

2000 Prospects for a Christian Philosophy in a Shrinking World. In: Lugo, Luis E. (Ed.) **Religion, Pluralism and Public Life. Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-first Century.** Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, pp. 221 - 242.

PROSPECTS FOR A CHRISTIAN SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY IN A SHRINKING WORLD

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Abstract

Postmodern society is a "transparent society". It is a society that can be characterized by the implosion of boundaries - "see through" boundaries - both in society and in the sciences of society. This is partially the result of processes of globalisation and de-differentiation that have given rise to pluralism, diversity and fragmentation with relativism as its apparent inevitable consequence.

This state of affairs is not regarded as a problem in need of explanation by all schools of thought in social scientific disciplines. Yet, there are also various approaches to the phenomena so characteristic of what has become known as "post-modernity" that do attempt to give some account of what has transpired in our postmodern society. In all these accounts the pivotal notion of "social order" - the contemporary version of the "boundary" issue - is central. What exactly constitutes social order or the lack thereof varies in different accounts. But, what seems to characterize these diverse attempts is their rejection of foundationalism and essentialism in both science and society and their choice for the grounding of social order in human rationality, reality or pure social construction and social convention.

Solutions to these developments are sought in various avenues: many declare the so called "boundary issue" to be a non-issue and opt for some form of relativism. Others attempt to localize the boundaries in human construction. Positions that acknowledge the presence of pluralism and diversity are tempted by the two extremes of "wild pluralism" on the one hand or the reification of boundaries on the other hand.

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Does the legacy of Kuyper and the Reformational tradition have anything to say to this state of affairs? The Kuyperian notion of "boundaries" with its emphasis on the intrinsic relationship between faith in God and the recognition of and obedience to these boundaries provides an understanding of "see through" boundaries that does not lead to relativism or reification of boundaries but emphasizes their relationality. The South African experience has proven that neither the reification of boundaries nor the obliteration of boundaries is the way of reconciliation, but relativizing these boundaries through relating them to God, the Creator of the boundaries and the Redeemer in whom all boundaries are not obliterated, but lose their decisive significance.

The emphasis on the notion of boundaries - in Social Philosophy for order, structure, law in the sense described above -is not an arbitrary choice for a Biblical theme. It does not exclude other emphases such as stewardship, compassion, justice, peace, etc. God's law for His creation also calls us to the recognition of the interconnectedness and coherence of the diversity and multiplicity of reality - **sphere universality**. This is what constitutes "see through" boundaries in the Biblical sense of the word.

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Of light and limits: Transparent boundaries

Fundamental changes in society, radical shifts in the theoretical and philosophical accounts of the nature of society and radical constructivism in epistemology characterize the landscape in which the Christian social philosopher needs to chart a course today. It is a hazardous task, filled with the need to clear epistemological debris from the past and negotiate obstacles posed both by developments in the social sciences, dynamic societal developments and the limitations of available Christian philosophical and epistemological tools. Limited because the Kuyperian and Dooyeweerdian social philosophy¹ addressed the societal issues of a different time and different place. And yet, I believe that Kuyper's magisterial vision of the Kingship of Christ, *Pro Rege* and Herman Dooyeweerd's articulation of this insight in his Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea, is as relevant and real today as it was at the time Kuyper formulated it. Although Abraham Kuyper's legacy in social philosophy has primarily been identified with his articulation of the notion of "sphere sovereignty", his social philosophy was far more comprehensive than only this notion. His theology, philosophy and epistemology were deeply embedded in his

¹ In this paper I shall refer to the social philosophy developed by Kuyper and further

understanding of the *antithesis*² and *common grace* and thoroughly permeated by the pervasive presence of Scholastic elements which were perhaps most apparent in his distinction between the *organic* and the *mechanical*. This distinction did not only surface in his epistemology, but also in his ontology and social philosophy.

In his address at the occasion of the transferral of the presidency of the Free University in 1892 - "**Verflauwing der grenzen**" Kuyper relates faith in God very closely to the preservation or obliteration of boundaries and to the recognition of and the obedience to these boundaries. This notion of boundary ("unchangeable law of its existence", [Kuyper, 1931:53]) was at the heart of his Stone lectures in Princeton in 1898. It was the recognition of God's sovereign rule over His creation articulated in the now well known philosophical insight of **sphere sovereignty**.³

The Kuyperian legacy has provided Christian social philosophy with a number of Biblical basics for the first embryonic seeds

articulated by Dooyeweerd as "Reformational Social Philosophy"

² I am referring to Kuyper's emphasis on two scientific systems (Kuyper, 1931: 133) brought about by the antithesis which rules out agreement between Normalists and Abnormalists because of the "... undeniable difference which distinguishes the self-consciousness of the one from that of the other" (Kuyper, 1931: 138 and Kuyper, 1980:156, 603). Dooyeweerd too, acknowledged that the idea of the antithesis was central Kuyper's understanding of Christian scholarship. Cf. Dooyeweerd, 1937:63.

³ This was too, by Dooyeweerd's own recognition, the central notion in the development of his philosophy (1937:64). Already in the first version of Dooyeweerd's **De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee** (Vol 1:10) he too refers to sphere sovereignty which he claims functions "...midden in de onscheidbare eenheid van het wettensorganismen van den kosmos.." (within the indivisible unity of the law organism of the cosmos). This notion, most probably taken over from Kuyper is later replaced by Dooyeweerd's idea of the *totality of meaning*, one of the three transcendental ground ideas of reality and society (**New Critique**, III:168,9) which form the key to Dooyeweerd's philosophy and to his Christian social philosophy.

of a Christian philosophy as it later was developed by Herman Dooyeweerd.

Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophy already addressed many of the issues at the core of the contemporary dynamic developments in both science and society at a point in time when most other philosophers and philosophical systems had not yet fully taken critical distance from the basic epistemological and societal assumptions embedded in modernity. His new critique of theoretical thought opened the door to the recognition of the presence of religiously grounded philosophical presuppositions (Groundideas) in all views of reality and society and theoretical knowledge of the world. Central to Dooyeweerd's recognition of the role and presence of such a groundidea in all theorizing was the pivotal Biblical notion of the God ordained *creation order, structure or law*. This is an insight Dooyeweerd shared with Kuyper (1931:70):

"...all created life necessarily bears in itself a law for its existence, instituted by God Himself".

The practical legacy of this social philosophy has been the now familiar theory of *confessional and structural pluralism* so characteristic of societies organized according to the insights of the Reformational tradition. Keeping in mind that the rudiments of the Reformational social philosophy were developed to address cultural and historical circumstances greatly at variance with those prevalent in contemporary society, the question arises whether the contours of this social philosophy can accommodate the sophisticated epistemological and societal challenges of a postmodern age. It was the majestic

Reformational legacy of the Scriptural understanding of God's law and its integral relationship to the meaning (i.e. religious) character of reality, that made it possible to gain insight into the ever present philosophical temptation to reductionism and the absolutization of some dimension of reality. Yet, it is also the interpretation of this notion of order or law that has been the subject of strong differences of opinion in recent discussions in Reformational Philosophy⁴.

I THE SHRINKING WORLD WITH 'SEE-THROUGH' BOUNDARIES

Boundaries in flux

A perfunctory look at trends in the social sciences, sociology and social philosophy reveal the pervasive presence of the theme of **the implosion of boundaries** (Baker, 1993:130; cf also Kellner, 1988:242) that have become characteristic of postmodernity⁵. But changes in the way the world is viewed has not only been brought about by societal developments and the theoretical disciplines interested in these dynamics, a far deeper, more profound change has taken place both in society and the nature of our knowledge about the world. We have started questioning the existence of boundaries of society and knowledge and have rejected any recognition of foundations and essences. The "shrinking world" does not only designate changes in the texture of society, but also fundamental changes to the texture of our knowledge of the world.

Parallel to these societal trends are developments in

⁴Cf. **The Ethos of compassion** discussions at the 25th anniversary of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, 1992.

⁵The theme of "boundaries" also intrigued the founders of the Reformational movement, but their emphasis was the God given and God ordained nature of boundaries that limited and constrained human life (Kuyper, 1892; Dooyeweerd, 1953; Henderson, 1994).

various disciplines in which three claims have surfaced that point to a simultaneous *inflation and deflation of "the (reality of the) social..."*.

The **first** is the rejection of *foundationalism* and *essentialism* (Young, 1990:35).

The **second** is the claim that reality is a mere "social construct" This is a claim made by radical constructivists and constructionists who claim that all knowledge is socially constructed (Berger and Luckman; Gergen, Collins, Brown, 1984:3-40).

The **third** is the claim of some postmodern theorists (Baudrillard) that this constructed social reality represents the "end of the social". This notion is closely related to the disappearance and systematic obliteration of the notion of "nature" from postmodern vocabulary.

All three these claims are inextricably related to the pivotal notion of *social order (or boundaries and constraints)* and are also reflected in the boundary flux (Kellner, 1988:241) of the social sciences and the multiplicity of perspectives proliferated by the social scientific disciplines and the pluralistic fragmentation of society.

When postmodernity is approached via developments in epistemology and knowledge it provides a different image to that which surfaces when the social and cultural dynamics characterizing societal developments in the modern world are the point of entry. If one chooses the former approach fragmentation, disintegration, pluralism, the decentering of the subject and relativism are the images that come into focus. When the latter approach is chosen the image of a world characterized

by globalisation and internationalization appears, processes that have contributed to the creation of the world being experienced as a global village. Uncovered by both approaches is the postmodern image of the disintegrating world and worldview, a world that has fragmented into a plurality of local and regional worlds often without much contact or actual understanding of other "worlds", and yet, a world far more global in its selfunderstanding than in any previous age. "World" here indicates both the reality of societal developments and the images (paradigms) created of this reality developed by the disciplines that reflect on the nature of the world and events in it.

These processes of **radical de - differentiation**⁶ in society are not only spatial, or geographical but indicate a fundamental change in the texture of society. It refers to the breakdown of barriers and the redrawing of boundaries brought about by processes of globalisation (Lash, 1990:11) in society and its corollary developments in the disciplines. This equivocal sense of the notion of "boundaries" is reflected in the last part of the title of this paper *The shrinking world*. Perhaps this can best be described as a world with "see-through" boundaries; a world characterized by **globalisation**.

Globalisation is one of the fundamental consequences of modernity (Giddens, 1990:175) - a process of uneven development that fragments as it coordinates. It is more than "... a diffusion of Western institutions across the world, in which other cultures are crushed". It introduces new forms of world interdependence, Giddens⁷ claims in which there are no "others".

Modernity is inherently globalising, a process defined by

⁶ Baker 1993:130 labels the whole gamut of developments otherwise signified as "post-modern" with the term "de - differentiation in perspective".

⁷ Giddens (1990: 71) distinguishes 4 dimensions of globalisation: the nation-state system, the world capitalist economy, the world military order and the international division of labour. Behind all four of these dimensions lie mechanized technologies of communication (199:77). The postmodern order is characterized by multi-layered democratic participation, the post scarcity system, demilitarisation and the humanisation of the technology (1990:164). These developments represent a fundamental shift from the industrial society - a society based on capital and labour - to one in which theoretical knowledge and information became the basis of society and consumerism and communication became central phenomena. Central too in the sense of having global effects. Consumer freedom and conduct has replaced work as the link holding individuals together in society (Bauman, 1988:807). We are dealing with what is being called a "risk society" - risks escalating and becoming more global in scope and intersecting routinely with our daily lives, e.g. global warming, (Lyon, 1997:108).

Giddens (1990: 63,64) ⁸ as

"... the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa This is a dialectical process because such local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanced relations that shape them".

He (1990:64) says globalisation is "...the stretching process" in which the level of time-space distanciation is much higher than in any previous period in so far as the modes of connection between different social contexts or regions become networked across the earth's surface as a whole.

The puzzling question is how this process of globalisation ties into the fragmentation and pluralisation of culture which is emphasized so strongly by postmodernists. Young's (1990) analysis of what he calls the "antinomies of postmodernism" sheds some light on this question. He (Young,1990:26) identifies two such antinomies:

* The binary opposition between globalisation which brings about both homogeneity and standardization, universal commodification and commercialization and simultaneously

" ... the most imperceptible of displacements, to reemerge as the rich oil-smear sheen of absolute diversity and of the most unimaginable and unclassifiable forms of human freedom" (Young, 1990:32).

⁸ There are also views of globalisation that argue that it does not signal "...the erasure of local difference, but in a strange way its converse, it revalidates and reconstitutes place, locality and differences" (Watts, 1991:10).

* The second antinomy is the binary opposition between "Nature" and "the urban". There is no "nature" left, only humanly constructed "culture" (Cf also Lash, 1988:333). So globalisation is accompanied by both homogeneity and heterogeneity and pluralism.

But the disappearance of "Nature" as the result of humanly constructed culture has not succeeded in erasing the "concept of 'nature'" from the vocabulary of science, social science and society. It is the *reality of the "concept of nature"* which remains the ephemeral and elusive chimera lurking in the background of postmodern⁹ discussions about issues in both society and science. Both modernity and postmodernity have led to a fundamental change in the *plausibility structures* (Berger) of Western society one of the most crucial changes being a change of belief in the existence of a fixed order and eternal laws brought about by the questions generated by science (Young, 1990:7). Young (1990:7) says: "If we want order, now we must ask ourselves, what kind of order do we want; there are no unchanging structures in science and society after which we must strive". He continues:

"In such an unstable, uncertain world there is much to trouble one. There is the absence of all laws, rules, norms, principles, and coherent connections between the

⁹ The distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism is drawn differently by various authors. Lyon (1994:7) distinguishes between postmodernity as being social whereas postmodernism denoting cultural and intellectual phenomena. The culture of postmodernism is taken to be evidence of linked social shifts, referred to as postmodernity (p.70). There are differences of opinion about the exact origin of what has come to be known as Modernity. Some authors trace its roots to the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century, others to the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, some even earlier (Walsh and Middleton, 1995:14). Diverse thinkers are identified as key figures in the origin of the dominant notions that characterize the philosophical landscape of Modernity. Descartes, is credited (or blamed!) for succinctly formulating what has become the centrepiece of what Peter Berger (1979:17) calls the "plausibility structure" of the modern world view: the human self and reason as starting point and the foundation for certainty, truth and morality (Bolt, 1993:52,3). A plausibility structure is a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within a specific society

runs of human behaviour as between the regularities in the physical world".

And yet, it is exactly the preoccupation with this basic question which is at the heart of postmodernism as intellectual phenomenon. It is a preoccupation which becomes apparent in the forsaking of **foundationalism** in philosophy of science - the view that science is built on a firm base of observable facts - and the rejection of **essentialism** - the notion that there are universal and constant essentialia characteristic of reality. This leads to a the collapse of hierarchies of knowledge in the interest of the local rather than the universal (Fraser and Nicholson, 1988; cf. Hesse and Rorty, 1987).

This cursory glance at developments in both society and in the disciplines interested in these developments reveal a world in which the notion of boundaries have become more and more transparent - "see-through". And yet, postmodern social science and social philosophy are characterized by theoretical positions that simultaneously claim knowledge of the world is "nothing-but-social"¹⁰. This disillusionment with and the failure of the Enlightenment project has brought the "social" even more acutely to the fore. This emphasis on "the social.." seems to be one of the marked peculiarities of the postmodern age.

II ALL IS SOCIAL ... YET, THE END OF THE SOCIAL?

The "flimsiness" of reality

What is ironic about trends in postmodernism is the fact that at the point in time when the social character of human knowledge formation became a central emphasis in epistemology

¹⁰ A phrase coined by Donald Mackay "nothing-buttery". Mackay, 1974.

and philosophy of science, some theoreticians in the social sciences gave up on the reality of the social! This is Young (1994:38) says "...a move than can be seen gradually to emerge in philosophical modernism ... that something could be achieved if one could travel light, leave those suitcases behind, do without the cumbersome foreign bodies of our inherited or unconscious presuppositions..." This inevitably leads to ontological insecurity and epistemological doubt.

Socially constructed foundationless edifices

In philosophy of science - the litmus test of developments in the disciplines - the **Historicistic Turn** (represented by Hanson, Toulmin, Polanyi, Kuhn, Feyerabend et al), with its emphasis on the dynamic and changing nature of scientific language and world views (cf. Kisiel, 1974; Shapere, 1966) led to **The Sociological turn**¹¹ in epistemology (Brown, 1984:3-40). The Sociological Turn can perhaps be seen as one of the most extreme outcomes of the erosion of foundationalism. This trend with its emphasis on the role of the community of practitioners of science, was drawn to an extreme by Harry Collins' (1985) constructivism in his so called **Empirical Programme of Relativism**. His EPR (1985:6), is an example of a constructivist position in which the order in reality is ultimately ascribed to human construction. Collins (1985:148) argues the natural world has small or nonexistent role in the construction of scientific knowledge, but concludes that because of the fact that there are groups, societies and cultures, therefore there must be large scale uniformities of perception and meaning (1985:5).

¹¹ **The Strong Programme of Sociology of Knowledge of the Edinburgh School** which argues that 'epistemic factors are actually social factors', a position exemplified by Bloor is

Another example of such an extreme and radical sociological interpretation of the nature of our knowledge of the world is that of Kenneth Gergen ¹² He says: Constructionism does not grant either "mind" or "world" ontological status. Both mind and world are constituents of social practice. Social constructionism traces the sources of human action to relationships and the very understanding of 'individual functioning' to communal interchange. Gergen states: "...constructionism is ontologically mute..." (Gergen, 1994:72). He says: "In the end one must be suspicious of all attempts to establish *fundamental* ontologies - incorrigible inventories of the *real*. (Gergen, 1994: 75)

Although most of the idealist, nominalist and instrumentalist approaches in the contemporary debates

qualified as "extreme externalism" by Niiniluoto (1991:139).

¹²Gergen distinguishes constructionism from constructivism.

I have just lumped a number of approaches together under the rubric of constructivism. Obviously exponents of the traditional Sociology of Knowledge (Mannheim et al) and contemporary schools of thought present in the "Sociological Turn" have different points of entry to the epistemological questions and also differing answers to issues of realism. In the relevant literature there is a difference between constructivism and constructionism.

Kenneth Gergen claims

"...Berger and Luckman's 1966 classic work, **The Social Construction of Reality** is a constructionist icon. It's emphasis on the relativity of perspectives, the linking of individual perspectives to social process, and the reification through language continue to play a major role in constructionist dialogues".

He says: The constructivist literatures are congenial with social constructionism in two important aspects:

- * their emphasis on the constructed nature of knowledge
- * their common suspicion about foundationalist warrants for empirical science
- * they both challenge the traditional notion that an individual mind is a device that reflect the character and conditions of an independent world. (Gergen says is remains lodged in the tradition of Western individualism)

concerning realism and specifically scientific realism in philosophy of science, choose a common denominator in the language, community or tradition of the subject, the issue at stake in the various debates pertains to the question whether there is an independent or objective reality, some universal or 'natural kinds' that can be approximated or articulated in our scientific theories or our statements about the world. And I would like to argue that it is exactly this issue which constituted the core of Kuyper's social philosophy and which in spite of its contamination with Scholastic or Romanticist overtones is still useful to point us to

"..Christ (who) has swept away the dust with which man's sinful limitations had covered up this world-order, and has made it glitter again in its original brilliancy. Verily Christ, and He alone, has disclosed to us the eternal love of Christ which was, from the beginning, the moving principle of this world-order" (Kuyper, 1931:71).

Sphere sovereignty was the recognition of God's sovereign authority over all societal relationships and a constant reminder pointing to the invisible reality of the Presence of the Omnipresent Sovereign Lord.

III SEE THROUGH BOUNDARIES... PROSPECTS FOR A CHRISTIAN SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY?

Recognizing wholeness

Prolific proposals for possible solutions to the challenges posed by "the shrinking world" oscillate between those that give up on the notion of order, nature, reality and choose for the constructivist project with its moorings in some dimension of "the social" and those who seek to redefine the nature and

content of order in order to overcome the impasse caused by postmodernism. Remarkably there are strong voices that emphasize the need to recognize that order can be commensurate with plurality, multivocality and multidimensionality.

One approach to the question concerning the nature of 'reality' seeks to redefine the nature of reality in order to reflect its multiplicity and plurality and also the integral coherence of the world. An exponent of such an approach is Bohm (1980) who proposes a view of a multidimensional reality which introduces the notion of the *implicate order* in which any element contains within in itself the totality of the universe, including both matter and consciousness. This view has overtones of the familiar Reformational notion of a real world characterized by both sphere sovereignty (diversity) and sphere universality (coherence). **Metaphoricity and multiplicity**

In epistemological approaches to the challenges of pluralism and multiple perspectives, Leddy's (1986) closer analysis of the nature of metaphor has led to the insight that human knowledge, human cognitive abilities and reality itself are "metaphorical" and that this forces us to acknowledge the multidimensionality of reality. These essences, he claims, are not merely discovered, they are also constructed and are "... patterns in the world-as-experienced".

Baptising "the social"?

Christian social theorists like Lyon and Jennings (1997) have also grappled with the need for a Christian answer to the challenges posed by postmodern social science and society. Lyon proposes to speak to the postmodern dilemmas and ambiguities of person and planet by retrieving the Jewish and Christian notions

of *creation and providence and suffering* - a notion given high profile in Bauman's work. So in stead of the Enlightenment ideal of progress brought about by the rational efforts of enlightened science, Lyons highlights the eschatological expectation of the renewal of the earth. Jennings (1997:118, 119) on the other hand argues for the resurrection of theology as "scandalous eschatological discourse" and the baptism of sociology and says: "We of course should press for a Christian theological discourse upon the social". This would enable sociologists to name societal evil as such and to exorcise this evil. Jennings acknowledges that knowledge has power embedded in it and the "baptism" of knowledge requires that it be liberated from its oppressive potential to distort the reality in which we live and to become instruments of liberation from evil. Lyon's (1997) narrative, Jennings argues, must be augmented by: "... the place of reading in grasping the social text, the place of knowledge in recognizing what is to be read, and the place of hermeneutics of retrieval in the larger scheme of things". Hermeneutics of the text - the text of reality and the text of the social world - require a prayerful "reading" and exegesis, one that will actually uncover the nature of "the real". This, Jennings says, can only be done where Christians have captured the secret of Christian community. Where do these proposals leave/lead the project of this paper?

A call to order

If it is true that our world is providentially upheld by God's constant and reliable law order and that "ideals of natural order" (to use a much used phrase in philosophy of science) are basic to our everyday understanding of the world

and basic to the groundidea that informs all our disciplinary endeavours, then the kaleidoscopic opening up of a multiplicity of dimensions of the world, society and the disciplines need not be any source of concern, need not necessarily lead to relativism. It becomes a source of concern when the only anchor we claim to have for our knowledge of and being in the world are our own constructions.

To the extent that theorizing is rooted in the Biblical narrative about God's covenantal love for His world and His gift and call to all His creatures to obey Him, it will produce perspectives that shed light on the path of scholarship and are conducive to growth of insight into the nature of social reality and human relationships. But, what does this actually mean in the praxis of theorizing and philosophizing about a fragmented-yet-globalised world and a plurality of world views and "worlds" ? A world in which the basic belief in a transcendent guarantor of ontological security and epistemological trust has been seriously fractured?

Nicholas Wolterstorff's (1983;1984;1988) attempts at answering these questions¹³ have elaborated central themes of the Gospel and situated them in the midst of contemporary societal issues. Proposals to resurrect the notion of *care* (Lyons and Goudzwaard) and an *ethos of compassion* (Hart) in social relations or to seek *justice and peace* (Wolterstorff) are augmented by suggestions to replace the epistemological stalemates posed by naive realism and radical constructivism with an epistemology of *stewardship which emphasizes gift and*

¹³ **Reason within the bounds of Religion, and Until justice and peace embrace**, deal with both epistemological and social articulations of this central question.

call (Walsh and Middleton, 1995:167 -171), i.e. a relational epistemology "...committed to respecting the other, attending to how the other discloses itself to us" (1995:168/9).¹⁴ or to replace the idea of knowledge as power and knowledge as control with the understanding of knowledge as "*intimacy*" for us to come to know and love others (Jennings, 1997:124). *Knowledge with love* he says will mean the transformation of the current symmetries of production, reproduction, and arrangement of knowledge. These worthy proposals have one refrain in common, a return to the very concrete claims of Scripture on the way society is structured and also on the way we form knowledge and theories of social reality.

Why choose for the one dimension and not for the other I pondered? Why emphasize love, or compassion, or community or intimacy or care or justice or peace? Do they not all have to come into the full orb of our daily lives in obedience to the Lord? Why privilege the one Biblical emphasis over the other? Moreover do all these Biblical emphases not also require philosophical articulation in order to become fruitful in the enterprise of the academy? Whether Henk Hart's criticism of Dooyeweerd's concept of law is justified or not, I think he opened our eyes to the need to recognize the multivalency of God's law, the multidimensionality of its validity ("gelding"). Is this perhaps an element we have in common with postmodern insights into the pluralistic nature of the world we live in and the wide spectrum of possible ways of coming to grips with (knowing - i.e. "being gripped by...") God's law. As mentioned

¹⁴ This reminds of the South African philosopher H.G. Stoker's notion of "fanerosis". He advocates an epistemology which recognizes the intrinsic revelational (fanerotic) character of

above it seems as if the correlate of the notion of sphere sovereignty, *sphere universality* (Cf. Dooyeweerd, H. 1979: 44,58), is now the notion which needs to be emphasized in order to address many of the problems raised by the discussions in the social sciences.

I do not believe that the emphasis on or recognition of law, order or structure is in any way an arbitrary choice of a Biblical theme or metaphor. Nor do I believe that singling out this notion amongst other Biblical notions is contrary to Biblical calls to justice, shalom, care, stewardship, intimacy, love or community. It is also not merely one possible alternative choice from an array of possible Biblical emphases. A Christian social philosophy adequate to the challenges posed by a shrinking world will have to be one that recognizes the centrality of this notion in its articulation of a Scripturally directed philosophy. This will require a full orbbed and nuanced understanding and application of what it is that constitutes the notion of "order", "law" or structure. Not only should it highlight boundaries as limits - so richly expressed in the notion of **sphere sovereignty** - but it should also highlight the multiplicity, the multivalence, the potential rich coherence-in-diversity of God's world embedded in His law - an insight accommodated by the notion of **sphere universality**. Recognizing the multiplicity, plurality and multivocity of nature, society and reality and also of the rich plurality of perspectives and possible epistemological and hermeneutical approaches that this facilitates, is the obverse dimension of sphere sovereignty,

reality.

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viz. *interconnectedness or coherence*¹⁵. It is this tenet in conjunction with the recognition of humankind's role in the positive formation of these God-given norms that will enable a Christian philosophy to enter into dialogue with those proponents of postmodernism in contemporary society who claim that fragmentation and pluralism is the inevitable end product of a shrinking world. It is the recognition of the human response to norms in which they are given a positive and concrete shape and form in the course of historical development. This is the element of truth in most constructivist approaches. It is true that the uncovering of the rich diversity of God's Word for the dimensions, facets and aspects of the world and of the concrete societal structures are dependent upon the existence of "interpretative communities" and traditions who respond to the dynamic, universal order for God's creation. These responses lead to differentiation of society. A view in which this is recognized does justice to the dynamic and changing traits of postmodern society and science and also to human involvement in these processes. It also recognizes that these changing realities are not mere constructions or products of society or merely constituted by discourse or a figment of the collective postmodern mind, but are dependent upon the reliability of God's providential laws. This is the "reality check" required to counteract the questions raised by the prevalent "hermeneutics of suspicion". This will cut through any false oppositions between the so called objectivist emphasis on stable and constant order guaranteed by human rationality and

¹⁵*Kuyper's understanding of the interconnectedness of things was strongly embedded in his organicist cosmology. He speaks about the "...organic interconnection of the Universe..."*

the free floating free-for-all relativism where anything goes, a position that seems to be the consequence of most postmodern theories about society. It is the questioning of the existence of transcendental notions of order which is at the heart of the radicalisation of Modernity. These boundaries are not arbitrary, they are not relativistic, but they are relative, i.e. related to Him who is the Ultimate. They point to a Creator whose invisible power is actually visible to all. They are see-through boundaries that help us understand the transparency of God's love, His providential care and the utter reliability of His Word.

In postmodernism philosophy finds itself not only at the end of an age but it also signals a turning point in the "turns"¹⁶ However, this development is not the essence of darkness, to use a metaphor the postmodernists would be loathe to accept, it is instead the culmination of a historical process in which we have allowed human intellectual arrogance to eclipse the clear and lucid light of God's revelation in His creation and in Scripture which proclaims that God is the Lawgiver and not our reason, senses, language or social community, how tempting this might be to believe... and how tempted we are to allow these derailing insights uncritically to inform our theorizing and our educational stories. Whether either Kuyper or his later Reformational followers was able to fully escape the seduction of the Enlightenment's fascination with the abilities of human reason is open to discussion¹⁷. They were

(1976:115).

¹⁶Cf. Botha, 1994.

¹⁷ As Dooyeweerd accused Kuyper of a fascination with Kantian epistemological notions, so Hart is accusing Dooyeweerd's philosophy of harbouring elements of the rationalistic tradition.

gripped by the deep conviction that society and the social can only be understood within the parameters of the Biblical understanding of God's utterly reliable rainbow covenant with humanity and His faithful grace - full and merci - full covenantal rule of reality through His law. Taking these central Biblical precepts seriously in social theory ought to be sufficient incentive to revitalise the flagging and vacuous understanding of "the social" and provide prospects for a Christian social philosophy.

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