DOOYEWERD VERSUS VOLLENHOVEN:
THE RELIGIOUS DIALECTIC WITHIN REFORMATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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1. Introduction

The philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) is frequently linked to that of his brother-in-law Dirk H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978). Both men taught at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, although in different faculties, and they are often referred to as the founders of reformational philosophy. It is often assumed that Dooyeweerd provided the systematic philosophy, whereas Vollenhoven wrote about the history of philosophy, and that their ideas can therefore be combined. But Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven disagreed on almost every key point. They differed in their ontology, epistemology, and theology. Although there has been some discussion of these disagreements in the Dutch literature,\(^1\) there has been no detailed exploration of the implications of these philosophical differences for reformational philosophy.

Vollenhoven himself lists many differences between his philosophy and that of Dooyeweerd. He lists these differences in three articles or transcribed lectures:


b) “De Problemen rondom de tijd” (“Problems about time”), private lectures from 1963 ['Problemen']. Vollenhoven’s notes of this lecture were only in fragmentary form, and they were completed by A. Tol, using notes taken by a student who attended the lecture, J.C. Vander Stelt. In the text, Vander Stelt’s notes are indicated between the symbols ‘>’ and ‘<’.

c) “Problemen van de tijd in onze kring” (“Problems about time in our circle”), a lecture given by Vollenhoven in 1968 ['Kring'].\(^4\)

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1 See especially A. Tol and K.A. Bril: Vollenhoven als Wijsgeer (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1992), 107-211 ['Wijsgeer']. This book contains several lectures and articles by Vollenhoven in which he expresses his disagreements with Dooyeweerd, as well as some helpful notes. Some comparisons between the two philosophers were made by Johan Stellingwerff: D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) Reformator der Wijsbegeerte (Baarn: Ten Have, 1992) ['Stellingwerff']. See also Marcel Verburg: Herman Dooyeweerd. Leven en werk van een Nederlands christenwijsgeer (Baarn: Ten Have, 1989) ['Verburg'].


In Problemen (p. 170) Vollenhoven says that his *Isagoogè* is not the same as Dooyeweerd’s *De Wijsbegertede Wetsidee*. Vollenhoven also says that he had made a conscious decision not to disclose his differences with Dooyeweerd. He gives three reasons for this non-disclosure: (1) the fact that there was a serious attempt to arrive at a Scriptural philosophy, and that it was important to maintain a united front, (2) he thought his primary responsibility was that of chairman of the Association for Calvinistic Philosophy, and (3) he was occupied with other work. While perhaps historically understandable, it may be questioned whether this non-disclosure of their disagreements was the right decision. The resulting conflict of ideas has caused a great deal of confusion both to students of reformational philosophy as well as to the wider public. I also wonder whether it was Dooyeweerd or Vollenhoven who most benefited by this pact of silence. On the one hand, both men were able to maintain a common front during the lengthy university investigation of their philosophies. On the other hand, it seems to me that because Vollenhoven taught in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, whereas Dooyeweerd taught in the Faculty of Law, the result of not disclosing these differences was to reinforce Vollenhoven’s ideas at the expense of Dooyeweerd’s, and that in general, this has resulted in Dooyeweerd’s philosophy being interpreted through the lens of Vollenhoven’s quite contradictory ideas.

Dooyeweerd was even more cautious about publicly disagreeing with Vollenhoven, but there are some parts of his *New Critique* where he clearly refers to such disagreements. And in 1964, the year before his retirement, Dooyeweerd

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5 See D.H.Th. Vollenhoven: *Isagoogè Philosophiae* (Vrije Universiteit: Uitgave Filosofisch Instituut, 1967) [*Isagoogè*]. This publication was intended for internal use at the university. It has not yet been translated or otherwise published. Drs. A. Tol is preparing a new edition with commentary.


7 On March 17, 1936 Valentijn Hepp of the theology faculty threatened that within two years both Vollenhoven and Klaas Schilder would be outside the Gereformeerde Church (Stellingwerff 130). Both Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd were subjected to an intense university investigation that was initiated by Hepp and that lasted 10 years. Dooyeweerd provided three written responses from April 1937 to March 1938. His August 1937 response was 39 pages long. Vollenhoven’s initial response was a 17-page letter dated October 17, 1937. These responses are in the Dooyeweerd Archives maintained by The Historical Documentation Centre for Dutch Protestantism [*the Dooyeweerd Archives*]. See my translation at [http://www.members.shaw.ca/hermandooyeweerd/Curators.html] [*Curators*]. The investigation was never really completed, but ceased when there was a change in the theological faculty after the Second World War.

8 Verburg says that Dooyeweerd did not want to jeopardize the positive aspects of Christian philosophy as it was being taught at the Free University. When Dooyeweerd was asked by a journalist whether Vollenhoven had helped in developing this philosophy, he gave the tactful [*charmant*] response that Vollenhoven was “the first to be at his side” [*medestander*] (Verburg 89, referring to a taped conversation between Dooyeweerd and M. Verbrugge on August 11/74). In 1964, Dooyeweerd said privately that his talks with Vollenhoven had had no influence on the direction in which his philosophy developed (Verburg 88, 89).

9 *NC* I, 31-33, fn. 1. A. Tol has shown that this long footnote, although it does not