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Vollenhoven and Thinking in the Light of Scripture



by John H. Kok

Since the beginning of the present era a continuing line of philosophers has read and referred to Scripture in different ways and with different results. Not all of them were equally convinced that believing the Bible should necessarily make a difference when it comes to doing philosophy.

In this article,¹ commemorating also his birth one hundred years ago, I want to focus on the thought of the Dutch philosopher Dirk Vollenhoven (1892-1978) and to highlight those dimensions of his work and method that pertain to the contemporary challenge of thinking scientifically from a Christian perspective. I aim to begin to map out the

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scope and measure the depth of his appeal for “scriptural thinking,” for a “scriptural philosophy.”

Beyond the Integration of Faith and Learning

What Vollenhoven has to say goes beyond recent calls to integrate faith and learning. Rather than assuming that we have faith on the one hand and learning on the other, Vollenhoven repeatedly warns against grafting Christian thinking onto secular thinking. He is convinced that given the *antithetical difference* between the commitments and projects of current thinking and those of the Christian community, *synthesis* of these two *will compromise* what Christians believe *and distort* what they know to be the case. He tells us to deal with philosophical topics, both systematic and historical, from an explicitly Christian philosophical perspective.² Vollenhoven did not find proceeding from a religiously defined framework exceptional. He was convinced that everyone does that. The difference lies rather in the fact that this philosophical perspective, as well as the worldview that it presupposes, is grounded in Scripture—hence his preference for the name “scriptural philosophy.”³

I will first discuss Vollenhoven’s view that religion is basic to life and that Christian beliefs and worldview are informed by Scripture, the word of God. My analysis of these three components of Vollenhoven’s conception, namely, Scripture, Christian belief, and religion, provides in turn the backdrop for discussing his view of science, that is, of disciplined theoretical thinking.

Although I can give no further attention to the

historical roots of his conception here, it should be noted that in underscoring Scripture, faith, and religion as central to life, Vollenhoven shows himself a child of his Dutch, Calvinist, Kuyperian predecessors. Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) was one of the leaders of the mid-nineteenth century Dutch *reveil* which labored to revive Christianity's presence and influence in society. Following in his shoes was Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). He, more than any other one person, mobilized Dutch Calvinists in the forty years around the turn of the century to claim every area of life for God. Among others, Herman Bavinck, Wilhelm Geesink, and Jan Woltjer, three of Vollenhoven's professors at the Free University, where he himself began as professor in 1926, were partners with Kuyper in an attempt to build, exercise, and expand their respective academic disciplines upon the foundation of Reformed principles. But most important, certainly during the first half of Vollenhoven's lifetime, Dutch Calvinists came to see that God was sovereign in every area of life, academic or not, and must be obeyed.

Vollenhoven saw that Calvinism must influence personal life, social life, and academic life. He wanted the Bible to inform all of his philosophizing.

Scripture and Life

Scripture, according to Vollenhoven, reveals the will of God for our salvation and what this salvation presupposes. Scripture is therefore the law for faith-life, that is, for the pistical functioning of humankind—"pistis" being the Greek word for "faith" (41d4). In order to get a handle on the sense and relevance of this definition I will deal first with what Vollenhoven holds concerning divine revelation in general and Word-revelation in particular; then with the relationship between word-revelation and Scripture; and finally with what is involved in maintaining that Scripture is the law for human believing and belief. In so doing, we will begin to see why Scripture is so vitally important to Vollenhoven not only in everyday living, but also in his theoretical work.

In his few extensive discussions of divine revelation Vollenhoven underscores the need to distinguish between revelation as God's *activity* of revealing and revelation as the *result* of this divine activity. Only revelation in this second sense is open

to human investigation, whether scientific analysis or not.

Although the divine revealing activity of God's creating, speaking, and leading cannot be analyzed by people, God is not beyond the human ken. God, Vollenhoven writes, is knowable "to the extent he has revealed himself both through his word as well as through his creatures, to the extent we can know these" (48f82). Also, through these means, one can know that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remains related to, actively involved with, and present within the cosmos. In his steadfast love he has covenantally bound himself to creation, the result of his divine creative activity.

Given this difference between activity and result and the diversity within the activity of the triune God with respect to the cosmos, Vollenhoven distinguishes between Word-revelation, the speaking and revealing *activity* of the second person of the Trinity, and word-revelation, the result of this sovereign activity (41d24-5). The former, *Word-revelation*, is "the creating and hence divine Word that preached, sent his prophets, finally appeared himself, and also now lets his word be preached" (33a47). The word of God, *word-revelation*, is "the result of revelation through him Who is the Truth" (31f67), the "preached gospel word, that, being meant for people, spoke and speaks of him in human language" (33a47). It is only on the basis of this "result" that Vollenhoven wants to speak about God and his divine activity. The word of God, and only that word, communicates knowledge about this activity, about the Word before and behind the word. As such it is revelation, "because it informs about what would otherwise remain hidden, in other words, about God and the relationship of creatures to him" (26a26).

Woven through the distinction between the activity and result of God's speaking are at least two other distinctions. The one difference, due to the fall, is between general and special word-revelation: "As a result of the fall. . . natural, general word-revelation is insufficient and comes to be supplemented in history with the special word-revelation concerning grace" (26a32). The other difference, present already before the fall, is that in the beginning God's speaking, as activity, is creative and that subsequently, within the context of the covenant, it is also commanding: "God's speaking in the covenant bears another character

than with creation: it does not call creatures that are to reveal the majesty of God into existence out of nothing, but already presupposes a listening ear" (421115).

Hence, Scripture, the sixty-six books of the Bible, is word-revelation. But, Vollenhoven will add, not all word-revelation is written down in Scripture. Scripture is the inspired, humanly inscribed word of God, but not all of God's words were inscripturated (see, e.g., John 21:25).

As a book among books, two things make Scripture unique. One distinctive feature has to do with the nature of words. All words, Vollenhoven will maintain, "have a meaning, by which they denote something and direct the attention of the hearer or reader to that which is denoted." Scripture is different from other books in that its words not only refer to created things, but to the Creator as well. Hence Vollenhoven's claim that everything that can be known about God is based, directly or indirectly, on believing God's word-revelation (43b12,15).

In addition to informing us about God and his covenanting with creation, Scripture is also uniquely inspired. People wrote the Bible using words they could understand. But what they wrote down they did not dream up and did not formulate. The thoughts came from God: "He, whose thoughts are higher than ours, has formulated certain of his thoughts in a language people can understand" (31f67).

Vollenhoven obviously esteems Scripture. While not to be equated with (all) the words of God (ever spoken), the Bible is the divine and holy inscripturated word of God. Accepted as such, it is also dynamic, moving the hearts of men. The Gospel, writes Vollenhoven, is "a power of God to salvation, that is, to redemption" (32b70); "the revelation of God in his grace and wrath, 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,' that pierces very deep, 'discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Hebrews 4:12)" (36c12). And, to be a Christian is to live according to this word: "What has the last word in our life is not some danger, threatening from wherever, but the word of God, that is, since its being inscripturated, Scripture" (53i3). And yet, however dear Scripture remains for Vollenhoven, he decidedly side-steps the common usage "I believe in the Bible," preferring rather "I believe the Bible."

"Believing in," in Vollenhoven's vocabulary, is

reserved for believing in God (or in what one takes to be god) and is ultimately a matter of the individual human heart. With respect to God, "believing in" refers to a personal relation of trust "that time and again is fed by the believing that it is and was as he says" and "expresses that the progressive process of being born again goes hand in hand with an awareness of having been called to *salvation*" (26a20,26).

. . . believing in God. . . is simply total, and without reserve. It touches the heart of the person. But then we must also believe (on) God, that is, that he exists. Better still, we must believe God at his Word. To believe in God

What lives in one's heart comes to expression in one's activities and their results, both of which are accessible to human analysis.

is to trust him personally. But no one can trust a God who has not spoken. . . . You can know God from his Word, if you believe that Word, if you believe God at his Word. (65b5)

To believe in God is to live in covenant with him, obeying his commands. It is what Vollenhoven calls "true religion": "a walking with God, whose Word one holds to be true" (57a7). The only alternative here is "false religion"—the difference being between obedience and disobedience to the first and great command of the covenant, to love God above all: "religion is the relationship of humankind to the God of the covenant in obedience and disobedience to his fundamental law of love" (43b74). This precept, the religious norm for human living revealed already prior to the fall, is knowable directly from the word-revelation and likewise from Scripture. Hence, to believe in God—a matter of the "prefunctional" human heart—requires that believers in their (functional) living also take him at his word, that is, that they believe the Bible.

Were it not, however, for the grace of God after the fall, even the desire to acknowledge his law of love as the norm for life and hence to believe in him would have been out of the question. So also, to believe God's (inscripturated) word to be *the* word-revelation requires that a person's heart be opened and converted through grace by the Holy

Spirit. Belief in God is a matter of the heart, a gift of grace to those once lost and now restored. And what a person believes *in* affects everything that person does. In other words, the direction of your heart, be it towards God or away from him, influences every facet of your life.

Hence, Vollenhoven distinguishes "believing," and its correlate "belief," from "believing in." Believing and belief, as human activity and result, are said to be qualified by one of fourteen distinct but interrelated modal functions inherent to human living—by the so-called "pistical function"—each of which is under a God-ordained "functional law." The God-given law for believing, that is, for pistical functioning, is more specifically what Vollenhoven calls a "norm": it is a law for creatures that, if it is to be obeyed, demands a listening ear (50d72). Vollenhoven sees Scripture as the law/norm for true faith-life (40p5).

So far we have seen that Scripture, according to Vollenhoven, is the inscripturated word-revelation of God. It is the modal norm for faith life which reveals among other things the religious norm for life within the context of the covenant. I will now discuss how Vollenhoven thinks scriptural belief applies to worldview: the pistical dimension of life and the knowledge it involves and presupposes.

Christian Belief and Worldview

In calling believing the highest function Vollenhoven implies two things. On the one hand, believing is (only) a function. It is a unique mode of creaturely functioning, one of many ways in which the direction of the human heart "manifests itself" (51h5). On the other hand, believing is the most important in the set of fourteen modally qualified functions that Vollenhoven distinguishes. The others are all "lower" than the pistical function and are said to constitute the substratum of faith.⁴

As we saw, the functional law for this mode of existence is Scripture. Scripture, as norm, holds for all pistical functioning, but also requires recognition if it is to be obeyed. At the same time, Vollenhoven warns against equating Scripture and the believer's listening to Scripture. Scripture is divine and holy, while our use of it is human and always tainted by sin (5317). Failure to acknowledge Scripture as the norm, however, does not imply an

absence of pistical functioning but rather disobedient pistical functioning (= unbelief).

Believing Scripture, however, is more than accepting it as "the functional law for pistical functioning." Vollenhoven often states that believers, including those with a philosophical bent, must seek without pretense or title, to understand and to live according to Scripture. This implies embracing the promises of God, involves continually consulting Scripture, and informs thankfully and joyfully serving God (5018).

Holy Scripture directs itself first of all to practical life: to teaching, to refutation, but at the same time to comforting, so that we shall have hope; so that our prospect as Christians will be toward things above; so that we know that there is a door in life through which God comes in order to speak to his people; a door through which we too, with our answer to that Divine Word, may direct ourselves to God. (5317)

In like manner, Vollenhoven emphasizes that Scripture does not present us with some sort of scientific system or theoretical conception (36c12). He not only rejects the notion that Scripture is a handbook for philosophical or even theological knowledge, but adds:

Nor should it primarily be seen as a source for nonscientific knowledge. Scripture directs itself to our believing, which, as long as it does not turn around in unbelief, can be circumscribed as a holding to be veritable what God reveals to us in his word, and "holding to be veritable" is more than simply (nonscientific) knowing. (41d4)

Christians accept Scripture as God's word and learn to trust him at his word.

Believing, as the highest function of every human being, not only rests on its substratum, but it also "forms one whole with it." Believing/belief refers to this substratum through traits ("retrocipations") inherent to this earthly mode of being: "the joy and sorrow of believing refer back to the psychical [function]; its thinking and knowing to the analytical [function]; its trust to the ethical [function]" (50d74). Of these inherent traits, the analytic retrocipatory moment requires our attention.

When someone listens to the word of the Lord, she comes to know something about God: that he created the world; about the cosmos: that the whole world is created by God; about his covenanting rela-

tion to the cosmos. She also learns about the world in relation to God: that human beings, though structurally unchanged, radically changed direction at the time of the fall; and about God's wrath and grace with respect to sin and the sinner. These, Vollenhoven recognizes, are all "major matters," primary givens having to do with "creation, fall, salvation through Christ, and life in restored communion with God, hence with the 'magnalia Dei' in creation and re-creation" (5018). He also repeatedly emphasizes that the knowledge of these things, implied in believing, not only presupposes some (analytic) distinguishing on the part of the believer, but also bears a nonscientific, pre-theoretical character.

The nonscientific nature of the knowing inherent to believing—faith knowledge—is not some sort of defect, due to sin, but is related to the fact that Scripture directs itself first of all to practical everyday life in a concrete way. God's word-revelation, Vollenhoven claims, *always* speaks about God—how he relates to creatures and they to him, "in the language of everyday perception" (26a26). Although he nowhere explains in great detail the nonscientific character of faith-knowledge, his most enlightening comments about it have to do with the total, circumscriptive (nonscientific) concepts of the knowing inherent to believing.

Knowledge of fundamental realities, usually received through the nurturing of parents and schooling, delineates the horizon of a person's life. The basic realities of creation, fall, wrath and grace, and re-creation, once grasped and understood by the Bible-believer as "major matters," exhibit, now as concepts of these realities, an all-inclusive character. These nonscientific "totality concepts" help to define the framework within which the Christian lives and moves and understands his being there (50d74-5). And although what a person knows from Scripture constitutes only one part of his everyday knowledge, Vollenhoven's claim is that, because the pistical is the highest human function, this faith knowledge is one of the most decisive factors in determining the parameters of that person's world and sense of living here and now.

Vollenhoven seldom discusses "worldview." When he does, he explains how worldview relates to philosophy. But Vollenhoven often discusses "Calvinism," though not as a theology or a theory or as a framework of circumscriptive concepts.

Calvinism for Vollenhoven is a worldview, or more poignantly, *a vision* of the world and of living.

A worldview is conceptual in the sense discussed above, but it is also more than that. A worldview is more intuitive and dynamic, and on that score also more elusive conceptually, than are the concepts, irrespective of their inclusiveness, that are included in a worldview. Vollenhoven, in one place, distinguishes within nonscientific knowing between worldview and experience (53i1) and, describing its role, writes that "worldview sets the practical knowledge of all experiences in the correct context" (55ms132). Worldview is a circumscribing whole, a unity of vision; one might also say, a sense of

Many times Christians fail to follow through on their relationship to God when it comes to theoretical activity.

place, calling, purpose, and context:

. . . [Worldview] is more than a collection of knowledge that rests on gradually widening the horizon, on continually coming into contact with other people, on expanding the scope of perception. It is the vision that you get from home, or that you've assimilated with difficulty. It is not a theoretical conception, but a view of God, of the world, life, being human, your fellowman, also of yourself.

This kind of vision puts its stamp on people. You can see that some humanists are humanists, that some Roman Catholics are Roman Catholic; and, yes, there are even those who look like they're Calvinists. But such a vision is hardly scientific. (53i8)

This vision as well as the beliefs and circumscriptive concepts it includes are all nonscientific. They are also *pre-scientific*, existing *prior to* (and not dissipating during) theoretical investigation, but also determining the basic contours of the *pre-supposed* foundation from which the scientist proceeds and to which he returns: "They cannot replace the concepts of scientific investigation, but they circumscribe them. What I find through theoretical research fits in there sooner or later" (50d76).

Religion and the Antithesis

Religion, for Vollenhoven, while basic, is itself part of a larger whole, namely, the covenant, the

“transcosmic” relationship between the Creator and his creation.⁵ Concerning the constant features of the covenant, Vollenhoven explains that the covenant presupposes (a) the existence of God, who is the origin, and his creative activity; (b) the result of this activity, namely, heaven and earth, and especially as far as the earth is concerned, the existence of humankind; and (c) the establishment of the covenant between God and humankind on the part of God, including the appointment of an office-bearer, a *mediator* between humankind and God. The structure of the covenant is said to be bilateral, having two “parties” and two “sides.” The two parties are God and the human race. Present in the covenant from God’s side is the Word-revelation; present in the covenant from the side of the human race is always a mediator (43b75-6).

Vollenhoven understands religion as the relation of humankind to God. It is the converse relation or “flip-side,” the answer or response, to the first and primary side of the covenantal relationship, God’s relation to human beings:

. . . the primary side, that is, God’s side of the connection between God and man, bears the character of covenant; answering to it from the human side, that is, secondarily, is religion—both the true and the false religion, hence, the holding to and the breaking of the covenant. (40j10)

In other words, religion is very specifically the relation in which the human race, as well as each of its members, stood or stands to God.⁶

Religion, according to Vollenhoven, dominates not only the whole of human life, but also indirectly all of created being. In his vocabulary the terms “creature” and “that which is subject(ed)” both refer to that which is created in its relationship to God. Everything created by the Creator is creature. But it is likewise subject to God’s sovereign and triune will. It is placed under his law and remains there, either in obedience or in disobedience. Whether Vollenhoven speaks of being creature or of subjected-being, he always sets religion in the foreground, while the covenantal relationship of God to that which is created constitutes the background. God, the ultimate origin, has priority. He and the covenant that he initiated with his creation is primary and constitutes the backdrop for everything else, the most important of which is people’s response to the Word of God, specifically, to the Great Commandment (48f69).

Human beings are by their very created nature always related (obediently or otherwise) to God. God places them in relation to himself and requires that they love him above all. Everyone begins here. It is, so to speak, humankind’s common *religious starting point*. Vollenhoven describes the difference in religion in terms of an antithetical duality in direction: since the fall, a person’s heart is directed either to God or away from him, that is, either toward the Creator (true religion) or toward something within creation (false religion). Vollenhoven also understands Proverbs 4:23, “Out of the heart are the issues of life,” in terms of this religious duality. Life “issues” in two directions, for better or for worse. For good, if one is born again, with a heart now converted toward God; for evil, if one’s heart is not turned to God in thankful service to one’s Creator and Savior, but is, at bottom, the slave of idols of one’s own making (that is, allowing something creaturely to have the last word in one’s life).

True and false religion are *related* in that both are subject to God’s law of love. But they are related *antithetically*. That is to say, given this duality, the one stands over against and in opposition to the other. This opposition manifests itself in *the antithesis*, in this case, as “the antithesis in religion,” or elsewhere, as “the antithesis in the world of the angels” (42h12; 43b18).

The antithesis in religion, like the individual heart that is opened or closed to God’s word, is said to be “pre-functional” and, as such, not accessible to human analysis or judgment. Rather, what lives in a person’s heart, and hence also the antithesis in religion, comes to the fore only in the various modes of earthly existence, in human activities and their results, all of which are accessible to human analysis. It is from out of the heart that religion radically and totally determines and dominates human living (53i2). Vollenhoven describes these various modes of being human as “the irreducible channels for the issues of life” (32d402) and explains that “all functions take their issue from out of the heart” (37y208).

Vollenhoven’s claims that religious direction pervades human experience are prescriptive. Religious direction should determine a person’s life and one’s heart direction should express itself in the modally qualified ways of human functioning. On the one hand, Vollenhoven is convinced that the entire per-

son is religious, that the direction of one's noetic, social, economic, and faith life is "steered" and "determined by the heart, and therewith by religion, that is to say, by the relationship to God." On the other hand, Vollenhoven reiterates this point time and again because he is also convinced that all too often a lack of integrity prevails among Christians between their religion and their lives. Many times Christians fail to follow through on their relationship to God when it comes to theoretical activity. Not that such consistency is easy. Speaking of his own attempt to survey the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective, he notes that doing so "costs laborious concentration and oceans of time" (59a48). He also acknowledges that obedient and disobedient living are not like water and oil: "actual living exhibits a mixture of striving in both directions at once" (50d73).

For Vollenhoven, true religion is not the "thesis" and false religion the "antithesis." The antithesis in humankind's relation to God is found in the opposition between true and false religion. But the antithesis is not limited to religion, just as religion is not limited to the prefunctional. The antithesis is also present on the functional level. In fact, wherever two things stand in opposition to each other as do good and evil, Vollenhoven does not hesitate to refer to the antithetical relationship between them. The antithesis is the *radical, thorough-going, and irreconcilable opposition* between obedience and disobedience to God's precepts, between good and evil, *wherever* this opposition is found.

Wherever an antithetical relationship can be discerned, religion is also involved: all of life is related, in obedience *or* disobedience, to God. Neutrality in this context is out of the question.

Thinking and Knowing

Vollenhoven's position on believing, religion, and the antithesis applies across the board to his conception of thinking, knowledge, science, and philosophy. In other words, the activity and results of everyday knowing, of doing science, and of philosophizing are said to be determined by the obedient or disobedient relationship in which the heart of the person performing these activities stands to God. But obviously more than religion is involved in coming to know.

Nonscientific knowing

People's knowledge of parents, siblings, relatives, and neighbors, also of those animals, plants, and physical things with which they have had contact, to mention just a few examples, is an everyday kind of knowing. Vollenhoven generally refers to such knowledge as "nonscientific," that is, as different from scientific (theoretical) knowledge. It is the concrete, everyday knowledge had by everyone.

I will first discuss six characteristics nonscientific knowing has in common with all knowledge and then focus on what, according to Vollenhoven, makes it unique.

(1) Like all knowledge, nonscientific knowledge

Science remains an insightful tool, but always a prosthesis, helping us to see details and connections that we otherwise wouldn't.

is not something had instantly or from the start. It is rather always learned, either from others or through personal investigation. But either way, Vollenhoven states that all knowledge presupposes someone, past or present, analytically discerning and noting a diversity in that which exists independent of this activity. In other words, the thinking and learning that results in knowing is always a thinking "by someone" "about something" and, as thinking, a matter of "distinguishing that which is different in the context in which it occurs" (37y202). Vollenhoven's formulation of the norm that holds for this activity reads: "Distinguish well that which can be analyzed, whatever it be" (48f73). He assumes this basic structure as common to all knowledge, be it about God, his law, or the cosmos.

(2) Although knowledge is always *about* something, whatever it *be*, Vollenhoven rejects the notion that the knower and that which is knowable, the subject and object of knowledge, are divided. Nor does knowing parallel being or stand over against it. Rather, he claims that knowing is a component of being (and consequently, that ontology is more basic than epistemology).

(3) A third characteristic common to all knowledge is that it can ultimately draw from only two sources: Scripture (the word-revelation of God) and nature (that which is created). Given these

sources, God, his law, and the cosmos are knowable, to a certain extent:

- A. God, as we noted above, is knowable to the extent he has revealed himself through his word and through his creatures (to the extent they are humanly knowable).
- B. The law governing the cosmos is said to be "knowable by the light of the word of God from the cosmos."
- C. The cosmos, more particularly:
 1. Heaven (the world of angels) is knowable to the extent humankind receives communication about it from the word of God.
 2. Earth is knowable "to the extent we receive communication about it from the word of God, and to the extent we can investigate its past, present, and future." (43b118-9)

(4) A fourth characteristic builds on the above. The activity involved in coming to know God, law, and cosmos is similar in terms of discerning and noting. But this activity also appears to be different in each case. Vollenhoven stipulates that with respect to God, this discerning and noting can be done only in trust; with respect to God's law for the cosmos, it is primarily an activity in subjection to the same; and with respect to the cosmos, it is inquisitive (48f87).

(5) A fifth characteristic of knowing pertains to the results that accrue when a person attends to that which is knowable and analyzes it in its context. Described generally, these results are either a knowing or an erring about what has been analyzed, depending on whether the person has distinguished well or poorly. That which is knowable determines the content and extension of each result. The character of the thinking activity determines whether the result is either simple or composite and either nonscientific or scientific. The person, functioning in other ways, then usually formulates these results in terms of concepts and assertions.

(6) In addition to the ever-present activities of perception, recollection, and expectation, a final characteristic of all knowledge in the sense of result is that these results must be put in some order. The rule Vollenhoven lays down is that one's concepts be arranged "according to the extension of that about which they hold" and that assertions be arranged didactically, ultimately according to the

order of reality that one accepts. This means that concepts are to be arranged in terms of one concept ("women," e.g.) being subordinate to another concept ("people," e.g.) or that two concepts coincide, intersect, or are mutually disjoint. Given his view of reality, Vollenhoven would want to order propositions, for example, those about that which is subject to God in an earthly way, into the categories of religion, values, (the structure and genesis of the various) kingdoms, inherence, and relations.

These six characteristics hold for all knowing as Vollenhoven understands it. Now a few comments about what is peculiar about nonscientific knowledge.

Faith-knowledge, as we saw above, is one kind of nonscientific knowledge. Each is typified by one or more of the fourteen modes of earthly being that Vollenhoven distinguishes.

Given the created structure of earthly reality, everything in the world does or can function in various irreducible modes of existence. Everything that functions in one of these different ways together constitutes an irreducible "law-sphere." A law sphere is a domain within the cosmos made up of that which is subject to a specific law. A law and its law-sphere are similar in their modality or character, but different in that the law *holds for* this domain, while the constituents within the law-sphere are *subject to* this law.

This diversity of law-spheres applies to nonscientific knowing in that the effort or activity of coming to know, as well as its results, is characterized by the modally qualified context in which it takes place. For example, the respect of children for their parents differs from the respect of citizens for their government (42i114). In other words, while all knowledge presupposes discerning and noting a diversity in that which exists independent of that person's activity, which is always modally qualified, the learning that takes place and the knowledge that results is always a particular (modally qualified) kind of nonscientific knowing. Knowing the difference in the garden between red and green tomatoes is different from knowing the difference behind the steering wheel between red and green lights.

At the same time, irrespective of the mode of being that qualifies it, all nonscientific knowing displays a basic similarity. The discerning activity

of coming to know nonscientifically always has to do with *things as a whole* (50d75). This holds for all of our daily experiencing, for the way we perceive persons or things around us and, for example, for a discussion with someone else that centers on nonscientific distinctions, such as between God and cosmos, animal and plant, one person and another, a business and a city. And because nonscientific thinking and knowing has to do with things as a whole, the results of this activity are likewise concepts of these wholes—the most inclusive of which define the parameters of one's horizon.

Scientific knowing

Scientific knowing differs from nonscientific in that the human activity that precedes it proceeds methodically and is not primarily directed to concrete things, but to a defined, abstract field or domain.

Before delving into the difference that science (theoretical thinking) makes, I must underscore the fact that according to Vollenhoven scientific knowing never stands alone, but is "continually undergirded and propelled" by the nonscientific knowing that precedes it (42h4-5). Nonscientific knowledge of oneself, one's needs and wants, of other people, of spouse and children and of what they may expect of us, of what one takes to be important in life, etc., constitutes what we can call the factual or *existential starting point* for all scientific activity. This point of departure, that we leave unquestioned, at least for the moment, does not dissipate and remains presumed when one turns to theoretical matters, that is, to scientific questions (50d76).

Vollenhoven acknowledges that people often are busy scientifically for some time already before giving much thought to methodological assumptions. Systematically, however, Vollenhoven would have the scientist first of all proceed to stake out her field of investigation, answering the question what is it exactly that, for example, sociology or psychology or physics or biology, as distinct from the other sciences, focuses on and studies?

One comes to discern such a field of investigation "A" as distinct from other fields "B" and "C," etc., through analysis, that is, by taking note of similarities and differences. After the scientist positively views or intuits "A", the field of in-

vestigation, Vollenhoven encourages the scientist to attempt to determine the place of *A* with respect to what falls outside this field, that is, with respect to *not-A*, and to survey the limits of this field. What is *not-A* as well as the context in which both *A* and *not-A* occur are then temporarily "put to the side." For the student of biology I take this to mean, among other things, that the stench of the formaldehyde and the expense of the fetal pig about to be dissected is forgotten; for the sociologist that the fact that she and her husband are looking for some good investment property in the city district she is surveying is for the moment simply not a factor; and for the economist that his methods of

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research and analysis may not be determined inwardly by his political preferences. Only after putting to the side the factors that do not pertain to the field being investigated should one proceed with the laborious investigation of the synchronic (structural) and diachronic (genetic) diversities within this field.

Although the analytic activity of discerning and noting is the same in each science, Vollenhoven states that the method of each discipline differs, owing to the unique character of the respective fields (26a42; 61c1,9). I take this to mean, for example, that the methods of physics and chemistry, though appropriate to the study of energy, motion, atoms, and molecules, ought not to be applied to the fields of sociology and economics. Because what they study is different, they require a different method.

A complete discussion of these procedural points would take us too far afield. Nevertheless, I want to elaborate briefly Vollenhoven's view of the nature and results of scientific activity and of the role of religion in this context.

Whereas nonscientific analysis for Vollenhoven involves distinguishing "wholes," scientific analysis not only focuses on a limited field of investigation, it also follows a methodic two-way

“route” within that field. The scientist can proceed (a) from the complex to the simple. Or he can (also) proceed (b), along the same route in the opposite direction, from the simple to the complex. The former Vollenhoven describes as “resolution,” the latter as “composition.”

Much can be said about these paths, which others have traditionally referred to as analysis and synthesis. Here, however, I want to mention only two points. First, Vollenhoven explicitly rejects the (Cartesian) notion that this procedure is one of breaking down and putting back together, of destruction and reconstruction. Reality is for humans simply a given and our knowledge is much more than the result of human construction. Secondly, resolution and composition are noetic processes whose results can provide only a possible embellishment of *detail* that must ultimately find its place within the broader context of the whole and of the connections left to the side when the scientific activity was initiated (57a18-9). Science remains an insightful tool, but always a prosthesis, helping us to see details and connections that we otherwise wouldn't.

I turn now to the specific role that religion plays in scientific analysis. On the one hand, religion is said to be found within each field of investigation. In his discussion of psychology, for example, Vollenhoven claims that in its field of investigation one will find “a difference between the psychic life of those who serve God and that of those who do not serve him” (57a13). Stated generally, at least for sciences other than the natural sciences, his point is that whatever field people investigate, they discover obedience and disobedience to the God-given norms for that domain of human life. How this claim might be borne out in those fields studied by the natural sciences he does not explain. On the other hand, Vollenhoven maintains that religion is also present in the analytic activity itself, namely, to the extent that scientific analysis obeys or disobeys the God-given norms for analysis (57a13). The antithetical difference between knowing and erring as results of scientific analysis, he explains, “is dependent on the antithesis in the relation of the preceding thinking to the law concerned” (421114). In both cases the presence of religion is a matter of the antithetical opposition between right and wrong, good and evil, according to the standards laid down by God for analyzing and for the field or domain in question.

An example taken from Vollenhoven's philosophical investigation of the cosmos may help clarify this point. In his analysis of earthly creation Vollenhoven distinguishes three different kinds of differences, none of which occur alone and each of which cannot be reduced to another: the “this-that difference” (this thing is not that thing); the “thus-so difference” (one mode of being is not another mode of being); and the “good-evil difference.” While none of these differences stand in antithetical opposition to one of the others, the diversity referred to in the third (good/evil) difference is both dual and antithetical. It has to do specifically with the relation of whatever-is-in-question to God's law and, hence, to God, that is to say, as we saw above, with religion. When Vollenhoven insists, then, that religion plays a key role in scientific analysis he is not suggesting, for example, that what counts is having one's well-intentioned heart in the right place, although that too is crucial, or that what needs analysis are “religious” topics. Rather, the point is primarily that a scientist has to analyze well, correctly distinguishing actual differences in their context. For Vollenhoven's own discipline this means that “one proceeds from the norm that philosophy must do justice to every diversity” (59a39). Only then will knowledge accrue and error be avoided. And when he insists that religion plays a role in the field of investigation he is not suggesting that value bases be added to knowledge bases (as though any knowledge base is not value-laden) or that the Bible be consulted to sanction every insight. His point is rather (a) that good and evil, right and wrong, healing and brokenness (by any name), make a difference in that field that is different from any other difference and (b) that this (third) difference ultimately presupposes a standard that is not only other than this or that thing or one or another mode of earthly being, but also holds for both, namely, God's laws and norms.

In summary, we can say that scientific thinking is for Vollenhoven one way of coming to know. It presupposes, builds on, and is borne by nonscientific knowing. As science, it involves *someone* moved by love or rebellion, that is, with an obedient or disobedient heart. It requires that someone is *thinking methodically about* similarities, differences, and relationships within *some limited field of investigation*. These fields of investigation, though different for the various sciences, each com-

prise a domain with a unique character and the laws that hold for that domain. Once this field has been staked out, been located with respect to what falls outside this field, and its limits have been surveyed, what remains to be done is the painstaking investigation of the structural and genetic diversities within that field. Vollenhoven's assumption and desire in all of this is that what we find in our investigation will fit, sooner or later, into the context of the circumscriptive concepts that define our understanding of the world and our lives in it.

Reformational Theoretical Thinking

Vollenhoven's insistence on scriptural philosophy, or more generally, on thinking in the light of Scripture, is paired with the emphatic rejection of synthesis with any thinking that does not subject itself to the direct sovereignty of God over creation, that does not acknowledge God's law as defining creaturely existence and the relationship between creature and Creator, and that rejects the Kingship of Christ, also when it comes to science. His own words, found in *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy*, are even stronger: "*Synthesis between Christian belief on the one hand and current philosophy on the other is impossible*" (33a16). What does he mean in speaking of the *impossibility of synthesis*, and what means does Vollenhoven suggest so that synthesis will be avoided and the desired reformation of Christian thinking will become a reality?

Vollenhoven's claim should not be taken to suggest that synthesis thinking is literally impossible, in the sense of "has not and never will occur." When he discusses synthesis philosophy, Vollenhoven sees before him an *attempted*, naive, uncritical *combination* of themes that agree with Scripture, with themes and thought patterns that do not agree. By "themes" he means to refer to basic discernable diversities, correlations, and or structures. The synthesis or combination of themes that are scriptural and those that are not involves an entwining or mixture, but can never result in a fully unified conception or theory (50e18). The "unity" of synthetic thinking is said to be artificial (33a306): "a mixture that does not do justice to either of the elements" (32b58). A *true synthesis*, in the sense of attained unity, between what Bible-believers know in the light of Scripture and, looking for ex-

ample to the social sciences, the basic themes of functionalism or symbolic interactionism or conflict theory, is what Vollenhoven claims is impossible. The result of attempting such a synthesis will be at best an unintegrated pastiche, like trying to connect iron and clay (32b69).

But what does Vollenhoven suggest as an alternative? As he repeatedly emphasizes: Scripture is not enough! An open Bible may help situate theoretical inquiry within a broader context, but it seldom presents its reader with answers to theoretical questions, even when the questions are posed correctly. Nor does Vollenhoven even come close to suggesting that Christian thinkers try to

*We must test and may not
neglect the efforts recorded
in the works of those who
have gone before us.*

begin from scratch, *de novo*. His advice to Christians in the sciences is rather *reformation*: "our own [thought]. . . will time and again have to experience a substantial reformation both in its premises and its terminology" (33a16-7).

For Vollenhoven the term "reformation" implies first of all a turn-about, a conversion, in one's relation to God and his law, that is, in religion, such that everything, including our theoretical pursuits, is seen in relation to God and, hence, as subjected to his will. At the same time, reformation for Vollenhoven also implies the active and ongoing element of reconsideration, revision, and reformulation. In order to do justice to this notion of scriptural thinking, this dimension also deserves our attention.

The basic categories and conceptual framework with which Vollenhoven worked was, in principle, not a closed system. Many of the results of his research are explicitly labeled as "provisional." Given the confines of this article I can best articulate the provisional and open character of Vollenhoven's conceptual framework by focusing on the thetical-critical method that he claims to follow.

Rather than defining one's theoretical position in terms of what one rejects, Vollenhoven suggests that the Christian thinker proceed *thetically*. That is to say, Christians should approach and deal with the problems and questions they confront from their

own positively stated point of view. I think that Vollenhoven would be uneasy to describe, for example, the methodological route for Christians in the social sciences as a "third way" that rides the fine line between positivism and skepticism. Priority number one for Vollenhoven is to work out a basic conception, in line with Scripture, that formulates as clearly and succinctly as possible one's own perspective on the matters in question.

This thetical procedure, to deal with questions from one's own point of view, presupposes a more or less defined basic grasp of things such that we can say "here I stand." At the same time, the theoretical articulation of this biblically informed and religiously grounded framework is definitely not a matter of pontificating, along the lines of "This is the way I/we see it and, therefore, that's the way it is." Rather, in addition to proceeding thetically, Vollenhoven also underscores the need to work *critically*.

To proceed critically for Vollenhoven is to analyze seriously and investigate meticulously (a) what others are saying and have said, (b) what those within the Christian tradition have said, as well as (c) what the person engaging in this evaluation has believed to date. Vollenhoven was not a soloist; he knew much could and had to be learned from others. But he also realized that a valid rejection of someone else's standpoint presupposes that the critic has seriously listened to and considered what the other person has to say. Vollenhoven's own development reveals his indebtedness to people like Henri Bergson, Alexius Meinong, and Bertrand Russell, as well as to Abraham Kuyper, Jan Woltjer, and Wilhelm Geesink. While he was obviously more akin to the latter group, Vollenhoven's acquiescence in either case was never complete or uncritical and his indebtedness never simply a matter of adoption. Vollenhoven dismissed the illusion that Christians entirely on their own and with their own devices can advance scientific reflection. What he says about the legacy of Kuyper holds in principle, I would claim, for everyone to whom he was indebted: take time to seriously consider and be ready to give account of what you accept and what you reject.

. . . it follows for us, Kuyper's students, that we may also not accept his legacy, let alone pass it on to others, without testing it. For even though it is obviously improper to insert one's own thoughts into the description of Kuyper's

standpoint, when it comes down to systematic reflection on the question "What can we adopt of this and what may we pass on to those who will in turn follow us?" we are directly accountable to him who calls every generation to their own task. (52k9)

And, in addition to others, Christian or not, Vollenhoven also emphasizes the need for self-critique. "Have I posed the problem correctly?" "Did I do justice to the difficulties involved?" He was very consistent on this score and, depending on the answer, Vollenhoven would change or maintain what he had earlier held to be the case.

There is then an obvious interaction for Vollenhoven between proceeding thetically and proceeding critically. The meticulous consideration and evaluation of oneself or others presupposes that one takes a stand, that some things are always taken for granted and, at least for the time being, are left unquestioned. Any critique worth its salt, whether it results in a (positive) confirmation or a (negative) rejection of the question at hand, presupposes a thetical stance. And, on the other hand, any thetical position that seeks to avoid contextual isolation, scholastic hair-splitting, and dead orthodoxy will have to engage in an ongoing process of critical (re)consideration, possible reformulation, and, where necessary, revision.

By maintaining what is viable in one's own position, by critically investigating the results reached previously by others, but also through one's own thinking, by daring to draw conclusions—in these ways one gets on, wrestling, further, and scores a double gain: a strengthened *position* and a more decisive *rejection* of what conflicts with it. (43b5)

The fact that Vollenhoven seldom explicitly records the critical wrestling that preceded his conclusions may well frustrate those who attempt to reconstruct the foundations and development of his thinking (and the same thing will happen to the generation we are nurturing today if we also keep our "sources" hidden). But among the many things that he did pass on was the description of this very helpful method that puts the positive in the foreground and the negative second. Vollenhoven's thetical-critical method underscores the need for an attentive ear to those asking and answering fundamental questions, for the meticulous analysis of historically situated theoretical frameworks, for the critical assimilation of insights forgotten or

previously unknown, and for the unabashed rejection of claims that cannot be rhymed with a theoretical framework that values the predicate "scriptural" and urges a continual reformation in its own premises and terminology.

Concluding Remark

In the preceding pages I have sketched the contours of what Vollenhoven means by thinking in the light of Scripture. His conception of religion and what moves people, of Scripture and its status in the cosmos, of believing and nonscientific knowledge, of worldview and circumscriptive concepts, of the fields and methods for theoretical investigation, evidences a depth and breadth in his thinking about thinking that deserves more attention than it has been given. The present generation surely may not neglect the effort and fruits of the Spirit recorded in the works of those who have gone before us. Vollenhoven's work, as that of Kuypers, needs to be tested, time and again. This introduction to Vollenhoven's call for the reformation of Christian thinking is an initial step along that path.

End Notes

- 1 This article is an abbreviated and slightly revised version of my "Vollenhoven and 'Scriptural Philosophy'" published in *Philosophia Reformata* 53 (1988): 101-42.
- 2 To mention only a few of his titles (translated): *Philosophy of Mathematics from a Theistic Standpoint* (1918a); *The Necessity of a Christian Logic* (1932b); *Calvinism and Reformation of Philosophy* (1933a); and "Needed Today: Scriptural Philosophy!" (1965b). In later years Vollenhoven developed a singular "problem-historical method" for the historiography of the history of philosophy with an eye to rewriting the entire history of ("unscriptural") philosophy from a Christian point of view.
- 3 Vollenhoven writes: "The term 'scriptural' only means to say that the philosophy that values this predicate continually reckons with Holy Scripture, to such an extent that its relies on Scripture; in other words, is *in line with Scripture*" (33a22).
- 4 The irreducible modes of earthly existence he distinguishes are, listed in their order of decreasing complexity: the pistical, ethical, juridical, aesthetic, economic, social, lingual, historical, analytic, psychic, organic, physical, spatial, and numerical.
- 5 "Now this 'covenant' is certainly not a connection that one has to search for within the cosmos. For the covenant is a relationship in which God sets himself before man and therewith man before himself. Hence, this relationship is one between God who does not and man who does belong to the cosmos. It does not lie within the cosmos, but, because the cosmos is taken up in this relationship, points beyond the latter" (33a40-1).
- 6 References to religion can also be found in terms of "a walking in the covenant with God"; "the functioning of the ex-

isting human being, sovereignly lead by the Spirit, with respect to the word-revelation." Religion is sometimes referred to as man's relationship to the law of love, to the word-revelation, or to Scripture, but here too it is ultimately a matter of man's relationship to God, the Lawgiver and source of this revelation.

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