

# KUYPER, DOOYEWEERD, AND THE REFORMATIONAL VISION: THEOSOPHY REFORMED

By

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Note: This summary of key points of a much more detailed set of notes of the same name, dated January 1988, was originally published in the online journal Nuances (now discontinued).

*A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, the “magnum opus” of the Dutch Christian philosopher, Prof. Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd, was perhaps my main catalyst for the exploration of motifs “Hermetic.” This seems to have been via discovery of Dooyeweerd's (and his “mentor,” Abraham Kuyper's) Romantic connections historically related (in parallel) to the Slavophile Movement in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Orthodoxy. What Dooyeweerd states philosophically of time and eternity, Orthodoxy expresses liturgically in prayer and worship. Hermetic motifs are a sort of rational reduction of this pattern.

I am sure that most, if not nearly all, Christian Reformed Calvinists would be very surprised (and doubtful) to hear that there could be any connection at all between the Hermetic Tradition and Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper himself not unlikely would have wished to play down any suggestion of such a connection, especially if in any way it would have detracted from his primary focus as an orthodox Christian theologian, pastor, and statesman bringing a revived Reformation vision to the people of the Netherlands (and abroad). Nevertheless, he was also very much a child of his times, and a key participant in that response to the French Revolution known as the Anti-Revolutionary movement.

Anti-revolutionary activity was certainly not localized in Holland in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It was a European, Romantic answer to Enlightenment rationalism and spiritual aridity, and needs to be distinguished from the more "reactionary" counter-revolutionary trend oriented to the *Ancien Régime*. Anti-revolutionary spirituality was Romantic Spirituality, whose

diverse roots extended beyond the pale of “establishment” Christianity to touch on themes medieval, hermetic, gnostic, tribal and native, etc., as we well know:

Even many leading Christian thinkers and politicians welcomed this historicistic view, especially in its application to human society, as a powerful ally in their contest against the principles of the French Revolution. [...] Especially the irrationalistic view that the organic development of history occurs in accordance with a hidden Providence, seemed to be quite congenial to the Christian belief in God's guidance in history. [...] This view of God's providence in history was quite in accordance with the conservative mind of the Restoration, and it had a great influence upon the whole so-called Christian historical or antirevolutionary movement in Germany, the Netherlands and France.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Kuyper's exemplary work of placing this theosophical,<sup>2</sup> European antirevolutionary movement on a Biblically reformed basis in terms of his doctrine of *sphere sovereignty* has been singled out by Dooyeweerd for the momentous event that it was:

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, (Nutley, N.J.: The Craig Press, 1975; The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1960). pp.76,77. Compare the theosophical political philosophy of Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), in *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, (New York: The Macmillan Company / London: CollierMacmillan Limited, 1965. Selection, translation, and introduction by Jack Lively). Dooyeweerd was explicitly aware of the inner connection of his anti-revolutionary background with the philosophical-religious occult stream which formed the immediate secular-religious European context of the Dutch *Reveil* or Revival of piety in the aftermath of the French Revolution (Herman Dooyeweerd: *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), pp.49-55, 187-188.

<sup>2</sup> "Theosophy" is intended here as a special, technical term from the study of religion and ideas, and does not refer in the first place to the particular system of Madame H.P. Blavatsky.

...I should like to indicate in a few words what I am trying to express by using this much abused term *theosophy*. By theosophy I mean that which was generally meant before the term became a label for a modern pseudoreligion, i.e., *theosophy* signifies a mystical doctrine or school of thought, which purports to perceive and to describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity, perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in its contemplation. Theosophy postulates a kind of divine emanation whereby God, abandoning his self-contained repose, awakens to mysterious life; further, it maintains that the mysteries of creation reflect the pulsation of this divine life... (Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1961, Ninth printing, 1977) [c1941, 1954 Schocken Books, Inc., New York], p.206.

Abraham Kuyper was the one who first understood sphere sovereignty again as a creational principle and thus fundamentally detached it from the historicistic outlook on human society....<sup>3</sup>

Kuyper had taken up the reformational political project of Groen van Prinsterer, who had been greatly influenced in his second period after 1850 by the Lutheran legal philosopher, Friedrich Julius Stahl.<sup>4</sup> Stahl appealed in particular to the “positive philosophy” of Schelling,<sup>5</sup> who sought to solve the problem of the relation of God to creation by the method of *theosophy*.<sup>6</sup>

Schelling had become friendly to the mysticism of the theosophist cobbler, Jacob Boehme, through the Roman Catholic theosophist, Franz von Baader, who, in turn, had been stimulated by both Boehme and Boehme's French, occultist prophet, St. Martin.<sup>7</sup> Baader, although a Roman Catholic, was very sympathetic to Eastern Orthodoxy,<sup>8</sup> whose view of creation order is theosophic cosmogenic, not rational reductive. Kuyper himself, aware of his theosophical propensities, confessed how he once had been tempted “to slide off into Baader's theosophic stream, entranced by its hypnotic spell and tempted by its ethical force.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, he proceeded

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Orthodox Judeo-Christian theosophy recognizes that the “divine emanation” remains wholly on the side of the Divine (eg., the Byzantine Palamite “uncreated energies” of God, conceived and constituted in the Word). There is no pantheistic continuity of the “emanation” with Creation.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, pp. 49 55,68,78,86, 187-188.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), p.366.

<sup>6</sup> W. Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, (New York: The Macmillan Co.,1893, 1901), p. 616.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.618. Boehme, in spite of his genuinely Christian piety, most likely drew his pantheistic mixture of Christianity, Paracelsian alchemy, Jewish Kabbala, and Renaissance neoplatonism from Heinrich Kuhnrat (*Amphitheatrum Sapientiae*, Leipzig, 1700) via his (Boehme's) great friend and admirer, Abraham von Frankenberg (See page 158 of Père Louis Bouyer: “An Introduction to the Theme of Wisdom and Creation in the Tradition,” *Le Messager Orthodoxe*, No.98 III 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *Unground and Freedom*, p.xxviii, introductory essay to Jacob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points and Other Writings*, The University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1958,1971).

<sup>9</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, tr. and ed. Lewis B. Smedes, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp.196 197.

in the direction of theosophy's reformation. Since Kuyper's approach to the Bible's Cultural Mandate moved in a theosophical direction, there could therefore be no Christian cultural endeavour for him, no genuine Christian learning, apart from the personal experience of Christian faith and conversion. This must be so because the God-centred Wisdom conveyed by theosophical education "is an inner knowledge [...], bound up with the way it is acquired and with the development of the man himself as he acquires it."<sup>10</sup>

"Theosophy..." wrote Dr. Hans Lassen Martensen, "is eagerly attracted towards nature...As the mysticism of the mind, Theosophy is attracted, not only to the microcosm, but to the macrocosm, to the universe and universal life in all its multiplicity, but in all this multiplicity it beholds only one God, the Living and Triune..But, on the other hand, it must be emphasized, that there is no genuine theosophy that is not qualified by the mysticism of the heart, by a regard for the salvation and perfection of the individual and by a personal relation to God in believing and prayerful love...".<sup>11</sup>

So radical was Kuyper's view of Christian conversion in all areas of life, that it is really impossible to follow him meaningfully without coming into a direct contact with the "principalities and powers." Reformed pastor and scholar, Gerard van Moorsel, has observed,

We do not even dream of calling this too much abused neoCalvinistic divine, philosopher, journalist and statesman (1837/1920) a gnostic or semignostic, but this does not alter the fact that, here, the τιμωρία-δυνάμεις [*timoriai-dunameis*]-scheme is palpably present or rather: *has* to be present as a result of a *prima regeneratio* carried à outrance.<sup>12</sup>

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For a lucid introduction to this general background see Ernst Benz: *The Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy*, Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1983 (Translated from the French by Blair R. Reynolds and Eunice M. Paul. Pittsburgh Theological Monographs, N.S. no.6. Dikran Y. Hadidian, general editor).

<sup>10</sup> Alan Unterman: *The Wisdom of the Jewish Mystics*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Hans Lassen Martensen (metropolitan of Denmark): *Jacob Boehme (His Life and Teaching, or, Studies in Theosophy)*, tr. T. Rhys Evans, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1885), p.19.

<sup>12</sup> Gerard van Moorsel: *The Mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus A Phenomenologic Study in the Process of Spiritualisation in the Corpus Hermeticum and Latin Asclepius*, (Utrecht: Drukkerij en Zoon, 1955), pp.112-113 fn50.

Kuyper's antirevolutionary and reformational Christian theosophy never broke fully free from the spiritist, "semi mystical", two world categories typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century German Protestant theology.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Kuyper's own inner experience as a culturally-involved Christian appears to move strongly in the direction of an orthodox Biblical theosophy intensely and intimately integrating his faith and conversion into the structure of reality roundabout him. Moreover, building on Calvin and Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, without doubt a full fledged Christian contemplative mystic and theosophist, has been able to eliminate just about every last vestige of dualism, in his transcendental critique, and integration of faith and conversion with all cultural activities through his doctrine of *sphere universality*.<sup>14</sup>

Lest this post become too long, I had better stop with the references and comments which follow. I hope I have successfully hinted at the way some "hermetic" elements have entered into the

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<sup>13</sup> John C. Vander Stelt, "Kuyper's Semi-Mystical Conception," in H. Dooyeweerd et al. (eds.), *The Idea of a Christian Philosophy: Essays in Honour of D.H.Th. Vollenhoven*, (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> The contemplative mysticism of John Calvin is the *meditatio coelestis vitae* or *meditatio futurae vitae*, apparently very little emphasized by Reformed Christians. Via the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Dooyeweerd's "Philosophy of the Law Idea" (*De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*) is also linked to Husserl's beloved *Theologia Deutsch* which synthesized the themes of Rhineland mysticism. On Husserl's mysticism see p.167n.92 of James G. Hart, "A Precis of an Husserlian Philosophical Theology," in Steven W. Laycock and James G. Hart (eds.): *Essays in Phenomenological Theology*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). The Dooyeweerdian philosophy is a theosophy or pansophy based on a cosmonomic order of mutually irreducible but analogically interrelated hierarchical levels of (cosmic) time. As distinguished from modern, reductionistic, Darwinian linear evolutionary time, this marks a return to ancient *sacramental time* whose dynamic is not so-called "evolution" (a mere organological, biotic analogy), but a process of *unfolding*. Orthodox JudeoChristian theosophies must be distinguished from occult/Gnostic/Hermetic/Neo Platonic forms typically characterized by the belief in intermediaries between Creator and creation. Byzantine *Essence/energies*, Jewish Kabbalistic *En sof/sephiroth*, and Reformational *God-Word-creation* (or *God-"LawWord"-creation*) are classical theosophical concepts of *God in relation to creation* in which the Creator creature distinction is maintained and *energies/sephiroth/Word* are properly not at all *subordinate* to God (See Gershom G. Scholem, *op. cit.*, pp.205-206, 208-209, and Gershom G. Scholem, *On the Kabbala and its Symbolism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 1977), pp.35-36, 41. Dooyeweerdian *cosmonomic philosophy* orients its *Law-Spheres* to God as revealed in the "natural order" ("*Cosmonomic Order*") of creation.

reformational vision of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, even if not obtrusive, in the manner of the gnostic elements Hans Jonas finally came to recognize in Existentialism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hans Jonas has provided an illuminating account of his own progressive awakening to the very strong possibility that the Existentialism to which he was oriented was one with Gnosticism, in his *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [c1958 Hans Jonas], 2nd edition, enlarged), Epilogue: “Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism.” In his *Philosophical Essays From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: PrenticeHall, Inc., 1974), Essay 15: “Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought,” he has indicated how a thinker might go on for years with little or no insight into the transcendental categories and potential personal religious experiences already embedded in his or her own philosophy and theology. Richard S. Westfall has observed that Descartes may never have realized that his philosophy retained Hermetic content which he had deliberately sought to exclude by means of his dualism. On the other hand, how many of us recognize the Hermetic elements which Newton actively integrated into his mechanistic framework?

...The Hermetic elements in Newton's thought were not in the end antithetical to the scientific enterprise. Quite the contrary, by wedding the two traditions, the Hermetic and the mechanical, to each other, he established the family line that claims as its direct descendant the very science that sneers today uncomprehendingly at the occult ideas associated with Hermetic philosophy (See pages 185-187,195 of Richard S. Westfall: “Newton and the Hermetic Tradition,” in Allen G. Debus (ed.): *Science, Medicine and Society in the Renaissance: Essays to honor Walter Pagel*, (London: Heinemann, 1972).

