

The struggle for a Christian philosophy: another look at Dooyeweerd

By Jacob Klapwijk¹

[p 12] One of the main barriers to a balanced appreciation of Dooyeweerd's work has been the fact that his critics and his sympathizers, whether Dutch or Anglo-Saxon, too often look on his philosophical system as some thing entirely new. Dooyeweerd's thought is in fact much less novel and original than is usually supposed. Throughout it run motifs which stem from the Kuyperian revival, but also from Calvin's Reformation, and indeed from the entire ecumenical tradition of the church going back to Augustine and the other Fathers.

Unless these connections are recognized it is impossible to assess the measure of his originality, his personal contribution within the continuity of Christian thought. Here I shall draw attention to one relation in particular: that of Dooyeweerd to Kuyper.

Originally Dooyeweerd always confidently presented his philosophy as "Calvinistic." In later years, when he found an audience beyond his own confessional circles, he dropped this phrase. But he certainly did not intend thereby to conceal his dependence on the "Calvinistic revival" of Abraham Kuyper; rather, he wanted to prevent the needless misunderstanding that his philosophy was bound to a particular doctrinal or theological position. He repeatedly emphasized that the biblical-reformational basis of his thought did not stand in the service of any one particular doctrine or ecclesiastical tradition, but simply intended to be thoroughly Christian. He believed that this basis could be of "ecumenical or catholic significance."

Where exactly does the significance of Dooyeweerd's starting point and developed thought lie? Opinions differ, depending on what one sees in Dooyeweerd. I believe his system, given his radically Christian starting point, revolves around three central themes: "sphere sovereignty," "antithesis," and "transcendental critique." Using these themes, I shall try to show how much Dooyeweerd depended on Kuyper but at the same time how much he went beyond him.

1. Dooyeweerd and the theory of sphere sovereignty

The first central theme of the philosophy of the cosmogenic idea is the theory of *souvereiniteit in eigen kring*. Commonly translated as "sphere sovereignty," the phrase would be more literally rendered as "the sovereignty of the unique spheres." Dooyeweerd was not the originator of this theory: it is already present in rudimentary form in the writings of Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (d. 1876) and Abraham Kuyper.

¹ [RH: Jacob Klapwijk was a lecturer in contemporary philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, where he had been a student in theology and philosophy between 1952 and 1961. This is a revision and translation, by John Kok, of four short articles which appeared in *Gereformeerd Weekblad* in February and March 1977. This was published in two parts in *The Reformed Journal* in February and March 1980.]

In an attempt to define the mutual relationship between church and state, the Christian statesman Groen van Prinsterer coined the term "sphere sovereignty." What did he mean by saying that church and state were sovereign spheres? On the one hand, he wanted to express the unique nature and independence [p 13] of the church. The church as institute has its own character, its own calling, and its own responsibility; and the state may not presume to have a say over it and its internal affairs. On the other hand, Groen wanted to accent the state's unique nature and independence. The body politic and civil government too have their own character, calling, and responsibility. The church has no right to involve itself in civil matters nor to lay down the law for those in political office. Both church and state are called on to give due obedience to God, the highest lawgiver, but in their relation to one another they are sovereign spheres.

Abraham Kuyper entitled his celebrated inaugural oration at the Free University in Amsterdam "*Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*."² From what he said, it is clear that sphere sovereignty was a much more *universal* principle for Kuyper than for Groen. Kuyper sees not only church and state, but also the school, the business, the family, and so on, as sovereign "spheres," each having a unique character and inner law of life. Furthermore, Kuyper sees the sovereignty of the persons in authority in each of these spheres as rooted in the *sovereignty of God* and in the kingship of Christ. Christ, to whom all power and authority belong, does not place this authority in the hands of a few sinful persons or in a single, exclusive sphere (the church or the state), but bestows it

Who was Dooyeweerd?

Herman Dooyeweerd was born on October 7, 1894. He was awarded the Dr. Jur. degree in 1917; his thesis dealt with the place of the cabinet in Dutch constitutional law. In 1922 he was appointed director of the Dr. Abraham Kuyper Foundation, which was the research arm of the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party. From 1926 until his retirement in 1965 Dooyeweerd was a full professor of legal philosophy at the Free University at Amsterdam (founded in 1880 by Abraham Kuyper).

It was in the mid-1930s that the young professor published his three-volume work *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*, which was later revised and translated into English as *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1953-58). Dooyeweerd also set out to write a three-volume history of philosophy, under the title *Reformatie en Scholastiek in de Wijsbegeerte*. The first volume of this was published in 1949; the second and third remain unpublished. In addition to these he wrote numerous other works, some of which have been translated into English.



Dooyeweerd had an air of distinction and dignity about him, but he also exuded a warm simplicity and cordiality. Those who knew him were impressed by how he was able to combine great learning with a childlike faith. Though he designed a unique edifice of radically Christian philosophy, he held the doors and windows open, remaining in discussion with all the great thinkers of past and present: Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Husserl. His thinking was disciplined and systematic; yet he was always able to present his case with a certain finesse and artistry.

Dooyeweerd's genius could not be denied, but he was never spared revilement. Respected in many circles, he was nevertheless accused of heresy in earlier years because, among other things, he criticized the body-soul distinction as it had been traditionally defined in Reformed theology. Later some dismissed him as an antiquated curiosity from the Kuyperian museum and his philosophy the already withered fruit of Kuyperian and neo-Calvinistic thought.

He died on February 12, 1977.

² [RH: A translated version can be found in Bratt's *Abraham Kuyper: A Centenary Reader*]

upon all sorts of office-bearers in all sorts of spheres. And Kuyper calls the sphere sovereignty of the different social bonds a *creational principle*. He sees it not as an accidental result of historical growth and development, but rather as an expression of the rich diversity of structures laid in the creation by God himself.

Kuyper's bold notion of sphere sovereignty was as contrary to the stream of social theories of his time as of ours. Contemporary thinkers prefer to explain the diversity of social structures as a purely pragmatic out come of historical evolution or as a functional decentralization of the authority of the state. The state and other social structures are generally seen as rooted in the sovereign will of the people; seldom does anyone consider a deeper foundation in the sovereign will of God and in the God-given creation order. This explains why we see the unlimited experimentation with social groups and institutions such as marriage and the family which characterizes our day.

For all the élan with which he presented it, Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty was not a mature theory, but more of an intuitive grasp, which served to give an initial basis to the independent status of the Free University in relation to church and state. In fact, the theory was deficient at many points. To mention only one example, Kuyper's inclusion of municipalities and provinces in his list of sovereign "spheres" must certainly be questioned, for these are nothing but parts of the body politic. A point might be made for their regional autonomy, but as such that has little to do with sphere sovereignty and everything to do with historical circumstances.

Kuyper and his immediate followers were not explicit enough in making their distinctions. Often they were too hasty with the use of the word "creational principle," even in cases in which sphere sovereignty was not at issue. The vagueness of Kuyper's distinctions served to discredit the idea of sphere sovereignty, as did the appeal of some conservatives, contrary to Kuyper's original intentions, to sphere sovereignty in order to advocate points of view testifying to a liberal, laissez-faire idea of society. Every form of state intervention in society, even when there was a crying need, was repudiated with a principled appeal to sphere sovereignty.³

It is to Dooyeweerd's credit that he brought some order into this matter. In elaborating a "Calvinistic philosophy," he and Professor D. Th. Vollenhoven⁴ made a sharp distinction between the previously muddled concepts of sovereignty and autonomy. They considered *sovereignty* the independent authority exercised by communities in heterogeneous spheres of society. State and church, for instance, are independent of each other, as they belong to different areas of life. The political area is different from the area of institutionalized religion. Therefore, each of them has its own competency on principle.

³ [RH: Bob Goudzwaard deals with this misunderstanding of sphere sovereignty alongside others in his important article "Christian Politics and the Principle of Sphere Sovereignty" in James W Skillen and Rockne M McCarthy eds *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* Scholars Press, Atlanta, pp. 335-342 which can be found at <http://www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/Goudzwaard/BG49.pdf>]

⁴ [RH: Vollenhoven was Dooyeweerd brother-in-law and professor of Philosophy at the Free University in Amsterdam. He worked alongside Dooyeweerd in pioneering a reformational approach to philosophy.]

Autonomy, on the other hand, is the more or less dependent or interdependent authority of communities *within* a homogeneous sphere of society. State and province, for instance, are interrelated, as they belong to the same sphere (the political). In their mutual relationship the competency of each of them is therefore not a question of principle. Their competency refers to a larger or smaller region and has a wider or narrower range, as the practical situation demands. By distinguishing sovereignty from autonomy Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven could define the validity and scope of the principle of sphere sovereignty more accurately.

Dooyeweerd also shed light on another matter. The intention of sphere sovereignty, he said, may not be to indicate *where* (in what situations) the state may or may not involve itself; rather, the theory of sphere sovereignty suggests *how* (on the basis of which mandate, to which goal, in which manner) the state may or must involve itself with various social institutions and problems. To give an example, the state as such is not forbidden to interfere in family life, although the family belongs to a different area of life from the state. But there is a world of difference between a government which, on the basis of its proper calling to oversee public justice, takes orphaned and abandoned children into its custody, and a government which high-handedly prescribes state education on the grounds that the family or the school are allegedly subordinate to its own unlimited sovereignty. The first case is probably in harmony with its structural competency; the second is always in defiance of it.

Even in the little world of Reformed Christianity, the theory of sphere sovereignty has little currency. Yet I would wager that the underlying idea – the idea of the peculiar competency and responsibility of the different spheres of life – still operates in wide circles, albeit practically and unconsciously. This probably explains the strong Christian defense of family life, the direct involvement of Christian parents in education and local schools, the personal responsibility many Christian believers take for church activities. In certain contexts it probably also explains the institutionalized activities of many Christian Democratic parties, the struggle of Christian labor organizations, and the existence of Christian colleges and universities. Though I am happy for this silent operation of the principle, I wish, Christian people would consciously rearticulate for themselves what they are unconsciously living out of. Our predicament, I believe, demands it.

I am referring here to the need of the world. It is a peculiar need, one which has many faces. On the national level – in many countries – this need is apparent in the ever-increasing government interference which continues to go on at the expense of freedom and initiative in the other areas of life. Unfortunately, we have become accustomed to everything, even bureaucracy and state domination. At the international level, this need of the world has taken on quite different features. Here the law of the jungle holds sway: more precisely, it seems that here everything has to dance to the tune of big business.

It is not difficult to understand why here and there outbursts of rage against all established power flare up. I can understand the clenched fist of the neo-Marxist and the anarchist. But I am frightened every time that fist is opened. For what does it reveal

other than an almost total lack of authority? Let's not deceive our selves: this vacuum is certainly unable to cope with the great need of this age.

In the face of this, what radically alternative perspective does Christianity actually proffer this broken world? Certainly, there is the church and the preaching of the Word. There is also the faithfulness of God, the coming kingdom, and the reign of Christ. But these great realities must be continually translated into practical proposals which can effectively offer a critique of as well as transform the established "order" – in obedience to what the Lord has shown his requirements [p 15] to be: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty deserves a new chance in our time – but only if it is accompanied by the critical considerations Dooyeweerd added to it. Kuyper alone supplies only bits and pieces. With Dooyeweerd's conception of sphere sovereignty one can at least see the duty of the state government in a national context more sharply; and government's in creasing meddling in minutiae will be open to sharper condemnation.

Who knows – from this perspective we may also be able to get a sharper picture of the duty of government in international affairs. We have orphaned peoples and abandoned whole areas to the law of the jungle and the power of mammon. Too often we have dealt with them in terms of charity instead of law and justice. In other words, at the world level too, sphere sovereignty – that is, the regimen of Christ and the duty of government to see to justice – is at issue.

But not only did Dooyeweerd clarify the theory of sphere sovereignty and make it operational for our day. He also provided it with a philosophical foundation. In the scientific world sphere sovereignty was some times brushed aside as "natural theology" or "meta physical speculation." As far as Dooyeweerd is concerned, this was anything but true. Few opposed "natural theology," "metaphysics," and similar shadowy suppositions as sharply as he did.

How Dooyeweerd gave a firmer foundation to the theory of sphere sovereignty would be a story in itself. His main point was that modern science and philosophy are by right *empirical*: they have to be related to human experience and the data of the empirical world. That is exactly the approach the philosophy of the cosmic idea followed. It traced the theory of "sphere sovereignty of the social structures" back, rooting it in the distinctive diversity of the possibilities of human experience. This is what Dooyeweerd termed "the sphere sovereignty of the law spheres."⁵

Whatever one may think of this theory in all its details – and I have many second thoughts myself – the important thing is that Dooyeweerd, proceeding from the theory of sphere sovereignty, drafted a Christian view of society which did not remain at the intuitive level of a world-and-life-view. Through his transcendental-empirical approach (that is, one directed to experience and its presuppositions) Dooyeweerd introduced his

⁵ [RH: Dooyeweerd developed his "theory of the modal spheres" in volume II of his *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. See also Seerveld and Strauss]

view of society into the realm of theory and made it the topic of numerous scientific discussions.

[end of the February 1980 *RJ* and start of the March 1980 *RJ*]
[p 20]

2. Kuyper and Dooyeweerd on the "antithesis"

There has always been a stir about the Kuyperian view of the "antithesis." Many people today balk at the mere mention of the word, dismissing it simply as a Kuyperian concoction. Yet the idea was not just the brainchild of Kuyper's. I would not hesitate to say that antithesis *as such* is ingrained in the biblical message and has been reiterated in all of the better confessional and theological traditions.

Antithesis literally means something "set against." In the religious and spiritual sense, the idea of it goes back to the first promise of redemption in Genesis 3. After the fall of man into sin, God said No to Satan, the tempter; who had waylaid the whole of God's creation work. There God proclaimed the antithesis, the bitter strife between "the seed of the serpent" and "the seed of woman," from which Jesus, *the* seed of woman, would emerge in the course of time as victor. God says that he will put "enmity" between them. Under this sign the history of the world unfolds, but only here and there, only at decisive points, is the veil of history lifted by the Bible.

Whatever one thinks further about "antithesis," one must agree that *this* antithesis at least is not a human invention, but God-given grace. Satan rages in this world, threatening it with destruction. But God in his grace will not stand idly by: On this enmity hangs the salvation of humankind, of the world in its entirety.

Many Christian thinkers – including, to a certain extent, Kuyper – have been carried away by this antithesis. Kuyper sought to give the biblical antithesis concrete form in the various areas of state and society. These attempts were by no means unique: fifteen hundred years earlier Augustine, in his opposing of the "city of God" to the "earthly city," had attempted to visualize the antithesis in the progress of world history. And Augustine has often found a following. But his intended disclosure of the antithesis throughout the course of world events was not convincing. There always remains a mystery in history – God's mystery.

Kuyper's effort to concretize the antithesis was an attempt to organize it into principles of society and social relationships. He wanted to give the antithesis visible form in a manifold of Christian organizations. It may – and must – be asked whether this "organizational antithesis" does not infringe upon God's mystery. One must ask, too whether Kuyper and his followers, motivated by the Christian (or if you will, Reformed) cause, did not identify themselves so closely with God's cause that exclusivism, complacency and a closedness to the plight of the world were inevitable.

For all that, I do not want to come down too hard on Kuyper. At least he realized that culture is not a neutral area where the brotherhood of all humanity can be acclaimed

and Christian discipleship forgotten. At least he knew of the struggle, also in social matters, for which Christians were enlisted by the antithesis willed by God.

This obligation remains, even in our thoroughly secularized world. I would like to see Christians and churches attain to the visionary discernment of Kuyper, who saw as no one else in his time that the struggle for the soul of humanity has slowly but surely shifted in the modern world from the church to culture. It is there, in civil society, that the good fight must be fought and not merely, or preferably, in the church or on theological territory.

In that connection Christians should jealously nourish their Christian organizations—provided of course that these organizations are considered as *instruments* and not as *ends* in the struggle. In spite of all my objections against Kuyper (and I shall mention some others below), I can only endorse his Christian view of culture.

[p 21]

In following the line of the Christian cultural mandate, Kuyper dreamed the most daring dreams. At times he saw "his school," the Free University, as the center for the re-Christianization of the entire Euro-American cultural world. Kuyper wanted to give the antithesis organizational form even in the recalcitrant world of science – an attempt attended by some rather bizarre consequences.

For Kuyper there are two kinds of science: one following from an unregenerate consciousness and the other from a regenerate consciousness. There are two "absolute starting points." The first is that of the Normalists, who proceed on the assumption that the world is normal. The second is that of the Abnormalists, who see the world as abnormal, dislodged by sin, and dependent on Christ.

Kuyper concluded that no liaison or reconciliation between these two starting points is possible. On the contrary! The two dispute 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 supports included upon which their assertions rest."

As often as I read these words from Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* (p. 133), I experience simultaneously admiration and objections. I admire Kuyper's single handedly locking horns with the entire educated world of his age which swore by the supposed objectivity and impartiality of all science. Kuyper refused to accept the world of science as a neutral given.

But I object to the solid and tangible form in which Kuyper, also here in the field of science, delineates the religious antithesis and "separates the thinking minds in the domain of Science into two opposite battle arrays" (p. 132). To speak of a reciprocal attempt to demolish each other's scientific edifice is to overstate the case. Science in particular depends on worldwide information and contact; in fact, science represents a universal communication system.

Obviously, Kuyper's antithesis theory, especially in relation to science, was in crying need of revision, and it was Dooyeweerd who did just that.

We saw in the first section how much Dooyeweerd had in common with Kuyper. He was in full agreement with Kuyper's defense of the principle of the religious antithesis, but he preferred not to speak of regenerate and unregenerate subjects. Instead, he spoke of mankind who is comprehended in Adam and of men and women who are comprehended in Christ, "the new root of mankind."

Like Kuyper, Dooyeweerd stressed the activity of the antithesis in culture; indeed, he discussed its effect in the world of science even more pointedly and consistently than did Kuyper. But Dooyeweerd emphasized that the antithesis must always be seen as a *spiritual* conflict. The antithesis cannot be grasped in an idea of organizational opposition.

Dooyeweerd says specifically that the antithesis "is not a boundary line which places a Christian part of the nation over against an anti-Christian part." He calls the antithesis "the irreconcilable struggle between two kinds of spiritual principles which pass through the whole of mankind irrespective of any 'safe' areas in the Christian way of life." It is a disparity "which passes right through the Christian life itself," and which (as Dooyeweerd says elsewhere) brought even the apostle Paul to cry out "Wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:24).

For Dooyeweerd there was no question that the antithesis is at work everywhere and in everything. It is not just a piece of biblical information in the back of our mind, but something which determines our whole life. The fight must also be fought on the terrain of theory and science. But not in a head-on collision of Normalists and Abnormalists, or Humanists and Calvinists, or however Kuyper arrayed the camps. For Dooyeweerd the antithesis was "a continuing battle in the religious *root* of history," a struggle dominating the whole of mankind, not one which mankind can dominate and manipulate. For Christians, it is also a struggle against the apostate tendencies of their own hearts.

We are called, also in philosophy and science, to be active *from out of* the revealed enmity between God and Satan. How? Through exhaustive criticism and inexhaustible *solidarity*. The latter is an explicit addition of Dooyeweerd's. He acknowledged critical solidarity to be his calling in life as regards his fellow philosopher, his "scientific neighbor," and he sought to realize it through his "transcendental critique," a topic to which we now turn.

3. Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique: a question of critical solidarity

Dooyeweerd referred to "transcendental critique" as the key to his philosophy of the cosmogenic idea. He made a sharp distinction between this *transcendental* critique and a completely different kind of critique called *transcendent* criticism. We may think of transcendent critique as "external critique" or "critique from without." Transcendental critique can then provisionally be entitled "internal critique," "critique from within."

External critique is not unknown in Christian circles. The church has always made use of it, also when it came to judging the results of science. Theologians in particular have subjected science to transcendent criticism.

Kuyper liberally applied such a critique to the sciences of his day, for example when he repudiated dyed-[p 22] in-the-wool Darwinism as "unscriptural." Kuyper was not here evaluating Darwin's teaching from within nor did he judge it on its own merits. Rather, he subjected it to the authority of a source external to it; he judged it from without, in this case, on the basis of the Scripture.

Dooyeweerd would never be satisfied with such a critique. External criticism may be correct from a biblical or confessional point of view, but scientifically speaking it is of little or no importance. A church can certainly contend that the concrete scientific results coming from the atheistic or materialistic camp cannot pass the biblical test, but such an ecclesiastical judgment carries, as such, absolutely no scientific thrust. It is of hardly any use to the party condemned, who still does not know where the mistakes or misconceptions crept into the investigation.

Dooyeweerd held that if the results of a scientific theory do not agree with the Christian outlook on life something must be amiss in that particular theory itself. And the question is: Should such a fact then not be made clear to this thinker who has become captured in his own theory?

Transcendent criticism, in other words, can be very cheap, especially if the church *confines itself* to this type of critique. It becomes cheap if there are no Christian scholars within the church who stand by the side of those being criticized and who in critical solidarity help to show where and why a theory has fallen on the slippery ice of an unscriptural starting point.

If we were to try to express the debt the church and Christendom have to Dooyeweerd, we could say that with his transcendental critique he has rehabilitated the levitical service of solidarity in the courtyard of the temple, that is, in the field of philosophy and science. Dooyeweerd developed this transcendental critique because he wanted to offer real help. With each of his books he elaborated on and improved the transcendental critique, each time from a new angle.

The transcendental critique is a rigorously theological approach to science. It does not test the results of science with the text of the Bible, but zeroes in on the phenomenon of science itself, retracing from the inside out, as it were, the train of thought which science follows, so as to finally arrive at its point of origin: the hidden religious starting point of all scientific activity. Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique is a process of critical and penetrating inquiry which asks: "What is it that makes scientific thought possible?" "How does Faith (the religious starting point) direct science (and likewise philosophy)?" "How can it, unfortunately, also misdirect science?"

We should clarify our earlier description of transcendental critique as an internal or immanent criticism. Immanent criticism is common in Christian circles, as is transcendent criticism. Kuyper, for example, did not only offer the transcendent criticism of Darwinism I mentioned above, but he also gave an immanent criticism by pointing out the internal tensions or logical contradictions of such a theory.

Transcendental critique, however, is a special type of immanent criticism. It is an immanent criticism of theoretical thought, which refuses to consider theory dogmatically as a closed system, based only on logical laws and empirical data. It tries to open a thinker's eyes to pretheoretical presuppositions and motivations. According to Dooyeweerd's critique these pretheoretical presuppositions seem to be religious. That is to say, the main tensions and contradictions within a theory or between theories, are caused not just by deficient human observation or analysis, but by different *religious* options. The collisions between different theoretical positions and philosophical schools can never be made fully understandable on a purely theoretical level. They can only be elucidated thanks to an immanent-theoretical critique, which is at the same time transcendently directed to their deepest religious motives.

In contrast to his predecessor in transcendental criticism, Immanuel Kant, Dooyeweerd would thus have nothing to do with a separation of faith and science. In separating the regions of faith and science, Kant had, to the satisfaction of many, declared the latter to be neutral. Dooyeweerd, however, took it upon himself to uncover the pitfall in Kant's critique. His search was successful. In spite of the dissimilar natures of faith and science, Dooyeweerd was able to discover the inner point of contact. More specifically, he was able to show how it is possible that the reasoned argumentation of the human understanding is propelled (and possibly warped) by the religious motivation of the human heart.

Dooyeweerd saw the inner point of contact between reason and religion to lie in what he initially called the "cosmonomic idea" of every system of thought. This "cosmonomic idea" is to be seen as the most general framework into which every scientist, consciously or unconsciously, fits his factual knowledge. The framework itself, however, is erected on a (believing or unbelieving) religious foundation. To use [p 23] a more dynamic image, the "cosmonomic idea" is the pinion by which religion sets the wheels of thought in motion.

What is the sense and meaning of this transcendental critique? One could say that it became a razor sharp scalpel in Dooyeweerd's hands, with which he not only cut down the dogma of unbiased scientific reason (as had Kuyper), but also dissected theoretic thought, bringing to light that its autonomy is a pretense belied by its very structure. He showed why a closed system of thought is impossible, how all thinking stands open to a thinking "I," and how thought proceeds not from an abstract rationality but from the full human being. He likewise made clear that it is impossible to argue away either religion or God from the full nature of man, adding that the one who denies this is the first to be taken in tow by a religious ideology. Finally, he observed how the spiritual antithesis

makes itself known in the foundational religious attitudes and ground-motives which also determine scientific thought.⁶

But Dooyeweerd was not just playing his part in the military march scored by Kuyper's antithesis theory, bringing his arsenal of scientific weapons to bear. The scalpel he wielded was not to hack with, but to heal with. Shortly after World War II, Dooyeweerd wrote:

In the present situation the Christian principle in the first place prompts a deep compassion for the spiritual and temporal needs of our nation and of the whole world, which have gone through the fire of God's judgment. What does man want? Fanfare does not befit the rains of our entire Western civilization. The antithesis can, at present, certainly not strike a militant note. It can, as always, only be professed in truth in the realization of the absolute solidarity of Christians and non-Christians in the collective guilt of mankind which has carried the earth to the brink of destruction (*Vernieuwing en Bezinning*, p. 3).

Dooyeweerd wanted no closed fronts. As a member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences and long time chairman of the Association for Legal Philosophy in the Netherlands he was devoted to breaking through old battlelines. Dooyeweerd was a philosopher of the dialogue, eager to invite opponents to the round table. The only condition was willingness to suspend – be it only provisionally or hypothetically – the axiom of the neutrality of science and/or of the self-sufficiency of reason.⁷ This was, as he had learned from experience, the only way to prevent the Christians' contributions from being ruled out in advance as unscientific.

I watched Dooyeweerd more than once in such discussions. Though unashamed of his Christian faith, he did not judge other viewpoints simply by putting the Bible on the witness stand. He remained a Christian *philosopher* with a specific mandate. He tested the issues by working back towards the religious presuppositions out of which the thought pattern at hand could have arisen.

In retrospect I would say that Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique was not only the key that unlocked his own philosophy: it was also the key with which he hoped to crack the closed systems within which other thinkers had entrenched themselves – the key to the door of their hearts. Truly, while his criticism was exhaustive, his solidarity was inexhaustible.

In these attempts at discussion Dooyeweerd confessed that he himself could not break open anyone's heart, that with his transcendental critique he stood in the service of him

⁶ [RH: Dooyeweerd analysed three dominant religious ground-motives in western culture: the Greek form-matter motive, the Medieval-Catholic nature-grace motive, and the modern humanistic motive of nature-freedom.]

⁷ [RH: A typical statement on what Dooyeweerd often called the “dogma of the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought” is the following: “We do not demand that the adherents of this dogma abandon it by anticipation. We only ask them to abstain from the dogmatical assertion that it is a necessary condition of any true philosophy and to subject this assertion to the test of a transcendental critique of theoretical thought itself” *In the Twilight of Western Thought* p.6]

who had laid a liberating claim on his own life and thought. His desire was to let those straitjacketed by the claims of science participate in that liberation. In this way this pre-eminent son of the church also proved a blessing for countless numbers throughout the world.

Yet we must be realistic, not suggesting too quickly that Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique provides a definitive solution to the problems of faith and reason or the implications of the antithesis for philosophical and scientific thought.

One of the most penetrating questions to be asked here is, as I see it, whether Dooyeweerd and Kuyper were not too quick in speaking of the "absolute character" of the antithesis in religious ground-motives. Is there, in fact, an *absolute* contradiction between God's guidance and Satan's strategy if Satan can, as Luther said, only imitate God? Does the religious starting point of the Christian stand in *absolute* opposition to all apostate or idolatrous ground-motives of Western thought if every falling away is a falling away from ... God himself, if even the most radical idolatry evidences, by its very absence, a trace of God's presence?

The religious antithesis, God's No to sin, is preceded by God's religious thesis, his Yes to his creation. In other words, God is the beginning and the end of our entire earthly existence. He is still present in this world, even in our false culture where science in particular has become an object of idolatry.

The notion of God's presence in no way undermines the depth of the religious antithesis or the gravity of sin. On the contrary. Religious enmity can be recognized as enmity, and sin can be exposed in all its shocking, guilt-riddled gravity only where God's goodness is still present.

This much, however, does seem certain: The notion of God's presence quite excludes the idea Kuyper had about an organizable antithesis. Equally I would submit that the notion does not leave undisturbed the intention of a transcendental critique as is found in Dooyeweerd. If one may translate God's presence in terms of faithfulness and solidarity, then the notion can offer new impulses, also in the field of theory and science, to the critical solidarity with one's fellows which Dooyeweerd had underscored.

The Apostle Paul, after referring to God's presence in this world, spoke of a truth suppressed in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). This word provides food for thought in two directions: that which is truth is suppressed, but also that which is suppressed is truth. This does not make the life of the Christian any easier. In this world we must be as innocent as doves and as wise as serpents.

Exactly how some of these notions are to be translated for the field of philosophical reflection and scientific communication would be a story in itself. What is clear is that Dooyeweerd's rich legacy gives us no right to retire on his gains.

[Prepared for the [alofliferedeemed](#) website by Rudi Hayward.]