

ANTITHESIS, SYNTHESIS, AND THE IDEA OF TRANSFORMATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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Philosophic thought as such stands in an inner relationship with historical development, ... no thinker whatever can withdraw himself from this historical evolution. Our transcendental ground-Idea itself ... rejects the proud illusion that any thinker whatever could begin as it were with a clean slate and disassociate himself from the development of the age-old process of philosophical reflection. Only let not the postulate of the 'philosophia perennis' be turned against the religious ground-motive of philosophy with the intention of involving it ... in historical relativity. (Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 1, p. 118)

In this paper I want to deal with one of the classic problems from the history of the Christian church. I want to discuss how a Christian thinker must approach the surrounding culture that is estranged from God. I want to narrow this question down and focus on the point of how a Christian thinker has to approach one most remarkable cultural phenomenon in particular, a phenomenon in which culture is, as it were, turned inside out – namely, philosophy. In short, the question is: How should we as Christians deal with the philosophical ideas and the philosophical climate of our times? – a climate that we often abhor, but at the same time a climate which we must perforce breathe, in one way or another?

1. The crucial question: Transformation in philosophy

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It is only with the greatest hesitation that I raise again this crucial question, which has accompanied Christendom since the days of the Apostles. Not only is the question of great fundamental and historical importance; it also raises strong emotions.

Who does not recall the words of the Apostle Paul to the church at Colossae that they should above all beware lest anyone spoil them through philosophy – by which he probably meant the philosophy of the Gnostics (Colossians 2:8)? Who does not recall the warning to the church at Corinth that the fool-[139]ishness of God, revealed in the crucified Son of Man, is stronger than the wisdom of the Greeks (I Corinthians 1:25)? Thus the question at issue here is one with regard to which extremely divergent standpoints are defended and the greatest imaginable differences of opinion have arisen – differences which have led on more than one occasion to schism, sectarianism, and mutual estrangement.

The controversies surrounding the problem of how to assess contemporary culture and modern philosophy have often flared up also in Reformational Christianity in the Netherlands and North America. Key terms in this debate have always been the words ‘antithesis’ and ‘synthesis’. The word ‘antithesis’ denotes the fundamental opposition that would exist between the Christian conception of life and the conceptions of life found in a world estranged from God. The word ‘synthesis’ is used to indicate the possibility, in principle, of connecting Christianity in one way or another with operative conceptions from ancient pagan or modern secularized philosophy.

It is well known how Neocalvinism, following in the line of Abraham Kuyper, took sides. The biblical point of departure was Genesis 3:15, the divinely proclaimed enmity between the ‘seed of the woman,’ say Christ and his own, and the ‘seed of the serpent,’ say Satan and his own. The whole world and the whole of world history were regarded as involved in this struggle between Christ’s kingdom and Satan’s power. In all fields of life, it was asserted, discipleship of Christ and acknowledgement of his kingship necessarily required an ‘antithesis,’ a separate vision and responsibility, yes, even separate forms of Christian organization set up in opposition to already existing patterns of culture and organization.

From here, lines were drawn also in the direction of philosophical and scientific thought. The result was the concept of Christian scholarship versus non-Christian scholarship or in any case – but in this restriction there was already a difficulty – the

concept of Christian philosophy versus non-Christian philosophy. The practice of scholarship and philosophy ought to be based on ‘palingenesis’ (that is, rebirth), as Kuyper said, or on ‘Reformed principles,’ as the early Free University stipulated, or on the ‘Christian worldview,’ as Herman Bavinck asserted, or on the ‘Christian groundmotive,’ as Herman Dooyeweerd put it, or on the ‘Calvinist view of world and life,’ as D.H.Th. Vollenhoven maintained.² In a word, antithesis was commended, also in the practice of science.

This antithesis in science implied, in the nature of the case, a struggle on two fronts. In the first place, it meant the rejection of the development of non-Christian science and hence criticism of Darwinism in the natural sciences, of materialism in the human sciences, and of liberalism in the social sciences. In the second place, it meant the rejection of the so-called synthesis thought believed to be embodied in Roman Catholicism and in Old Protestantism, where the religious antithesis would be obscured in a subtle attempt to accommodate Christian belief to the spirit of the age.

To this sketch I would append a few remarks. First, I believe I can assert candidly that the philosophical development in the Netherlands at the Free University and subsequently also in the Association for Calvinist Philosophy—think of Kuyper, Bavinck, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven—has been based mainly on the antithetical assumption I have just described. In the second place, I want to assert that now, after half a century of Neo-reformational philosophizing—to which this issue of *Philosophia Reformata* pays tribute—the time has come to engage once again in fundamental reflection on the assumptions of this philosophizing, and then in particular on the doctrine of the religious antithesis and its implications for philosophy. In the third place, I want to assert—this will be the central thesis of my paper—that the debate about synthesis and antithesis in philosophy impedes the real discussion about the religious antithesis in philosophy and that it should therefore be superseded by what I have come to refer to in recent years by the term ‘transformation in philosophy.’

In what follows I shall first analyze the debates about synthesis and antithesis in

² Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1931; 5th ed., 1961), ch. 2; Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1904; 3rd ed., 1959), ch. 1; *Publicatie van den Senaat der Vrije Universiteit in zake het onderzoek ter bepaling van den weg die tot kennis der Gereformeerde beginselen leidt* (Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1895), pp. 7 - 16; Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1953-58; and Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1953-58), vol 1: *The Necessary Presuppositions of Philosophy*, trans. by David H. Freeman and William S. Young (1953); Dirk Hendrik Theodoor Vollenhoven, ‘Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte,’ in *Oosthoek's Encyclopedie*, 5th ed, 16 vols. (Utrecht: Oosthoek's Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1959-66), vol. 3 (1960), p. 108.

philosophy (sections 2-4). Then I shall undertake to explain what I understand by the idea of Christian philosophy as transformational philosophy (sections 5-6). Next, there is a point to be made regarding inverse transformation (sections 7-8). Finally, I shall undertake to show why a Christian transformational philosophy could be characterized as dynamic and contextual philosophy (sections 9-10).

2. Questions regarding so-called synthesis philosophy

From the countless discussions that have been carried on in Reformational circles about synthesis and antithesis in philosophy, it is clear that both terms are fraught with special difficulties. Let us first look more closely at the term 'synthesis philosophy.' The term implies that there are thinkers who strive for a synthesizing, that is, a connecting of the Christian sphere of faith, or of philosophical conceptions that would flow forth from this doctrine, with philosophical conceptions of ancient pagan or modern humanist provenance.

In Neo-reformational circles such a synthesis is generally rejected on the grounds that the intended connection boils down in fact to an accommodation of Christian belief to the spirit of the age and the philosophy of the day. Thus synthesis philosophy is rejected in principle.

Yet there is something remarkable to be noted here. Already in the opening passages of his great work on Calvinism and the reformation of philosophy Vollenhoven says: 'Synthesis between Christian belief on the one side and the prevalent philosophy on the other side is impossible.'³ Note that Vollenhoven says 'impossible,' not 'impermissible.' Dooyeweerd in fact shared this viewpoint with Vollenhoven from the outset. Thus, in *Reformatie en Scholastiek* he often speaks of a religious 'pseudo-synthesis' (*schijnsynthese*) which would [141] be characteristic of scholastic philosophy. Somewhere he writes plainly: 'Of a *real* religious synthesis . . . there can be no question.'⁴ So the question arises: How could Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd become so adamantly opposed to a philosophy based on synthesis if such a synthesis, given the unique and exclusive character of Christian belief, is simply impossible?

³ . D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, *Het Calvinisme en de reformatie van de wijsbegeerte* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1933), p. 16.

⁴ H. Dooyeweerd, *Reformatie en scholastiek in de wijsbegeerte*, vol. 1 (Franeker: T. Weyer, 1939), pp. 19, 37, 57.

That there is certainly something at stake with regard to this so-called synthesis philosophy and that Christian thinkers can fall under the spell of an alien doctrine and even lose their hearts to an unchristian philosophy is something I would not want to deny. All I want to do is raise the question of whether that against which we rightly must warn can be meaningfully signified by terms such as 'synthesis thought' and 'synthesis philosophy.'

3. Questions regarding the antithetical approach

The problem can also be approached from the opposite direction. Then the question becomes: Is it meaningful to emphasize the antithetical starting point that Christians would be obliged to adopt in philosophy? What does 'antithesis' signify in this context? In our context, as I have said, the word 'antithesis' refers to the religious opposition between Christ's lordship and Satan's power, both of which lay claim to man and reality, including human thought. On the basis of this opposition, I am most profoundly convinced that Christians must fight the good fight of faith to this very day, also in the fields of philosophy and science.

The question is, however: Can the 'good fight' be carried on in philosophy and science by means of an antithetical approach? Does the claim that Christ lays to our lives mean that we have to establish our distance from the prevalent ideas of the non-Christian side down the entire line, or at the very least leave these ideas scrupulously alone?

From various of Abraham Kuyper's publications one gains the impression that he did, indeed, conclude that Christians and those holding other views would go their entirely separate ways in philosophy and science. Kuyper asserted that the opposition between belief and unbelief must necessarily lead to two systems of science, one Christian and one non-Christian, and that they would have to engage one another down the entire line in a life-and-death struggle. 'These two scientific systems... are not relative opponents,' he says somewhere, 'walking together half way and, further on, peaceably suffering one another to choose different paths, but they are both in earnest, disputing with one another *the whole domain of life*, and they cannot desist from the constant endeavor to pull down to the ground the entire edifice of their respective

controverted assertions, all the supports included, upon which their assertions rest.’⁵

Thus in Kuyper the Christian and non-Christian views of reality are ‘two absolutely differing starting points, which have nothing in common in their origin.’ They are comparable to two ‘parallel lines [which] never intersect,’ and for this reason Kuyper considers it necessary for every person of science just to think through, in all scientific seriousness, the consequences of his or [142]her own starting point. I have to add that Kuyper’s position was not an exceptional one. The emphasis on ‘the undeniable fact of the absolute antithesis’ and on ‘the Christian groundmotive in its absolute character’ can for example also be found frequently in Dooyeweerd.⁶

Yet it is necessary to introduce some nuances. Kuyper did not always honor his confident pronouncements and likewise often suggested various forms of cooperation that would be possible, on the basis of God’s ‘common grace,’ between Christians and those holding other views. And later, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, each in his own way, spoke of signs of God’s ‘general grace’ and also of ‘elements of truth’ in non-Christian cultural life, of which Christians, as they saw it, might make grateful use.⁷ Are those not concessions which would render it impossible to carry through without curtailment the antithetical approach envisioned by Kuyper? Granted all the fundamental differences, should it still not have to be acknowledged that there is legitimate room for communication in philosophy and science? The question is *not* whether the contest between the Son of Man and the Evil One – which Augustine in his *City of God* so clearly showed to be an all-encompassing global struggle – has something to do in some way or another with scientific reflection – for it surely and certainly does – *but* whether this involvement must lead in all seriousness to an exclusively antithetical stand at all levels of philosophical and scientific praxis.

The problem can be considered in terms of principle or from a practical standpoint. With respect to principle, it must be seriously doubted whether speaking of religious antithesis in terms of an ‘absolute contradiction’ does not overstate the case and whether upon further reflection such terminology does not turn out to belong to a

⁵ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, p. 133.

⁶ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, p. 134; Dooyeweerd, *Reformatie en scholastiek in de wijsbegeerte*, vol. 1, pp. 47, 57.

⁷ Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*, 3 vols. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1902-05; 3rd ed., 1931-32), vol. 2; Vollenhoven, *Het Calvinisme*, pp. 46-47; Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique*, vol. 1. See also the article ‘Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper,’ trans. by Harry Van Dyke, in Sytse Ulbe Zuidema, *Communication and Confrontation: A Philosophical Appraisal and Critique of Modern Society and Contemporary Thought* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972; and Kampen, J.H. Kok, 1972), pp. 52-105.

Manichean rather than to an Augustinian tradition. Is the idea of an 'absolute antithesis' to be rhymed with the biblical revelation concerning the good creation which – if one wishes to use philosophical terms here – precedes and therefore in a way relativizes, as divine thesis, all religious antithesis? I can not elaborate this point further here, but elsewhere I have for this reason referred to the 'incongruency of the religious antithesis.' Is the Evil One himself not a creature of God? Is not all his power borrowed power, i.e., a perversion of forces that God Himself has established in the creation? Can Satan do anything except, in his own fashion, imitate God (Luther)?⁸

It is also possible to approach the problem in question from a more practi-[143]cal standpoint. It can be pointed out that the *de facto* situation is that Christian thinkers — and certainly also representative personalities such as Augustine, Calvin, Kuyper, and Dooyeweerd — before arriving at their own Christian conception steeped themselves for years in ancient pagan or modern secularized philosophy, as the case may be, and that they thereafter were able to emulate their own views only in confrontation and communication with dissenters. Must this dependence upon communication with those of another mind be condemned beforehand? Does the practice, which features communication, not rather confirm our standpoint of principle, namely, that even from the non-Christian side people can only seek to turn to the best advantage they can possibilities that God Himself has established in the creation? And then we are not yet speaking of the bitter fact that Christian thinkers too can be smitten with malignity and blindness!

Kuyper asserted most emphatically, it is true, that 'parallel lines never interact'; but is this metaphor not misleading? Do Christians and those of other persuasions go entirely their own, separate ways, also in the fields of science? Do Christian scholars take cognizance of alternately directed conceptions only in order to dismantle them? Or would it be possible for me to gain something, say from an existentialist view of man or from a marxist analysis of society or from a modern hermeneutical conception of history?

Believers and unbelievers can learn from each other. There is a *common nigg*le for the truth in the more practical special sciences such as physics and biology, and even in the strongly world-and-life view oriented field of philosophy. Do science and philosophy not

⁸ See Jacob Klapwijk, 'Rationality in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Tradition' [trans. by Graham E. Morbey and H.D. Morton], in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, eds. H. Hart, J. van der Hoeven, and N. Wolterstorff (Lanham and London: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 93-111. Cf. by the same writer 'Calvin and Neo-Calvinism on Non-Christian Philosophy,' trans. by Graham E. Morbey, *Philosophia Reformata* 38 (1973): 43-61; and 'Dooyeweerd's Christian Philosophy: Antithesis and Critique,' trans. by John Kok, *The Reformed Journal* 30 (1980): no. 3, pp. 20-24.

always require communication?

4. The sheer necessity of communication

Communication plays a crucial role in science today. The results of research in be called scientific only if they can be justified before a broad scientific forum. Normal science is even defined for the purposes of some philosophies of science as research which is done within a paradigm, that is, within the .framework of the shared assumptions of a scientific community.⁹

Something of the same sort obtains for philosophical thought as well, which day can be called anything but individual reflection. Nowadays, scholarly inquiry is often carried on in long-term research projects. Such research projects engage philosophers of diverse plumage in shared acceptance of certain points of departure, methods, and objectives.

The necessity of communication arises not only from the demands of contemporary research in a complex society. It arises also from the nature of the scholarly, scientific way of thought as such. Scholars have no other recourse than to set forth their conception of things in language, in the categories of Ought and within the horizons of understanding existing in their own time. is especially true of philosophers. If philosophers desire to be relevant, they need to articulate their ideas in such a way that they respond to the [144] questions and expectations, the burdens and exigencies appearing within these communal intellectual horizons.

Christian philosophers too are consigned to the philosophical and ideological discussions of their own day, even if for no other purpose than the development of their own ideas along the way. Various non-Christian conceptions are not so much starting points [*aanknopingspunten*] as they are points of contact [*aangrijpingspunten*] fostering development of the distinctive conceptions of Christian scholars. Certainly Christian philosophers will often feel the calling and experience the need to reformulate the questions that have arisen and the answers that have been given in the light of Scripture and also to exchange them if need be for

⁹ I mean here conceptions as developed by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962; 2nd ed., 1970). It will be clear in view of what I have said thus far that I do not consider his sociological and psychological approach to the phenomenon of science, aided by 'paradigms', and 'disciplinary matrices,' to be adequate. Moreover, the concept of communication is also central in the philosophies of science of Kuhn's opponents, including Imre Lakatos and Jürgen Habermas.

better problems. However, only in communication with the non-likeminded can they help themselves and others to move ahead. Only through such a complete openness to the problems of their age can Christian scholars, in their own way and at their own level, live up to the words of the Apostle Peter: ‘Always be prepared to give an answer to every one who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have’ (I Peter 3:15).

For the moment I conclude the following. The history of philosophy shows many forms of Christian scholarship: think of the writings of Justin Martyr and Augustine, or of those of Thomas and Bonaventure, of Luther and Calvin, of Dooyeweerd and Rosenstock-Huessy. In all these forms of Christian scholarship there is, however, precisely because they seek to be Christian, something of an antithetical content. By the same token, because they respond to the questions and ideas of their own times, something of a synthesizing intention can be distinguished as well. All Christian philosophy is antithetical insofar as it is foreign to and at enmity with the wisdom of this world and insofar as it allows itself to be led by God’s revelation concerning man and earthly reality. All Christian philosophy is synthetical insofar as this foreignness is brought into liberating reference to the many questions and uncertainties and also to the terrific discoveries and gargantuan dislocations that are so typical for every new epoch in human history.

In short, Kuyper’s metaphor of two parallel lines without intersection does not fit the relation between Christian and non-Christian philosophy. Christian philosophy is antithetical and synthetical at the same time. I sense the presence of both these elements in Paul’s words in II Corinthians 10:5. There he says antithetically that ‘we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.’ And in the same breath he adds synthetically that ‘we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.’ Clearly, Paul means that human imaginings which in themselves betray rebellion can become of use to the Christian if they are reallocated and reformulated in the perspective of the service of Christ.¹⁰

5. Transformation as critical appropriation

If we now assume that the good fight of faith in philosophy neither may nor in fact

¹⁰ Cf. Jacob Klapwijk, ‘Rationality in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Tradition,’ in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, p. 108.

can lead to a philosophy featuring an exclusively antithetical posture towards every humanist philosophy, in repudiation of all synthesis thought, how, then, must this fight be waged? [145]

If the religious antithesis, from which I still wish to proceed without any qualification whatsoever, does not lead automatically to a philosophical or a scientific antithesis, then how can it acquire form in philosophy and science? In short, is there an alternative to Kuyper's antithetical program of science?

I believe there is such an alternative, and I want to attempt to indicate more fully what it is by taking up in philosophy the concept of 'transformation.' I need to place the concept of transformation at the center. I wish to argue that a serious confrontation between Christian conviction and scholarly tradition should not lead directly to the adoption of either an antithetical or a syncretical attitude of thought; it will lead rather to a transformational process of thought. What kind of transformation is involved here? A distinction needs to be made at this point between transformation in a normative and in an anti-normative sense of the term.

Let me begin with transformation in the normative sense of the term. The question can be formulated this way: How ought Christian belief, or rather, how ought the gospel as 'the power of God to salvation' (Romans 1:16) be brought to bear in changing – that is, reforming and transforming – scholarly discourse?

To clarify the process of change that Christian belief must initiate insofar as scholarly tradition is concerned, I want to mention by way of illustration a theme encountered in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* (II. 40,60) that is generally referred to by the Latin terms *spoliatio Aegyptiorum*. In Exodus 12 we read how during the great Exodus from the land of Egypt the Israelites, following Moses' instructions, demanded silver and gold objects and also clothing and that the Lord favorably disposed the Egyptians so that the people got what they asked. Literally, it is written: 'And they spoiled the Egyptians' (Exodus 12:36).

6. The Church Fathers and the theme of spoliatio

It is interesting to note that the early Church Fathers more than once seized upon this theme of plundering the Egyptians in order to clarify and defend their attitude towards ancient philosophy. Their argumentation was this. Just as the children of Israel were

meant to spoil the Egyptians of their finest cultural treasures, so likewise may we appropriate the grand treasures of Greco-Roman civilization and then especially of Greco-Roman philosophy and science.

In principle I have no difficulty with this notion of appropriation. That the early church ought either to have raised science and philosophy in its own vegetable patch by resorting entirely to its own devices or else have left them entirely alone strikes me as an unfruitful and, likewise, untenable position. As early as the second century after Christ, the Apologists entered into public debate with pagan philosophers in terms of both criticism and appreciation.

The appropriation of existing insights can be warranted. The only question is: How? Here it must be acknowledged that the old Christian writers often went about their work very uncritically. Sometimes, in the line of Plato, they strongly turned their backs on earthly life and material reality. Sometimes, in the line of Anaxagoras or Aristotle, they interpreted God as 'mind'. Sometimes, in the line of the Stoa, they identified the revealed Word with a cosmic Logos, and so forth. These interpretations and accommodations were a grandiose mistake fraught with unimaginable consequences. Ancient thought left [146] its mark on Christian theology, Christian theology subsequently determined ecclesiastical doctrines, and these ecclesiastical doctrines led on a grand scale either to an intellectualistic, dogmatic religious experience or else to hyperspirituality, asceticism, and monasticism. The traces are still recognizable in the church today.

One thing is certain: it should never be our intention to accept uncritically ideas from pre-Christian or post-Christian cultures. Equally unacceptable would be to make an external adaptation of such ideas to Christian doctrines in the manner so often undertaken in patristic and medieval thought. The appropriation of non-Christian learning may not consist in external adaptation *to* but must consist rather in critical assimilation *into* a Christian view of reality.

The example of the children of Israel is illustrative. They spoiled the Egyptians of their gold and silver, to be sure. But initially the people carried on uncritically with Egyptian animal worship by setting up the golden calf to the cry, 'Those are your gods, o Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt' (Exodus 32:4). Only later did the Israelites learn to appropriate the gold in a much deeper and, indeed, *critical* sense of the word. Servants of God themselves, they then also offered their gold in service to

God. They melted it down to make the furnishings for the tabernacle (Exodus 35).

This story from de Bible can perhaps serve to clarify the meaning of transformation. Transformation in the normative sense of the word means to me the *critical* appropriation and assimilation of non-Christian learning, so that it can be truly integrated into a Christian view of reality and used in service to God. *Critical* assimilation means smelting and refining, and thus also exposing and relinquishing all that can not stand the purifying fire of criticism.

Critical assimilation implies, in other words, that the valuable insights of those of other persuasions must be shelled from the pods of their worldviews, that they must be pulled up out of the religious ideological soil in which they have thus far been accustomed to flourish. Thus Calvin could speak of the outstanding insights of the ancient philosophers and jurists, but then separated from the self-righteousness of heathendom. Thus even Kuyper could at times allude to the outstanding insights of a Darwin, but then separated from Darwin's evolutionistic system he detested.

To my mind, we must also recognize something of such a critical transformational intent in the works of the Greek and Latin Church Fathers, whom many amongst us have tagged without nuance as 'synthesis philosophers.' It is undoubtedly true that, measured by biblical standards, they often depreciated the material world and human corporeal existence. Yet it is equally true that compared with the philosophical standards prevalent at the time (leaving aside rare cases such as Marcion and Mani) they revalued this ubiquitously devalued material reality by relating it in one way or another to God, the good Creator of heaven and earth.

Such a critical transformational task lies upon our way as well. For a Christ-centered reflection on man and society, it seems to me that one of the most important categories in modern humanistic philosophy would be the concept of 'alienation'. Now, I believe that I as a Christian may adopt such a key concept if I separate it from the ideological context of historical materialism and show that for me alienation means something just a little more concrete, more personal and more radical than estrangement in modern labor re-[147]lations, which indeed so often impede man's self-realization. Alienation is arguably a basic-notion to be taken and scrutinized as spoils. That is to say, Christians have to admit that there is a great ,deal of alienation in modern society. But we must dissect this marxist notion until sin is disclosed at the foundation of all human and societal alienation: man, estranged from God.

7. Inverse transformation

The Christian is called to Christianize and sanctify all of life, including the life of culture and society. As a corollary, the Christian is also called to bring philosophy, the world of the mind, under the claim of the gospel. If the Christian does *not* do so, then the encounter between Christian belief and worldly philosophy brings about the opposite situation, with the Christian being brought under the influence of the modern climate of thought. That is also a kind of transformation, but then in the opposite, anti-normative direction: an inverse transformation.

I speak of inverse transformation when the sanctification of culture stagnates so that a worldly way of thought creeps into a once Christianized society. Then the Christianizing of the climate of philosophical thought turns into its opposite, the secularization of the Christian way of thought. Is inverse transformation not in many ways characteristic for church and Christendom in the present age, an age in which we are being inundated by post-Christian and anti-Christian ideologies?

The examples are there for the taking. Naturally, the ecclesiastical, the theological, the general Christian jargon is still used. But words acquire a new burden in which no longer God but man is central. The kingdom of God is diminished to the 'city of man.' Salvation is reduced to emancipation, yes, to self-emancipation. Authority is hollowed out until it means no more than humanly legitimated power. Truth is thinned down to intersubjective consensus. The Exodus becomes the symbol of self-emancipation. The Cross becomes the symbol of solidarity of comrades. The Resurrection becomes the symbol of uprising, of revolt. And the list goes on.

If one looks carefully at Christian philosophical reflection down through all the ages of the church, then he is struck by the tremendous tension to which the claim of the gospel and the pressure of the world have subjected Christian thinkers. Transformation and inverse transformation often appear together in one and the same system! Take Origin. In his Logos thought he wants, on the one hand, to demarcate Christian belief from all pagan philosophy, yet at the same time he undertakes – and this is what I would call inverse transformation – to present Christian belief as the perfection of all ancient wisdom. Take Augustine. On the one hand, he seeks to link the evil in the world with the Fall into sin and with the general corruption of human nature, but on the

other hand, he often shows signs of Platonism and associates evil with a doctrine of emanation and diminution of being. Take Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, he would regard man expressly as the creation of God, standing in an immediate and undivided relationship to the one origin; on the other hand, he divides human existence up and proceeds to speak, in the language of the Aristotelian categories, about the natural and supernatural final goals of man.

Something of the same sort occurs in Modern Times. Transformation and inverse transformation are again seen to go hand in hand. Reading Hegel, we [148] discover how he emphatically challenges the exclusive and central importance of Christian belief; but then he turns around and incorporates Christianity into the world spirit's inclusive sweep through history. In Tillich, Pannenberg, and Gutierrez we read how Christianity with its theonomy or its orientation to the future or its expectation of the kingdom of God can lift contemporary philosophy out of the mire; but time and again the same writers also turn around and describe this effort as contradictory and ambiguous and restore the autonomy of the modern mind.¹¹

8. The 'dialectics' of transformation and its inversion

Looking back on the centuries-long tradition of Christian philosophical thought, we have to notice that the world of culture really is hardly neutral at all. On the one hand, we can see how believers have attempted to address the current questions of their cultures and so to provide an account of the implications of the Christian faith without surrendering their Christian starting point. On the other hand, we also find that this involvement with current debates did not always produce salutary results, that it did not mean reformation and transformation exclusively but slippage as well.

What was often true of individual thinkers was also true of the church in general. Having become a cultural power in its own right, the church itself proved to be vulnerable. On the one hand, the church has become a transformational blessing for culture; on the other hand, it has been cast to and fro by every wind of doctrine and has all too often been the duped victim of a deceptive culture. The church's openness

¹¹ To illustrate what I mean by 'transformation' and 'inverse transformation' I have in this article made only the most summary mention of such outstanding thinkers as Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Hegel, Tillich, Pannenberg, and Gutiérrez. More extensive documentation is included, however, in my 'Epilogue: The Idea of Transformational Philosophy,' trans. by H.D. Morton, in *Christian Assessment of Secular Thought*, eds. J. Klapwijk, S. Griffioen, and G. Groenewoud forthcoming.

to the world is at the same time an opening *for* the world.

In short, transformation and inverse transformation are always simultaneously at stake. That is what one could call in a philosophical and thus not fully adequate terminology 'the dialectics of transformation and-inverse transformation.' This phrase represents the vulnerability of Christ's church in general. It represents in particular the vulnerability of individual Christian philosophers, whose calling it is to think through the doctrines of their times and who in doing so can easily lose their footing.

Earlier I referred to the religious antithesis, the enmity between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil, as a struggle in which the philosopher, too, is involved. I said at that point that this struggle cannot be opened up for discussion by the adoption either of an antithetical or of a synthetical standpoint in philosophy. My thesis was rather that every type of Christian philosophizing, to the extent that it is truly Christian, implies willy-nilly an antithetical ferment and that every type of Christian philosophizing, to the extent that it is truly philosophical, contains willy-nilly a synthesizing element. Does this mean that all types of Christian philosophy are of equal value? Does this mean that in the gloom of history all philosophical cats are gray? [149]

That is the last thing I would want to maintain! But the religious struggle between God and the powers of evil at the philosophical level can best be understood, I believe, not in terms of antithetical versus synthetical standpoints but in terms of what I have called the 'dialectics' of transformation and inverse transformation, a 'dialectics' in which the blessing of Christianity is all too easily turned into a curse. We call this curse down upon us if, whether through accommodation or through isolation, we neglect our transformational task.

9. Reciprocity of transformation. The dynamic character of Christian philosophy

If the view of transformational philosophy presented here is correct, then two important consequences follow with regard to the character of Christian philosophy. Christian philosophy ought to be dynamic. And Christian philosophy ought to be contextual. I wish to provide a brief explanation of each of these characteristics.

First, a word concerning the dynamic character of Christian philosophizing. Sometimes it is asserted that there have been so astonishingly many systems of

Christian philosophy from the days of the apologists and Church Fathers to today because Christian philosophy tried to wed itself in every new epoch to the spirit of the age. It is then asserted that the real task should have been to frame one lasting Christian system of philosophy for all times. What are we to think of that?

The objection that Christian philosophy has adapted itself far too much to the spirit of the age in the course of the centuries is probably well taken. Yet the alternative, i.e. that Christianity should develop a single, enduring philosophical system of its own, evokes equal reservations. If we accept the idea of transformational philosophy as the critical appropriation and incorporation into Christian reflection of systematic conceptions from the general history of philosophy, then the dynamic character of this general history must influence the Christian reflection in some way.

I can formulate this differently. The progress of Christian philosophical thought is determined not only by an *internal* dynamics whereby Augustine learned from Ambrose and Origen, Calvin from Bonaventure and Augustine, Dooyeweerd from Kuyper and Calvin, and so forth. The progress of Christian philosophical thought as transformational philosophy is also determined by an *external* dynamics, say by the developments that have led from Plato to Wittgenstein. I mean, Augustine was about as able to ignore the platonist idea of a diversity of levels of being in his thought as we are to ignore Wittgenstein's notion of a diversity of lingual fields.

There is, moreover, a complication. In the relation between Christian philosophical tradition and other philosophical developments, the matter is one of influence that goes forth and returns again. We must not forget that this so-called general history of philosophy, even after it had loosened itself from the Christian intellectual tradition at the beginning of modern times, remained ineradicably marked by such dominant conceptions as those of Augustine, Thomas, and Luther.

I cannot imagine modern historical and utopian consciousness without Augustine's Christian conception of history. I cannot imagine the modern sense [150] of human self-transcendence without Thomas's vision of the religious perfection of man. I cannot imagine the modern philosophy of emancipation without Luther's treatise on *The Freedom of the Christian Man*. However secularized modern philosophy may be, it cannot shake off Christianity as simply as a duck shakes water off its back. Modern philosophy is not just unchristian philosophy; it is post-Christian philosophy. It is stamped by Christianity –'a philosophy within Christianity,' to use Hegel's

expression – just as Christian philosophizing is consciously or unconsciously stamped by the ancient Greek and modern humanist spirits.

To indicate this returning mutual influencing, I use the term ‘reciprocity of transformation.’ By ‘reciprocity of transformation’ I mean to say that in history a constant interchange takes place not only between ideas that are of Christian and ideas that are of humanist origin but also between ideas that are present in the one camp or the other as fiefs that actually ultimately belong – if one may put it that way – to the opposing party. To me one of the most telling examples of this sort of thing is the secularized messianic expectation of salvation underlying Marx’s coming kingdom of freedom. Certainly *that* can be called a Judaeo-Christian fiefdom, a fiefdom that is presently being reclaimed by contemporary Christian thinkers and transformationally traced to its Judaeo-Christian sources.

This reciprocity of transformation can afford us a new view of the spoliation theme that I mentioned earlier. At first glance a deed like plundering the Egyptians seems morally suspect, even though this deed was prescribed by God. Does the commandment ‘Thou shalt not steal’ not apply to stealing from the Egyptians? Upon reflection, however, the insight comes that the children of Israel were only reclaiming what was itself plunder: the results of four centuries of repression and exploitation at the brick kilns.

Could we not also undertake to legitimate philosophical *spoliation*? One could argue as follows. The modern mind lives on the cultural treasures it looted from Christianity. Christianity would have the right to reclaim these cultural treasures: an ‘expropriation of the expropriators’ to speak with Marx. Why should a Christian not be permitted to profit from the modern hermeneutical philosophy, itself a runaway from the school of Luther and Matthias Flacius? Why should a Christian not be permitted to profit from a neomarxist philosophy of hope if this hope, notably in the case of Ernst Bloch, is itself drawn from the springs of the Judaeo-Christian tradition?

10. Transformational philosophy as contextual philosophy

It remains only to clarify why transformational philosophy, carried on in the spirit of Christ, ought to be contextual philosophy. Here we touch upon a burning question. I have often heard the complaint, even from kindred spirits, that Reformational

philosophizing has perhaps thus far produced some impressive systems of Christian philosophy, but – so the demurrer – in practice they are of little value.

Is this complaint not in some sense correct? And is that not the result of a tendency amongst Christians – especially in Neocalvinist circles – still excessively to harbor the illusion that they can advance philosophical reflection entirely with their *own* people and entirely with their *own* devices?

If we genuinely desire to philosophize in the spirit of Christ, then we shall [151] have to do as He did, that is, seek people out where they are to be found: in a world of expectations and frustrations, of questions and uncertainty, of insight and delusion, in short, in the concrete context of human existence. It is something of this sort that I desire of Christian philosophy. It must not isolate itself. It must direct itself to real people, as they express their experiences in the language and thought patterns of particular cultures. Only in this way is Christian philosophy vital, addressed, contextual philosophy: to the Jews a Jew, to the Greeks a Greek (to speak in biblical language).

This contextualizing of our thought does not mean simply that humanistic philosophy is to pose the questions, to which Christian reflection would thereupon provide the answers, after the model of Paul Tillich's systematic theology. By the same token, it does not mean that the Christian is to formulate for others what their questions and answers ought to be. The idea of contextual philosophy implies that a serious dialogue is required, adjusted to the concrete situations in which people find themselves, Christians and non-Christians alike. It implies mutual interrogation and mutual criticism which in all likelihood will be conducted from very different positions and in connection with which one acknowledges that a non-Christian philosopher will probably see things from his vantage point that the Christian would all too easily overlook from his own. The idea of contextual philosophy implies philosophical communication as a process of mutual critical interrogation.¹²

Transformational philosophy practiced in terms of mutual critical interrogation renders the Christian approach complex in the extreme. On the one hand, we Christian thinkers must view and, if necessary, review our own perspective in the light of another person's critical questions. On the other hand, we must reconsider such

¹² It is in these terms that the theologian Jan Milič Lochman, who left Czechoslovakia in 1968, pleads for a dialogue with marxists: *Marx begegnen: Was Christen und Marxisten eint und trennt* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975), ch. 1.

questions critically in the light of our own basic convictions. For example, Christians, as I see it, must allow themselves to be asked by existentialists and marxists whether one can philosophize about man without speaking of human guilt and whether one can philosophize about society without mentioning social injustice. At the same time, Christians must lay before the existentialists and marxists the problem of whether *their* questions are properly framed, of whether guilt is not something more than an existential attitude, of whether social injustice is not something more than power structures grown askew.

It will be clear that a philosophy that wants to operate in this transforming and Christianizing way will become strongly involved in real philosophical and social issues. Viewed from this standpoint, it is not only inevitable but also salutary that Christian philosophy should develop entirely differently in Asia, Africa, and Latin America than in continental Europe or the Anglo-Saxon world. A Christian social philosophy in Latin America must respond to the processes of 'conscientization' going on there. A Christian philosophy that would take root in Africa must take into account the autochthonic cultural awareness present there. A Christian philosophy for Asia would have to ask penetrating questions of Oriental wisdom, and so forth.

Finally, a warning against misunderstanding. My case for Christian philosophy as transformational philosophy and contextual philosophy is not a case [152] for the fragmentation of Christian truth but a case for the concretization of Christian truth at the philosophical level. The Christian church throughout the entire world must continue to bear witness to the one truth that is in Jesus Christ. We can understand this Truth, however, only together 'with all the saints' (Ephesians 3:18). The idea of contextual philosophy tries to make room for this 'together with all saints.'