

Dooyeweerd's Passing: An Appreciation

H. Evan Runner¹

On Saturday, February 12, 1977, Herman Dooyeweerd, professor emeritus of the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, passed away at the age of 82. He knew that to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord. Among us, Prof. Dooyeweerd was best known as the first developer and organizer, together with his brother-in-law, Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven, who now survives him, of a concerted and sustained philosophic effort that wishes to be more accurately and more adequately grounded in divine revelation than philosophizing has traditionally been. Both these men belonged to the first post-Kuyper generation, and towards the end of his life Kuyper had called for the development of a Christian philosophy; he had sensed that without that, the entire undertaking of the Free University would fail. It is in this light that we must see Dooyeweerd's principal work.

But he was so much more than that! In this man, around whose head currents of controversy swirled almost from the beginning of his career, God gave His church an uncommonly talented leader, but one also who, through the years, learned increasingly to submit his life to the will and Word of God, and in doing so became more and more clearly a humble servant of God's people, patiently using his talents for the good of the church and thus also for the good of all mankind. Few North Americans are even now aware of the many talents God entrusted to Herman

¹*The Banner*, April 22, 1977, pp. 21-23. Edited by Jan H. Boer. Though the story of Dooyeweerd comes through clearly, this article seems a rough draft that needs thorough editing. I have restricted my editing to a minimum of punctuation and paragraphing. I even left untouched Runner's annoying resorting to frequent parenthesized interlocutions, most of which should have been worked into the sentences. I deeply appreciate Runner's largely successful attempt to avoid the jargon so typical of Dooyeweerd's philosophy in this non-scholarly magazine.

Dooyeweerd. Likewise, the results which can surely be expected from his life's work have still only just begun to surface.

Such things never bothered Dooyeweerd. But the slighting of his work by his fellow believers, their casual and careless misunderstanding of it, did trouble him, though not in the first instance because of his personal involvement, but because of the hindrance it might bring to the advancement of the Lord's cause, with which his whole life, with all its humanness, was so utterly bound up.

Meanwhile, ironically, a distinguished colleague of Dooyeweerd who did not share his Christian faith has offered us an estimate of the historic significance of Dooyeweerd's work. On the occasion of Dooyeweerd's 70th birthday, Prof. G. E. Langemeyer, a man of socialist persuasion, for many years professor of legal philosophy at the University of Leiden, Prosecutor General of the Supreme Court of the Netherlands and for several years President of the Royal Academy of Science and Letters, had this to say: "It may seem strange that on the 70th birthday of a philosopher of such pronounced religious and political persuasion as Dooyeweerd . . . tribute is paid by a jurist with an entirely different world-view and political persuasion . . . However . . . there is every reason to put the question what the significance of this philosopher is for Dutch philosophy of whatever persuasion, or even for philosophy in general without any restriction of nationality. For without any exaggeration Dooyeweerd can be called the most original philosopher Holland has ever produced, Spinoza himself not excepted." The plain implication of that judgment is that in Dooyeweerd the church of God possessed a man of the quality of mind that appears but rarely in the space of several hundred years.

In yet another estimate of his importance Dooyeweerd's name was linked with those of Johan Huizinga (known in this country especially for his books *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and *Erasmus*) and Gerardus van der Leeuw (known for his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*) as one of the four most encyclopedically learned men in the Netherlands in the twentieth century.

As a young man Dooyeweerd was attracted to music and the world of the fine arts; he even seriously considered becoming a concert pianist. And though he soon turned to one of the traditional professions, the study and practice of the law, he kept a grand piano in his large study and remained an accomplished pianist throughout his life. I remember that when he was staying in our home in 1958 (at the time he was giving a series of lectures in America some of which were collected and published under the title *In the Twilight of Western Thought*), he played a number of piano concerti for us from memory. This marked development in him of the aesthetic side of our human life, which was passed on to a number of his nine children, graced everything he did. He was, among other things, a most gracious host and an elegant lecturer.

These were attractive things about Dooyeweerd, but they were not what ultimately attracted so many of us students to him or what led, over a period of many years, to the forming of what is often referred to as the Dooyeweerdian movement. That was his Christian faith, at once simple and profound, and particularly the bold consistency with which, using all his many talents, he set it forth and worked it out in his philosophical writings. We who came under his influence learned how to be Christians and do philosophy at the same time.

Dooyeweerd's excellent early training in the classical languages and literatures and his immense historical knowledge were undoubtedly indispensable to the work he

did. How else could he have undertaken, as he did in the years the Nazi occupying power closed down the universities, the reading of all the fragments of the Greek philosophers prior to Plato in preparation for the first (and as yet only published) volume of his work *Rejormatie en Scholastiek in de Wijsbegeerte; (Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy)*?! But, mainly, Dooyeweerd was a witness, as few men in our time have been, to the power of the Word of God to liberate, to redeem, to reclaim a lost creation, and through men to actualize creational potentials. On at least two occasions that I remember, Prof. Dooyeweerd took pains to call to my attention the somewhat mysterious revelation recorded in I Kings 19: 9-18, where, after the contest with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel into the wilderness, finally seeking refuge in a cave on Horeb, the mount of God where God had given His people the law by which they were to live in covenant with Him. Only after the destructive wind, the earthquake and the fire had passed, did there come the still small voice. Not the dramatic and theatrical, or the powerful forces in nature or human society, but the sure, quiet, redeeming and actualizing work of God's Word and Spirit is to be the ground of our confidence and calls us to faithful and obedient service, as Elijah was summoned to anoint the king of Syria, the king of Israel and Elisha the prophet.

Dooyeweerd was never out to build his own empire or to make a name for himself. He only wanted to be a servant of the Lord. His confidence was that wherever in life, and particularly in philosophy, we build our work faithfully on the Word of God, there it will make its way, have its effect, go on to self-correcting broader reformation. God's Word goes forth, also in men's work, and it does not return to Him void; the power to accomplish is in the Word itself (see Luke 1: 37 in the original Greek text). In the scientific work we do in theology, for instance, we may have to employ exegetical and hermeneutical methods and procedures, but

underlying these, at the root of our being, is the powerful working of revelation. Either the Word of God sets us in the light of the truth, (we can never do that ourselves simply by the application of a proper method!) or we go on walking in the darkness of our rebellious hearts, and this existential condition of the one doing theology precedes the application of any procedure or method. God, we confess, is first with our souls. "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me" needs to be applied to the scientific work we do. This is what Dooyeweerd was trying to tell me. It was the secret of his own life. For one thing, it was the ground of Dooyeweerd's almost infinite patience and his quiet of soul amidst raging billows. Of his own work he wrote,

I do not consider it to be a disadvantage if this philosophy does not enjoy a rapid and easy success.... If the elaboration of the Kantian philosophy was deemed worthy of [great] self-denial, it is certainly obvious that those interested in the Christian foundation of theoretical thought should not be concerned with personal success, which is after all of no value. Rather, they should be willing to carry on a long and difficult labor, firmly believing that something permanent can be achieved with respect to the actualization of the idea concerning an inner reformation of philosophy For, as a matter of fact, the precarious and changing opinion of our fellowmen is not even comparable with the inner happiness and peace that accompanies scientific labor when it is based upon Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life!"²

Indeed, Dooyeweerd took revelation seriously. He took Scripture seriously. This enabled him to make a very important distinction, which is captured in a phrase of

²A *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. I, p. ix.

the immediately preceding quotation. He speaks there of "those interested in the Christian foundation of theoretical thought." Here we have two things: an actual example of theoretical thought in someone's thought-results or system of thought at a particular point in time, and, second, the grounding or rooting of those thought - results. The Word of God may indeed set us in our inner man in the light of the truth, that is, may unite us to Christ.

At the same time, we are in the process of being redeemed from a lost condition that has affected every thought of our hearts and every facet of our environment. Dooyeweerd was always calling attention to the power of the Word of God, but he also knew the strength, the comprehensiveness and pervasiveness of the worldly traditions, including persistent patterns of thought which had arisen in ancient pagan societies, from which the people of God had to be liberated (see Romans 12: 2). He realized the complicatedness of personal sin, and that our sanctification in this life is always only partial. Thus, any piece of Christian work is: 1) directed by the powerful revealing activity of God's Word and Spirit in the heart; 2) an accommodating response to worldly influences; 3) limited by the phase of historical development to which the work belongs. That is why Dooyeweerd was very careful to distinguish the Christian direction (foundation) of his thought, and his actual philosophical system. He was a sinner. Besides, he lived at a particular period of time. God's Word and Spirit would go on, generation after human generation, redeeming, sanctifying, through men further actualizing creational potentials. As to that matter of the foundation or root of our thought, God's revelation, not our philosophizing, presents us with light upon life's ultimate questions.

A Christian philosophical enterprise would have to be grounded in the light the Word sheds on our own selfhood and on the all-encompassing situation in which

we find ourselves firmly planted (the covenantal relation of the entire creation-order). Here in his own words, very simply, is how Dooyeweerd described how he, with Vollenhoven, felt constrained to undertake a reformation of the whole field of philosophy, both systematic and historical, a reformation so fundamental that Kant's famous Copernican revolution in modern philosophy could henceforth only be regarded as something peripheral. He writes:

I came to understand the central significance of the 'heart,' repeatedly proclaimed by Holy Scripture to be the religious root of human existence Confronted with the religious root of the creation, nothing else is in question than a relating of the whole temporal cosmos, in both its so-called 'natural' and 'spiritual' [cultural] aspects, to this point of reference."

Of course, the more one knows about philosophy and its history at this point, the more significant this brief but pregnant passage appears. But the least we can say is that when we have been thus enlightened by revelation, we may no longer go on speaking of man as an organism, not even a sensitive or intelligent organism (even though human behavior may have its organic aspect); nor even as a rational soul (though his behavior may include the kind of functions we call logical). Neither may we reduce creational diversity (Psalm 104: 24), naturalistically, to the natural sciences, with mathematics or mathematical physics as the basic science; or, humanistically, to the human sciences, with history or psychology as the basic science. All such reductions are mistaken, and the result of an apostate inclination to seek the underlying unity of everything within a self-sufficient world. At the religious root (foundation) of their thought Christians have been freed to allow all observable creational difference to have its own place and be appreciated according to its own distinct nature.

Thus able to distinguish the ongoing revealing work of God's Word and Spirit at the foundation of his thought-life (a process of sanctification that was not yet completed) from the details of all his thought-constructions, Dooyeweerd was always apprehensive about the formation of any "Dooyeweerdian school." It all depended on what was meant. If it meant, statically, a group of adherents to his system, he wanted nothing of it. If it meant working together in a renewed spirit of submission to the Word of God, a spirit which, while recognizing God's revealing Word at work in the "inwards" of his system, looked expectantly to Word and Spirit of God to go on liberating us from apostate schemes of thought and action and further enabling us to realize creational potentials, then he was able to accept that.

Dooyeweerd cannot be understood if he is read statically; like Calvin, he must be read dynamically. Repeatedly Dooyeweerd spoke of his elaborated system of thought as first tentative results. The work of God in revelation, in the sanctification of His people, goes on, and we shall somehow, somewhere, have to advance beyond Dooyeweerd. But that does not mean that we can ignore him: The work of God's Word and Spirit in his dedicated life demands that we take his work very seriously. Dooyeweerd's view of his own work came from his high view of the work of God in the lives of His people.

In a remarkable way God prepared both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven for the philosophical work they were to do at the Free University, a work that certainly could not have been foreseen. The nineteenth century had seen a rapid proliferation of the special sciences, sciences that investigate special aspects of created things. Besides new developments in arithmetic and geometry and in physics, the newer sciences of chemistry, biology, history, psychology, sociology, economics, etc. began a period of intense cultivation and rather rapid development. At first the

view had prevailed (positivism) that the special sciences were self-sufficient, i.e. that they could make it on their own, were structurally unrelated to philosophy. But it gradually became clear to a great many investigators that every special science was running up against foundational problems of a philosophic sort. By the end of the first World War what philosophy itself needed, if it was to develop soundly in this new situation, was men whose general philosophical abilities were related to an informed awareness of these philosophical questions that lie at the foundation of each of the special sciences. Not many North Americans are aware even now that Dooyeweerd was not trained during his university years in philosophy. On the contrary, his training was in the law, and all his life he was a professor in the law faculty of the Free University. His doctoral studies had resulted in a dissertation on *The Cabinet in Dutch Constitutional Law* (1917), and only after a number of years as a practicing lawyer did the opportunity present itself to him which was to determine the future course of his life.

But it was the year 1922 that made the crucial difference. In the spring of 1920 (Kuyper died in November of that year) the national convention of the Antirevolutionary (political) Party had elected Colijn Chairman of its National Committee, after which Colijn had immediately submitted a bold proposal to the convention to establish a million-guilder Foundation, which would set up a national headquarters for the Party, conduct scholarly and practical research, and issue publications that would promote the Antirevolutionary principles in both party and nation. This proposal passed. Then in 1922, two years after Kuyper's death, after a national search, Herman Dooyeweerd was appointed adjunct-director of the Dr. Abraham Kuyper Foundation, as it was called by that time. Here Dooyeweerd gave counsel, but he was also free to probe into foundational problems of the law sciences, such as the sources of positive law, legal causality,

the meaning of sovereignty, all from his emerging Christian perspective. This forced him to consider the relation of law to morality, to economics, and to the structures of human society. Thus, Dooyeweerd came to general philosophical questions by way of a study of the philosophical questions that lie at the foundation of the law sciences.

When, in May, 1921, Vollenhoven, returned from his studies in Leipzig, received a call to a pastorate in the Hague, where the Kuyper Foundation was located, the two men had much opportunity to talk together, in the spring of 1922. It was at this time that the first outlines of the subsequent "*Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*," the name that was given to Dooyeweerd's philosophical work, began to take shape in the minds of both men. In 1926, Vollenhoven was appointed to be professor of philosophy at the Free University and Dooyeweerd was appointed there in the philosophy of law. It is not the place here to trace this whole development. The point I wish to make is that the keen awareness both men had for the philosophic problems to be found in the special sciences caught the attention of many young men in those sciences and showed them the importance of a philosophic foundation, and a Christian one, for their work. Thus they too came to see the urgent need for a general Christian philosophical theory. Prof. Langemeyer, whom we quoted at the beginning of this article, had this to say:

It can be said, I believe, that the theories of Dooyeweerd lend themselves, to a greater degree than is normally the case, to an exchange of thought with persons of a different persuasion. The reason for saying this lies in the fact that he has drawn the implications of his doctrine concerning the supratheoretical presupposition of philosophy very far--farther than other movements which at this point are akin to him--even into the special

sciences. As a matter of fact, it is precisely in the problems and perplexities, in the 'impasses' of the special sciences, that he has demonstrated his thesis."

Up to World War II, Dooyeweerd found an audience largely in the Netherlands, except for some individual scholars in Austria, Germany, and France. Especially the annual conferences of the League of Calvinist Students held at Lunteren, Netherlands, won student adherents to the new philosophy from many departments of a number of Dutch universities. One of those present at these conferences has written:

A new world opened itself up to us Everywhere God's Spirit was at work. Oh, no, nothing 'special' happened, actually. It was just that for a great many people the Scripture suddenly became clear. It was as though God's loving hand brushed away the dust that scholasticism and mysticism, pietism, and every other kind of subjectivism and individualism had heaped upon His Word, in order that that Word might once again send forth its clear sound and shine forth as a lighthouse to give direction in a dark night.

During these years, intense discussions began with Roman Catholic philosophers and theologians, which have profoundly affected Roman Catholic thought in the Netherlands. After the war, the movement spread to practically every continent. Dooyeweerd's thought has contributed much to the reviving life of the Reformed congregations of France. His own ability to speak and write fluent French, as well as German and English, was of great help, and he lectured at a number of universities in France and the United States. With Vollenhoven, he founded a

society to study and develop Christian philosophy³ and until just recently was editor of its journal, *Philosophia Reformata*.

From the beginning of his activity, the charge was levelled against Dooyeweerd repeatedly that he was too critical. He was critical of Aquinas, but he was also critical of Augustine. (Of course, he also found much to appreciate in them both.) In Calvin he found a good new Biblical start, but also many remnants of the medieval scholastic tradition of compromise with pagan Greek thought-patterns. Of course, his mortal error, especially in the eyes of the theologians of the Free University, was to find some Biblically unacceptable elements in Abraham Kuyper, the founder and first theological professor of the university (in whose general line, however, he wished to develop). Especially Prof. Valentine Hepp attacked him in a series of articles entitled “*Dreigende Deformatie*” (“Threatening Deformation”), a clever play on Dooyeweerd's call to constant reformation of our lives and our thinking.

At stake here was just that matter we discussed earlier: Christians individually and the community of Christians collectively are on the way. They are being liberated from worldly patterns of thought and action; they are being sanctified in the truth. God by His Word and Spirit is busy redeeming His people and He employs human agents in the work. Dooyeweerd saw himself squarely in the middle of this age-long process. Where he believed he saw something wrong, he pointed it out, trying to analyze the matter as clearly as he could. He saw the Christian's obligation in all things to be spiritually discerning of the spirits (directions of thought) that are abroad in the world. But he did everything possible to make certain that his philosophical criticism constantly remained within the domain of principles, and

³It is currently known as the “*Stichting voor Christelijke Filosofie*” (Foundation for Christian Philosophy). www.christelijkefilosofie.nl .

knew that the judgments he made were always subject to on-going debate and criticism, but on a Biblical foundation. Far from setting himself on a pedestal, he made clear that any criticism he made was to be understood "as self-criticism, as a case which the Christian thinker pleads with himself."

There was good reason for his humility. In his early years he had himself tried to accommodate (he uses the word "synthesize") his Christian faith first to a form of neo-Kantian philosophy then prevalent in Europe, and after that to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. That was before he had seen that the Scriptural revelation concerning the 'heart' would not allow room for any human reason that made itself a law unto itself, certainly not one that prescribed to the creation its "order." Dooyeweerd's preference in his later years for the term "ecumenical-Christian" instead of "Calvinistic" to designate his philosophical work was in no sense a departure from his Reformed heritage, as has been charged. It was his attempt in these times of rootlessness, to speak to all Christian groups, however ecclesiastically and theologically divided traditionally, an attempt springing from his firm faith in a revelation that has the power to penetrate to men's hearts and fill their souls with light. Reformed Christianity claims to be nothing else than a wanting to live out of the fullness of divine revelation, and the Word of God addresses all mankind.

And now this giant among thinkers and this humble servant of Christ has passed into the full light of day. When I first heard Dooyeweerd's name, I was just a twenty year old Philadelphia youth in my first year at Westminster Theological Seminary. The news of his passing reached me just after I had passed my 61st birthday. My encounter with Dooyeweerd and his brother-in-law changed the whole course of my life. We who were privileged to know this man and see him at work, can only feel immense gratitude to God for the incalculable ways in which

his work has enriched our lives. Without doubt, the effects of his work will be increasingly felt in the years to come. For one thing, the much heralded evangelical revival in America, if it is to deepen, take firm root in our culture, and thus become more stable than it has been in the past, could scarcely do better than to take a good long look at the faithful work of this now departed servant of Christ.