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## Van Riessen Lectures at Dordt

James Koldenhoven  
*Dordt College*

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## Van Riessen Lectures at Dordt

In his lecture tour of Christian colleges in North America, Dr. Hendrik van Riessen also spent a week at Dordt College, the sponsoring institution. While most of his lectures dealt with the influence of science in the Western World, van Riessen also found time to tell a public audience of his experiences under Nazi rule during the second World War, and to speak to a student discussion group ("Bridge") about the relationship of higher education and authority.

This brief report will not satisfy many readers of *Pro Rege* who would like to follow van Riessen's presentation more closely. Space here permits only highlight coverage.\*

Central to his presentations was van Riessen's thematic "from Christ, through Christ, and unto Christ." In his opening lectures van Riessen spoke of the uniqueness of everything in reality, saying that every unique thing has its own referring capability, and that everything refers ultimately to its creator. Science, an analytic way of looking at reality, from its historical beginning was religiously motivated to be independent from God. Since man is central to the scientific process, and since man chose to objectify reality apart from Christ, science has not only declared itself independent of God, but science "boomeranged" by declaring itself independent of man. "Scientific truth," the

speaker went on, "is a part of the man who makes it." Using a common illustration, he said, "Knowledge of my garden is my knowledge." In other words, absolute objectivity is a fake.

As van Riessen sees it, there are two central observations to make in order to be a Christian busy as a scientist: 1) that everything in reality is in coherence with everything else, and 2) man (as compared with animals) is open to his environment, that is, alone able to surpass himself in his situation. Man's ability to transcend himself is by virtue of his believing capability. It follows then that thinking and believing, and faith and science, are compatible. The problem has not been with science, but with godless scientists who put their faith in the method and thereby give it meaning and a life of its own, producing thereby the god-science.

Van Riessen next turned to the question of the relationship of revelation and faith as these relate to science. Herman Dooyeweerd, he said, finds the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til coming in from the "outside"; and Van Til faults Dooyeweerd for finishing his philosophy and then "adding something on." Van Til, it appears, begins his philosophy by bringing a Scriptural apologetic to reality (as if Scripture and reality were separate), while Dooyeweerd begins in reality, on the "inside," as if reality were a part of the

revelation of God. Van Riessen did not "take sides" in this issue, except to give his own version of the task of the scientist: "Science begins with wonderment, then a problem is formulated, and the investigation ends in truth. You don't begin with a truth proposition." Van Riessen rejected the traditional meaning of "synthesis," but claimed that word in his final view of the problem. Logic is not the avenue of synthesis in van Riessen's view, but language. "The important thing is the meaning of something, not the analysis of it," he said, and gave examples of common problems to mankind, such as "origin" and "freedom." Together, with the humanist we approach a problem, but with our language we ultimately discover our differences in meaning and faith. Both the humanist and Christian declare their "truths" separately, and in their separate declarations, through language, imply different faiths. Synthesis is not between belief and unbelief, but a matter of relating the aspects of reality, through language, for the purpose of better knowing ourselves and the universe which God has made.

The limitations of science became the speaker's next point. He identified four: 1) Science is an abstraction from the unique and will never be equal to the unique character of creation. 2) The creation is coherent and derives its meaning from that coherence, whereas science is dependent on this coherence for its function. 3) Science has not so far demonstrated that it can employ the language of faith as it deals with the modal aspects of creation (which cannot be reduced, one to the other). 4) Science is presently threatening man's freedom with the power falsely attributed to it.

Dr. van Riessen, following a weekend break, dealt with "The Power and Powerlessness of Modern Man." To begin, the speaker identified the main features of the modern era which he dates from 1940 on. These are as follows. Applied science and technology are the new spiritual leaders, with technology producing a new, man-

made world. As a result, the community of man has become so complex that parents can no longer teach their own children, and authority drifts with the flux. The new era is marked by affluence, and affluence provides a sense of emancipation. People can now "mix themselves" in the life of the community and state. Also characterizing the new era are mass communication and world unity. In summary, noted van Riessen, the world is now "from Man, through Man, and unto Man."

In a brief survey of the progress of secularization, van Riessen pointed to a third important power in the Western World: organization. Organization, technology, and science now were repeated frequently in the van Riessen lectures as the trinitarian god of modern man.

Before moving to a discussion of the powerlessness of man, the speaker characterized "human power." In his capacity to go beyond his own problems and situations, man has proved his powerfulness. But that power has exceeded man and has taken on independent characteristics. For example, noted van Riessen, science, technology, and organization engendered, first, mass production (technology) with its conveyor belt, then automation to remove the drudgery of work, only to discover that the inventor (man) was displaced and withdrawn from the process. Besides his ability to go beyond his own problems and situations, which led to his withdrawal from the process, man created the philosophy of positivism where only the facts matter and where God is eliminated. Illustrating the pervasiveness of positivism, van Riessen asked the audience to be honest with themselves and notice how even our personal correspondence (our letters) do not speak openly of the Lord. His point was well made that we are, even as Christians, greatly influenced by positivism.

Van Riessen reviewed, next, the influence of human power on secularization. On the one hand, he noted, we live in a time when man seems to be able to achieve anything through the power of

science, while we fear the awesomeness of that power. The humanist view has infiltrated the Christian's dependence on God by suggesting, for example, that now that we have the weather forecaster we don't have to pray anymore about weather conditions. His critique of Dietrich Bonhoeffer also furthered this point about the humanist influence on secularization. He pointed to Bonhoeffer's belief that we should not worry about secularization which is a natural result of power. In this view religious feelings and practices are needed only when we can't answer the problem. Then we should turn to God. "Prayer is unnecessary when you can manage yourself," he said in reporting Bonhoeffer's view, and added, "Redemption is that man can come to power." The key to this view of Bonhoeffer is that "God saves us by leaving us."

In response to this secularization of Christianity through human power, the speaker made the following observations: 1) this view is not Scriptural; 2) man is not "mature," "free," or "at home," but an alien because of sin; 3) power is not power apart from God, for existence is determined by "being in Christ"; and 4) secularization is not inevitable, though it appears to be so because man has so projected that

opinion on reality and it has become a religious, moving force.

In turning finally to the influence of secularization on power, van Riessen demonstrated how man needs some absolute. Man may eliminate God, but he will find a substitute. And that substitute he locates in creation. His system becomes closed, for the idol is now an absolute because man has determined that it should be such. Historically this process of secularization begins with the Renaissance and the Reformation—both of which say man is important. His own importance, his influence, his power equip him to project an idol of his own choosing which in turn begins to define reality. During the following discussion, the speaker noted that death and evil are within man, and these make him look outside himself for something to trust.

Van Riessen gave a final warning to his listeners, not to fall into the trap of explaining things scientifically, as if a scientific analysis alone is sufficient or absolute in the search for meaning and truth.

\*Tapes of the lectures are available from the Media Center, Dordt College.

## The Dance and Dancing

"The dance," and "dancing," are two very different things. Unfortunately, the same word identifies both.

An honest inquirer on this subject

referred to the March issue of Pro Rege and a short report called "Introduction to Dance—Choreography." Others in the Christian community also ask about this