

## DOOYEWEERD'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS GROUND MOTIVES: A FEW IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY AND SCHOLARSHIP

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**ABSTRACT.** The first part of the article surveys the theory of “religious ground motives” elaborated by Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), a Dutch Calvinist philosopher and founder of the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea. The main tenets of the theory are highlighted and a few articulations and amendments proposed by adherents to this philosophical school are discussed. The second part provides a few reflections on particular aspects or implications of this theory which I consider relevant for Christian scholarship. Themes like the nature of religion, the dangers of “synthesis” the dialogue between “rival” types of scholarship and the evaluation of alternative theories are explored.

**Key words:** *Herman Dooyeweerd/ religious ground motives/ philosophy of religion/ science and religion / Christian scholarship/ dialogue and opposition in scholarship*

### 1. Introductory notes

Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) is a Dutch Christian philosopher who initiated (together with D.H.Th. Vollenhoven) what is currently known as the “reformational” school of philosophy. This philosophical trend can be regarded as the finest product of neo-Calvinist scholarship<sup>1</sup> and is nowadays well represented by several institutions, organizations and individuals in all continents. Dooyeweerd worked in the line of Abraham Kuyper, a well known Dutch statesman and Christian leader who founded the Free University of Amsterdam, a political party, and several other Christian-reformed organizations in the Netherlands.

In this article I am going to briefly introduce Dooyeweerd’s theory of “ground motives” and afterwards discuss a few implications of this theory which I would consider particularly stimulating for contemporary debates concerning the nature of (and sound strategies for) Christian philosophy and scholarship. Although my knowledge of the Romanian context is rather limited, I have realized that Dooyeweerd’s

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term scholarship to indicate all academic disciplines, sometimes distinguished as natural sciences and humanities.

philosophy has been increasingly explored in Hungarian Christian (especially reformed) circles and educational institutions. My hope is that reformational philosophy may gradually become known in other Eastern European countries. The themes discussed in this article are obviously important for Christian scholars but can be considered relevant also from other philosophical points of view.

## 2. Dooyeweerd's theory of religious ground motives

### 2.1 A basic presentation

Dooyeweerd considers the "discovery" of religious ground motives as the "turning point" of his philosophical career. In a philosophical context impregnated by the "dogma" of the autonomy of theoretical reason, he realized that rationality is always-already linked to the "I" of the thinker, the agent of theoretical reflection. Rationality is therefore shaped not only by structural givens and constraints but also by presuppositions which are the result of "religious" commitments.

It is necessary to explain what Dooyeweerd means by "religion". In his view religion is "the innate impulse of the human selfhood to direct itself toward the true or toward a pretended absolute Origin of all temporal diversity of meaning which it finds focused concentrically in itself".<sup>2</sup> In this category he includes, therefore, not only the "classical" religions like Christianity or Islam, but all belief-systems and interpretations of the world, including the secular, agnostic or atheistic ones. Religion is therefore a structural trait of being human: only the direction or the content can differ from person to person, while the basic structure remains the same for all.

From this point of view it is not possible, therefore, to speak of "religious and non-religious" people (or scholars). One can rather speak of what people do or don't believe. Some religions do not recognise sacred books, temples, prayers or even gods, yet they remain religions. Concerning the atheist, knowing what one does not believe does not exclude religious belief, just as knowing what a vegetarian does not eat does not imply that he doesn't eat any food at all. The common denominator of all religions lies in the identification of someone or something *independent* from anything else and on whom/which everything else depends. Clouser has recently argued this thesis in details and the interested reader is referred to his text.<sup>3</sup>

Dooyeweerd, however, did not limit himself to a *proclamation* that the non-religious scholar does not exist. He provided a thorough analysis of Western culture and scholarship aimed at demonstrating that a few specific ground motives shaped Western culture and scholarship in all its departments. The 2.000 pages of his opus magnum, *A new critique of theoretical thought*, constitute the most complete

<sup>2</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A new critique of theoretical thought*, 4 volumes, Jordan Station - ON, Paideia Press, 1984, vol. 1, p. 57. Dooyeweerd uses the word "meaning" as a technical term indicating the whole of created reality. Creation is therefore *meaning* in distinction from God who is "being".

<sup>3</sup> R.A. Clouser, *The myth of religious neutrality: an essay on the hidden role of religious belief in theories*, Revised edition, Notre Dame - In., University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.

exposition of his thesis. As it would be impossible to discuss his analysis in detail, I will just briefly mention the ground motives which he identified and explain how their shaping of concrete scholarship is made possible through the medium of *cosmonomic ideas*.

Dooyeweerd identified five major ground motives operating in Western history:

- 1) The **form-matter** motive of Greek culture
- 2) The **power-law** motive of Roman culture
- 3) The biblical motive of **creation-fall-redemption**
- 4) The scholastic-medieval motive of **nature and grace**
- 5) The humanist **nature-freedom** motive

Their influence on scholarship and science is channelled through a cosmonomic (or transcendental) idea. The latter may be regarded as a threefold *answer* to a threefold question concerning 1) the origin of meaning, 2) the unity (or multiplicity) of meaning and 3) the relation of coherence and diversity between the different aspects of created reality.<sup>4</sup> The three questions are inter-related. According to Dooyeweerd, acceptance of a unique Origin of all meaning (or e.g. of two original principles opposed to each other) determines whether one accepts or not (see second question) the integral unity of meaning at the root of the modal aspects. And the answer given to the second question determines in turn how one understands the mutual relation and coherence of meaning among the modal aspects.<sup>5</sup>

At this point it might be helpful to try to identify a few of the main characteristics of religious ground motives. Runia and Choi<sup>6</sup> agree on the following points. Ground motives are pre-theoretical in nature (and difficult to grasp by theoretical analysis). Although they have much to do with scientific theorising they should not be confused with the academic or scientific results that they might inspire, shape or help achieving. They remain non-theoretical in nature. Secondly, ground motives display a “spiritual” *dunamis*. In other terms, they are not simply words, ideas or even beliefs. They are *motifs*, ideals capturing the hearts and minds of people in a certain time and shaping their cultural endeavours in particular ways. This implies that each ground motive undergoes dynamic development, and is not a static “paradigm” in the sense of a model to be perpetuated.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, ground motives are “communal”, not

<sup>4</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A new critique*, vol. 1, p. 93-102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> W.Y. Choi, *Dialogue and antithesis: a philosophical study on the significance of Herman Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique*, Potchefstroom, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, (Thesis - Ph.D.), 1999, p. 31-32. See also D.T. Runia, “Dooyeweerd, Bos and the grondmotief of Greek culture”, in *Philosophia reformata*, LIV (1989/2) p. 162-163.

<sup>7</sup> In *Dialogue and antithesis*, p. 28, Choi observes that the (Dutch) terms used by Dooyeweerd to indicate ground motives became gradually more “dynamic”. Initially he occasionally used “ground theme” and “scheme”, yet since 1949 he adopted “ground motive”. This choice, together with the subsequent occasional use of “central driving force” and “dunamis” (1958) shows his intention of expressing the dynamic character of ground motives.

only individual: they are shared and transmitted by a group of people. As I said, they capture the “hearts and minds” of entire communities (sometimes for decades and even centuries) and this is how they are enabled to support considerable cultural achievements.

Nevertheless, one may say that ground motives “operate” according to certain patterns, or exhibit similar features in their shaping of cultures. This will be the topic of the next section.

## ***2.2 Deepening the analysis***

One may notice that the ground motives of Western culture (with the only exception of the biblical ground motive) are constituted by two “poles” (e.g. nature and freedom). According to Dooyeweerd such poles are in conflict between them or in some sort of dialectical tension. In some cases the initial tension becomes open conflict as a certain civilisation develops and refines its cultural achievements.

We may take the humanist ground motive as example. The poles of nature and freedom are respectively related to the “ideal of science” and to the ideal of the “free, unconstrained human personality”. The ideal of science is in turn related to the natural world, with its fixed and all-encompassing laws (which are accessible by scientific knowledge). The ideal of freedom is by contrast related to the quest for freedom of the Humanist man, released from the “Dark Ages” and determined to find in nature the field of expression of his un-constrained personality. The two ideals are in contrast. As soon as fixed and universal laws are postulated in the field of nature, they are supposed to apply to the human personality as well, and therefore they threaten human freedom. On the other hand, as soon as nature is regarded as the unlimited field of expression of a free personality the mechanistic view of the natural laws is threatened. In Dooyeweerd’s words therefore, “nature is revealed as the relentless enemy of freedom”.<sup>8</sup>

How can the dialectical tensions between the opposite poles of a ground motive be handled in practice? What normally happens is that, for a certain period, one pole is given a kind of “primacy” to the detriment of the other. During the Romantic period, for example, the freedom-pole became dominant and the nature-pole was “depreciated”. But because the basic ground motive is constituted by both poles and because some sectors of reality cannot be absolutised to the detriment of others, in due time the under-valued pole will raise its head again and claim its rights, so to speak. This will then set a process in motion, at the end of which the “forgotten” pole will gain the primacy at the expense of the rival pole.

In addition to (and as integral part of) this dialectical process, there are usually several attempts at integrating the two poles in order to resolve the tensions between them. According to Dooyeweerd such attempts cannot be successful, due to the fact that religious antithesis cannot be solved by theoretical means.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, “Cinq conférences”, in *La revue réformée*, X (1959/3) p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A new critique*, vol. 1, p. 65.

A final note should be appended to the issue of the origin of such ground motives. Sometimes Dooyeweerd almost “personifies” such motifs: they *direct* our culture, they keep people in their “grip” and so on. Should they be understood as independent from humankind? Or are they rather human constructions? If so, how is it possible that they exert such an influence upon us?

Although Dooyeweerd does not address this question directly, I think it is possible to get an indirect answer from him. A distinction should be made between the biblical ground motive and the others. The biblical ground motive is not a human construction but God’s revelation to the human heart<sup>10</sup>. It finds its origin, therefore, in God’s redemptive plan for humanity. The “apostate” ground motives, on the other hand, are generated by people, by a sort of “veneration” for a certain aspect or sector of concrete reality. For example the matter-pole (in the Greek ground motive) was generated, according to Dooyeweerd, by a fascination with (i.e. absolutisation of) the endless stream of biotic life, constantly re-creating itself. Human constructions, therefore, yet it can be understood that once constructed such religious motives have power over individuals and cultures, so that certain problems become central, certain solutions are accepted, cultural developments are shaped and so on.

### 3. Proposed articulations and amendments of the theory

#### 3.1 *Beyond the Western borders*

Compared with other parts of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy, his theory of ground motives enjoyed a lower degree of criticism. There were nevertheless several proposals aiming at either “articulating” the theory or at modifying it in some respects. Due to space constraints we will now survey only some of the proposals presented by reformational scholars, leaving aside the critical contributions delivered from other philosophical points of view.<sup>11</sup>

Starting from the articulations of the theory, there were a few attempts at applying Dooyeweerd’s insights beyond Western borders. The ground motives of Japanese and Korean culture were an object of research by Asian scholars working in the reformational tradition. Inagaki<sup>12</sup> did not reach a fully clear picture, but discussed

<sup>10</sup> Dooyeweerd uses the term heart in the biblical sense of “personality”, or self (cf. Proverbs 4: 4). In this sense the “heart” is the “centre” of the human personality, not only of emotional life.

<sup>11</sup> Concerning the ground motive of nature and grace see for example the contribution by H. Robbers, “Het natuur-genade schema als religieus grondmotief der scholastieke wijsbegeerte”, in *Studia Catholica* XXIII (1948) p. 69-86. (This article was the beginning of a long dialogue with Dooyeweerd). Concerning the humanist ground motive of nature and freedom, see J.F. Glastra van Loon, “Dooyeweerd in gesprek met de filosofie”, in *Dooyeweerd Herdacht: referaten gehouden op het Dooyeweerd-symposium aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op vrijdag 18 november 1994*, in J. De Bruijn Ed., Amsterdam, Free University Press, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> I. Inagaki, “A philosophical analysis of traditional Japanese culture”, in *Philosophia reformata*, LVII, (1992/1) p. 39-56.

the poles of *tradition-innovation* in Japanese culture in a way which resembled the Dooyeweerdian analysis of ground motives. Choi obtained better results in his analysis of the religious motives permeating traditional Korean culture. As the latter is constituted by several different “branches”, he distinguished a Shamanist, a Buddhist and a Confucian component. He furthermore identified a *hananim-nature* motive of Shamanism, a *kyo-son* motive for Buddhism and a *I-ki* motive as the religious ground motive of Confucianism.<sup>13</sup>

Given the present context of globalisation it would be surely relevant to enquire into the fundamental motives of Chinese, Islamic or Indian culture and it could have very practical applications as well. Yet one must admit that in recent years the reformational community has not done much research in that direction.

### 3.2 *The ground motive of ancient Greek culture*

In addition to simple articulation of the theory, there were also a few proposals for amendment, at different levels. One of them was provided by Abraham Bos,<sup>14</sup> professor of ancient and patristic philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam. He argued that, in his analysis of the roots of ancient Greek culture, Dooyeweerd relied too much on Nietzsche (especially on *The birth of tragedy*) and other modern philosophers, thus looking at Greek philosophy with too “modern” eyes. Dooyeweerd identified the origins of the form-matter motive in the conflicting claims of Greek nature-religion and Greek cultural religion, centred respectively on Dionysus and on the Apollinean gods. Dooyeweerd detected a conflict between two absolutizations or deifications: the endless stream of (biotic) life on the one hand and the cultural perfection of the *polis* on the other were “venerated” as the key factor of life and reality.

According to Bos, however, the ground motive of Greek culture is better captured in the “Titanic meaning-perspective”. In his opinion the myth of Kronos and the Titans is a sort of archetypal story revealing the roots of Greek culture and philosophy. Kronos is a fallen god who has lost his glory through his own fault and therefore lives in the under-world. The myth greatly influenced the Greek understanding of man and nature. In the following philosophical developments since Parmenides, via Plato and Aristotle, man is regarded as fallen and captive in the darkness of ignorance. Yet he retains a divine part (his rational soul or mind) which can be rescued and can lead to salvation.

<sup>13</sup> W.Y. Choi, *Dialogue and antithesis*, p. 166-206.

<sup>14</sup> See for example A.P. Bos, “Oude en nieuwe discussies over de waarde van het Platonisme”, in *Philosophia reformata*, XXXIV (1979/1) p. 16-45. See also A.P. Bos, “Het grondmotief van de Griekse cultuur en het Titanische zin-perspectief”, in *Philosophia reformata* LI (1986/1-2) p. 117-137. An English translation of this text is available as “The ground motive of Greek culture and the Titanic perspective on the meaning of reality”, in *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap*, XXIV (1988/3-4) p. 94-123. Finally, A.P. Bos, *In de greep van de Titanen*, Amsterdam, Buijten & Schipperhijn, 1991.

A fundamental feature of Greek culture is that it identifies part of the world as “divine”, yet deprived of its divinity because it is bound to the non-divine rest of reality. This fundamental feature, according to Bos, is better qualified to be considered the ground motive of ancient Greek culture. The Titanic perspective continued to influence not only Hermetic and Gnostic thought but also the Church Fathers. They did not always realize that such perspective is diametrically opposed to the biblical perspective on man and the cosmos, which requires a radical distinction between Creator and creature. This lack of awareness led to a slow “ellenization” of the Church, which Bos considers most unfortunate.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, Bos’ proposal was not immune from criticism. Although its merit of pointing out clear weaknesses in Dooyeweerd’s account was generally recognised, a few perplexities remained. Without trying to display them all, and in detail, a fundamental objection was raised regarding the *nature* of the Titanic perspective. The latter looks to Choi like a worldview rather than like a ground motive. He notices that such perspective does not seem to “determine the content of the three central philosophical ideas” (i.e. the cosmomic ideas mentioned above in section 2.1).<sup>16</sup> On this point Choi calls in his support Runia, who argues that the Titanic perspective illuminates only a limited part of the Greek philosophical tradition. In Runia’s opinion too, the titanic perspective is a prominent idea but not the most fundamental motive of Greek culture.<sup>17</sup>

My impression is that, in order to make his proposal more convincing, Bos would need to articulate more clearly how the Titanic perspective concretely shaped Greek philosophy and culture (as Dooyeweerd did with the form-matter motive). For the moment it seems to me that the general attitude towards Bos’ proposal is summarised in Choi’s question: “how much difference is there then” between Bos’ and Dooyeweerd’s proposals? Can perhaps the contact-point between the two approaches be found in what Runia calls the “dialectical opposition between the divine and the random”?<sup>18</sup> Could this supply a sort of common denominator concerning the ground motive of Greek culture?

### 3.3 Questions by Jacob Klapwijk

Klapwijk asked a few sceptical questions on the possibility that ground motives may influence concrete scholarship and culture, due to the fact that they are transcendental with respect to (e.g.) scholarship. In this context he also proposed the idea that ground motives are in fact worldviews.<sup>19</sup> Worldviews are formed by

<sup>15</sup> D.F.M. Strauss, & A.P. Bos, “Greek ontology and biblical cosmology: an unbridgeable gap”, in *Tydskrif vir Christelike wetenskap*, XXXV (1999/3-4), p. 137-163.

<sup>16</sup> W.Y. Choi, *Dialogue and antithesis*, p. 80-81.

<sup>17</sup> D.T. Runia, Dooyeweerd, Bos..., p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172.

<sup>19</sup> J. Klapwijk, “Reformational philosophy on the boundary between the past and the future”, in *Philosophia reformata*, LII (1987/2) p. 109.

concrete experience and are more immanent to scholarship. This has the advantage, says Klapwijk, that scholarship can be more tuned to the “here and now”, thus becoming less universalistic and therefore more attentive, for example, to the problems and suffering of concrete people in concrete situations.

Furthermore, in Klapwijk’s opinion Dooyeweerd derived his theory of ground motives from Kuyper, who spoke of four *life-systems*: paganism, Romanism, humanism and Calvinism (which he considered the purest version of Christianity).<sup>20</sup> But according to Klapwijk, Kuyper had in mind four worldviews, or at least “four religiously oriented worldviews”. In addition, Klapwijk proposed a “mediating role” for worldviews, in other words a role of connection between religion (i.e. ground motives) and academic theory.<sup>21</sup>

To Klapwijk’s first objection one may answer that according to Dooyeweerd ground motives manage to influence concrete culture via a cosmomic idea (see Section 2.1). In the second place, it is not so obvious that Kuyper’s “life-systems” can be classified as worldviews. The phrase “life-system” points rather towards the roots of a culture or civilisation. In addition, Dooyeweerd never said he derived his theory from Kuyper. The correspondence between four worldviews and four ground motives is not very accurate, for we have already noticed that Dooyeweerd analyses at least five ground motives (see Section 2.1 above). Finally, if ground motives are in fact worldviews and worldviews have a mediating role, between what are they supposed to mediate? I think these are some of the issues and questions which prevented Klapwijk’s proposals from gaining broad consensus.

In the next sections I would like to highlight a few implications of Dooyeweerd’s theory which might be useful and stimulating for our time.

## 4. Reflecting on some implications

### 4.1 Religion as universal human condition

Dooyeweerd’s theory of ground motives places all scholars “in the same boat”. Religion is not an optional to be adopted by some and rejected by others. Being human means, among other things, placing trust in something. It is not only in the dimension of faith that religion expresses itself. In all cultural formations, in politics as well as in economics, in the way we construct our societies or educate the youth, we express our fundamental commitments.

Christian philosophy, therefore, is as legitimate as any other philosophical trend. Some may regard it as biased, classify it as theology or consider it a contradiction in terms, incapable of saying anything different from secular (i.e. “proper”) philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 109. Klapwijk refers to: A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978 (original 1898).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

Yet Dooyeweerd's standpoint implies full recognition of Christian scholarship: if liberal, Marxist or existentialist philosophy is legitimate, Christian philosophy is equally legitimate, it works in the same way and it shares the same tasks. Christian philosophy should aim at presenting its own original standpoints and solutions, without becoming secular discourse disguised in theological clothes or sprinkled with a few biblical verses.

This perspective has potentially liberating effects on the Christian scholar. The latter is no longer in a position where his academic work is perceived as "biased" in contrast to the more "open-minded" work of academics who have allegedly liberated themselves from the prejudices inevitably linked to religion. Structurally speaking, the Christian scholar is in the same position as any other scholar. While we all strive for objectivity and unbiased research, we all have to start from some sort of pre-judgement concerning our field of research and the entities and relationships we find in it. Although recent philosophy of science and epistemology have not tackled this issue on the level of religion, they have basically confirmed Dooyeweerd's approach by gradually abandoning the positivist tradition and by recognising the importance of "premises" (Polanyi), paradigms (Kuhn) and other presuppositions (Feyerabend) shaping scientific enquiries.

Dooyeweerd's position, however, does not fall into the trap of relativism as some of the more contemporary trends do. The fact that all scholars (actually all human beings) adopt some sort of religious standpoint does not mean for Dooyeweerd that all ground motives are equally valid, truthful or helpful. Comparison and evaluation are necessary. Admittedly, any evaluation of religious positions can only be performed from a certain point of view and position. Yet the concrete effects of a certain ground motive on cultural developments can be traced and discussed, even among people holding to different "paradigms". In fact, a broad part of Dooyeweerd's work was dedicated to pointing out the effects of a certain motive on Western philosophy and culture in general.

Dooyeweerd's theory of ground motives, therefore, does not aim at relativising all religious starting points by declaring them equally sound in their own way. On the contrary it aims at implementing genuine evaluation, with the purpose of pointing out the difficulties, contradictions or antinomies ultimately derived from any ground motive.

#### ***4.2 Christian or biblical?***

It is worthwhile reflecting on a second interesting aspect of Dooyeweerd's theory. In a sense, he identified two Christian ground motives. The first is the ground motive of the biblical revelation, constituted by the three "poles" of "creation, fall and redemption in Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit".<sup>22</sup> This is the

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<sup>22</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, "Het oecumenisch-reformatorisch grondmotief van de wijsbegeerte der wetsidee en de grondslag van der vrije universiteit", in *Philosophia reformata*, XXXI (1966/1-2) p. 14.

living power of the Word of God, regenerating the human heart and directing it towards liberating paths. According to Dooyeweerd, Augustine was one of the scholars “in the grip” of this motive, and so were Calvin and Kuyper. One may notice that this motive is not constituted by two poles in dialectical conflict between them. There is however another motive inspiring Christian culture and action since the patristic era. This is the motive of “nature and grace”, typical of scholastic Christianity. Historically speaking, it replaced the biblical motive quite soon, before the latter could start expressing a truly mature influence on Western culture.

Very soon, the nature-grace dialectical motive produced a synthesis of biblical doctrine and Greek philosophy or culture. One interesting feature of this motive is that the Greek motive of matter and form was incorporated in the nature-pole of the Christian motive. In a sense, the Christian motive created an integration, an addition to the Greek motive according to the classical Roman Catholic approach: *gratia natura non tollit sed perficit*. Such an addition had to be harmonised, of course, with the Christian ground motive, and here a synthesis had to be performed. Not only integration therefore, but a synthesis in which grace is supposed to “control” nature, to bring it to “perfection”, while in return nature constitutes the support of (or introduction to) the sphere of grace (*praeambula gratiae*).

According to Dooyeweerd, the replacement of the original biblical ground motive with the motive of nature and grace caused Christianity’s inability to produce a truly Christian culture. The nature-grace approach produced rather a mixture of Christian and pagan beliefs and a “church-ification” of Medieval society. Dooyeweerd’s disappointment, however, does not concern only (or even mainly) the Roman Catholic culture and theology of the past. It rather concerns the many Protestant circles in which the motive of nature and grace is still preserved and cultivated in slightly different versions and not replaced with the fundamental motive of the biblical revelation. After the first generation of reformers, the Reformation too was usually captured by the nature and grace paradigm and this prevented, according to Dooyeweerd, a true reformation of European culture. The same problem is present today in large sections of the Protestant world.

Perhaps the main lesson contained in this aspect of Dooyeweerd’s theory is that genuine Christian scholarship is not possible in the absence of deep personal and communal commitment to the biblical ground motive. Only when the Christian scholar is in touch with the spiritual *dunamis* of such motif can there be hope for solid results in Christian scholarship.

### ***4.3 Dialogue and antithesis***

According to Dooyeweerd, penetrating to the “hidden” roots of different philosophical systems is the only way to real dialogue. As long as the participants in the dialogue hold to the “dogma” of the autonomy of theoretical thought, they will misjudge their differences of opinion as due to some or other failure of logical or rational nature. Only by penetrating to the sources of such differing approaches

can the deep causes of dissension be identified so that dialogue can be fully open and genuine. How far can this dialogue go, for the Christian scholar?

Unlike Kuhn's paradigms, Dooyeweerd's ground motives do not replace one another after a period of undisturbed and solitary hegemony. They rather live alongside each other and in many cases "contaminate" each other. I have just mentioned how the scholastic (nature-grace) ground motive incorporated in his nature-pole the form-matter motive of Greek culture. The humanist ground motive, for a second example, is not simply a form of paganism because it has borrowed and transformed, for its own uses and purposes, scholastic and biblical themes related to Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Knowing that such syntheses occur in practice, why did Dooyeweerd recommend the Christian scholar to avoid similar operations?

I think the answer lies in the unique nature of the biblical motive. For those who believe that this religious starting point is the heart of divine revelation, any synthesis with any other ground motive can only result in some sort of blurring of the spiritual *dunamis* available in the biblical motive. One of the foremost traits of the Dooyeweerdian approach, therefore, is that Christian scholarship should stem from the biblical ground motive and avoid syntheses with non-Christian ground motives. This is a third implication of Dooyeweerd's theory of ground motives.

If this is the case at the religious level, however, the question might still be asked whether some sort of synthesis is advisable at the theoretical level. After all, Dooyeweerd does not deny the historical situatedness of his philosophy, nor the fact that "insight into the wealth of meaning of the cosmic order may grow even through the work of schools of thought against which our own starting point is set".<sup>24</sup> He insists that the different philosophical schools have a common task and should learn from each other. The Christian philosopher should not ignore any philosophical trend, because "no single serious current of thought, however apostate in its starting-point, makes its appearance in the history of the world without a task of its own, by which, even in spite of itself, it must contribute to the fulfilment of the Divine plan".<sup>25</sup>

Would it then be advisable to resort to syntheses or compromises? Or is Dooyeweerd trying to isolate Christian philosophy from the context of its own time and culture? I think the following quotation summarises quite well a few important traits of Dooyeweerd's approach.

Whoever takes the pains to penetrate into the philosophic system developed in this work, will soon discover how it is wedded to the historical development of philosophic and scientific thought with a thousand ties, so far as its immanent philosophic content is concerned, even though we can nowhere *follow* the immanence-philosophy.<sup>26</sup>  
The philosophical elaboration in this book of the basic principle of sphere sovereignty,

<sup>23</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A new critique*, vol. 1, p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A new critique*, vol. 1, p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> Dooyeweerd regards as "immanence-philosophy" all philosophical systems which find their *starting point* exclusively within the horizon of created reality.

for example, would not have been possible without the entire preceding development of modern philosophy and of the different branches of modern science. Nevertheless it is just with the philosophic idea of sphere-sovereignty that we turn in principle against the humanistic view of science. In like manner it can be said that our transcendental critique of theoretical thought has an inner historical connection with Kant's critique of pure reason, notwithstanding the fact that our critique was turned to a great extent against the theoretical dogmatism in Kant's epistemology.<sup>27</sup>

Two important principles emerge from the above lines. First, dialogue and interaction do not necessarily exclude antithesis, opposition or dissension. In postmodern times we seem to have gradually developed an idea of dialogue which aims at eliminating all possible moments of friction. The aim of dialogue seems to be a relativisation of all positions for the sake of reaching peaceful sleep. We have become extremely afraid of dissensus because we are afraid of conflict. Without denying the value of negotiation for all practical purposes, one should realise that excessive emphasis on accommodation does not always yield valuable results.

Secondly, for the Christian scholar there remains a crucial difference between interacting and borrowing, between debating the same problems (or even learning from the interlocutor) and adopting the presuppositions or solutions of immanence-philosophy. This seems to me the crux of the Dooyeweerdian position, and it holds for both the theoretical and the presuppositional level.

#### ***4.4 Weighing the alternatives***

Finally, Dooyeweerd's theory helps understanding the roots of a certain culture and by so doing empowers Christian scholars for the task of dealing with that culture properly. In many cases the Christian scholar is convinced s/he is building alternatives to (e.g.) a humanist position, while in fact s/he is simply trying to avoid one pole of the humanist ground motive while promoting its counterpart (the opposite pole). This happens in all disciplines.

Let us take for example Nicholas Wolterstorff's appeal to Christian scholars to avoid "deterministic approaches" in the social sciences.

Christians, committed as they are to human responsibility, are thereby also committed, as I see it, to human freedom; which means they will reject purely deterministic accounts in the social sciences and search for non-deterministic accounts.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to notice that the alternative to determinism is identified in "freedom", and this seems to take us back to the nature-freedom dilemma implied in the humanist ground motive. What usually happens is that the "search for non-deterministic accounts" occurs within the contemporary humanist arsenal and this

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<sup>27</sup> H. Dooyeweerd, *A new critique*, vol. 1, p. 118.

<sup>28</sup> N.P. Wolterstorff, "On Christian learning", in P.A. Marshall, S. Griffioen & R.J. Mouw, *Eds.*, *Stained glass: worldviews and social science*. Lanham - Md., University Press of America, 1989, p. 76.

leads to selecting humanist alternatives which simply look “tolerable” to the Christian scholar. The “roots” of such alternatives are mostly ignored and the Christian scholar remains captive to dilemmas and alternatives stemming from the humanist ground motive when it would be necessary to build on new ground and with new materials.

Christian philosophers often feel that they have no alternative but to choose for example between realism and nominalism, rationalism and irrationalism, objectivism and subjectivism (or some middle position) and so on. When this strategy becomes standardised and consciously pursued, I believe it corresponds to the (Christian) *liberal* approach.<sup>29</sup> It is in fact typical of this approach to select one secular trend, theory or movement (in whatever discipline or field of activity) and to endorse it as *the* Christian position. The “rival” trend(s) are then opposed as non-Christian. (For example in many cases socialism is regarded as the Christian standpoint and capitalism as ungodly).

Even when dealing with Christian positions and options, far from devising anything new the Christian scholar often seems to be bound to the “weighing”<sup>30</sup> of already existing alternatives. It is interesting to read Marshall’s lucid analysis of a book by Wolterstorff in which this strategy was accurately pursued.

The first four chapters of the book, which comprise its systematic core, each lay out two options, insist that we must choose between the two options, and argue for the choice of a particular one. Chapter 1 calls for a choice between “avertive” and “world-formative” Christianity; Chapter 2 a choice between “modernization” theory and ‘world system’ theory; Chapter 3 between liberation theology and “neo-Calvinism”; Chapter 4 between the rich and the poor. Wolterstorff allows for some synthesis but the basic pattern is that the question of a Christian understanding of the modern world is posed as a type of choice between pre-existing theories.<sup>31</sup>

In many cases, however, theories and trends are not selected or rejected on the basis of a deliberately liberal attitude but rather out of insufficient insight into the particular features and influences of (e.g.) humanist culture. In this context, Dooyeweerd’s approach may act as an eye-opener to avoid false dilemmas and to promote integral Christian scholarship. Such scholarship doesn’t shy away from humbly devising new solutions, theories, paradigms.

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<sup>29</sup> See R. Coletto, “Christian attitudes in scholarship: the role of worldviews”, in *Koers* (to be published in 2012).

<sup>30</sup> The concept of “weighing” became central in Wolterstorff’s theory of scholarship since his essay “On Christian learning” (see footnote 28) It is interesting to observe that in his *Reason within the bounds of religion* (Grand Rapids - Mich., Eerdmans. 1976) he still used to couple without exception the “weighing” and “devising” of theories. Yet in “On Christian learning” the “devising” of new theories was apparently abandoned and only the “weighing” of existing alternatives was preserved.

<sup>31</sup> P. Marshall, “Book review of N.P. Wolterstorff, *Until justice and peace embrace*, Grand Rapids - Mich., Eerdmans, 1983”, in *Philosophia reformata*, L (1985/1) p. 91.

## 5. Concluding remarks

After a brief overview of Dooyeweerd's doctrine of religious ground motives I have selected a few themes related to the elaboration of Christian scholarship. The first theme was Dooyeweerd's recognition of the "religious" character of all scholarship, Christian, non-Christian or secular. I have argued that this opens totally new avenues for Christian scholars, as they do not need to feel somehow "biased" in comparison with their secularist colleagues who would allegedly be more objective.

The second theme which was explored has to do with the dangers of a synthetic approach to Christian scholarship. Dooyeweerd has distinguished the biblical ground motive of creation-fall-redemption from the scholastic motive of nature and grace. Although they can both be called "Christian" (because they have been usually endorsed by Christians), only the first is integrally and legitimately Christian, as it is constituted by the central motifs of the biblical revelation. The nature-grace motive is, according to Dooyeweerd, the result of a synthesis which has been realised *de facto* in history, but results in several amputations of the truly Christian standpoint.

The rejection of any synthetic approach, however, does not imply for Dooyeweerd the rejection of dialogue, cooperation and mutual emulation. On the contrary, real dialogue between different types of scholarship is enhanced by a clear understanding of the deepest roots of each position. It is rather an insufficient understanding of those roots which often condemns philosophical dialogues to superficiality. This was the third "lesson" derived from the theory of ground motives.

Finally, Dooyeweerd's theory can show the Christian scholar that the same ground motive often gives rise to apparently opposed trends. Rationalism and irrationalism, nominalism and realism, optimism and pessimism are for example results of the same humanist ground motive which is constituted by conflicting "poles". A clear understanding of these dialectical tensions and conflicts can empower the Christian scholar for a real discernment of philosophical trends and schools. It can also lead to the abandonment of spurious alternatives and to the recognition of the necessity of integral Christian approaches in scholarship.

There is one Dooyeweerdian "lesson", however, which is perhaps the most fundamental: it is not possible to engage in Christian scholarship without being rooted in genuine Christian spirituality. It is not sufficient for the Christian scholar or academic community to be well equipped from a rational or ethical point of view. When the spiritual *roots* are not solid, the rational, moral or even psychological resources will in the long run dry up and Christian scholarship can easily lose its very identity.