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A Free Christian University: Review Essay



by Keith Sewell

Arie Theodorus van Deursen, *The Distinctive Character of the Free University in Amsterdam, 1880-2005: A Commemorative History*, translated by Herbert Donald Morton. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-8028-6251-8, 538 pp. incl. bibliography.

Some books, as soon as they are announced, find their way to the top of my “must read” list. This is one of them. Translated by Donald Morton, this is the first history of the Free University in Amsterdam (FU) in the English language. The author, Arie Theodorus Van Deursen, is Professor

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Emeritus of modern history at the FU; therefore, the latter portions of this work are written from the standpoint of the participant-observer. This is a personal account, without any mask of presumed objectivity. As the preface states, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) saw the establishment of the FU in 1880 as his greatest achievement. Its twofold purpose was to train in science and scholarship according to Reformed principles and to produce an educated leadership for those institutions representative of the Reformed side of Dutch national life (xiii). After the *Doleantie* crisis of 1886 resulted in the formation of the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN), it was the *Gereformeerde* portion of the Reformed in the Netherlands that the FU both served and from which it received support. The FU was envisaged in terms of Kuyper’s teaching on “sphere sovereignty,” the theme of Kuyper’s inaugural address: *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*. As van Deursen puts it, “all spheres of life are independent of each other” and “possess their sovereignty by the grace of God” (20). Accordingly, a university distinctively Reformed (here specifically *Gereformeerd*, meaning “re-reformed”) in character was necessary if science and scholarship were to be pursued in an authentically Reformed manner (21).

Van Deursen undoubtedly admires this grand vision, yet as we read chapter after chapter, it is possible to detect the presence of what amounts to an *arrière-pensée*. It is detectable when he suggests that the FU was free only from 1880 to 1886 and was thereafter bound to the GKN denomination, which only terminated the relationship in 1999 (190, 444). Certainly, van Deursen is clear that especially since the level of government funding rose to 100 percent in 1968 (241), the FU was inevitably subjected to

successive waves of governmentally-decided policy and budgetary changes (250 *ff.*) and cannot be said to be truly “free” as originally envisaged (318 *ff.*). In the last half-century the FU has experienced student radicalism and neo-Marxism of the 1960s and 1970s, with all their distractions (375), state-imposed budgetary regimes (420-28), and the many maladies of contemporary higher education (411-12).

Yet the question that seems everywhere implied, but never explicitly formulated, is this: “Was the FU ever truly free?”

Yet the question that seems everywhere implied, but never explicitly formulated, is this: “*Was the FU ever truly free?*” Was it not, at one stage or another, bound to Kuyper—his authority and reputation—or to the proclivities of its supporting constituency, or to the GKN as a denomination, or to theology as the “queen of the sciences,” or to all of these *before* it latterly became wholly dependent on the state? This book richly repays interrogation on this basis. So, was the FU ever free of Kuyper and his reputation? As one early, friendly observer put it, “it never entered the minds of his listeners that Kuyper might occasionally be wrong” (1). Insisting that the faculty was indispensable—he was supremely clear on that point—Kuyper drew the circle of those deemed acceptable very tightly (11, 15-20). A fortress mentality prevailed (96). Kuyper launched the FU on the basis of majestic general principles, but these still needed to be unpacked (55) and were only given rigorous theoretical articulation half a century later by Dirk Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd (21), the “rambunctious young men” of the 1920s and 1930s (175).

We may also inquire if the FU was ever free of its constituency. Its initial establishment was made possible financially by the gifts of some forty wealthy persons (11). The wider GKN supporting constituency contributed small sums in large

numbers and was not to be ignored. Yet its pietistic tendencies could chafe against the life and priorities of an institution of higher learning, as, for example, when the staging of *Charley’s Aunt* gave offense (125-26). The constituency itself generally lacked higher education (43). Of itself it could not always supply sufficiently qualified persons to fill academic positions, especially as the FU expanded (359 *f.*). Sometimes it had to be placated by explanation. For example, after a conference on “the age of the earth” in 1950, Jan Lever and J. R. Van de Fliert had to explain to the *gereformeerde* constituency the cogency of the evidence that the earth is millions of years old. These professors said “yes” to evolution and “no” to evolutionism (224-5, 252, 265-8). After 100 percent governmental funding was introduced, the old-style supporters found themselves upstaged (244, 303). There emerged a situation in which the Board of Governors of the [supporting] Association “gave the university its character,” while the Board of Directors of the University were the “real administrators” (353). The former experienced displacement by the latter, not least because a voluntary association cannot govern a large institution (354, 398).

The FU was not simply Reformed—it was denominationally *gereformeerde* (GKN) and politically oriented to the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), led by Kuyper. The relationship was tight. When the anti-revolutionary political movement split over the widening of the electoral franchise, the redoubtable Alexander Frederik de Savornin Lohman (1837-1924) supported the anti-enlargement Christian Historical Union and its publication *De Nederlander*, and as he found himself in opposition to Kuyper’s ARP and *De Standaard*, his days at the FU were numbered (50*f.*). To uphold “sphere sovereignty” in practice, its supporters found it necessary to contrive a certain cross-institutional synchronization, notwithstanding the distinctive integrity of church, party, and university. As if to underline the ambiguities, in 1903 Directors were required not only to uphold the declared basis of the FU but also to be members of the GKN (48). It is hardly surprising that at the FU, intra-*gereformeerde* family ties could have a significant if imponderable influence—“across” the spheres, so to speak—in the making of appointments (53). A kind of tribalism seemed to be in play. Hans Rookmaaker appears as the first professor born outside the *gereformeerde* fold (269).

The “sphere sovereignty” principle declared

that ecclesiastical pronouncements had “no force for the university” (133). However, when a FU graduate, the preacher J. G. Geelkerken, raised the issue of whether Genesis chapter 3 should be read literally (as factual) or literarily, the fat was in the ecclesiastical fire. The (GKN) Synod of Assen of 1926 condemned Geelkerken, geology, and archaeology notwithstanding, although there were those who never accepted this verdict, including some of his students at the FU (129-132). The question drew attention to the linkage between the relation of the Bible to learning and the relation of learning to the Bible (cf. 356). The demands of the latter are not set aside by recognizing either the non-neutrality of science or its distinctive integrity (60, 88, 171). In my judgment, Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was right in asserting that “The facts that geology has brought to light are just as well words of God as are the contents of Holy Scripture, and thus to be accepted by every believer” (129). Latterly, Bavinck came to see the *gereformeerden* as “surrounded by a high wall” and unable to “move ahead”—the great theologian contemplating a switch to philosophy in his latter years (96). The Assen decision impacted science—and training in science is *the* task of the university—as well as the churches. At this time, says van Deursen, “the interplay between the church structure and theological science permeated church life with a spirit of anxious conservatism and strong regulation” (190).

All this raises the question of whether the FU was ever free of theology as the queen of the sciences. For many years, theology attracted the most students (161). The initial theological orientation of the FU was towards the scholasticism of Gijsbertus Voetius (1589-1676) (26). The key figure was Valentine Hepp, who joined the faculty in 1922. He was oriented towards the systematic theology of “old Princeton” professor Charles Hodge (1797-1878) (91-2). Assen demonstrates that the doctrinal tone of the GKN was then staunchly conservative. The publication of the *Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift* series of Bible commentaries testified to a strong disregard of biblical criticism. The prevailing ethos was “allergic to critical historical research” (93). And here we encounter a significant lacuna. The FU, under Kuyper, stood for “Neo-Calvinism”—a term first used by Prof. A. Anema in 1897 (88). This Neo-Calvinism went further than Calvin, requiring the historical study of Calvinism in order to discern the

realization of its basic principles in history. Yet there was no chair of history at the FU in the nineteenth century (56-57).

Into this context came Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. They collaborated philosophically from 1921 onwards and received faculty appointments in 1926. Van Deursen suggests that Dooyeweerd was Vollenhoven’s *alter ego* (108). Vollenhoven developed his “problem-historical method” for the analysis of Western philosophy, and Dooyeweerd developed his “philosophy of the cosmonomic law idea.” Here were “two original minds of international allure”: the FU reached its high-point in their hey-day (176, 189, cf. 384-86). Their writings, as is often the case with philosophy, proved to be not very accessible (140-42, 171-73). Nevertheless, Dooyeweerd’s inaugural address was memorable, and he gained the reputation of being a clear lecturer (171) and was even cheered by students (154) at a time when the GKN was losing the allegiance of its youth (137). As these philosophers entered a *milieu* still dominated by the old scholastic theology represented by Hepp, they and Hepp clashed. The philosophers understood “the soul” as the whole person, challenging the “rational soul” of the scholastics (174). This was just one flashpoint. More basically still, “Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd denied that reformational philosophy would be bound by existing theology,” while Hepp and his supporters held “to the contrary that the other sciences must submit to the tutelage of theology” (175). Hepp, who published against the philosophers, asserted that “real science” could not contradict scripture as construed by scholastic theology (188, 190-91). Of course, it is imperative to distinguish between the world-picture of the biblical writers and a biblically directed world-view.

W.J.A. Schouten, a critic of Hepp’s Stone Lectures on *Calvinism and the Philosophy of Nature* (1930), maintained that Hepp “does not know, or at least knows only superficially, the modern world picture, which he rejects” (188). Hepp’s fundamentalist-style Biblicism—which foisted a scientific agenda on the scriptures that they never claim for themselves—prompted J. P. de Gaay Fortman to acknowledge that a gap had opened up between the natural scientists and scholastic theologians: “We have no idea what to do with the prehistoric finds. Evolution solves the problem, but orthodox theologians know nothing of it” (189). Of course, the Bible is a book *for* science (and everything else) but not a book *of* science. And

so, while Hepp was aiming his fundamentalist-style salvoes at Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, the appeal of Karl Barth (1886-1968) amongst the theologically literate *gereformeerden* grew apace (190-91). Hepp was a prime mover in the dismissal of the widely-respected preacher Klaas Schilder, while Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd were opposed. The action helped provoke a movement of secession from the GKN, in the form of the “*vrijmaking*” of 1944. Nothing was ever the same again (202-6). After the war, for a time, the *gereformeerden*, lacking a forward orientation, stuck to their “eternal principles” and “hold the dike” stance, but the artificial barriers they had erected collapsed with the coming of television (215, 237). It is hard not to conclude that the same circumstances that gave rise to the FU’s inception in the era of *gereformeerd* cohesiveness constituted a constraint to its development once that cohesiveness dissolved (cf. 234).

There are, of course, some criticisms to be made. The appointment of C. A. van Peursen is under-discussed (272), and Reijer Hooykaas’ denial of even the possibility of Christian philosophy requires further

contextualization (217). The failure to acknowledge the immense contribution of Bob Goudzwaard is both puzzling and grievous. Nevertheless, this volume is most welcome and would be well-complemented by equally candid English-language volumes on the GKN and the ARP, now both departed from the scene.

The tender yet tenacious plant of integral Christian scholarship constantly seems to find itself in institutional settings vulnerable to the more powerful interventions of denominational concerns, governmental requirements, and commercial prioritization. That is its predicament. These potentially pre-empting and undermining challenges do not invalidate Kuyper’s “sphere-sovereignty” principle but point to the supreme importance of thinking and acting normatively, rather than in terms of pragmatic and opportunistic goal-setting. As we consider the prospects for Christian higher education in the twenty-first century, it is incumbent upon us to ponder the cautionary implications of van Deursen’s narrative.