of profound truth, according to Griffioen's analysis.

Johan van der Hoeven, who taught modern philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, recalled Mekkes's way of philosophizing in a memorial article after his passing, expressing it in one word as "*penetrantie*" (penetration). "He was deeply aware of the temporary essence and possibility of error in human thinking, and the same applied to his own thinking. Nevertheless, he practiced philosophy with true dedication," van der Hoeven evaluated Mekkes, and noted that "he possessed an incomparably sharp discernment, but the most striking aspect of his philosophical work is above all the combination of that sharpness with an intense awareness of the dynamism of meaning."⁴⁴

Furthermore, van der Hoeven concluded the memorial by quoting a few passages from Mekkes's little-known work published by Leiden University Press in 1959, titled "The Scientific-Critical Attitude and the Acceptance of Revelation" (*De wetenschappelijk-critische houding en het aanvaarden van de openbaring*).

God's revelation applies critique to maintain science as science. (...) Revelation prevents science from degenerating into the idolatry of thinking—that is, the worship of natural scientific, historical, or theological thinking. (...) Revelation guides the way or warns against wrong directions. Revelation warns against choosing paths that inevitably lead to dead ends, that is, paths that in fact lead to religious contradictions. (...) Revelation (...) emphasizes that all academic practices and methods are essentially hypothetical and subjective in nature. (...) Where is the overall practice of my life, my scientific insight, and the integrated totality ultimately determined? Where is the crisis of my daily, scientific, philosophical, and theological behaviour? That crisis, the court of critique, is at the farthest periphery. In the entire history of humanity, and only in that place, can I see the farthest horizon, which includes my widest horizon of thinking. (...) Ultimately, revelation comes to us from the most despised place, the cross. And the resurrected One says to me: 'All things are yours, and you ... are mine!' (pp. 10, 11, 12, 13).⁴⁵

These evaluations demonstrate that Mekkes's philosophy is not merely a theoretical system but a philosophy of responsibly thinking and living before revelation.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thus far, we have examined the intellectual characteristics of the Dutch Christian philosopher Mekkes. As a soldier, he directly experienced World War II and underwent three years of prisoner life, during which he developed deep philosophical reflections on human existence and responsibility. Therefore, the prophetic seriousness and spiritual insights revealed throughout his writings stem from this background. The implications of Mekkes's Christian philosophy for us today can be summarized in three points as follows.

First, he emphasized fundamental solidarity and dialogue. His attitude of seeking to think together with all people, including those with views completely different from his own, shows that Christian philosophy should possess persuasiveness in universal dialogue rather than closed camp logic. This point can be said to be very important from the perspective of "common grace" emphasized by Abraham Kuyper. Dooyeweerd can also be understood in the same context: after first publishing the "Philosophy of the Law Idea" in Dutch, when republishing "A New Critique of Theoretical Thought" in English, he revised his philosophy from "Calvinistic philosophy" to "Christian philosophy." That is, he too sought to maintain a thinking community with all other philosophers and, while dialoguing with them on the common denominator of "theoretical thinking," reveal the internal problems of humanistic philosophy and ultimately propose Christian philosophical alternatives. Mekkes also developed his philosophy from the same perspective but criticized Dooyeweerd for not being sufficiently prepared for dialogue, as we have seen. Therefore, Korean Christian philosophers should remember that an attitude of sufficiently listening to theories of other thinkers is of utmost importance. Thus, by first acknowledging the strengths of the counterpart's philosophy and securing a horizon of mutual understanding, then pointing out the weaknesses revealed by that thought while presenting philosophical alternatives based on a biblical worldview, it will be more persuasive.

Second, in that regard, Mekkes believed that exchange with modern philosophers is impossible without a deep understanding of the overall history of philosophy first. Thus, Vollenhoven abandoned systematic philosophy research right after World War II to devote himself to philosophy history research. For Dooyeweerd as well, skimming his masterpiece reveals how much he valued philosophy history research. In Mekkes's case, the challenge to

"think together" with others was closely linked to the possibility of transcendental critique. This holds enduring significance, but only a few of his disciples adopted it, and as a result, they faced difficulties in both interaction with thoughts and philosophy history research. Therefore, Korean Christian philosophers need an attitude of steadily researching not only Western philosophy history but also Eastern thoughts and Korean philosophy history. Through such research, while dialoguing with various thoughts, they should strive to identify what can be learned and simultaneously clearly present unique alternatives that Christian philosophy can offer.

Third, Mekkes presented a unique line of Christian existential philosophy or philosophy of existence, advocating existential, phenomenological, and dialogical philosophy within Reformed philosophy, and made the relationship between God and humans the central theme of philosophy. He criticized general ontology or metaphysics, emphasizing that philosophy must begin from human existence and the concreteness of life. He viewed human existence not as an independent substance but as something to be understood within a personal relationship with God. He also emphasized that all existence is established in relationships with God, neighbours, and the world. Therefore, his philosophy is characterized above all by his deep interest in the individual and subjective concreteness of life, even its social and historical connections. Additionally, focusing on temporality and concreteness, since human life is temporal and historical, he emphasized human existence and responsibility in concrete time rather than abstract and universal ontology. Thus, his philosophy is one of love and responsibility, valuing the responsible existentiality of humans standing before God in the present moment.

According to Mekkes, the fundamental flaw in most Western philosophical traditions is abstraction. This arises from absolutizing abstract and analytical thinking in contrast to the concreteness of living humans. That is, Western philosophy sought answers to fundamental problems of human existence through theoretical insights. However, the problems of human existence are by no means abstract but issues of concrete and finite existence. Therefore, humans must focus on their individual concrete subjectivity, he believed. It is precisely there that decisions about meaning are made, and ultimately, the ultimate problems humans face become problems of love, he argued.

Dooyeweerd focused on structural and academic systems centred on the "law idea," emphasizing the diversity of creation order and philosophical structures, as well as modal theory. However, Mekkes criticized Dooyeweerd's philosophical structuring as abstract and ahistorical, placing greater weight on personal responsibility, love, existence, the concreteness of life, temporality, and relationality. Based on these fundamental insights, he continuously tracked and discussed the development of phenomenology and existentialism. Through his works, he increasingly delved into the existential philosophies of Scheler (M. Scheler, 1874-1928), Heidegger (M. Heidegger, 1889-1976), Jaspers (K. Jaspers, 1883-1969), and Sartre (J. P. Sartre, 1905-1980). By placing time, subjective individuality, and issues of meaning at the forefront of his concerns, he sought to contribute to the fundamental reform of philosophy itself. Therefore, emphasizing the philosophy of love and responsibility, he viewed the core of human existence as revealed in relationships of love and responsibility. And so, how should we love our reality? Mekkes reads the Bible precisely in this sense. He discovers in the Bible these two characteristics of humans: finitude and life through love. As a result, Mekkes's thought influenced various fields, such as Christian understanding of humanity, ethics, and philosophy of education. Therefore, Korean Christian philosophers, too, should pursue a practical philosophy where the ultimate motive of all academic activities is to wholeheartedly love the Triune God, who is the Creator and Savior, while deeply empathizing with the pain of neighbours in difficulty and practicing Christ's sacrificial love to bring about the coming of God's kingdom.

NOTES

- ¹ J. Stellingwerff, *D.H.Th. Vollenhoven* (1892-1978) (Baarn: Ten Have, 1992), 206.
- ² H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* Vol. III, (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1953-1958): 426n, see his commentary.
- ³ A. Deddens, "Liefde voor de meester," *Sophie* 6/1 (2016): 32-35.
- ⁴ Bernard and Josina Zylstra (eds.), I. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian-Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought* (Toronto: Wedge, 1975), 24. Translated by Hwang Young-cheol, *The Christian Worldview: An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Seoul: Pyeonghwa-sa, 1981).
- ⁵ Johan Peter Albertus Mekkes, "Wet en subject in de Wetisdee der Wijsbegeerte," *Philosophia Reformata* 27/3-4, (1962): 126-190.

- ⁶ H. Dooyeweerd, *De Wijsbegeerte Der Wetsidee* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1935-1936). *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: The P&R Publishing Company, 1953-1958) Choi Yong-joon "Herman Dooyeweerd: The Philosopher Who Established the Character of Christian Philosophy as Transformative Philosophy". Son Bong-ho et al., *Nine Philosophers Who Loved God* (Seoul: IVP, 2005): 37-66. Yong-Joon Choi, *Dialogue and Antithesis: A Philosophical Study on the Significance of Herman Dooyeweerd's Transcendental Critique*, (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2000).
- ⁷ The Anti-Revolutionary Party was the first Protestant Reformed political party in the Netherlands founded by Abraham Kuyper in 1879. For more details, see H. Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), 68.
- ⁸ This organization is currently active under the name Stichting voor Christelijke Filosofie (Christian Philosophy Association). For more details, see <https://www.christelijkefilosofie.nl/>.
- ⁹ H. Dooyeweerd, *De Wijsbegeerte Der Wetsidee* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1935-1936), I, p. vi.
- ¹⁰ French term used by Dooyeweerd to emphasize the meaning and subjectivity of all things.
- ¹¹ Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* I, 507–508. Here, the term "boundary" is used in a metaphorical sense. Because space itself belongs to the created realm. R. Van Woudenberg, *Gelovend Denken: Inleiding Tot Een Christelijke Filosofie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1994), 43.
- ¹² Mekkes, "Wet en subject in de Wetsidee der Wijsbegeerte", 126-190.
- ¹³ J.P.A Mekkes, *Tijd der Bezinning* (Amersfoort: De Horstink, 1973), 15.
- ¹⁴ Mekkes, *Tijd der Bezinning*, 68. ¹⁵ Mekkes, *Tijd der Bezinning*, 61.
- ¹⁶ H. Dooyeweerd, *Reformatie en Scholastiek in de Wijsbegeerte*, (Franeker: T. Wever, 1949). H. Dooyeweerd, *Vernieuwing en Bezinning: om het reformatorisch grondmotief*, (Zutphen: van den Brink & Co., 1975), Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra eds., I. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian-Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought* (Toronto: Wedge, 1975), 24. Translated by Hwang Young-cheol, *The Christian Worldview: An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Seoul: Pyeonghwa-sa, 1981).
- ¹⁷ J.P.A. Mekkes, "Grondmotief," *Philosophia Reformata* 31/3-4 (1966): 97-123.
- ¹⁸ Choi Yong-joon, "A Study on the Christian Technology Philosophy of Egbert Schuurman," *Christian Philosophy* No. 43 (2025): 553-579.
- ¹⁹ Goudzwaard said, "Mekkes was a professor of Calvinistic philosophy in the Netherlands, and to me, he showed the closed and autonomous worldview and view of humanity that existed and still exist in mainstream economics, which claims to be positivistic and value-neutral." "Notes on Dooyeweerd, Reason, and Order", *Contemporary Reflections on the Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2000): 135.
- ²⁰ "Mekkes's philosophy has been an endless source of inspiration for me in philosophically elaborating the central themes indispensable for reflection on technological development." E. Schuurman, *Technology and the Future*, (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1980), 403, note 5.
- ²¹ J.P.A. Mekkes, "Heeft "christelijke politiek" een zin?", *Antirevolutionaire staatkunde* 31 (1961): 164–169.

- ²² J.P.A. Mekkes, *Scheppingsopenbaring en wijsbegeerte*, (Kampen: Kok, 1961), 90.
Creation, Revelation, and Philosophy trans. by Chris Van Haeften (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2010).
- ²³ J.P.A. Mekkes, *Tijd der bezinning*, (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1973), *Time and Philosophy*, trans. by Chris Van Haeften (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2012).
- ²⁴ The starting point of Dooyeweerd's thought is based on the Bible's creation account. The first philosophical idea he emphasizes, "meaning (zijn, meaning)," appropriately expresses this creation motive. The Bible says that all things in the universe were created, and the centre is focused on God the Creator as the sovereign subject. God is the origin (Arche) of all things and still rules all creation. And all things are ultimately completed by God. In this sense, Dooyeweerd defines all reality not as "being (zijn, being)" used in ontology and general philosophy but as "meaning." For more details on this, see Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* I, 3–4.
- ²⁵ C.A. van Peursen, "Enkele Critische Vragen bij *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*" *Philosophia Reformata* 24/3–4 (1959): 160.
- ²⁶ In this sense, Dooyeweerd says there is a planned basic structure in reality, and he explains this basic structure as "three transcendental ground ideas." Here, "transcendental" means that these ideas are prerequisites for philosophical thinking. The first idea is the origin of all things (Origin). For Dooyeweerd, this is the Creator who created all things according to His sovereign will, and all existence depends on Him. The second idea is that the various aspects and modalities of all phenomena are "root-unity" and the totality of meaning (meaning-totality). In other words, it means the unity that strings all phenomena like beads and focuses them. This is found in Christ, the second Adam and the religious root of all temporal reality. And each individual participates in this totality of meaning through the "heart," the central religious concentration point or focus of existence. The third idea is "meaning diversity in the coherence of cosmic time." Meaning diversity means the various modalities of meaning and entity structures, and these two are connected by time. According to him, all philosophy and science depend on pre-theoretical presuppositions that form this "law idea." That is, these three ideas are prerequisites necessary for all academic activities.
- ²⁷ For more details on this, see Choi, *Dialogue and Antithesis*, Chapter 1.
- ²⁸ Mekkes, *Tijd der bezinning*, 60.
- ²⁹ J.P.A. Mekkes, "Methodologie en praxis," *Philosophia Reformata* 43/4 (1978): 4.
- ³⁰ S. Griffioen, "Thinking Along with Mekkes," *Philosophia Reformata* 82/1 (2017): 26-42.
- ³¹ Mekkes, (1974): 35.
- ³² H. Dooyeweerd, *Vernieuwing en bezinning. Om het Reformatorisch grondmotief*, edited by J.A. Oosterhoff (Zutphen: J.B. van den Brink, 1963): 8-9.
- ³³ Mekkes, *Scheppingsopenbaring en wijsbegeerte*, 26, 89.
- ³⁴ J.P.A. Mekkes, *Teken en motief der creatuur*, (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1965).
- ³⁵ J.P.A. Mekkes, *Radix, tijd en kennen: Proeve ener critiek van de belevingssubjectiviteit* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1971), 91.
- ³⁶ J.P.A. Mekkes, "Gods 'normaal' en wijsbegeerte," in *Wat is normaal?* edited by H. Algra, B. Goudzwaard and J.P.A. Mekkes (Baarn: Bosch & Keuning, 1974): 34-47.

- ³⁷ S. Griffioen, “Thinking Along with Mekkes,” 26-42.
- ³⁸ S. Griffioen, “Thinking Along with Mekkes,” 36-38.
- ³⁹ Mekkes, “Gods ‘normaal’ en wijsbegeerte”, 40.
- ⁴⁰ Mekkes, *Radix, tijd en kennen*, 149.
- ⁴¹ Mekkes, *Radix, tijd en kennen*, 165.
- ⁴² Mekkes, *Radix, tijd en kennen*, 194.
- ⁴³ G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Ongeloof en revolutie. Een reeks van historische voorlezingen* (Leiden: S. en J. Luchtmans, 1847).
- ⁴⁴ J. van der Hoeven, “In Memoriam J. P. A. Mekkes,” *Philosophia Reformata* 52/2 (1987): 98-99.
- ⁴⁵ J. van der Hoeven, “In Memoriam J. P. A. Mekkes,” 100.

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