CALVIN AND NEO-CALVINISM
ON NON-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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Christian faith and non-christian thought

In the following article \(^1\) I examine a theme which, through the centuries, has been of central importance for many Christian thinkers and which, as will be shown, has occupied Professor Vollenhoven's deepest reflective powers: the question of the relationship between Christian faith and non-christian thought. The history of philosophy and theology supplies ample evidence that this problem is extremely complicated and almost impossible to oversee. Since some kind of selection is necessary I will focus on this problem as it is dealt with in calvinistic circles.

An investigation into this matter confronts us immediately with three urgent questions: 1. Is the problem of the relationship between Christian faith and non-christian thought a truly relevant one? 2. Is the problem as stated here correctly put? 3. Is the problem not too narrowly formulated if limited to the calvinist reformation? The scope of my topic will become evident if I begin by giving short answers to these three questions.

Peripheral or central problem?

1. When one considers how philosophy is increasingly becoming a tool of language analysis or an engaged critique of social structures and at the same time how Christian faith is increasingly experienced as an ineffable private experience — then the question arises inevitably: Is the theme presented here indeed relevant? Is not the relation of Christian faith to philosophy of peripheral concern when compared to the gigantic problems our world and century are faced with?

This is certainly not the case! In the first place it will have to be admitted that this so-called peripheral problem has been a basic issue of western culture from the 1ste century after Christ until the 18th century. The 2nd century "Wanderphilosoph" Justin Martyr early met the earnestness of this problem when he was converted to Christ and wrestled with the problem of how the truth of Christianity could be harmonized with the results of worldly philosophy. And I believe Justin's problem will continually con-

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front the Christian conscience so long as the church does not become sectarian and a cultural drop-out.

Nor has the problem lost its urgency outside the Christian camp. I realize that many with a secularized view of science will hardly be interested in this issue because it does not seem to concern them. However, modern thought is ambiguous in casting aside the Christian faith. For it still continues to bear the stamp of Christianity. Present-day philosophy is not non-christian but post-christian. This is not only true of philosophy! The whole world in which we live is the cultural product of Athens and Jerusalem, of pagan culture and the Christian church, of worldly wisdom and biblical truth with all their indelible characteristics. Profane, secularized thought can never fully rid itself of its own historical roots. If it wants to know itself then it will have to know its own past and, accordingly, the mysterious relationship and interwovenness of Christian faith and non-christian philosophy.

An existential problem

2. Is it correct to establish an antithesis between Christian faith and non-christian thought? Does not such a formulation conceal a double contrast between what is Christian and what is non-christian and between faith and reason? If considered systematically this argument is indeed valid. When considered historically, however, it is necessary to add some additional remarks. Of course it is possible for one — including the historian — to treat the contrast between Christian faith and non-christian faith and the relationship between faith and reason separately. But history shows that these problems are always interrelated and just here manifest their existential depth. History witnesses to men who put their trust in Christ and as a result were forced to face the question: How to deal as Christians with previously obtained philosophical insights? Does the acceptance of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God involve saying farewell to the dialogues of Plato, to the organon of Aristotle, or, if you like, to the works of Kant and the writings of Marx? Or do these philosophers still have an independent worth or perhaps only a subordinate worth?

These questions can be likened to those arising in the confrontation between Christian belief and non-christian morality. Many missionaries have experienced how the acceptance of Christianity by heathen tribes undermines such customs as polygamy and slavery and opens them to discussion: Is the Christian faith a refinement or an corroboratation of pagan standards of life, or is it a change of course, perhaps even a total rejection of heathen morals? These questions, arising from the tension between Christian belief and pagan morality, reverberate in the conflict area between Christian faith and pagan philosophy and that with even greater urgency, because of the Bible's less explicit pronouncements about philosophy.

Yet in my opinion it is incontestable that the radiance of God's Word lights also non-christian thought and philosophy. The apostle Paul expressed it graphically as follows: "Casting down reasonings, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Reading only the first sentence — about every high thing that must be cast down — it ap-