

## *Rationality* *in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Tradition*

**Jacob Klapwijk**

Calvinism has always been a movement of much greater scope than the development of a distinctive theology or lifestyle. To put it positively, the reformational aspirations of Calvinism since the 16th century also had implications for human society and culture, and, more specifically, for the status of human rationality and a new approach to philosophical and scientific learning.

When we look at men like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, and Herman Dooyeweerd, an important question arises. What has been the contribution of the Dutch neo-Calvinism tradition, which they represented, to finding such a new, reformed approach to rationality? I think that each one of these thinkers has made a unique contribution to the idea and ideal of a truly Christian scholarship. At the same time, we should not neglect the strong differences which become apparent, already in the 19th century, between the views of Kuyper and Bavinck, and later on, between the conceptions of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. These differences were not merely on secondary issues; they concerned the central issues of reason and revelation, of faith and philosophy.

### *1. Two Basic Convictions*

However, it seems to me that there are at least two basic convictions with respect to Christian learning and philosophy on which there has been a far-reaching agreement within Dutch reformational circles. The first is the belief in a divine creation order,

that is, the belief that the whole of created reality is subject to the sovereign will of God, the Creator of heaven and earth. This belief entails that the laws and normative structures of reality, including the reality of man and of human *reason*, have in one way or another their ultimate origin in God, and that God himself is not subject to these laws, although he must be viewed as faithful to them. To express this in the [94] language of the reformers: *Deus legibus solutus est*, and at the same time, *Deus non exlex*.

The second basic conviction concerns the religious antithesis. It is the belief that not everything that takes place in God’s created world is in accordance with his sovereign will. On the contrary, ever since the fall of man, Satan has wreaked havoc on the whole creation, drawing it into the way of rebellion, folly, destruction and death. However, the second basic conviction holds that this demonic strategy, the signs of which are becoming ominously manifest in our present rationalized and scientized world, is (and shall be) brought to naught by God through Jesus Christ, who, before the eyes of faith, is at work in restoring God’s creation, guiding it to its ultimate destination—the kingdom of God. This fundamental opposition between the work of God on the one hand and the devious exertions of the evil one on the other hand, between the realm of darkness and the kingdom of light, comes to expression in the term “religious antithesis.” This same opposition is revealed to us even in the first pages of the Bible (Gen. 3:15), where God declares that he will put “enmity” between “the seed of the serpent” and “the seed of the woman,” from which in due time Jesus, the true seed, would come forth as the victor.

It must be observed at the very outset that these two basic convictions—the idea of a divine law-order for the creation and the idea of a religious antithesis within the created world—cannot be easily dealt with apart from each other, if indeed it is true that Satan’s strategy of sin, as opposed to Christ’s plan of salvation, runs counter to God’s holy will for his creation. Moreover, we must realize that the idea of God’s creation order as well as the idea of a religious antithesis are both highly relevant for (any discussion on) the status and scope of human rationality. Nevertheless, within the limits of this essay, it is impossible for me to deal with both subjects in a satisfactory way. For this reason, I will pass over the subject of the creation ordinances in silence—at least to a certain extent—even though this idea obtained a significant expression in Kuyper’s theory of sphere sovereignty, in Dooyeweerd’s

conception of the cosmomic structure of all reality, and in Vollenhoven's triadic distinction between God, law, and created reality.

Let me add at this point that while these philosophical positions offer many helpful insights with respect to our problem of the status of human rationality, they also conceal many difficulties. These difficulties come to the fore as soon as we become more specific and begin to ask the following questions. How must we interpret the [95] biblical teaching of God as the sovereign Lord? What exactly is the biblical idea of "law"? How do we (come to) know these so-called creation ordinances? And how must we distinguish between what is due to God's creation order and what is the result of historical development and human (often sinful) positivization? You will understand that in answer to these and similar questions there is anything but a consensus in the reformed community. In fact, the variety of views is very great and extends even to a consistent rejection of the notion of a divine creation order as being rather of Greek than of biblical origin (C.A. Van Peursen).

As I have stated, I will restrict myself in this essay to the second subject, namely, that of the religious antithesis. Within the Calvinian tradition this idea of a religious antithesis is perhaps an even more characteristic contribution of Dutch neo-Calvinism than the idea of a creational law order. But, once again, we must limit ourselves. I cannot deal with this theme in its full breadth; instead, I want to focus on its relevance for human rationality. The problem that I want to dwell on is therefore this: religious antithesis and human rationality—how does the one relate to the other?

## ***2. Calvin on Sin as a Corruptio Totalis***

Since the days of Calvin, several questions in this connection have been very urgent. First, is it possible to state meaningfully that human reason in our world is affected or even corrupted by sin in a radical sense of the word? Second, if so, how can we account for and come to terms with the philosophical wisdom of the Greeks and the juridical insights of the Romans? Similarly, how are we to deal with the scientific knowledge and philosophical theories of our modern world, which is to a great extent a post-Christian world, and in its theoretical reflection is based on the principle of a man-centered humanism?

As far as the first question is concerned, I do indeed believe that the human mind is strongly affected by sin and that, in positing this, I am in harmony with the reformers

of the 16th century. Luther and Calvin rediscovered in the Bible the totalitarian character of sin. They read, primarily in the letters of Paul, that sin is much more than a human defect; on the contrary, it reveals itself as rebellion against God, as lawlessness, apostasy and unwisdom. In their view it is an evil which festers in man's heart and in all his life. It was John Calvin in particular who in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (hereafter, *IR*) taught the “total corruption” of human nature. This view is echoed in the *Heidelberg Catechism* where it is stated that man's [96] nature is “wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil.”<sup>1</sup>

This doctrine of sin's total corruption of fallen man does not mean, of course, that all sin is equally bad. The Bible speaks of lesser and greater sins and even of mortal sins. This doctrine does suggest, however, that there is no area of life that escapes the grip of sins and, accordingly, none which is not in need of restoring grace through Jesus Christ.

My quoting the *Heidelberg Catechism* is not without reason. This reformed confession of faith has deeply influenced the preaching, the life of faith and the theology of Dutch Calvinism. This Calvinist view of sin as a corruption and perversion which pervades man's total being has far-reaching consequences for our subject. According to Calvin himself, human reason is so darkened that only muddled notions are produced, especially with respect to the highest knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of God. Calvin considers this muddledness all the more remarkable because God, through his general revelation, manifests himself clearly in his whole creation and before the eyes of all men. But because of sin, man is unable and also unwilling to free himself from the prison of ignorance and superstition. Only by the grace of Jesus Christ and through God's special revelation in the Scriptures is man able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Calvin's position seems to me very challenging, because it turned resolutely against the classical medieval view of scholasticism. According to that view, at the Fall in paradise the original righteousness of man's supernatural being was completely lost. But the consequence of this was not that man's natural being was totally corrupted but rather that it was wounded and weakened. That is to say, the capacities of man's natural being remained more or less intact. Therefore, up to a certain point, man's power of reasoning also retained its self-sufficiency and ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Lord's Day III.8. [The endnotes in the original volume *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition* have been replaced here as footnotes.]

discover truth. Calvin flatly denies this. “All parts of the soul,” he states, “were possessed by sin after Adam deserted the fountain of righteousness”; and he explicitly adds that even the excellent gift of the human mind is not only wounded but corrupted in such a way that it needs, as it were, a new nature (*IR* II.1.9). Thus he can also write that the scholastic *lumen naturale*, the natural light of reason, is “blind” or “extinguished” (*IR* II.1.9; 2.18,24). In other words, Calvin rejects the scholastic distinction of nature and supernature (although not always consistently), because he feels it misjudges the totalitarian character of sin and, for that reason, also the all-encompassing significance of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. [97]

### ***3. Kuyper’s Idea of Antithesis***

When the Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper rejected the dualism of nature and supernature, he was thinking in accord with Calvin, as he was when in his *Stone Lectures on Calvinism* (1898; hereafter, *LC*) and elsewhere he emphasized the “total depravity by sin” (*LC* 122) and, as its counterpart, the “wide, comprehensible, cosmical meaning of the Gospel” (*LC* 119, cf. 49). And when on this basis he came to speak about a “religious antithesis” and made it a central motive in his worldview he was again, as far as I can see, in the line of Calvin and even in the line of the church father Augustine, who in his book *De Civitate Dei* (hereafter, *CD*) already spoke of a fundamental opposition between the “city of God” and the “earthly city.”

However, it seems to me that Augustine went wrong when he then tried to visualize this antithesis in the progress of world history by attempting to describe the story of both cities from the very beginning up to the time in which he himself lived. His interpretation of the antithesis as pertaining to two “groups” or two “communities” within the human race (*CD* 15.1), and as concretized on the one side, for example, in the Assyrian and Roman Empires (*CD* 18.2), and on the other side in Israel (*CD* 18.47) and the Church (*CD* 20.9), was not convincing and, as far as I can see, not permissible. There always remains a mystery in history regarding peoples and persons, a mystery which we have to respect, because it is a divine mystery. World history unfolds itself under the sign of a religious opposition, but only here and there, only at decisive points, does the Bible lift this veil of mystery for us.

It is not without good reason that at this point I referred to the church father

Augustine and to the fundamental weakness of his inspiring book *De Civitate Dei*. For I believe a similar weakness is shown in the work of Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper sought to give the biblical antithesis concrete form in the various areas of state and society. He wanted to give the antithesis tangible expression in a manifold of Christian organizations in society. I believe that Kuyper also had other, more acceptable, motives for establishing Christian organizations in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the motive of giving expression to the religious antithesis was one of them, and again I question whether this "organizational antithesis" does not infringe upon God's mystery and whether, in the case of Kuyper and his followers, it did not inevitably lead to a dangerous identification of the Christian (or, if you will, reformed) cause with God's cause. Although I am sure that Kuyper wanted to see Christian organizations as a means for [98] Christianizing society, the danger was that they were considered not as deficient instruments but as ends in the struggle for the kingdom of God.

#### ***4. Antithesis and Human Rationality***

Kuyper's idea of antithesis had direct consequences for his view of human consciousness and human rationality. The antithesis should be given organizational form even in the unyielding world of science. In following this line, Kuyper dreamed the most daring dreams. At times he saw "his school," the Free University of Amsterdam, as the center of the re-Christianization of the entire Euro-American cultural and scientific world.

For Kuyper there are two kinds of science (in the broad sense of the German word "Wissenschaft"): one following from an unregenerate consciousness, the other from a regenerate consciousness. These are two "absolute starting points." The first is that of the Normalists, who proceed on the assumption that the world is normal. The second is that of the Abnormalists, who see the world as abnormal, dislodged by sin, and in need of saving and restoring power through Jesus Christ.

In his *Stone Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuyper concluded that no liaison or reconciliation between these two starting points is possible. On the contrary, the two are in dispute with one another about "*the whole domain of life*, and they cannot

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<sup>2</sup> See J. Klapwijk, "Christelijke organisaties in verlegenheid," in: *Christelijke organisaties in discussie*, pp. 21-66.

desist from the constant endeavor to pull down to the ground the entire edifice of their respective controverted assertions, all the supports included, upon which their assertions rest” (*LC* 133).

On the one hand we can admire the way in which Kuyper took seriously the biblical teaching of the unbridgeable opposition between what the Scriptures call “the dominion of darkness” and “the kingdom of God’s beloved Son” (Col. 1:13), and the possible consequences of this opposition for the realm of science and academic learning. Kuyper single-handedly battled the entire educated world of his time, an age which swore by the supposed objectivity and impartiality of all science. Kuyper refused to accept the world of scientific and theoretical knowledge as a neutral given.

On the other hand one must object to the tangible and massive form in which Kuyper, also in the field of science, delineates the religious antithesis and “separates the thinking minds in the domain of Science into two opposite battle-arrays” (*LC* 132). To speak of a reciprocal attempt to demolish each other’s scientific edifice is to [99] overstate the case. Science in particular depends on worldwide information and contact; in fact, science represents a universal communication system.

### ***5. Calvin and Common Grace***

Of course, Kuyper himself was, as an academic scholar, fully aware of this issue; and to understand Kuyper’s view on rationality one should not only read his *Lectures on Calvinism* but also his main scientific work, *De gemeene gratie* (*Common Grace*; hereafter, *GG*), which was published some years later. In developing his theory of common grace, Kuyper saw himself again in the line of Calvin. In this regard he was right, at least up to a certain point.

Although, as we have already seen, Calvin stressed the depravity of human nature, he did not categorically reject all non-Christian thought. Calvin insists that there are still some sparks of light to be found in man’s degenerate nature (*IR* I.5.14). This applies above all to human reason. Calvin, in my reading of his Latin text, considers it incompatible with both the Scriptures and common sense to condemn reason to permanent error and blindness (but cf. Battles’ translation of *IR* II.2.12). Granted, reason achieves very little where it directs itself to God and heavenly things. It is more competent when it directs itself to earthly affairs. And to these earthly affairs Calvin reckons politics, art and science (*IR* II.2.13). Even science! Calvin, who

himself had a great knowledge of classical antiquity, sees "that admirable light of truth" shining in the works of pagan and secular authors, and he declares that reason, even if it is apostate, "is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts" (*IR* II.2.15).

Calvin's attitude to all non-Christian culture and science appears, therefore, to be quite subtle. On the one hand, he does not want to depreciate or ignore the gifts which God has distributed outside his church. That would be a deep ingratitude to the giver (*IR* II.2.15)! On the other hand, he does not want to consider these gifts merely in themselves and esteem them as pure human achievements. Calvin continually occupies himself with how these gifts *function* in man. Do they serve to satisfy individual ambition and insight or do they tend to the service and glory of God? It is precisely the latter area in which man on his own falls short. All human gifts are by nature affected by sin. No one can reap glory from them. This applies also to human reason. Human comprehension and understanding, says Calvin, "... is an unstable and transitory thing in God's sight, when a solid foundation of truth does not underlie it" (*IR* II.2.16). [100]

Thus already Calvin speaks at times of God's common grace in order to avoid on one hand a denial of human depravity and to avoid on the other hand a depreciation of what God by his Spirit is doing outside the circle of faith. One thing must be kept in mind, however. Although Calvin sometimes speaks of "common grace," he does not use it in a fixed technical sense as Kuyper did. Following the language of the Bible, he can just as easily speak of God's kindness, of his mercy and gentleness (*IR* II.2.17; I.5.14; III.3.25), of his particular grace to all or to a few, or again simply of God's providence (*IR* II.2.14,17).

Calvin also mentions widely divergent motives for God's restraining of sin and his bestowing of gifts of grace. In distributing his blessings to so many people, God is upholding the creation order and caring for the human race (*IR* II.2.16; 3.4; III.14.3), preserving his church (*IR* I.17.7,11), and bringing men to repentance (*IR* III.3.25; I.5.14). Moreover, God does not only want to display his grace or goodness (*IR* III.24.2; 20.15); his holy intention can also be to brand the conscience of the ungodly, to impress upon him his ingratitude and his deserving punishment, and to remove his every excuse (*IR* I.3.1; III.3.25; I.5.14; III.25.9).



## ***6. Kuyper and Common Grace***

Kuyper's position is not quite the same. Kuyper is the one who systematized all of this in the doctrine of common grace. And he distinguished sharply, although not always clearly, between common grace and particular grace. According to Kuyper, common grace and particular grace have a different nature, scope, purpose and ground.

They have a different nature because the content of particular grace is the deliverance from sin and eternal salvation, and the content of general grace is the restraint of sin and temporal blessings (*GG I 243ff.*, *265ff.*). They have a different scope because particular grace applies to the regenerate Christian, and common grace applies to the whole world and the whole of humanity (*GG I 8ff.*). They have a different purpose because common grace is aimed at preserving the creation order, and particular grace is aimed at a recreation that in its final fruits (the new heaven and the new earth) to a certain extent transcends the natural creation order (*GG I 243ff.*, *II 613ff.*). Finally, they have a different ground. Kuyper often suggests that the particular grace which is bestowed in the church is based on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, and that the common grace which is realized on earth in the creation order is *apart from that* based on the care of God as Creator. As if God had different grounds for being merciful to man! [101]

Serious difficulties attend this sharp contrast between common grace and particular grace, between creation and re-creation, cultural activity and salvation of the soul, earthly life and heavenly life. In all of this there is the threat of a dualism, which expresses itself in a divided directedness to the hereafter and to the present. Only rarely does Kuyper know how to connect the spheres of common grace and of particular grace centrally. Yet there are moments when the issue becomes clear to him: the ground for personal grace is the same as the ground for common grace, namely, the cross of Jesus Christ. It is Christ who bears the church *and* the world: to him is given all power in heaven *and* on earth (Mt. 28:18). At such moments he honors Christ as king not only in the sphere of particular grace but also in the sphere of common grace, and he can then confess this kingship in the lofty words: "There is not a square inch of our whole human existence of which Christ, who is

sovereign over all, does not say: ‘Mine!’”<sup>3</sup>

However, most of the tensions in Kuyper’s cultural theology remain. These tensions are also reflected in Kuyper’s person. In part his work echoes the mystery of the born-again heart and the sigh of the weary pilgrim who longs for his eternal home. In part he is driven to work with an extraordinary vigor at the unfolding of God’s creation in state, society and science. But even here, in the domain of common grace, Kuyper’s ideas diverge. At times he sees the creation mandate as a common human task in which Christian and non-Christian stand shoulder to shoulder. Then again he is sure that the great cultural mandate must start from the antithesis and must be translated into a program of organized Christian action in all areas of life, including science and philosophy. One can find a condensation of this train of thought in his book *Pro Rege* (1911-1912).<sup>4</sup>

### ***7. Common Grace and the Sciences***

This brings us back to our main theme again. Thinking, science, and philosophy are grounded in God’s creation order. Science is “God’s own creation” (*GG* III 495). Hence science is also to be seen as a fruit of common grace. Sin has darkened the understanding, and it follows that all science would end in deceit and self-deception if there were no common grace. God’s grace is the reason that men such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Darwin (1) have shone as “stars of the first magnitude” (*GG* III 498). The conclusion is that Kuyper can appreciate pagan and profane thought. The appreciation is not added to the account of sinful man, however, but to the grace of God.

Yet Kuyper will also say that science is seriously affected by sin. As a matter of fact, Kuyper’s opposition to non-Christian science is [102] much stronger than his appreciation of it, despite his theory of common grace. One can observe this critical approach especially in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, and to a certain extent also in his later work *De gemeene gratie*.

In *De gemeene gratie* Kuyper distinguishes between the natural and the human sciences. He thinks that in the natural sciences a general consensus is, to a large extent, possible because so much depends on an exact observation of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> See also S.U. Zuidema, *Communication and Confrontation*, pp. 52-105.

objects. On the other hand, in history, philosophy and the other humanities the subjectivity of the researcher is at stake. Here questions arise concerning the origin, coherence and purpose of things, which cannot be solved through observation or purely logical thinking (*GG* III 499, 508, 512). At this level two kinds of science—regenerate and unregenerate—become possible. Here an antithetical position is needed and a truly Christian science is demanded. The distinctive character of such a Christian science is not primarily determined by the consideration of the data of Scriptures (which is properly concerned with particular grace) but by the consciousness of the investigating subject, who is a born-again man.

Hence Kuyper's position, as far as science and human rationality is concerned, is ambiguous and full of tensions. Science, for Kuyper, belongs to the realm of God's common grace. Therefore here lies a God-given task for the Christian. However, because he tends to separate the field of common grace from the realm of particular grace, Kuyper is hesitant whether he can introduce the principle of religious antithesis. Does the idea of common grace have to function as the basis for appreciating non-Christian conceptions, or does it have to function as the basis for antithetical action and Christian initiative? In *De gemeene gratie*, starting from the principle of common grace, Kuyper tries to limit the antithesis mainly to the higher sciences (*GG* III 515). But when in his *Lectures on Calvinism* he starts from the opposite side and emphasizes the principle of antithesis, he often ignores his ideas on common grace. In the chapter "Calvinism and Science" just a few sentences are addressed admiringly to the "treasures of philosophical light" found in ancient Greece and Rome, legitimized with the argument of common grace (*LC* 121, 125). Yet immediately thereafter Kuyper advocates a comprehensive organizational antithesis in the sciences between the "normalists" and the "abnormalists" and he unfolds a universal program of Christian scientific activity, as we saw before.

In short, Kuyper did not succeed in harmonizing his view on religious antithesis and on common grace, especially not when he [103] dealt with the problem of human rationality.

### 8. *The Bavincks on Religion and Rationality*

Kuyper's views did not go unopposed. I am reminded of Herman Bavinck, the professor of dogmatics at the Free University. Bavinck was a close spiritual brother of Kuyper, and he was an unconditional supporter of a Christian approach to the practice of science. Bavinck, too, put aside scholastic dualism, which denied the total depravity of human nature, including human reason. Yet Bavinck arrived at a much more moderate judgment of non-Christian thought than did Kuyper. How was that possible? A number of issues should be discussed at this point.

In the first place, Bavinck notes that the antithesis is a conflict of principles, not of persons or of organizations. He therefore cannot follow Kuyper in concluding from two kinds of principle to two kinds of people and two kinds of science. Somewhere he calls this a "metabasis eis allo genos," a shift to another category. For Bavinck, the kingdom of the truth can no more be equated with those who have been born again than can the kingdom of Satan be equated with those who have not been born again; among the former there is in fact much error present, among the latter much truth.<sup>5</sup>

Second, although Bavinck takes it for granted that there is an opposition of *principle* between belief and unbelief, Christianity and heathendom, he states that this opposition is not *exclusively* antithetical: in the heathen religions (see Bavinck's *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*: hereafter, *GD*) "elements of truth" must be acknowledged. Yes, Christianity may be called the "fulfillment" of the heathen quest on the ground of God's general revelation (*GD* I 292ff.).

A different view of the antithesis brings with it a different view of the philosophy of the day! Like Kuyper, Bavinck thinks philosophy is feasible given the basis of God's common grace, which certainly must entail some restraints on lies and errors in thought. However, I think Bavinck views common grace somewhat more consistently than Kuyper as a source of light and truth, because for Bavinck, God's general revelation continues shining, despite everything, in a world estranged from God. For this reason he can describe the philosophy of the day, just as Calvin could, as a *praeclarum donum Dei*, an excellent gift of God (*GD* I 509, 577).

Bavinck adds a third point to this argument. He notes that Christianity did not

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<sup>5</sup> See R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, p. 40.

destroy ancient civilization and philosophy but rather “Christianized” and “sanctified” it. The church fathers themselves, according to Bavinck, came to the view that the existing science “was [104] neither to be rejected as a whole nor accepted as a whole.” It is clear that this line of thought must make newer and different demands of Christian philosophy than would a consistent Kuyperian antithesis view. And then especially it must demand that Christian philosophy, given this openness to non-Christian thought, not fall back into scholasticism—something Bavinck wanted to avoid at all cost.

Herman Bavinck’s viewpoint was subsequently worked out in greater detail by Johan H. Bavinck, professor of (Christian) missions at the Free University. In his book *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof* (1949) (Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith) and in other publications, J.H. Bavinck shows how ambivalent non-Christian religions and non-Christian philosophies really are. On the basis of an extensive analysis of biblical givens, especially Romans 1, Bavinck states that two things come to expression in the non-Christian religions. In the first place there is present in them the self-manifestation and self-presentation of God. Paul states in Romans 1:20 that God has made known “his eternal power and Godhead”; there is knowledge of God among the peoples of the earth. In the second place, however, there also comes to expression in these religions something that might be called the human suppression mechanism. Knowledge of God is constantly *suppressed* and *replaced*. Paul writes of those “who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18) and of those who “changed the truth of God into a lie and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25).

In other words, in the view of J.H. Bavinck, it cannot be said that the non-Christian religions, which express themselves even in different types of rationality, are unadulterated apostasy or pure and unmixed idolatry. Rather, it is evident that in their very apostasy and idolatry there is a struggle going on with respect to the truth; they bear witness to both the influence of, and the resistance to, the God who makes himself known to all people.

### ***9. The Van Peursen-Dooyeweerd Discussion***

In the light of our discussion of Kuyper and the Bavincks, it is now possible to make a

few clarifying comments on the discussions between the two Free University philosophers Van Peursen and Dooyeweerd, which have partly been published in *Philosophia Reformata* (*PR*).<sup>6</sup> One of the most important points of difference between them is their view on rationality and their evaluation of non-Christian philosophy. As far as I can see, this difference is caused by one fact: with regard to the principle of antithesis, Dooyeweerd [105] shows himself as a disciple primarily of Kuyper, and Van Peursen as a follower of J.H. Bavinck.

Dooyeweerd and Van Peursen both want to give a positive evaluation of non-biblical thinking. However, not only the degree but also the ground of their evaluation differs considerably. Dooyeweerd posits that human reason and therefore all rational and philosophical systems are subjected to the principle of religious antithesis. Most theories are based on an apostate ground-motive, a motive which stands in “radical antithesis” (a word of Kuyper’s) to the biblical ground-motive (*PR* 25, 144ff.). They can and ought to be appreciated only insofar as they appear to be confronted with undeniable “states of affairs which conform to the law-structures of creation,” as he puts it. That is to say, all Christian and non-Christian philosophers, in spite of their conflicting religious starting points, must face the states of affairs which, as it were, impinge themselves upon every man within the structures of God’s creation order (*PR* 25, 105ff., 150).

As I mentioned before, Van Peursen does not recognize such a divine creation order, nor does he recognize anything like a “state of affairs,” which is based on it. According to him the “affairs” are never static; on the contrary, they are related to the meaning-giving human subject and move always within human patterns of interpretation (*PR* 24, 162ff., 168). Where, then, does Van Peursen find a ground for his appreciation of, and communication with, non-Christian thinkers? In separating faith and reason? That would be impossible, because Dooyeweerd and Van Peursen are both convinced of the impact of religion on human rationality. But for Van Peursen the religious antithesis is not so absolute as for Dooyeweerd. The religious antithesis, God’s “no” to sin, is preceded by a religious thesis, God’s “yes” to his creation. In line with the Bavincks, Van Peursen emphasizes the *presence* of God in

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<sup>6</sup> C.A. Van Peursen, “Enkele critische vragen in margine bij ‘A New Critique of Theoretical Thought’,” in: *PR* 24 (1959), pp. 160-168; H. Dooyeweerd, “Van Peursen’s critische vragen bij ‘A New Critique of Theoretical Thought’,” in: *PR* 25 (1960), pp. 97-150; C.A. Van Peursen, “Antwoord aan Dooyeweerd,” in: *PR* 26 (1961), pp. 189-200. See also: C.A. Van Peursen, “Culture and Christian Faith,” in: *Wetenschap, wijsheid, filosoferen*, pp. 32-37.

our created world, because God reveals himself to man even within false religions and humanistic ideologies. Not in the general structures of a supposed creation order but in this general appeal of God to every man can the real basis be found for a mutual appreciation and a rational communication between Christian and non-Christian scholars (*PR* 24, 168).

### ***10. The Incongruity of the Religious Antithesis***

At this point I would like to evaluate the contributions of Kuyper, along with his adherents and critics, and then to articulate more fully my own perspective on the matter of the relation between religion and human rationality. First of all, it seems to me that Dooyeweerd deserves support when he speaks of incontrovertible [106] states of affairs within reality due to God's creation order. This order impinges upon man even in the use of his power of reasoning. Granted, in the course of life and history man is capable of constantly giving new meaning to reality, but always within certain limits. These limits explain why man in modern civilization does have at least some understanding of what is and has been going on within other civilizations, even in the remote past. Man's capacities for interpreting and re-interpreting reality are, in other words, not unlimited and completely arbitrary. Moreover, even the status of the human being as an interpreting being cannot be understood apart from God, who has obviously created man in this way. If human meaning-giving is possible, this possibility itself presupposes the framework of a divine law order; it refers back to God as the ultimate law- and meaning-giver.

The true significance of Kuyper's teaching on common grace for our subject lies, I believe, precisely on this point of the creation order. With this doctrine Kuyper wanted, among other things, to give expression to his conviction that God, in spite of sin, upholds the world by his "creation ordinances" (*GG* I 62). But as we saw before, Kuyper did not stress nearly enough that God upholds these ordinances with a view to (their fulfillment in) Jesus Christ, thus, with a view to particular grace. One could say that his common grace doctrine is not Christocentric enough, that is, not sufficiently rooted in particular grace.

Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and others in the Netherlands have reformulated Kuyper's view of common grace more satisfactorily on a Christocentric basis. Or, phrased differently, they have clearly stated that not only does the earth bear the

cross but, first and decisively, the cross bears the earth. The common grace doctrine, once anchored Christocentrically, need not become disconnected from Kuyper’s reformational starting point: the biblical teaching of a comprehensive religious antithesis. The common grace doctrine offers in this way the possibility for a more correct evaluation of non-Christian thought.

Nevertheless, in taking this position we should not forget the point that has been brought into the discussion by the Bavincks and by Van Peursen: namely, the point of God’s personal presence, or his general self-revelation, even in non-Christian cultures and religions. The theme of God’s presence is, to my mind, closely related to the question of the structure of religion in general. I believe that not only the Christian religion but every religion, however primitive or perverse it may be, has an “answer-structure.” Religion is religion inasmuch as it is a response to an appeal from the side of God; it is a response to [107] God’s self-presentation in his Word (special revelation) or in his works (general revelation). The answer that man gives in his religion, or in any rational system insofar as it expresses his religious attitude, is always an answer of surrender or of rebellion. Whatever the answer may be, it always reflects the echo of God’s call: “Adam, I am here, where are you?”

One can agree with Dooyeweerd that an “apostate religious ground-motive” is at work in non-Christian thinking. However, just as the doctrine of common grace must not be deduced from the teaching of a religious antithesis, so, for the same reason, the idea of God’s universal self-presentation must not be deduced from it. It is with a view to Jesus Christ that God upholds his creation ordinances and confronts all men with them. It is also with a view to Jesus Christ that God manifests himself in the heart of all men. And every apostasy, within or without the church, testifies to this self-revelation because every apostasy is a falling away from the living God himself. Every apostasy is a holding down and a twisting of the truth which nevertheless continually confronts man.<sup>7</sup>

In short, there is always a certain ambiguity in pagan religions: the same ambiguity is present in human ideologies: human lie is mixed with divine truth. However, this does not weaken the satanic power of the lie. Rather it confirms its

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<sup>7</sup> See also J. Klapwijk, “The Struggle for a Christian Philosophy: Another Look at Dooyeweerd” and “Dooyeweerd’s Christian Philosophy: Antithesis and Critique,” in: *Reformed Journal* 30 (1980), pp. 12-15 and 20-24.



inexcusableness, to speak with Calvin. And at the same time it confirms the superior power of the truth: "For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (II Cor. 13:8). That is the fundamental *incongruity* which is inherent in the biblical teaching of a religious antithesis.

### ***11. Openness and Opposition***

In order to find a good argument for a positive appreciation of non-Christians, I have argued in support of Kuyper's and Dooyeweerd's ideas concerning a divine "creation order" or of creational "states of affairs." To that end I have also argued in favor of J.H. Bavinck's and Van Peursen's appeal concerning God's universal presence. Let me conclude this point by stating that to me both emphases refer to each other and stem from an original unity. I fear that an exclusive appeal either to universal states of affairs or to the universal presence of God will still ensnare us in a spiritualizing dualism à la Kuyper. For that reason I again draw attention to the teaching of John Calvin, who in the exposition of his *Institutes* never separated God's general revelation from his general grace. Indeed, God's action upon the heart of man and his upholding of creation structures cannot be separated, because God reveals himself to [108] mankind in the visible works of his creation (Rom. 1:20). God's voice and the voice of facts are indivisible.

The voice of truth has sounded again and again in the history of mankind. He who listens has cause for wonderment and bewilderment. We experience wonderment in the working of God's Spirit even in a world of heathenism, secularism, and modern ideologies. And we are bewildered that this working of God is continually warped through human arrogance and guilt, to which a Christian's mind is anything but immune. The Christian finds himself in this delicate situation, especially when he is called to take a stand in the world of scientific learning and rational communication. This situation demands complete openness and radical opposition at the same time. The apostle Paul describes this attitude as follows: "Casting down reasonings, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:5). How do these two attitudes—"openness" and "opposition"—and these two activities—"casting down" and "bringing into captivity"—go together?

## ***12. Reformation and Transformation***

I think that bringing these two attitudes together is, for the Christian (even for the Christian scholar and scientist when he is driven by the spirit of the Gospel), largely an unconscious operation. However, because the open-mindedness of the Christian scholar so easily turns into a philosophical adjustment to the wisdom of the world, and his opposition so quickly turns into an unfruitful isolation from this world, let us *reflect* on the position that we as Christian scholars have to take.

It might be helpful for us to recollect a favorite theme of the church fathers, who also wrestled with the problem of rationality in a sinful world: the theme of "despoliation," or plundering. The church fathers recalled how the children of Israel were asked to despoil the Egyptians of their cultural treasures, their silver and gold, when they left the land (Exod. 12:36). As the Israelites made use of the treasures of Egypt, so Augustine and others believed they were justified in making use of the cultural treasures of the classical world, and thus also of its philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

I think that in principle this despoliation theme yields a useful analogy to what can be done with non-Christian theories and ideas. Yet the church fathers did not always keep these points sharply in view: (a) the Israelites had to take the gold and silver of Egypt, using these valuables just for service in the tabernacle of God; and (b) these [109] treasures had to be smelted and refined before they could be used as vessels in the service of God.

What do I mean to say by this? I believe, indeed, that the rational and philosophical ideas of the day, thanks to God's universal creation order and universal self-presentation within and through this creation order, can in certain respects be seen as excellent gifts of the Spirit of God, and we therefore may make use of them. I am personally engaged in the study of contemporary philosophy. But the goal of this study cannot be exclusively to warn against modern thought! On the contrary, I learn from it, and take something of it along with me. Yet I never do so unconditionally. One must always (this is the first condition) devote philosophy, like the gold and silver of Egypt, to the service of God. To state the matter differently: it can never be our purpose just to adopt the valuable insights of non-Christian thinkers, or to accommodate them in some way to the content of Christian faith. Such an

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<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* II. 40.60.

approach would amount to either eclecticism or scholasticism. No, if we think it possible to make use of the chattels of non-Christian thought—much of it unusable, some of it execrable—then this is only permissible, I think, to the extent that we are in a position to really fit it *into* or integrate it *into* a Christian, God-directed view of life.

Here I must present the second condition. The above-mentioned fitting into, or integration, can never take place without far-reaching changes. Indeed the insights of philosophy, even of science in general, function for Christians as well as for non-Christians in a broader context of thought, in a total life's view. These insights function in a *Weltanschauung* that is religiously charged and that I would call an ideology to the extent it is in conflict with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is necessary to take the ideas we borrow from others and smelt and refine them like the Egyptian's gold—in other words, purify them of ideology. I may and must enter into communication and discussion with non-Christian thinkers. I may gratefully acknowledge their gifts, God's gifts. Yet I must always extract their insights from the ideological connections present in them, and present perhaps also in myself, which lead men to resist and suppress the truth of God. I have to take these insights and I have to transpose, to alter, to *transform* them. In this way I have to take the gold that comes *from* God and offer it again *to* God.

In conclusion, therefore, I would contend that we who stand in the tradition of the Calvinian reformation, a tradition which had, and still today has, meaning for philosophy, are all committed to the idea of the reformation of philosophy. But the reformation of [110] philosophy is never possible without communication with dissenters. And such a communication means transformation after the model of the Israelites. Thus our program for a reformation of philosophy should at the same time be a call for the transformation of philosophy.

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