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The groundmotives of biblical philosophy

By the term “biblical philosophy” I mean a foundational, philosophical perspective which refers itself continuously to the Holy Scriptures. I do not mean to imply here that a person who is committed to biblical philosophy may remain content with Scripture study: indeed in important ways one must direct such a person to matter beyond Scriptures... The adjective “biblical,” then, is used to denote constant (not exclusive) reference to Scripture. Such philosophy might be said to “to lean upon Scripture,” i.e., it is in accordance with it.

(What follows is an analysis of the Scriptural content of biblical philosophy.)

A.

A biblical philosophy teaches the total sovereignty of God who has revealed himself in his Word. It teaches a sovereignty which is exercised over all things in every context and relationship. Consequently, biblical philosophy distinguishes sharply between God qua Sovereign and his Creation. [subsequent points act as a commentary upon this first thesis]

1. First, I call attention to the adjectival phrase “who has revealed himself in his Word.” Our attention is hardly redundant as there is no term with which philosophy has tinkered more than the term “God.” Some have taken the term to refer to a primordial one-ness; others have associated the term with the form of the world. There are other formulations. During the Middle Ages, especially, when many Christians took on the task of combining pagan and biblical thought, the term was often defined in religiously damaging ways. Consequently, I emphasise that Whoever in their philosophy feels compelled to embrace a perspective on God which diverges from the teaching of Scripture, their “god” is not the God of Scripture and their philosophy is not Calvinistic.
2. Relying upon Word-revelation, biblical philosophy affirms that God created the heavens and the earth and that he holds it in being in and through the power of his Word. Consequently, biblical philosophy follows Scripture when it values him as the stable ground of everything that is and when it distinguishes him sharply from the invisible and visible things of heaven and earth which rest upon this “ground.”
3. In the third place one could ask what is meant by the term “sovereignty.” One can perhaps see clearly what is meant in reference to the relationship which adheres between an absolute monarch and his subjects. When this

relationship appears among human beings it is, of course, to be rejected, since it conceptually deifies the monarch, positing him either as creator of the state 'or as son of the territorial god. Such a human sovereign formulates at law and then falsely considers himself above it. But God actually does relate to his law in this way for he in fact created the universe and in fact established his commands for its good. Our analogy not only clarifies what is meant by sovereignty, it also identifies the boundary between God and cosmos.

“The boundary between God and cosmos is the law.” For whatever stands above the law which governs the cosmos is sovereign over the cosmos, a state-of-affairs which is rightly ascribed only to the God of the Scriptures. Conversely all that belongs to the cosmos stands under God’s law and is subject to that law, hence, subject to God.

4. Given the previous discussion of sovereignty, we hardly need comment upon the phrase “over all things.” [He briefly summarises the expanse of divine sovereignty implied in A.3.]
5. We do, however, need to spend time on the phrase “in every context.”

[Modal aspects, which Vollenhoven calls functions, and their interconnections are introduced in a manner similar to Dooyeweerd]

B.

Biblical philosophy considers religion as a covenant (*unio foederalis*) which the human race came to know by Word-revelation even before the Fall.

1. With this proposition Calvinist philosophy directs itself against every attempt to conceptualise religion as a substantial or functional “rising up” of the human person “to God.” Consequently, religion is dealt with separately [from functions]. This would not make sense were one to capitulate to contemporary sensibilities for one could then identify religion with the functions previously discussed.

But why one might ask is it so important to avoid confusing religion with one of the subject functions, even with the highest (i.e., pistic) function of the human person?

An answer becomes clear as soon as we begin to investigate pistic function.

Qua function, therefore as the act of faith, the pistic unction is simply the acceptance of God’s Word-revelation or some putative equivalent. One adds the last clause, because the pistic function is also found among non-Christians. But, if one accepts this definition and simultaneously ascribes life in relationship with God to one or another human function, one ends up willy-nilly with universalism--faith, spiritual life, knowing, or whatever one wishes to term the pistic function, become emanations of divine being, crystallizations of the Logos or something similar. But precisely because this function is present in all, universalist faith in Christ and unbelief can no longer be viewed as antithetical. Such speculation leads, thus, to a relativisation of difference.

If universalism is unacceptable, maintenance of the proposition that religion is identified with a human function leads to the conclusion that the pistic function is not present among all human beings. Faith becomes, then, a *donum superadditum* that exists at a remove from most, if not all, other human functions. This line of thought leads to the utterly questionable rupturing of the connection between thought and faith.

Rome has taken a somewhat different way. It has rejected disjunction between thinking and believing and universalism, not all live with God. But Rome has also gone astray in its attempt to draw the line between thought and faith, for it attempted to define the dividing line in the position one takes vis-à-vis the authority which officeholders exercise within their ecclesiastical institutions. They stray because this position-taking, while not itself a function, locates itself upon functional terrain, for it constitutes the relationship between authority-seekers and holders within the pistic sphere. This raises the old question whether one can find an analogue to this Christian relationship among non-Christians or whether there is nothing corresponding to this “Christian” notion of religion institutionally conceived. Heretofore, study of non-Christian religions precludes answering this question. Nevertheless, to define the difference between belief and unbelief in this manner does not identify the difference clearly. Moreover, in all the above mentioned ways of construing the problem one denies that one can serve God directly in non-pistic or non-institutional functions. Consequently, wherever these perspectives dominate the lower aspects of life, quite against the thrust of Scripture are secularised, a process which is at first hardly noticeable, but one which grows ever stronger and more telling.

Now one sees that identification of religion and pistic function leads neither to its appointed end nor can it be called biblical. Consequently one ought to ask whether there is another way of understanding the term “religion.” Scripture itself points the way. For the same Scripture which denies universalism in and through its message about eternal punishment neither isolates religion from life nor identifies it, a la Rome, with the position of the laity over and against officeholders, however highly valued. Indeed, the Scriptures speak simply of “the heart” from which “the beginnings of life” flow.

This reference to the language of Proverbs 4: 23 also indicates the relationship between heart and functions. Functions are, as it were, the fields within which the human heart expresses itself. But whatever pertains to the functions viewed altogether, also pertains to the pistic function. Thus even a person’s beliefs are dependent upon the nature of that person’s heart. Consequently I have not spoken of a human being as a “pistic thing,” even though *prima facie* there appeared solid grounds for doing so.

The distinction I have just drawn between heart and faith finds support in Scripture. Anyone who knows Scripture well will acknowledge this. Indeed the same insight lies behind the traditional distinction between “vivification” and rebirth on the one hand, and conversion (inclusive of conversion within one’s faith life) on the other.

Thus, faith as a function is present in everyone. Nevertheless, a Christian’s faith refers itself to God’s Word, whereas among non-Christians faith refers itself to a surrogate. As a result, those who do not believe in

God's Word build their pseudo-knowledge upon what is ultimately a pseudo-revelation produced in the human heart in a movement analogous to the Christian's advance to knowledge out of God's Word-revelation. The unbeliever lives and dies in the final analysis in terms of a product of his or her own culture.

In contradistinction, whenever a life has been turned around by God's Spirit, whenever its central lines have been redirected toward good, whenever it has been brought to obedience *vis-à-vis* God's Word, that Word becomes progressively more important to that renewed life. And it is from this Word that one finds a determination of what religion actually is. Scripture indicates it is a "walking with God," as a "maintaining and preserving of covenant".etc.

Now this covenant is not a relationship one ought to seek within the cosmos. For the covenant is the way in which God relates to a human being and in which a human being relates to God. It is, in other words, a relationship between God who does not belong to the cosmos and a human being who does. Consequently the covenant does not exist within the cosmos. Rather it points to what is above the cosmos inasmuch as the cosmos is taken up within this relationship.

[Vollenhoven next distinguishes covenant from and relates it to genetic connection.]

C.

Concerning the human situation after the Fall, biblical philosophy accepts

- a. The total depravity of the human being
- b. death as punishment for sin, and
- c. the sovereign God's revelation of Grace in the Mediator.

1. If one has followed me to this point, he or she understands that biblical philosophy also assents to God's Word when it articulates difficult truths. In the end one gains much more from doing so than from a refusal to look reality in the face. Here too philosophy is impotent to change things. Rather its task is to try and get a firm grip on God's Word.

It is in this context that one receives the report of Scripture that the human race has been corrupted by sin. Moreover one acknowledges that death implicates not just Adam but all who are comprehended in his person. If one understands this, one cannot articulate it without it becoming as it did in St. Paul's case a groan: "for all have sinned and have fallen short of God's glory." This moan applies to every member of the human race. Moreover, sin implicates not just a part of one's existence, but rather the whole of one's life. For one's heart is untrustworthy. Indeed, it is precisely from this heart, from which flow the beginnings of life, that evil thoughts and every other sort of horrible pollution come.

It is for this reason that whenever God's grace comes between God and the human heart a struggle ensues within that heart between a hardening and a softening, between the old hate and the new love, between "flesh" (used here in the negative sense) and "spirit." There arises an antithesis which does not correspond to the distinction between "spirit and life" which modern philosophy has borrowed from its ancient counterpart.

This is an antithesis in any event that is present in the life of every human being not just in Christian life.

2. One also begins to understand what biblical thought indicates by the term “death.”

Scripture distinguishes here between two types of death, i.e., between first and second death. *Prima facie* one might think to find the same idea in ancient philosophy. Nevertheless a closer examination reveals that what seems the same is actually something quite different. For ancient philosophy took its beginning and end in the human being, or to be more specific, at least inasmuch as it wished to be religious, in human functions. For this reason, ancient philosophy considered death as a desirable divorce within the field of human function. Thus first death was viewed as a divorce between a moved body and a motor soul. Further ancient philosophy taught that in second death the higher part of the soul, now freed from the prison house of the body, leaves the lower part in the sphere of the moon so as to continue its own return to the sun. [Vollenhoven probably summarises here the Stoic views of Plutarch.]

Certainly the underlying pattern of the thought of Scripture is very different. Certainty is, according to the Scriptures, in any event not to be located in the human being, but in God. Moreover, the richest destiny which a human being can be granted is to walk in covenantal partnership with God and in so doing to enjoy the wonderfully sweet life as only a child of the Father-in-heaven can. To die, consequently, is in Scripture hardly desirable. Rather, it is something laid up for human beings as punishment for their grave trespass. This is as true of the first as of the second death. The differences between the two types of death consists principally in the fact that first death holds for all who are included in Adam whereas the second is identical to the punishment which awaits those who have not been saved by the Christ. One can see that neither this characterization of death nor the resultant distinction between first and second death, though the result of authentic religious thought, have anything to do with the pseudo-religious speculations of Plutarch. But even if one looks at the other details we considered (the divorce between body and soul for example) the Scriptures speak in a different tone from Plutarch, namely not in a functionalist way. To be sure, death is a rupture. But in the foreground one places the rupture of the tie by which human beings as living souls--(thus, even as they live whether or not as children of God) relate to their environment. In this line of thinking the shedding of the body is a secondary element which pertains only to first death; at second death the heart or soul has already been joined to the body. Moreover, the word “body” does not indicate “the animal life of the human being,” a concept which is foreign to Scripture, but rather the totality of human functions, what Paul indicates with the metaphor of a mantle.

Everything which we have said so far, argues for the conclusion that Scripture views death as a punishment. For this reason, even Paul remains in fear of (first) death. Rather than having to undergo death he preferred to see Christ return so that the path to the grave, which few believers are spared, would be replaced by a sudden transformation, a transformation he too needed to undergo. Still a double vista offers comfort to Christians who have already died. In the first place, punishment, which they undergo as children of Adam, is paired with a blessing. For though they suffer the rupture of connectedness to their environment and of the unity of life, they are also freed on two fronts from the struggle between “spirit” and “flesh” which

consumed their life. Whereas on earth evil desires flowed from their heart, their soul, now purified, comes to live with their Lord. Moreover, their body, what is in the here and now termed a “body of death” will follow shortly. It, though buried in corruption, humiliation and weakness as if a “natural” body, is just as immune to the trap of death as is its soul. This seed will rise up as a “spiritual body,” because it is associated with the Holy Spirit. One can see that the words “body” and “spiritual” are used here in such a way that one finds nothing in the joining which is contrary to the terms as Scripture uses them, and that nothing lives in our usage which originates in a thought world alien to the Scriptures.

In passing and inadvertently, I have already spoken of Grace. It is still worthwhile to consider it expressly for a while.

a. In the first place let us make a few clarifications in terminology. What is Grace? How does it relate to “nature” and to “sin.” Moreover ought one to associate this word with “field” and thus speak of “fields of Grace?”

Here also let us begin with positive explication. “Grace” means in the first instance “sign of divine favour.” In the relationship of God to sinners, therefore, one speaks of “forfeited sign of divine favour.” In this relationship Grace always proceeds from God; its opposite is neither nature, nor sin but rather “divine wrath.”

To answer the question as to the relationship which Grace has to nature or to the natural one needs to consider what one means by the word “nature.” Sometimes “kind” is indicated. In this context we speak for example concerning the Mediator and his divine and human “nature.” In other contexts the word actually means “the original.” Thus it can indicate what human beings are in Adam. Because the human race fell, human nature has become a “corrupted nature” and this state continues to exist for us only as long as God’s Spirit does not come with saving presence between God and human. In this context let us read the Pauline saying, “the natural human being does not understand the things which are of God’s Spirit.” Fortunately it does not remain at that. The people of God born again in the Spirit do understand the things which are of God’s Spirit and to them Paul also says now with respect to the relationship between their Adamic and Christian legacies, “Still, the spiritual is not first rather the natural is, then comes the spiritual.” In this sentence nature stands over and against Grace which compels it to recede. I do not want to deny that there is at this point a great danger of misunderstanding. One thinks only of Rome’s misuse of the terms “nature” and “grace” by which Rome identifies “Grace” and “the means of Grace.” One also thinks of the word play of Leibniz by which he identified grace with those human functions lacking in animals.

An accounting for the relationship between Grace and sin is terminologically less complicated than that between Grace and nature. Originally in Scripture sin meant a “missing” of one’s destiny in and through one’s trespass against God’s commands, though one remains at the same time still under the law.

Therefore, Grace in relation to sin means “forgiveness” and just as, from the divine perspective, Grace stands in opposition to wrath, from the human side, forgiven sins stand in opposition to those which still bind us, i.e., which are still reckoned to us.

There remains the question as to whether the meaning of the term “Grace” allows for speech about “fields of Grace.” In and of itself this type of language is not objectionable provided one maintains ... that this ‘field’ is identical with the creaturely and that it is called a field simply because and simply to the extent that God looks down upon the creaturely with satisfaction. This field is, then, much wider than that of the Church as a body of Christ and thus is *a fortiori* greater than the life of the Church as ecclesiastical institution. Indeed even from out of the lowliest families God gives certain persons rich gifts *vis-à-vis* the governance of the family and national life.

Calvinists have always seen this and it is this which lies behind Calvinist talk about “common grace.” The field of special Grace stand thus with respect to common grace as a life which has been reconciled with God and stands over and against life here and now which has not been reconciled with God. At least that is so inasmuch as God looks down upon his creature with favour. The distinction between “common” and “special” grace is thus completely apposite and equally the distinction between fields of grace. Danger appears then only when one associates the distinction between fields of Grace with a two-fold division of life in a single person. For in that instance one returns to the Roman perspective on nature and Grace, while depriving oneself of the chance to see this return movement because one uses Calvinistic terms which point to totally different realities. In light of this last and unfortunately not metaphorical danger it is perhaps better to speak in the spirit of Scripture of “objects” of Grace rather than of “fields.”

b. The question as to how Grace comes to a person is more important than all these questions of terminology. One can answer, “by means of the Word.” The question arises then as to what one understands by this phrase. If one associates the Word with the Word preached, one comes to identify vivifying Grace with the magic of office. One ought then to distinguish between, on the one hand, the creating and thus divine Word which preaches, which sent the prophets, which finally appears Himself and who permits his Word to be preached, and, on the other, the gospel that is preached, which, because it is meant for human beings, spoke and yet speaks of Him in human language. In other words, behind the word qua report lies the Word which in a very singular way joined itself with him who is the second Adam, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, and who despite his connection with fallen human nature, in and through his unbreakable tie with God and the consecration of the Holy Spirit, leads all those of Adam’s lost descendants whom he claims as his through every kind of opposition to their eternal destination.

Much of this was of course already known by my readers. But I could not in this context do away with a summary of the content of Scripture, because one so soon forgets these foundational ideas when one turns one’s attention to the confusing diversity of philosophical theories. Moreover many who were Calvinistic in theology have wandered from the Calvinist path in philosophy. Some have confessed for example that the whole of human nature has been corrupted but no longer see that what is meant by this confession is humanity as comprehended by its first covenantal head, or they have exchanged (without really realizing it) this meaning of the word “nature” for another in accordance with which “nature” is identified either with the sum of the lower functions or with a neo-Platonic mediating entity between a pseudo-divine primordial “simplicity” and its “particularisations.”

[A number of other possibilities are mentioned]

The sad result of all this is that in times of need when things become tense in our circles many hold themselves at arms length from scholarship and base their judgments upon an intuition which is fortunately very often healthy at its core though it lacks the help learning could have provided.

How does one account for the constant recurrence of this constellation of affairs?
In no small measure it results from the fact that one puts too much trust in contemporary philosophy and does not see the deep abyss formed by commitment and history, an abyss which separates contemporary philosophy from child-like faith.

[Just one last sentence culled from the following chapter p. 51 as if the point were not already obvious]

The first and all important question which one asks of a philosopher in order to categorise the product of his or her philosophical thought is whether or not there is room with his or her philosophy for the principle motif of biblical philosophy, i.e., for recognition of the boundary between God and cosmos.