

REFORMATIONAL CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY AND CHRISTIAN COLLEGE EDUCATION

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If there were an underground booklet profiling the “Presbyterian and Reformed educational institutions” that regularly hold discussions about Christian higher education, like one of those stapled sheet collections put out by students at certain colleges that give you the brutal-truth low-down in terse, humorous paragraphs on which profs to avoid and which to choose, would you be aware of how Dordt stacks up next to The King’s, Calvin, Trinity Christian, Redeemer and others? They are all “Reformed,” let’s say; they are all sheep, no goats; but each one, because of its history, location, timing, and leadership—such as “The B.J.Haan years” at Dordt—stands on its legs a little differently as far as being “Reformed” goes. I’m not talking PR, “Best Buys,” or picking favorites (although our three children are Dordt graduates). I am simply stating, to begin our discussion, that being “Reformed” shakes out a little differently in various Christian colleges whose faith-thought tradition goes back to the Reformation, especially the Calvinian brand. That is to be expected.

So as not to bear false witness in advertising and because passing on and keeping alive, if not lively, a Reformation tradition in the complex matter of higher education is a difficult endeavor, it is also critically important for a college to be conscious of just what the perspective is that shapes its educational identity. Calvin College asked Nick Wolterstorff in 1989 to give a series of talks for new faculty on the distinctive character of Calvin College as an institution in the lived tradition of the Reformed community. Its title, *Keeping Faith*, invites new faculty to enter into a living faith-thought tradition which acknowledges that creation is good (the world belongs to God), that sin deeply permeates human historical cultivation of the world, and that members of the body of Christ are called to participate in the cosmic, societal redemption afoot under the provident God and working Holy Spirit in anticipation of Jesus Christ’s Rule being completed when he comes again in glory.

Wolterstorff invites new faculty who are not white Dutch-American Christian Reformed males to live into and dialogically modify but keep the promises of being “a college committed to the project of integral Christian learning” (48). Calvin College now requires new faculty to attend a series of seminars which assumes a reading list to be vigorously discussed in a serious attempt not to prescribe thought patterns but to flesh out roughly what for them as a college community “Reformed” Christian education means.

When I began teaching philosophy at a brand new Trinity Christian College in Chicago in 1959 (Seerveld 2000b: 30-32), a three semester sequence of conjoined history of philosophy (2 hours each semester) and cultural history (3 hours each semester) courses were required of all freshmen and sophomore students, so they would get a “Western Civ” knowledge from reading primary texts in “The Great Books” from Homer and Plato through Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes and Kant to Sartre, along with the development of Greek and Roman, Medieval, and Modern European institutional history. Prior to that sequence, along with required courses in English composition and literature (3 hours each) and two courses in Reformed Doctrine (2 hours each), was an introductory philosophy course.

Philosophy 101 was conceived to give a Christian philosophical orientation, in baby language mixed with jargon, to these high school graduates who thought they already knew everything needful to live and die happily in suburban Chicago life, to stretch their vision for serving Jesus Christ in any and all of their impending studies—school-teaching, law, laboratory science, nursing, artistry, medicine, or home-making. After facing them with Bertrand Russell's tract, “Why I am not a Christian,” we examined why thinking, even scientific thinking, cannot be neutral with respect to a human person's fundamental stance (*pou sto*) on where the buck ultimately stops, what everything means, and what kind of world we inhabit.

Collateral reading for Philosophy 101 included prolegomenal sections of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the section from Abraham Kuyper's *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* on “Logic impaired by sin,” Oscar Cullmann's dramatic lecture on “Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead,” describing why Socrates took the hemlock with poise while Jesus was afraid of death in Gethsemane and sweat blood. One of the too-difficult texts for this introductory course was Herman Dooyeweerd's little book, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*. Near the end of this Philosophy 101 first-year first-semester course (3 hours), we held

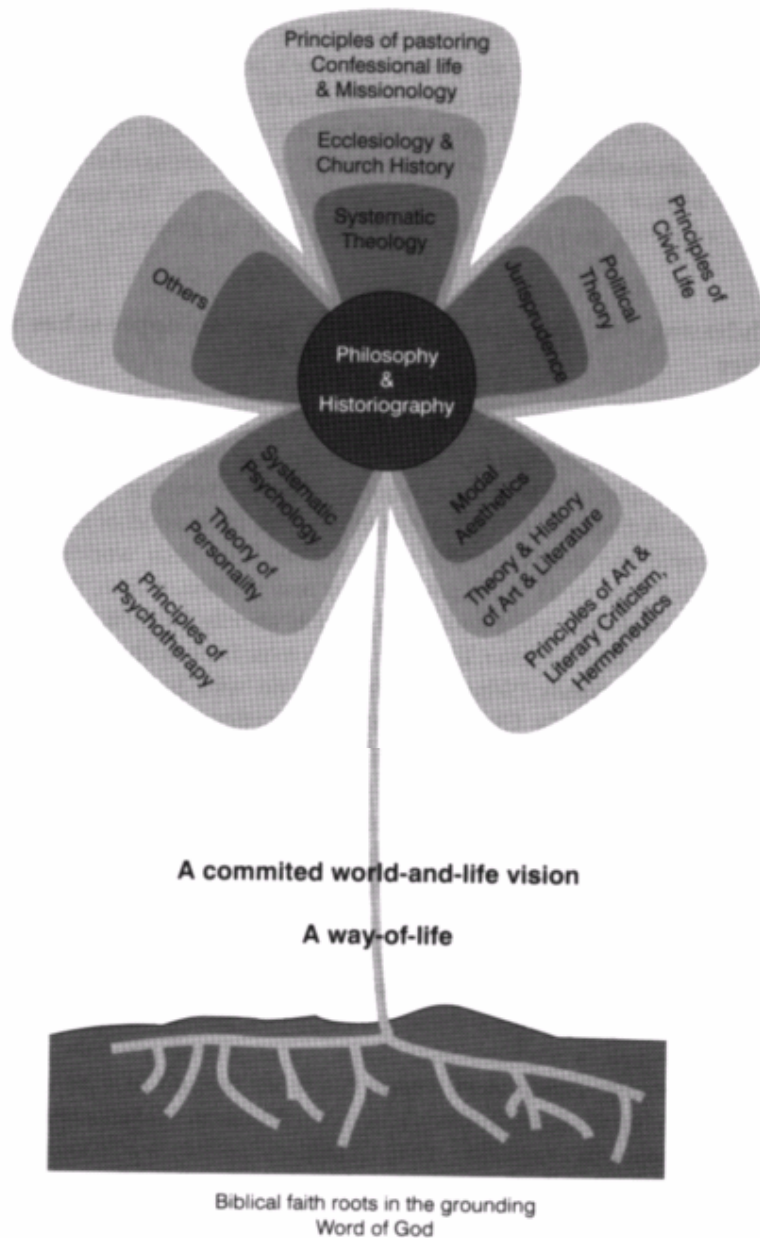
“modal” seminars on how different specialized studies in mathematics, biology, psychology, sociology, economics, political science, theology or educational theory were shaped by different philosophies. Profs from these various fields joined in the modal seminars with their prospective majors in trying to figure out questions like these: Why are there Bayesian and non-Bayesian statistical theories? What difference does Pavlov's psychology make next to Freud's for treating neuroses? Is a Capitalistic macro-economics theory more normative than a Socialist economics? How significant is the difference between John Dewey's theory of schooling and a Thomist one? The seminar was a lot of fun because we were discovering things we didn't quite know the answers for, and knew it was important for being a follower of Jesus Christ in the world around us.

I also should mention that in the beginning we Trinity Christian College faculty held a series of week-night lectures for our supporting constituency on how the Christian faith shaped each of our conceptions in the field of our specialization—this was 1960. Those early lectures in the areas of math, biology and psychology were not mature like Karen de Mol's essay on music and Simon du Toit's recent *Pro Rege* article on theatre, because some of us back then with a Ph.D. from a secular university didn't have a clue on how to show the biblical faith was integrally shaping the contours of our discipline. We all knew our Christian faith was not an addition to our scholarship, was not just to be parallel to our scientific reflection, or that we could be satisfied with an earnest prayer before we neutrally examined Edgar Allen Poe's short stories. But how could our biblical vision make a difference in the study of snails, German, and psychosomatic trauma? Nobody was losing face because we were all searching together, helping each other.

As for claiming that there were discernible contours for a Christian philosophy and that a Christian philosophy and a specific biblical sense of historical narrative were at the hub of a “Reformed” Christian college of interrelated disciplines (see *Diagram 1*), this idea was news in a way to Chicago. “Dooyeweerd” was also an unsettling curse word in certain circles of Reformed people at the time. When asked what we were doing in philosophy, I said, “We're just being Reformed, biblically Reformational,” you might say. That is, not “Reformed” as past tense, but as an active, ongoing Reformation of life, including thought, word and deed, honing it all to be true to the Scriptures. That was when I defined the term in this way:

“Reformational” identifies (1) a life that would be deeply committed to the scriptural injunction not to be conformed to patterns of this age but to be re-formed by the renewal of our consciousness so that we will be able to discern what God wills for action on earth (c.f. Romans 12:1-2); and (2) an approach in history to honor the genius of the Reformation spearheaded by Martin Luther and John Calvin in the sixteenth century, developed by Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper in the nineteenth century, as a particular Christian tradition out of which one could richly serve the Lord; with (3) a concern that we be communally busy reforming in an ongoing way rather than standing pat in the past tense (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*). (Seerveld 1980a: 46 n)

Diagram 1 (Seerveld 2000b: 153)



I personally am deeply grateful to be “Reformed,” to be a member of this “biblically Reformational” community over the centuries up to today, and want to serve my Lord and our neighbors by being biblically Reformational in translating and reading the Bible, in experiencing artistry, in constructing policy for economic and political life, in communally (institutionally) educating a next generation, in conceiving and doing theology, and whatever. Since I think this is what Dordt College education is all about, let me lead you to consider a few perennial problems that have disturbed and probably will continue to trouble any given generation of Christ's followers who attempt to keep the promises of the historical Reformation vital in our terribly pragmatic, secularizing, technocratically dehumanizing age.

What is the Bible?

My first point, which may seem tangential to a college faculty, hits the sciatic nerve of every person who confesses Jesus Christ: What is the Bible? My Reformational answer is that we should normally sing psalms rather than gospel choruses. What do I mean?

The holy Scriptures are God-speaking literature given to us historically for our learning by faith the one true story of the Lord's Rule a-coming and the contours of what our obedient response should be. The Bible is God's Word booked telling us the *magnalia Dei* with a Holy Spirit-ed power that can convict us as hearers to repent of our sin, drive us to plead for adoption by the sovereign Lord into Jesus Christ's body, and teach us to carry steadfastly our neighbors' burdens (Romans 8:14-17 and 10:14-17, Galatians 6:1-3). The Bible is a Holy Spirit-packed script to be spoken which works faith in people's hearts and generates human life in community, a community of people who thankfully congregate to search the Scriptures together for wisdom to be obedient to God in whatever they are gifted to do on earth (II Timothy 3:16-17, Proverbs 1:1-7, Romans 12:3-9, I Corinthians 12, Acts 17:10-12).

The historic European Reformation of the 1500s asked Bible readers to meet the text fresh. Luther and Calvin were three-language people, Greek and Hebrew as well as Latin. Augustine and Aquinas did not know the original biblical languages! So Luther and Calvin purposefully got to the sources behind the Vulgate translation of the Bible in use. Luther's moving letter thanking his professor John Staupitz (30 May 1518) exclaims Luther's joy when he found out that *poenitentia agere* for *metanoite* in Matthew 4:17 meant not to do the penances stipulated by the clergy but to become

penitent in your heart, repentant: *metanoieite* that Jesus preached asked for a fundamental turnaround, a change of heart, a pivotal conversion in one's whole consciousness. Instead of a bitter word, writes Luther, *poenitentia* now became the sweetest word of the Bible.

That scholarly discovery in the Bible sparked a new-old idea of "church." Church is not the clergy, the administrative clerics, or the popes in charge because they are the only one single, true apostolic authority succeeding from Simon Peter. The "church" is the communion of ordinary, sinful saints who have repented! It is faithful people (*ho laos*, the laity) of God, the believers sealed in the baptism of Jesus Christ and stamped, anointed by the Holy Spirit, ordained to live out and mediate the gospel to others. That's a Reformation conception of the church as the body of Christ at large.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) in Question and Answer #32 explains what it means to be a Christian without even mentioning the (at the time often misconceived) word "church."

Why are you called a Christian?

Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing.

I am anointed to confess his name,

to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks,

to strive with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life,

and afterward to reign with Christ

over all creation for all eternity.

Another key contribution of the 1500s Reformation is John Calvin's metaphorical linkage of the Bible and human knowledge of God's world. Scripture states clearly that creation and creatures reveal God who made them (Psalm 19:2- 5, Isaiah 28:23-29, Acts 14:17, Romans 1:18-25), but it takes human eyes with Scriptural vision to find the traces of the Lord God's merciful order we are to follow in cultivating God's world in our generation and in dealing with one another in society.

The Bible, says Calvin (1559), is a special gift from the Lord, like a pair of eyeglasses, spectacles, that help un-confuse and bring into correct focus our coming to know the saving Creator of the universe (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I,6,1).¹ The Belgic Confession of the Reformation, authored by Guido de Brés (1561-1566), reinforces Calvin's point when it says (article 2a) that creation is like a lovely book in which all creatures are letters to make us ponder God's powerful, provident governance, and that the Bible, all of whose matters we believe without a doubt

because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God (article 5), makes God known to us more openly than creational revelation does, with its intimations of the Lord's glory and the riches of our salvation (article 2b).

The Reformation leaders understood the point Psalm 119 makes about God's law (*torah*), ordinances (*hoqqim*), Word (*dabar*), commands (*piqqud*), and judgments (*mishphat*) of creational mercy to be retold, celebrated, and illuminated by the Scriptures: the Bible gives followers of the Christ the wherewithal to interpret intelligibly the *glossolalia* of the creatural voices (Seerveld 2000a: 159-163; 2000b: 46-48). No wonder the Reformation leaders enjoined the princes and magistrates to educate school children, also girls (1528 in Wittenburg), because the whole world is declaring the wonder of God, and if education be Scripturally directed we will be able to discern God's will not only for doctrines, but also for living in marriage, charging or avoiding interest in commercial life, formulating just protocols for civic life, and establishing regulations for treating the sick and helplessly weak. The Reformation of the 1500s stands for sustained, on-going, intelligent redemptive work in God's world at large under the searchlight of the Bible, perceiving what disobeys the Lord, too, expecting the landowner's return to review our trusteeship (Matthew 21:33-43 and 25:14- 46).

And now here is the crux of this point on the Bible for teaching: assuming that the Bible serves as 20-20 eyeglasses, lenses (van der Walt), or a focusing searchlight, then if you just stare at the glasses or the source of light, you will miss its enlightening purpose. How does one put on the armor of the view-finding, penetrating Word of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) without just coming to look bespectacled?

Christians who are dedicated professionally to serving students need, I believe, to become thoroughly at home in the Bible, honoring its historical, literary, and proclamational nature. We need to become familiar with its names, the times and places that locate concretely the true story running from Genesis to the Apocalypse of John so that, like a lover, we will know its nuanced crevices of comforting promises and fulfillments and warnings inside out. For example, by immersion one comes to understand how Genesis 50:20 connects with the *toledoth* of Genesis 2:4 to unite the diverse episodes of the whole book into a brilliant symphony of the Lord God's compassionate care for our difficult, bumbling, believing forebears, and for us, through vicissitudes of war and peace; how Exodus 20, Leviticus 19, and Deuteronomy 5-9 are not criminal statutes to club us into submission, but embraces

by God to keep us out of harm's way and to norm our thankfulness; how Psalms 1 and 2 identify the keynote chord of wisdom and messy Messianic politics as the sound that reverberates through both the laments and the praise of the whole collection of songs; how the accent in the book of Esther to the key verse in 4:14 is not "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" making Esther a heroine, so much as Mordecai's message, "If you keep silent now, deliverance for God's people will come from some other quarter!"

That is, to be a teacher in the tradition of the Reformation—Luther translated the whole Bible into German; Calvin persisted until he produced a complete Psalter into singable French so that the illiterate people could themselves voice God's Word—you become steeped in the God-speaking literature the Bible is. So the Bible is not a source book of proof texts, but a network of connected passages coloring the Lord in a rainbow of awful glories. (That's why I think we should not neglect the habit of singing a whole psalm, which better honors the gritty complexity of the Bible than do many a repetitive Bible chorus quoting a few words.) If you are sensitive to the unfinished, enthymemic style of Mark next to the airbrushed complete gospel of John, and if you can appreciate how Matthew's account is attuned to Jewish traditionalism and catch the poignant, observed detail of Luke's gospel, you are not tempted to waste time to rationalize so-called inconsistent details in the synoptic gospels but to revel in the multifarious God-breathed truth disclosed about Jesus Christ's passionate healing ministry, resurrection, and ascension that fulfill, among others, Isaiah's striking prophecies (Isaiah 54-62). And once the book to the Hebrews grips your soul, veritably a *midrash* on Psalm 95, you get a palpable sense of the intricate mesh of the Older and Newer Testaments as God's one compelling Word to us from the Lord revealed in Jesus Christ who is the source of grace, mercy, and peace for us who have faith in the time when we need rescue (Hebrews 3-4).

Teaching is an occupation in which one often needs rescue, and where a chief hazard is death by millstone for misleading a little one of the next generation (Luke 17:1-4, James 3:1). To have our teaching consciousness shaped by faithful intimacy with the Scriptures (good exegetical pastoral preaching helps, reading the Bible at home in storytelling fashion to the children helps); to know conversationally the Bible's very idiom (if not its languages), so that one has been outfitted with a biblical *mentalité*, and so that the Bible provides the *a priori* for searching the world we live in rather than letting the present culture set the standards and force us to take up a

defensive posture; and to make work of having the Bible so ingrained in our habit of thinking, speaking, and getting things done: all of these make one a good heir, in my judgment, of the Reformational praxis of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Christian Historiography and Philosophy in College Scholarship

My second and main point is more contentious. In Abraham Kuyper's day (1837-1920) in the Netherlands, a Reformed Christian school was known as *de school met de Bijbel* (the school with the Bible). But how does the Bible operate in the actual schooling—in our setting in college education, where one has many different fields of study? The Gideons, so to speak, have virtually put a Bible in the chemistry lab, in the Black Box theatre, and on the basketball court, but who is academic boss at a Christian college? My Reformational answer is this: there is no papal discipline in a Reformed college curriculum (Matthew 20:20-28).

Diagram 1 (Seerveld 2000b: 153) pictures what I should like to present as a Reformational look at the problem of relating Christian philosophy and historiography, Christian theology, and Christian teaching in any academic discipline. I will single out theology and aesthetics in my limited time because theology is especially where the rub comes for certain Reformed people and aesthetics is my field of special attention.

Note that I am not delineating what should go on at a Bible College, which has its own restricted legitimacy, to study just the Bible, plus some church music perhaps, and training in leading church youth groups. A Bible College is basically a professional school that is oriented toward practicing an honorable profession, turning out graduates who are practitioners like church workers, executive secretaries, registered nurses, and certified teachers. Also, I am not concerned here with what a seminary should be, which is also professional training to produce for churches pastors who are grounded in the Scriptures, able to preach the gospel, knowledgeable of church history, and committed to edifying the faithful and to reach out to any unbelieving neighbors. The seminary undertakes this training within the definite limits of a specific confessional stand, whether it be Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Anabaptist, United Christian or, for that matter, Judaic or Muslim. Seminaries are a proper source for preachers, pastors, and evangelists, even though in Reformed churches they rightly do not have a monopoly on church congregational leadership: witness ruling elders and deacons who are not usually seminary trained.

It would be a mistake, in my judgment, to think that a Christian college should be a Bible college or a denominational seminary. There can be historical connections and should be on-going supportive relations between church, church seminaries, and Christian colleges, yet their tasks are different, as different as the tasks of a church Sunday school or catechism and a regular five-day-a-week school that teaches reading, writing, arithmetic, American literature, history, and various sciences.

So precisely how does the Bible operate in carrying out the task of this kind of Christian college? As I indicated in my first point, it is the calling of every believer in the Reformation tradition to become intimate with the Bible as God-speaking literature with its true story of the Lord creating the whole world, of our historical fall into sin, and of Jesus Christ's making redemption graciously available for those who respond by faith to discipleship as they live in love, sorrow, and hope for the completion of Christ's kingdom Rule a-coming (the underground roots in *Diagram 1*). In other words, become so intimately at home with that Reformation take on the Older and Newer Testament gospel that one's consciousness subconsciously(!) assumes that heart-depth commitment in one's way-of-life and finds it shaping one's world-and-life vision of things. This kind of intimacy corresponds, I think, with Syd Hielema's focus on wisdom as the lynchpin for relating God revealed in Jesus Christ, God revealed in the Scriptures, and God revealed in creation (Hielema 153-155): as the Holy Spirited Scriptures convict you of the Lord's compassionate redemptive hold on the heart of your very life and all things, you begin to bud in wisdom (Proverbs 1:7, 15:33).

Such an outlook and demeanor, in the variant peculiar to the Reformation strand of the Christian faith, has been described as having *Gereformeerde voelhorens* (extra-strength Reformational antennae); that is, such people are like snails whose quivering antennae can detect what is subliminal, they smell it when a deed, word, or thought is wholesome, unbiblical, or off-color with what is true to the Reformation brand of the Christian faith. That's the antennae that uneducated Reformed people who lived close to the Scriptures had—I know from experience—before television entered their homes.

This is the way, as I understand it, the Bible enters a Christian college that takes its cue from the Reformation: faculty members have *Gereformeerde voelhorens*, naturally at different stages of seasoned maturity. These faculty seek for and work toward that Bible-rooted, subterranean consensus *fidelium Reformatorem* (an underlying consensus of faithful Reformation-oriented saints). As they begin to

blossom in wisdom, these faculty distinguish their Christian college as a “Reformed” community from a Thomist Christian college, a Shi’ite Muslim company of *mullahs* in a *madrassa*, or an American secular state undergraduate college with individual professors resting mostly on a bed of trust in scientific Reason.

Many evangelical Christian colleges are content, I think, to rest the communality of their academic endeavor at the basic level of patterns of life that are moral and church-going, perhaps with a few taboos against drinking wine or wearing jewelry. Reformed Christian colleges may add the dimension that faculty must subscribe to certain churchly confessional “forms of unity” or belong to a certain church denomination so it is clear that you support infant baptism as a promise of God’s covenant with believers or a common statement of world-and-life-envisioning purpose. Such subscriptions try to ensure not uniformity but at least enough conformity to the particular common objective of this Christian college that concord will result—a harmony among diverse teaching faculty, administrators, and the over-all assistant staff so important to the feel of a college.

A Reformational perspective would ask the following: since college education like all human culturing happens communally, can we follow through on the unity we have in Christ—past a holy daily way of life and a world-and-life-vision that we cultivate in God’s world for Christ’s sake—into the very fabric of our vocation, namely considered reflection on what, how, and why things mean what they do, on what has taken place, and on what should be done? Such follow-through would mean for Christian academics of the Reformation that they also find a studied way to interact across disciplines and to correlate awareness of the historical developments behind the state of each one’s art or science as it now is so that we really act like a genuine thinking-imagining-talking-together community of scholarly teachers.

If you have ever listened to an argument between, let’s say, a vigorous Roman Catholic and a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist on the topic of “knowledge,” or tried yourself to communicate with someone across faith-thought paradigms on something important, like “normativity,” you know how difficult, if not exasperating, it can be. Well, it takes almost as much patience, ingenuity, and good will to share knowledge across disciplinary lines in the different fields we specialize in. Can people who talk and dream isotopes and those for whom the wrench of a ninth chord speaks volumes understand one another’s passion? Can those who know the crucial difference between certain herbicides and pesticides and those for whom the optative mood of a

verb is critical catch each other's spark? And everyone would be immeasurably more united as teachers if all grasped that 1848 and 1968 like 11 September 2001 are not just chronological dates, culturally speaking—at least if the college faculty is a working reflective community in their teaching the student body together.

Our resident American individualism militates against taking the time and making the effort to go this wise second mile to mesh our diverse, often professionally technical examinations of reality. Does one with a Ph.D. still need to continue to be educated outside one's disciplinary specialty? Busy faculty can easily rest with a college unified by chapel exercises, a wholesome Christian ethos on campus, and a curriculum that allocates required courses fairly and spells out major and minor concentrations for sound graduation. Also, not every Christian college for whom a faculty unified in its teaching perspective and practice is important is aware of or feels kindly toward a conceptual framework and a position taken on historical development that comes out of the Reformation, a framework that is specially geared to facilitate such encyclopedic interaction of the various disciplines along with a critical eye for what is fruitful and wasteful in the development of societal human culture through the ages.

Already Augustine in *De civitate Dei* (413-426 AD) sketched horizons in which the historical struggle between the woman with child (*civitas Dei*) and the dragons of John's Apocalypse (*civitates mundi*) is seen as the only genuine war on earth. Groen van Prinsterer's *Ongeloof en revolutie* (1847) updated Augustine's vision to contrast on the one hand the sanity of faithful, constructive institution-building for humankind that honored God with on the other hand the cataclysmic violence of the French Revolution in the name of the deity of Reason. And then D. H. Th. Vollenhoven's (1892-1978) method of historiography refined the same Scripturally-directed approach to history by showing how all human leaders were caught in epoch-forming dynamics and enhanced or ruined their particular inheritance from out of a typical perspective usually a-kilter to God's directives for normal creatural life. So there is in embryo a particular historiographic position focused on history-keeping (cf. Seerveld 1991) that is generated by a Reformational Christian approach.

Moreover, a systematic philosophical conception is prompted by John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ([1536], 1559) on the Lord God's amazing sovereignty ordering all creatures and societal institutions when Calvin drops the remark that the office of municipal judge is a highest human calling for a responsible

follower of Christ to prepare for (IV,20,1-7). Abraham Kuyper's *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring* (1880) and attendant political, educational, and journalist leadership presented a theory of societal institutions that showed how school and government, commerce and media, as well as home and ecclesiastic communions, could serve as redemptive vehicles of God's grace. And then Herman Dooyeweerd in *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* followed up Calvin's lead² and Kuyper's societology by sketching a philosophical cosmology and a refined analysis of societal structures that simply begs to be worked out by succeeding generations of scholars who specialize in various fields of study, to think-imagine-talk things through professionally in concert as our "reasonable service" to bring insight.

So it would be natural, it seems to me, for a Christian college grateful for its debt to the Reformation for an operative (albeit fallible) Christian philosophical systematics and an (unfinished) redemptive historiographic method to parlay that legacy into the blessing of strengthening and unifying a faculty member's sense of being part of and knowing how to contribute to a genuine communion of wise Christian academic work and teaching. I do not mean that there is a ready-made Christian philosophy and method of historiographic narrative all set, and that once we learn the jargon, presto! we solve all our theoretical problems, and teach, talk, and think happily ever after. No, but if a Christian college makes earnest with the thrust of the Reformation that we faculty members of the body of Christ are to wash each other's educational feet with the conceptual, imaginative, verbal, and enabling gifts we have at our disposal (Seerveld 1980b: 142-145), and if there is a philosophical systematics deepening a Reformed world-and-life-vision that can help a college teacher test the basic categories one uses in one's field, points one toward intersecting cruxes of meaning for several disciplines, provides a precise vocabulary to export the results of one's special studies out of the strength of being one voice within a whole reflective communal chorus of teaching saints, then imagine what such a cross-disciplinary, resonating message from different classrooms will make upon students!

I can't say everything needful on my second point, but I can say enough to get into trouble and to suggest perhaps why the Reformational strategy for Christian philosophical and historiographic mediation within and between and among what we as faculty teach is worth consideration.

Every discipline has a history, and every art and science sets limits to its task and draws implications from its practice. Such prolegomenal and postlegomenal

decisions as well as “legomenal” narration are philosophical by nature, I dare say. This is because they are decisions on inter-relational meaning that, in the province of theory and reflection, are meta-disciplinary, are setting categorical foundations and parameters that determine the over-all contours of what gets conceived in that universe of discourse, and recognize whether that discourse’s results are blessed and cursed with neighboring matters both before, presently, and a-coming, or are considered only abstractly by themselves.

Now I may think that Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, S. U. Zuidema, J. P. A. Mekkes, M. C. Smit and K. J. Popma, Johan van der Hoeven, Bob Goudzwaard, Sander Griffioen, and a host of other witnesses are good, professional academic janitors who give precise, nuanced Christian wisdom on inter-faculty matters and do not just leave connections over-viewy (as Ezra Pound would say). But no tribunal from the Free University of Amsterdam provides your answers. The needed philosophical and historiographic decisions have to be wormed out of the teacher who thoroughly knows the special field of study. And a faculty member can basically accept and maybe quibble with the ruling secular paradigm current in one’s field (or the pattern of two generations ago, as, Heine joked, most Dutch writers and thinkers always did), try something idiosyncratic—do it your own Sinatra way, or tap into a Reformational philosophical and historiographic habit, trying it on for size. But faculty members as scholars and teachers are willy-nilly loaded, better yet primed philosophically and historiographically, despite any disclaimers.

Reformed Theology and Reformational Theology

For example, Reformed theology epistemized by Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* adopts six traditional loci: (1) the Being of God, (2) Man, (3) the God-man Jesus Christ, (4) Redemption, (5) Church, (6) Last things. Without apology Berkhof begins by saying, “Reformed theology regards the existence of God as an entirely reasonable assumption” (21), even though one cannot demonstrate it by argumentation.³ John Cooper (Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids, 1993) states that “Standard Reformed theology ... affirms a universally available standard for knowledge, truth, and moral order” (21). He adds, “In affirming general revelation and common grace, the Calvinist tradition points to the existence and cognitive availability of the God-revealing cosmic order as the universal framework of meaning

and condition of truth.... Guided by its theology, Reformed epistemology articulates what I would call a fideistic perspectival rational realism” (22).

Karl Barth, however, was so adamantly opposed to taking over even a smidgen of the Enlightenment assumption that sound, scientific (*wissenschaftliche*) knowledge must be religiously neutral in its reasoning that Barth conceived dogmatic theology to be simply *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932-1967), a churchly re-description of the church’s confession of what God’s Word says about (1) God’s Word, (2) God, (3) Creation, (4) *Versöhnung* (Reconciliation through Jesus Christ’s action), and (5) *Erlosung* (salvation, deliverance), which last section Barth did not live to write. Barth denies having any “philosophical” orientation to his church dogmatics: he claimed no theology but God’s Word (like “no creed but Christ”). And for Barth the Trinity and the incarnation of Jesus Christ, a divine human, are not subject to the logic of non-contradictory reasonableness, but are nevertheless simply realities.

In contrast to both Berkhof/Cooper and Barth, Gordon Spykman’s *Reformational Theology: A new paradigm for doing dogmatics* (1992) says “theology and philosophy form a partnership in the sense that the best prolegomena to Christian theology, more specifically to Reformed dogmatics, is a Christian philosophy” (13,107; cf. Bartholomew 33-35). Spykman argues that “Dogmatics is too important to be left to theologians who are unclear about their philosophical underpinnings” (97). The upshot of Spykman’s Christian philosophical orientation is that he adopts a confessional focus in theology that takes dogma (confession officially declared binding by an ecclesial assembly) most seriously as breathing in concentrated form what a certain company of faithful followers of the Christ assert they believe (103-107,110). Then in a Christian dogmatic theology we will examine the Holy Scriptures as to their interconnected beliefs, and the historical development of the human race in the formation of the earlier elected Israel and confessing church, its nature, place and task in fidelity and apostacy, relatively distinct from all other societal institutions as a caretaker of the faithful which God provided, Christ set up, and the Holy Spirit preserves to the end of the present age. Spykman then organizes Reformational dogmatic theology along the historical-redemptive lines of the Apostle’s creed, braided with a (*perichoretic*) trinitarian awareness (135-137), into (1) the good creation, (2) sin and evil, (3) the Way of salvation, (4) the consummation.

Attractive to me about Spykman’s Reformational dogmatic theology is its systematic thetical sureness on Calvinian tenets explicated with a conversational

tone,⁴ rather than its assuming an argumentative posture where the round creedal warmth of Reformed doctrines gets pared by Occam's razor back to the bone of "propositions," whose fixed "truth-value" can be cold-bloodedly debated in a universal logical framework and constitute the indubitable test for what is essentially Reformed orthodoxy or heresy.⁵

I think that a difference I detect between "standard Reformed theology" and "Reformational dogmatic theology" is that "standard Reformed theology" seems to appear with almost *ex cathedra* finality and authority to "lead" philosophical discussion with logical certainty, while the Reformational formulation of doctrines breathes a spirit of supple, trusting certainty in offering to serve other fields of inquiry with its important limited contribution of constructing *regulae fide* (guidelines for expressing obedient faith). That difference depends upon the underlay of a general theistic "rational realism" for "Reformed" theology, and having "a biblically induced Christian philosophy" underneath "Reformational" theology.

And it may be important in a Christian college to not let Reformed theology (or a Christian philosophy!) slip into taking the role of being "the faith once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3). Not only functional creedal testimonies but especially the systematized theological reflection on what we (churchly) confess are structurally different from, though connected to, the fundamental matter the Bible calls faith (*pistis*), which is that existential attachment of us with certain trust at being fixed in the true God (or heart-committed to an idol) by the gift of regenerating grace in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9).⁶ What keeps a Christian college alive in the Reformation biblical faith-thought tradition, I believe, is whether the spirit at work in the Scripturally-led philosophy, theology, history-telling, and scholarly contours of all the teaching disciplines be earthly redemptive and interdisciplinarily diaconal in bearing fruit worthy of repentance (*poenitentia*) (I John 4:1, Romans 12-14, I Corinthians 12).⁷

*Theology of art and a
Christian philosophical aesthetic*

One other example of the difference between on one hand a Christian college and Christian scholarship that have a Reformational Christian philosophy and historiography as their cohering disciplines and on the other hand the many evangelical Christian colleges that have theological study as the discipline which

certifies its Christian cachet is the frustrating conundrum, for me, of the tack taken by a “theology of the arts” instead of “a Christian philosophical aesthetics.”

When “theology” is uncritically taken to mean Christian theology (as if Jews and Muslims have no theology), and Christian theology is loosely taken to mean “faith in Jesus Christ” (as if secular Rationalists have no *bonafide* faith in Reason), so that theological reflection is undistinguished from the Holy Spirit’s existential grip on our hearts; and further, when the congregated church and its institutional task to nourish us humans as believing followers of Jesus Christ is confused with the kingdom Rule of God in history and the body of Jesus Christ at large who are not simply clerics or parishioners but servants of the Lord fulfilling multiple tasks in God’s world, then it becomes quite a jumble to untangle, from a Reformational standpoint, so that one can try to appreciate these fellow Christian attempts to give artistry a place and task in God’s world, yet be troubled by what seems to be askew.

It is a mistaken project, in my judgment, to perform and analyze music, for example, to illustrate the (trinitarian) nature of God. Rather than give folk music, symphonic orchestral music, or improvisatory jazz its due as a glorious creatural gift from God for us humans in which either to laugh and weep redemptively and thankfully or to be stolen as an idolatrous escape from the Lord, music in such cases is misconceived as *ancilla theologiae*. Music becomes read and heard allegorically and used apologetically or evangelistically (Begbie 19-20,125-127): “we should let music do some of the theological work for us” (198). Jeremy Begbie goes this route—“theology through the arts”—because underneath his approach is a philosophical position of *analogia entis* which holds “that creaturely reality participates in the rationality of God” (276; 255, 278).⁸ That’s a problem. I respect Dr. Begbie and his ministry very much, but cannot share his adopted metaphysics that, though time-honored, has transgressed ontologically, it seems to me, the human artist’s creaturely status and has traditionally bound art to a sacred servitude.

The idea that “faith” is always Christian faith⁹ and that *fides quaerens intellectum* is properly and singularly “theological” activity inevitably twists theorists of physics, political science, economics, as well as aesthetics, into contortions to be theologians if we would subject our theoretical analyses through faith into “Christian” service for God and neighbor. This point is more than hassling about a term like “theology.” Such a theologistic straight-jacket is harmful, I think, because it is often bound up with the old idea that art, for example, can perform a kind of secular sacramental

service: as though by its great beauty art could raise us up beyond the mundane world and give us a sense of transcendence, a taste of “religious life” (Brown 55,58-61; cf. Seerveld 1980b: 121-125).

Again, such a deep-going, concerted attempt to enlist artistry for the “Christian life” is laudable, but its semi-mystical bent overrates artists as prophets, and mis-prizes, as I see it, ordinary aesthetic activity that can enrich human life but does not occasion epiphanies of illuminating glory. The philosophical Monarchian Aristotelian framework behind such a theological aesthetics is exemplified by Gerardus van der Leeuw in his book *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The holy in art*, and was in full force at the University of Chicago Divinity School in the 1960s under the leadership of Nathan A. Scott, Jr.¹⁰ Its “incarnational theology of art” is commending itself to educated evangelical Christians nowadays who are taking more kindly to Anglican ritual or Eastern Orthodox Christian reliance on icons as an entrée to “spiritual experience.”

My own theoretical aesthetics, conceived in the womb of a Reformational Christian philosophical systematics, tries to honor aesthetic life as an imaginative moment integral to our whole corporeal human existence. As a facet of God’s good creation, aesthetic activity is to be received and exercised with holy joy inside one’s speaking, thinking, feeling, voting, money-spending, and prayer life. Regarding art itself, in its many-splendored varieties, encapsulations, and functions, it is important to remember that since the crux of the aesthetic is allusivity and nuancefulness, normative art might not be beautiful but could be puzzling, tragic, even ugly, so long as the oblique artistic presentation of meaning keeps an imaginative symbolic quality defining its result or event. My appreciation of the aesthetically grotesque is a significant difference from the usual “theology of beauty” that has been for centuries a dominant traditional blight on understanding art. And to upgrade the dimension of aesthetics that bridges theory with praxis, claiming that hermeneutics lies in the province of aesthetics could really startle theologians. If colleges and seminaries where theology is taught would understand that biblical hermeneutics needs to consider that reading the biblical text assumes you know how to read literature and artistic texts with *Gereformeerde voelhorens* sharpened by an aesthetics of nuance, such trained theologians might write different kinds of sermons.

This sketchy outline of a Reformational Christian theory of aesthetics I once called a “doxological aesthetics,” because its whole thrust is to praise the Lord and to

glory thankfully in the gift of imaginative knowledge of nuances in the world. My colleague Adrienne Dengerink-Chaplin designates such a philosophical aesthetics most insightfully a “creational aesthetics.” That’s a defining mark of the biblically Reformational Christian philosophical stance: take creation seriously as God’s revelation which, despite the perversions we sinners bring into history, is still God’s world and is to be studied by us in the light of Scriptural revelation as a communion of saints redeemed by Jesus Christ (Seerveld 2000b: 206-208).

Higher Education: Apprenticeship in Holy Scholarship

I’ll be very brief here on my third and last point: What good is a college education? My Reformational answer to both a teacher and student is, take time to be a holy scholar.

By “scholar” I don’t mean you have to cite at least two dozen chemical abstracts in your brief report, or add footnotes to your next short story, or get a major concentration in philosophy. To be a scholar means to be schooled in studying something, disciplined, thoughtfully thorough in coming to know what you are doing or are discovering. “Higher education” at college is a special opportunity for a younger generation to taste and for an older generation to show-and-tell scholarship together, to be engrossed with the musical capability of the human voice, the intricate biosphere and genetic code of weeds, or the relative power of images and words for convincing people what is important or true. During your time in higher education, some reality of God’s world fascinates you, and now you have the opening to spend time in probing, examining, researching, practicing, and testing your growing understanding of whatever this wonder be in all its marvelous interconnected richness until you gain the beginnings, as Dordt’s *Educational Task* document states (11), of “serviceable insight.”

“Higher education” is substantially different from “elementary” and “secondary” schooling, I think, because pupils have made a discretionary choice (presumably) to become, for a time, students, to listen to and watch scholar-professors—professional students—report their researched “serviceable insights,” and to be led as newcomers into catching the joy of the scholarly endeavor and giving away its fruits. Scholarly research is not always cut from the same cloth but is appropriate to the subject matter. Biologist Harry Cook (The King’s College, Edmonton) investigated (for years!) under microscopic laboratory conditions the pituitary gland of the snail in order to section

an organism and analyze the nature of biotic growth. An art historian may need the grace to sift through countless dusty, unused books and print archives in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris to get the key to unlock the meaning of Watteau's subtle artwork so that people today might second-think the crass boy-meets-girl in back car seat or disco scene. When James Schaap spends weeks alone in a pup tent amid the endless waste grasses of the Dakota badlands in order to recreate the setting of his next work, or when Hugh Cook (Redeemer College, Ancaster) has a two-hour coffee session every week with a retired head cop in Ontario because there is probably going to be a crime in his next novel, all that is research to produce stories that give you pause and nuggets of wisdom.

College is the time of your life to be an apprentice scholar, even if you do not want to be a scholar for life. And for us who teach in post-secondary education, I think it is vitally Christian to convey the assurance that study time offers its own peculiar service to God and neighbor. Students should not be hurried, must not have to be in a pell-mell hurry to get a job to make money. That is the hypnotic, crooked idea of time that American culture breathes—time means money. No! according to the Bible, time is a gift of God to be redeemed (Ephesians 5:15-20; van der Hoeven, 65).

Consecrated studious thinking, imagining, speaking, writing, and reading is doing something and doing something as important as a pregnancy: preparing with “serviceable insight” for the birth of “insightful service.” Christian college time is seedtime; the harvest comes later. In this amazing academic crucible we know as an institution of “higher learning,” mentor and novice have the busy, tiring “leisure” to build up a treasury of knowledge and understanding that will stand them in good stead when the lean years and the hard times come. Academic time allows teacher and student to meander around topics, to explore following their noses, to chew and gnaw on books, to delve into backwater eddies of history that deserve to flow fresh in our stream of consciousness, to experiment in essay and lab and make mistakes that become “holy” mistakes when the overview the mentor provides gives the student encouraging, forgiving, redemptive guidelines in which to “do it again.”

It's a good thing that Moses, after his Egyptian training, could spend 40 years in the grazing land of Midian tending sheep before he had to tend twelve huge tribes of petulant people. Only four years at Dordt tending virtual problems is fairly short by comparison; so we should cherish this Christian college time of planting and watering

good seed, the precious gestation time for setting policies on counseling neuroses or for correcting miscarriages of justice before we have to do it in the press of actual emotional breakdowns and violent cases of racial injustice. During this seeding time, Christian profs make the best manure.

I consider the emphasis on taking one's time to study to be Reformational: Luther and Calvin were scholars before they were public leaders, and, I suppose, my own European educational experience emphasized history-keeping and learning several languages more than American education does. So I am wary of the turn in Wolterstorff, seconded by Fernhout, to promote "more praxis-oriented scholarship" (Wolterstorff 56; Fernhout 115-116 n.8). What strikes me as unwise is the pragmatist American narrowing down of higher education to pre-professional training to make education more attuned to political and business projects, plus a determination to emphasize "the primacy of experiential knowing-in-relation" (Fernhout 125) rather than to stress the abiding central role of books for Christian learning by maturing students.

Christian educators today certainly need a sharper awareness of non-Western world cultures, and of the fact that technology is moving us into a post-literate society, as well as a concern that genuine "justice" and "keeping promises" (Micah 6:8) be foregrounded in our Christian learning. But those concerns should not be addressed in a way that jeopardizes the norm that academic learning is to be one step removed from the streets.¹¹ *Credo* it is better to fight battles for the Lord in the library, where the ammunition is also live, as a soldier of Jesus Christ still being outfitted with holy armor (Ephesians 6:10-20), before you engage an enemy in unmediated combat and be tempted to use unsanctified weapons and fight fire with fire.

Conclusion

Everything I have presented here is in accord, I think, with what I know about Dordt College and find in its *Educational Task* and *Educational Framework* documents, albeit tweaked a little differently. My hope is not that you move "beyond" forging "serviceable insight" (Fernhout 125), but that you deepen its Reformational integrality, to use Robert Sweetman's good term (14-16). Moreover, do this deepening work with your own particular historical strengths that have accrued from a decided, fruitful working use of the biblically Reformational Christian philosophy for

orientation,¹² which I would prefer to call “a philosophy of God’s structuring Word.”¹³

One must not allow either the Reformational Christian philosophy (or the Reformed theology) jargon ever to become mouthed shibboleths denoting kosher faculty. Instead, these should offer faculty winsome servants and pregnant ideas that do make a difference in conceiving and teaching a field of study, and that will contribute to everyone’s joining in to be members of the lived communality as Christ's body of teachers. Only Jesus Christ deserves disciples, not Luther and John Calvin. But repossessing a faith-thought tradition once it has gone missing is almost futile. So I pray that you Dordt faculty keep the tradition of the Reformation alive, not let it become past tense. I pray that you live the faith brokered philosophically and historiographically in your disciplined field of study, teaching congenially together by re-minting and ramifying, in the Reformational way, God-honoring “serviceable insights.”

Endnotes

1. *...nempe sicuti senes, vel lippi, & quicunque oculis caligant...specillis autem interpositis adjuti, distincte legere incipient: ita Scriptura confusam alioqui Dei notitiam in mentibus nostris colligens, discussa caligine liquido nobis verum Deum ostendit.* (“Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision ... with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God”--Ford Lewis Battles translation.)

2. “Why a radical Christian philosophy can only develop in the line of Calvin's religious starting-point,” Herman Dooyeweerd in *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*, 3 volumes (1935-36), translated David Freeman and William Young, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1953), 1:515-527.

3. Berkhof almost sounds like Anselm in the *Proslogium* on *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest* (c.2): since God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, God must exist. Cf. Spykman 135.

4. G. Berkouwer's multiple volumes of *Dogmatische Studien* (1949-1972) which deftly explicate major Reformed doctrines amid many other positions current is very valuable, but the series seems to me to be episodic, missing a linking systematic character.

5. Mike Vanden Bosch notes the difficult role this conception of the Bible as a source book of propositions to be believed played in the troubled struggle of being "Reformed" at Dordt College during the 1968-1974 period (146-148). My own approach would be, “It makes all the difference in the world whether you take a person to be a living soul who could be x-rayed to discern the skeleton, or treat him like a skeleton with certain other accoutrements. It makes all the difference in the world whether you take Scripture as God-speaking literature narrating a true story, which can be x-rayed to

get at the doctrinal skeleton, or treat it like a book of dogmatic propositions with certain other interesting features” (1980b: 94).

6. K. J. Popma's treatment of *De taak der theologie* (1946) explained the danger of treating confessional matters like the creeds of a church communion as if they needed to be theologized. For Popma theology is specialized theoretical analysis of the (pre-theoretical) faith-functioning side of human life, how people believingly understand God's word (especially 64-71); but, Popma says, theology must not usurp the authority of primary faith and confessional life.

John Vander Stelt is wrestling too with the double meaning of *pistis/geloven*: (1) “the gracious gift of faith, which cannot be studied in theology” (1981:131,128) and (2) conscious acts of confessing the faith worked in one's heart, which surely can be carefully scrutinized and ordered.

It would be very good for someone to delineate the family of terms used loosely with resulting confusion: saving faith, faith-commitment, the function of ultimate trust, confession of one's underlying faith, church creeds, doctrines, dogmas, biblical hermeneutics, academic dogmatic theology, catechism....

7. “...a sense of organic coherence is of the essence for Reformed higher education, just as it is for a society that Christians would call good” (Bratt 1993: 38).

8. Al Wolter's inaugural address at Redeemer College gives a telling correction to the usual translation of II Peter 1:4, in “Partners of the Deity: A covenantal reading of II Peter 1:4,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 25 (1990): 28-44.

9. The Robert Sweetman and George Maarsden 2001 exchange in *Perspectives* shows that the sleepy use of the term “faith” is very subtle and far-reaching.

10. The New Orpheus collection of essays edited by Nathan A. Scott, Jr. includes authors like Dorothy Sayers, Denis de Rougement, Allen Tate, William F. Lynch, S.J., Walter Ong, S.J., W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., Preston T. Roberts, Jr., Amos N. Wilder.

11. “Perhaps it would be fruitful to turn the tables, with elementary or secondary education serving as a model for post-secondary” (Fernhout, 125 n.19). Such a turnabout would run the danger, it seems to me, of being patronizing toward the older students, if “modeling” (so important to this conception of education) used to form primary school children would be taken as the model for forming teenagers and college students. A reason Ken Badley's book, *Worldviews: The Challenge of Choice* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1996), is so stimulating for high school students, I think, is that the book treats them more like college students who may have the need to jostle with others and try what is out of the ordinary to forge a mind of their own.

At this point I also am doubtful whether wisdom can be taught. Wisdom can only be caught, after a person comes to know and understand things.

12. I find chapters 9 and 10 of *The Memoirs of B.J. Haan* strikingly honest and historically relevant to this very day (153-191).

Lindbeck's comment applies here too: “...provided a religion stresses service rather than domination, it is likely to contribute more to the future of humanity if it preserves its own distinctiveness and integrity than if it yields to the homogenizing tendencies associated with liberal experiential-expressivism” (128).

13. Cf. "Dooyeweerd's legacy for aesthetics," in *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd: Reflections on critical philosophy in the Christian tradition*, ed. C.T. McIntire (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), p.62.

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