

**THE COLLECTED WORKS
OF HERMAN DOOYEWEERD**

Series B, Volume 3

GENERAL EDITOR: D.F.M. Strauss

Roots of Western Culture

Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options

Herman Dooyeweerd

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Redeemer University College
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Roots of Western Culture

Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options

by

Herman Dooyeweerd

Translated by

John Kraay

Edited by

Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra

Newly Edited by

D.F.M. Strauss

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Foreword

A series of editorial articles written by Herman Dooyeweerd (in the weekly paper, *Nieuw Nederland*) during the first three years after the Second World War was compiled by J.A. Oosterhof and published in book form by J.B. van den Brink & Co. in Zutphen, 1959, under the title, *Vernieuwing en Bezinning om het reformatorisch grondmotief* (Renewal and Reflection upon the Reformational Ground-Motive). A second edition appeared in 1963 – with the addition of two paragraphs – one on Groen van Prinsterer, the politician who established the Anti-revolutionary Party and who first employed the expression “sphere sovereignty” subsequently elaborated by Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, and another paragraph on the overestimation of the concept of a “natural community” in sociological universalism.

In 1979 the first English translation of this work appeared under the title, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*. The work did not include the extensive last part of *Vernieuwing en Bezinning om het reformatorisch grondmotief* where Dooyeweerd discusses the nature of business organizations within modern society.

As the 1979 edition has been out of print for some time now, the Dooyeweerd Centre decided to incorporate it in the Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd in its present form. The entire translation has been subjected to a thorough new check against the original Dutch text by the General Editor. In its present form the translated text strictly follows the order in which the text appeared in the Dutch edition. Because the work is based upon a series of articles, Dooyeweerd constantly resumed his explanations with a brief summary of preceding sections, in some instances causing minor, partially overlapping, repetitions in the text. In addition to minor alterations a number of larger sections – sometimes one or more paragraphs – had to be translated for the first time. The page numbers of the 1979 edition have been inserted in the running text and can be found between square brackets. At a later stage a new edition will include the last part of the Dutch text on the nature of business organizations.

Dooyeweerd’s own preface (written in 1958 but not taken up as such in the 1979 edition) has been included at the beginning of this edition. Furthermore, the translator’s preface and the editorial preface from the 1979 edition are to be found at the back of the volume, after chapter eight.

D.F.M. Strauss
General Editor¹

¹ *General Editor’s note:* This Volume contains three different kinds of footnotes: (i) those inserted by the *General Editor*, (ii) the notes present in the original Dutch text, and (iii) the notes added by Kraay, Vander Vennen and Zylstra to the 1979 Edition.

Author's Preface

(1959 edition)

Shortly before my departure for North America where I was asked to deliver a series of lectures at a number of universities and other institutions for higher learning, I was asked to give my approval for the publication in book form of the feature articles that I wrote for and which appeared in the weekly newspaper *Nieuw Nederland* some years ago.

I was delighted with this request because it indicated that there remains an interest, in broader circles, in the ideas I had developed in these articles. But for many people it proved to be difficult to obtain copies of the back-issues in which they appeared. Accordingly, it is my hope that this publication in book form will meet the needs of those who have been looking for them.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Mr. J.A. Oosterhoff, who during my absence abroad undertook to assemble and adapt the rather extensive material brought together in this book, a laborious task of which he acquitted himself most conscientiously.

The title *Renewal and Reflection*¹ reminds us of the catchword “renewal,” which during the first years after the liberation and re-awakening of our fatherland could be heard everywhere. It often drowned out any plea for prior reflection on the foundations and the course that the quest for renewal should take. The manner in which the so-called breakthrough movement supposed it could finally dispose of the “antithesis” in all its significance for temporal life, urgently necessitated a renewed reflection on the meaning and scope of the religious ground-motives that have controlled our western culture in its historical development.

Reflection on these matters continues to be of vital importance today. This is so, because on the one hand the spiritual crisis in which this culture is entangled and the influence of unbiblical dualistic ground-motives on Christian thought can easily blur our awareness of the central, all-of-our-earthly-life-encompassing significance of the antithesis posed by the biblical starting point. On the other hand, this reflection also remains important in order to learn to understand the danger of overestimating the value of Christian forms of organization and of formulated Christian principles that can turn into sinful weapons when the driving force of God's Word is missing from them.

Herman Dooyeweerd
Amsterdam, 1959

1 Dutch: *Vernieuwing en Bezinning*.

Introduction

The Dutch National Movement

On May 12, 1945, the Dutch National Movement [*Nederlandse volksbeweging*] made an appeal to the Dutch people in a manifesto which decisively rejected the Christian antithesis¹ as a principle of demarcation for political party formation in the postwar period. It stated this conviction:

The Second World War signifies the close of an old era and the dawn of a new period for all nations. Economically, socially, politically, and spiritually the world has changed profoundly and confronts the individual and the community with new demands.

In order to promote their own national community and to maintain a worthy place among the nations, the people of the Netherlands need above all a spiritual renewal nourished by the wellsprings of Christianity and humanism, which have always been our sources of strength.

Fundamental to this striving for renewal ought to be respect and responsibility for humankind, which can unfold only in the service of a strong, just, and inspired community (personalistic socialism).

Every area of human life is bound by absolute norms, such as charity, justice, truth, and neighborly love. According to the gospel, these norms are rooted in the will of God. However, they are also grounded in convictions other than Christian. From this follows an unconditional rejection of nation, state, race, or class as the highest corporate good, and likewise of all spiritual coercion as an instrument for the formation of community. [1]

The manifesto particularly stressed this matter:

The greatest possible consensus among the various religious and political groups is necessary at this time, in order to alleviate our desperate needs, to repair what was laid waste, to stamp out all corruption, to set production in motion again, and especially to base governmental authority upon new confidence. . . .

Our national political life must move along lines of division which are

¹ *General Editor's note:* The opposition between *belief* and *unbelief*.

different from those of before 1940. Specifically, the Christian antithesis and the Marxist class struggle are no longer fruitful principles for the solution of today's social problems. . . .

A time of open discussion is urgently needed, so that spiritual renewal will become visible also in the political arena.

The appeal was signed by representatives of the most diverse viewpoints and beliefs. Their names alone guaranteed the sincerity and earnestness of this attempt.

One can assume that the manifesto gave expression to the aspirations of many in the country who wish to break down the old barriers that kept our nation divided, a wish stirred most powerfully by the deep distress of a people under enemy occupation. These hopes and aspirations required formulation. The appeal of the Dutch National Movement has indeed given them a specific form. Instead of an *antithesis* between the Christian and humanistic views of life, the appeal recommended a *synthesis*. It called for unification rather than absolute opposition, so that the Dutch national strength, which had been nourished by the spiritual traditions of both Christianity and humanism, might be drawn together again in national unity.

The manifesto indicated that "personalistic socialism" should be the way toward spiritual renewal of our nation. The old antithesis, it argued, must be bridged by the principle that human solidarity and responsibility develop only in the service of a strong, just, and inspired community. According to the appeal, Christians and humanists alike can find themselves in agreement on this common basis. The assumption was that neither the Christian antithesis nor the old Marxist-socialist dogma of class struggle can serve any longer as a fruitful foundation for the solution of today's social issues.

Anyone who would claim the contrary for the Christian antithesis would therefore have to prove that the Christian religion does indeed draw a permanent dividing line of essential significance not only for one's personal faith but for one's whole view of society. Specifically, one would have to demonstrate the meaning of this spiritual antithesis for the solution of the acute postwar problems.

Dealing with this burden of proof will not be an easy task for those who continue [2] to take their stand on the basis of the antithesis. As one option, they might be tempted to duck the issue by putting the onus of proof on the Dutch National Movement. They might ask the latter to explain how specifically its newly enunciated principle will, in fact, provide a fruitful foundation for the solution of contemporary social problems and thus allow the old polarity between Christianity and humanism to be made irrelevant.

However, evading the issue in this way would not be a very convincing approach. After all, one cannot really take cover behind the weak position

of one's opponent when sooner or later one will be expected to demonstrate the value of one's own principle in the practice of daily life.

There is, rather, another option. It involves making the case that since the days of Groen van Prinsterer [1801-1876] and Abraham Kuyper [1837-1920] the principle of the Christian antithesis has been a vital driving force. One must make clear to both allies and opponents that Christians have not simply relied on the authority these leaders exercised, but have worked productively with their spiritual heritage. For if the spirit that moved Groen van Prinsterer and Kuyper is no longer alive among their present followers, then a theoretical appeal to the principles they confessed is of no avail. Then we are confronted with a spiritless continuation of tradition which fearfully guards against the budding of new shoots on the trunk of the past. Perhaps the slogans and terms remain the same, but those who voice them are no longer inspired. Their view no longer exudes the sparkle of devout inspiration. The convincing effect of the old slogans disappear, because for those who express them they are no longer a spiritual reality, and because those who are addressed by them cannot fail to detect that the slogans no longer embody any spiritual reality for their advocates.

For surely, the Christian principle is not the permanent possession of a select few who can manipulate it as if it were a collection of magical formulas! On the contrary, it is a dynamic, spiritual force that cannot be halted. Those who confine it within the fixed boundaries of tradition are irrevocably left behind. Those who claim to be led by the Christian principle are placed directly before the face of God who knows our hearts and consumes every insincerity in the fire of his anger. Today the Christian principle fills us above all with a deep concern for the spiritual and physical distress of our nation and of the entire world which passed through the fire of God's judgment.

What then are we to say? Amidst the ruins of our nation's existence and the rubble of western civilization it is hardly fitting for us to beat the drums. Surely, this is not the time for the proponents of the antithesis to sound the battle cry. The antithesis can only be *confessed*, as always, in recognition of the complete solidarity of Christian and non-Christian alike in the sin and guilt of humankind, the same sin and guilt which recently led the world to the brink of destruction.

The antithesis runs right through Christian life itself. Although everywhere, whether in the personal life of the individual, in the life of the Christian family, in Christian organizations and political groups, or even in the Christian church, there have been gratifying signs of genuine vitality, there have at the same time been alarming symptoms of apostasy, discord and schism. These latter symptoms are manifestations of the turbu-

lent spirit of darkness which wages war against the spirit of Christ in the most reprehensible ways.

The antithesis is therefore not a dividing line between Christian and non-Christian groups. It is the unrelenting battle between two spiritual principles that impacts the entire nation and indeed all of humankind. It does not respect any perceived sanctuaries of Christian lifestyles and patterns.

If the Christian idea of the antithesis were to seek its root in and take its nurture from the human person, then it would be a clear invention of Satan, the source of all hypocrisy and pharisaic pride. But if the impact of the antithesis continues to make itself felt as the battle between the [3] spirit of God and the spirit of darkness, then we must each day humbly give thanks to God for his grace in proving his continuing commitment to the world, and confess that we ourselves as Christians cannot take any credit for having brought it about.

How wide is the scope of the antithesis? Is it limited to the secret compartments of the human heart, or does it also draw a principal¹ demarcation line in temporal life? Is it limited to the personal life of each individual or does it also penetrate temporal society in science, culture, politics, and economics? And if the latter is true, is the antithesis then limited to a few “specifically Christian areas,” or is its significance *fundamental* and *universal*?

In other words, shall we agree with the Dutch National Movement that the Christian antithesis is no longer a fruitful principle, at least for the solution of contemporary societal problems? Shall we agree that its significance for political and social life has been transient and historical? This is the crucial question.

It is concerning this decisive issue that we will initiate an open discussion with the Dutch National Movement in a series of articles, hopefully for the benefit of the entire Dutch nation. Taught by experience, we have decided to pursue a path different from the ones generally followed in a dialogue of this kind. We hope that the Dutch National Movement will follow us on this path for the sake of the discussion, for we believe that it does not permit either side to evade important issues. Since more than ever before this issue is of fundamental importance for our spiritual development of the nation, more than ever before, the Dutch people have the right to expect clear and explicit answers from those who claim to be able to give spiritual guidance. [4]

¹ The adjectival and adverbial form of the Dutch words *beginsel* and *principe* (“principle”) is *principieel* which as a rule will be translated as *principlial* or *principially* (i.e. based on principle).

Genuine and Superficial Dialogue

The antithesis was not invented by Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. Anyone who lives the Christian religion and truly knows the Scriptures is aware of that. Still, even among those who confess Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer there is no unanimity about the scope of this antithesis for temporal life. Even worse, it appears that in the discussion about this fundamentally important problem, no method has yet been found to uncover the true underlying nature of this difference of opinion. The result of this is that the discussion, in spite of all the good intentions of those who participate in it, continues to display the character of a *soliloquy*, a monologue of every participant on its own, since it does not really come to a true *dialogue*, a genuine discussion where those who participate indeed contribute to the mutual aim of acquiring a principled clarification of what is understood.

Genuinely fruitful communication is possible only when both points of view are developed jointly and when both sides try to penetrate to the root of their differences. Then the discussion will exhibit the character of a dialogue in which individual people truly cooperate to achieve a mutual clarification of the principles at stake. Only then can the reader begin to reflect on the fundamental question as to which side to join.

It is possible that one can react to such a method by raising the well-known objection which comes from the period before the Second World War: is this type of discussion not far too difficult for the average reader? Is it not more appropriate for a *scientific* discussion than for a popular exposition meant for everyone?

Whoever argues in this way is still the victim of a fatal misunderstanding that constituted one of the greatest obstacles to real contact among the various spiritual currents in our nation before the war.

Surely, then, the first question is this: what should we expect from a discussion about the meaning of the antithesis? Should we merely expect that two opinions are put forward and that each participant is given the opportunity to advance a number of arguments in favor of that participant's point of view? Should we leave the reader with the impression that apparently something can be said for either standpoint? It seems to me that in this way little if anything is gained. This kind of debate remains superficial. The arguments from both sides only give the appearance of meeting on common ground, because the deeper starting points, that determine the argument, remain hidden. As long as these starting points themselves are not placed in sharp and clear light in their opposition to each other, real contact is simply out of the question. It is even conceivable that those who defend their views are not aware of their own deeper points of departure. In that case certainly the whole discussion never moves toward dialogue, and the listener is left in the dark as to the basic principles at stake.

In the second place it is quite wrong to think that the quest for the deepest source of our differences about the antithesis is fitting only in a *scientific* inquiry. The deepest source of our view on life's fundamental issues does not lie in scientific theory, but in the *religious* direction of our lives. This is a matter [5] which concerns every human being and which certainly cannot be delegated exclusively to the theoretical sphere of scholarship.

It may be true that a segment of the reading public prefers not to concern itself with the deepest motives in life and seeks discussion for the sake of entertainment instead of insight. But this attitude is hardly a criterion for distinguishing readers with scientific training from those who have little or none. It is a fact that among scientists, too, there are those who would rather *escape from themselves* and find some kind of "diversion." Indeed, experience tells me that many in academic circles belong to this class. Unfortunately, many view the realm of science as a haven where they think they can escape from themselves by means of the "diversion" of theoretical inquiry which in their opinion is quite unrelated to the deepest root of their life. And precisely the opposite situation is often found among those who are not scientifically schooled; they frequently put the shallowness of the educated to shame.

Whatever the case may be, "spiritual renewal" has become a slogan for the postwar period. We will readily adopt it. If we are to take it seriously, however, we must not be content with *superficiality*, but must look for renewal in *depth*. If the postwar "dialogue" is to contribute to the spiritual renewal of our nation, it must penetrate to that depth dimension of human life *where one can no longer escape from oneself*. It is precisely at that level that we must come to the unmasking of the various views regarding the significance and scope of the antithesis. Only when people have nothing to hide from themselves and from their counterparts in the discussion, will the way be opened for a dialogue that seeks to invite rather than repel.

Anyone who seriously desires to start out along this path will not quickly dismiss my discussion under the pretext that it is too "heavy" to digest for the ordinary reader. If serious investigation is the only way that ultimately promises results, then no effort necessary for a truly mutual understanding of the various standpoints should be considered too great. This road is indeed accessible to every serious reader and not merely to a select company of "intellectuals." *It is the way of self-examination and not the way of abstract theoretical inquiry.* [6]