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Maarten Vrieze

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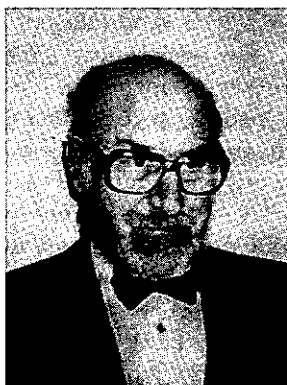
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# The Reformed College Confronts Poverty

Maarten Vrieze  
Professor of Philosophy at  
Trinity Christian College



*Maarten Vrieze is Professor of Philosophy at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois. Vrieze has done graduate work in Sociology and Theology at the Free University in Amsterdam and holds a Ph.D in philosophy from the University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa. A nineteen year veteran of teaching at Trinity Christian College, he has published twelve books, all in the Dutch language.*

Poverty is an appealing topic in any college course. When you bring it up in class you can count on a discussion. Talking about poverty, however, is not the same as doing something about it, and one may well ask how responsible such collegiate talk-without-action really is. After all, you don't study a man while he is drowning; you pull him out of the water. Is it legitimate to study the poor?

Is it possible at the college to do something about poverty? The college in North America is a middle-class affair. You know

that the moment you look at the check with which the college student pays his tuition, at the pile of books with which she leaves the college bookstore, at the cars on the campus parking lot. There is not only a difference between talking and doing, but there is also an embarrassing distance between college campus and poverty. How many students who discuss poverty in their term paper have actually met the poor?

In the following article I bring together a number of remarks made at a seminar with Dordt faculty members in the social sciences earlier this year. The focus of this handful of

remarks is on poverty as a concern in the instruction at a Reformed college. The instructor at the Reformed college may be expected to look for what we customarily call "biblical light" on the concerns and issues in his or her field. In the Bible we read about poor and needy people. How does, or should, it form our study and instruction, particularly in what we call the social sciences?

I begin with a few remarks about the traditions in which we work at our colleges. I continue with some comments on the way we use the Bible and what it says about poverty. And I conclude with some observations about implications of what the Bible says for our concern with poverty in our college courses.

First, a number of observations about the college as we know it here in North America. One set of remarks deals with the structure of that college and with the distinctive features of the instruction which it offers. A second set of remarks comments on the fact that colleges follow a direction and inquire more specifically into some of the implications which the central place given to the Bible has for the direction that Reformed colleges take.

The North American college is a curious institution. The precise character of its instruction is not immediately obvious. Most college instructors no doubt think of their field as a legitimate branch of science. They would feel deeply hurt if someone were to suggest that what they are doing is not really science at all. At the same time, however, many of them would be quite upset if they were told that behind their back students complain that they are "too theoretical" and that their courses are not relevant and practical. In other words, they are uncertain about what they are doing and about what the college is or should be. It does not help that at many colleges there is an embarrassing reluctance to raise critical fundamental questions about the nature of the college and its learning.

The college as we know it is an aggregate

of two different structures. That comes clearly to expression in the two different kinds of learning activities the college provides. One activity is science. It is an activity characterized by theoretical abstraction. The other activity is the preparation of young people for their prospective careers. It is an activity characterized by its concrete involvement of such young people in the skills and know-how of the work they aim to do after college.

The two activities, or series of activities, are *structurally* different, i.e., follow different structural principles.

The simplest way to characterize the nature of scientific activity is to say that the scientist *identifies* reality. That does not mean that identification does not play a role at all in non-scientific activities. On the contrary, the surgeon, the businessman, the builder, the social worker, all identify things as relations, events, people, circumstances, and the like, when they go about their business, but that identifying is not their actual objective. They are, so to speak, not in the business of identification, but they are in the business of healing, of conducting business transactions, of constructing buildings, of helping clients. For that reason, their identifying is an identifying in terms of what makes them realize their objectives, an identifying in terms of particular circumstances, a particular event, a particular relationship, a particular profit, etc. The scientist, on the other hand, is in the business of identification. His objective is not the healing of people, the construction of buildings, the service of those who need help, but his objective is identification. His identifying, therefore, differs radically from the identifying as we find it in non-scientific activities. It is an identifying in terms of that which conditions the very existence of what is to be identified, and what thus determines that existence. In other words, it is an identifying in terms of the transcendental existential conditions of reality. That is the reason why the scientist follows the route of theoretical abstraction: it is the only route

which enables him to compose an account of reality in terms of transcendental conditions.

It is now possible to describe scientific activity as the meaningful, historically sustained and communally structured composition of a systematic theoretic account of reality in terms of the transcendental existential conditions on which that reality depends for its very existence.

You don't learn science from being told how others do it. In order to understand scientific theory one needs to adopt the theoretic attitude: theories make sense only to those who have learned to work with

dent in what is actually happening in the field of the student's intended profession or vocation. Obviously, there is a great deal of knowledge the student must master before being ready to enter the field. Some have the unfortunate habit of speaking of that knowledge as theory. It is, however, not theory at all, but concrete insight, practical understanding, know-how on the basis of long experience, technical familiarity, and a good measure of wisdom. That knowledge is concrete and therefore fundamental to human work and life, richer than any theoretical construct.

**To learn science it is not enough to hear someone lecture about it or to read summaries of scientific theory. One has to engage in scientific work itself.**

theoretical abstraction. Van Riessen was correct when he said that one learns science only "at the frontier of human knowledge," i.e. where the scientific research is being done and scientific theory is being constructed. To learn science it is not enough to hear someone lecture about it or to read summaries of scientific theory. One has to engage in scientific work itself. That, on a very modest scale, is what the college provides: an opportunity to take one's first steps on the road of science and to begin to participate in the actual construction of theory in some branch of science.

Professional or vocational education, as I prefer to call the preparation of students for careers other than those in science, is an activity of a completely different structure. It is *not* characterized by theoretical abstraction, but by the concrete involvement of the stu-

The tradition in which the Reformed colleges in North America stand has always demonstrated a special concern with structural principles such as those which determine the nature of the college and its instruction. It strongly emphasizes the creaturely character of reality. It clearly recognizes that everything in reality depends for both its existence and its identity on the structuring hand of the Creator.

Directed by this tradition, the Reformed community has been very much aware that both education and science occupy key positions in the western world. Precisely because of its concern with structural principles the Reformed community has been able to resist firmly scientism and the scientialization of life that one witnesses in this century.

It is important here to emphasize this concern with structural principles. We run into a

quite different tradition when we ask how collegiate learning should approach the phenomenon of poverty. I think here of a tradition that appears to dominate, in one way or another, many of the social sciences on the college scene. At the heart of it one finds the centuries-old conviction that knowledge is the key to establishing a relatively secure and gratifying human existence on this planet. Inseparable from this conviction is the deep-seated belief that science offers the means *par excellence* to acquire that knowledge.

These convictions are certainly not new. One does not have to be a sociologist to remember how Auguste Comte pushed the appealing idea that the social scientist must draw up the blueprint for the good society and set the societal ideal for everyone and thus all such imperfections as disorder, dissatisfaction, and human poverty, would be eliminated. People no longer read Comte, they say. That is probably so, but for the college classroom it does not make any difference: the same convictions, modified and adjusted to fit the controlling ideology of our time, permeate today's most popular college textbooks in the social sciences and, thus, the courses in which these texts are being used. That this kind of positivism has long ago been publicly exposed as ideological propaganda has apparently not yet been heard of in most college classrooms.

In the light of what I have said here it will be obvious that not only in its organizational structure, but also in the instruction which it offers, the college is not a neutral institution, but one that follows a direction. That has implications for the way the instruction deals with poverty. Is poverty a separate topic, to be discussed by the sociologist in the course on social problems? Does it possibly call for an interdisciplinary "values seminar"? Or does it belong in the course on business ethics? Are the social sciences best equipped to discuss and study it, or should poverty have a place in the vocational education curriculum?

Do Reformed colleges have a different

answer to such questions than colleges which follow a different direction? The central place which the Bible has in the instruction at Reformed colleges is no doubt of prime significance for their direction. That not only raises the question whether the Bible addressed such issues as poverty, and if so what it says, but also how one should read the Bible. Is it legitimate to ask the Bible to speak to twentieth century issues?

Even at a Reformed college one cannot realistically expect complete unanimity. Reformed Christians are known to have their disagreements and conflicts, even about what to do with the Bible! The Bible may be the inspired Word of God, but how does one read it? Does one look for examples and models in "the world of the Bible" to follow them in the world of today? Does one search for eternal principles from which we could (logically?) derive the rules and instructions by which we should live here and now? Does one look, somewhat overwhelmed by the diversity of books, styles, and kinds of writings, in the Bible, for one "central message"? There are different traditions within the Reformed community, even with respect to the Bible.

The Reformed college campus is one of those unique places where one experiences firsthand the complexity of an encounter between different Reformed traditions. That encounter surfaces particularly when the instruction addresses concrete issues such as poverty. The different traditions share, however, a number of fundamental attitudes concerning the Bible. Two of these I want to emphasize here. On the one hand, the deep respect for the Bible in its unity. On the other hand, the open and honest recognition of the distinctive character of each of the various components, or segments, of the Bible.

The Bible, the Reformed tradition insists, is not only an inspired, but also an inspiring book. In its many different parts and segments, each from a different time and a different world, and in its many different styles and kinds of writing, the Bible con-

tains, and forms, *one* message, *one* Word. That *one* Word liberates, claims, instructs, comforts, renews, directs, sets free, strengthens, and calls all who read the Bible. Even though many men and women have spoken and written the words that make up the Bible, it is the *one* Word of the *one* Speaker.

An intriguing question now is this: does this one Word address itself also to such issues as poverty in our time?

Those familiar with their Bible may hesitate here. On the one hand, the one message of the Bible that reverberates through all the stories, songs, and letters, is a message of liberation from precisely that which bruises, crushes, and destroys human life. God, it appears, sides with the bruised, the needy, the victims, the lost, and the poor. Is it perhaps possible to characterize the *one* message of the Bible as the good news for the poor? Isn't that precisely the way Jesus said it? On the other hand, doesn't the Bible have a few rather unpleasant things to say to the poor also? The liberation of the poor may be something close to the center of the message of the Bible, but the center itself it does not seem to be.

The Reformed tradition, I said, also shows an authentic respect for the obvious diversity which one finds in the Bible. The Bible is a collection of many different kinds of writings. Each one of these writings seems to have its own objective, its own style, and often its own "discourse." To read a particular book of the Bible is to enter a particular world different from the world one enters when reading a different book of that same Bible. The world of Abram differs from the world of David; and the world of Job, or the world of Isaiah, differs from the world of Jesus, James, and Jude. And all these worlds, in turn, differ from the world of today. When we compare them, we become aware of deep structural differences. Abram's world is differentiated very little, societally and culturally. The kind of stagnation in the differentiation process that we find there has serious implications. There is

something dreadfully anti-structural and anti-normative in it. An unbending impersonal—and therefore usually personified!—tribal or kin-communal tradition frustrates and represses the structural unfolding of human life, resisting the individualization of distinctive areas of human initiative, responsibility, and interaction. Totalitarian and self-perpetuating, that tradition leaves no room for such essential distinctions as between norm and conduct and communal routine and personal choice. Small wonder that translators find it nearly impossible to find expressions and terms that do justice to the concepts, the perceptions, and language, of such a world as Abram's; it is a world of different concepts, different ways of interaction and communication, different "rules" and expectations, different forms. We do not share a language with that world, nor a way of experiencing reality or life. What we today mean when we speak of law, of family, of freedom, of society, and the like, simply does not exist in Abram's world, just as what we cannot translate from that world by our terms of law, family, etc., does not have a place in our world of today.

Naturally, it would be impossible to say such things about worlds such as that of Abram if the difference would be radical and absolute. That is not the case. Both Abram's world and ours are worlds in which people interact and in which such interaction even in its most frustrating and repressive forms is bound by structural principles on which it depends for its very existence. At the same time, however, we must realize that even though our understanding of our own or of Abram's world is not determined by the way the world to which we ourselves belong is ordered and patterned, it is conditioned by it and because of that, limited and partial.

How then should we approach the Bible with questions concerning a phenomenon such as twentieth century poverty? If the Bible speaks in words, styles, concepts, etc., that not only reflect, but also belong to and help constitute worlds that are often significantly different from ours, can one ex-

pect it to answer such specific questions? We do not open the Bible to learn what it says concerning heart transplants or space travel, do we? Is it really legitimate to ask about poverty as a phenomenon in such a highly differentiated world as ours?

Many of us are familiar with only one society and one culture: the one in which we grew up and in which we feel thoroughly at home. It is very difficult for us not to regard that society and that culture as *normal*, i.e., as the way all societies are, and in case they are not, then the way they should be. It is then easy to assume that we *know* what is meant when in our English Bibles we read

tient listener with inspiration and direction. The many different authors behind the books and segments of the Bible all wrote for specific audiences. A twentieth century reader who is really prepared to respect *the way in which* the Bible speaks, realizes that when he reads his Bible, he is *looking over the shoulders* of authors and audiences. He *listens in* when Moses speaks to the Israelites, when Job reacts to his friends, when Jeremiah complains to God, or when Paul addresses his Corinthians. He *overhears* what Abram says to Sarah, what Goliath says to David, and what Jesus says to the poor. Respect for the Bible implies

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words as family, authority, freedom, citizenship, poverty, and need. And the danger is that we draw our conclusions all too hastily when we hear Jesus say to someone that he should sell all he possesses, when we read Paul's instruction that elders should be people who show hospitality, or when we see an old stipulation called the year of Jubilee!

The link—and therefore the bridge!—between our world and the worlds which are reflected in the various books or segments of the Bible is to be found in the cultural and societal structural principles that are the conditions on which both those and our own world are possible. That also means that authentic respect for the distinctive character of the diversity of the Bible rewards the pa-

that we do not impose a twentieth century frame of reference upon it, but allow it to speak in its own language and to choose its own concerns. Then one comes away from the Bible, not with texts for specific occasions, not with principles to be applied in specific situations, not with models of specific conduct, but with a direction, a commitment, and—one remembers Calvin's metaphor—the kind of glasses that enable us now to begin an evaluation of our own situation.

One of the most frightening dimensions of every one of the different worlds of the Bible is the human helplessness, the human despair, the vulnerability one finds at the fringes of the societal configurations in these

worlds. It may be the world of Abram, or of Paul, but that vulnerability is there. Society is a matter of orders and configurations of human interaction. The manner in which these are patterned in a society appears decisively to count some in and some out, to allow some to go ahead and some to stay behind, to reward some initiative and give some access, to require some to follow orders and some to be excluded. That also holds for the worlds in the Bible. The foreigner in Israel offers an illustration.

There are different kinds of foreigners. All of them are outsiders, unwanted, uninvited, a threat. Mosaic law stipulates what the position of the foreigner is. It is not a particularly pleasant one, especially not after Israel has exchanged its rather incoherent desert existence for a particular kind of territorial life with boundaries, ownership arrangements, and even a crude distinction between life within walled cities and life in the country. The foreigner who finds himself away from his own society, perhaps because it has cast him out and he has nowhere to go, or perhaps because he is on a cultic mission or on a commercial journey, is an easy prey. The law does not appear to object against a bit of exploitation. You are free to make the foreigner pay what you want him to pay, provided you do not use that practice when you are dealing with fellow Israelites. You might, the law suggests, even sell them the meat that is unfit for consumption by Israelites! The foreigner is in the unenviable position of being at the mercy of Israelites. He is helpless, without the protection of those with whom he is united in a clan or tribe. Unless some Israelite accepts him as guest (!) and so provides him with protection, he does not have anyone who will come through for him in time of danger and need. Some foreigners, the Mosaic law stipulates, are to be respected. About them it is said: one law for all, both Israelite and foreigner. Yet even that does not mean that the foreigner can expect anything like equal treatment with others in the land. Until this society changes, and changes drastically, the

foreigner in Israel is the man in need, the one without someone else to stand up for him.

Moses' law at times speaks in one breath of foreigner, widow, and orphan. The kind of foreigner meant in that case is the non-Israelite who lives among the Israelites and on their territory. Perhaps he came from somewhere else and decided to stay. Perhaps his ancestors lived here already before the Israelites took over and made him a foreigner in his own land. In any case, this foreigner is the dispossessed, the one whose views don't count and whose voice is not heard. That is what he has in common with the widow and the orphan to whom the expression refers: the woman who did not only lose her husband, but also somehow ended up without the customary "extended family" of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and so on, and who now is on her own with her children, helpless, vulnerable, with no one to fall back on, alone in the world.

The people who in most English translations of the Bible are called the poor do not all belong to the same category. There are, for example, the unfortunate who have lost control of the ancestral farmland. They are forced to hire themselves out to others. They are not slaves, and they are not beggars, but they are helpless and vulnerable all the same: they depend completely on the whims and caprices of the fortunate who are able to hire them for a day or so. They are often without food or decent clothing, but what appears to hit and embarrass them more than anything else is that they lack what we call prestige: they lack "a good name" and there where it really counts, as in the courts, no one listens to them and no one stands up for them.

There are also other poor. These are not even able to hire themselves out for no one in his right mind hires them. One day it happened: an enemy tribe attacked, a storm hit, an accident happened, an illness struck. Suddenly there was what the Israelite perhaps fears most: cultic impurity with all its consequences. The rules that stipulate who is clean and who is unclean in Israel are very strict. A slight disfigurement, a sprained ankle, a



minor skin irritation, are already sufficient to keep a person from approaching God with an offering, a prayer, a simple "Thank You." Besides, impurity is highly contagious! That's why the unclean person is shunned. You don't communicate with him. You don't give and you don't take. No room for an unclean man in the market, in the court, in the street, in the temple. That means, in the non-differentiated societal ordering of Israel's life, cultic impurity is at once social, economic, jural, and ethical impurity! Who would hire an impure man! And so impurity, even if it is an impurity that lasts for only a few weeks or a few months—and that's easy in a society with little hygiene and no modern medicine—almost automatically leads to a man's falling behind more and more, only to find himself in the end at the outer fringes of his society, abandoned by all, without *mishpat*.

The non-differentiated society has very few societal configurations that are capable of holding on to the person who stumbles and falls behind. The all-inclusive corporate totality to which one belongs—the "village" or the "clan"—give one one's identity, one's place in life, one's worth and meaning. It is a universe all by itself. It exists alongside other such universes, but it is not really connected with them. The universes do not integrate into a still wider and more-encompassing world to which the several universes and their members would belong. That would mean that such an all-encompassing universe would give you an identity on top of, and apart from, the identity you already have from your much narrower universe. That, however, is unthinkable in the non-differentiated world. You belong to one universe only, and you have one identity only, namely that which your village or your clan gives you. Once you lose that identity, you are no longer someone people know how and where to place. You yourself are at a loss as well. You no longer belong to any kind of interaction context because there simply is no such context left for you. You now exist at the fringes, in no-man's-land, in

the most literal sense of the word, an outlaw. You are no longer a member of a body, merely an item in a category.

The universe-like clan or village can hold onto its members only as long as they follow the traditional routines. Tradition is partly (a dated understanding of) normative *principle*, partly earlier (often ancestral) *conduct* made normative. It is generally unable to allow deviation from the uniformity of conduct it imposes upon all regardless of personality or circumstances. There is little room for innovations and that means that there is no way of dealing with the extraordinary, the unexpected, the abnormal. All one can do is withdraw, abandon, leave behind. That's where the poor are.

One might get the impression that the Bible's evaluation of the phenomenon of poverty is not always the same. It is, therefore, good to remember that "poor" is not always the same thing and that the scene changes from desert to promised land, from the time of the judges to that of the kings.

The prophets, for example, really stand up for the poor. To them, being poor is being stepped on and exploited by the rich and powerful. The rich, then, are the godless, the unjust, the sinners. The poor, by contrast, are the righteous, the men and women who wait for God and side with Him.

The picture in the so-called Wisdom literature is different. It is ambiguous, to say the least. Poverty, the book of Proverbs seems to suggest, comes to a man because of his carelessness, his lack of common everyday concern and diligence. The poor man is the fool, the sinner who gets what he deserves. Being rich is what happens when you keep your eyes open, do the right thing, and work hard. You are a wise man and God blesses you. At the same time, however, Proverbs makes a number of highly unpleasant remarks concerning the rich. The rich man is a fool. He treats the poor with arrogance and disdain. He acts without righteousness. The poor, on the other hand, may be abandoned by neighbors, friends, and relatives, but God sees what goes on and

cares. It almost seems a contradiction, but there is yet another dimension that must be mentioned here. Poverty is also pictured as something that is unexplained, not necessarily linked with what a man does or does not do, something that comes out of the blue and strikes. There is then no answer to questions. You are a victim and nobody seems to know why. There is the unexplained presence of evil and suffering in a man's life that makes him one of the poor.

One theme appears to cut through all the different forms of vulnerability and abandonment in the several worlds of the Bible: the authors who describe what goes on are all thoroughly convinced that God does not accept the situation as He "finds" it, but is

The theme, therefore, is a theme of redemption. That inspires. It makes us aware that it is meaningful, not useless to analyse society today and find ways to combat poverty in a broad-reaching architectonic critique. It is *possible* to do something about poverty, even in our highly differentiated world in which human vulnerability assumes such completely different forms than in the worlds of the Bible. There is a *perspective* of God at work!

The Christian community does not have a very impressive record with respect to that perspective. True, over the centuries it has shown an often moving willingness to give to people in need, and we should not underestimate what that has meant in many

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doing something about it. From Isaiah's word that God does not take responsibility for the state the world is in today (45:18) to Mark's report about God in Jesus identifying with the unclean (1:45), the theme is unmistakable: poverty in whatever form or appearance does not "belong" in the good creation and God is out to remove it.

We don't grasp the full impact of that theme if we do not recognize it as the theme that pervades the very descriptions that the Bible contains of poverty and human vulnerability. That vulnerability is not simply a matter of structure and form of interaction, however central that indeed may be, but it is first of all a matter of something that does not *belong* in creation, something *anti-structural* and deeply *evil*.

lives. On the other hand, it is embarrassing, to say the least, that through the ages the Christian church has customarily been on the side of those in power and has been little inclined to call for a radical re-organization and re-formation of society. Architectonic critique is a fine topic to discuss, but it is an extremely costly affair really to engage in. Is that the reason for the Christian community's hesitation?

It is even more embarrassing to the Western Christian community that the social sciences have virtually taken for granted that it is their task to work at such an architectonic critique. Still, that should not make us attempt to take that task away from the social sciences to return it to the Church! That would really get the poor from the fry-

ing pan into the fire.

When the social sciences try to make sense of the phenomenon of poverty, they face insurmountable difficulties. Their methods, every one of them a form of theoretic abstraction, fail to get at the heart of it. Poverty is without a doubt a matter of societal structuring and cultural organization. It is, however, more than that. In it we always also confront the incomprehensible, the unexplained in the life-shattering reality of evil. Here identification in terms of existential conditions is impossible. Besides, actual identification of evil can never be anything but a passionate, concrete protest and an all-out practical rejection and assault, never a theoretic construction.

That does not imply that the sciences should not also make their contribution to such a thoroughly practical activity. Science's strength, however, is in its distinguishing, and its contribution is always exclusively in that realm. A number of sociological insights have already been used in the foregoing. Another such insight deserves still to be mentioned at this point.

The various societal entities in a highly differentiated society undergo what is often incorrectly called a loss of function. Thus a family may surrender its educational function in part to a separate institution, namely the school. That is, obviously, not a loss at all, but rather a healthy development in which functions are individualized in specific societal communalities that serve the unfolding of human functioning and interaction.

Yet, this very process of continuing societal differentiation may also lead to a particular kind of pseudo-differentiation in which essential functions of a societal structure are thrown off and assigned to artificial agencies that are supposed to take such functions as their specific concern. We see this pseudo-differentiation used particularly where larger modern institutions are no longer prepared to live up to ethical obligations and responsibilities and prefer to have specific agencies see to specified needs of

employees, etc. Precisely because the process followed here is a process of *pseudo-differentiation*, the agencies that have been invented for the purpose are structurally unable to function the way actual communalities function. It is their very nature to be impersonal and to remain unaffected by individual circumstances. In other words, in our highly differentiated society we suddenly come across a situation that is embarrassingly similar to the one we found in the ancient world where the poor and the helpless were pushed to the fringes precisely because their society also was unable to come to terms with what did not exactly fit into the universal mould, the impersonal tradition! Modern pseudo-differentiation leads directly and unavoidably to modern poverty.

In the light of the Bible we realize, to our excitement and inspiration, that poverty, human vulnerability, exploitation, existence at the fringes, human isolation, and whatever else constitutes twentieth century needs, do not belong in the good creation. We also realize that there is a future in which the promise of that good creation will be realized. God guarantees it and whoever has any doubt should listen carefully to the words of Jesus. That means, however, that an overhaul of culture and society is called for as long as there still is need and poverty.

No one societal institution by itself is structurally able to take on this enormous task. Any overhaul of a culture implies activity in the different areas of culture, and any overhaul of society implies activity in every one of the many societal configurations one finds in our modern world. That now alerts the Reformed college. After all, by its very preparation of students for careers in those many different areas of human responsibility, the college is directing people either to affirm the given situation in culture and society, or overhaul it. That challenge has enormous proportions. When, however, a college accepts it, it can again discuss poverty, however middle class the mood of a campus may be.