

Friesen's Reformational Critique of Reformationals

Friesen—Boer Correspondence (Mostly Friesen)

Glenn Friesen:

Who or what I am should not affect your reading of my historical and philosophical research. Over the past 15 years, since I first published an article on Dooyeweerd, I have been subjected to many ad hominem arguments and a lot of verbal abuse from people who call themselves reformationals. But the issues are not about me. I understand that my findings will cause concern to many people, especially those who have spent their entire careers teaching ideas that have been shown to be incorrect.

But I am glad that you are wondering what makes a person a reformational. Do reformationals need to subscribe to the right-wing ideas that I have described? I hope not. In my view, the ideas of people like Nancy Pearcey or Rousas Rushdoony bring disrepute on all of Christianity. Does one have to discriminate against the LGBTQ community to be a reformational? Again, I hope not. But the record of reformational institutions is not very good.

We now know that the key ideas of neo-Calvinism, whether in Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper, or Dooyeweerd, came from other sources, especially the two fellow anti-revolutionary philosophers Franz von Baader and Julius Stahl. Baader was a Catholic with strong theosophical influences from Jacob Boehme as well as from mystical sources and Jewish Kabbalah, and Stahl was Jewish, but converted to Lutheranism for the sake of obtaining a job. Neo-Calvinism is not the same as Calvinism. So, reformational philosophy must no longer be used as an apologetic for Calvinistic theology.

Dooyeweerd was very critical of theologians. Read his responses to the Curators of the VU. And read Stellingwerff's "De VU na Kuyper" to see some of the horrible disputes at that university based on theological differences.

We also know that Dooyeweerd's philosophy is very different from that of his brother-in-law Vollenhoven, or of Van Riessen or Van Til or Schaeffer. What counts as reformational? These philosophies cannot be reconciled; they differ on almost every major point. Of the professors at the VU, only Andre Troost was close to Dooyeweerd's ideas. Dooyeweerd said that the central idea of his philosophy was his philosophy of time. Although that idea—the distinctions of temporal, supratemporal and eternal—continues to fascinate me, it is not accepted

by most reformationals. Dooyeweerd even said that those who do not interpret creation, fall and redemption as occurring outside of time do not share his views of the Christian ground-motive.

Dooyeweerd was ecumenical in spirit. Vollenhoven was not. Will reformationals be open to ideas from other denominations? From other religions? Or does reformational mean being closed off from others (or what Dooyeweerd called ‘geborneerd’)? A friend who used to work at ICS used the word ‘tribal’ to describe it. You are a former missionary, so I understand that these questions are particularly acute for you.

I have spent a large part of my life studying Dooyeweerd’s philosophy and his sources. At the conclusion of my book on Dooyeweerd, I listed 5 possible responses that I anticipated with respect to my research. You might want to look at them. And during the peer review of my article on Groen van Prinsterer, one of the reviewers congratulated me but then asked (I paraphrase), “What do we do, now that you have shown that Franz von Baader was a major source of Groen’s, Kuyper’s and Dooyeweerd’s views?

There is after all a side to Baader that we must oppose.” My reply was that it makes a difference whether we ask this question from a philosophical or a theological perspective. They are not the same. I am interested in the philosophical and experiential. Dooyeweerd begins his “New Critique” with experience, and not with theological presuppositions. If you want to consider Baader from a theological point of view, then you may or may not be comforted to know that Baader’s theology is much more orthodox than Dooyeweerd’s, and that he has a higher view of Scripture. As the late Peter Koslowski, a professor at the VU told me, “Baader was a great Christian!” But he was certainly not Calvinistic.

In politics, Baader advocated for the ‘proletariat’ long before Marx used the word; Dooyeweerd would later also use the word. And as I have shown in my review of Jonathan Chaplin’s book, Dooyeweerd allowed for intervention by the state to a much larger extent than reformationals have acknowledged. It is time for reformationals to not only re-examine their theology and philosophy, but also their politics.

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Jan H. Boer: Thanks a lot for your lengthy, interesting, fascinating and intriguing response. I have since long realized that you are a Reformational with a difference, one who seems to have had more time than most doing research and come up with very different and challenging conclusions. I may have some philosophical interest, but am no philosopher. Nevertheless, let me raise a comment and question or two.

I have long been aware that Groen van Prinsterer and Kuyper had some of their major concepts from elsewhere, but that has not bothered me. Everyone picks up cues and clues from elsewhere. A major difference between thinkers is not the sources or ideas themselves, but how they combine and relate them to each other. As to where Marx got his ideas, not only was his "proletariat" not original with him, but same for his famous opiate statement, which actually originated with Anglican clergyman Charles Kingsley: "We have used the Bible as if it were a mere special constable's handbook, an opium dose for keeping beasts of burden patient while they are being overloaded."

I find your contention that philosophical and theological perspectives may lead to different perspectives puzzling. In a perfect world, should they not lead you in the same direction? As to "tribalism," the Calvin Groen Club, as much as I slowly learned to appreciate it, definitely had a tribal colour. I know, for I was a somewhat hesitant member and, later, spent 30 years in a tribal environment. If you are interested in more details about that Club, go to the Runner section on this very page.

Speaking of Runner, how do you size him up? Did he understand Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven?

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Glenn Friesen

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Historically, reformationals have been opposed to any mention of human rights, viewing this as a rationalistic idea from the French Revolution. The Dutch political party founded by Kuyper has frequently been on the wrong side of human rights issues, opposing women's right to vote, de-colonization, co-education, mandatory vaccination and divorce. It supported the death penalty. After it merged with the CDA, it entered into a coalition with the far-right Pim Fortuyn List. This has continued in the U.S., where people like Nancy and Rick Pearcey misuse reformational ideas to promote an extremely right-wing agenda. Ideas of sphere sovereignty, worldview and religious antithesis have been used by Christian universities and other organizations to discriminate against LGBTQ individuals. The ideas have also been misused to support the idea of a minimalist state that does not intervene in business, medicine or education. I believe that Dooyeweerd's political philosophy can support a less conservative viewpoint; he advocated the intervention of the state in other societal spheres on the grounds of equality and

public justice. His son-in-law Ernst Stern wrote a two volume work trying to place Dooyeweerd's philosophy within the context of human rights. Dooyeweerd's roots in Baader are also helpful. Baader opposed revolutionary ideas, but said that we still need evolution and progress. Not to progress is to regress and to petrify.