

# Theology and Philosophy: the Controversies Concerning their Nature and Role in the Reformational Tradition

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"But for healing we need understanding"  
Middleton & Walsh (1995:27)

## Samevatting

**Teologie en filosofie: die strydvrage rondom hul aard en rol in die reformatoriese tradisie.**

*Hierdie artikel handel oor die debatte en strydvrage tussen en binne reformatoriese kringe oor die aard en die rol van teologie en filosofie. Die perspektief is beide histories en sistematies. Tekortkominge, oordrywings en weersprekinge wat hierdie debat telkens laat ontvlam, word uitgewys, tesame met denkpatrone wat meer skolasties as reformatories is. Die artikel sluit af met 'n oproep dat die verlede agtergelaat word, asook vir interdisiplinêre samewerking ter wille van Christelike wetenskap.*

## 1. Introduction

The publication of a history of the reformational<sup>1</sup> movement has been recently auspicated (and briefly sketched as well) by B.J. van der Walt

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1 The author's use of the term "reformational" refers to theologians and philosophers who regard the works of Kuyper, Dooyeweerd or Vollenhoven as (part of) their reference points for theorising.

(2007). When this history will be written, the author hopes it will also help understanding some aspects of the rather bewildering relationship between reformational theologians and philosophers. Admittedly, the relationship between (Christian) theology and philosophy has been rather tense from the patristic era, well before the appearance of the reformational tradition and well beyond its borders. Yet one should not conclude that such tensions are unavoidable and normal, especially when theologians and philosophers belong to the same confessional tradition. This article offers an analysis of some of the debates and difficulties experienced within reformational circles.<sup>2</sup>

These difficulties may have many reasons, some psychological, other ideological, other related to a lack of inter-disciplinary communication. The present article has no ambition of dealing with all the sides of the problem, and some of them (e.g. personal idiosyncrasies) can hardly be tackled from a scholarly point of view.

Scholarly discourse, however, can help identifying the roots of a controversy. Furthermore, one can eventually point out inconsistencies, shortcomings and the presence of ideas or presuppositions that are incompatible (or to some extent in conflict) with sound reformational reflection. This strategy may hopefully lead to avoiding certain mistakes in future and may result in an improved communication between philosophers and theologians.<sup>3</sup>

Improving such communication and cooperation is the practical aim of this contribution. Concerning its scope, the author will focus on a rather fundamental level of this debate: our philosophers and theologians have often quarrelled on the very nature, relevance and role of their respective

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2 An early example of the intensity of the debate within Dutch reformational circles is provided by Douma (1976) and by Troost's (1978) response. The latter, before being published as a book, filled an entire issue of *Philosophia reformata* (1977, 42(3-4):115-193). A review of Troost's (1978) book was written (in the same journal) by John Vander Stelt (1980:186-188), a scholar who devoted much of his academic career to the issues presented in this article (see e.g. Vander Stelt, 1989). In that review he wrote: "the questions involved in this discussion are so sensitive that they have often tempted theologians and philosophers to resort to mutual recriminations" (Vander Stelt, 1980:186).

3 It is for simplicity's sake that the author defines the two "rival" groups as "theologians and philosophers". In practice, the situation is more complex: there are theologians who defend the "priority" of philosophy (e.g. Spykman, 1991:13) and vice versa (e.g. Wolterstorff, see 1976:104 in connection with 2004:287). There are also authors who are not inclined to attribute a "priority" to any discipline, but might contribute to the debate without belonging to a specific "party".

disciplines. The exploration of this topic will be performed with the help of both historical and systematic perspectives.

The controversies explored below were often accompanied by the *feeling* that some members of “the other party” had a rather “imperialistic” attitude (e.g. Frame, 1987:86) and had no appropriate consideration for the contribution that philosophy (or theology) could offer. Allegations of arrogance and ignorance have thus emerged from both groups and this has obviously heated the debate. Yet, the author does not believe that the problem was simply an emotional one.

Such controversies are rather the result of conflicting views regarding the relationship between scientific disciplines. They reveal the adoption of different encyclopaedic models and in some cases of different worldviews. This situation, however, has at least one positive consequence: these conflicting views can be discussed as ideas and theories, and not only as feelings. In what follows the author will not focus on the differences between encyclopaedic models<sup>4</sup> but rather on the problematic results that sometimes are produced.

Any sound reconciliation must start from a recognition of mistakes. The author believes no party has been totally immune from shortcomings and sometimes the mistakes of the two groups have been quite similar. An inventory of the (possible) problems is therefore necessary, and he will provide it below. As the author belongs to the “corporation” of the philosophers, however, he trusts he will be allowed to start this survey by first discussing the “damages” caused by theologians (Part 1), with the promise that he will not make discounts when “presenting the bill” to the philosophers as well (Part 2).

## **Part 1: Presenting the bill to the theologians**

### **2. The absolutisation of theology?**

Some reformational theologians have actively supported a kind of “absolutisation” of theology. For some of them whatever is derived from the Bible, whatever is related to “faith” or “belief”, whatever is “Christian” is automatically considered “theological” as well. Theology is regarded as including within itself the very pre-scientific presuppositions that are fundamental to Christian thinking.

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4 On this point see my “Explorative notes on the “theology-based approach” to Christian scholarship within reformed circles, section 5.1 (forthcoming: *Acta Academica*).

For example, for Garrone and De Chirico<sup>5</sup> (2002:58) a worldview is always shaped by a certain “faith” and (in the case of the Christian) is derived from the gospel. As a consequence worldviews are regarded as “pre-theological” (instead of pre-scientific), thus becoming a kind of “property” of theology. In this way, not only worldviews (Bolognesi, 2002:55) but also religious ground motives (Bolognesi, 1991:87; De Chirico, 1997:10, 43) and presuppositional frameworks in general (Bolognesi, 1991:85-88) become synonyms for (or parts of) theology. In this way, theology is regarded as the basis of Christian scholarship: whoever wants to deal with the very foundations of a Christian approach is supposed to deal with theology.

Some reformational theologians do not annex to theology only pre-scientific presuppositions; sometimes they annex other sciences as well! According to Frame for example, the phrase “Christian epistemology” is equivalent to “theology of knowledge” (1987:xv). Christian philosophy is “a subdivision of theology” (1987:85). The scientist “will be doing theology (i.e. applying Scripture) much of the time” (1987:86). Bolognesi (1980:16; 1991:88; cf. also 1990:219) regards (Christian) ethics, anthropology and philosophy as “theological” disciplines.

Having included within theology both science and non-science, some theologians are prepared to include within this discipline the rest of life as well! Consider for example the idea that theology “uses not only the methods of science but also those of art, literature, philosophy, law and education. Indeed, since theology must be lived as well as spoken, it uses all of the methods by which human beings accomplish things in God’s world” (Frame, 1987:316). Given this background, is it surprising to read statements like: “every time we link to the internet we perform a theological act”? (De Chirico, 2007:2 – translation by R.C.).

For Frame (1987:319-320) “all human actions constitute responses to and applications of the Word of God”. As he (Frame, 1987:76) defines

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5 Having published mainly in Italian and French, some of the authors mentioned below (for example Pietro Bolognesi, Leonardo de Chirico or Henri Blocher) may not be very well known to an Anglo-Saxon public. They are nevertheless fairly well-known reformational theologians in Italy and France. Blocher has been for many years Professor at the *Faculte Libre de Theologie Evangelique* in Vaux-sur Seine (Paris area). De Chirico is the director of the *Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione* (IFED) in Padua, Italy (see <<http://www.ifeditalia.org>>). One can read in English some works by De Chirico (e.g. De Chirico, 2003). Bolognesi, president of IFED and member of the Federation of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET), has published only in Italian and French.

theology as an *application* “of the word of God to every sphere of life”, what he is trying to prove is that all human actions are theology. For example, when it comes to epistemic activities, Frame enthusiastically declares: “all knowing is theologizing”! (Frame, 1987:128). From this point of view, all linguistic expressions are theological as well. In fact he (Frame, 1987:128) claims that the proposition “Sacramento is the capital of California” is theological in character! Why does he believe so? Because the proposition represents a true state of affairs, and the Bible insists that we should always speak truthfully!

Henri Blocher maintains that human beings are essentially theological beings. In fact, in a discussion about evolution, Blocher postulates the existence of pre-human beings and defines the first type of human being (the one who was “suitable for a covenant with his Creator”) as “*Homo theologicus*, or perhaps better *Homo theologus*” (Blocher, 1984:319 – translation by – R.C.). In a similar vein Frame (1987:xvi) argues that “everyone is a theologian”! (including women, he assures).<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps philosophers should have simply enjoyed the undeniable *vis comica* of some of the above pronouncements, and should have kept quiet.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes time brings better advice. The fact is that often one could not help being concerned about the implications of these pronouncements. Dooyeweerd had rightly linked any process of absolutisation to a kind of idolatrous attitude. These exaggerations seem to point towards a kind of “veneration” of theology (or perhaps of the faith-aspect of created reality) which shouldn’t take place within Christian theorising.

It is for this reason that Spykman (1992:14), a theologian himself, warned that theology can become an idol, and reminded that “when you have a King you don’t need any queen”. Runner (1970:115, 117) used the term “theologism” and warned that it is just one more form of scientism, which is obviously not recommendable for Christian thinking. Unfortunately, it

6 Translated into (reformational) philosophical language, Blocher’s and Frame’s statements imply that human beings are qualified by the pistic modal aspect, an idea which has been repeatedly and emphatically rejected by Dooyeweerd (e.g. 1984, 3:88 and 1980:179-180), Hart (e.g. 1984:276-280) and others. Human beings are fundamentally religious beings, not theological beings. Here is an example of ignoring each other’s contributions, a theme on which the author will return in section 4 below.

7 Stuart Fowler has tried another strategy, i.e. responding to these statements in a friendly-humorous way. As some authors call almost everything “theology”, he writes: “it is something like entering a fruit shop and using the word ‘carrot’ to describe beetroot, parsnip, turnip and potatoes” (Fowler, n.d.:1).

seems to me, most of the times these warnings have simply generated more irritation.

Even if one doesn't want to go as far as saying that for some theology has become an idol, one has at least to say that such an approach is not based on a reformational worldview. In the article mentioned in footnote 4 above, the author has argued that a "queenly"<sup>8</sup> view of theology is often the result of the adoption of a nature-grace worldview, in particular the version of this worldview which is typical of catholic thinking and is often defined by the formula *gratia supra naturam* (e.g. Van der Walt, 1994:99 ff.). As this argument has been already displayed in that article, he will not repeat it here. He will only point out that the patterns of thought leading to a "queenly" view of theology are the same patterns shaping the roman catholic doctrine of the church.

The fact that some reformed theologians fervently oppose catholic ecclesiology, but defend with equal fervour a catholic view of the relationship among sciences, is something that escapes the author's understanding. What he does understand, is that when theology is supposed to have the monopoly of Christianity, the presence of a Christian philosophy is acknowledged at least with suspicion. This will be discussed in the next section.

### 3. Ambiguity towards reformational philosophy

The over-estimation of theology has often been accompanied by a rather cold acceptance of reformational philosophy. The fact is almost unbelievable: as calvinism aims at "glorifying God in all spheres of life", the emergence of a philosophical school presenting itself as "calvinist" should have raised hope and enthusiasm among reformed theologians. Yet the birth of a reformed philosophy within Dutch circles at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has sometimes been welcomed in rather hostile terms.

It is fairly well-known that the presentation of the philosophy of the cosmomic idea was received, by theological circles, with such a hail of exegetical objections that Dooyeweerd was driven to limit to a minimum his references to the biblical text. It is possible that this had lasting consequences on his philosophical method, in the sense that in the long run this parsimony of biblical quotations became a "style". While his

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8 Formally speaking, the specific definition of theology as "queen of the sciences" has been endorsed only partially by Frame (1987:316), and to a lesser extent by Bolognesi (2001:97-98). As a matter of fact, however, they both depict theology as the foundation and "leader" of Christian scholarship.

brother-in-law, D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (who was trained in theology as well), could remain more confident on exegetical grounds and kept closer to the biblical text, Dooyeweerd withdrew of a few steps, probably giving up potential strategies and resources. In academic terms, the “cost” of the operation cannot be estimated.

Of course exegetical objections are always legitimate. Yet wisdom would advise that these should not be massively used to stifle the emergence of a promising philosophical trend, right at its beginning. After all, while the catholic tradition had already built its monumental philosophical systems from the middle ages, the reformed tradition was still deprived of sound philosophical articulations.

As a matter of fact, the Reformation did not provide a reformed philosophy. How did reformed theologians react to this problem in the period following the Reformation? Did they ever notice the problem? Did anyone ever mention the need (or the desirability) of a reformed philosophy? The author is afraid the problem was simply ignored. In practice, most of them simply borrowed what they could from scholastic philosophy, with results that were often quite detrimental to their own theological work (Van der Walt, 1984).

And today? Now a reformational philosophy is available. What difference does it make to contemporary reformed theologians? The author would say that a large sector of them still prefers to “borrow”<sup>9</sup> from secular philosophers<sup>10</sup> probably imagining that they are simply making *formal use*<sup>11</sup> of philosophical categories. Perhaps they feel protected by the fact that they work on theological grounds, where they would not be affected by the influences of the *saeculum*.<sup>12</sup>

9 By “borrowing” or “flirting”, in the next few paragraphs, the author means adopting a few ideas from a certain philosophy without fully endorsing it (in his colloquial language “they do not marry it”, thus conserving their “celibacy”). Philosophical “promiscuity” refers to “borrowing” from different philosophies.

10 Systematically speaking, borrowing from *secular* philosophies is not the only option, of course. One may “borrow” from philosophers who are non-Christian but also non-secular (for example from some Jewish philosophers). One may also borrow from philosophers who are non-reformed but still Christian and of course non-secular (e.g. Roman Catholic authors). In the latter case the main problem is the synthesis between Christian and aristotelian or humanist themes, which is typical of catholic thinking.

11 On the illusory character of a merely “formal use” of philosophical ideas and categories for theological purposes see Dooyeweerd (1980:153 ff.).

12 Of course the author is not opposing every type of interaction between Christian theology (or any other science) and non-Christian philosophy. Dialogue and cooperation are necessary and desirable. Yet the choice of one’s own philosophical

When it comes to philosophy, our theologians are often afflicted either by a celibacy-syndrome or by a promiscuity-syndrome. Some of them feel they don't need to "marry" any philosophical trend, working in splendid isolation and safety. Some of the "celibates", however, keep "flirting" with all sorts of secular or synthesis-philosophies.

As an example of the latter group, Frame claims that he feels free to borrow from many (secular) philosophies, as he knows how to "separate wheat from chaff" (1987:314) and how to "plunder the Egyptians"<sup>13</sup> (Frame, 1987:146). Apparently, he doesn't need to resort to reformational philosophy because he does not believe "that a Christian philosophy now exists that is reasonably adequate for the needs of the modern Protestant theologian" (Frame, 1987:318). In the case of reformational philosophy, therefore, he doesn't care about wheat or chaff. He simply prefers working with Wittgenstein, Copi, Kuhn and others (Frame, 1987:318).

At least Frame has the merit of stating clearly his (highly questionable) position. A large number of reformational theologians simply don't say a word on the topic while they maintain a rather prejudiced attitude towards all philosophies, including the Christian ones. Believing they don't need any philosophy, they exemplify the "celibacy-attitude" mentioned above.

These attitudes lead to the most incredible paradoxes. On the one hand, members of the Roman Catholic clergy like Michael Marlet (a German Jesuit), affirmed already in the 1950's that the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea should be welcomed as *philosophia in ecclesia accepta* even in the Catholic Church (Marlet, 1954). On the other hand, in reformed circles, the same philosophy has often been reluctantly tolerated (and in many cases opposed) by theologians who were often busy "courting" all sorts of non-christian philosophies!

In many other cases reformational philosophy has been simply ignored, which is the topic of our next section.

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approach in support to one's theological work should be something different from mere interaction. In his opinion when one wants to produce reformational theology, one should also adopt a reformational philosophical approach.

- 13 The phrase refers to the episode reported in Exodus 3:21-22 and other texts. Here the Israelites appropriate the golden objects of the Egyptians (often representing heathen divinities). Later they melt the gold and use it for the utensils of the temple. By allegory, the story would mean that it is possible to re-shape pagan ideas and to introduce/use them within Christian theology. A similar strategy has been proposed by reformational philosophers like Klapwijk (1986:146). The problematic nature of this proposal has been pointed out e.g. by Bos (1987), Groenewoud (1987), and Dengerink (1988). Their critical observations apply, at least in part, to Frame's arguments as well.



#### 4. Ignoring positive contributions and proceeding alone

The attitudes described above, often lead to ignoring both constructive criticism and some positive contributions provided by reformational philosophers. It is obviously difficult to write about what has been ignored, i.e. about contributions and reactions that were never written. The author's remarks may therefore sound arbitrary to some, yet he finds it difficult to avoid the impression that important contributions have been neglected. He will make a few random examples.

The author has already mentioned (see fn. 6) Blocher's glaring neglect of fundamental themes of a reformational (philosophical) anthropology. And if Rushdoony (1971 and 2005) had paid some attention to the rudiments of reformational ontology, would he still have tried to account for the unity and diversity ("the one and the many") of created reality, by drawing his arguments from the doctrine of the Trinity? In the field of church history, reformational authors have often pointed out that the period immediately after the reformation shows many symptoms of a return to scholasticism (e.g. Van der Walt, 1984; Sewell, 2005) and the large credit given to some of its "heroes" should be carefully re-considered. It seems to the author that these warnings too have been largely ignored. Equally under-appreciated, says Zylstra (1975:32), were many contributions concerning the problem of dualism in theological thinking. (Dualist patterns of thought were detected in distinctions like body-soul, special-general revelation and so on).

A related problem is the inclination to proceed alone, trying to respond in solitude to the many challenges and needs of contemporary society and culture. This includes, for example, the expectation that theology will equip Christian scholars with sufficient resources to operate from a Christian perspective in all fields of study.<sup>14</sup> Others regard the dialogue between Christian and non-Christian scholarship as a dialogue between "theology and science". Theology then represents and summarises in itself *the* Christian position and "science" is the supposedly non-religious, secular interlocutor.

But proceeding alone is often accompanied by frustration. In the long run, too big expectations lead to disillusion. No single discipline has the

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14 An example is offered by the institute (IFED) mentioned in footnote 5 above. The declared purpose of the institute is to equip the believing individual/community for Christian commitment "in all spheres of human existence" (IFED: Statuto dell'IFED, art. 5). However, the institute aims at doing so by promoting theological publications, conferences and so on.

resources to support, all alone, huge enterprises like the dialogue with non-christian scholarship or even culture. No single discipline has in itself sufficient resources to “give birth” to Christian scholarship, as if the latter was somehow latently present within theology (or philosophy). And probably, no single discipline has all the resources to provide an “inner reformation” of scholarship. This is the main reason why such efforts are destined to fail, or at least not to bring about the hoped-for results. The “punishment” for the overestimation of a discipline and lack of interdisciplinary co-operation is that the desired results do not materialise.

That these problems do not afflict only theologians, and that they have been intuited by some reformational authors before the author himself, will be argued in the next section. In fact, it is now time to move to the second part of this article, dedicated to the “damages” caused by the philosophers.

## Part 2: Presenting the bill to the philosophers

### 5. Substituting the “queen”?

#### 5.1 *The mediatrix-queen*

Herman Dooyeweerd (e.g. 1959:66) wrote several outstanding pages on the danger of theology becoming a “mediatrix” between the biblical revelation and philosophy (or the simple believer – Dooyeweerd, 1980:135). He rejected that approach (which he rightly linked to the scholastic tradition), on the basis that *it would have prevented Christian philosophy from accessing the very source of its original inspiration*, i.e. the biblical religious ground motive (Dooyeweerd, 1959:66). In this way, philosophy would be bound by theological reflection, it would have no way to detect eventual insufficiencies in the latter and to outline improvements both for theology and for itself. The author believes this point is correct, and should be fully appreciated before proceeding to the following remarks.

In fact, one may ask the question whether in some cases our philosophers have not simply substituted one mediatrix-queen with another. Though the issue was not much discussed, the author thinks the suspicion that (for some) philosophy was becoming the new “queen” or “mediatrix” of scholarship did arise in some of our philosophers.<sup>15</sup> Very soon, however,

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<sup>15</sup> The author feels this is the case, for example, in the following quasi-apologetic sentences by Van der Walt (1983:188 fn. 30). He writes: “[my arguments] may also create the impression as if, in this writer’s view, it is no longer Theology which gives a Christian character to Philosophy, but Philosophy to Theology. This is not the intention by any means ...”

the same mediation-pattern started to emerge in the works of some reformational philosophers as well.

The arguments presented by philosophers to legitimise the mediating role of philosophy are quite similar to the ones provided by theologians. The author is referring (see section 2) to the “annexation” to theology of pre-scientific frameworks and presuppositions. By following a parallel pattern of thought, some reformational philosophers regard such pre-scientific frameworks as containing a kind of pre-scientific *ontology*. They tell us which existents are there and in what relation to each other. As a consequence those frameworks are regarded as “pre-ontological” and therefore as pre-philosophical. Once again, their full pre-scientific nature is restricted and they become a kind of back-store or “property” of philosophy.

Having completed this preliminary operation, philosophers too run the risk of creating a new “mediatress” for the special sciences (i.e. philosophy), in total disregard of Dooyeweerd’s warning that this type of operations are highly problematic. Even more surprisingly, it is Dooyeweerd (1986:60) himself who declares, for example, that (Christian) social philosophy is based on the central ground motive of the biblical revelation while sociology, as a special science, is based on social philosophy (Scripture is not mentioned).

According to Wolters “a significant and perhaps dominant strand in the tradition represented by the Free University of Amsterdam and its younger reformed sister institutions has always been that *philosophy is a key link between faith and scholarship, like the gearbox which connects the motor of a car to its wheels*” (Wolters, 1989:14-15, italics by R.C.). More recently, Strauss writes quite explicitly: “The Bible exerts its authority therefore *only through the mediation of a Christian philosophy* which ought to provide the special sciences with a Scriptural view of reality” (Strauss 2001:87, italics by R.C.). With this, the mediation-pattern seems to be fully established. The author thinks it is necessary to ask a few questions and to point out some problems.

## **5.2 Further examples and questions**

In a splendid article in which Strauss (2002) tackles the problem of theo-ontology, his aim is to prove that (as phrased in the title) it is not “possible to do theology without philosophical presuppositions”. This raises a few questions: are those presuppositions scientific or pre-scientific? If they are pre-scientific why should they be called “philosophical”? (i.e. why should they be “part” of any scientific discipline?) If they are

scientific, on the contrary, to what extent is theology bound to philosophical presuppositions? Are the latter just part of a broader range of presuppositions that theology needs in order to perform its tasks? Or are they the only presuppositions needed by theology? If the latter is the case, can theology still be considered to some extent “independent” from philosophy?

The author is convinced that the message Strauss wants to pass is: theology and philosophy need to cooperate and to recognise each other more openly. In fact, he concludes his article by saying that “as Christian philosophy may benefit from a biblically founded Christian theology, the reverse is equally true”! (Strauss, 2002:162). But how can theology render its services to philosophy if theology is “completely in the grip of and determined by some particular philosophical view of reality”? (Strauss, 2002:157). Does this not create the same mediation-problem that was stigmatised by Dooyeweerd, with the difference that theology is now substituted by philosophy?<sup>16</sup>

If we maintain, as Troost (1983:43) does, that the reformation of the (special) sciences depends on philosophy or necessarily “starts from philosophy” are we not placing philosophy as the new mediator between the (Christian) special sciences and their presuppositional sources of inspiration? And are we not preparing a paralysis for Christian scholarship as well? Van Belle is among the few reformational thinkers who mention this problem when he observes that the special sciences cannot wait for the “immaculate conception” of a Christian philosophy before starting to work on their academic tasks from a reformational perspective (Van Belle, 1985:21).

In section 4 above the author has argued that the “punishment” for the over-estimation of a discipline and lack of inter-disciplinary cooperation is that the hoped-for results do not materialise. Can this be the case (at least in part) for reformational *philosophy* as well? In this tradition many

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16 The problem of mediation discussed above, in the author’s opinion, doesn’t require any dramatic alteration of reformational principles to be solved. It can simply be overcome by acknowledging the full pre-scientific nature of (e.g.) ground motives and worldviews. The latter, for example, do not “contain” only a “faith” or an “ontology”, they contain both, and more. Therefore it should be recognised that each science has a legitimate and relatively independent access to (e.g.) a worldview which is its pre-scientific basis and source of inspiration/direction. This is not to suggest that philosophy or theology can be safely ignored, but only that the other sciences do not depend on them entirely. Although philosophy and theology have a crucial role to play, any science may be influenced by all other sciences and may influence them in turn.

hoped to initiate a reformation of science and scholarship on the basis of philosophy. This project was very important to Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:vii). During a conference of the Society for Reformational Philosophy in Hoeven, The Netherlands, Geertsema (1995:18) observed that this project had succeeded only in a certain sense. On this point one doesn't need to be naive: it is a project that cannot be completed in a few years.

Yet is it not time to ask the question whether the project may have also been hampered by the same syndrome that the author has described above (see section 4)? Is it possible that an excessive insistence on the role and resources of philosophy, coupled with lack of inter-disciplinary co-operation, might have been an obstacle to an inner reformation in the special sciences?

## **6. Ambiguity towards theology: what is its positive role?**

Let us now move to a different, but related topic. The author believes Dooyeweerd (1959:66) is right when saying that philosophy should find its own access to the biblical revelation, without depending on the theologians and without being thus obliged to move in a vicious circle. Philosophy should be independent from theology as it was conceived in medieval times.

But then we also need to ask: is philosophy in some way related to theology? And in which way? Furthermore, is theology in any way relevant for Christian scholarship? From Dooyeweerd we hear rather sombre comments on theology, like the one reciting that “dogmatic theology is a very dangerous science” (Dooyeweerd, 1980:135). One may also remember his opinion that “all heresies have a theological origin” (1980:135).<sup>17</sup> We also learn from Dooyeweerd (1980:156) that theology needs a (Christian) philosophical foundation and this is “the first service which the new reformed philosophy can render its theological sister”. But we never hear of a possible service that theology may provide to philosophy.

Interestingly, Kok detects exactly the same problem in Vollenhoven. He (Kok, 1988:124) reports that in the writings of the Dutch philosopher “a positive formulation as to what theology should be and do, is not to be found”. We miss the positive type of pronouncements. It is then necessary

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17 Curiously, even though in Dooyeweerd's view philosophy influences theoretical thought in all its forms, apparently it does not influence heretics!

to ask: what kind of contribution could theology provide for the other sciences, according to a reformational point of view?<sup>18</sup> Does it still have something to say to philosophy, or not?

Kuyper was determined to allow theology a respected place in his encyclopaedia:

If non Christian philosophy ignores the results of theology, as though it was no science, theology is in duty bound to enter her protest against this. If, on the other hand, the philosopher himself is regenerate (...) then of course in his studies he includes the results of theology, together with the results of all the other sciences, and it is his care, architectonically, to raise such a cosmological building that the results of theology also find their place naturally in it (quoted in Spykman, 1991:98).

Is this still the case with contemporary reformational philosophers?

For example, by reading Troost's beautiful book on philosophical ethics (Troost, 1983) one discovers that there is still a role to play for ethics as a special science and for philosophical ethics as well. But theological ethics can be safely eliminated! The reason is that this discipline, according to Troost, is still trying to do what it did in the middle ages. It claims "to be able to provide the supernatural complement in the way of biblical insight, biblical concepts and indications" (Troost, 1983:47). This approach is blind to the need of reformation of the special sciences, says Troost, and tries to supply a biblical insight that is supposed to be the monopoly of theological investigation.

One should notice, however, that when Troost describes the role of special and philosophical ethics he does not start from how they *are still conducted* in certain circles. He rather begins from what these sciences *should be doing* (according to a reformed approach). In his opinion ethics, as a special science, has no monopoly on issues of "right and wrong". As a matter of fact ethics cannot deal with all moral issues that originate from all fields: from economics, politics, biology and so on. In these cases, it is the responsibility of the special sciences themselves to say what is "right or wrong" within their domain. Then why is not theology as well included among the special sciences that deal with such ethical questions?

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18 Geertsema (1995:21-26) poses the same question after admitting that in the Dooyeweerdian tradition theology plays too little a role. Then he suggests a remedy as well, though the author is far from convinced, personally, that the blurring of the distinction between (central) religion and (modal) faith, would constitute an improvement at all.

One might have the feeling that, historically speaking, among some philosophers there has been a certain uneasiness towards theology, perhaps due to its initially unfriendly attitude towards reformational philosophy. Only by overcoming such obstacles would reformational scholars experience a new freedom in the fulfilment of their tasks.

## 7. Disregarding (reformational) theological orthodoxy

As reformational theologians have often ignored philosophical criticism and contributions (see section 4 above), so philosophers have sometimes disregarded theological and confessional orthodoxy, thus hindering the communication with their colleagues in theology. The list of alleged abuses is rather extensive,<sup>19</sup> but will be limited to one author. The following are a few pronouncements provided by Nicholas Wolterstorff in one publication: *Reason within the bounds of religion*, of 1976.

Concerning the Bible, for example, he (Wolterstorff, 1976:56) doubts that it may contain “only what God reveals” and he thinks the history of textual transmission can support his doubt. God could even have revealed something that is “strictly speaking false”, although quite “fit and proper for us as his ‘children’ to believe” (1976:95).

Concerning soteriological issues, Wolterstorff argues that in the dispute between Calvinists and Thomists of the 16th and 17th centuries on the effects of sin on human nature “it is very difficult for us in the 20th century to put our finger on what exactly it was that the dispute was about” (1976:108, fn. 12). As the dispute was about very central issues for both theological systems it is rather unfortunate, the author would say, that Wolterstorff does not know what our predecessors were talking about!

To complete the picture: Wolterstorff holds to an “interactive view” of science and religion. They mutually influence each other: sometimes our religious beliefs modify our scientific theories, sometimes science modifies our religious beliefs. There is no allusion to the fact that the modifications of our beliefs should be effectuated in all carefulness, and never “dictated” (by science, politics and so on). In other words, there

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19 A much heated debate in North American reformational circles, in the 1960s and '70s, concerned the nature of the Word of God. Some reformational authors were accused of holding an un-orthodox position. Downs (1974) gives a vivid account of the controversies, meetings and publications surrounding the debate. In this regard Zylstra (1975:32) observed that the reformational movement lacked theological expertise to elucidate and clarify its proposals better. In this case a desirable role of theology in support of philosophy was recognised.

seems to be no real “bracket” to the influence of science on belief. No consequence seems to be excessive.

And so we are rather squarely told that sometimes Christians have given up their commitment, because they found it to be clashing with the scientific views of their days (Wolterstorff, 1976:22; 92-93). Not a single word is spent to regret such occurrences. Instead, we are asked: “for all the dangers in particular cases, why should such developments in general be prevented”? (p. 86). “In the extreme case people have given up their Christian commitment entirely (...) That, I say, is how things have gone (...) at least sometimes that is how they should have gone” (Wolterstorff, 1976:89)! And if you find out that your religion is gone, this will teach you the lesson that “we are all profoundly *historical* creatures” (1976:93)!<sup>20</sup>

It must at least be said that the above mentioned pronouncements are expressed in rather un-sensitive language. Some of these ideas might perhaps prove to be acceptable in the end, if properly articulated and explained. But they shouldn’t be simply “thrown” to the reader, without the necessary carefulness and specifications. Philosophers should learn to be more informed and sensitive in their dialogue with theologians.

## 8. Conclusion

It might well be that the author has not yet touched on other important aspects of the controversy between theologians and philosophers. Apart from the debates over theology and philosophy, surely there are more specific issues on which the two parties could not find agreement. In all these areas, further research is of course welcome. Nevertheless, the author trusts that the present article shows at least that, within reformational circles, much time and energies have been wasted fighting the wrong battles.

The point is not trying to find out which party is more guilty. Furthermore, the fact that mistakes have been committed from both sides should not be taken as justifying both groups. In this case, errors are cumulative. Much work is required to heal divisions and to overcome old prejudices.

More positively: communication between scholars and interdisciplinary efforts constitute great resources for a scholarly community and are at

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20 Wolterstorff’s “interactive view of science and religion” (especially the idea that the Christian religion can be “lost”), meets a crucial theological objection from an evangelical-reformed point of view. In fact, it is definitely in contrast with the doctrine of the “final perseverance of the saints”. Here is another example of how theology may have something to say on philosophical elaborations.



present still under-appreciated. In their hearts, both theologians and philosophers in the reformational family know that both their disciplines are indispensable callings and that co-operation and dialogue are necessary. It is certainly time to overcome old obstacles and to work out more concrete forms of co-operation, which have enormous potential for the future of reformational scholarship.

Perhaps the first area in which co-operation should take place is exactly the articulation of a new encyclopaedic model. A model in which the nature, the role and the interconnections of the different scientific disciplines are clarified from a truly reformational point of view. A model which abandons the hierarchical tendencies of a Thomist encyclopaedia, with its queens and ancillae, and places all scholars and fields of study equally *coram Deo*.

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