BOEKBESPREKING


This historical overview of Western thought and brief introduction to philosophy written from a Christian point of view, is a book among few of its kind in the English language. It is divided into three sections:

I. Introduction
II. A Historical Survey of Western Thought
III. Contours of Thought Patterns in Line with Scripture

Not a work of critical philosophy but a textbook for young students eager to be exposed to a world of ideas from a distinctive perspective, this work covers a wide range of periods, people and problems. The book offers an ambitious treatment of the history of Western philosophy, together with an introduction to Reformed or Reformational thought. It contains a great deal of information presented in a terse and generally accessible style.

The introductory section begins with a brief discussion of the nature of philosophy, explaining that the subject has “three basic problem areas, namely, ontology, anthropology, and epistemology” (p. 4). After a short description of each one of these, there is a discussion of questions of philosophical method in which a summary is given of Alvin Plantinga’s “three point challenge to ‘theists’ busy in the area of philosophy” (p. 10). A so-called “thetical” and a “critical” method are advocated which means that “Christians should approach the (philosophical) problems and questions they are confronted with from their own positively stated point of view” (p. 12), and yet not be afraid to be critical.

In the historical survey in section II, most of the prominent periods and names in philosophy are at least mentioned, e.g. the pre-socratics or ‘early cosmological philosophers’ as Mr. Kok calls them, Plato, Aristotle, the Hellenistic philosophers, neo-Platonists,
Apostolic Fathers, Scholastics, Renaissance, Modern and late Modern philosophers. Apart from Plato, Augustine and Kant, most of the thinkers introduced in this “bird’s eye view... of the history of thought” (p. 100) are dealt with in one page or less. Nevertheless, Mr. Kok tries to give a distinctive view and classification of what he writes about. Frequently he gives swift and binding judgments concerning the philosophical schools he treats of and states in direct terms what he understands as the Christian position on the issue at hand.

In section II, extensive discussion of details on particular subjects is left for another occasion or a more advanced level of study. A complete explanation of how the views expressed or assumed were arrived at is not included. Newcomers are not overwhelmed by questions and uncertainties but neither are they told about some of the more problematic parts of the topics discussed. Students may not realize the controversial character of the issues or statements being made, issues upon which philosophers in the same camp sometimes can’t agree. The problem with this, it seems to me, is that young students who are all too ready to take decisive and resolved views, will one day discover that questions to which they thought they had answers were not yet even understood by them. Eventually they feel unprepared if not cheated and inclined to dismiss “Christianity” as grossly inadequate. In part this may be an unavoidable consequence of the rather quick pace and the nature of the book as a global introduction to the history of Western philosophy. It may also be a result of the books own history, i.e. it started life as a syllabus. At times it still displays the forthrightness of a syllabus in containing bold statements which in a class room can be supplemented, explained, and used to provoke discussion. But as a book standing alone, it falls short in explaining or developing the theories behind the criticism it gives. It puts off many questions until the last section of the book where it expounds its distinctive basis of criticism. By that time, however, many of the issues raised already seem to have been resolved.

Section III of the book presents an orientation in “scriptural philosophy,” i.e. the thought developed by H. Dooyeweerd and D.H.Th. Vollenhoven in the early part of this century. Although still primarily a presentation of other peoples thoughts, Mr. Kok puts forth his own distilled version of the philosophy. There are abundant echoes of other voices from the school, for example, that of H.E.