

Slaying Goliath: The genesis of Reformational philosophy

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The story of the rise of Reformational philosophy is best begun by looking at some key dates in modern history, when Goliath strode on the scene.

1500

The beginning of Modern Times was marked by the Great Divide in Western Civilization, when two movements, the Renaissance and the Reformation, parted ways. This ended the medieval *synthesis* of Nature and the Supernatural, Reason and Revelation, the pagan philosophy of Antiquity and the teaching of Scripture.

The spirit of the Renaissance was attuned to the former: Nature, Reason and Antiquity. It can be captured in the following maxims: "I should be true to myself and make something of myself. I am the master of my fate and I can be the lord of creation."

The spirit of the Reformation was attuned to the latter: the Supernatural, divine Revelation, the Church Fathers. It is summarized in these words: "I am a sinner, saved by grace through faith. I am thoroughly furnished unto all good works and called to live a life of thankfulness."

For the longest time, the Renaissance remained an *elitist* movement. It inspired the cultural leaders: philosophers, poets, painters, practitioners of the humanities. The Reformation, meanwhile, became a *grassroots* movement. Led by the Reformers, it soon won the allegiance of the masses.

In the ensuing decades, however, Protestants had often to fight for their lives. They scarcely had time to think through the *cultural implications* of their new understanding of the Christian faith.¹ **After gaining a place under the sun in various jurisdictions throughout Western Europe, its leaders focussed on keeping the sheep within the fold by guarding confessional purity.**

¹ August Lang, in a Calvin commemorative volume of 1909, quoted in H. Evan Runner, "Cui Bono? (To what End Men's Societies?)" *Torch and Trumpet* 3.4 (Oct.–Nov. 1953): 4.

Principal figures in our story have not been kind to this phase of the history of Protestantism. Judged one critic: the movement “went to seed” in the 17th century; Protestantism’s internal debates resembled the “splitting of hairs” and the “chattering of magpies.”² Another critic was even more negative: the movement “silted up” as it exhausted itself in polemics; during the 18th century Protestantism, securely ensconced in “the narrows of the ecclesiastical terrain,” was gradually “outflanked by the grossest fallacies.”³

1700s

The fallacies were propagated by a new movement that enlarged upon, radicalized and popularized the spirit of the Renaissance, *viz.* the Enlightenment. Its spirit can be summarized in the following slogans: “Dare to know! Distrust authorities! Trust your own judgement! Follow unaided Reason!”

The Second or Further Reformation, largely pietist, countered by emphasizing: “Bow to the sovereign God. Leave things to Him. Take Revelation as your guide and trust your innermost feelings.” This response failed to address the root error of the new trend in philosophy, namely the claim that man should be self-directed and that human consciousness, not authoritative revelation, is the source of truth and the guide for life.

1789

This was the year of the great French Revolution. A most turbulent event, it attempted to put into practice the worldview of the Enlightenment under the battle-cry “*Ni Dieu, ni maître!*” Amid great enthusiasm and optimism it promulgated a Declaration of the Rights of Man. Man’s duties were restricted to loyal citizenship.

Because it fundamentally undermined all authority and delivered society up to endless experimentation, the Revolution ended in dictatorship. Yet its ideas and ideals continued to set the agenda during the 19th century and became global during the 20th. When a journalist during the Bicentennial Celebration asked the Chinese premier Chou-Enlai: “What has been the historical impact of the French Revolution?” his astute answer was: “It’s too early to tell.”

The *ideals of ‘89* are at the heart of Modernity. The spirit of modernity believes in an exclusively rational approach to issues, the consignment of religion to the private sphere, and the ability of man to give shape to

² A. Kuyper, *Bilderdijk in zijne nationale beteekenis* (Amsterdam, 1906), p. 13.

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G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Ongeloof en Revolutie* (Leyden, 1847), p. 176.

society at will, by common consent—if need be through social engineering.

Historically, in God's providence, Calvinists in the Netherlands over many decades worked out an in-depth response to the spirit of modernity—to "the Revolution." For them, Calvinism was not just a theology, but a world-transforming religion. To these men we now turn, since their "anti-revolutionary" worldview sowed the seeds of Reformational philosophy.

Seminal ideas against the Revolution

Important figures in the shaping of the "anti-revolutionary worldview" were three graduates from the law faculty of the University of Leyden: Bilderdijk, Da Costa, and Groen van Prinsterer.

Willem BILDERDIJK (1756–1831), a poet of some fame as well as a solicitor, was committed to Calvinist theology but also touched by the Romanticism of his time. He emphasized the *unity* of life. For him, creation was one gigantic *organism*, with which man was in touch through his *heart*.

The optimism of our age is ill-founded, he said; after all, the human race by nature is prey to depravity.

Bilderdijk believed Biblical revelation will always trump human reason. In his opinion, Christianity went wrong very early when it borrowed heavily from pagan philosophy. Surely, Biblical religion yields its own philosophy and generates its own distinctive worldview—a conviction he once expressed in a sonnet entitled *De Wareld*, which we shall examine in a moment.

A direct pupil of Bilderdijk was Isaac DA COSTA (1798–1860), a poet who earned his living from the proceeds of lecture series that he would give in Amsterdam and The Hague. He published a spirited *Grievances Against the Spirit of the Age* (1823), often referred to as the birth-cry of the religious revival in the Netherlands. The book was a wholesale condemnation, in a rather reactionary vein, of the favoured beliefs of his "progressive" contemporaries.

In time Da Costa came to modify his views by emphasizing that "there is no going back" to any kind of pre-revolutionary situation. We object to the *spirit* of the age, he would say, but our witness can only be effective if our alternatives are in tune with the *course* of the age, i.e., with what has come to be established as the new situation. Therefore we need vigorous theological renewal and a progressive political program that anticipates change, all in the spirit of historic Christianity as well as through faithful use of the opportunities the new age has brought us.

The challenge Da Costa issued to his friend Groen van Prinsterer was that "the enemy must be challenged and vanquished *on his own terrain*," a

terrain that included theology, politics and all the other branches of higher learning.⁴

Perhaps the most articulate, and certainly the most radical, of our three trailblazers was Guillaume “Willem” GROEN VAN PRINSTERER (1801–1876). Groen grasped the nettle when he wrote that the Revolution was the intellectual-spiritual foundation of every cultural initiative in his day. Given this diagnosis, he announced that the Revolution had to be combatted *in every one of its manifestations*. Nothing less would do, since it propagates three errors:

(i) Truth is based on *consensus*. Whatever the majority of men agree to regard as truth shall be so considered and honoured. Any so-called “revealed truth” must justify itself before the tribunal of human reason or the majority of right-thinking people.

(ii) Society is based on *convention*. Whatever the majority of people agree to regard as viable social relationships shall be installed and declared valid. Any so-called “creation order” must always give way to what humans think fit and acceptable.⁵

(iii) Authority is based on *consent*. No one has the right to wield authority over me unless I have given my permission. Governments, parents, teachers, elders, etc. cannot tell me what to do unless I have (expressly or tacitly) agreed to be subject to them.

Such, said Groen, are the fatal fallacies that undermine our civilization. But too many of us oppose only the symptoms of these false teachings. What we must do is expose their basic premise or starting principle, and then confront principle with principle. There is no third way: human life is driven by either *belief* or *unbelief*. Religion is inescapable. The atheist and the agnostic, too, are religious. The religion they espouse is the Religion of Humanity.⁶

Groen was an historian as well as a political theorist. His book *Unbelief and Revolution* traced the *empirical fact* that the reigning worldview was not just indifferent to historic Christianity but hostile to it, and that the new public philosophy was not just hostile to the civilization of Christendom but destructive of any well-ordered society. In line with Reformed thought he made an observation that would resonate down the century: Fear of the Lord is the controlling principle of knowledge, but it is not the whole of it; for the Christian with

⁴ Da Costa to Groen, 11 Nov. 1852; in G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Brieven van Mr. Isaac da Costa*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1873), 2:106.

⁵ A contemporary example is the view that cohabitation is as good as a marriage that is begun by publicly exchanging vows of fidelity. And for an example Groen could not have imagined: marriage can be both hetero- and homo-sexual.

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G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Ongeloof en Revolutie*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1868), p. 185 n.

intellectual gifts, scholarship is a legitimate calling, one that deserves earnest dedication in order that it may produce "believing science."

Other seminal ideas that are elaborated in the pages of *Unbelief and Revolution* are sphere-sovereignty, the persistence of the creation order, and the power of ideas in history. Let me say a word about each.

(i) The various *spheres of life* each have their own circumscribed authority. The state must not try to regulate the whole of life, least of all church, home and school.

(ii) The Revolution turns things upside down as it seeks to displace the "unshakable principles [and] immutable laws which the Maker and Sustainer of all things prescribes for his creatures and subjects."

(iii) The driving-force of the "ideas of '89," as it shapes the course of history, derives from firm convictions that are anchored in people's hearts. At the same time, the ideology also faces the superior force of the *order of creation*, an empirical fact that Christians must continue to point to.⁷

In his moments of despondency Groen van Prinsterer would nevertheless remind himself: "The issue has not yet been decided whether *unbelief* will triumph." We might say at the beginning of the 21st century: The days are evil, but we are to redeem the time by resisting *secularism* in whatever shape it presents itself, leaving the outcome to God.

The World

What are thou, structured frame, 'yond mental power's clasp?
Chain of effect and cause, to which there is no end;
whose possibility the mind can't comprehend;
whose actuality our reason fails to grasp.

O deep abyss, where can our consciousness then enter?
What art thou? Mere appearance, pressed upon the sense?
An imprint of the mind, remaining ever dense?
A notion we construe, like a conceited mentor?

Nay rather, then, art thou a being outside me?
Dost thou exist? Thou art not pure illusion?
Or of some other Being but a mere effusion?

Thus did I fret myself, until God answered: Hear Me!
All things depend on Me; whatever is, is Mine:
The whole world is My voice, and summons you to fear Me.

—Willem Bilderdijk (1786)

⁷ Ibid., 1st ed. (Leyden, 1847), pp. 53, 67, 116, 222.

How does Bilderdijk's sonnet epitomize the quest for a reformation of philosophy? Clearly, his poem is an initial attempt at framing a *Christian conception of totality* that is oriented to the true Origin of the world. It is the birth-cry of the reformation of philosophy. Surveying the history of Western philosophy from Stoicism, over materialism, empiricism, idealism and solipsism, back to Neoplatonism, the poet concludes that one cannot fathom the mystery of the world unless one confesses that it is a *creature*, hence does not rest in itself but is dependent from moment to moment on its Maker. Thus the starting point for all reliable knowledge is the divine Word, heard throughout the universe, calling all men to walk humbly before Him. In essence, Bilderdijk's sonnet is an appeal not to conform to the patterns of worldly thought but to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Abraham Kuyper: The antithesis in scholarship

Our next "trailblazer" of Reformational philosophy is the pastor, professor, publicist and politician Dr. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). He was the immediate successor of Groen van Prinsterer. In his old age Groen hailed Kuyper as the new leader of the anti-revolutionary movement—not just as his follower but "in his own right."

At university Kuyper had been trained as a modernist, but under the influence of simple folk in his first congregation he came to embrace the historic Christian faith as espoused by John Calvin. His lifelong mission became to bring Calvinism "in rapport with the age." This earned his theology the epithet Neo-Calvinism.⁸

Dr. Kuyper's first, youthful publication, penned in the village parsonage, was a strong plea for church reform. This earned him a warm thank-you note from a like-minded gentleman in The Hague—Mister Groen van Prinsterer. Groen followed up his letter with a photograph of himself and a complimentary copy of *Unbelief and Revolution*. Kuyper replied by thanking him for the photo as well as the book, about which he observed, "With this book you have given me a photograph of your mind."⁹ For the next few years Kuyper pored over the many publications by Groen.

Unlike Groen, whom he now called his "spiritual father," Kuyper had the gift of speaking and writing in such a way that an unschooled but clearheaded peasant farmer or shopkeeper or dockworker could read

⁸ The extent of Kuyper's faithfulness to historic Calvinism is ably discussed in James E. McGoldrick, *God's Renaissance Man: The Life and Work of Abraham Kuyper* (Darlington, UK, and Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2000).

him. At the same time, as a scholar he was the equal of his academic contemporaries in erudition and, what is even more important, far ahead of them in identifying the role of non-rational, worldview elements in the formation of knowledge and the pursuit of learning. In his dedicatory address at the opening of the Free University in Amsterdam Kuyper explained that the founders believed that higher education in all its branches called for an institution where all instruction would be based on unwavering loyalty to Christian principles:

Should a banner such as we carried away from Golgotha ever be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy so long as we had not done our utmost, so long as there remained a single arrow in our quiver, so long as there lived on this soil a bodyguard, however small, of the One crowned on Golgotha? To that question—and with this I conclude—to that question the response “*By God, No Never!*” must resound in our soul. Out of that *Never* this institution was born, and to that *Never*, as an oath of allegiance to a higher principle, I ask for an echo—may it be an Amen—from every patriotic heart.¹¹

After lecturing in systematic theology for a decade, Kuyper formulated a principle for scholarship that implied an *antithesis* among scholars—a parting of the ways, an opposition—in accordance with their fundamental beliefs:

Thus the usual idea that *science* establishes truth that is valid for everyone, purely on the basis of observation and demonstration, whilst *faith* comes into play only in the realm of conjectures where all certainty is lacking, turns out to be altogether untenable. With every expression of one’s person, hence also with the acquisition of any scientific conviction, all men proceed from *faith*. In every domain it is always faith that is the final link *connecting* the object of our knowledge with our knowing *selfhood*.¹²

Kuyper worked out his understanding of the antithesis in scholarship during his lecture series at Princeton University in 1898:

⁹ G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Briefwisseling* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), 5:668–71.

¹¹ A. Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring* [Sphere-sovereignty: Address at the inauguration of the Free University, 20 Oct. 1880] (Amsterdam, 1880), p. 33; Eng. trans. in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 461–90, at 490.

¹² A. Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1893/94), 2:90; cf. the (partial) Eng. trans., *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (London, 1899), p. 233. In this and other quotations from Kuyper (and below from Bavink, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd) I italicize words that would become pivotal terms in Reformational philosophy.

Notice that I do not speak of a conflict between faith and science. Such a conflict does not exist. Every science in a certain degree *starts from faith*. . . . Every science presupposes faith in—: the accurate working of our senses; the correctness of the laws of thought; the universal behind the particular; . . . and especially the principles from which to proceed.

Thus all these axioms, indispensable for productive scientific investigation, do not come to us by proof but are self-evident and given with our consciousness. . . . Hence it follows that the conflict is not between faith and science, but on the contrary between the assertion that the cosmos as it exists today is either in a *normal* or *abnormal* condition. This, and no other, is the principal antithesis that separates thinking minds in the domain of science into two opposing battle arrays.

The Normalists refuse to reckon with any other than natural data, and they oppose with the utmost vigour all attempts to break the logical inferences of cause and effect. . .

The Abnormalists on the other hand . . . maintain a conception of man as an independent species, because in him alone is reflected the image of God; they conceive of sin as the destruction of our original nature . . . and for that reason maintain the miraculous as the only means to restore the abnormal—the miracle of rebirth, of Scripture, of the Incarnation, and thus of the regeneration of the abnormal . . .

Not faith and science, therefore, but two scientific systems, or if you will, two scientific elaborations, stand opposed to each other, *each having its own faith*.¹³

Further quotations from Kuyper

The richness of Kuyper's mind is best illustrated with a few more quotations from his many writings and speeches that are pertinent to the story of the gestation of a Reformational philosophy. The ringing statement most often quoted is this one: "*There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human life of which the Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not exclaim: Mine!*"¹⁴

Among other cultural pursuits, higher education under the sovereign lordship of Christ was therefore the ideal. However, the authorities responsible for appointments to university faculties at the time were quite prepared to appoint scholars of every stripe—except those espousing classic Reformed positions. Reformed leaders came to the conclusion that to counteract the growing influence of secular scholarship an independent university was needed. In 1880, together with a few friends and associates, Kuyper founded the Free University (VU). It was explicitly "free" of State

¹³ A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*: The 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton University, Lecture IV.

¹⁴ Compare: "There is not one square inch or split second in the whole universe which is not claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan." (C. S. Lewis)

and Church, free to follow the laws for academic scholarship and scientific pursuits, in obedience to the Word of God alone.

At the inauguration of the VU, Kuyper explained that scholarship must always remain “sovereign in its own sphere,” lest it “degenerate under the guardianship of Church or State.” Scholarship, he went on, “creates its own life sphere in which truth is sovereign; under no circumstances may violation of the law for its life be tolerated.”

The new venture began very small. Kuyper admitted its “embarrassment to the point of blushing” (there were only five professors and five students). “What we venture by founding this School is to defy all that is called great; it is to row against the current of the whole scholarly world; it is to run counter to a whole age, an age of enormous charm.”¹⁵ Yet, *in God we trust*.

Slowly but surely the VU grew into a viable institution for higher learning, first in theology, law and letters, later also in medicine, the natural sciences and the social sciences. Thus was born what would become the *nursery* of Reformational philosophy.

Reformed principles

The aspiration to practise uncompromising, integral Christian scholarship was a historical novelty and proved much more difficult than had been imagined. Sure enough, after more than a decade of operation, the VU Senate adopted *18 Theses* (largely from Kuyper’s pen) that dealt with a “method for ascertaining the Calvinist principles that are to guide Reformed scholarship.” Below are some representative theses. They talk about deep-seated *motives* and they zero in on *the nature and limits* of our knowledge. Notions like that would not fail to have effect in the long run.

V: God, not man, brought about . . . the life embodied in Calvinism. The thought that guided Calvin and his adherents transcended their personal thinking. They were impelled by *motives* which very often did not pervade their personal consciousness with much clarity.

XVI: Calvinist principles must give answers to questions which did not arise until Kant’s inquiry into *the knowing subject*, including questions about the nature of our knowledge, the manner in which our faculty of knowing works, the relation between this faculty and the object of knowledge, the limits of our knowledge, and the method to acquire knowledge.

XVII: The foundation of Calvinist principles should support the *entire edifice* of science.

This last thesis covered the full circle—the “encyclopedia”—of both the natural and the human sciences. It became an unwritten rule at the VU

¹⁵ A. Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*, pp. 20, 32f.; Eng. trans., pp. 476, 489f.

that at least the third appointment in any faculty should be a scholar versed in the *history and philosophy* of the discipline in question.¹⁶ In the same vein, a course of instruction in philosophy became mandatory for all students.

Kuyper's song

Nothing gives us more immediate access to Kuyper's deepest motivation in such short compass than the poem he fashioned in 1897. For years on end, Kuyper wrote meditations in the religious weekly *De Heraut*. Later he took on the chief editorship of a fresh newspaper, *De Standaard*, to which he contributed leading articles almost every day. In 1897 he had been doing this for 25 years and the anniversary was celebrated in a gala evening. In his thank-you word at the end of the evening Kuyper recited this song:¹⁷

My life is ruled by but one passion,
one higher urge drives will and soul.
My breath may stop before I ever
allow that sacred urge to fall.
'Tis to affirm God's holy statutes
in church and state, in home and school,
despite the world's strong remonstrations,
to bless our people with His rule.
'Tis to engrave God's holy order, among scholars
heard in Creation and the Word,
upon the nation's public conscience,
till God is once again its Lord.

It repays to look carefully at certain expressions used here. "In church and state, in home and school," that is: as wide as human life. "Heard in creation and the Word," that is: Scripture as the fountainhead and touchstone, yet also in close interaction with general revelation in creation. "The nation's public conscience," that is: the legal order by which a people agree to live, regardless of whether they accept it in obedience to God or purely in the best interest of the nation. Kuyper was not an intolerant "theocrat," but a Neo-Calvinist pluralist whose only weapons are spiritual. Kuyper's dream would be realized, if at all, by persuasion, not coercion.

¹⁶ Communication to the author by Professor Reijer Hooykaas, May 3, 1991.

¹⁷ In *Gedenkboek, opgedragen door het Feestcomité aan Prof. Dr. A. Kuyper bij zijn vijftien- twintig-jarig jubileum als hoofdredacteur van "De Standaard"* (Amsterdam, 1897), p. 77. Kuyper explained that his poem followed a model borrowed from Da Costa.

The poem as a whole echoes the ongoing revival of the Reformed religion, a rejuvenation of a faith and a worldview by means of which the country would be defended against secularism. One implication, dear to Kuyper's heart and key to his cultural strategy, was the pursuit of scholarship in a struggle with secular scholarship that refused academic standing to alternative science. He hoped, God willing, to wrestle this Goliath to the ground.

Kuyper on the human heart

A pivotal role in the genesis of Reformational philosophy would be played by the concept of the human heart. The biblical thrust of that concept, foreshadowed in Bilderdijk's poetry and prose, was grasped in formulations penned by Abraham Kuyper. In one of his weekly meditations he described the centrality of the heart as man's religious core with this image:

God says in His Word: The gateway to knowledge does not lie in your *head*, but in your *heart*. . . . And the heart must be understood here not as an organ of feeling but as the place within you where God is at work and from where he affects your head and also your brains.¹⁸

Speaking to an assembly of party delegates, Kuyper reminded them:

From the *heart* are the issues of life; that which wells up from the heart must be shaped into conscious form by the *head*.¹⁹

One of his best formulations is found in the *Lectures on Calvinism*:

Just as the entire creation reaches its culminating point in man, so does praise find its fulfillment only in man who is made in the image of God. And this not because man seeks it, but because God Himself implanted the only genuine religious expression exclusively in the human heart through the 'seed of religion' (*semen religionis*). God Himself *makes* man religious through the *sensus divinitatis*, i.e., the sense of the Divine, which He causes to play on the strings of his heart.²⁰

¹⁸ A. Kuyper, *Honig uit de rotssteen* [Honey from the rock], 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1880, 1883), 2:35ff.

¹⁹ A. Kuyper, *Niet de Vrijheidsboom, maar het Kruis* [Not the Tree of Liberty but the Cross] (Amsterdam, 1889), 11.

²⁰ A. Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme; zes Stone-Lezingen in October 1898 te Princeton (N.-J.) gehouden* (Amsterdam, 1899), 39. Cf. *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: 1931), 45f.; the English there is slightly defective.

This understanding and use of the concept of the human heart as the central religious selfhood of every human being, affecting all his life expressions, was to be seized upon by a later generation as the proverbial philosopher's stone that would transform the philosophical debate from arguments about logic into arguments about principle.

Herman Bavinck

Professor Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), a younger contemporary of Kuyper and his successor in systematic theology at the VU, reinforced the latter's mission with further insights gained from Scripture. Bavinck was a child of the Secessionists who in 1834 had broken with the established church in order to escape creeping modernism. Apart from a small percentage of well-to-do members, they were people who generally spent their waking hours earning a living and had time for little else. While they tended to lean toward a world-flight mentality, they were among the first in the country to establish private Christian day schools. In Bavinck they found a trusted leader who, next to Kuyper, awakened them to a broader cultural calling.

Bavinck self-consciously took up position in the movement that had been given prominence by Groen van Prinsterer.²¹ In his Foreword to the 1904 reprint of *Ongeloof en Revolutie* Bavinck remarked that Groen's work was "not antiquated, since the enemy he fought may have changed its face but not its spirit." In the past half century, he explained, "science has been completely secularized and today explains phenomena purely historically, or psycho-genetically, and in the final analysis mechanistically." Hence a Christian witness in the academy had become all the more urgent.

Writing for the members of his church, Bavinck emphasized that redemption impacts all of life: salvation in Christ does not lift us out of this world but sends us back into it, to bless it with redemptive solutions. Bavinck shared Kuyper's conviction that it was imperative to revive the Reformed doctrine of *common grace*—the doctrine of the wideness of God's mercy as He upholds fallen man and a broken world. Christians are saved from sin *and saved for service*. The world is crying out for ambassadors of Christ. Christ's followers need to be trained for this missional calling. This calling, though it begins with "front-line evangelism," is a calling that extends over the whole range of human activities and cultural pursuits. To be able to witness in an effective and relevant way in all these areas requires much training of the mind.

²¹ See his inspired address *He vierde eener Eeuw. Rede bij gelegenheid van het vijf-entwintig-jarig bestaan van De Standaard* (Kampen, 1897).

Training of the Christian mind begins with the discipline of theology, but it must not stop there; it must reach out to all the other disciplines.

Bavinck's own life came to exemplify this view of the Christian's calling as applied to the academic world.²² He taught systematic theology at the seminary in Kampen from 1881 to 1901, a fruitful period that resulted in the publication of his four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.²³ In 1901 he assumed a similar chair at the VU, in which he served for another twenty years. However, in 1911 he sold all his theological books and spent his time away from lecturing at the university in an ambitious program of writing and publishing in such diverse areas as psychology, pedagogy, politics and philosophy, insisting that these "worldly" fields, too, were crying out for the liberating insights of Reformed thought.

Grace restores Nature

One of Bavinck's most fruitful insights came from his analysis of the church's answer through the ages to this fundamental question: How does the grace we have in Christ relate to our life in the world? Does grace stand *against* nature, as Anabaptists hold? In that case a field like philosophy is worldly and should be avoided. Or does grace stand *above* nature, as Rome teaches, in which case philosophy provides a fund of natural knowledge that is valid up to a point and in order to be complete needs no inner reformation but merely the addition of supernatural knowledge. Or, again, does grace stand *alongside* nature, as Lutheranism believes, so that grace does not touch philosophy internally but assigns philosophy to worldly concerns that are religiously neutral.

To these three traditional answers Bavinck replied that they are inadequate. Rather, grace works *within* nature. The atoning work of Christ reinstates man in his calling and restores nature to its created purpose. That is why fields like philosophy can receive inner healing and be redeemed. It is high time, he urged, that this work be taken in hand in a serious and concerted way!²⁴

Obviously, Bavinck's analysis goes a long way in explaining why it took so long to slay the giant of worldly philosophy. For, so long as grace does not, need not and cannot affect philosophy internally, there will be no effort by Christians to reform philosophy from the ground up.

²² See Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2010).

²³ Eng. trans. *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–08).

²⁴ See Jan Veenhof, "Nature and Grace in Bavinck," trans. Al Wolters, *Pro Rege* 34.4 (June 2006): 11–39. Available on-line. Offprint by Dordt College Press, 2008.

Meanwhile, inspired by Bavinck's and Kuyper's call for developing a distinctively Reformed philosophy were two young VU graduates, Dirk Vollenhoven (1892–1978) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977).

Dirk Vollenhoven

After earning a bachelor's of theology and a doctorate with a dissertation on the philosophy of mathematics, Dirk Vollenhoven entered the pastoral ministry on the island of Walcheren in the south-western province of Zeeland. Here he came into contact with Antheunis Janse, headmaster of a nearby Christian primary school, a singularly gifted man who initiated a correspondence with Rev. Dr. Vollenhoven and over the years helped him with a wholistic—unitary instead of dichotomist—anthropology and a less theological, more childlike reading of Scripture.²⁵

Vollenhoven's second charge was a ward in the *Gereformeerde Kerk* of The Hague. This city became the *cradle* of Reformational philosophy, because it was here that he spent many an evening discussing with his brother-in-law Herman Dooyeweerd how philosophy could be reformed. Their collaboration²⁶ resulted in both men being appointed in 1926 to the faculty of the VU—Vollenhoven to teach general philosophy, Dooyeweerd to teach philosophy of law. Nine years later they founded the Association for Reformational Philosophy.²⁷

A defining criterion of philosophy for Vollenhoven was whether or not it was practised by the light of Scripture, thus in submission to God's Word or in ignorance or repudiation of that Word. On the basis of this criterion he divided the history of Western philosophy into the conventional three periods, but with a characteristic difference:

(1) Ancient philosophy (600 B.C.–A.D. 50), a “pre-synthesis” period during which philosophers were bereft of the Word and so were not tempted to devise a combination or “synthesis” of biblical and pagan themes.

(2) Medieval philosophy (A.D. 50–1550), a real “synthesis” period.

(3) Modern philosophy (1550–present), an “anti-synthesis” period during which biblical and pagan thought went their separate ways.

25

B. J. van der Walt, “Antheunis Janse of Biggekerke (1890–1960): Morning star of a 20th-century reformation,” *Koers* 69 (2004): 221–57; repr. in *The Eye is the Lamp of the Body: Worldviews and their Impact* (Potchefstroom, 2008), 189–229.

²⁶ For their relationship, see Anthony Tol, *Philosophy in the Making: D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and the Emergence of Reformed Philosophy* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2010), pp. 129–231.

²⁷ The 75th anniversary of the Association was celebrated with a conference at the VU, Aug. 16–19, 2011, attended by close to 250 people representing 30 countries.

The First Period was further divided into two phases, the Greek and the Hellenistic. The Greek phase included subjectivists (e.g., Thales), objectivists (Anaximander), and realists (Plato), to name some chief representatives, whose main concern was ontological, focussing on the question, Where is the law order for the cosmos? Thinkers during the Hellenistic phase concentrated on the epistemological problem: How can one know the law? It encompassed Epicureans, Stoics and Neoplatonists.

The Second Period divided naturally into three phases: an Early Christian phase (Augustine, Tertullian), the Medieval (Anselm, Aquinas, Ockham), and an Anti-Scholastic phase (Bradwardine, Petrarch). The Synod of Orange (A.D. 529) was crucial when it ruled that "grace perfects nature." This opened the floodgates to synthesis.

The Third Period also has three phases: a prelude, a rationalist and an irrationalist phase. For Phase One Vollenhoven identified three main versions of an orientation to "nature" apart from "grace": Humanism (represented by Boccaccio), Renaissance (Bruno), and Classical Humanism (Valla), while John Calvin departed in the opposite direction when he taught that "grace restores nature."

During this Third Period, thinkers in Phase Two located the law for the cosmos in human reason. This phase had two subdivisions: Old Rationalism (1600–1830), represented by scientialism (Descartes, Locke, Berkeley), Enlightenment (Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau), and Idealism (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel). The second subdivision Vollenhoven called Late Rationalism (1830–1900), which shifts the focus from reason's *results* to reason's *method*; it includes Positivism (Comte, the early Marx), Neo-positivism (Dilthey, Wundt), and Neo-idealism (Windelband, Rickert).

Finally, Phase Three in the Modern Period, which dates from approximately 1900, is marked by the turn to Irrationalism. It reduces the scope of human reason and gives priority to non-rational and irrational elements in human consciousness. This phase subdivides into Pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey), Vitalism (Bergson, Spranger, Klages), and Existentialism (Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre).

In addition to this succession of paradigms or "time currents," Vollenhoven discovered that whenever a philosophy answers the four basic questions that all philosophies must answer, "only" 93 permutations—thought patterns or "types"—are conceivable. Each *time current* has thinkers who exhibit thought that falls under one of these *types*. This fine-meshed taxonomy also enables the student to ascertain whether a thinker shifted to another type or moved to another time current. In addition it carried a clear message: history is instructive; it tells us what the great thinkers have observed in reality, what they struggled

with and solved, but also what they misconstrued. So beware of falling into any of their deficient ways of explaining the world.²⁸

For his own explanation of the world, Vollenhoven worked out a distinct ontology of disarming simplicity. Philosophy is the science of *what there is*, and therefore philosophy's task is to investigate the *entire* domain of the cosmos.

Very well, he starts, the entire cosmos is a creature and therefore subject to *God's law*. And whatever is subject to God's law can only be one of two things: it is either *heavenly* (Part I) or *earthly* (Part II). Both parts contain an immeasurable richness, of which we, obviously, know the earthly best. After analyzing the *differences* between them we shall, he writes, discuss their *connection* (Part III).²⁹ This he then proceeds to do in one hundred and twenty-two numbered sections, as follows: Part I in 3 sections (§§ 19–21), Part II in 115 sections (§§ 22–136), and Part III in 4 sections (§§ 137–140).

The main distinctions that Vollenhoven's ontology introduces is the *thus-so* difference and the *this-that* difference. The *thus-so* distinction seeks to account for "modalities": *how or in what ways* the things in created reality behave or function.³⁰ The *this-that* distinction seeks to account for "individuality," for that which determines the great diversity among things (objects, plants, animals, man, as well as acts, events, relationships). A third determinant is an antithetical one: that between *good and evil*.³¹

When it comes to epistemology or *the theory of how we know*, Vollenhoven is equally disarming. He distinguishes two kinds of knowing: a non-scientific and a scientific knowing. In a telling statement he then writes: "Since scientific knowing relies on non-scientific knowing, the latter shall be discussed first. . . ." which he then follows up with a statement of three pillars undergirding this epistemology:

(i) The thinking subject belongs to the cosmos. He cannot transcend the limits of the cosmos, but he is *connected* with all that is knowable in it.

(ii) This connection is a *direct* one. . . . The thinking person focuses his attention on what is knowable, be it a thing or a human being, and analyzes it there where it is found.

²⁸ See Al Wolters, "On Vollenhoven's Problem-Historical Method," in *Hearing and Doing: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner*, ed. John Kraay and Anthony Tol (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), pp. 231–62.

²⁹ Cf. Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven, *Isagôgè Philosophiae: Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. John H. Kok and Anthony Tol (1930/1967; Sioux Centre, IA: Dordt College Press, 2005), p. 18.

³⁰ Namely, arithmetically, spatially, physically, organically, psychically, analytically, historically, lingually, socially, economically, aesthetically, juridically, ethically or pistically. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³¹

(iii) *Primum vivere, deinde philosophari*: first live, then philosophize. . . . “Non-scientific knowledge without a doubt belongs to *vivere* and is present there in an abundance that is far more varied than indicated here. No one, not even those who also work at a scientific level, can ever get too much of non-scientific knowledge.”³²

Herman Dooyeweerd

Kant’s critique of theoretical thought is not critical enough. His central selfhood (he called it the “transcendental logical subject”) is not really central. Deeper still is the central religious selfhood.

With this conclusion Dooyeweerd shook off the Neokantians who were the staple authors of his day. After completing a doctorate in constitutional law, Herman Dooyeweerd had become a civil servant. An abiding interest of his were the foundational questions of the field of law, where he was at first bewildered by the dogmatic positions of the major competing schools. After an appointment as researcher at the Ministry of Labour and soon thereafter as director of the Abraham Kuyper Institute, both situated in The Hague, he stilled his hunger for philosophical insight during evenings at the home of his brother-in-law Dirk Vollenhoven. He soon struck out on his own and became a critical student of Neokantianism in particular.

One afternoon, lost in a volume of meditations by Kuyper, he came across a passage that he would remember and be able to recite from memory to the end of his days: “The gateway to knowledge does not lie in your head but in your heart . . . the place where God is at work and from where he affects your head and also your brains.”³³ He later recalled:

The great turning point in my thought was marked by the discovery of the religious root of thought itself, whereby a new light was shed on the failure of all attempts, including my own, to bring about an inner synthesis between the Christian faith and a philosophy which is rooted in faith in the self-sufficiency of human reason.

I came to understand the central significance of the “heart,” repeatedly proclaimed by Holy Scripture to be the religious root of human existence.

On the basis of this central Christian point of view I saw the need of a revolution in philosophical thought of a very radical character. . . .

From a Christian point of view, the whole attitude of philosophical thought which proclaims the self-sufficiency of the latter turns out to be

Ibid., pp. 21–102.

³² Ibid., pp. 109–10, 123–24, 135–36. At a seminar he once said: “After all, non-scientific knowledge constitutes 95% of our knowledge.” During intermission his students said to each other: “That’s a philosopher talking; it’s probably more like 99%.”

³³ See note 18 above.

unacceptable, because it withdraws human thought from the divine revelation in Christ Jesus.³⁴

And so Dooyeweerd was ready to set out on a search for a philosophy that would do justice first of all to the nature of thought, and underneath that to the nature of reality. He developed both a distinct epistemology and a distinct ontology in ways that signalled a radical departure from prevailing schools of thought. In ontology he strongly resembled Vollenhoven with his ascending scale of fifteen “modalities,” and he further enriched this tool of analysis with an intricate theory of “individuality structures” and “enkaptic relationships.” In epistemology he developed his own definition of the object of thought, the so-called *Gegenstand* relation.

As a preface to both subdisciplines, Dooyeweerd developed a “transcendental” critique of theoretical thought. This critique demolished the stubborn dogmatism of the rival philosophical schools by demonstrating how all thought is invariably anchored in prior commitments. It sounded the death-knell to all “immanent,” inner-worldly philosophy that pretends to be autonomous, self-standing, religiously neutral.³⁵ Goliath was slain in principle.

The history of Western philosophy is told by Dooyeweerd in terms of three *basic themes*, each wracked by internal polar tensions: form and matter (Greek), nature and grace (Scholastic), and nature and freedom (Modern). Over against these “ground-motives” he posits the biblical ground-motive of creation, the fall into sin, and redemption through Christ Jesus in communion with the Holy Spirit.

Because Dooyeweerd published so much more than his comrade-in-arms Vollenhoven, the movement for Reformational philosophy is often equated with Dooyeweerd’s “Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea.” Yet their differences on the level of technical philosophy are not negligible. Nevertheless their overall unity is unmistakable in their biblical orientation and motivation. This can also be said of the subsequent practitioners of Reformational philosophy: despite their sometimes significant disagreements their basic unity is evident, especially in their adherence to the religious underpinnings of their numerous elaborations

³⁴ Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1953–58), p. v.

³⁵ See, among many other places, the first two chapters in H. Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia, 1960). Reprinted as Ser. B, Vol. 4, of *The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd*, ed. D. F. M. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2009–).

and applications in an amazing variety of disciplines.³⁶ No longer do they cower before Goliath or kowtow to him.

Dooyeweerd called his system a “first attempt” and he was realistic enough to say that he worked in the field of philosophy as a child of his time, “in critical solidarity with the intellectual-spiritual community of the West.” When asked toward the end of his life what his philosophy might look like fifty years from now, he answered: “That I don’t know. It is possible that it will have disappeared. And I would not mind that if it had done its work.”³⁷

³⁶ Cf. e.g. M. C. Smit, *Toward a Christian Conception of History* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).

³⁷ Interview, aired on IKOR television, 16 May 1973; quoted in Marcel Verburg, *Herman Dooyeweerd: The Life and Work of a Christian Philosopher* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paideia Press, forthcoming).