

MBS TEXTE 81



4. Jahrgang
2007

Thomas K. Johnson

**Dutch Reformed
Philosophy in North
America**



Philosophical Initiatives
Philosophische Anstöße

Table of Contents

Inhaltsverzeichnis

I The New Reformed Epistemology	4
2 The Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea	7
3 Reformed Transcendentalism	12
Remarks	14
Annotations	14
The Author	16
Impressum	17

This essay was first published in *Communio Viatorum* (Vol. XLV, 2003), a journal of Charles University, Prague. It is republished with permission.

1. Aufl. 2007

Dutch Reformed Philosophy in North America

Three Varieties in the Late Twentieth Century

Thomas K. Johnson

A striking development in Christian scholarship with roots in Europe has taken place in North America in the past generation or two. This scholarship may be largely unknown in Europe, but it may be of special interest there. I am referring to the unfolding of Dutch Reformed philosophy.

This description sounds rather ironic, and the irony may be sharpened by asking why this particular intellectual development should not be called “Varieties of American Reformed Theology.” An answer to this question will get us started on our study.

The reasons these movements should be called “Dutch in North America,” not “American,” are multiple. On the one hand, the major leaders in these three movements are all of a Dutch ethnic heritage, either raised in Dutch communities in the U.S. or Canada, or else they are immigrants from the Netherlands. On the other hand, the leaders of these three movements all took much of their inspiration from Dutch Reformed theologians or philosophers, especially from Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, who themselves drew on the writings of John Calvin. The reason these movements should be called “Re-

formed” is that the key leaders of the movements all have or had strong ties to classical Reformed churches, many of which have a strongly confessional orientation. The reason we can call these writings “philosophy” and not “theology” is that they address many classical philosophical questions, and further because many (not all) of these writers insist strongly that they are NOT theologians. (Only Cornelius Van Til is an exception here.)

The three varieties could be described as The New Reformed Epistemology; The Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea; and Reformed Transcendentalism. The first two names are used by the representatives of these movements. I have given the name “Reformed Transcendentalism” to the movement that calls its own philosophy “Presuppositionalism” because I think this name better describes this type of philosophy.

The main developers of “The New Reformed Epistemology” have been Nicholas Wolterstorff (Yale Divinity School) and Alvin Plantinga (Notre Dame University), whose basic ideas have been promoted and used by thinkers such as Ronald Nash and Dewey Hoitenga.¹ *Return to Reason* by Kelly James

Clark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 1998) can serve as a useful compendium of this type of philosophy. “The Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea” has been developed by American and Canadian followers of the Dutch thinkers Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven. Gordon Spykman has explored the implications of this philosophy for systematic theology, Roy Clouser for the theory of knowledge and reason, Al Wolters for worldview studies, Hendrik Hart for systematic philosophy, while James Skillen has written numerous books in educational and political theory from this perspective.² *Patterns of the Western Mind* by John H. Kok (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 1998) serves as a useful introduction to this perspective. “Reformed Transcendentalism” is largely the work of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). Van Til was heavily indebted to the Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. His views have been developed and promoted by thinkers such as John Frame, Richard Smith, and Scott Oliphant.³ *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* by Greg L. Bahnsen (Phillipsburg, NJ, USA: P & R Publishing, 1998) is a thorough guide to this perspective.

It is worth noting that 1998 saw the publication (or republication) of books that summarized or unified a half a century of research and writing by scholars from each of these three philosophies. This article will outline some of the distinctive ideas of each perspective.

I The New Reformed Epistemology

The NRE writers like to start with the question, “Is belief in God a rational belief?” As they discuss the rationality of religious belief they like to keep two things in mind. First, since the Enlightenment many serious thinkers have regarded belief in God as an irrational superstition, and second, the results of the numerous attempts to “prove” the existence of God, that is, “natural theology,” from Aquinas to Paley and Swinburne, have been less than overwhelming. The NRE writers generally say that the arguments for the existence of God all depend on assumptions that some people bring to the discussion but other people do not bring into the discussion. Therefore they call the arguments “person relative” arguments for the existence of God, not “proofs.” In order to show that belief in God is a rational belief, they claim, it will be necessary to re-examine what makes any belief a rational belief. In the course of doing this they will discover the failure of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theories of knowledge which fail to explain why ordinary, everyday beliefs are rational. This discovery will then prompt them to begin articulating a new theory of knowledge, a “new Reformed epistemology.”

Their more detailed introductions to their philosophy go something like this: the challenge to belief in God arising out of some Enlightenment thinkers developed into the theory of

knowledge called “evidentialism.” A classical spokesman for evidentialism is W. K. Clifford, who said, “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”⁴ Clifford’s explanation of why he thought it wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence is that what we believe, on any subject, has a wide impact on many people and on society as a whole. “The harm which is done by credulity in a man is not confined to the fostering of a credulous character in others, and consequent support of false beliefs. Habitual want of care about what I believe leads to habitual want of care in others about the truth of what is told to me. ... The credulous man is father to the liar and cheat.”⁵

Clifford’s evidentialist theory of knowledge led him to be an agnostic with regard to belief in God; indeed, he thought it was morally wrong to believe in God. In response the theistic evidentialists have agreed with the evidentialist theory of knowledge (it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence) and have then argued that the evidence does exist to make belief in God a rational belief. Some theistic evidentialists have returned to classical natural theology, others to historical arguments, whether for the resurrection of Jesus, the historicity of the Bible, or to other types of evidence. But the NRE has rejected the entire Enlightenment/evidentialist theory of knowledge.

Alvin Plantinga took the first giant step in this new direction in his studies on the philosophy of mind, specifically

whether or not it is possible to prove that other people have minds. Simply stated, Plantinga pointed out that it is probably impossible to prove that another person has a mind, and yet most of us regard it as fully rational to believe that other people have minds. (Those of us who are educators might be forgiven for doubts with regard to an occasional student.) If it is rational to believe that other people have minds, even though the evidence for the existence of their minds might not satisfy Clifford and the evidentialists, then maybe it is rational to believe in God without evidence, especially if God is more like a mind than any object in the physical realm. This is to suggest that belief in God is a direct or immediate belief, not a belief that is formed on the basis of rational inference or evidence. In other words, say Plantinga and friends, belief in God is more like believing other people have minds than it is like a proof in the natural sciences.

According to Plantinga, evidence or proof has relatively little to do with belief in God, and neither evidence nor proof are needed to make belief in God a rational belief. However, this does not mean one should avoid studying and discussing arguments for the existence of God. This may be a good exercise for students, and they may be a lot of fun. In reading Plantinga’s books and articles (which contain various arguments for the existence of God) one can get the impression that he pursues these arguments as an interesting hobby, with all the passion and enthusiasm that go

into any great hobby. But, of course, a hobby does not generally have great religious significance. (This should not be interpreted as suggesting that Plantinga is not serious about either his philosophy or his Christian beliefs.)

The NRE approach to religious epistemology obviously has broad ranging implications for a total theory of knowledge. Their account, briefly stated, is as follows. They point out that the different things that people believe stand in certain relations to each other, that people have a noetic structure. The central distinction in this structure is between nonbasic beliefs and basic beliefs. Nonbasic beliefs are held inferentially, on the basis of evidence rationally interpreted. In contrast, basic beliefs are things that are known directly, not on the basis of evidence or inference. Basic beliefs include perceptual beliefs (e.g., I see my desk), memory beliefs (I ate breakfast this morning), and simple logic. Nonbasic beliefs would include things like scientific hypotheses and complex mathematical formulas. NRE calls a belief a “proper” belief if it is one that it is rationally justifiable for a person to hold (which does not automatically guarantee its truth). Thus, “properly nonbasic beliefs” are “beliefs that one justifiably holds on the basis of other beliefs.”⁶

Philosophy since Descartes has used a method of doubt, which we could call “classical foundationalism.” In order to try to exclude any possibly false ideas from the body of truths we affirm, the classical foundationalist says we

must start from a very limited number of properly basic ideas and apply careful rules of inference to arrive at a very limited number of properly nonbasic beliefs. The only types of beliefs that the classical foundationalist accepts as properly basic are of three types: things evident to the senses; matters that are self-evident; and incorrigible propositions (usually about our own subjective state). All properly nonbasic beliefs, claims the classical foundationalist, must be derived by careful inference from properly basic beliefs. The evidentialist objection to belief in God clearly operates only within a classical foundationalist theory of knowledge. If classical foundationalism fails the test of rational scrutiny, evidentialism will fall, too, which would open the possibility that belief in God is rational without evidence.

The problems with classical foundationalism, says NRE, are multiple. To start with, it would require that people hold very, very few beliefs about anything, since very many of our everyday beliefs fail to meet the classical foundationalist standards of rationality. The number of beliefs that classical foundationalism allows as rational is so few that it is quite certain that by these standards there has never been a rational person. Further, classical foundationalism regards as irrational many beliefs that clearly seem to be rational to rational people, e.g., that my wife has a mind. Finally, classical foundationalism fails to meet its own standards, for it cannot prove that this limitation to

claims to knowledge is itself a properly basic belief or is derived from properly basic beliefs by means of careful inference in such a way that would make it a properly nonbasic belief. Classical foundationalism can be said to be self-defeating or even self-referentially absurd.

In light of the total failure of classical foundationalism to give an account of knowledge, NRE has proposed an alternative which its adherents call broad foundationalism or Reidian foundationalism (in gratitude for ideas learned from Thomas Reid). They retain the term “foundationalism” because they think the distinction between basic and nonbasic knowledge is a proper distinction. However, there are two massive differences between classical and Reidian foundationalism. The first is that Reidians reject Cartesian doubt (and thereby evidentialism) that says “guilty until proven innocent” with regard to normal knowledge claims. Because they think human epistemological equipment works well most of the time, they argue for an “innocent until proven guilty” stance toward normal knowledge claims. The second major difference from classical foundationalism is that Reidians are convinced that the knowledge that is properly basic is very wide ranging in scope, much, much wider than classical foundationalism allowed. This wide properly basic knowledge includes matters about the physical world, the existence of the minds of other people, and, at least for some people, knowing God. This means that claims to know or encounter God can

stand as rationally justified claims without any further evidence or proof.

Since many of the new Reformed epistemologists are members of Reformed Churches, they like to point out that their conclusions sound a lot like Calvin, especially when Calvin talked about the “*divinitatis sensum*.” Accordingly, many of their quotations from Calvin come from the first three chapters of the Institutes. (The Reformed critics of NRE might point out that they rarely mention chapter four of Calvin’s Institutes, which talks about the smothering and corruption of the natural knowledge of God.)

Having taken the starting point for their thinking in the rationality of belief in God more than thirty years ago, and having also rejected classical foundationalism and evidentialism, some of the new Reformed epistemologists are now engaged in developing a comprehensive theory of knowledge to stand in contrast with much western epistemology since Descartes. I, for one, am eager to see more of their results.

2 The Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea

John Kok’s *Patterns of the Western Mind* contains an introduction to the two major distinctive elements of this philosophy: a particular interpretation of the history of western thought and a highly developed ontology. And the two distinctive elements stand in a close relationship to each other.

“A set of resolute commitments and assumptions precede the historian’s analysis, define his focus, and govern his evaluations and judgments. These prior assumptions bear ultimately a confessional and even religious character. ... there cannot be an “objective” ... description of the history of philosophy (or of psychology or of physics.)”⁷ By putting statements like this in the opening chapters of their books, Kok and his colleagues are not only saying that every history of philosophy is written in light of the philosophical commitments of the historian. They are claiming that all learning and education in every field of study, whether philosophy or mathematics, theology or physics, takes place in light of a set of commitments and assumptions that a person brings to the learning task. Further, they will often argue, the commitments and assumptions that a person brings to the learning task necessary contain a religious dimension because everyone makes assumptions about the basic religious questions, such as “What has always existed? What is our place in the universe? What is the solution to the world’s problems?” Whether a person brings Marxist, Darwinist, or Christian faith commitments to their learning, religious assumptions always shape learning. The Augustian-Anselmian phrase that “faith seeks understanding,” they claim, is a description of all learning, even if that faith is an atheist faith.

Under this framework Kok provides a very interesting historical introduction

to philosophy intended for humanities students in their early years. His historical introduction largely follows that of the Dutch writers Dirk Vollenhoven and J. M. Spier. A few examples of his comments on some of the great thinkers of the tradition will serve to illustrate this model of philosophical historiography.

Western thought from Philo through Ockham is described as “The Period of Synthesis.” The key to grasping this era of philosophy, they claim, is to see it as an attempt to combine the biblical message with pagan patterns of thought, which attempt necessarily had to fail. “The radical antithetical nature of the Christian message often became infected and contaminated by paganism.”⁸ “There is no lasting unity and in the long run both the pagan way of putting things and the biblical insight are distorted. To grasp the Good News with bad categories warps the gospel and twists the truth.”⁹ One can hardly imagine a Christian thinker using stronger terms to reject the biblical-classical synthesis.

Of St. Augustine, Kok writes, “One could say that in his writings two Gods appear. On the one hand there is the covenanting God of Scripture, the Lord and Creator who loves Augustine and who is loved by Augustine. ... On the other hand, there is the neoplatonic ONE: a god who is a self-identical, uncompounded essence, ‘being’ in the absolute sense.”¹⁰ The criticism of St. Thomas is similar. “The Thomistic proofs do not prove the existence of the

Father of our Lord, but rather an aristotelian god, an unmoved mover. With the traditional attributes of simplicity, impassibility, immutability, and eternity, his conception of God too often sounds more Greek than Christian.”¹¹ Kok and his friends think the great Christian thinkers of the era of synthesis did not sufficiently understand that pagan classical philosophy brought a pagan faith commitment and ground motive with it.

The philosophers of this group not only claim that the biblical-classical synthesis brought much grief to the Christian community by introducing a false understanding of God. They also claim that the synthesis of biblical faith and classical philosophy prepared the way for the secularization of western thought and culture. Thinkers of this group generally think the secularization of thought and culture has been disastrous in its effects while they also applaud the freeing of state, society, and education from ecclesiastical control. Some seem to hint that an ecclesiastical society flows from a false synthesis. Their account goes something like this:

The Scholastic thought of the Middle Ages with its nature/grace conceptual framework was a result of the synthesis. Scholasticism divides life into two areas, “nature,” which includes society, state, philosophy, and reason, and “supernature,” which includes grace, faith, church, and theology. The realm of nature is then interpreted to be quite independent and autonomous from su-

pernature and grace. And then at some point in time people began to think that “nature” could be governed and interpreted by reason alone, without reference to the church or the Christian faith. And finally people began to think of the supernatural realm as unnecessary, and secularism is complete. For the tiny remnant that continues to cling to the Christian message, the nature/grace conception leaves them with the impression that their faith is irrelevant to vast areas of daily life; faith and grace have nothing to do with life as it is lived and interpreted in the realm of nature. The philosophers of this group think that most Christians in the western world, whether Protestant or Catholic, misinterpret the Christian faith because of an unconscious nature/grace dualism inherited from the synthesis period.

If the unity of philosophy from the time of Augustine through the Middle Ages was that of a synthesis of Christianity and classical thought (with a basic framework or ground motive of nature and grace), the theme that unifies philosophy since the Enlightenment is the rejection of the biblical-classical synthesis. The new ground motive or basic conceptual framework is that of nature and freedom. On the one hand nature is “conceived as a set of scientifically discerned laws and processes.”¹² On the other hand there is human freedom. The background problem for most modern and postmodern thought is how to give an account of human freedom in a mechanically determined world. Obviously this interpretation

of the history of philosophy since the Enlightenment gives a high priority to Kant's problematic.

Over against the synthesis of Christianity and classical philosophy in an earlier age, and over against the rejection of this synthesis in the modern and postmodern era, Reformational philosophers think it is important to develop an authentically Christian philosophy. This they attempt to do under the heading of laws which they claim God gave or gives to the creation, hence the name "cosmonomic." This is their distinctive ontology.

"God's law" is seen as the boundary line between God and non-God that both keeps God and creation totally distinct but also is the primary point of connection between God and creation. The concept of "law" here is far broader than the moral concept of God's law commonly found in Christian thought. It is "the totality of God's ordaining acts with respect to the cosmos ... continuously laid down and maintained by God for all that is created, in heaven and earth."¹³ "This structural law ... includes what we usually refer to as the laws of nature, but which are actually God-given laws for nature."¹⁴

When the cosmonomic thinkers look at the world they see a multi-dimensional reality. They claim there are roughly fifteen dimensions of created reality, which they also call aspects, modes, or law-spheres. What distinguishes one dimension from another is a different type of divine law given to govern that dimension of creation.

Thus numeric (mathematical) laws are different from organic (biological) laws, and both are different from aesthetic laws. Or as Kok says,

If it makes sense to speak of "being-subject to God in a social way," then it makes just as much sense to speak of a God-given law that holds for the social dimension of creation. ... A numeric law holds for that which is numeric, a spatial law for that which is spatial, a social law (a norm actually) holds for that which is social, and so forth. Each of these laws holds from the foundations of the world, for they were dictated by the Creator. These laws for earthly creatures together contribute to the structure of earthly creation.¹⁵

One of the crucial differences between different types of law spheres is that some require a conscious choice to follow the relevant laws, whereas in other spheres we do not have a choice about obeying the relevant law. For example, in the kinematic sphere we do not have any choice about following the law of gravity, whereas in the jural sphere, not only choice but also much thought and effort will be required to follow the sphere law of public justice. The conflict between good and evil exists exclusively in those law spheres in which people must choose between obeying or disobeying the relevant law. Good and evil are either going the right direction or the wrong direction in a law sphere or law structure that is itself

good and enduring because it was created by God.

Many of the problems in academic and political life arise from a confusion of the relationship among the law spheres. For example, logical antinomies normally arise when a law from one dimension of creation is used to analyze a different dimension of creation. And the many “isms” that come and go in academic and political life arise when all of creation is interpreted by means of a creation law for one dimension of creation. This absolutizing of the relative is only truly overcome by seeing God as the creator of all reality who gives distinct laws for the distinct dimensions of reality.

In the social-political arena the cosmomic thinkers advocate “sphere sovereignty,” a term probably coined by Abraham Kuyper. Society is seen as made up of several different entities, such as family, marriage, education, church, state, business, etc., each of which should be regarded as a distinct part of creation with distinct, God-given laws, tasks, and areas of competence. Therefore, each sector should be seen as accountable to God but sovereign in relation to the other spheres. This means not only that the state should not be under the church, not only that business should not be under (run by) the state, but also that education (schools) should not be under the state. They advocate a separation of church and state, a separation of business and state, and a separation of school and state, because each institu-

tion represents a different dimension of creation with a distinct creation law, which requires each institution to function in a different manner. They claim that their way of thinking is a healthy alternative to the ideological distortion of academic and political life seen in the various “isms” of the last centuries and also a true alternative to any tendencies toward totalitarianism. While avoiding totalitarianism they claim also to avoid undue individualism because they see each person as connected with others in multiple institutions and communities. The social-political application of this originally Dutch Calvinist philosophy has received considerable interest in the US, among Catholics and Protestants, both at the popular level and at the upper levels of politics and education.¹⁶

One has to wonder if some of the terminology of this philosophy might contain a bit of old anti-Catholic sentiment, especially the way Catholic thought is described as a synthesis with paganism. This is particularly ironic, given the marked similarities between this philosophy and the natural law theories of Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus.¹⁷ In light of the well known affinities between medieval natural law theories and Stoicism, one can be forgiven for wondering if the “cosmomic” philosophy is not a Christianized, redeveloped cousin of Stoicism. This would suggest that the cosmomic view of the relation between Christianity and philosophy needs some further refinement. All their best efforts to the contrary, these thinkers have made exten-

sive use of ideas also found in secular philosophy.

3 Reformed Transcendentalism

Reformed Transcendental Philosophy, sometimes called “Presuppositionalism,” is largely the work of Cornelius Van Til and his students and followers. Its focus is epistemology, and like the NRE, it is very conscious of difficulties related to classical natural theology and the arguments for the existence of God. But the solution proposed is quite different. Rather than arguing for the proper basicity of belief in God, RT argues that the existence of God, as well as a suppressed knowledge of the existence of God, is the transcendental condition of any knowledge or any communication. In order to stimulate thought and discussion Van Til liked to scatter ironic one-line provocations through his writings, things like “One has to be a theist to claim to be an atheist,” and “antitheism presupposes theism.” This echo of Tertullian is worthy of investigation.

Van Til thought that modern culture has not taken the critique of knowledge since Hume and Kant seriously enough. Van Til argues that if Kant is right that the human mind structures and categorizes sense data so that the human mind constructs or legislates knowledge, we no longer have any basis for natural science, logic, or morality. Our everyday

experience of the world is rendered incoherent, and real communication becomes impossible. Van Til’s simplified summary of Kant’s critical philosophy is that “we always make facts as much as we find them.”¹⁸ (Van Til was in constant dialog with Kant in his various books, taking Kant as the key representative of Western epistemology.) If Kant was right, we really do not know anything about the world outside our minds. What Kant called “knowledge” could better be called skepticism. But Van Til did not think it was necessary to agree with Kant.

Van Til followed Herman Bavinck¹⁹ who claimed that real knowledge of the thing in itself is possible because there are correlations among human mental categories and structures, the structures of created reality outside our minds, and human sense perceptions. Because all these are created by God, Van Til and Bavinck thought that we do have real knowledge in science, logic, morality, and everyday experience. This makes a nonskeptical epistemology a part of the Christian doctrine of creation. Further, Van Til claimed that human knowledge is not really constructed or legislated by the human mind, whether about nature, logic, morality, or daily experience; all knowledge, he claimed, is analogical, meaning it is a thinking of God’s thoughts after him. So whenever anyone knows or communicates anything, even if that person is an atheist, it is because God has created that person in his image and structured

the world so that people can think his thoughts after him.

This leads to the transcendental element in Van Til's thought. In Kant's transcendental analysis Kant asked what the preconditions are that render human experience intelligible, what conditions need to be true to make sense of our experience of the world. And in Kant's analysis, knowledge that is transcendently ascertained cannot be false. This leads to an interesting philosophical move on the part of Van Til, for he thinks religious certainty is to be found on the transcendental level. Normal people, he thinks, live with certainty of knowledge of the thing in itself because on a transcendental level they know things they may not be conscious of knowing. Transcendently people know they are made in God's image and live in God's world with epistemological equipment designed to give real knowledge of this world, even while that person might claim to be an atheist. This transcendental knowledge, which is often denied or suppressed, is the result of God's general revelation which makes it possible for people to have true knowledge, whether of natural science, logic, ethics, or anything in ordinary experience. Van Til argues that any form of naturalism or materialism renders the world and human experience incoherent, but people generally do not act as if human life and experience are incoherent because they secretly assume what they know transcendently. In light of this, keeping in mind the way Kant argued that tran-

scendental knowledge is totally certain in contrast with the vast uncertainties of empirical or logical knowledge, Van Til thinks he has given an utterly certain proof, not only of the existence of a god but of God as understood by the Christian faith.

A central part of Van Til's philosophy is his notion of general or natural revelation. He says, "God speaks His requirements through all the facts with which man deals. He speaks to men in the works of creation and providence. ... There is no fault in the objective revelation of God to men. ... Paul makes bold to claim that all men know deep down in their hearts that they are creatures of God."²⁰ "As made in the image of God, no man can escape becoming the interpretive medium of God's general revelation both in his intellectual (Romans 1:20) and in his moral consciousness (Romans 2:14,15)."²¹ But this general revelation leads to natural atheology, not to natural theology. The reason is that people generally suppress or repress the general knowledge of God. "They keep under the knowledge of God that is within them. That is they try as best they can to keep under this knowledge for fear they should look into the face of their judge."²²

This leads to tremendous internal contradictions in the life and thought of the modern atheist. On the one hand, in a good Kantian manner, the modern or postmodern atheist thinks that the laws of natural science, the laws of logic, and the moral law are created by the human mind to impose order on otherwise in-

coherent experience.²³ However, atheism means that the human brain is only a result of chemical and biological processes, which implies that there can be no coherent account of thinking which uses universals, causal connections, and moral prescriptions. So, “Involuntarily men think back, with the prodigal, to the father’s home.”²⁴ Involuntarily and unconsciously people live on the basis of what they know about themselves, God, and the world via general revelation, using the truths of general revelation to interpret life, while consciously and intentionally regarding themselves as atheists. Van Til’s transcendental epistemology builds on a depth psychology similar to that of Tertullian which led to Tertullian’s claim that the soul is by nature Christian (Apology). Van Til thought this should be central to the public presentation of the Christian faith in a post Kantian culture.

Remarks

When the various groups of Dutch immigrants moved to North America, they brought with them a great love of learning. This led to the establishment of schools and educational institutions of various types, as well as to starting publishing houses. Naturally, their Calvinist faith played a central role in this love of learning. In this environment of faith and learning three major styles of philosophical reflection unfolded in dialog with each other, as well as in dialog with much of the history of western thought. This philosophical flourishing has long been flowing from the Dutch immigrant community into the broader North American culture. Theologians and philosophers of almost every variety and orientation are interacting with one or another of the Dutch Reformed philosophers in North America. Maybe some Europeans would like to join these stimulating interactions.

Annotations

Anmerkungen

¹ The literature is extensive. A few selected titles can be mentioned. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), *Until Justice & Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, editors, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith*

and Reason From Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology (State University of New York Press, 1991), Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

² Again, just a few of the numerous works can be cited. L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd’s Thought* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1975), J. M. Spier, *What is Calvinistic Philosophy*, trans. Fred Klooster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953),

Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Nutley, New Jersey, The Craig Press, 1980), James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1994), James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy, editors, *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* (Emory University Studies in Law and Religion, Number 2, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), *Medical Ethics: Principles, Persons, and Problems* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), Richard L. Smith, *The Supremacy of God in Apologetics: Romans 1:19–21 and the Transcendental Method of Cornelius Van Til* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996).

⁴ W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886) p. 346.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 345, 346.

⁶ *Return to Reason*, p. 132.

⁷ *Patterns of the Western Mind*, p. 23.

⁸ p. 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ p. 86.

¹¹ p. 108.

¹² p. 140.

¹³ p. 192.

¹⁴ p. 193.

¹⁵ p. 212.

¹⁶ Richard John Neuhaus is an example of a (formerly Protestant) Roman Catholic social theorist using the notion of Sphere Sovereignty to interpret society and even papal statements. See *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (Doubleday, 1992).

¹⁷ A good primary text is Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law* (Summa Theologica, Questions 90–97) with an introduction by Stanley Parry (Regnery Gateway, N.D.). For an outstanding overview of classical natural law theory see Jean Porter, *Natural & Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Canada: Novalis; USA: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹⁸ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, p. 346.

¹⁹ *The Philosophy of Revelation*, (Longmans, Green, and Co. 1909, reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) chapter 3. This is the book version of the L. P. Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary in 1908 and 1909.

²⁰ p. 84.

²¹ p. 409.

²² p. 449.

²³ p. 110.

²⁴ p. 192.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D. is a descendent of Dutch Reformed immigrants to North America. He grew up in Holland, Michigan, but currently lives in Prague, Czech Republic.

Martin Bucer Seminar

Berlin • Bonn • Chemnitz • Hamburg • Pforzheim

Ankara • Innsbruck • Prag • Zlin • Zürich

Study Center Berlin

Martin Bucer Seminar, Breite Straße 39B, 13187 Berlin
E-Mail: berlin@bucer.de

Study Center Bonn

Martin Bucer Seminar, Friedrichstr. 38, 53111 Bonn
E-Mail: bonn@bucer.de

Study Center Chemnitz:

Martin Bucer Seminar, Mittelbacher Str. 6, 09224 Chemnitz
E-Mail: chemnitz@bucer.de

Study Center Hamburg

Martin Bucer Seminar, c/o ARCHE,
Doerriesweg 7, 22525 Hamburg
E-Mail: hamburg@bucer.de

Study Center Pforzheim

Martin Bucer Seminar, Bleichstraße 59, 75173 Pforzheim
E-Mail: pforzheim@bucer.de

Website: www.bucer.de

E-Mail: info@bucer.de

Studycenters outside Germany:

Study Center Ankara: ankara@bucer.de

Study Center Innsbruck: innsbruck@bucer.de

Study Center Prag: prag@bucer.de

Study Center Zlin: zlin@bucer.de

Study Center Zürich: zuerich@bucer.de

Martin Bucer Seminary offers part- and fulltime theological education leading to American and international degrees (B.Th.; M.Th.; Th.D; Ph.D.). Much of the teaching is by means of Saturday seminars, evening courses, extension courses, independent study, and internships. Courses from other schools can often be transferred to MBS.

The work of the seminary is largely supported by the contributions of donors. North American supporters may send contributions to our American partner organization, The International Institute for Christian Studies. Checks should be made out to IICS, with a note mentioning MBS and sent to:

The International Institute for Christian Studies:

P.O. Box 12147, Overland Park, KS 66282-2147, USA

EU:

IBAN DE52 3701 0050 0244 3705 07

BIC PBNKDEFF



Publisher:

Thomas Schirrmacher, Dr. theol. Th.D.,
Ph.D., DD.

Editor: Ron Kubsch, M.Th.

Editorial Committee:

Thomas Kinker, Th.D., Titus Vogt,
Drs. Frank Koppelin

Contact:

mbsmaterialien@bucer.de
www.bucer.de

MBS-TEXTE (MBS-TEXTS)

Philosophische Anstöße
(Philosophical Initiatives)

Es erscheinen außerdem folgende Reihen:

(The following series of MBS
Texts are also being published:)

Reformiertes Forum
(Reformed Forum)

Pro Mundis

Geistliche Impulse
(Spiritual Impulses)

Hope for Europe

Ergänzungen zur Ethik
(Ethics)

Vorarbeiten zur Dogmatik
(Preliminaries for a Systematic
Theology)

Theologische Akzente
(Theological Accents)