

INTRODUCING REFORMATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN BRAZIL : A HOPEFUL REPORT

Ricardo Quadros Gouvêa

Introduction

This “paper” is a brief report on my efforts to introduce reformational philosophy in Brazil. It has not been easy. There has been opposition and difficulties with which to deal. I will try to explain them to you. The main reason for presenting this report today to you is to obtain your help in finding the best way to proceed in my attempts to follow my vocation as a Christian philosopher and a Reformational thinker in Brazil.

I believe, furthermore, that presentations such as this may serve also to show the growing interest and dissemination of reformational thought. It is profitable, I suppose, in this international symposium on “Cultures and Christianity” organized by the Association for Reformational Philosophy, to give witness to the abiding influence and actual reformational power of Harman Dooyeweerd’s philosophy.

In fact, I would rather present something quite more theoretical, but the symposium’s theme, with its emphasis on transcultural problems, made me choose to present a more practical work. In it, I give, in the Augustinian tradition, a brief account of my own pilgrimage as a Christian and as a thinker. This is followed by a set of considerations on the main difficulties I am facing right now in the attempt to introduce Dooyeweerd’s legacy and to be a Christian Reformational philosopher in Brazil. Finally, I engage in some considerations of how reformational philosophy could help Brazil as a nation, in its cultural, social, political and educational problems, as well as how it could help the Christian churches in Brazil, and particularly the so-called Reformed churches, to find a better focus for their reforming activity and their proclamation of the gospel.

1. My Story

I was born and reared in a Christian family. I belong to the fifth generation of Brazilian Presbyterians. The third Brazilian Presbyterian local church was organized in 1865, in the lands of my great-grandfather's father. My great-grandfather was one of the first Brazilian Presbyterian ministers, and both my grandfather and my father were Presbyterian elders for many decades.

I was never a great student, and yet, I was trained to be a reader. Wonder was a powerful force within me. My upbringing was quite ambiguous, being partly puritanical, due to the puritanical ways of the Presbyterian denomination to which my family belonged, and partly full of liberty, due to the more behaviorally liberal opinions of my father. Thus, from being an extroverted little Christian boy, I became a very confused adolescent, with my head full of strange and complicated doctrinal conundrums, and finally to a quite sinful young man, with much energy, deviant ways, and a strong will.

During a troubled youth in which I became a confessed atheist, I finally came in direct contact with the dialogues of Plato. Reading Plato restored my belief that life is meaningful as well as my belief in a form of afterlife. At this time I was an undergraduate student at the University of São Paulo. After a couple of awkward so-called mystical experiences, I realized eventually that I could say again I was a Christian and I decided to go to the seminary to prepare myself to become a minister of the Brazilian Presbyterian Church. By this time I also got married.

Since I had a college degree, I soon became a professor of philosophy at the seminary and after I finished my theological studies and graduated, I stayed there as a professor. This experience as a philosophy professor helped me to understand the inadequacy of the study of philosophy in the theological seminaries, and helped me later to see the complete lack of perception, in the evangelical and Reformed churches of Brazil, of the need of a transcendental critique of philosophical ideas.

This period was also marked by a growing awareness of the sheer barrenness of the rationalistic fundamentalist theology which was being taught in Brazil both in the churches and in the seminaries, with some noble exceptions. I was a minister of the Brazilian Presbyterian Church and a professor at one of the church's seminaries and yet I felt as if I could no longer affirm a Reformed confession of faith.

In 1992 I went to the US for further studies in theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, in Pennsylvania, where I got acquainted with Dr. Robert D. Knudsen. He introduced me to reformational philosophy and the work of Herman Dooyeweerd. He was very fond of Dooyeweerd's thought and was able to transfer his enthusiasm to me, although I soon perceived that this transference of interest was rare, since Westminster was dominated by the legacy of another important Reformed thinker, Cornelius Van Til, who, in his late years as professor and writer, always placed his own approach in opposition to that of Dooyeweerd, in spite of his evident dependence on Dooyeweerd in the construction of his presuppositional apologetics.

I was also put in touch with Van Til's heritage at Westminster and studied it in detail. Yet, Van Til's thinking was clearly inferior to that of Dooyeweerd in many ways. It was sectarian and fideistic. It was also in sheer opposition to the very idea of a Christian philosophy and the idea of a constructive dialogue with the philosophical tradition. Van Til always insisted that he was not a philosopher but rather an apologist

for the Christian faith, which he presented in a rather fundamentalist fashion. He could not accept, for instance, Dooyeweerd's view of Scripture as pre-theoretical, due to certain rationalistic prejudices in his conception of truth and of revelation which are still present in some fundamentalist groups among Reformed circles.

Having learned much about Dooyeweerd and his way of thinking with Robert Knudsen, and having finished my coursework for the Ph.D., I wanted to write my dissertation on some topic related to Dooyeweerd's philosophy. However, Dr. Knudsen was retiring that year, and my new advisor, Dr. William Edgar, insisted that I dropped the idea in favor of something supposedly more relevant. Dr. Knudsen was very enthusiastic when I told him I planned to write my dissertation on Dooyeweerd, and was willing to be my advisor. I must say, nevertheless, that Bill Edgar had the best intentions when he suggested me to change my topic, believing, as he does, and not without some reason, that an expertise in Dooyeweerd's philosophy was not a good door to the difficult and competitive life of the academic world.

I decided to write on Søren Kierkegaard's thought. After reading much of the primary sources I perceived how unjust were most compendiums of contemporary theology in their critique of Kierkegaard. To my surprise, the further I studied Kierkegaard the more I found in common between his presuppositional thinking and reformational philosophy. One of the chapters of my dissertation is about this unexpected similitude. I could cite, for instance, Kierkegaard's "either/or" radically antithetical thinking, his belief in the effects of sin upon human reason, his emphasis on the infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creatures, his insistence upon the impossibility of a presuppositionless system of thought, his radical rejection of human reason's supremacy and human autonomy, his rejection of natural theology, his precursory phenomenological approach to psychological themes or the humanities or the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and finally the clear presence of the basic Augustinian motif of Creation-Fall-Redemption undergirding all his intellectual production.

Furthermore, I never stopped with my studies of reformational philosophy. Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* continued to be a source of philosophical insight and a guide to my own reflection. And now I felt the need for a formal degree in philosophy. I applied and was accepted as a Ph.D. student at the *Institute for Christian Studies* in Toronto, but I was never able to go to Canada for lack of funds.

Instead, I came back to Brazil and began to work as a theology professor at Mackenzie University. Meanwhile, a series of coincidences led me to get in contact with a few key persons working at the University of São Paulo, and I was able to start another Ph.D. program, my second one, in philosophy at the philosophy department of the University of São Paulo, more particularly in the medieval philosophy department. This semester, however, I am delving into the study of the thinking of Edmund Husserl. My goal was to find the connections that Dooyeweerd himself recognizes between his thinking and that of Husserl. Having now finished the coursework, I will begin to write a dissertation which will be on some aspect of Augustine's philosophical thinking.

2. Reformed Thinking in Brazil

The Protestants are a minority in Brazil, which is called the most Roman Catholic country in the world for having the highest number of Catholics. The so-called evangelicals are mainly Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal. Historical Protestants are a minority even among non-Catholic Christians. And the Reformed churches are a minority among the historical Protestants.

One may be easily misled by the appearances, and think that, among the historical Protestants, there is a majority of so-called Calvinists. These so-called Reformed thinkers are, in fact, mostly fundamentalists who would consider a book such as Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* much farther from their idea of Reformed theology than the sort of ideas that come out of American fundamentalist seminaries.

I will offer to you the witness of a friend of mine, Paulo Arantes, who, with me, is working on the first translation of Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* to Portuguese. He said:

Facing this Kuyperian view of Calvinism as a life system, I can only conclude that (i) the Reformed church, it seems to me, was never taught this Kuyperian conception of Calvinism, and if it was one day, it has forgotten it a long time ago or is afraid to put it in practice; (ii) this Kuyperian conception of Calvinism must be taught to the Reformed church at once; and (iii) the Reformed church must be stimulated and challenged to live Calvinism as an all-embracing life system, regardless of the consequences, and trusting on the sustaining grace of our Father Almighty.

Among the small group of truly Reformed thinkers, those who follow the Scottish and Puritan tradition are an overwhelming majority. The Dutch tradition has little voice except among the small communities of Dutch immigrants in the south of Brazil, and after a visit that I made to one of those communities, I believe that it is disappearing even there.

Therefore, it is no surprise that there are no signs of reformational philosophy and no awareness of the need for it. Almost all philosophical theology and apologetics is done within a Thomistic perspective. The philosophy courses at the seminaries and schools of theology are either prepared and offered under the influence of Roman Catholic text books or they are conceived naively as an impartial survey of disconnected moments in the history of philosophical ideas.

Most times they are conceived in an old positivistic fashion as part of the basic, general educational background that pastors are supposed to have to begin their theological studies, not as part of their Christian thinking proper. Due to the technicism which has taken control of our seminaries, most students see these courses of philosophy as cosmetic courses, entirely irrelevant to their future ministry.

3. The Andrew Jumper Center

When I returned to Brazil I immediately became a professor at the Andrew Jumper Center for Graduate Studies in Theology which is located at Mackenzie University in São Paulo. It was founded under the sway of the ultra-conservative movement led by Rev. Boanerges Ribeiro, a movement which began during the period of the military dictatorship in Brazil. The movement was fundamentalist in character, being intolerant, obscurantist, and sectarian, among other things.

The Andrew Jumper Center has a clear ultra-conservative vocation and has battled all constructive or progressive movement in practical and theoretical theology. Even though I knew this situation beforehand, I was nevertheless surprised by the opposition I encountered at the Jumper Center as soon as I began trying to develop my educational projects there, including the teaching and the popularization of reformational philosophy.

I dispute its purported conservative stance. For me, fundamentalism is not conservative, but rather disruptive. It is a form reactionary thinking which has little to do with the dynamics of church history and the history of Christian ideas. Therefore, I see fundamentalism as heterodoxical. The truly conservative stance would be one that upholds the two-thousand year old Christian orthodoxy in the dynamic spirit of reform and contextualization, geographical, historical, and cultural.

When I decided to quit, and do my work somewhere else, the president of the denomination, the Rev. Guilhermino Cunha, who agreed with my analysis of the theological stance of the Center, alerted me that the church was going to intervene and take charge, and that I should expect changes at the Jumper Center. He told me to wait, and I waited, and the changes came. A new department was created named “theology and philosophy.” I was indicated by the church as its coordinator and a good amount of independence was given to the coordinators to develop their projects. This finally made possible the scheduling of a course on reformational philosophy for May of 2000, even if only for the students interested in the program of theology and philosophy, which I was coordinating, and even if I could not use the term reformational, and had to use the older, and probably less adequate expressions “Calvinist philosophy” and “Reformed philosophy” to avert further criticism and hindrances.

My first contacts with the students of the program was very positive and my first mentioning of reformational philosophy to them was astonishingly promising. They were immediately interested and asked me to schedule a course on the subject. I believe there is a hunger for it among the philosophically inclined. The course was scheduled for May, 15th to 19th of 2000. It was going to be an intensive one-week course with thirty hours of class work.

4. The Dooyeweerd Course

At first I thought I was getting quite ambiguous signs of interest in the course. Many told me they were planning to attend, but there were very few students registered for it. Surprisingly, a considerably good number of students appeared for the course. We had around 10 students in class every day. This number is considered high for the average attendance at the Jumper Center.

What I intended to do in this course was to offer to the students a brief history of reformational philosophy, starting from the work of Abraham Kuyper, his calvinistic worldview presented in the *Lectures on Calvinism*, and Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation*, till the days of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven and the more recent developments. I did this, but in a much more summarized form than I first planned, and I presented instead with greater detail the basic tenets of Dooyeweerd's philosophy.

Therefore, after a discussion of the intellectual origins of the European religious reformations of the 16th century, the difference between the philosophical background of Calvin's thinking and that of his direct successors, and a list of frustrate attempts to build up a positive Reformed philosophy by Pierre de la Ramée, by Pierre Bayle and Pierre Jurieu, by Jonathan Edwards, and by Frances Hutcheson, Thomas Reid and other Scottish common-sense philosophers, we discussed the following topics of Dooyeweerd's apparently successful attempt to build up a positive calvinistic philosophy: the philosophical problem of theoretical thought, the three steps of Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique of theoretical thought, individuality-structures and sphere sovereignty, the horizon of naive experience and the cosmomic idea with its phenomenology, the basic groundmotifs of the history of philosophical ideas, Dooyeweerd's conception of meaning, of the subject-object relation, and of enkaptic relations, and general applications of Dooyeweerd's thinking to different fields of philosophical enquiry.

Now I offer to you the testimony of two of my students who wrote, by request, on their experience in this course. The first of them, Telêmaco Jucá, is from Natal, a city in the extreme north of Brazil. This is what he said:

I registered for the course on reformational philosophy with great suspicion, for two main reasons: 1) I always believed in the Roman Catholic proposition that a denial of natural theology implied the denial of any Christian philosophical reflection; and 2) whenever I heard of Calvinist philosophy, the association in my mind was with Francis Schaeffer, who represented a kind of thinking about which I had a very negative impression for its reductionism and rationalism. I was very surprised when I saw myself listening to a form of Christian philosophical reflection that had not only a sound critical dimension, but also a positive agenda for a constructive philosophy from a Christian perspective. Many prejudices came down to earth and many challenges were revealed to me, for I came to realize that the contributions of this kind of thinking to the Brazilian church would be unsurmountable. Brazilian Christian, especially Reformed Protestants, which work daily in contact with academic life and social institutions feel the need for a kind of literature that can give rational, philosophical support in their dialogue with persons propounding ideas taken from one of the many worldviews we find being held today in the university and in the

workplace. When one can eliminate one's prejudices, one finds a refuge in Roman Catholic thinkers. But Reformed Protestants lack the kind of approach I saw being proposed in the course on Dooyeweerd offered by Prof. Gouvêa. I believe that the introduction of reformational thought in Brazil will bring some nutrition to the arid hearts of Brazilian Protestant thinkers who thirst in their struggles in the academic environment, and in their struggle to uphold and defend convincingly their worldview, or even in their attempt to communicate their faith to colleagues in the campuses or in the workplaces. My dream and firm hope is that the Brazilian Presbyterian Church open its eyes to this reality and provide resources as soon as possible to help the people of God to be salt and light in Brazil, to face our national reality with the Christian maturity we need, implying involvement in all areas of our national life: politics, arts and culture. It is paramount that good literature be provided, and centers of study should give priority to the translation and divulgation of thinkers such as Dooyeweerd.

This is what another student of mine, Kleber Machado, who came from the south of the country to attend the Dooyeweerd course, said, in a more synthetic way:

Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophical thought is, unfortunately, almost entirely unknown in Brasil. Calvinist Protestantism arrived in Brazil only in 1859. The kind of Calvinism which Brazil came to know was that of the Old Princeton School. It spread its roots and is still the form of theology taught in most chairs of the main Presbyterian seminaries in Brasil. Notwithstanding, neither the theology of the Old Princeton School nor any other form of Protestant theology has reached the national culture or affected to any degree our national life. If today we see the evangelical movement each day more and more influent in Brasil, we have sadly to admit that it has not offered any new or different worldview or life-system to our society. We do have an evangelical movement but we do not have the Reformation. Dooyeweerd could be the key for the creation of an evangelical movement genuinely Brazilian and also truly Reformational in a country that, even among its best men and women, and even in its best moments, and even in its most clearly Protestant circles, still lives according to an ethics and a philosophy built upon Romanist basis.

I do not think I need to add anything else. There is a need, and people like Telêmaco and Kleber are the means, but we still lack time, funds, and support from the church to proceed in this noble attempt to bring genuine Reformed thinking, that is, reformational thinking, to Brazil

5. Concluding Remarks

The Brazilian society needs reformational thinking. Brazil is a country of continental proportions, famous for its incredible social disparities and unjust distribution of wealth. The political life in Brazil is marked by scandals of corruption, of nepotism, and of lack of understanding of what the political life actually is, for politicians seem to grasp the opportunity of a public position to enrich and advocate causes in their own behalf. Brazilian art lacks a clear direction. The Brazilian culture has no power to open, in the Dooyeweerdian sense, and has no power to face the menace of a complete process of aculturation by the American machine cultural domination. There is no relevant scientific endeavor taking place in Brazil, and the academic life has no vigor, and this has to do with a mistaken philosophy of education. Today, Brazil is a nation between its past in which a Roman Catholic worldview determined the subservience and quietism of its people as well as its lack of creativity, and its future, menaced by the American utilitarian pragmatism, which hypnotizes us with minimal cultural and economic gain and makes us believe that what is good for America is good for the world, a practice which is a form of cultural enslavement.

It is impossible to know by now how the project of introducing reformational thinking in Brazil is going to work. Most evangelicals are accommodated with a form of private utilitarian religiosity. Christian thinkers who challenge the nation's or the church's status quo are naturally expelled as undesirable trouble-makers within the evangelical community. Yet, there is a renitent group who insist on doing the subversive church work of awakening the evangelical intellectuals to the need of a reformational intellectual revival, something that would make us heard, that would place us in the job of truly reforming the life and thinking of a whole society, the Brazilian society.

I want to emphasize the need for funds. I would like to create an institution or a foundation for Reformational Studies in Brazil, one that would help us to translate Dooyeweerd's works and the works of other reformational thinkers to Portuguese. There are no translations of any work of any reformational thinker to Portuguese yet. We are working on Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*, which is a beginning but far from enough.

The biggest peril we face is the persecution by the ignorant and the obscurantists, within our very circles, that is, by those who believe that the church should be kept ignorant. There are those few persons in Brazil who have heard of Dooyeweerd and think he can be labeled a liberal theologian of sorts, or one who somehow invariably leads pastors and thinkers to a liberal stance. Perhaps they consider it liberal to get involved in one's society, in politics, in art, in science. Perhaps they consider it liberal to study and to deal with theology and biblical studies in the dynamics which is typical of the intellectual history of Christianity. Perhaps they consider it liberal our fight against all forms of dogmatism and legalism which abound in the evangelical sub-culture. We call it orthodoxy, and Reformed, and reformational.

Yet, there is something me and my friends in Brazil call liberal: (i) conformity with the spirit of the age, the market or consumer's society, the church's growing concern with numbers; (ii) lowering the evangelical requirements of Christian life to make it easier, instead of speaking of our absolute need for forgiveness before God's judgment, due to our inability to uphold the evangelical requirement; (iii) transforming the Christian faith into a form of gnosticism of doctrines to be learned and understood

and forcibly accepted, or a gnosticism of experiential mysticism, like that of the charismatic movements; (iv) making something very comfortable out of Christianity, something we can practice in our private times and leisure times, some odd, cathartic religiosity, but that has nothing to do with public life, in short, something that does not offend, that does not disturb, and that does not prophecy in act or in speech against idolatry within both church and state. This is what we call “liberal theology” and liberal thinking, and those who practice these things call themselves “conservatives” and call me and my friends “liberals.”

Labeling, however, does not help. We must live and struggle for a genuine Christian faith and life in the churches and in the nation, and I am convinced that reformational thought is one of the main avenues through which we can walk toward the actualization of our goals in Brazil and in the world.