

THE AMSTERDAM PHILOSOPHY:  
A PRELIMINARY CRITIQUE

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## **Preface, 2005**

This booklet was published by Pilgrim Press in 1972, in the midst of some theological warfare. Representatives of the Amsterdam Philosophy were then taking a militant stance against traditional Reformed theology, and the controversy created partisan battles on the campus of Westminster Seminary, where I was a very young professor. It also threatened to split churches, Christian schools, and other Christian organizations. As a member of a committee of the Ohio Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, I was asked to write a brief study of the movement, and the booklet resulted. Originally it was published together with another essay by Leonard Coppes, the Chairman of the Committee.

As I read the booklet today, I think my tone was far too shrill. The booklet also contains far too much smart-alecky stuff. I suppose I could have entirely rewritten it, but that would have made my 1972 efforts look better than they were. I prefer now to let readers judge me as I deserve, warts and all. I also think that the basic points of the pamphlet were never answered, though I received a lot of invective, and a lot of undocumented charges that I just didn't know Dooyeweerd. On those issues also, I will let readers judge.

## **I. BACKGROUND**

The Amsterdam philosophy<sup>1</sup> is a movement which over the last (approximately) fifty years has attempted to develop a philosophical system on a radically biblical, radically Christian basis. Its earliest proponents were Prof. Herman Dooyeweerd and his brother-in-law Prof. D. H. Th. Vollenhoven of the Free University of Amsterdam, and Prof. H. G. Stoker, University of Potchefstroom, South Africa. Other names associated with the movement in the Netherlands have been K. J. Popma, J. P. A. Mekkes, H. Van Riessen and J. M. Spier. In North America, for many years, the leading proponent of this movement was generally acknowledged to be Prof. Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> His influence was perhaps the major factor in attracting such younger men as H. Evan Runner (now of Calvin College) and Robert D. Knudsen (now of Westminster Seminary) into the Amsterdam circle. During the same period, other men such as William Young and David H. Freeman (both now of the University of Rhode Island) and T. Grady Spires (now of Gordon College) took considerable scholarly interest in the Amsterdam movement, but maintained a sufficiently critical attitude toward the movement to preclude their being listed here as members of the school. The last ten years have brought many more names into prominence as adherents of the Amsterdam School. At Trinity Christian College of Palos Heights, Ill., we note Calvin Seerveld and Carl T. McIntire, son of the famous radio preacher. A number of "Amsterdam" thinkers can be found at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, such as J - Van Dyk, J. Vander Stelt, and H. L. Hebden Taylor, one of the more prolific publishers of the movement. The Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada, founded specifically for the purpose of advancing this school of thought, boasts the presence of B. Sylstra, James Olthuis, John Olthuis, Arnold De Graaf, and Hendrik Hart. Within the area of our own presbytery, Peter J. Steen advocates his version of the Amsterdam philosophy in his philosophy classes at Geneva College, Beaver Falls, Pa. Organizations supporting the goals of the movement are the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship (A.A.C.S.) (formerly the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies) and the National Association for Christian Political Action (N.A.C.P.A.). Influence of this philosophy is strong in the Christian labor movement in Canada, and is being increasingly felt in the Christian school movement in both Canada and the U.S., especially in the National Union of Christian Schools. Developments in the movement can be followed in such periodicals as the scholarly journal *Philosophia Reformata* (published in the Netherlands), the more popular *Vanguard* magazine, the N.A.C.P.A. *Politikon*, and *New Reformation* (directed at college students, emanating from the Center for Christian Studies, Santa Barbara, California).

Since the movement is so widespread and is growing rather than diminishing in influence, a warning is in order: not *all* of the comments made about the movement in the following pages will apply to *all* of its adherents. Nevertheless, these adherents claim to belong to a "school," a group dedicated to the advancement of certain basic principles and the application of those principles to all areas of life. Such a claim not only legitimizes but necessitates critical

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<sup>1</sup>This phrase seems to be the designation of the movement which causes the fewest difficulties. Dooyeweerd's own name for his philosophy, "The Philosophy of the Idea of Law" (with its Hellenized variant, "The Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea") is a bit too cumbersome for easy reference. "Dooyeweerdianism" is generally looked upon as a bit vulgar, and besides is thought to burden the movement with a closer attachment to the thought of its best-known member than it generally wishes to acknowledge. Phrases like "Reformational" and "Radical Christian" are too honorific for use in a context of debate.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Van Til is still listed as an editor of *Philosophia Reformata*, and the 1968 printing of Dooyeweerd's *In The Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley, Craig Press, 1960) lists him as a member of the school (p. 197). As we shall see, however, Dr. Van Til has become increasingly critical of the movement in recent years; so critical, in fact, that it would be inaccurate to regard him now as a member of this school. Cf. below, especially section 14.

evaluation, which is directed toward the principles and goals affirmed in the movement as a whole, and not just toward the viewpoints of individuals.

Another caveat: it will be impossible in this report to more than summarize the issues at stake in this movement. The Amsterdam philosophy, as expounded by Dooyeweerd and Volienhoven especially, is extremely difficult even for people with philosophical training. It is complicated, sometimes unclear, burdened with an often baffling technical terminology. Occasionally it is said that it would take a lifetime of study to really understand what Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven are saying. Thus it has been easy for some to dismiss criticisms of these philosophers by saying that the critics have not put in the requisite lifetimes of study and thus do not really understand what they are criticizing. But this dismissal of criticism is far too easy: (1) Few of us have a lifetime to devote to Dooyeweerd. And even fewer of us would be willing to devote that lifetime to Dooyeweerd in the absence of some compelling *prima facie* arguments demonstrating the potential value of such devotion. Thus, before even considering such a lifetime commitment, it is necessary to develop a critical perspective. We must ask whether or not the Amsterdam philosophy can make a *prima facie* case for itself, whether it shows sufficient promise to warrant our more profound attention, either as its partisans or as its critics. If this report, therefore, carries on its arguments to some extent at the *prima facie* level, that in itself cannot call its value in question. *Prima facie* criticism, as well as depth-analysis, is necessary in this situation. (2) Although Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven write in a highly technical style, many of their disciples have developed a rhetoric which is vivid, down-to-earth, and has a tremendous appeal to people with little philosophical training. These disciples have raised many issues in the Christian community upon which all Christians have much at stake. May a Christian school adopt an ecclesiastical confession as its basis? Is the Bible reliable when it speaks on matters of science? Does evangelism include the restructuring of social institutions? These are questions in which all Christians have an interest, on which they are all called to take a stand. Even those without the technical tools needed to understand Dooyeweerd must somehow determine what stand they should take. On these issues it is legitimate and necessary for critics of the Amsterdam movement to be just as down-to-earth, just as “popular” as are some of its proponents. (3) A movement, like a man, is known by its fruits. When a movement advocates erroneous positions, positions which can be shown to be unscriptural, then it must be called to account, even by those unable to comprehend the philosophical premises from which those positions are derived.

For the above three reasons, it is both legitimate and necessary for non-philosophers to make a critical appraisal of the Amsterdam philosophy, particularly of its concrete implications for Christian doctrine and life. This fact does not mean that this report will be entirely non-philosophical. It does imply, however, that the arguments of this report cannot be evaded by the observation that they are sometimes on the “popular” level, or by the consideration that they do not always display the most profound technical grasp of Dooyeweerd's categories. And it implies further that non-philosophers in the church may not shrug off these issues by saying, “It's all too complicated for me.” The issues before us are matters of life and death to the church of Jesus Christ. *Every* Christian, therefore, should be passionately concerned about them.

## **2. THE APPEAL OF THE MOVEMENT**

What is it that makes the Amsterdam philosophy so attractive to Reformed Christians? One thing is surely its emphasis upon God's sovereignty – sovereignty both in the sense of all-controlling decree and in the sense of all-encompassing demand.<sup>1</sup> God is Lord over all, and demands our allegiance in all areas of life. There is no compartment of life where we may assert our autonomy, where we may serve ourselves. We must do *all* to the glory of God. All of life, therefore, not just formal worship, is “religion” – service to God. In *all* of our decisions, we decide either for Christ or against Him. These principles reaffirm the Reformation emphasis that every lawful occupation may and should be a “vocation” – a calling of God. All useful work is kingdom work. No one need feel left out of the Kingdom program simply because he has been called to be a farmer rather than a preacher. God still cares about the replenishing and subduing of the earth (Gen. 1: 28; 9:1-7). And God wants us to do our farming, our carpentry, our homemaking, our musical, medical, business work – all our labor – in ways pleasing to Him. There should be Christian businesses, just as much as there should be Christian churches. There should be Christian schools, Christian labor unions, Christian political associations. Nor do the sciences escape the comprehensive demand of our God. Science, too, is not neutral. It too is a human activity which is either good or evil, right or wrong, for God or against Him. Unbelieving scientists and philosophers strive in vain comprehensively to understand God's world. They *must* fail; for, not knowing the true God, and yet requiring an ultimate criterion of truth, they inevitably deify, and thus distort, some element of the created world. Thus we need Christian philosophers and Christian scientists, if our understanding of God's world is to be true in the deepest sense.

On the other hand, says the Amsterdam philosophy, we must beware of looking upon these academic disciplines as the be-all and end-all of human life. No scholar, not even an academic theologian, has a right to set himself up as a mediator between God and other men. No scholarship, not even academic theology, is necessary for the salvation of men.<sup>2</sup> Even Dooyeweerd's philosophy is only the work of a fallible man, which may not be put on a par with God's Word.<sup>3</sup>

All of these principles are, in our view, scriptural, Reformational, and worthy of our support. And it might also be said that the Amsterdam philosophers make these points with as much eloquence as anyone in Reformed circles – if not more. If this were all there were to the philosophy, then we should all be “Dooyeweerdians”! In fact all of us are Dooyeweerdians – to the extent that we have been helped and enriched by these emphases in the movement, particularly to the extent that we have been inspired by the peculiarly vivid formulations of these principles in the rhetoric of the movement.

### 3. SUMMARY OF OUR CRITIQUE

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<sup>1</sup> On this distinction, compare the distinction between “law” and “norm” in, e.g., J. M. Spier, *What is Calvinistic Philosophy?* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1953), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, 135.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53 f.

The trouble is, however, that these scriptural, Reformational, brilliantly well-expressed principles are not “all there is” in the Amsterdam philosophy. Unfortunately, these emphases are mixed in with others, which in our view are not scriptural, not Reformational, and not particularly clearly expressed, either. That is to say: (1) The writings of this movement are full of unclear statements, invalid arguments, and general intellectual shoddiness. This criticism is not as serious as (2) below, but it is a serious one. Such lack of rigor in a Christian philosophy is not pleasing to God. It will not do for Christians to support a second-rate philosophical system simply because that system claims to be Christian or even because it is Christian in some respects. But further: (2) The writings of this movement contain a substantial amount of demonstrably unscriptural, and therefore false, teaching. These two criticisms will be documented in what follows.

#### 4. COMMON SENSE AND SCIENCE

We hope that the following discussion will not be so technical as to lose the reader's attention at this early point. If it is, the reader is advised to jump ahead, for later sections of this report will be more “practical” in some senses than this one. This one is important, however. The distinction between common sense and science, between “naive experience” and “theoretical thought,” between “pre-theoretical” and “theoretical”<sup>1</sup> is central to the Amsterdam scheme. This distinction is the reason why, in the Amsterdam view, there can be no theoretical knowledge of God or of self. It furnishes the reason why there can be no theoretical study of the central Biblical themes of creation, fall and redemption. It shows us why these central themes must be sharply distinguished from all theological doctrines. It shows us why theology studies only the “result” of a “theoretical abstraction” and never “the full or integral reality” of God.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this distinction will show us why Scripture does not speak directly to the scientist without the mediation of philosophy, and why the philosopher has a right to tell the theologian what Scripture may and may not say to him.

Dooyeweerd and the other Amsterdam thinkers clearly want to draw a *sharp* distinction between “pre-theoretical” or “naive” experience on the one hand, and “theoretical” thought on the other. Sharp, that is, in the sense that every human thought must be classifiable, in principle, as *either* “naive” or “theoretical.” There is no third category, and there is no overlap.

Now what, precisely, is involved in this distinction? The usual illustrations are fairly straightforward. A child walks through a field on a summer day, looking at the daisies. A botanist walks through the same field, picks a daisy, and takes it home for an experiment connected with his doctoral dissertation. The child “looks,” the botanist “experiments.” Surely there is a difference between these two people in their attitudes toward the daisy! Surely, then there is a difference between ordinary life, where we appreciate daisies as we walk through a field, and theoretical thought, where we *study* them.

Well, there seems to be a difference! But the matter becomes a bit more complicated when we consider other cases. We will agree that the child looking at the daisies is “naive” or “pre-theoretical,” in some obvious sense. But what about a child who has been told by his teacher to

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<sup>1</sup> These phrases should be taken appositively, as different ways of denoting the same distinction.

<sup>2</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 135.

find as many different colored flowers as he can? He wanders through the field, looks at a daisy, writes down “yellow and white.” He looks at a dandelion, writes “yellow”; looks at a rose and writes “red.” Is that theoretical or naive? Well, it certainly isn't the beginning of a doctoral dissertation! It is a matter of simple observation, we might say. Yet it presupposes some learning a knowledge of color – words, an ability to write. Surely this learning is the beginning of what we might call “theoretical equipment.” What of a ninth grader who writes an essay concerning his political philosophy? The essay might consist mostly of “naive” observations – yet these would be on a more sophisticated level than we would expect from a *sixth grader!* From these illustrations, then, it would seem that “naive” and “theoretical” are not air-tight compartments as the Amsterdam philosophy would suggest, but are rather the two ends of a continuum. All thought is *relatively* theoretical (in that all thought presupposes some *learning*, *some* conceptual equipment); and all thought is *relatively* naive (our learning is never so perfect that we outgrow our need for simple perception). The illustrations, therefore, would appear to point in a different direction from that which the Amsterdam philosophy suggests.

But of course we must go beyond illustrations and ask precisely how the Amsterdam philosophers define this distinction. Here it is difficult to obtain clarity. Evidently, theoretical thought is felt to be in some sense more “abstract” than naive experience; theoretical thought makes certain “distinctions” which naive experience does not make:

Scientific thought is *discriminative, analytical, and antithetical*. In our naive experience we are closely in touch with *life-in-its-totality or fulness*.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say, however that naive experience makes no analyses, no distinctions of any kind:

In our naive experience we have a naive view of concrete reality. We know how to distinguish a man from an animal and from a plant. We are conscious that family life is something different from Church life. We know that the state possesses other capacities than the Church.<sup>2</sup>

More significantly, naive experience makes distinctions among the various aspects of human experience which Dooyeweerd calls “modal aspects” (on this concept see later discussion):

In naive experience we conceive [a bird's nest] as an individual whole, qualified by this subject-object relation to the bird's life; and this finds expression in the name whereby the thing is symbolically signified.... A plastic work of fine art is experienced as an individual whole, functioning in all the modal aspects of our temporal horizon, but typically qualified by its aesthetic subject-object relation.<sup>3</sup>

Note here that it is in naive experience that we determine what modal aspect “qualifies” a particular object. At first glance, at least, this sort of idea makes naive experience sound rather theoretical!

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<sup>1</sup> Spier, J., *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Phila., Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954), 2. Emphasis his. “Scientific” of course = “theoretical.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 15. Cf. *Spier, Introduction*, 39.

So then what *is* the difference between naive experience and theoretical thought? That difference Dooyeweerd and others portray in various ways. The most common, and most promising formulation usually resembles the following:

[In naive experience] we ... experience concrete things and events in the typical structures, of individual totalities which in principle function in all the modal aspects of our temporal horizon in their continuous mutual coherence. Our logical mode of distinction is entirely embedded in this integral experience. Our pre-theoretical logical concepts are only related to things and events as individual wholes, and not to the abstract modal aspects of their empirical reality.<sup>1</sup>

The idea here seems to be that naive experience focuses on *things* (tables, chairs, trees, rocks, persons) and *events* (the battle of Waterloo, the invention of printing, Mary Jane's trip to the grocer), while theoretical thought focuses on *aspects* of things (number, space, movement, economic value, aesthetic beauty, etc.). We say “focuses” because Dooyeweerd has said that naive experience does make certain distinctions among these aspects, and has some interest in them (next to last quote). The trouble here, though, is that “focusing” is a *relative* concept. One can be *more or less* “focused” on something. All we have said so far is that naive experience is *relatively* more interested in things and events while theoretical thought is *relatively* more interested in aspects (aspects, of course, of *things*). And this sort of idea doesn't give us the *sharp* distinction that Dooyeweerd wants to assert.

Another related type of distinction is found in the assertion that in naive experience, in distinction from theoretical thought,

These aspects are only experienced implicitly in the things and events themselves, and not explicitly in their analytical dissociation and opposition to the logical function of thought.<sup>2</sup>

Here let us consider the distinction between “implicit” and “explicit” (leaving other aspects of this statement aside for the present). The trouble is, again, that this distinction is not *sharp* enough. Implicitness as opposed to explicitness is a relative matter, characterizable by “more” and “less.” We say, for example that the doctrine of justification by faith is “more explicit” in the New Testament than in the Old. Within the New Testament, we might say that it is more explicit in Luke 18 than in James 2. There is a sense, to be sure, in which we say that it is “perfectly explicit” in a passage like Romans 3:28 that is the extreme end of the continuum. Short of that there are many degrees of explicitness. Thus it appears that if the implicit/explicit distinction is to be our criterion for the naive/theoretical distinction, we will again have only a *relative* distinction, a difference in degree rather than kind, a continuum rather than a sharp disjunction. Dooyeweerd himself suggests this, again, when he says that naive experience is interested in the modal aspects of the things it perceives. (See above discussion.) If naive experience perceives these modal distinctions, then surely these distinctions are only *relatively* “implicit” in naive experience. They are to some extent also explicit.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 f; cf. 84. Dooyeweerd does not, of course, mean to say that pretheoretical concepts have no relation whatever to abstract modal aspects, for in the next sentence he finds the latter to be “implicit” in the former.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; cf. 84.

Spier suggests that the two forms of knowledge have different purposes, or goals:

The naive knowing-process ... can have a multiplicity of ends. It can seek to attain an economical end, as in the case of industrial knowledge, or it can have a pistical end, as in the case of pistical knowledge. Scientific knowledge, in contrast, always has an analytical end; it is concerned with a scientific understanding of reality.<sup>1</sup>

As it stands, of course, this quote won't do for a definition, since in the description of "scientific knowledge" the word "scientific" is used, thereby rendering the definition circular. But laying that aside, is it true that scientific knowledge has only one purpose? Is it true that scientific knowledge is purely for the sake of knowledge and never for the sake of gaining wealth or deepening faith? We think not, unless Spier is employing some highly unusual concept of "science" here. And is it the case that naive knowing is not concerned with an understanding of reality?<sup>2</sup> For that matter, if scientific knowing is rooted in naive knowing as Dooyeweerd says it is, then it would appear that some naive knowing, at least, is necessary for (and therefore instrumental to) even a *scientific* understanding of reality. This suggestion of Spier, then, is no more helpful than the others we have considered in defining clearly the naive/theoretical distinction.

Some of the characterizations of this distinction in the Amsterdam literature suggest a continuum quite "explicitly." Note:

There are non-scientific and scientific concepts. The former, the naive concept, is strongly bound to the Psychical substratum of sensory representations. The latter frees itself from a Psychical substratum, and under the leadership of the norm of cognitive symbols, it rises above the level of abstraction attained by a naive concept. Because of its high degree of abstraction, a scientific concept gains in clarity but it loses direct contact with life.<sup>3</sup>

Here the expressions "strongly bound" and "high degree" suggest the kind of continuum we have been arguing for. Of course, if Spier had specified the precise degree of abstraction which scientific concepts obtain, then the distinction could have been as sharp as he wishes; but he has in fact not done so. Note also the following:

... theoretical knowledge is a *deepened* knowledge. Finally, naive knowledge is unsystematic while science continually seeks to systematize and complete its knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 132. Notice here, incidentally, the extent to which Spier's "naive knowing" is concerned with modal distinctions! Cf. in this connection also p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Spier says it is: *What Is Calvinistic Philosophy?*, 80.

<sup>3</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 135. Cf. *What Is Calvinistic Philosophy?* 39. "In rigorous scientific thought [the law spheres] are more sharply differentiated."

<sup>4</sup> Spier, *What Is Calvinistic Philosophy?* 81. One wonders how the remark about "deepened" knowledge is consistent with his statement on p. 80: "Naive knowledge is unspeakably richer than theoretical knowledge."

Deepening, of course, is something that can be done by degrees, and we generally assume that it is unless the precise level of deepening is made clear. As for being “systematic,” that too is a matter of degree. Spier himself speaks of naive experience as attempting to attain “precision.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly the knowledge we obtain in everyday life is not chaotic, utterly disorganized. On the other hand, scientific knowledge is never so perfectly systematized that it needs no reconstruction. Naive knowledge appears to be *relatively* unsystematic, while scientific knowledge is *relatively* systematic.

We have purposely avoided discussing the more technical formulations of this distinction, simply because these technical formulations presuppose other parts of the Amsterdam system, parts which we are unwilling to endorse. Examples of these are the concepts of “analytical dissociation”<sup>2</sup> and “Psychical substratum” found in some of the above quotations. Another:

(Theoretical thought) displays an antithetic structure wherein the logical aspect of our thought is opposed to the non-logical aspects of our temporal experience.<sup>3</sup>

This formulation, of course, presupposes that one can distinguish clearly between “logical” and “non-logical” “aspects,” something that we do not believe Dooyeweerd has done. Another typical formulation, the idea that scientific thought is characterized by “theoretical abstraction”<sup>4</sup> (as opposed, presumably, to some other kind of abstraction) is no help unless we have a definition of “theoretical”; but that is precisely what we have searched in vain to find!

The real *power* of the naive/theoretical distinction, however, seems to lie in the connotations of certain images and metaphors constantly employed in the literature. Naive experience is close to its objects, while “in science we maintain a certain distance between ourselves and the object of our investigation.”<sup>5</sup> Science tries to “grasp” its objects which in turn “offer resistance” to it.<sup>6</sup> Theoretical thought “sets things apart,”<sup>7</sup> while naive experience sees them in the “continuous bond of their coherence.”<sup>8</sup> In naive experience, “our logical function remains completely immersed in the continuity of the temporal coherence between the different aspects.”<sup>9</sup> Not only “immersed,” but even “embedded”!<sup>10</sup> Naive experience has an “integral” character.<sup>11</sup> Naive experience *distinguishes* subject and object, but theoretical thought *opposes* them, breaking asunder that experience which the naive mind preserves in “unbreakable coherence.”<sup>12</sup> The *force* of these metaphors is undeniable. We have all had the feeling, as we sit down to write an academic paper, that we are in some sense “backing away” from reality. It seems as though we are tearing apart things that in ordinary life are kept together. We feel that we are, as it were,

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<sup>1</sup> Spier, “In our *naive* everyday experience, if we observe a beautiful table, for example, we examine it precisely . . .”

<sup>2</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 11, 15 f, 126, etc.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6; cf. 8, 11, 13, etc. “Oppose” is in any case a metaphor. Cf. below.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 13, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Spier, *Introduction 2*

<sup>6</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 8, 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, cf. 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

digging into the universe with our fingers and pulling it apart to see how it works. Occasionally, in personal appearances, an Amsterdam-oriented thinker will expound the naive/theoretical distinction by closing his eyes, becoming very intense, pronouncing his words very slowly and distinctly, and saying “Naive experience does not make *thee-oh-rett-i-cal* distinctions” or something to that effect. His manner imitates the feeling that we have all had, that theoretical work is something very difficult, abstract, precise, removed from ordinary life, etc. The difficulty, however, is that –paradoxically! – these metaphors do not have sufficient precision to distinguish “theoretically” between one thing called naive experience and another very different thing called theoretical thought. The concept “distance,” when applied to the relation of knower to thing known, is a metaphor, and a metaphor which can be taken in various ways. There are surely senses in which, even in ordinary life, we feel “distant” from the things we perceive. Thus without further explanation, the “distance” metaphor does not clearly distinguish theoretical from naive experience. The same for “grasping,” “setting apart,” “immersed,” “integral,” etc. Even the concept of “coherence” is unclear here, for it is obviously not a literal “coherence” as, e.g., between the parts of a desk. There are kinds of figurative “coherence” in both naive and theoretical types of thinking, and if one does not specify the kind of coherence in view, then the concept cannot help us with the distinction in question. These observations, of course, do not negate the force of the *feeling* generated by these figures. We *do* feel that theorizing is more “distant” from the world than ordinary experience – in various senses of “distant.” But that feeling is perfectly consistent with the view that naive experience and theoretical thought are opposite ends of a continuum, that there are *degrees of* “distance” (and hence of theoreticality), and therefore that the Amsterdam philosophy is wrong on this crucial point.

If we are right, and no sharp distinction can be drawn at this point, does that imply that “the masses who live by naive experience live in a world of illusion...”?<sup>1</sup> No. There is no reason to assume that the theoretical side of our continuum is any more “true” than the naive side. Scientists do and should continually draw upon the observations of “common sense.” But common sense also needs technical refinement if it is to be adequate for certain purposes. Different purposes require different *degrees* (and kinds) of technical refinement.

We conclude this section with a few observations on the Amsterdam view of the *relations between* naive experience and theoretical thought. Spier tells us that philosophy, a kind of theoretical thought,

...joins forces with naive experience and focuses its attention upon the concrete reality which we experience in our everyday life. The diverse aspects and coherences directly observed in naive experience are subjected to scientific analysis in philosophy....

The scientific view of the created cosmos is not superior to the naive view of everyday experience. In fact philosophy can not do without naive experience, as it is based upon it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13f.

Philosophy, and by implication all theoretical thought, presupposes the data of naive experience; these data are precisely what the theorist studies. And the theorist should assume, on the Amsterdam view, that the data with which he deals are united in the “continuous bond” of naive experience. The “opposition” between aspects which is distinctive of theoretical thought does not correspond to anything in the real world. The real world, rather, is that of naive experience where this opposition does not exist.<sup>1</sup> Now we have already expressed some bewilderment about the meaning of “opposition” in this context. Apart from that, however, we wish to note that in this scheme theoretical thought requires the use of premises derived from naive experience. Dooyeweerd's writings, in fact, include many references to God and the self, for instance, both of which are said to be beyond all theoretical thought.<sup>2</sup> But does not this fact tend further to blur the distinction between naive and theoretical thought? If a *theory presupposes* propositions of a “non-theoretical” kind, discusses those propositions, includes them in its theoretical structure, then what actually bars us from calling these propositions “theoretical”? The fact that a theory cannot function without reference to these “non-theoretical” propositions makes us wonder whether the label “non-theoretical” is anything but a linguistic convention. Propositions necessary to a theory are surely “theoretical” in the most important sense of that term.

## 5. SCIENCE AND TIME

Dooyeweerd places a definite limitation upon the capacity of scientific or theoretical thought: “theoretical thought is bound to the temporal horizon of human experience and moves within this horizon.”<sup>3</sup> At first glance, this statement seems to imply that theoretical thought may not speak of anything eternal or supra-temporal. Thus it could not speak of God, or even of the human self (since Dooyeweerd, though not others in the movement, regards the human self, the heart of man, to be supra-temporal). Dooyeweerd, however, has much to say about God and the self in his philosophical (and therefore theoretical) writings. Therefore, more must be said. How can a theorist talk about God when his thought is “bound to the temporal horizon of human experience”? One could observe, of course, that “bound” is another of Dooyeweerd's metaphors which is never literally explained. To say that theoretical thought is “bound” in such a way is surely not to say that it has no relations with, no dealings with supra-temporal realities. Dooyeweerd in fact clearly teaches the opposite. But then what does it mean?

Perhaps it would be better to start from the other side of the “boundary.” That is, instead of asking the nature of the “bond” between theoretical thought and the temporal horizon, we should ask how supra-temporal realities such as God and the self can function in the context of theoretical thought. Now, perhaps we can get somewhere; for Dooyeweerd here does make some points which can be discussed. Essentially, he maintains that, while God and the self can be spoken of in a theoretical context, they have such special statuses in that context that it is not quite proper to call them elements of the theory. That special status is that of *presupposition*.

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 120. - and perhaps beyond “naive experience” also. Cf. below.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, cf. 125 f.

... all conceptual knowledge in its analytical and inter-modal synthetical character *presupposes* the human ego as its central reference-point, which consequently must be of a super-modal nature and is not capable of logical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

God and the self, Dooyeweerd is saying, are *presuppositions* of any true theory, and therefore not part of the theory itself. Of course, in a theoretical discussion it is perfectly proper to discuss the presuppositions of the theory in question. But in Dooyeweerd's view, the theory as such does not include its presuppositions.

We find this a rather arbitrary principle. Why is it that the presuppositions of a theory may not be regarded as part of the theory? There is no obvious reason why this should be the case. Traditionally, historians, physicists, philosophers and theologians have frequently discussed the presuppositions of their disciplines, and Dooyeweerd offers no obvious *argument*, so far as we can see, either to show that this practice is wrong or to show that it cannot be extended to theoretical thought in general.

Dooyeweerd's reply, undoubtedly, would be "Supra-temporal presuppositions are not like other presuppositions." Supra-temporal presuppositions are *transcendental*, showing the conditions necessary for the very *possibility* of thought. They have the character of "central reference point" (last quotation), "Archimedean point,"<sup>2</sup> etc. Somehow, therefore, these presupposed realities must be "beyond" that thought which they render possible. Ah, but that "beyond" brings us back to spatial metaphors again! And indeed, again at this point, the force of Dooyeweerd's conception lies in the emotive connotations of certain figures:

In the process of directing my philosophical thought in the idea towards the totality of meaning, I must be able to ascend a lookout-tower above all the modal speciality of meaning that functions within the coherence of the modal aspects.<sup>3</sup>

The presupposition is a kind of lookout-tower – and the lookout-tower can't be on the ground, else it won't be a lookout tower! So the "central reference point" can't be part of the theory, or it won't be the central reference point for the theory to refer to! Yes, the picture is a compelling one. But of course theories are not landscapes, and therefore the question arises as to how Dooyeweerd's analogy (not only the "explicit" analogy of the above-quoted illustration, but also that "implicit" in his metaphorical definitions) is to be applied. After all, not all presuppositional relationships fit the lookout-tower image with equal ease. The book on my table would not exist if the paper in it were missing: it *presupposes* the paper. But I would not say that on that account the paper is not part of the book! Nor would I say that the paper must be "above" the book or "beyond" the book as a lookout-tower must be "above" its landscape. A dictionary is a kind of "central reference point" for proper spelling of words; but this fact does not imply that it must be "above" or "beyond" the realm of words. It *contains* words – words which are spelled according to its own principles. The dictionary legislates for all usage in its language, *including its own*.

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, "Cornelius Van Til and the Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought," in Geehan, E. R., ed., *Jerusalem and A thens* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971, place of publication unnamed), 85, emphasis his. Presumably, when he elsewhere speaks of experience "referring to" something supra-temporal (e.g., *Twilight*, 7), he means "presupposing."

<sup>2</sup> Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Phila., Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953), I, 8..

<sup>3</sup> See above reference.

Or perhaps one could say: the dictionary is “above” the realm of words indeed, but not in any sense that prohibits its being considered as one group of words among many, not in any sense that prohibits its being discussed as a piece of language. So: why may not the presuppositions of theory be themselves part of a theory? Dooyeweerd does not answer that question with any clarity. Why is it that one cannot form a theory about the basis of theories? Why shouldn't Dooyeweerd's own philosophy be regarded as such a meta-theory? Such a theory, of course, would reflect on its own basis as well as on the basis of other theories. But what is wrong with that?

The reader may be getting impatient by now at what appears to be a rather dry academic discussion. What is the importance of all of this? As a matter of fact, this teaching raises very important questions. Much secular, non-Christian philosophy, notably that of Immanuel Kant, has maintained that theoretical thought is in some sense “bound to the temporal horizon of human experience.” In these non-Christian systems, this limitation effectually locks God out of all theories, eliminating from those theories all possibility of reference to God. One would think that Dooyeweerd, as a *Christian* philosopher, would wish sharply to challenge this sort of approach, to insist that God *is* relevant to theoretical work, that theories have no right to lock God out. In fact, however, Dooyeweerd's formulation is ambiguous. He wishes to speak of God, to show the necessity of God for all theoretical thought; but at the same time he wants to make use of a quasi-Kantian formulation that calls God's role in question.

This ambiguity shows up especially in Dooyeweerd's assertion that there can be no “conceptual knowledge” of God and the self.<sup>1</sup> This is a peculiar statement, for it certainly appears from most of Dooyeweerd's writings that one *can* have such “conceptual knowledge,” for Dooyeweerd speaks often of God and the self in highly “conceptual” ways. The fact is, of course, that Dooyeweerd is using “conceptual” here in a rather technical sense, a sense in which only theoretical thought is “conceptual.”<sup>2</sup> Dooyeweerd further says that when a theoretical thinker uses the idea of God or of the self,

... the genuine *conceptual* contents of these transcendental limiting ideas do not transcend the modal dimension of our temporal horizon of experience. The same applies to the theological limiting concepts relating to the so-called attributes of God.<sup>3</sup>

But then what happens to Dooyeweerd's view that theoretical thought must acknowledge some supra-temporal reference point? If a theory may not include any language referring to supra-temporal realities; if a theory, when it *seems* to be making such references is actually making theoretical, conceptual reference only to temporal experience; then the relation of a theory to its “supra-temporal presuppositions” is mysterious indeed. It is a relation which cannot be spoken

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, “Cornelius Van Til,” 85 ff.

<sup>2</sup> This usage is not the only one followed in the Amsterdam philosophy. As we have seen, Spier speaks of “non-scientific concepts” (*Introduction*, 135), the concepts of “naive experience.” Would Dooyeweerd grant that there are “naive concepts” of God and the self? That possibility, a very relevant one, does not seem to cross his mind in these contexts. In fact, the relation between naive knowledge, on the one hand, and knowledge of God and the self on the other, is very unclear in Dooyeweerd. Both are contrasted with theoretical thought, but the knowledge of God and the self does not appear to be a form of naive experience. More likely (as will appear from what follows) the knowledge of God and the self transcends even what Spier would call “naive concepts,” so that this knowledge of God and the self is even less conceptual than is naive experience.

<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd, “Cornelius VanTil,” 87. Emphasis his.

of theoretically; it is a relation which, when it *is* spoken of, appears to refer only to the finite world, so that “God,” “self,” “Maternity,” “omniscience,” etc. (used as theoretical concepts), refer only to temporal things! What then is the status of Dooyeweerd's statement that theoretical thought presupposes God and supra-temporal selfhood? That statement cannot be a theoretical statement; a theoretical analysis of it must interpret it as not referring to God and the self at all! Is it a statement of naive experience? Dooyeweerd doesn't say that either, and it seems rather unlikely (see above footnote on this question). Is there some other kind of statement? If so, how can it be relevant to a *theory* which by its very nature cannot affirm the conceptual validity and truth of such a statement? Or does Dooyeweerd want to go all the way with Kant (and with some modern “Christian atheists”) and affirm that the term “God” never refers to anything except temporal, created reality?! That view would make Dooyeweerd a sheer idolater (one who worships a created thing as God), and would make his philosophy explicitly and flagrantly non-Christian. Essentially, however, we think Dooyeweerd is confusing and confused. He presents us with no clear basis on which to attack the Kantian conception or even to distinguish his own position from it. He leaves the status of God-language entirely unclear, at a time when this language is under intense scrutiny (and attack) throughout the philosophical and theological communities. A Christian philosopher, we believe, should straightforwardly repudiate the Kantian view and say clearly and forcefully that the theorist not only can but *must* speak of God in his theoretical work. It is this which we think Dooyeweerd really *wants* to do in his better moments – when he is challenging scientists to recognize the necessity of presupposing God.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. THE BASIC STRUCTURE

### a. *The Modal Spheres (Low Spheres, Modal Aspects)*

As we have indicated earlier, Dooyeweerd says that both naïve and theoretical thought perceive certain basic distinctions in the universe:

Our temporal empirical horizon has a numerical aspect, a spatial aspect, an aspect of extensive movement, an aspect of energy in which we experience the physico-chemical relations of empirical reality, a biotic aspect, or that of organic life, an aspect of feeling and sensation, a logical aspect, i.e., the analytical manner of distinction in our temporal experience which lies at the foundation of all our concepts and logical judgments. Then there is a historical aspect in which we experience the cultural manner of development of our societal life. This is followed by the aspect of symbolical signification, lying at the foundation of all empirical linguistic phenomena. Furthermore there is also the aspect of social intercourse, with its rules of courtesy, politeness, good breeding, fashion, and so

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd's debate with Van Til in the article we have been quoting is rather confusing in many ways, not least on the question of “conceptual knowledge” of God. Van Til affirms such knowledge, but he clearly is not using “conceptual” in the narrow sense of Dooyeweerd which restricts it only to what Dooyeweerd calls “theoretical thought.” Why, then, is Dooyeweerd so upset? It appears that in Dooyeweerd's thinking there is a real aversion to *any* claim to “conceptual knowledge” of God. Not only “conceptual knowledge” in Dooyeweerd's narrow sense, but in *any* sense. This fact makes our comparison between Dooyeweerd and Kant a highly serious one. But that aversion to “God-concepts” is not clearly or consistently articulated in Dooyeweerd; thus we prefer to believe the best about him – that he simply hasn't understood the problem.

forth. This experiential mode is followed by the economic, aesthetic, juridical and moral aspects, and, finally, by the aspect of faith or belief.<sup>1</sup>

These are the “modal aspects” which naive experience perceives (in unity) and which theoretical thought studies. None can be reduced to any of the others. Dooyeweerd's list quoted above proceeds in an order of ascending complexity. He maintains that that order is irreversible, because the more complex always presuppose the less complex, never vice versa. Each aspect “can only exist upon the foundation of the preceding.”<sup>2</sup> These aspects are related to one another in various complicated ways; things, persons, social structures, etc. may be theoretically analyzed according to their functions in the different spheres. This system is most impressive in its symmetry and balance, and if valid it provides a ready guide to the analysis of many problems in philosophy and other disciplines.

It would take too long, of course, for us to produce an elaborate critique of this system. At times the categories seem a bit arbitrary, a bit too easy, as if the world had to be squeezed a bit in order to fit the categories of the system.<sup>3</sup>

In Dooyeweerd, though not in some of the other members of the movement, there is a rather strange twist on this doctrine of the modal spheres – that is that all the spheres are “aspects of time itself.”<sup>4</sup> The diversity of modal aspects

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Spier, *What Is Calvinistic Philosophy?* 37.

<sup>3</sup> Some questions that might be raised: (i) Are the law spheres elements of the real world, or are they merely ways in which human beings perceive the world? Dooyeweerd's formulations are not entirely clear on this point. (ii) How can one, finally, distinguish one law sphere from another, when in Dooyeweerd's view the “nuclear moment” of each sphere, which distinguishes it from all the others, is indefinable? (iii) Why must the universe be arranged in law spheres of the type Dooyeweerd describes? Dooyeweerd never offers any argument to the effect that the universe is so arranged. (Nor does he even argue the competence of the human mind to discern this structure!) Rather, Dooyeweerd assumes that there are such spheres and then proceeds to ask what spheres there are. Perhaps he thinks that this order is directly perceived, but certainly many other philosophers would disagree with Dooyeweerd on precisely what their perceptions are in this connection. More likely, Dooyeweerd feels he can offer a negative argument – namely, that any philosophy or science which denies the structure which Dooyeweerd describes will invariably fall into contradictions and other insurmountable difficulties. But Dooyeweerd's examples of such difficulties in alternative conceptions are not always clear or persuasive. (iv) Granting that there are such spheres, why must they be arranged in the precise order Dooyeweerd suggests? Many of the arguments for this precise order are highly dubious. Spier, for example, says that the linguistic sphere must precede the social sphere because symbols are necessary for social intercourse (*Introduction*, 43). True enough; but is it not also the case that there could be no agreed-on symbolism unless there were already some kind of social intercourse? Isn't it evident that both spheres “presuppose” one another, rather than one being the unequivocal “basis” of the other? The Amsterdam philosophers rarely consider such *mutual, reflexive* relations between their alleged spheres. Cf. also Spier's argument with regard to economics and aesthetics (same page as last reference). Does *anyone* really find that sort of thing persuasive? (v) What of concepts that appear to overlap several spheres? The Amsterdam philosophers call these “analogical” concepts – concepts like “thought-economy” or “vital motion” or “spatial feeling.” Spier argues that although these do relate to more than one sphere, each “belongs to” one and only one (*Introduction*, 60ff.). Here his arguments are somewhat more persuasive than they are elsewhere, but that is in part due to the fact that he has carefully chosen his examples. If he had chosen to discuss, say, “ethical language,” or “aesthetic history” or “psycho-physics,” “aesthetic analysis,” “economic judgment” or many others, he would have been hard pressed to show which sphere each one “belongs to.” Aesthetic history, e.g., is of interest to *both* artists and historians, and it is really difficult to see which it would interest more. In other words, we think that reality is much more complicated than the Amsterdam scheme makes it out to be. And we consider it at least possible that although God has revealed to us his power and glory in the created world, he has not necessarily revealed to us the general structure of that created world.

<sup>4</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 6.

... refers to a supra-temporal, central unity and fulness of meaning in our experiential world, which is refracted in the order of time into a rich diversity of modi, or modalities of meaning, just as sun-light is refracted by a prism into a rich diversity of colors.<sup>1</sup>

All the different kinds of “order” in the world are considered to be forms of time – numerical order, spatial relationships, the psychological feeling of duration, logical order between premise and conclusion, etc. Even rest is seen as a kind of “economic time.”<sup>2</sup> This scheme serves to underscore the temporal limitation upon theoretical thought (see above, section 5) for it discourages the view that some objects of thought (such as propositions, thoughts, numbers, etc.) are in some sense “timeless.” Yet this view seems to rest upon an equivocation in the use of “time” which has no basis in the actual meaning of the word. If Dooyeweerd wishes to redefine the word, of course, that is His privilege, but then it becomes all the more perplexing when Dooyeweerd asks us to confine our theorizing to the “temporal.” Does he mean that all our thinking must have some kind of “orderliness”? And does “supra-temporal” mean “disordered”? We find little clarity in this whole approach.

### ***b. The Self***

The Amsterdam philosophy labels the human self in many ways. It is the “central reference-point in our consciousness from which this theoretical synthesis can start.”<sup>3</sup> It is the “center of human experience and existence.”<sup>4</sup> It is the “central reference-point of our entire temporal horizon of experience with its diversity of modal aspects.”<sup>5</sup> It is the “religious concentration point.”<sup>6</sup> It is the “starting point of Christian philosophy.”<sup>7</sup>

Note again the rather heavy use of metaphor. The “center” in view is clearly not a geometrical center; the “starting point” is not a geographical starting point. The “concentration point” is not a piece of freeze-dried experience. What then do these phrases mean? Two emphases seem to be found: (i) That the heart or self in some sense “concentrates” all human experience. But in what sense? Does it mean that it is the heart which *has* all experiences? Does it mean that the heart furnishes the universal concepts by which experience is “unified” (i.e., organized, accounted for, analysed, etc.)? Does it mean that all experience presupposes the existence of the heart? Does it mean that any true *account* of human experience must presuppose the existence of the heart? Does it mean that the heart somehow perceives supra-temporally what the senses perceive temporally? Dooyeweerd seems to take the doctrine in all of these different senses at different times. All of them, indeed, could be true at the same time. But none of them is so obvious that no argument is required; and *different* arguments are required for each one. Dooyeweerd avoids his responsibility to defend these theses by resting on his uninterpreted

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>2</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 52f.

<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, f. 121.

<sup>6</sup> Dooyeweerd, “Comelius Van Til,” 85.

<sup>7</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 16.

metaphors. The other emphasis (ii) is that the heart or self, *since* it “concentrates” all human experience, is the necessary “starting point” for any *account* of human experience. But the phrases “starting point” and “reference point” are, again, ambiguous. How does the heart serve as a “starting point” for thought? Does this mean that I must accept the validity of my present views until those are disproved? Does it mean that in my consciousness somewhere there are some “innate ideas” that I must accept if my thinking is to be true? Does it mean that thought must presuppose the *existence* of the heart? Is the heart a sort of faculty by which I learn propositions from a higher power? These and many more things might be meant by the metaphors in question. Doubtless Dooyeweerd would not wish to accept them all; but again he avoids arguing for his specific hypothesis by resting his case upon an uninterpreted metaphor.<sup>1</sup>

We should take note of another teaching of Dooyeweerd on this subject, a teaching with which some other members of the Amsterdam school disagree. Dooyeweerd teaches that the human heart is supra-temporal. Why? Part of the argument seems to be based on the lookout-tower metaphor which we discussed above (section 5). “In the temporal order,” Dooyeweerd says, “...we do not find a central reference-point, transcending the diversity of the modal aspects.”<sup>2</sup> Well, since we don't really know what Dooyeweerd means by “central reference-point,” we will pass over this argument. There is another argument, however, which gives us pause: “How could man direct himself toward eternal things, if eternity were not ‘set in his heart’?”<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Spier:

If our heart were subject to temporality, we would not possess an idea of eternity and we would not be able to relate our temporal life to God in religious self-concentration.<sup>4</sup>

The gist of these quotes seems to be that if man's heart were not supra-temporal he could have no fellowship with God. Two points must be made: (i) This argument is clearly *invalid*. Would Dooyeweerd and Spier be willing to say that we could not have an idea of God unless we were God? Then why should they say that we must be eternal to have an idea of eternity? Must we be omniscient to have an idea of omniscience? or omnipotent to have an idea of omnipotence? (ii) The argument is not only invalid, but *dangerous* as well. It is precisely this kind of argument which has been used throughout the history of thought to break down the creator-creature distinction. Over and over again, philosophers such as Plotinus, John Scotus Erigena, Thomas Aquinas and others have argued that we cannot truly know God or have relationships with God unless we share some sort of common being, some common attributes with Him. Some have maintained, on the same grounds, that although we do not have any attributes in common with God, we do share the attributes of some semidivine being who in turn shares some attributes with God. This sort of argument lies behind the “great chain of being” idea found in Greek philosophy (especially neo-Platonism), Gnosticism, and much current thought. The Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> It is true that Scripture speaks of the heart in comparably general terms: “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23; cf. Matt. 12:34; 15:18 f., parallels). The teaching of such passages, we believe, is that each man has a basic orientation either for or against God, and that this basic orientation will determine whether the specific acts of his life are pleasing to God or not. In any case, these passages are not attempting, as Dooyeweerd is, to show the precise relation between the data of human experience, accounts of that experience, and the self. For *that* job it is not enough to imitate the generality of the scriptural representations.

<sup>2</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 19

<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, I, 3 1, note.

<sup>4</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 54

Christian should not admit for one moment that men must be in any sense divine in order to know God.<sup>1</sup> God is perfectly able to reveal himself to His creatures without making gods out of them. We do not need to be eternal in order to have an idea of eternity; for our God *tells* us what eternity is in His word.<sup>2</sup>

### *c. God*

Dooyeweerd says much about God as creator and lawgiver, and as that “origin” which must be presupposed by all thought. As we have noted, however, Dooyeweerd thinks it is impossible to have any *concept* of God, since in his view there can be no theoretical knowledge of God and since he regards all concepts as theoretical.<sup>3</sup> The whole idea of “knowing” God is rather obscure in the Amsterdam philosophy, since knowledge of God and the self, for Dooyeweerd, seems to be totally distinct from all other knowledge. It is neither “conceptual” theoretical knowledge, nor does it appear to be a form of naive experience. Is it something greater than these which nevertheless *includes* some factual knowledge as one of its elements? Or is it something wholly distinct from all factual knowledge, theoretical and otherwise? On this matter, Dooyeweerd is not clear. He objects strongly to Van Til’s assertion that a Christian philosopher must submit to the “thought-content” of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> At times, this objection seems to rest on a misunderstanding of Van Til, namely, that Van Til is making the knowledge of God “theoretical” in Dooyeweerd’s narrow sense of “theoretical.” (As a matter of fact, it is not clear that Van Til accepts Dooyeweerd’s naive/theoretical distinction at all.) At other times, it seems as though Dooyeweerd simply does not want to include any “thought content” within the scope of the “knowledge of God.”

But this is a most serious kind of unclarity. Throughout the history of human thought, men have attempted to declare God “unknown.” Fallen man finds the concept of the unknown god most appealing; an unknown god does not speak, does not command, does not judge or redeem, does not call man in question. Philosophers and religious people have gone to great lengths to argue the unknowability of God. It has often been said that because God is transcendent, supra-temporal, far above us, nothing may truly be said of Him. Every word, some have argued, limits Him. Thus He may never be truly spoken of. Scripture, however, confronts such thinking and attacks it directly. What the heathen worship as unknown, the apostle Paul clearly sets forth (Acts 17:23). Though God is exalted, high and lifted up, He is not on that account unknown to man. On the contrary; *because* He is transcendent, *because* He is sovereign, He engraves His

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd does not, of course, say that we must be divine in order to know God. In fact he draws a distinction between God’s eternity, on the one hand, and “created eternity” or “*aevum*” on the other. But then what happens to the argument which we have noted? If man must be eternal in order to know eternal things, then must it not also be said that man must have precisely *God’s* eternity in order to know God’s eternity? The one argument is just as strong as the other. The use of this *type of* argument, we maintain, is itself a compromise of the creator-creature distinctions compromise which Dooyeweerd does not intend to make, no doubt; but a compromise nonetheless.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this issue, we refer the reader to an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Peter J. Steen, *The Idea of Religious Transcendence in the Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd* (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1970). Steen, who regards himself as an “Amsterdam philosopher” registers in this dissertation a vigorous dissent against Dooyeweerd’s notion of created eternity. He identifies this idea with the scholastic chain of being concept, and collects many references to other members of the school who share his criticisms. We are not convinced, however, that Steen has adequately purged himself of those “remnants of scholasticism” which remain in his own thinking. See below, section 6-c.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. above, section 5

<sup>4</sup> Dooyeweerd, “Cornelius Van Til,” 8 3 ff. Cf. also section 8 below.

reality upon every created thing, so that His creatures *cannot help* but know Him (Ps. 19, Rom. 1: 18-32). And this knowledge is not an inarticulate, non-discursive knowledge; it is a knowledge which can be truly articulated in words. Even those without access to the Scriptures have knowledge of certain *commands* of God which can be truly formulated in language (Rom. 1:32). Doubtless the knowledge of God is more than the knowledge of verbal formulae, but it most certainly does not *exclude* such formulae. Doubtless, also, there is a sense in which God is incomprehensible, in which our knowledge of Him is non-exhaustive; but Scripture always assumes that it is possible to have *true* knowledge of God which can be expressed in *true language*.

Does Dooyeweerd maintain this clear scriptural witness against the concept of the unknown god? It would seem not. We are not saying that Dooyeweerd teaches the unknown God concept; but it is clear that he does not adequately guard against it. Everything that he says about the knowledge of God discourages, rather than encourages, the confident assertion that we know truth about God. When Dooyeweerd argues that God is supra-temporal and therefore cannot be spoken of theoretically, he is using a kind of argument that has historically been used to prove the total unknowability of God. In our view, all of this gives aid and comfort to the enemy. It may be that if pressed Dooyeweerd would allow that there can be some rational, discursive (though of course non-theoretical) knowledge of God; but almost everything he says tends in the opposite direction; and he uses certain arguments which, if valid, would invalidate not only theoretical knowledge of God but all knowledge of God.

This problem, we must add, concerns not only Dooyeweerd but the movement generally as well. Not all members of the school accept Dooyeweerd's account of supra-temporal selfhood, but all accept the time-bound character of theoretical thought and all are rather unclear concerning the possibility of rational knowledge of God. Those in the Amsterdam school who are anxious to avoid scholasticism would do well to re-examine this phase of their own thinking. For the greatest error in scholasticism was not the concept of created eternity, as Steen maintains (see above, section 6-b, last footnote). Far more basic to scholasticism (and its most basic inheritance from neo-Platonism) was the concept of the unknown God, the God who may be spoken of only in figures, the God about whom no predication may be really true. The concept of created eternity (and other aspects of the "scale of being") arises because of the need for mediation between this unknown God and His ignorant creatures. In fact, compromise with the unknown God concept also produces a kind of "scale of being" in the Amsterdam scheme. Even if we reject Dooyeweerd's idea of "created eternity," we must still reckon with the fact that in the Amsterdam movement *generally*, there are mediators of various sorts between God and His creatures, mediators other than that one mediator who is God and man, Jesus Christ. There is the "law," which has a rather unclear metaphysical status (see section 7, below). There is the "heart," which is called the "central reference point" for all thought (notice that it is the heart, not God, or the Word of God, which is called the "central reference point"). Then there is the hierarchy of the modal spheres. Hierarchicalism is always found when God is regarded as unknown; for without direct knowledge of God, knowledge of subordinate entities must somehow be made to suffice, and this necessitates at least one authority, which becomes God's representative.

## 7. LAW

Law is obviously a crucial concept for the “Philosophy of the Idea of Law.” It is by law, in the Amsterdam view, that God controls all things, and by which God provides norms for human conduct. “Law is the boundary between God and the cosmos.”<sup>1</sup> The cosmos, in other words, is subject to law, but God is not. God is free from the law; yet God is not, in the Amsterdam view, “outside” it.<sup>2</sup> This “outside,” another of this philosophy's suggestive metaphors, seems to mean that although God does not have to “obey” any laws, nevertheless His laws are consistent with His character and therefore He may be expected to act in ways consistent with those laws. At least that is what Calvin meant by the idea, and Spier does quote Calvin!

How does “law” fit into the “basic structure” which we discussed in the last section? Law, like God and the self, appears, first of all, to be a supra-temporal reality which is “refracted” by the prism of time into a great diversity of specific precepts. The supratemporal reality is what Dooyeweerd calls “the central unity of the divine law, namely, the commandment to love God and the neighbor.”<sup>3</sup> This central commandment takes many forms in the temporal world. There are laws of arithmetic, laws of physics, laws of biological growth, of history, language, aesthetics, ethics, faith, etc. In the first five modal spheres, the arithmetical, spatial, physical, biological, and psychological,

the law is given directly by God, and it cannot be broken. An animal always acts according to its psychological instincts and does not deviate from them. So also plants and inanimate things are absolutely bound to the laws laid upon them by the Creator. On the other hand, in the higher, uniquely human law spheres, the law has the character of a *norm*, that is, a rule for proper conduct which can be *broken* by a free choice. In our thinking we can transgress the laws of thought by illogical reasoning. We make lingual errors. We violate the social laws, and act without love, etc. In such ways human sin comes to expression.<sup>4</sup>

It is important, however, that we do not misunderstand concerning what aspects of each sphere are “laws”:

Some maintain that history is never normative and can never be the standard of action; while others maintain the very opposite, contending that history certainly is normative. Which is true? The contention that history is normative is true in the sense that historical action in its subjective side is determined by historical norms. But history understood as the subjective process of cultural unfolding is not normative. That is to say, one may never use the historical facts, which are always subjective, as a norm for his conduct. In other words, the historical subject never becomes the historical law, for every historical subject is always subject to an historical law.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Spier, *What Is Calvinistic Philosophy?*, 32 f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

This Amsterdam view of law raises a number of questions:

(a) What is the relation of law to God? Is the law something created, or is it essentially divine? The formula that law is the “boundary between God and the cosmos” obscures matters here, because one would like to know what side of the boundary the boundary is on! The Scriptures teach that God is creator, the world is His creature, and that there is nothing in between, no third category. Where does “law” fit in this structure?

Sometimes it appears that for the Amsterdam philosophy law is a kind of created structure in the universe, a sort of cosmic machinery. Scripture, however, never regards it this way. In the Bible, the law of God is never a created thing, or a created structure in things. Scripture frequently speaks of nature *obeying* God's ordinances (e.g., Ps. 119:89-93), but it never speaks of any “law structure” or “law order” in nature. Nature *obeys* God's law, but it is not itself God's law, nor is any part of nature God's law. Rather, in Scripture, the law of God is purely and simply divine. There, “law of God” is a phrase which refers to the “Word of God” (note Ps. 119:89); and the “Word of God” is equated with God Himself in John 1:1. To obey the law is to obey God. The law deserves from us a kind of total obedience which only God deserves; divine attributes are ascribed to it (Ps. 119). The Law of God, in other words, is not some created machinery in the universe which mediates between God and man (cf. last section). “Law of God” is simply a way of speaking of God's own claim upon His creatures. The Law is *spoken* by God, not created by Him (note distinction in John 1:1-3). If indeed the Amsterdam philosophy regards law as something created, an aspect of the universe, then it is placing upon that law too low an estimate. Such a view is an inducement to idolatry, for it grants divine authority to elements of the created world.

We are not saying that this is the view of the Amsterdam movement, but we do feel there is unclarity here, especially in this philosophy's use of phrases like “law structure” and “law spheres.”

(b) The view that all physical, biological, linguistic laws, etc., are temporal expressions of the supra-temporal law of love: is that view anything more than a mythology? So far as we can see, there is no scriptural basis for it; and can we really discover conclusions about God's love commandment on any other basis than Scripture? And if Dooyeweerd and the others have any other basis for this view, they have not succeeded in making it clear. They have not shown, in other words, either that the law of love is a supra-temporal something, or that other laws are temporal “expressions” of it, or even what it would *mean* to say, e.g., that the law of gravity is an expression of the law of love to God and neighbor. Again, the philosophy seems to have been seduced by tempting metaphors.

(c) Has God really told us the basic structure of the universe? The Amsterdam scheme, which regards physical laws, logical laws, etc., as refractions of the basic love commandment, would seem to imply that He has. Scripture, however, does not suggest that God has revealed to us a thoroughgoing cosmology. When Scripture speaks of God's revelation in nature, that revelation is not said to give man all sorts of information about biology or economics. Rather, this revelation is to reveal God himself – His glory (Ps. 19), His mercy and grace (Acts 14:17; Matt. 5:45), His wrath against sin (Gen. 3:17-19, Rom. 1:18; Luke 13:1-5). Now doubtless man does

learn many things from his study of nature – things about number, motion, feeling, biotic life, etc. And surely there is a sense in which all these facts have been revealed by God. But the Amsterdam philosophy thinks we have something more than that. It maintains that in the law of love God has given us a kind of “key” to knowledge, a means by which we may work out a system including the basic principles of all the sciences – a system which has just as much divine sanction as the love command itself! But might it not be the case that God has given us the ability to understand various facts in the universe, facts important for our life on earth, without giving us a divinely endorsed map of the cosmos? The Amsterdam philosophy does not seem to take this possibility seriously; we think they should.

(d) Is it true that a study of logic, history, linguistics, sociology, economics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, ethics, or theology will yield *norms* beyond those found in Scripture? The Amsterdam philosophy appears to answer “yes.” Earlier in this section we quoted Spier to the effect that such studies can yield norms, which we are under divine obligation to obey – disobedience to such norms is “sin.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is “sinful” to make an error in logic, or to use less than the most “proper” English. It is even sinful, Spier implies, to “build churches in Roman style, or write a book in the literary style of the 17th century...”<sup>2</sup> In our view, these statements compromise the sufficiency of Scripture. God has directed His people to seek His law, not through their own study of the creation, but through His written word. To be sure, nature does reveal some of God's ordinances (Rom. 1:25, 32; 2:14f.). But Scripture never suggests that nature contains a richer or fuller revelation than the written word. On the contrary: In Romans 3:1-2, the Jews, because of their acquaintance with Scripture, are said to have a tremendous advantage over the Gentiles who (according to the preceding chapters) had only general revelation. Scripture, says the Apostle Paul, is sufficient “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly furnished unto every good work.” Adding to God's word is as much an act of human presumption as subtracting from it (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18). Now we agree that a study of nature and of the human situation may be necessary in order to determine the proper *application* of a scriptural commandment. But we cannot agree with Spier that a study of nature will uncover new commandments, commandments which add to God's written word, commandments which declare the written word to be insufficient. In fact, we regard Spier's elevation of cultural, linguistic, and other such “norms” to quasi-scriptural status as a usurpation of divine authority and an assault upon the liberty of the Christian. And we don't believe that (in the absence of other factors) God will condemn anyone for building a 17th century house in the 20th century!

## 8. SCRIPTURE AND THE WORD OF GOD

The above considerations lead us naturally to a most important area of controversy – over the Amsterdam view of Scripture and the Word of God. Much is said in the literature about the radically scriptural character of this philosophy, and as we have indicated earlier, much of the initial appeal of this philosophy to Christians rests in its claim to relate Scripture to all areas of life. Indeed, there are some in the movement who maintain the historic Reformed view of scriptural authority, who uphold biblical infallibility and inerrancy. However, there are also

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Spier, *Introduction*, 119-122; *What Is Calvinistic Philosophy?* 76ff.

<sup>2</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 88.

some who do not. And there are many of us who feel that the philosophical premises of the Amsterdam school tend to undermine the authority of the Bible.

The Word of God, like the Law, is a supra-temporal reality which takes on various forms within our temporal experience, on the Amsterdam view.<sup>1</sup> It may be, in fact, that the Word of God is equivalent to, or closely related to the Law in this view. Much is said in the Amsterdam literature about the three “forms” of the Word – the Word in creation, in Jesus Christ, and in Scripture. These are three temporal forms of that supra-temporal fullness which is the Word itself. The Word itself is often described as the

...radical and central, biblical theme of creation, fall into sin and redemption by Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God, in the communion of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

It is also called the “basic motive” or “ground motive” of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Dooyeweerd, however, points out that “it should not be confounded with the ecclesiastical articles of faith...”<sup>3</sup> – that is, when he talks about the “basic motive of creation, fall, and redemption,” he is not talking about the *doctrines* of creation, fall, and redemption. The doctrines of creation, etc., can be studied theoretically; the “basic motive” may not be, for it is addressed only to the heart of man and not to theoretical thought. It

... has a radical unity of meaning, which is related to the central unity of our human existence. It effects the true knowledge of God and ourselves, if our heart is really opened by the Holy Spirit so that it finds itself in the grip of God's Word and has become the prisoner of Jesus Christ. So long as this central meaning of the Word-revelation is at issue we are beyond the scientific problems both of theology and philosophy. Its acceptance or rejection is a matter of life or death to us, and not a question of theoretical reflection.<sup>4</sup>

Dooyeweerd's language here suggests that the Word in its central meaning is a kind of *power*, a force that “grips” us and “effects” true knowledge of God and self. Indeed, Dooyeweerd is fond of speaking of “the central ground-motive of the biblical revelation as moving power or *dunamis*...”<sup>5</sup>

This language raises the question of the extent to which this “Word” resembles other words. Is there any sense in which this Word, in its central meaning, is appropriated by hearing, understanding, believing, obeying? Or is the Word a kind of blind force which “grips” a person and changes him, without giving him any information, commands, questions, promises, etc.? Neo-orthodox theology tends to conceive of the Word in the latter way, as does the “new

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<sup>1</sup> For much of what follows, we are indebted to N. Shepherd, “The Doctrine of Scripture in the Dooyeweerdian Philosophy of the Cosmogenic Idea,” *Christian Reformed Outlook* XXI, 2 (Feb., Mar., 1971), 18-21; 20-23. We commend these articles to the readers of this report.

<sup>2</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 41f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Dooyeweerd, “Cornelius Van Til,” 82.

hermeneutic.” In those circles, the Word is conceived as a kind of power which imparts no new ideas, gives no commands – in fact which might even come in the form of *false* language without loss to its power. Dooyeweerd does not assert this neo-orthodox view, but his language often seems to suggest something like it – especially in view of his sharp contrasts between the Word and all doctrinal expressions. The language of “gripping,” etc.: Is this another of Dooyeweerd's uninterpreted metaphors, or is that “gripping” perhaps all that can be said about the relation of the Word to the believer? Dooyeweerd's unclarity, again, leaves the door open for false doctrine.

And what about those contrasts between heart knowledge and theoretical reflection, between “a matter of life and death” and “a question of theoretical reflection”? Why is it that a matter of life and death may never be also a question of theoretical reflection? Dooyeweerd seems to assume this is obvious; but very often we expend our greatest theoretical energies on those problems we care most about, and few of us find anything strange about that. The present ecological crisis, for example, may be said to be, in a sense, “a matter of life and death”; but does not that fact make all the more urgent the theoretical study of ecology? *A fortiori* it would seem that if creation, fall and redemption are matters of *eternal* life and death, then they *ought* to be studied – theoretically as well as “naively.” Dooyeweerd offers no arguments to refute that logical supposition. He appears to feel, here as at other points in this thought which we have discussed, that creation, fall and redemption are *presuppositions* of theoretical thought and therefore incapable of theoretical analysis. But we have argued earlier, and still maintain, that there is no reason why the presuppositions of theoretical thought may not be analysed theoretically. Perhaps, indeed, the reason why the Word in its central meaning cannot be analysed theoretically is that it is not really a word – not really a linguistic communication from God to man. Perhaps, as we suspected above, the Word is a kind of bare power which “effects” and “grips,” but does not inform, command or question. Perhaps, indeed, the terms “creation,” “fall” and “redemption,” used in this sort of context (and sharply distinguished, as we have seen, from the *doctrines* of creation, fall and redemption) are mere code-words to designate that unnameable brute power. Perhaps it might even be possible to substitute “x,” “y” and “z” for “creation,” “fall” and “redemption.” If so, Dooyeweerd is quite far from scriptural ground. And he certainly has not clearly excluded such an anti-scriptural view.

Let us now turn to the Amsterdam teaching concerning the *temporal forms* of the Word: creation, Christ and Scripture. This philosophy has nothing unusual to say about Christ as the Word, so we shall restrict our discussion to the other forms. Creation, as we noted above (last section), is said to contain a “law structure,” the study of which will disclose the basic structure of reality and also provide “norms” for all areas of human life. In section 7, above, we argued that this conception obscures the creator-creature distinction, is a speculative hypothesis, distorts the biblical teaching concerning general revelation, and compromises the sufficiency of Scripture. But now where does Scripture itself fit into the Amsterdam scheme?

Spier argues that the norms discovered in the law-structure must be “positivized” or “specified”:

Love, for example, is a non-native principle, but the principle of love does not itself tell us what is demanded in a concrete instance. It does not always afford parents an immediate solution to the concrete problems which arise in rearing children.<sup>1</sup>

Aesthetic “norms,” historical “norms,” ethical “norms,” faith “norms” – all are given by God in the law structure and may be discovered by men there; but the discovery of these God-given norms is not the end of our labors. We must also *apply* these norms to the concrete situations where we must decide how to behave. Now Scripture, on the view of some members of the Amsterdam school, is a “positivization” of *faith-norms* for a particular group of situations.

“Faith norms” are norms of the “faith aspect,” the highest of the modal spheres. It is not entirely clear what this “faith aspect” is in the Amsterdam philosophy. At least it can be said that this faith aspect is not the same as the basic orientation of the human heart.<sup>2</sup> That basic orientation, toward God or away from Him, directs all aspects of human life of which the “faith aspect” is only one. The “faith aspect,” in distinction from man’s heart-commitment, has to do primarily with acts such as “attending church, engaging in prayer, or partaking of the sacraments.”<sup>3</sup> To say, then, that Scripture is a positivization of faith norms is to say that it applies the norms of the law structure to such matters as prayer, sacraments, the institutional church, preaching, etc. These matters, of course, are very important. They influence, in their turn, other areas of man’s life such as his ethical standards, his aesthetic sensibilities, his use of logic. But the bearing of Scripture upon these other areas is “indirect.” It speaks directly only to the “sphere of faith.”

This view raises serious problems of two sorts. We must question (a) the limitation of Scripture to the realm of “faith,” and (b) the concept of Scripture as a “positivization” of the law structure.

(a) Even if we accept the unscriptural use of “faith” to apply only to one aspect of man’s life rather than to his central heart relation to God, we must reject the view that the Bible speaks directly only to this faith aspect. Scripture itself contains no hint of any such limitation in its relevance to human life. It addresses the *heart* of man (Prov. 4:23, other similar references) and calls man to bring *every* thought captive to the obedience of Christ (II Cor. 10:5), to do *all* to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). It speaks to all areas of man’s life. Doubtless there is a “focus” to the biblical revelation, namely, the saving work of Jesus Christ. But the work of Christ is surely not something which deals only with some “aspect” of human life; it reorients man’s whole existence.

Here is one of the surprising paradoxes of the Amsterdam philosophy. Many of us were first attracted to the movement by its promise to “open” the Scriptures, to show their relevance, not only to our Sunday “church” activities, but to all areas of our daily life. The more one studies the movement, however, the more one discovers the extent to which this philosophy “closes” the Scriptures, and the extent to which it really makes them a “Sunday” thing. The Amsterdam philosophers, perhaps, feel the force of this paradox. They are indeed fond of saying that Scripture addresses the heart, that it bears on all aspects of life, etc. It appears,

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<sup>1</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 76f.

<sup>2</sup> It is worthy of note that this distinction is contrary to the scriptural usage of the term “faith”; for in Scripture, “faith” is precisely a man’s heart-commitment relating him to God

<sup>3</sup> Spier, *Introduction*, 93,

however, that when they use this sort of language, they are thinking of Scripture, not as a book with words and sentences, but as a vehicle of that *dunamis*, that “power” which Dooyeweerd describes as the Word of God. As we read Scripture, the power “grips” us, changes our “direction,” and thereby affects all areas of life. As a book with words and sentences, however, the Bible is said to address only the faith aspect of human life. This distinction between the word as “power” and the Bible as written text<sup>1</sup> resolves the paradox we have noted. Granting this distinction, we may use the Scriptures (as power) to address all areas of life. But the actual words and sentences of Scripture – the words which we can analyse, exegete, paraphrase, translate, etc. – these words tell us only about the faith aspect of human existence. We find this distinction, however, to be totally unscriptural. In Scripture, the “power” of the Word is the power of a verbal message accompanied by the Holy Spirit. The “power” is operative in human life when the word is believed, obeyed, trusted. The very words and sentences which Jesus spoke to his disciples and which we have recorded in our Bibles today, these words are “spirit” and “life” (John 6:63, cf. 68). Neither Jesus, nor the apostles, nor any other biblical writers give any hint that there is any distinction between “power” and “text” such as these philosophers envisage. We experience the “power” of the Word when we come to believe what the *words say*. And of course, we repeat, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that these “words” address only one aspect of human life; quite the contrary!

The attempt to distinguish sharply between “power Word” and “text Word” is characteristic of neo-orthodox theology, the “new hermeneutic,” and other forms of modern thought. In these movements, the “text word” is always deprecated as a merely human word, while the “power Word,” which conveys no intelligible content, is exalted as the true Word of God. This scheme enables these modern theologians to accept the fallibility of the Bible and to deny that God has ever spoken to men in words and sentences. The Amsterdam construction comes perilously close to these modern views, and some members of the school have in fact rejected the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture.

But even without explicitly denying biblical authority, it is possible for an Amsterdam philosopher to *evade* biblical authority by adopting principles of interpretation which distort the plain meaning of the Bible. Dooyeweerd, for example, argues that the “six days” of Genesis 1 must have nothing to do with astronomical or geological concepts of time, since Scripture is concerned directly only with the faith aspect. The six days, therefore, are faith days, rather than geological periods of calendar days. (Dooyeweerd is not very clear on what these “faith days” are, except that they have something to do with the Sabbath commandment).<sup>2</sup> Note here that Dooyeweerd's interpretation does not arise through study of the Hebrew text; rather it is dictated by his philosophical (and anti-scriptural) presupposition that Scripture as text speaks only to the realm of faith. But this sort of “interpretation” evades the authority of the Bible just as surely as does an explicit denial of that authority!

(b) We also reject most decisively the concept of Scripture as a “positivisation” of the law structure. We have already argued (above, section 7) that the Amsterdam philosophy compromises the sufficiency of Scripture by regarding nature as a source for extra-

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<sup>1</sup> For documentation of this distinction, see the articles by N. Shepherd which we cited earlier.

<sup>2</sup> For this discussion, see Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 149f.

scriptural norms. But now there is more to be said – for not only does the Amsterdam philosophy find extra-scriptural norms in the law structure; some of these thinkers even regard Scripture itself as a kind of “positivization” or “application” of the norms of that law structure. This view implies that Scripture contains nothing which could not, in principle, have been discovered through study of the law structure. Furthermore, since a “positivization” or “application” is valid only for a particular set of circumstances and for a particular time and place, this view implies that Scripture as we have it is *dated*. It was valid for the circumstances in which it was written, but cultural change has made it impossible for us today simply to obey its commandments. The chief value of Scripture, on this view, is that Scripture shows us how *ancient* man (possibly under divine inspiration, though our philosophers say little on that subject) positivized the faith norms. The authority of Scripture for us, then, is that we should therefore, write our own Bibles by studying the law structure and finding how it applies to our own situation. Only this law structure, founded as it is on the law of love, is absolute. Scripture, on the other hand, must be supplanted by more up-to-date “positivizations” as the times change.

De Graaff argues that he is not a believer in “situation ethics.” He does not believe that “love” is all we have “to go by.”<sup>1</sup> He stresses that we do, indeed, have Scripture as an *example* of how we should positivize the law structure. He stresses, also, as the situationist does not, that there *is* a “law-structure,” and that this, too, helps us make decisions. We feel, however, that these differences between De Graaff and the situationists are not terribly significant. As for the “example” of Scripture, any situationist would agree that we have many “examples” of love which are worthy of imitation up to a point. These “examples,” however, may not be made into absolute rules, because they do not anticipate the unique features of the situations we confront. De Graaff’s view is not substantially different from this. As for the “law structure,” the situationist, as well as DeGraaff, admits that there are certain constancies about the world and about human nature which we must take into account in our decisions. But both the situationist and DeGraaff would admit that these “constancies” do not enable us to analyse exhaustively every situation before it occurs. Thus, for DeGraaff as well as for the situationist, there are no “rules” by which we can determine beforehand what is right and what is wrong. DeGraaff would say against the situationist that *at one time* (the biblical period) there *were* such rules. But for our own time and culture, DeGraaff and the situationist agree on the essential nature of moral decision.

The Reformed Christian will not need much help from us to see how unscriptural this view is. Scripture is not a mere application of God’s law to a particular situation; Scripture *is* the law of God. Scripture is the very Word which proceeds from God’s mouth, the “breath” of God (II Tim. 3:16, Greek text). The “law” of God referred to in Scripture is, not some “law structure” in the created world, but the *written Word of God* (or, occasionally, as possibly in Psalm 119:91, *God’s spoken Word*). It is not addressed to only one culture: the culture of Abraham’s day was very different from that of David’s, or Jesus’, or Paul’s. Yet Jesus said of the *whole* Old Testament that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and He showed by His use of Scripture that every part of the Old Testament was binding upon the culture of His day. It is true, of course, that in the process of the history of redemption, God’s requirements on men do change. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 37f.

dietary laws of the Old Testament are not literally binding on New Testament believers. But changes of this sort do not come about because of the “process of cultural change.” They come about because of God's specific appointment (cf., e.g., Mark 7:19). Furthermore, we concede that scriptural commands may vary in their *application* as culture changes: e.g., I Pet. 2:13 now applies to highway speed laws which did not exist in the first century. But this variance is a variance in the application of *scriptural* commands; it is not a change which contradicts Scripture in the interest of re-applying some more fundamental “law-word.”

It may be wrong to say that the doctrine of scriptural authority is the “most important” doctrine of our faith; but it is certainly true that if this doctrine is rejected, no other doctrine can be established. We believe that the approach of some Amsterdam philosophers to scriptural authority, which we have discussed above, in fact eliminates that authority in the historic sense and elevates human reason as the ultimate rule for Christian faith and life. We reject that position in the strongest possible way.

## 9. PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

If, as we have suggested, many Amsterdam thinkers reject the historic Christian view of Biblical authority, how do they propose to do the work of Christian philosophy or theology? This question becomes all the more important when we consider that the absence of a strong doctrine of Scripture makes us all the more dependent on the philosophers and theologians to learn what we used to think we could learn from Scripture. This is true even though Dooyeweerd argues frequently *against* setting up philosophy or theology as a mediator between the believer and God's Word.

Dooyeweerd suggests that the term “theology” has been used ambiguously through the history of the church:

On the one hand, this word is used in the sense of the true knowledge of God and of ourselves, and it refers to the holy doctrine of the Church. As such it cannot have a theoretical, scientific meaning, as will become evident presently. But on the other hand, Christian theology refers to a theoretical explanation of the articles of faith in their scientific confrontation with the texts of Holy Writ and with heretical views.<sup>1</sup>

We have already discussed Dooyeweerd's sharp distinction between the heart-knowledge of God and the self on the one hand and theoretical thought on the other. It is on the basis of this sharp distinction that Dooyeweerd argues that theology must be *either one or the other* – either heart knowledge of God and the self, or theoretical knowledge. To combine these ideas, in his view, is to use the term “theology” ambiguously. However, since we have rejected Dooyeweerd's sharp distinction, we have no reason to say that theology must fall into one category or the other, and therefore we have no reason to think that the historical usage has been in this respect ambiguous. Historically, theologians have felt that the true knowledge of God and the self was not sharply distinguishable from scientific knowledge, that theoretical work in fact could contribute to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 115.

knowledge of God and the self in important ways, so that some theoretical knowledge might actually be knowledge of God and the self. This is not to say, of course, that the theoretical thinker is a necessary mediator between God and man. “Simple” people do know God, and often much better than sophisticated theoreticians. The knowledge of God is by no means equivalent to *academic* knowledge of God. But the latter, if faithfully carried out, is an aspect of the former, and can be used of God to broaden and deepen the heartknowledge of any believer.

Dooyeweerd, however, by his heart knowledge/theoretical thought dichotomy, is forced to make a choice: either theology is heart knowledge or it is theoretical knowledge. He chooses the latter, but without, in our opinion, an analysis of the work of theology adequate to justify his choice. Having made this choice, he asks what the subject matter of theology is to be. He considers the possibility that theology provides a comprehensive, total world view, which shows all the relations of the different modal aspects of human experience. He rejects this alternative – again, in our opinion, with no serious argument and no serious analysis of the nature and task of theology. Thus he comes to the conclusion that theology is a special science, the science of the “faith aspect.” It is not a study of God, for God is beyond theoretical thought in Dooyeweerd's view. It is not a study of God's Word, for God's Word is also beyond theoretical thought. Nor is it a study of Scripture: for Scripture as a vehicle of the power word is beyond theoretical study, and Scripture as a textual positivization of faith norms is directly valid only for its own culture and circumstances. Theology, indeed, can benefit from the study of Scripture, but only (or so it would seem from the doctrine of Scripture which we discussed in the last section) as an example of how the faith norms can be applied to a particular situation.

This view of theology is essentially an implication of the Amsterdam view of Scripture, which we have discussed earlier, and we reject the implication for the same reason for which we rejected the premise. We maintain that theology is simply the teaching of God's Word – the Bible: it is that teaching by which God's people are built up in the knowledge of God and of themselves. This teaching can be relatively “theoretical” or relatively “naive.” It can be by means of precept or by means of example. The scholar cannot claim to mediate between God and the believer, because scholarly knowledge is only one part of the knowledge of God, a part which because of the perspicuity of the Scriptures is not necessary for salvation. But it is a part of this knowledge, a part which adds to, enriches, deepens other forms of this knowledge. Further: whether relatively “naive” or relatively “theoretical,” theology is the teaching of *Scripture*; and theology is *bound* to Scripture as its necessary, sufficient, and perspicuous authority. The theologian may not regard Scripture as limited in its authority to some “faith-aspect,” nor may he regard it as merely an application of some more basic law. Scripture is His law (see above, last section).

What, then, is philosophy on the Amsterdam view? Philosophy is that science which shows the relations between all the other sciences. Philosophy gives a total worldview, showing the limits of human knowledge, showing the limits of each science, showing the general structure of the universe. The philosopher, therefore, has a right to tell the theologian what he may and may not do.<sup>1</sup> The philosopher determines that Scripture is a positivization of faith norms for a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd does, of course, also say that philosophy must take account of the results of the special sciences – presumably theology included. Thus there is a sense in which the theologian “dictates” to the philosopher as well as a sense in which the philosopher “dictates” to the theologian. Somehow, though, in the Amsterdam literature, the philosopher always comes out on

culture, and therefore he forbids the theologian to interpret, say, the days of creation as geologic periods. The philosopher decides, in other words, what Scripture can and cannot say to the interpreter. And he decides these matters, not by exegesis, not by intensive study of the biblical text, but on the basis of his own study of the law structure, “directed” in some mysterious way by the “power” of the Word. On this point, Dooyeweerd is quite explicit. He severely castigates Van Til because Van Til calls philosophers to “subordinate all our thinking to the truths of Scripture.”<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd considers Van Til's position “rationalist” because Van Til wishes to “derive” philosophical concepts from the “thought-content” of Scripture. On the contrary, says Dooyeweerd, the Bible contains no “concepts” which the philosopher must accept on its authority. The bearing of Scripture upon philosophical work is to be expressed exclusively by the notion of “power”: Scripture may exert power upon the philosopher, but may never teach him any *concepts*.<sup>2</sup>

At the risk of being monotonous, we must again reject this view in no uncertain terms. For in this scheme, Dooyeweerd has essentially rejected the rule of Scripture over the work of the philosopher, and has given to the philosopher virtual final authority over Christian faith and life. Dooyeweerd indeed denies that a Christian philosophy should be so imperialistic! Yet upon analysis, it appears that Dooyeweerd's philosophy is as imperialistic as any philosophy that man has invented. The philosopher, by virtue of his superior knowledge of the law structure of the universe, may dictate to all other sciences what they may and may not say; and he does not so dictate on the basis of what Scripture says (he *never*, as philosopher, derives *any* thought content from Scripture); rather, he says what he says on the basis of his own expertise and on the assertion of a vague divine “power” directing him in some way. The philosopher, therefore, has virtual autonomy; and Dooyeweerd's polemics against the “autonomy of theoretical thought” lose all force. We urgently warn God's people not to become entangled in such a philosophical bondage. Let us submit our philosophizing, rather, with all our thinking, to the *words* which our Lord has spoken to us; for only those words tell us the truth that sets us free (John 8:31f.).

## 10. SCIENCE

Our remaining observations can be more brief, since the basic picture should now be clear. Obviously, if the Amsterdam scheme rejects the authority of Scripture, in the historic sense, for philosophy and theology, it is not likely to accept that authority in the case of the other sciences. And in fact, although the Amsterdam thinkers speak much of “scripturally-directed science,” their scientific work appears to be much more philosophically directed than scripturally directed. As Shepherd points out,<sup>3</sup> the scientific pronouncements of this school are based on

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top! The reason seems to be that though the philosopher must accept the *data* with which theology works, the philosopher has the final word on what the theologian may or may not do with the data. The philosopher declares the *limits* of theology – a declaration the theologian is incompetent to make.

<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, “Comelius Van Til,” 83.

<sup>2</sup> Again, we remind the reader that to Dooyeweerd, “concept” applies only to *theoretical* concepts. One may legitimately ask Dooyeweerd if Scripture might not teach the philosopher some “concepts” of a “naive” kind. But Dooyeweerd does not reflect upon this possibility in context, and thus we must assume that Dooyeweerd is ruling out the derivation from Scripture not only of “concepts” of a technical, sophisticated sort, but even of any meaningful, authoritative thought content. In other words, Dooyeweerd is saying what modernist theologians have always said, that we may not accept any philosophical view simply because Scripture teaches it. In fact, in Dooyeweerd's total scheme, it appears that we may not accept *anything* on the authority of Scripture.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, 11, 2 3.

philosophical, rather than exegetical premises: evolution is wrong, not because Scripture teaches otherwise, but because evolution is based on philosophical presuppositions opposed to the Amsterdam scheme.<sup>1</sup> We disown this approach and call for scientists to submit their scientific hypotheses, together with all their other thinking, to the judgment of God's written Word.

## 11. EDUCATION

Members of the Amsterdam school have always had a keen interest in Christian schools, and today they wield considerable influence, e.g., in the National Union of Christian Schools. This influence was strongly felt in 1971 when the Board of Directors of that organization proposed for the organization a new doctrinal basis. The former basis affirmed that the organization accepted the Scriptures as explicated by the Reformed Standards as its final authority. The new proposal included (a) a very ambiguous affirmation of scriptural authority, wherein the Bible was mentioned as one "form" of the Word of God (coordinate with Christ and creation), with no mention whatever of the relationships between the various "forms" of the Word; (b) elimination of all reference to the Reformed Standards (except for a rather vague reference to the doctrine of Scripture contained in these standards). The new document failed, not only to commit the organization to the Scriptures and the Reformed Faith, but even to commit the organization to the simple Gospel of sin and forgiveness: for the document itself contained only a few references to the "implications" of sin and redemption for the field of education, and it failed unambiguously to refer its readers to any other document wherein authoritative *definitions* of sin and redemption might be found. Therefore, the document contained nothing that could not be affirmed by any liberal humanist.

The change in the commitment to Scripture is understandable in the light of our previous discussion. The elimination of commitment to the Reformed Standards stems from an Amsterdam dogma which we have not yet mentioned, namely, the dogma that no "ecclesiastical creed" may ever be used as the basis of an educational institution. This dogma is based, of course, upon Dooyeweerd's system of modalities: the church is a faith institution, while the school is an analytic institution. The two belong to different modal spheres, and thus can never share a common basis. In our view, this is nonsense. For one thing, we cannot regard school and church as so different that they cannot share a common basis. A scriptural perspective on the matter indicates that there are certain truths which all Christians must confess in common. It may be that in *addition* to the common Christian confession, a Christian school may wish to confess scriptural truths of particular relevance for the educational task; but this does not imply that the school and church may confess nothing in common. For another thing, the Reformed Standards are not "ecclesiastical creeds" in any narrow sense. The Westminster Confession, Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, etc., are simply summaries of the redemptive message of Scripture. They are not concerned with details of church government, liturgical ritual, etc. Like Scripture itself, they address the *heart* of man, not some narrowly defined area of man's life. Therefore it is altogether appropriate that a Christian school, as much as a Christian church, should confess the historic standards of the Reformed faith.

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<sup>1</sup> R.J. Rushdoony, in his Introduction to Dooyeweerd's *Twilight* (p. xiii), criticizes Bultmann for regarding science as "a new source of norms, one within the cosmos." We think Rushdoony should have asked seriously whether Dooyeweerd has not done the same.

We are therefore glad to say that later in 1971 the N.U.C.S. Board reversed its position on this matter and recommended that the basis of the organization be the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as explicated in the Reformed Standards. Yet we are certain that adherents of the Amsterdam philosophy will not be pleased with such a formulation and will work hard to dilute the commitment of the N.U.C.S. to the Scriptures and the Reformed Faith. We call upon Christians concerned about Christian education to resist this Amsterdam influence, an influence which could destroy the defenses of the Christian schools against that secular humanism which so permeates the public schools today.

## 12. CHURCH AND SOCIETY

The Amsterdam philosophy draws a sharp distinction between the church as “institution” and the church as “visible body of Christ.” This distinction is not the same as the theological distinction between the church visible and the church invisible. Rather, in the Amsterdam view, both “institution” and “visible body of Christ” are *visible* entities. The latter is the broader category, manifesting itself in many institutions of which the “church institution” is only one. Some of these are: Christian schools, Christian labor unions, Christian political parties, etc. Thus on this view the Christian school is as much the body of Christ as is the local church congregation.<sup>1</sup>

We do not deny that Christian schools and other such institutions are legitimate and important; but we must question the legitimacy of the above distinction between church institute and visible body of Christ. We do not find it in Scripture. Ephesians 4 speaks of the “body” and explains that that body grows through the gifts which God has given to each member. At the head of this list of gifts are “apostles,” “prophets,” “evangelists,” “pastors and teachers.” These are the men whom God has appointed “for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ” (vs. 12). In this passage, the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers are the leaders and edifiers, not merely of the “church institution,” but of the “body of Christ” itself. This passage knows of no distinction between the two. The officers of the institutional church are the officers of the body of Christ. The officers of the one are charged with the oversight of the other. This is the regular scriptural pattern: in the New Testament, the “Church” is that “organization” ruled by God through His elders and deacons, wherein the worship of God in prayer, preaching, sacrament and offering is carried on. The New Testament knows of no other visible form of the “Church.” The Amsterdam distinction is a sheer speculation.

Christian schools and other organizations, no doubt, manifest the “unity of the body of Christ” in various ways. Christians who are “one in Christ” will demonstrate their love in all areas of life. Paul, indeed, later in the Ephesian letter, makes this very point with regard to family life (Eph. 5:22 - 6:4) and the master-servant relation (6:5-9). These points, however, do not make the school, family or business into visible forms of the body of Christ coordinate with the institutional church. In the New Testament, the institutional church *is* the visible body of Christ.

This is not to say, of course, that all Christian organizations must be ecclesiastically controlled. The institutional church, indeed, must apply the word of God to all areas of human life, and must

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<sup>1</sup> On these points, cf. Spier, *Introduction*, 222 ff.

call such “Christian organizations” to account when they move in unscriptural directions. But the institutional church is not called upon by God to control schools, unions, governments. When we grant such “independence” to these organizations, however, we need not at the same time grant them the status of “visible body of Christ.”

### 13. EVANGELISM

Now the Amsterdam philosophy does not stop with the assertion that schools, unions, political parties, etc. can be visible institutions of the “body of Christ.” This assertion is part of a broader conception which we must now consider.

As we have noted (above, section 7), the Amsterdam philosophy claims to have discovered many divine laws, or norms, beyond those of Scripture. There are aesthetic norms, historical norms (e.g., “one may not build a 17th century house in the 20th century”), etc. To break any of these laws, in this view, is sin against God. This conception, indeed, broadens the concept of sin considerably beyond that which is usually found among Reformed Christians. But the Amsterdam philosophy broadens it even more. Since the heart of man is the “concentration point” of the whole temporal cosmos, says Dooyeweerd, man's fall into sin “implied the apostasy of the whole temporal world.”<sup>1</sup> Thus not only man, but the whole world is somehow involved in sin: rocks, trees, rivers; and especially corporate human entities such as families, schools, governments, etc.

If, then, sin extends over all of these entities, then redemption does as well. And if redemption does as well, so the argument goes, then evangelism must also. That is to say, evangelism should not merely be the preaching of the good news to individuals; rather it should include the restructuring of social institutions as well. It should even involve the “subduing of the earth” mentioned in the “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:28, since it should include the removal of the effects of sin from the creation. And does not Colossians 1:20 say that Christ will “reconcile all things unto himself”?

We feel, however, that the Amsterdam philosophy has here failed to make certain crucial distinctions. No doubt the sin of man affects the entire creation; Scripture says that many times, in many ways. But there is an important difference between *sin itself* and the *effects* of sin. Sin is an *exclusively personal* category. Only a *person* can sin. Only a *person* can disobey a law of God; only a *person* can hate his creator; only a *person* can rebel against his Lord. A tree can be *affected* by sin, but it cannot *sin*. Thorns and thistles can ruin a garden as God's curse on man's sin, but those thorns and thistles are not *sinner*s.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of social institutions. A labor union may be affected by the sins of its members; but the union will not thereby be a *sinner*.

Now just as sin is an exclusively personal category, so are faith and repentance. A tree or rock cannot repent; only a person can. A labor union or Christian school cannot *believe* in Christ; only *persons* can.

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 124.

<sup>2</sup> Spier, indeed, makes these very distinctions, *Introduction*, 119ff. We feel, however, that the movement as a whole forgets them at times.

We maintain, therefore, that evangelism, too, is an exclusively personal category; for evangelism is essentially the calling upon persons to repent of their sins and believe on Christ. Doubtless, “redemption” in a larger sense includes other elements than evangelism. The New Testament, however, puts all its stress upon the exhorting of persons to faith in Christ. Normal cultural pursuits, according to I Corinthians 9, for instance, must take second place to the preaching of the Gospel, because of the urgency of man's plight and, more basically, because of a divinely ordained priority.

It is most dangerous, we believe, so to expand the concepts of “sin,” “repentance,” “faith,” and “evangelism” that their personal focus is lost. If “sin,” for instance, becomes anything less than personal disobedience, hatred, rebellion; if it is made into a kind of general disorder in the world as such; then it is not what Scripture says it is. In the language of Cornelius Van Til, sin is “ethical,” not “metaphysical.” It is a personal heart attitude, not merely a weakness of constitution. If “sin” and the other above terms are expanded to include the whole universe, then the very Gospel of Christ will be lost in the verbiage. We believe that there is at least a tendency in this direction in the Amsterdam philosophy.

#### 14. APOLOGETICS

The Amsterdam philosophers do not claim to be apologists; yet the Amsterdam philosophy is constantly in dialogue with non-Christian ideologies in its quest to “evangelize” all aspects of human life. It is important, therefore, for us to ask how the Amsterdam thinkers approach the non-Christian. What are the ground rules for the “dialogue”? What, if any, “common ground” is presupposed? These, of course, are questions which are usually asked in connection with apologetics.

As we mentioned earlier, Prof. Cornelius Van Til has for many years been considered by many to be in league with the Amsterdam school. Indeed, Van Til has supported the movement in many ways, endorsing much of the work of Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and the others. During the last several years, however, Van Til has become much more critical of the Amsterdam movement. Part of this change, indeed, has been due to the emergence of “younger radicals” within the movement such as Arnold De Graaff and Hendrik Mart. But part of it, too, has resulted from Van Til's closer re-reading of the writings of Dooyeweerd himself. Naturally, since Van Til is a professor of apologetics, his criticisms center in the area of apologetics. The main question: does Dooyeweerd proclaim clearly to the unbeliever that no reasoning or philosophizing is possible apart from the presupposition of the God of Scripture?

Van Til now feels that he does not. Dooyeweerd's “transcendental method,” especially as Dooyeweerd has “sharpened” it in his later writings, rejects all merely “transcendent” or “dogmatic” criticism of non-Christian philosophy. “Transcendent” criticism is criticism which merely shows that the philosophy under consideration conflicts with Christianity. “Transcendental” criticism, on the other hand, is a “critical inquiry into the *universally valid conditions, which alone make theoretical thought possible, and which are required by the immanent structure of this thought itself.*”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, I, 37.

What does Dooyeweerd find in that structure?

The antinomies which result in theoretical thought from disregarding the irreducible nature of the fundamental experiential modes, show that there are structural states of affairs in our experience which cannot be neglected with impunity.

These states of affairs can, indeed, furnish a common basis for every philosophical discussion since they are transcendental data and as such have a general validity for every philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Dooyeweerd appears to assume, however, that these “states of affairs” are something less than the reality of the triune God of Scripture. To introduce God at this stage of the argument would, in Dooyeweerd's view, be a form of “transcendent” criticism, a form of dogmatism. We must, rather, first show the non-Christian philosopher that theoretical thought presupposes naive experience and cosmic time; secondly we must show him that all of this presupposes the existence of a self which transcends time; thirdly we must show that this self, itself, presupposes something beyond itself, namely “an origin.” It is at that third step that the confrontation occurs between biblical and non-biblical ground motives. Van Til replies:

My contention over against this is, Dr. Dooyeweerd, that this confrontation must be brought in at the first step, and that if it is not brought in at the first step it cannot be brought in properly at the third step. *But to say this amounts to saying that there is only one step, or rather that there are no steps at all.*<sup>2</sup>

Van Til's point is that Dooyeweerd, by his three-stage scheme, leads the non-Christian philosopher to believe that one can reason out the existence of cosmic time and supra-temporal selfhood without presupposing the God of Scripture. Further, Dooyeweerd, even at step three, insists only that the unbeliever recognize the existence of “an” origin, “an” ultimate – one which need not be the true God at all! In other words, Dooyeweerd *never* seriously challenges the unbelieving philosopher to accept the God of Scripture. He constantly assumes that the unbeliever is able to reason perfectly well without this assumption. Therefore Dooyeweerd in fact concedes what he claims to challenge, namely, the autonomy of theoretical thought. Or rather: Dooyeweerd does challenge the independence of theoretical thought from naive experience, supra-temporal selfhood, and ultimate origination; but he does not challenge that autonomy which is far more significant – the pretended autonomy of sinful man over against the living and true God!

Van Til also offers criticisms of matters which we have already discussed, such as the “conceptual” *contentlessness* of Dooyeweerd's transcendental ground motives<sup>3</sup> and the supra-temporal selfhood as the “central sphere of occurrence.”<sup>4</sup> For now we are content to endorse Van Til's basic critique of Dooyeweerd's stance vis-a-vis the non-Christian philosopher. Scripture

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<sup>1</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 58.

<sup>2</sup> VanTil in Geehan, E., ed., *Jerusalem and Athens* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 112f.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

allows for no “neutral” sphere in which we may reason out our philosophical conclusions without reference to God. In Scripture all facts confront man directly with God, for all facts are what they are because of God's plan. To suggest that the unbeliever may examine certain states of affairs without considering the relation of those facts to God is to concede the Christian's entire case at the outset.

But what more could we expect from a philosopher who has also compromised the scriptural teachings on so many other matters! This philosophy is saturated throughout by attempted autonomy!

## 15. CONCLUSIONS

We believe that we have now fully substantiated our initial assertion that the Amsterdam movement is (1) full of unclarity and poor argumentation, and (2) unscriptural at many crucial points. Let us now summarize the main points of the last 14 sections:

1. This movement is important and must be evaluated even by those who are not experts in philosophy.
2. Genuine biblical elements in the philosophy give it a powerful appeal to Reformed Christians.
3. Yet the philosophy is both intellectually and doctrinally deficient.
4. Dooyeweerd's “sharp” distinction between naive experience and theoretical thought is unclear in its definition, resting for its persuasiveness upon uninterpreted metaphors.
5. Dooyeweerd's limitation of science to the world of temporal experience rests on no substantial basis and opens the door for<sup>1</sup> a Kantian concept of an “unknown God.”
6. Dooyeweerd's basic metaphysical scheme, modal spheres/supratemporal self/God, is poorly argued and threatens to<sup>1</sup> make both God and man correlative aspects of a common scale of being.
7. The Amsterdam concept of law further clouds the relation between God and the world, discourages a proper philosophical humility, and compromises the sufficiency of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> N.B.: by the phrases “opens the door for” and “threatens to,” we are making an important qualification which we have also made in the text. We are not saying that Dooyeweerd or any of these philosophers *wants* to teach the “unknown God” idea or a Greek scale of being. Nor are we saying that they explicitly teach such doctrines. But we are saying that they fail adequately to *guard against such* doctrines, and further, that such doctrines might even be *derivable from* the Amsterdam scheme on some interpretations of its ambiguous terminology.

8. Some members of this school posit a sharp dichotomy between the text of Scripture and the Word of God. They make of Scripture nothing more than an *application* of natural law to *one sphere* of human life for one particular culture and period of history.
9. This school of thought absolves the philosopher of any responsibility to the verbal content of Scripture and gives to the philosopher virtually unlimited authority over the realm of theoretical knowledge.
10. This movement also prevents any criticism of scientific theories on the basis of scriptural exegesis.
11. The influence of this movement in the area of Christian education has been harmful in very important respects.
12. The Amsterdam distinction between the “church institute” and the “visible body of Christ” is without scriptural foundation.
13. The Amsterdam concept of evangelism threatens to water down the very content of the Gospel.
14. Dooyeweerd fails to confront unbelieving philosophy with the total bankruptcy of its position.

These are very serious criticisms, and we do not make them lightly. We recognize that this movement has many supporters in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and much influence in other churches and Christian organizations. We consider it most important that Christians in our presbytery become informed concerning this movement and that they take firm stands against its unscriptural emphases. We are convinced that if the goals of the Amsterdam philosophy prevail in our circles, the Reformed Faith as we have known it will disappear entirely from those circles. The good elements of this philosophy are not unique to it; they have been held by Calvin, Kuyper, and many other Reformed people. The *distinctive* elements of the Amsterdam philosophy, those which distinguish it from other kinds of Reformed thinking, we find to be almost entirely harmful.

Our denomination has long been known for its devotion to doctrinal purity. The time has come for it to speak out on the unscriptural notions herein described. It is all too easy for us to confine our doctrinal concern to those movements which have no influence in our own circles. When a movement of this sort comes close to home, that is when doctrinal purity requires courage. We recommend therefore, that presbytery issue an official warning against the unscriptural tendencies of the Amsterdam movement which we have noted in this report, and that ministers and elders be encouraged by presbytery to study these matters sufficiently to educate their people as to the dangers involved.

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<sup>1</sup> Steen, as we have noted in the text, is himself a member of the Amsterdam school, and his position exhibits a number of the weaknesses which we have described in this paper. This particular dissertation, however, is basically a critique of some ideas of Dooyeweerd, and therefore we have listed it under "Works Critical of the Movement."