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## Confessional Scholarship?

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consequences of the antithesis.

Some Christians seem to feel that the problem created by the antithesis can be solved by a kind of division of labor in scholarship. Christians in the past have often busied themselves with theology and "moral science" as having particular religious significance, while the natural sciences were relegated to the non-Christian as a kind of neutral area. In the natural sciences, the antithesis had little force. With that emphasis in mind, it often happened in the early history of American church-related colleges that the President taught the course in "moral philosophy" to make sure that the job was done right and, I presume, to strengthen himself in the assurance that he was heading a Christian college.

Though I don't like the single-text way of getting at the biblical perspective on a subject, I would call attention to the fact that it is also in Colossians that we are given an impetus towards integrated learning. In Colossians 1:17, where the personal pronoun clearly refers to Christ, we read, "And he is before all things, and in him all things consist." I take it that "all" here admits of no exceptions. It would follow that if we are to understand any "thing," that we will have to begin by taking it in its creational context. Furthermore, "thing" in this context should not be limited to tangible entities such as desk and chairs, but must be extended in meaning to cover also our doing and the very possibility of any meaningful saying—or non-meaningful saying, for that matter, as the latter can only be what it is in the context of the former.

In the history of Christian thought, those who felt the need for some meaningful association between their Christian confession and their intellectual pursuits have from time to time approached the solutions in divergent ways. Let me promptly and sincerely say that if it turns out in sequel that I differ radically with the position of a fellow Christian, it should by no means be

construed to mean that I am calling into question his love for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, or his dedication to the cause of Christian scholarship.

The medieval monk thought he could cloister himself away from the conflicts inherent in the Christian's confrontation with the antithesis. But even then, those who were engaged in scholarship were confronted with and sometimes tantalized by the existing pagan writings. One can imagine a monk taking in the metaphors of Virgil with heady delight while the abbot was out of sight, somewhat like a teenage boy inhaling his first cigarette out of sight of his parents.

Very early someone found a useful figure to justify the appropriation of pagan ideas, when they were considered useful and did not seem to carry any thought that stood in diametrical opposition to the plain truth of the Bible as they interpreted it. This figure was that of the Hebrews relieving the Egyptians of their treasure as the Hebrews made their Exodus. This analogy was already in use at the time of Augustine. Rabanus Maurus of the ninth century court school of Charlemagne repeats the idea with the added provision, "The philosophers, especially the Platonists, if perchance they have spoken the truth, are not to be shunned but their truth appropriated as from unjust possessors." Those who employed this figure failed to note that much of the Egyptian treasure was later used to form the golden calf that so stirred the wrath of Jehovah as Moses came down from the mount with the Ten Commandments.

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, the noted Dominican theologian, formulated an approach to Christian scholarship which under the name "Thomism" has since that time borne his stamp. Taking his general method from Aristotle, Aquinas began with the empirical-rational method, which in the modern period has been identified with scientific method. By the

Thomistic method, all rational human beings can share a common deposit of knowledge, Christian and non-Christian alike, as long as it comes by sense perception and is rationally organized. No distinction need be maintained between Christian and non-Christian thought as it operates with a common method and with common ingredients. What distinguishes the Christian is the fact that through the Bible he is given the mysteries of the Christian faith which are necessary for his salvation. The interpretation of the Bible, meanwhile, remains the sole prerogative of the Church.

While Thomism had a necessary place for the Bible as to the way of salvation, at the same time it developed a "natural theology" by which it offered proof for the existence of God on the basis of the inductive procedures which had been developed by Aristotle. Thomists argued from the obvious appearance of motion to the need of a Prime Mover. God, the omnipotent, then becomes the best candidate for the title of Prime Mover. So with a bit of inductive sleight of hand, they moved up from the natural to the Creator of the natural. Not all Roman Catholics were content to follow the line of argument set by Thomas Aquinas, however. In the early seventeenth century, the French philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal showed up the inductive gap in the argument of the Thomists. He insisted that by the method of natural theology we cannot move to the God of the Scriptures. The God of Aristotle is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Even before the time of Thomas Aquinas, St. Anselm of Canterbury had tried to give the Christian belief in God a reasonable proof through his a priori argument. He argued that the very concept of God includes the concept of perfection, and the concept of perfection includes the concept of existence; therefore, God necessarily exists. Anselm's ontological argument

was buffeted about by subsequent philosophers with a variety of disproofs. Many were satisfied that it was permanently laid to rest by Kant when he suggested that the argument is invalid because existence is not a predicate. But it would be like saying, God is good; God is powerful; and God is "is." But Kant's argument did not terminate the discussion. Only a few years ago, Alvin Plantinga, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, edited a small-volume treatment of the subject, though he did not try to find new validity for Anselm's approach.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty with the argument of the Thomists, both medieval and modern, and the argument of Anselm should now be obvious. We cannot move by an unbroken causal series of events in creation to the Creator as First Cause. We cannot move by an unbroken chain of logical steps from a presumably self-evident assumption in our minds to the Creator of all minds. In each case, we end up with an abstraction, instead of the God of our salvation who has revealed Himself in the Bible as a personal triune God and has provided for our redemption in Christ.

Roman Catholics often point with pride to the magnificent job that Thomas Aquinas did when he built a Christian superstructure on the foundations provided by Aristotle. They see no need to begin with our Christian confession as the only possible foundation. Some evangelicals would borrow the Thomistic blueprint. They assume that they must present their case in such a way that it will seem plausible to the non-Christian, using the non-Christian's rule of plausibility.

John Warwick Montgomery writes, "Dogmatics is a field of endeavor directed to Christian believers and thus properly begins with God's inerrant revelation of himself in Holy Scriptures. But apologetics is directed to unbelievers—to those who by definition do not accept God's Word as divine utterance. Here the focus must be

on their needs, and the starting point has to be the common rationality (the inductive and deductive procedures) which all men share."<sup>2</sup> In his little book, *Christianity and Philosophy*, Arthur F. Holmes of Wheaton College gives the same idea rather explicit expression. Holmes writes concerning the Christian philosopher as an apologist, "He will seek to show that Christianity is intellectually respectable, that it is relevant, that it is defensible, that it is the most appealing of all the voices that clamor for the ears of contemporary man."<sup>3</sup>

From the quotations just cited, one would have to assume that there is a widespread agreement as to what constitutes "common rationality," as well as what is "respectable" and "defensible" in the world of non-Christian thought and among scholars generally. That may have been the case when scholars were rather uniformly under the spell of eighteenth-century rationalism. Today, however, that is by no means the case. There is a great deal of disagreement as to what logic ought to control one's thinking.

There seems to be a considerable body of opinion among evangelical scholars that the "law of non-contradiction" is the paradigm for plausibility. For Montgomery, it would seem that asking the non-Christian to set aside his dogmas for yours would be like asking the Las Vegas gambler to throw down his money at the gaming table, all the while knowing that the croupier has the stakes contrived against him. The non-Christian ought to be given a sporting chance. He should not be asked to knuckle under to the "foolishness of preaching" at the outset, and to take the beliefs acquired in that way as the controls for his philosophy or whatever other kind of theorizing might be his scholarly pursuit.

In the past one hundred years within

the Reformed community, Abraham Kuyper was one who felt that confessional demands were of the essence of scholarship. He felt this so strongly that with his positions of influence he was able to gain support for the establishment of the Free University of Amsterdam. Yet, as a man of his time along with Princeton theologians of the same day, Kuyper did not work out his confession with the kind of thoroughness in his theory of knowledge that one might have expected on the basis of his arguments for the need of a confessionally based university. In his own writings, remnants of Platonism and Scholasticism remained here and there to haunt the halls of his new educational establishment.<sup>4</sup>

Herman Dooyeweerd, for almost forty years a professor at the Free University and now emeritated, spent a lifetime working out a systematic philosophy along the line of Kuyper's beginnings. Dooyeweerd identified three groundmotives which have controlled the thinking of Western man throughout the centuries ever since the beginning of scholarship with the ancient Greeks. Dooyeweerd would not have us think of these groundmotives as directional motifs with limited results. They determined the entire pattern of cultural development and the spirit of Western thought.<sup>5</sup> Taking as his groundmotive the scriptural theme of creation, fall, and redemption, Dooyeweerd engaged in a penetrating and relentless critique of all thought that did not begin with that scripturally-based motif as its starting point.

Dooyeweerd's criticisms were hailed by many as the catharsis which would purge Reformed philosophizing of the last remnants of Platonism and Scholasticism, that is, philosophizing which began with some immanent principle, instead of using the Creator as the transcendent source of all

meaning. However, when Dooyeweerd began the constructive part of his philosophizing, disappointment was expressed by some of his early admirers. Cornelius Van Til, whose tenure as Professor of Ethics and Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary was concurrent with that of Dooyeweerd at the Free University, expressed disagreement with Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique. Van Til pointed out that in his immanent critique of philosophic thought Dooyeweerd begins immanentistically without the assumption that no meaningful prediction can take place outside of the parameters of the Scriptural groundmotives which Dooyeweerd himself had accepted on the basis of his Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

Through all the years that he occupied the chair of Apologetics at Westminster, Cornelius Van Til has insisted that there are no brute facts. Every possible statement stands in the context of pre-interpretation. In a 1937 address before the convention of the National Union of Christian Schools, Cornelius Van Til challenged the teachers to take that view of "fact" into their classroom. This view immediately created problems for Christian scholars. How do you account for the situation that non-Christians can count, write, and contribute many wonderful discoveries in the field of science? And if all facts are contextual, how do you set them into the context of your biblically grounded faith? It soon became apparent that the exposition of "Common Grace" which came out of the 1924 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church was of little help to the Christian scholar in taking account of the problem of communicating to and working with the non-Christian scholar.

Cornelius Van Til continued to maintain, however, that the non-Christian uses his gifts of scholarship in an apostate way.

"The natural man uses his logical powers to describe the facts of creation as though these facts existed apart from God. He has rejected the common mandate. (Cf. Gen. 1:28) It is therefore in conjunction with the sinner's subjective alienation from God, as a limiting concept merely, that we can speak of anything as not having been destroyed by sin. In the interpretive endeavor the 'objective situation' can never be abstracted from the 'subjective situation'."<sup>7</sup> Van Til's position has not been widely accepted among Evangelicals generally. Scholars in the Reformed community have also shown reluctance because the preconditions seem too stringent by way of an approach to the presumption that there is commonly sharable body of knowledge available alike to Christian and non-Christian scholars.

As he is a leader in the Christian Reformed community of scholars, we can also profitably follow the work of Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff of Calvin College as it relates to confessional scholarship. In 1955 as a college student, Wolterstorff asserted that in order to be Christian, a philosophy would have to be directly deducible from statements found in the Bible. As this is obviously impossible, Christian philosophy is an impossibility.<sup>8</sup> Presumably, this can be applied to the other sciences as well.

Some years later as Associate Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, Wolterstorff contributed an article for a "Festschrift" which acknowledged the emeritation of W. Harry Jellema, as the nestor of the philosophy department at Calvin College. In the lead article of that volume of essays, Wolterstorff treated the subject "Faith and Philosophy." He wrote, "In principle, at least, it seems possible for a man's philosophical perspectives and his way of life to be independent—for his philosophical appeal to be independent of his ultimate trust."<sup>9</sup>

Aside from the fact that the designation "ultimate trust" comes across as a kind of Tillichian substitute for Jehovah, I would have to argue that Wolterstorff, in this instance, has his order exactly reversed. For while in practice we often do keep our philosophizing or our scholarship and our confession separate, in principle they never can or should be separated.

In his most recent book, On Universals, with analytic and linguistic finesse, Wolterstorff treats the history and the implications of the concept of Universals as it has affected various theories of knowledge throughout the development of philosophy ever since ancient times. Wolterstorff concludes that one can posit three kinds of entities: Creator, creatures, and predicables. This may come as somewhat of a surprise to those who have been accustomed to a dual distinction, namely, Creator and creature.

How does Wolterstorff argue his case? After some discussion concerning God's properties and whether or not He is a necessary being, Wolterstorff concludes as follows: "Further, if God did not exist, then the proposition 'God exists' would be false. And then the property of being either true or false would still be exemplified. It would still exist. This existence of this property seems not to depend on God even in the sense that if God did not exist it would still exist.<sup>10</sup> Once more I must demur. I would have to say that as a precondition, one's confession would rule out the possibility that any entity can exist on the basis of syntactical or semantic necessity. No predicable can stand outside of the creating Word of God, as God is the basis for all meaning.

This past September we welcomed Professor Wolterstorff to the Dordt campus as the first lecturer under the sponsorship

of a newly formed consortium of Reformed and Presbyterian colleges. In his lectures, Wolterstorff was concerned with the development of a Christian "theory of theories." This bears directly on the subject of Christian scholarship, so we had the opportunity to bring ourselves up to date on Wolterstorff's thinking. Before proceeding to an examination of his thought, it is necessary to issue two cautions. First, while the above discussion was written before Wolterstorff arrived at Dordt and has bibliographical references, the subsequent discussion is based on an introductory unscripted lecture and on further lectures which as yet are available only in mimeograph copy with a very limited distribution up to this time. Second, though I am sure that Wolterstorff spoke from a basic position that is part of his mature thought, the purpose of the lectures was to be somewhat of a catalyst to get the above-mentioned consortium moving in the direction of some new endeavors on the subject of Christian scholarship.

In his first lecture, Wolterstorff asserted that he wanted to be a Kuyperian "transformationalist." He would avoid the twin hazards of pietism and dogmatism in favor of relevant change in the world. This is not to conclude that there is no place for dogma or that one must eschew piety.

Getting into the material of his mimeographed copy in the second lecture, Wolterstorff concentrated on past attempts to develop a theory of theories, in particular, the past attempts at tying theory to the demands of one's Christian confession. All previous attempts were set aside as coming under the indefensible rubric of "Foundationalism." In reporting the lectures, the Dordt Diamond ran the heading "Foundationalism Blasted." Perhaps one should



pass that off as a bit of student hyperbole or student eagerness to see certain "sacred cows" led off to the abattoir.

In any case, in his captivating way, Wolterstorff disqualified Thomism for its empirical-rational attempt to tie theory to its foundations. Some evangelicals came under criticism for trying to use their "control beliefs"—beliefs which are part of their foundation—as data for their theories. For example, a dispensationalist might use his control beliefs as data for a theory of history. Wolterstorff also rejected Cornelius Van Til's insistence that one's confessional base precedes all theorizing and unifies it while at the same time tying the subjective firmly to the objective. For Wolterstorff, the monistic direction of Van Til's approach too closely parallels Idealism.

Though for the most part, we applauded Wolterstorff's declared intention once more to move Christian scholarship along the lines of Kuyperian transformationalism, I think his theology reflects the interim influence of the historical-critical method and that of Neo-orthodoxy. The historical-critical approach is apparent in Wolterstorff's reflection on the Scriptures; for he says, in reference to the Old and New Testament, "These are, on the one hand, expressions of the religion of ancient persons and peoples. But they have always been judged, by the community of Christ-followers at large, as proper guides for our thoughts and our lives."<sup>11</sup> The first sentence would be entirely unacceptable to Abraham Kuyper, as well as to such later theologians in the Reformed tradition as the Kuipers, R. B., H. J., and Herman, as well as to Louis Berkhof and John Murray. They would all begin with the self-authenticating character of the Bible.

The Neo-orthodox aspect of Wolterstorff's thought, it seems to me, demon-

strates itself in his uneasiness with the idea that in the Reformed tradition God has been deemed an atemporal being. The question then arises, How can an atemporal being be busy in the time-reckoned events of man in history? The neo-orthodox thinker cannot allow God as the "Wholly Other" to break into the history of revelation without using a virtually non-historical category, that of Geschichte. Basically, the problem as to how one communicates meaningfully concerning the revelation of God in history is of a piece with the problem of how one ties his scholarship to his confession. Is it not a fact that the Bible places God outside of our time reckoning, though it speaks anthropomorphically concerning God's participation in history? It would seem, then, that the solution does not lie in the direction of placing the God of history within history as a way of allowing Him to reveal himself progressively through history. If I have misconstrued the basis for Wolterstorff's difficulty at this point, I assume that he will elucidate his views on this subject in the future.

The exploratory character of Wolterstorff's lectures gave them a kind of "nothing ventured, nothing gained" atmosphere. So I venture some critique of his ideas on "a theory of theories." There is some unresolved inconsistency in Wolterstorff's solution at this time. For example, he says, "It is important to see that a person's control beliefs determine his theoretical activity from the inside. They are not simply added on."<sup>12</sup> Consistent pursuit of that idea, it seems to me, should lead Wolterstorff in the direction of reconstructing Abraham Kuyper along the lines of Cornelius Van Til and the early Herman Dooyeweerd.

Wolterstorff reasserts his belief in the integral nature of control beliefs when he



states, "The scholar who is serious about his Christian assent will be one whose assent works within his theorizing."<sup>13</sup> Having said that, Wolterstorff goes on to say, "I wish to insist on the fact that theories acceptable to Christians are acceptable to others as well. If someone's theory of theories affirms or entails the opposite, I take that to be a decisive mark against it."<sup>14</sup> By way of further fostering the idea of common knowledge between the Christian and the non-Christian, Wolterstorff insisted that both have a common experience and knowledge of color, as, for example, the blueness of the upholstery on Dordt's lecture-room chairs. In contrast, I would respond that though the Christian and the non-Christian share God's creation as a common source of knowledge, the non-Christian has no basis for knowing that he can know and therefore never does significantly know. He is at best hemmed in by probability.

In his "blasting" of "Foundationism," Wolterstorff suggested that we cannot tie our confession to our theorizing analytically, empirically, or by the use of the a priori of Cornelius Van Til. At the same time, under the influence of positivism and the language analysis schools of philosophy, Wolterstorff would put us in fear of resorting to the use of rhetoric or metaphor as we refer to the foundations of our theorizing. At this point, at least, I don't think that we have been furnished with a creditable substitute for that which we have been encouraged to abandon.

After we had terminated our discussions and Wolterstorff was winging his way back home, it occurred to me that we had done a lot of talking about a subject which has at its base the problem of common grace, though the term was never mentioned. If we find the early Reconstruc-

tionism of Herman Dooyeweerd and the present position of Cornelius Van Til too limiting, there is the choice of going back to Abraham Kuyper. By this time, I think it should be obvious that our work towards a Christian Theory of Theories will stand in the setting of our unfinished business with respect to common grace.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The Ontological Argument, Garden City, N. Y., Anchor Books, 1965.
2. "Once Upon an A Priori." Jerusalem and Athens. E. R. Geehan, ed. Nutley, N. J. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1971, p. 391.
3. Chicago, Inter-Varsity Press, 1960, p. 35.
4. Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer." Philosophia Reformata. Vol. IV, p. 193.
5. Herman Dooyeweerd. "De Cristische Onderzoeks-methods," Reformatie en Scholastiek in de Wijsbegeerte. Franeker, 1944, p. 41.
6. For the details of this discussion see Jerusalem and Athens, pp. 74-127.
7. Common Grace and the Gospel, Nutley, N. J. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1973, p. 43.
8. "The Christian and Philosophy." The Calvin Forum, May, 1955, p. 195.
9. Faith and Philosophy. Alvin Plantinga, ed. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1966, p. 32.
10. On Universals. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 292.
11. For those on several campuses who have Wolterstorff's mimeographed copy, this is found on page II, I, of Lecture II.
12. Lecture II, I, 3.
13. Lecture II, III, 4.
14. Lecture II, III, 5.