

Christian philosophy

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At the cradle of a Christian philosophy

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Author:

B.J. van der Walt

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Review Title:

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Reviewer:

John H. Kok¹

Affiliation:

¹Faculty of Philosophy, Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Email:

john.kok@dordt.edu

Postal address:

246 Fourth street NE, Sioux Center, Iowa 51250, United States

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I understand and truly appreciate B.J. van der Walt's stated desire in this book to help keep reformational philosophy alive and relevant by acquainting the younger generation(s) with a tradition that goes back to John Calvin in the 16th century. This tradition was reinvigorated by Abraham Kuyper in the late 19th century, and it blossomed in the 20th century under the leadership of Dirk Vollenhoven, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Hendrik Stoker.

Van der Walt's opening chapter on John Calvin is excellent. It also illustrates what a 'loving critique, but critique nevertheless' (which he recommends in chapter 2), looks like. I very much appreciate his methodic presentation of Calvin's *philosophia Christiana*. By explaining the difference between cultural context, religious direction, and ontological structure, Van der Walt sets the stage for a discussion of the main contours of Calvin's worldview or thought that is both incisive and provocative. Distinguishing these three *angles* on Calvin's work and writings allows him ample opportunity to point out and unpack many of Calvin's sound insights whilst at the same time challenging the reader to consider that some of Calvin's claims or assumptions should be rejected as inadequate. He brings that challenge home by not only suggesting where Calvin's questionable suppositions may have come from (e.g. a Christianised Stoic *logos* doctrine and dualism in his anthropology and societal philosophy), but also by sketching in the basics of some sound or scriptural alternatives. In doing so, Van der Walt is also able to illustrate why, however necessary, conversion and renewal are not sufficient and how, 'through the shaping of a genuine reformational worldview, true reformation can be achieved in our own times'.

The second chapter, 'The Christian philosophy of D.H.Th. Vollenhoven: Its inception and further development', is, however well-informed the author is regarding this topic, unfortunately a bit of a hodgepodge that does not really deliver on what its title would lead one to believe. Less than one third of the chapter is devoted to Vollenhoven's philosophy proper; with very little said about its inception, let alone about its development. Taken as a whole, the chapter also lacks integration. Too many factors are 'dealt with' (p. 47) in a manner that, I believe, will fail to engage, excite or challenge the reader, be they from a younger generation or not. The following examples explain this: '*something* is said briefly about his personality' (but most of these 3½ pages are devoted to differences between Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd); 'a brief historical background *is provided*', followed by an inventory of '*possible* influences on Vollenhoven's thought'; then 'attention is *directed at* [Vollenhoven's contributions]'; with the final paragraphs devoted to 'how their (D.H. Th. Vollenhoven, Herman Dooyeweerd and Hendrik Stoker) work was received', to '*how* [*that*] the tradition became divided', and to a list of followers and of contacts in South Africa. It seems to me that these provided *pieces* are left too much to the reader to piece together. That said, part of the merit of this chapter (and of the next two) is the author's intention 'to convey something of this [*reformational*] tradition to the younger generations' by making 'as many references to [*existing re*]sources as possible ... so that students ... not fully conversant with [*the*] ... available literature ... can study it for themselves'.

Although written in a much more engaging and narrative style than the previous chapter, it seems to me that the third chapter presents little about Stoker that is inviting, that is, it includes little that encourages the uninitiated to want to get to know Stoker better. Why should the reader want to know more about Stoker, given his relative obscurity at home and certainly abroad; that he lived through turbulent times in a relatively isolated country; his questionable 'Christian-national' brand of Calvinism, which had 'a lasting influence' on his thinking; that Herman Bavinck's reformed rationalistic and scholastically colored theology and Max Scheler's irrationalistic-phenomenological philosophy 'flowed together in Stoker's philosophy' (p. 106); and given that no particular attention is given in the chapter as to what is 'good in his philosophical legacy [*that*] should still be kept alive' (p. 90)?

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Although the author indicates in the discussion of Bavinck that it is 'not easy to ascertain' the points in Bavinck's thinking with which Stoker agreed or differed, he nonetheless uses a kind of suspicion by association argument: Bavinck's embrace of the 'age-old logos speculation' is questionable; his 'ontology is derived from Thomistic thinking'; Jan Veenhof has documented 'important problems' in Bavinck's philosophy of revelation; synthesis thinking 'seriously hampered [Bavinck's] Reformational intentions'; Stoker's 'leaning towards several facets of Bavinck's philosophy [– noting that parallels to Bavinck can be "easily" traced in Stoker's philosophy –] could have toned down the Reformational purity and élan of his philosophy'.

When the author turns to 'how Stoker describes his [own] method', little is said, I believe, that might pique anyone's interest. Stoker's method:

searches for the essence of a certain individual phenomenon – something he admits is hard to describe. ... [One] has to make use of intuition. ... [I]n order to use this method, all prior knowledge ... regarding the phenomenon [has] to be pushed aside. ... The essence of this phenomenon which is revealed, Stoker says, cannot be described in any direct way. It can only be seen in an indirect manner, so that logical grounds or validity are not applicable when using this method. (p. 104)

This brief expose of Stoker's method is then followed by seven ('quite a few') questions, problems or concerns on the part of the author.

Beyond passing reference to his 'philosophy of the idea of creation' – as an 'original product of an independent philosopher' (but about which nothing further is said) – the author also fails to explain the claim that Stoker 'can rightly be regarded as one of the three fathers of a Reformational philosophy' (p. 107). In addition, I feel that the chapter ends with a bit of a whimper. After suggesting that 'Christian-Reformational thinking and acting' is suffering from 'a general decline and concomitant superficiality' (back cover), that the 'coals of an important tradition [are smouldering]' p. (114), I do not think that the reader is well-served with an overly defensive response to nameless accusations and misrepresentations – does the younger generation not also

need to know where these accusations and misrepresentations are coming from?

My sense is that the 4th and final chapter of this book is very successful in 'reconstruct[ing] the contours of the complex philosophical development of Dooyeweerd by employing the problem-historical method of a philosophical historiography of his colleague, Vollenhoven' (p. 116). The author's 'hypothesis' is clearly stated (p. 121); he delivers admirably on its first two points.¹ The suggested three stages of Dooyeweerd's development are clearly delineated; recurring reformed anthropologies, 'semi-mysticism', and 'monarchianism' are described with ease; and the difference and relationship in Dooyeweerd's thought between 'a descending, diverging direction from the Origin (as Unity) downwards into cosmic diversity' and 'an ascending, converging direction from the cosmic diversity to a unity in the Origin, God' (p. 152) is well-documented. Undoubtedly some will question these and some of the author's other observations about (interpretations of) Dooyeweerd's position,² but all-told the author's argument is cogent and worthy of informed response.

In closing, Van der Walt references 'an African proverb that says when one speaks (and probably also writes) one should look out to provide not only food for the giraffes high up in the branches, but also grass for the small antelopes low down on the ground' to help articulate his intention of 'providing something to chew and to ruminate on for both the giraffes (philosophical connoisseurs) and for the antelopes (ordinary interested people)'. Given my comments above, I believe that the first and last chapters are both incisive and provocative, and that, whilst the author's style is generally accessible, chapters 2 and 3 do not serve his intended audience well.

1. Some of the word choices in this chapter are unfortunate or confusing. For example, 'depart from' (see p. 123 top) means 'go away' or 'diverge' (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/departed+from>); and often 'temporary' could better have been rendered 'temporal' – see also page 153 'supra-temporal heart'. I also have no idea what 'monargian' (possibly a Finnish word) means (p. 137).

2. For example that Dooyeweerd's emphasis on the meaning character of the cosmos 'renders material reality more or less redundant' (p. 129), that 'in Dooyeweerd's final phase reality is merely called "meaning"' (pp. 152 & 153); or that Dooyeweerd's notion of religious ground motives has anything to do with the (monarchian) assumption that 'the spirit of the individual human being ... is actualised or brought into motion by the universal *nous*' (p. 148; see also p. 153).