

In Memoriam: Professor Vollenhoven

Anakainosis 1 (1978) 1, 18-20. [A M Wolters]

On June 6, 1978, Professor D. H. T. Vollenhoven, for many years (1926 - 1963) professor of philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, passed away in the Netherlands. He was 85 years old.

Vollenhoven was, together with his brother-in-law Herman Dooyeweerd, one of the two fathers of the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea, one of the most impressive achievements of the movement for an intrinsic Christian reformation of the sciences, and one which no one committed to this enterprise can afford to ignore. Vollenhoven, though as yet relatively little known in broader circles, stands as one of the intellectual giants of twentieth-century Christendom. His contribution to Christian scholarship will be a lasting one.

Vollenhoven was born in 1892, the year when the churches of the *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* (the two Calvinistic renewal movements which seceded from the Dutch state church in the nineteenth century) merged to form the *Gereformeerde* (Reformed) churches. Vollenhoven grew up in the distinctive milieu of this relatively small segment of the Dutch population. A native of Amsterdam, he attended the recently founded *gereformeerde* classical high school in that city, and then proceeded to the *gereformeerde* university there: the Free University of Amsterdam.

Intellectually, the orthodox Calvinist world in which Vollenhoven was raised was dominated by two men: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. Kuyper had founded the Free University in 1880, and for two decades was professor of theology there. But by the time Vollenhoven enrolled as a student of theology, the prodigious Kuyper had moved on to become the prime minister of the Netherlands, and his professorship had been taken over by Herman Bavinck, the greatest Reformed theologian of recent times.

The influence of Bavinck on Vollenhoven was decisive. As it happened, the year of Vollenhoven's arrival at the university (1911) was a turning point in Bavinck's life. Having completed his monumental **Reformed Dogmatics**, Bavinck devoted the last decade of his life to the application of the principles of Calvinism (which he, following Kuyper, understood to be much more than simply a theological system) to the reformation of other academic disciplines, notably psychology, paedagogy and philosophy. He was thus carrying out the program of biblical renewal which Kuyper had envisaged for the Free University.

[19] Vollenhoven followed Bavinck in his movement from theology to philosophy. After seven years under Bavinck's tutelage he had earned a baccalaureate degree in the former, and a doctor's degree in the latter. His dissertation, defended in 1918, dealt with the philosophy of mathematics from a theistic point of view.

For eight years Vollenhoven served as a pastor in the *Gereformeerde* Churches, and in 1926 was appointed to the chair of philosophy at his *alma mater*. During this period he continued his work on elaborating a distinctively Calvinistic philosophy. In the early twenties he was joined in this work by his wife's brother, Herman Dooyeweerd, a brilliant young legal theorist who had come to see the importance of philosophy for his studies in jurisprudence. Both lived in The Hague at that time, and both were appointed to the Free University in 1926.

The philosophy which Vollenhoven had begun to elaborate under Bavinck, and which was greatly enriched by the creative genius of Dooyeweerd, continued to bear the marks of Bavinck's influence, especially in the great unifying theme of salvation as the restoration of *creation*. Together with the characteristic Calvinist emphasis on God's sovereignty, and thus on his word of command (law), this creation theme led to the centrality in Vollenhoven's thought (as it had in Kuyper's and Bavinck's) of the idea of *creation ordinances*. This became a cornerstone of his philosophy, which can therefore quite appropriately be called a *cosmonomic* philosophy.

Vollenhoven's thought can thus be said to center on two fundamental ideas: the spiritual antithesis manifested in the restoration of sin-distorted creation by God's grace and the constitution of creation by God's sovereign law. This is what lies at the bottom of Vollenhoven's crucial distinction between (spiritual) direction and (creational) structure. It can be said that a good part of his philosophical achievement lies in the consistent working out and application of this fundamental categorial distinction.

It emerges from this that Vollenhoven's systematic work is of the greatest importance, despite the greater fame which Dooyeweerd enjoys, especially in English-speaking countries. Vollenhoven's systematic work is found chiefly in publications which have never been translated. We think especially of his works **The necessity of a Christian logic** (1932), **Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy** (1933), **Isagoge philosophiae** (1943) and **Fundamentals of Logic** (1948). There is an English translation of a 1931 article which contains a brief outline of his systematic conception. It is entitled "The Significance of Calvinism for the Reformation of Philosophy," and appeared in *The Evangelical Quarterly* III, pp. 387 - 403; IV pp. 128 - 160 and 389 - 427.

In later years Vollenhoven's attention was very largely absorbed by the application and refinement of the consistent problem-historical method to the history of philosophy. He developed a comprehensive typology, allowing of very fine distinctions, of the ontological conceptions of Western philosophy, from the pre-Socratic philosophers to modern operationalism and existentialism. Using this approach, he came to significant conclusions concerning the intellectual development of Plato and Aristotle, among others. A projected twelve-volume history of philosophy using this method had to be discontinued after the publication of the first volume in 1950, but Vollenhoven continued work on the method until shortly before his death.

There is much work that remains to be done in tracing the development of Vollenhoven's thought, in exploring the significance of his systematic and historical labours, and in making his insights available to the English-speaking world. But already it is clear to those who have become acquainted with him and his work, that in him the Lord has given the Christian scholarly world a man of extraordinary vision, penetration and perseverance. The lasting significance of his work will not soon be finally measured.