

Review Essay

The Calvinistic Ethic and the Spirit of Renewal in Some Recent Christian Scholarship

John C Vander Stelt ed The Challenge of Marxist and Neo-Marxist Ideologies for Christian Scholarship Dordt College Press, Sioux Center, Iowa 1982 ISBN 0-932914-07-1

Bob Goudzwaard Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1979 ISBN 0-8028-1809-9

The current situation in Christian thought is one of great turmoil. The power of various Christian traditions to shape the world of scholarship, as well as the push-me-pull-you of political, economic and ethical debate needs no documentation. The various branches of Christian phenomenology have made, and are still making, a considerable impact. The current incumbent of the Vatican throne, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, has also made his contribution. Analecta Husserliana, Volume X carries his contribution to the phenomenological anthropology. Osoba i Czyn (1969) has been translated into English as The Acting Person. Less known, but equally significant perhaps, is the Calvinistic phenomenology that has been developed in the Republic of South Africa. Like most things Calvinistic in that complex country, the actual contribution appears, at least from this distance, to be involved in profound ambiguities. On the one hand, the contribution of Hendrik Stoker and his theological and philosophical associates at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, appears in some accounts to be the philosophical co-architects of apartheid (see T Dunbar Moodie The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion 1975). On the other hand, the same Calvinistic camp of philosophers have been able to contribute to the thorough reconsideration of the roots of western culture and mount fundamental criticisms of the South African way of life, immanently, from within the laager (see the Koinonia Declaration; Johan van der Vyver Seven Lectures On Human Rights).

These South African Calvinists derive their distinctive position in part from a tradition of Dutch Calvinism which experienced a considerable revival in the 19th century. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), building on the work of the Dutch Evangelical statesman, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876), had fashioned a reformed "world-view" - *wereldsbeschouwing* - in which each of the "spheres" of social life (state, church, family, business, art, "community") was ascribed legitimate public sovereignty for its own area of competence. In this sense the distinction between public and private realms was relativized by reference to the different spheres of social life. The meaning of the distinction depends on the sphere under consideration. This differentiation is established in the Law of God which holds for the entire cosmos and is maintained by the Creator. This was not then simply an abstract and theoretical doctrine for prospective clergy to contemplate in their manses. Through van Prinsterer this viewpoint was enshrined in the modern parliamentary history of Holland, when Groen, opposing Thorbecke's liberal commitment to State education, argued that public education need not be equated with state-control of schooling. Under Kuyper this neo-Calvinistic "leit-motif" became "sovereiniteit in eigen kring" and the banner for a Calvinistic praxis the likes of which has never been experienced elsewhere in Europe or its off-shoots (see M P Fogarty Christian Democracy in Western Europe 1820-1953 London 1957 and R E M Irving The Christian Democratic Parties of Western Europe London 1978).

This Calvinistic development as a genuine public movement had to fight for its life in the

early decades of this century when scholasticism and pietism revved in the midst of the turmoil of European society. Holland had remained neutral during the Great War. Herman Dooyeweerd was one of the leading post-Kuyper generation of scholars at the Free University of Amsterdam. According to him, serious ambiguities were implicit in world inherited from van Prinsterer and Kuyper, not least because of a failure to systematically work out the basic idea in a thorough-going and consistent manner. "Community" had been included in the morphology of societal structures, placing it on the same level as church, state and family and thus this caused confusion. "Community" is actually a manifestation of societal intercourse in an inter-personal, inter-organisational and intra-organisational sense within an interweaving of societal structures and responsibilities, which gain their inherent meanings in their own spheres. Therefore, it would seem, that the neo-calvinistic world-view if left unreformed could lead in the direction of an approach to public life and politics which considered the interweaving of social structurations to be legitimately under the control of whatever group could gain the power and hold onto it. Dunbar Moodie (op cit) refers to the neo-Fichtean aspects of Afrikaner calvinistic philosophy and an examination of van Prinsterer's response to the thought of his time might highlight some very important aspects of the relationship not only between Dutch and South African neocalvinism, but also show why neo-calvinism is compromised when appeal is made to a "community" sphere to justify a public philosophy of apartheid. Sadly Dooyeweerd's critical examination of van Prinsterer's social thought was not included in the English version of Roots of Western Culture (1978).

From what I can understand of the issues, it seems as if some of the South African calvinists who followed Kuyper, Dooyeweerd et al indeed added "racial community" to their morphology of social spheres and hence provided a philosophical ground, if one was needed, for the advocates of separate development (see Dunbar Moodie pp. 66-67).

The two works listed for review in this article are important scholarly contributions in their own right, but also helpful to those scholars who would like to probe deeper into the calvinistic wereldsbeschouwing sired by Kuyper. Does modern-day calvinism have any insights which can, in the terms of Werner Pelz, lead to creative cross-illumination in the social and humanistic sciences?

The book edited by John C Vander Stelt is published as a calvinistic contribution to the debate about the significance of Marxism in the modern world. The Challenge of Marxist and Neo-Marxist Ideologies for Christian Scholarship is the collected proceedings of a conference sponsored by a consortium of Christian-reformed-evangelical institutions for higher education. Previous conferences had been held in Potchefstroom (1975) and Calvin College, Michigan (1978). What makes the Marxism volume absorbing reading is the wide range of background, interest and understanding of the various contributors, eleven in all, including one woman who presented an in-depth analysis of human freedom and social justice in Poland. All the authors are christian academics representative of a range of reformed-evangelical opinion. The eleven addresses are supplemented by a series of Appendices which among other things shows the intense political dimensions of such a small and such a widely dispersed organization. The christian position as outlined in the purpose and basis of the Governing Council's one which asserts a confessional independence for christian scholarship from all "-isms" within the framework of the Apostles' Creed. Both capitalism and apartheid are rejected as heresy. Conference statements on Poland (manifesting a calvinistic solidarity with that country's christians working for justice), South Africa (calling upon fellow christians in RSA to oppose apartheid and work for justice for all) and South America (a letter to President Reagan

calling upon him to halt the destabilizing and covert activities of the CIA in Guatemala and other South American countries) all contribute to a rather unique volume. These statements follow the now famous "Koinonia Declaration" in style and content.

But the meat of serious scholarship is not to be found in the Appendices. These are, at best, public statements which give support to the insight and depth of scholarship revealed in the rest of the book. Of course, it can be expected that some, if not many, of these contributors direct their analyses to an audience of christian fellow-travellers. The truly intriguing essays, in this reviewer's opinion, are those which have been written as scholarly contributions to the academic debate about Marxism and which presuppose a knowledge of current reflection in the scholarly "sphere".

There are eleven essays in this volume. They are of a mixed quality and different value. Together they manifest a real problem: they lack a common focus. It is true that the topic of marxism and neo-marxism recurs in each of the essays. But some are scholarly works, some are didactic treatises attempting to educate christians about the value and errors of marxist philosophy, some are theological-philosophical polemic seeking to revive christian life in the late 20th century, whilst others border on inspirational talks.

I would like to comment, briefly, upon some of the eleven essays. I have chosen those which, in my view, are not specifically directed by their authors to fellow christians as educational, interpretative or inspirational pieces. Rather I have decided to comment upon those contributions which have been formulated to "speak" to the scholarly world in general. The need for this kind of choice in a review such as this highlights, what is to me, one of the major failings of the volume. It includes scholarly essays, consciousness-raising appeals to the faithful to develop a christian praxis. Sometimes these two dimensions are inextricably mixed. As such it would be a difficult book to comprehensively review in a critical social science journal.

Sander Griffieon in his unashamed confessional introduction, the opening address at the conference, makes a similar point in remarks about any proposed calvinistic contribution to the challenges which face Euro-communism and the problematical leninist tendency within marxism.

I don't think Reformational (ie calvinistic BCW) philosophy is ready to face the challenge. Terms such as "sphere sovereignty" suggest too much a division into watertight compartments to be of any help in debates with Marxists. Attempts to overcome this problem and to speak of a pluralism of norms for various institutions have not fared much better thus far. But it is not only a matter of terms. I think we have to pay much more attention than has been done thus far to such questions as how norms are present and how they can be theoretically known, and the difference between the normative and the factual structure of an institution. I doubt whether we will ever be ready, both because of the limited scope of theoretical knowledge and because of the growing interwovenness of political, social and economic institutions (p.15).

Steeped in an appreciation of the dialectical character of western thought, Griffieon assumes that christian thought can make a helpful contribution to the theoretical problems with which Marxist scholars are wrestling. [He has authored De Roos en Het Kruis: de

waardering van de eenigheid in het latere denken van Hegel Assen 1976]. But he hedges his comments with the cultural insight that the well-dressed, well-intentioned christian scholars all too easily become kings parading naked. Griffieon's remarks do not assume that the christian contribution to marxist thought has been worked out in great detail. His opening remarks are an open, frank, non-iconoclastic acknowledgment of the paucity of sympathetic scholarly critique from within his own calvinistic tradition. His is an excellent introduction to the volume. It is an appeal for a non-pretentious contribution.

James W Skillen's "Human Freedom and Social Justice: A Christian Response to the Marxist Challenge" is an argument developed in terms of the views of Ernst Bloch Atheism in Christianity (1972) and Roger Garaudy Marxism in the Twentieth Century (1970). Though he takes the Marxist critique of religion and christianity seriously and argues in effect that the power of that critique has been strengthened by the christian failure to take the biblical teaching concerning comprehensive social justice seriously, the impression is yet given that this is an essay to christian scholars who have still to be educated about the character of marxism. The essay is a pertinent appraisal of the state of critical scholarship lamenting the fact that marxists, neo-marxists, post-marxists and also "christian marxists" have, in their scholarly traditions, taken the biblical teaching of creation, the nature of history, the sabbatical principle, the jubilee, liberation, justice and peace etc etc much more seriously in the critique of christianity, than those in the christian camp have done in their supposed "defence of the faith once delivered unto the apostles." Skillen and Griffieon set forth their contributions openly and without undermining their confessional orientation with any slipshod polemics.

Alice-Catherine Carls' "Human Freedom and Social Justice - a Case Study - Poland" is, in my view, the most "practical" contribution to the volume. In her historical discussion of the Polish situation she shows the immanent implications and tensions of the christian-marxist dialogue in Poland. The development of a christian "Solidarity" movement in the shadow of the Stalinist purges of 1938-1939 has the depth of faith and feeling to be a fundamental challenge to the hegemony of the Russian/Polish Communist Party. Carls carefully explains the difference between the western and eastern European response to marxism.

Whereas the dialogue of the west is freely conducted and remains at the theoretical level, in Poland it results always in concrete implications ... what secured the success of christianity over Marxism is the fact that the "ethical level" of the challenge has resulted in choices which are lived and felt by the people, instead of being just thought through by scholars. This may well be the core of the difference between the West's and the East's reaction to Marxism (p.55).

It is the church which has stood out fighting for freedom after the Marxist "revolution" was foisted upon the Polish people. Implicit are two challenges - that of the gospel and that of dissent. It is in this sense that Poland is unique. The power of this contribution is the careful historical discussion of the tensions and counter-tensions of that tragic situation. Moreover, Carls highlights the important fact that Polish christians are involved in an ongoing self-critical critique that must go deep into their psyché, individually and collectively, if they are to withstand the forces of oppression in the evil day. The Primate of Poland sums up the search for a critical point of reference that would lead to peace in the midst of disaster.

We are confident that, with God's help, we will be able to explain to

ourselves the reasons for our anger, in a dialogue and not by force. Poland must not become an arena of bloody confrontation. No one must be allowed to manipulate our wrath, because the people want to shed this illness of rage all by itself, and emerge all in one and healed (Quoted from New York Times 8 Feb 1982 p. A12] (p.80)

The question of liberation theology and the attempted christian appropriation of the marxist methodology must, of course, be an important dimension of any discussion of the marxist challenge for christian thought. But the marxist challenge is also the neo-Marxist re-critique of theological tradition and religious commitment. The neo-Marxist interest in the early Hegel and the early Marx involves a theoretic struggle against a perceived transcendent destruction-principle. Those who would today follow Marx are cognisant that Marx's apparent deprecation of religion went hand in hand with his assertion that the starting point of all critique is the criticism of religion. A recent "Symposium on Religion and Politics" in Telos asks:

Has the simplistic and often misunderstood statement by Marx that "religion is the opium of the people" too quickly foreclosed a careful discussion on the Left of the continuing importance of religion in everyday life? [Telos 1983: XX].

The issue of liberation theology is dealt with in two essays (Padilla and Perkins) which are attempts to accommodate christian faith and action to the good points of liberation theology whilst warning of critical differences. As such they would have limited appeal for marxist scholars and scholars of Marx and neo-Marxism. "Christian Belief, Marxism and Rich and Poor Countries" by Roelf L Haan, is written out of his experience in Argentina, and is an alternative "calvinist" and ecumenical rationale for a theory of development. In a hard-hitting essay Haan emphasizes that, for him, christian service involves working hard to defend and establish a true and open democracy, with a right appreciation of the character and necessity of planning. He concludes quoting André Bieler: "It is not allowed for the Church to dream about the restoration of some *Christendom*." Her only concern is fidelity to her mission of love and service which is "to make credible the testimony of Christ by consequent acts" (Bonhoeffer).

Of the other essays there is a theologico-philosophical critique of the Frankfurt School's view of the state (DuPlessis), an informative review of "Religion and Education in China" (Chao), a survey of how Marxism has typically been related to education (Bockmuehl) and two other shorter pieces which exhort christian scholars to read Marx and Marx's followers with a critical openness to learn.

The best contributions, as I have stated above, are those which stand on their own as scholarly contributions and which can be read sympathetically by a wide circle, one wider than the confessional parameters in which the conference as a whole was conceived. In other words the value of this volume is to be found in terms of those essays in which the writers have not been covered by the marxist challenge by yet have also learnt from it.

If this collection makes any distinctive contribution it is that it represents a willingness in contemporary calvinistic scholarship to learn from a tradition which is, in principle, opposed to it. There is vigour and there is also dogmatism. There is cautionary critique, but there is yet a little triumphalism. There is genuine openness to the scholarly task, but there is also a tendency to engage in outdated polemic of ten years ago and the yearning for some

"community". There is surprisingly little churchism or antichurchism. The volume stands as a calvinistic contribution to christian scholarship, respectful of the church as institute but by no means uncritical of its failings. It is a sign that some serious and critical scholars would like to make a constructive and creative christian contribution to Marxist scholarship even though the preconditions may not be present at this time.

It would be a truly worthwhile exercise for both Telos and the ICPCHE to arrange a joint "Symposium on Religion and Politics." That might indeed lead to what Werner Pelz calls constructive and insightful "cross illumination."

The other work for review here, Goudzwaard's Capitalism and Progress is among other things a calvinistic response to "the protestant ethic thesis" of Max Weber. This work coincides with the publication in English of a sustained body of neo-calvinistic socio-philosophical publications. Some of them include E Schuurman Technology and the Future, Dooyeweerd Roots of Western Culture, Th de Boer The Development of Husserl's Thought, and J L Paterson David Harvey's Geography. A proposed "review essay" considering these contributions will be held off until a later time. For the present it is instructive to see how these two works (Vander Stelt and Goudzwaard) represent, in some ways, a turn in christian-calvinistic scholarship, away from polemical opposition to sympathetic and critical analysis. Whereas the Vander Stelt volume shows an attempt by a christian-calvinist group of scholars to respond to Karl Marx, Goudzwaard's book is a response to the Weberian vision of modern society.

How have protestant scholars reacted to Weber's thesis? That is a difficult question to answer. Ever since H M Robertson's critique of "Max Weber and his school" in the 1930s much of the so-called critique of Weber has resulted in "proof-texting" what Calvin actually wrote" counter-posed by explanations of what Weber "actually meant". Of course, any calvinistic critique should also challenge the Weberian *a priori* that the world can no longer be said to be subject to Divine Grace. But Goudzwaard, the 20th century reformed thinker, seems to transcend the traditional polemics pro ad con concerning Weber's argument. Rather he, like Christopher Dawson and others, attempts to draw an alternative overview of western society. The book is subtitled: "A Diagnosis of Western Society."

Rather than take issue with sociological interpretations of the history of protestantism which rest upon a false equation of Calvin with Aristotelianism, Goudzwaard makes his contribution by placing protestant ideas of progress within the framework of more inclusive historical trends. In the immediate post-mediaeval years, western society was in a crisis. With the waning of the middle ages, post-ecclesiastical society became the venue for "the free unfolding of the forces of the economy and technology" (p.11). The obsession with such "freedom" is the peculiar accomplishment of both the Renaissance and Reformation. Capitalism was spawned as both these cultural forces made their impacts felt in European civilization. In this context Goudzwaard writes about "the ground motive of the Renaissance" - a dialectical cultural theme which united freedom and control in their mutual contradiction. It is this ground motive that has gained the ascendancy in the western European world, and it is therefore necessary that late-twentieth century earth dwellers understand its pervasive character.

Goudzwaard notes that an understanding of the religious character of the faith in progress is a necessary pre-requisite for any theoretical and scholarly unravelling of the seemingly insoluble complex of mutually intertwined problems that confront our world. By faith Goudzwaard is referring to the "propelling, all-embracing visions which direct persons in

everything they feel, think and do"(p.xxii). Faith, of necessity, is built into the architecture of human creatureliness - an irreducible dimension of the structure of human society. To understand our society, its problems and to discern its future, we need to see our society in terms of its faith, says Goudzwaard.

But that is not all. Goudzwaard would explicitly reject a counter-historical or anti-historical standpoint. Consequently there is a task in renovating the modern world-view and placing "progress" as true cultural "disclosure" in its right place. Goudzwaard's dilemma is this: if "progress" is no longer to provide the confessional criteria by which we can judge all cultural and social developments, then a new understanding of historical process is required. Can there be criteria by which to judge whether faith in progress is actually progressive? Do we have grounds for asserting that faith in progress is actually regressive? Goudzwaard would argue that faith in progress is regressive, but adds the rider that that assertion is as much involved in faith but of an alternative orientation. Faith in God, rather than faith in an idol (Progress), leads the way to a better appraisal of the normative criteria by which to judge whether some historical tendency is progressive or regressive. Goudzwaard also seems to indicate that it is possible to accept progress, as some kind of worthwhile norm, for any particular setting, without lapsing into a faith in Progress.

The perplexing ambiguities of our cultural situation are also manifest in the realm of theoretical argument, and the difficulties we have in discussing this problem is a central part of the problem. These are the ontological, epistemological and confessional questions with which Goudzwaard wrestles. In Part 4 "Toward the Disclosure of Society" the author gives his own view of the possibilities and limits of true social development. In pages 224-237 Goudzwaard gives his views which sound quite similar to those of E F Schumacher. Is there a chance of recovering wholeness, peace and happiness in the concrete setting of one's immediate life and work? (p.229). Goudzwaard discusses the possibilities of making a small beginning although he does not rule out the possibility of disclosure on a national and inter-national level. What then does he mean by this term disclosure?

Disclosure ... is first of all a process in which the norms for human life - like justice, trust and truth - regain their original validity for our decisions and acts ... cultural institutions and societal forms - like governments, trade unions and economic enterprises - regain opportunities to develop themselves according to their own distinct responsibilities ... Disclosure implies that everyday life is intended to have its own meaning; that today's significance is not exhausted in what it may contribute to tomorrow's needs and wants (p. 186).

The apparent anthropomorphism in which Goudzwaard refers to "institutions" regaining opportunities to develop themselves according to their own distinct responsibilities is not a slip of the pen. Goudzwaard would argue that human development should not be limited to the development of personal meaning and happiness in what we might call "personal" or "inter-individual" relationships. He assumes that these fragile institutions also have a potential to ennoble human life if they are shaped so as to allow them *qua creaturely human institutions* to follow their own callings. At this point Goudzwaard is developing the calvinistic concept of "beruf" in a way that diverges significantly from Max Weber's interpretation that makes it compatible with individualism and utilitarianism. "Disclosure" brings the possibility of a light at the end of our tunnel society. It is an opposite view to tunnel vision whereby all modes of social life are brought into a system of economic and technological functions. For Goudzwaard, "disclosure" is a recovery of the meaning and

value of human life in human life. His is no Pilgrim's Progress where the only reason for being in the world is to get out of the world.

For Goudzwaard "disclosure" is a normative task. Norms are built into the character and fabric of human social functioning by the Creator. If there is not justice in the way we govern ourselves there will be injustice. If there is not trust in our reliance on each other there will be distrust. No respect is disrespect and lack of truth is falsehood. There is, in Goudzwaard's terms, more than a mere individual interpretative side to norms - they are applied to the manner in which we form our institutional life as well as shaping our own personal morality.

Goudzwaard's "disclosure" is counter-posed to "progress" in much the same way that Augustinian views of history place the City of God (*civitas dei*) over against the city of this world (*civitas terrena*).

Apart from his obvious calvinistic sympathies, in terms of cosmology, what is distinctive about his analysis is his rejection of the attempt to transcend the crisis of capitalism in some kind of self-transformative theoretical and confessional transcendence. This is rather an immanent confrontation with problems, theories and historical-social processes. Eschewing "isolated remedies for supposedly isolated problems", Goudzwaard seeks to draw our social crisis in all of its complexity. recognizing that our progressive and/or conservative paradigm for political action is an integral part of the problem, Goudzwaard plunges deeper into the system-logic of modern capitalistic life. Our society is closed precisely because of our desire to dominate nature and to be free. How do we get out of this bind? Are we to control our thinking so as to free our action. Or are we to free our thinking by controlling our action? Such tension-ridden ambivalence is our contemporary form of tunnel thinking and tunnel-thinking cannot lead the way to the true disclosure of our "beruf" in our society. It can only think it can.

These two books will not necessarily be pleasing to critical and marxist thinkers. They do represent a serious counter-point to the marxist critique of capitalism and deserve to be read carefully and sympathetically. They contribute to a truly critical and self-critical understanding of theoretical reflection and contemporary society.

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