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A Review of Robert Sweetman's *Tracing the Lines: Spiritual Exercise and the Gesture of Christian Scholarship*



by Calvin Seerveld

Sweetman's *Tracing the Lines: Spiritual Exercise and the Gesture of Christian Scholarship* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016, ix-177) is an unusually good, genial, provocative, brave book. Robert Sweetman has bared a believing heart as well as a fertile intelligence to proffer a new way to understand Christian scholarship. If you buy, pick up, and read this book with patient attention, it will change your idea of

how to conceive and practice professional scholarly study if you would be a follower of Jesus Christ. But there is historical insight and philosophical wisdom afforded by these reflections, which can attract any educated person, of whatever commitment.

The book title engaged me immediately: *Tracing the Lines* (Vollenhoven), *Spiritual Exercise* (Loyola), *Gesture of Christian Scholarship* (Sweetman's own modesty on the problem under consideration—just a "gesture" toward: what is "Christian" scholarship?).

The usual way this problem has been set up is to realize that since "Scholarship is scholarship, is scholarship," "Christian scholarship" must add something distinctive to the scholarship (112).¹ If it be true that the biblical Christian's and the non-Christian's starting points, first principles, or pre-suppositions are different and incompatible, and each carries out logically its philosophical analysis, they will arrive at conclusions, as Cornelius Van Til famously did, when he argued that $2+2=4$ means something quite different to a child of God than it does to a disbelieving thinker (113-116), as the two really live in different universes, which is not true. Or others have maintained that a certain method, insight, or conceptual result is peculiarly "Christian," like the modal aspectual cosmology of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, developed phe-

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nomenologically from Abraham Kuyper's idea on the specifically limited but universally interrelated spheres of responsibility belonging to societal institutions. But when the outright secular scientists at the Lulea University in Sweden have adopted and use the modal theory as a very helpful model for their scholarship, is it still a "Christian" idea (117-118)?

Before he zeroes in to solve the embarrassments of this systematic, philosophical enigma, Bob Sweetman, who holds the H. Evan Runner Chair of the History of Philosophy at the graduate Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, gives a brilliant, intriguing, hopscotch sketch of what has passed for "Christian philosophy" in Western civilization, out of the matrix of Justin Martyr (second century AD) and the African St. Augustine (354-430 AD).

Their core legacy for *philosophia christiana*, precisions Sweetman, is that "Christian scholarship is thinking in line with the scriptures in their witness to divine revelation" (22, 36), revelation of God. Further, Christian scholarship is never the (telic) end of human activity but is always a means toward loving God, self, neighbor, and the creation (36).

These traits of intentional alignment with Scripture and of being an on-going, intermediate offering of thought, posits Sweetman, is common to all different varieties of Christian scholarship (37). So, he concludes, teasing out Augustine's implications, "Christian scholarship always emerges out of what is prior and deeper than itself" (36), "a distillate of one's individual and communal living with God revealed in the scriptures" (39); Christian scholarship is "always provisional" (36) and "must be judged by its fruits" (37).

With this foundational template, Bob's book then delineates three basic formats in which he discerns that Christian scholarship, with a good measure of internal integrality, has found lodging: (1) the thought tradition of Bonaventura, Etienne Gilson, and John Paul II, where faith-filled theology **complements** and regulates parameters for other faith-directed disciplines; (2) the tack of Alvin Plantinga and George Marsden, where "Common Grace" allows non-God-confessing thinkers to produce valuable knowledge on God, humans, and the world (101) but where faith-filled scholars can generate with liberated *recta ratio* for all academic disci-

plines an apologetics, a philosophical theology, and positive Christian cultural critique that refutes non-theistic and anti-Realist dogmata that are contrary to Christian pre-philosophical assumptions (39,71-72,102); and (3) a stance, exemplified in our day by Herman Dooyeweerd, D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, H. Evan Runner, and Sweetman himself, which "places at the very center of Christian scholarship an awareness of all academic life as a schooled reflection upon the creation *within* the context of the spiritual antithesis of sin and Grace" (39,102) and is therefore deeply **critical** of its own struggles to be wise rather than foolish, as well as sensitive to the myopia of the secularist ethos that would laugh at Vollenhoven's contention for "a Christian logic" (103 n.186, 104).

I will not attempt to do a précis of the rich historical account in these 70 pages. Just let me say that this is pinpointed philosophical history-telling by a *magister*. No wonder he is in demand by the Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies in Toronto as a mentor and judge for their Ph.D. dissertations. Bob has **conversational** knowledge and command of the material from Plato and Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas down to Derrida and Wolterstorff. The learning is lightly worn in an occasional footnote with the exact location of the citation backing up the thought expressed, but the main text is jargon-free and has verve. It read for me like an exciting detective story: "**Christian** scholarship"—Whodunit? Did Gilson improve on Bonaventura's contribution? How does Alvin Plantinga stack up against Herman Dooyeweerd? Did John Paul II with the *fides et ratio* encyclical (September 1998) grab the brass ring?

Sweetman's account has the historical richness and panache Runner would have greatly appreciated. But Bob's historiographic approach is friendly rather than judgmental. He is as thorough going and complete as Aquinas' *ad primum, ad secundum, ad tertium, sed contra...respondeo*, but his critical analyses and arguments with the different thinkers' positions on Christian scholarship are **not** argumentative (3). Sweetman is evocative and, almost like a good defense lawyer, shows the best face of Bonaventura, Marsden, and Runner and treats the facial profile of each with Levinas' care. There is no doubt, to pick up Charles Saunders Peirce's meta-

phor,² that the Reformational take on Christian scholarship is Sweetman's "bride," but he is respectful of other Christian scholars' wives.

The wonderful surprise to it all occurs in the last half of the book, where Sweetman carefully challenges the generally accepted Aristotelian prejudiced way of determining "Christian scholarship," as the species of a genus, with all the ensuing endless disputes about what the *differentium* be, and who, if anyone, has a corner on its quality (118-119). Instead, let every person self-consciously examine (a "spiritual exercise") and confess the configuration and spirit of one's own underlying, committed, ceaselessly on-going, becoming heart formed by both one's individual biblical understanding and one's inhabited communal perspective on life (120-121).

Fruit from this unusual task could be (would be?) a culture of non-partisan mutual discernment by everyone intent upon producing Christian scholarship—"Is the spirit and ethos of my scholarly work truly breathing the call, the comfort and warning, of God's Holy Spirit?" (123). Such a personal, heart-deep concern as entry point for sharing the nature and fruits of Christian scholarship will be able to humble the temptation to one-upmanship, so often the intellectualism of defining logically, definitively what is and what is not precisely "Christian" thinking and encourage an imaginative, neighborly embrace of multiple human efforts to be an obedient child of God in one's scholarship.

Fundamental to Bob's brief for the adventure of doing Christian scholarship in communion is the conviction that nobody and no scholarly result of any human consciousness is ever totally, wholly pure, fixed, world without end. Working with the medieval theological conception of *sunderesis*, which Sweetman says is related to Jean Calvin's *semen religionis* (a haunted sense of divinity),³ and working with an inescapable reflexive awareness of being in a good, God-created world with a mysterious awareness of one as self, and holding your *conscientia*, a premonition of good and evil but believing that good

will prevail (142-144): with such a pervasive foundational "creation-fall-redemption" orientation, one's apriori expectation is a mixture of gracious good and cursed evil infecting **everything** (144-145).

Not only are Christian scholars formed by different communities—you grew up in a staunch, old-fashioned Christian Reformed Church world of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, you went to a Jesuit high school, you were converted as a graduate discontent at a chain of l'Abri centers around the world, or volunteered for a couple of years at L'Arche—and not only do followers of Jesus Christ, and also disbelievers, see like a Cubist's painterly eye, says Bob, different jarring features of our common diamond of a wonder-filled created world (148-149), but all human endeavor, and that includes scholarship attuned to our hearts, also betrays astigmatism. Certain emphases are insisted upon, and other matters are inadvertently or purposely neglected or left out (150).

Given this ambiguity of good and evil in things at large, Bob does not adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion. Of course one must sift and judge scholarly accounts (148), he says, but at the same time remain "trusting, hopeful and love-struck." We should cultivate

an eye for aboriginal goodness at play even in the presence of evil,
an eye for the sorrows to be found even in life's relative bliss,
an eye for the advent of surprise hidden even within our world's
most stable and pedestrian features. (145)

He goes on to claim that for us to adopt a truly gracious humility, we should receive the world as a perduring mystery, so that in scholarship "*even to be right is to be almost wrong and even to be wrong is to be almost right*" (152, his emphasis). This is Bob's thesis because, he writes, "'Peacemaker' and 'pacific'—these terms mark for me the shape of my Christian heart" (153-154).

This is, in brief, spiritual autobiography at its

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36), REVELATION OF GOD.

finest, utterly honest and incredibly vulnerable, I believe. So I should like to respond to my beloved colleague, in closing, first, with a thank you, and second, by entering into the heart-shaped confessional and spiritual exercise myself—which Bob is asking every one producing Christian scholarship to do **first**, before you look at the splinters in other scholars' eyes.

So first, Bob Sweetman has gentled me. (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, the still normative second edition, 1951, allows "gentle" to be a transitive verb.) Thank you, Bob, for during the 25 years, you have gentled my global philosophical judgment on "synthesis philosophy," which I received from Runner, and the "bad neighborhood" idea, which I took from Vollenhoven on the various conceptions of philosophical frameworks one can detect in history.

Also, teaching undergraduate history of philosophy at Trinity Christian College, I early learned the genius of Plato's positing permanent realities, νοητά and ἰδέαι, beyond what Sophistic Subjectivists and Pythagorean mathematical Objectivists could affirm as certainties, but I discovered myself that Plato's philosophical Realism not only denigrated our sensible and imaginative life, but turned the whole psalmodic wonder of God's creation into a darkened cave-world. And I learned from studying biologist Aristotle's *Ethica* and *Metaphysica* how his entelechic and hylomorphic critique of his teacher tried to patch together (in Monarchian fashion) Plato's discounted dualist cosmos and anthropology. But I never quite knew how to align Augustine's *Confessions*, its biblical insight on human restlessness until we men and women rest in God, the loving Lord of creatures, with Augustine's (I thought) attempt to Platonize evil away as *privatio boni*.⁴ And I was offended at the schematist aplomb of Thomas Aquinas' citing Aristotle as "**the** philosopher," it seemed to me, on an equal basis with Scripture.

But you, Bob, have helped me be more charitable rather than anachronistic toward the so-called "medieval" scholars. Bernard of Clairvaux's allegorical misreading, in my judgment, of שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים still pulled the passionate love expressed in the text, you would say, into a biblical affirmation of intensely **loving God**, rather than, one could say, settling for Ernest

Renan's later smirk about the canon formers having been asleep at the switch when *The Greatest Song* got into the Bible. I learned from you that Thomas' *ratio* is richer, more graciously ample, even propadeutic, than Descartes' *cogito*, or even John Locke's "reason"; so, we shouldn't let human rationality be screened and defined down by a post-Renaissance Western idolizing Rationalism. We are wiser, instead, to honor "the vast supporting edifice of Christian thought" that has made the Reformational Christian thought tradition able to take shape: "...biblical faithfulness will look different in different eras."⁵

As aesthetician, I've spent years facing and scrutinizing an enormous variety of fascinating, puzzling artworks, which led to my modifying Vollenhoven's insightful historiographic categories for telling a history of artistry. I finally discerned, as Vollenhoven himself did, that I too am on the chart of possible problematic neighborhoods. And to be honest, my picaresque predilection is not the richest, most inclusive and wisest apriori perspective that could be had, the so-called "troubled cosmic" vision.⁶ But such self-critical awareness prompted me to realize that the spirit (a "Rococo Enlightenment," a "Victorian Domesticated Idealism," a "Post-Christian Zetetic Agnositicism" spirit) casting its spell over whatever the problematics be, is even more important than the ideational, visionary framework structuring the artwork, philosophy, or scholarship. That Seerveld approach is confirmed, as I see it, by the Sweetman "scholarship of the heart": test the spirit of the work (I John 4:1), if you would gauge what to trust or not trust for bearing mixed good and bad fruit in a culture.

Second, my heart is shaped by the commission that Jesus Christ gave—to be sent out as a sheep among wolves; so I must become as worldly wise and wary as a snake but remain as naively innocent as a dove (Matthew 10:16). I crave an aged, seasoned heart juicy with the wisdom that Psalm 92:12-15 promises and the ability to speak always graciously and saltily, lightly prickling one's interlocutor, as the apostle Paul commends (Colossians 4:5-6). I admire the peace-maker. You taught me, Bob, that Abelard's *Sic et Non* was not, as I had first thought, a skeptical ploy like that of the late Platonist Academy, to highlight hard-and-fast contradictions, to reduce opposing Church authorities

to rubble (35); instead, Abelard was promoting a **unity of contrary views**, *Sic et! Non*, to show that in the Church too there are many mansions. So I hear the pacific wish even to let wheat and tares be growing together in the field of transmitting a tradition of Christian scholarship, lest anyone presume to play God, making final excising judgments.⁷ But maybe, because my professional scholarly environs have been the American Society for Aesthetics and the Société canadienne d'esthétique, where God and salvation is not a normal theme in their universe of discourse, as it is among medievalists; maybe that's partly why my giveaway, truth-telling-shaped heart with a puckish accent of humor⁸ is focused less on peace-making and more on giving my students fresh tasty fish, not slippery serpents (Luke 11:9-13).⁹

Tracing the Lines is a game-changing book for discussing "Christian scholarship." My hope is that the testimony of a very learned peace-maker and a would-be picaresque truth-teller will encourage other scholars to come out of their closets and beat their arguments into festive, conversational, confessional ploughshares.

I am wondering, Bob, whether a pacific scholar, so led to kind interaction, is still singing in the phrygian mode? Though I too treasure lament, especially in our day, your book has led me to consider whether my home melody is not dorian—the mode of thetical, restful composure, instead of suffering questioning.

No matter, we are both in the same choir, and later on we will be singing the Genevan 89 mixolydian mode of joyful celebration. God's promise (Psalm 126:5-6) is sure:

Those who sow now in tears, shall later reap in joy.
Whoever goes out crying, goes out carrying live seed,
shall come back--no doubt about it!
come back triumphantly carrying one's bundle of grain.

THIS IS, IN BRIEF, SPIRITUAL
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AT ITS
FINEST, UTTERLY HONEST AND
INCREDIBLY VULNERABLE,
I BELIEVE.

Endnotes

1. Numbers in parentheses in the text refer to pages in the book under review.
2. "The genius of a man's logical method should be loved and revered as his bride, whom he has chosen from all the world. He need not condemn the others...." in "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), *Values in a Universe of Chance. Selected Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 111-112.
3. A crux at which the Reformational Christian line seems to distinguish itself from the "Roman Catholic" line is fingered by Gilson when he expresses astonishment at why Jean Calvin does not take the step from semen religionis to a "natural theology" (*Christianisme et Philosophie* [Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1949], 69-74, 70-1 n.2). Alvin Plantinga seems to me to try to straddle the notion, which Calvin rejects, that *sensus divinitatis* provides a pinch of positive *cogitatio dei*, inciting "theistic beliefs" (Warranted Christian Belief [Oxford University Press, 2000], 172-174).
4. *Confessiones*, I,1, and *De civitatis dei*, XI,22.
5. Robert Sweetman, "Epilogue," *In the Phrygian Mode*, ed. Robert Sweetman (Toronto: University Press of America, 2007), 284.
6. See C. Seerveld, "Categories for Art Historical Methodology," in *Art as Spiritual Perception, Essays in Honor of John Walford*, ed. James Romaine (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 164-178; "The Place for Imaginative Grit and Everlasting Art in God's World" (2009) in *Normative Aesthetics*, ed. John Kok (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2014), 177-181.
7. *In the Phrygian Mode*, 285-287. Cf. my article about passing on the Reformational philosophical thought tradition: "WANTED: Vegetarian Kuyperians with Artistic Underwear," in *Pro Rege* 46.3 (2018):24-28.
8. An example of what I mean is a paper I gave at the Learned Societies of Canada meeting in Montreal, 1995, where I jokingly used my Dutch (finger-in-the-dyke) background and minority (Christian orientation) solidarity with First Nations, to speak about "On Identity and Aesthetic Voice of the Culturally Displaced" (*Redemptive Art in Society*, ed. John Kok [Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2014], 29-45).
9. It would be important for us to reflect on and exercise the ebb and flow of Christian scholarship introduced at the end of *Tracing the Lines*, especially for philosophers whose priming special academic disciplines is pivotal.

Deepening one's openness to the Scriptural sources of heart formation should attend the flowing out as unpolitely as possible of the intelligent service of scholarship. Such honouring of the ebb of communal sourcing biblical studies rather than accepting a dogmatic theological ceiling and imprimatur would, it seems to me, help take the "risk" out of human thinking (161 and passim) [which I feel uncomfortable with, although I cherish adventure], and remove doubt as a (dialectical?) correlative of faith (162) [is faith not a sure knowledge

and hearty confidence, however weak?]. And why not have a little accent (an Irish brogue or Galilean intonation) to one's speaking knowledge in an understandable idiom (166 n.1)? George Steiner hints that good (archaicizing) translation of any text will sound a little strange to those with a monolingual mentality (in "The Hermeneutic Motion" section of *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1975).