

# **EMPLOYING VOLLENHOVEN’S HISTORIOGRAPHIC “MINESWEEPER” IN DETECTING AND DETONATING DANGEROUS “LANDMINES” AT THE THEOLOGICAL “MINEFIELDS” OF DORDT (1618-1619) AND AFTERWARDS.**

**Its contemporary relevance in the light of the continuous  
resurgence of Reformed Scholasticism<sup>1</sup>**

**B.J. van der Walt<sup>2</sup>**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

To start with, a few notes about (1) the motivation for this research, (2) previous and present contributions in this field, and (3) the set-up of this paper.

### **1.1 Motivation**

At this 75<sup>th</sup> celebration of the Association for Christian Philosophy *anno Domini* 2011 one should, I think, explain why a paper like this one – digging into the past of nearly 500 years ago – is still needed and relevant. I am doing so because of four main considerations.

#### **1.1.1 Personal interest**

The first one is of a *personal nature*. As a trained philosopher and theologian I was always interested in the relationship between Christian theology and a Christian philosophy.

#### **1.1.2 Mutual service**

Secondly, I was and am still of the opinion that between (Christian) philosophy and theology there should be close cooperation, mutual service and enrichment.

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<sup>2</sup> 7 Bezuidenhout Street, Oewersig, Potchefstroom 2531, South Africa. E-mail: [hannah@intekom.co.za](mailto:hannah@intekom.co.za)

Vollenhoven (2011) already in 1963 delivered a lecture on the service a Christian philosophy could render to Christian theology. He emphasized inter alia that: (1) A Christian theology cannot be practiced in “splendid isolation” from philosophy, since every theology (like all other disciplines) is – whether one like it or not – influenced by deep-seated worldviewish and philosophical presuppositions. (2) A Reformational philosophy can draw the attention of theologians to the dangers of synthetic thinking. (3) It can warn against Biblicism. (4) It may also be of help to reflect on the appropriate field of investigation of Christian theology.

It seems to me that up to today this possible service – not domination – of a Christian philosophy was not welcomed by Reformed theologians. The only exception I am aware of is the work of Spykman (1992).

### **1.1.3 Reformed Scholasticism is (still) alive**

My third motivation is that today the period of Reformed Scholasticism or Orthodoxy (about 1550-1700) is not something of the past at all. I can mention examples of this kind of theology in sermons in South Africa and elsewhere, and in articles in the periodicals of some Reformed churches. Since the Canons of Dordt (CD) are still accepted as confessional standards by many Reformed Churches worldwide, and even have to be subscribed to by ministers, elders and deacons as in full agreement with the Scriptures, debates about the authority of the CD continue. Some Reformed theologians are of the opinion that the *form* (wording) may be deficient, but the basic *content* should not be challenged. Already during the previous century a few Dutch theologians (e.g. Berkouwer) asked deeper questions about, for instance, the influence of Aristotelian causality on the CD, but this debate also seems to have become silent.

A clear example that Reformed Scholasticism is not dead but very much alive, is what is happening at Calvin Seminary and College, Grand Rapids. Reformed theologians at this institution of Reformed churches in the US and Canada, like Muller (2003) are republishing the old writers of Reformed Orthodoxy and present their ideas in a very uncritical way in his books about this period (cf. also Muller, 2008). And Christian philosophers at Calvin College (e.g. Smith, 2004)

even tries to combine Reformational philosophy with Radical Orthodoxy (which is to my mind a return to Medieval Scholasticism).

Many efforts to define “scholasticism” are available. I will not try a new one, but simply try to describe the cluster of the most important ideas it contains.

#### **1.1.4 A tribute to Vollenhoven’s pioneering philosophy**

My fourth consideration behind writing this paper is the following. It wants to be a tribute to Prof. Vollenhoven for his development of both a genuine Christian systematic philosophy, and in particular for his Christian analysis – the only really one we have after 75 years – of the entire history of Western philosophy.

As indicated by Tol (2010) the young Vollenhoven also found his thinking in the grip of Reformed Scholasticism, albeit a qualified one, called “critical realism”. It must have been a huge spiritual struggle to liberate himself from such a powerful synthetic philosophy. He also had to bear the brunt of vehement criticism from the theologians of his day. I am convinced that Vollenhoven’s thetical-critical philosophy can be of great help to strengthen Reformational thinkers – philosophers and theologians – against the powerful seduction of the contemporary resurgence of Reformed Scholasticism.

Although Vollenhoven (as far as I know) never wrote explicitly on the Synod of Dordt (SD) or its Canons, he left enough clues – to be followed up in this paper – of how his evaluation would have turned out.

## **1.2 Previous and present research**

For my master’s thesis in Philosophy (cf. Van der Walt, 1968) I already applied Vollenhoven’s consistent problem-historical method. It dealt with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. In this way I got acquainted with Medieval scholastic thinking. For my doctoral dissertation I again analysed Aquinas’ thinking, but also Calvin’s and that of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (SPT) of 1625 (cf. Van der Walt, 1974), again with the help of Vollenhoven’s historiographical method.

It was only recently that I had the time to look at the “gap” between Calvin and the SPT, viz. Reformed Scholasticism in general and the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) in particular. Several articles were already published or will soon appear in Afrikaans journals. Two of these are available for this colloquium in English, (to be referred to as Van der Walt, 2011a & 2011b).

### **1.3 Setup of this paper**

This paper will provide, because of limited time, a brief summary of the above research under the following main headings: (1) Vollenhoven’s philosophical “minesweeper”; (2) the “biblical” theological “minefields” at the Synod and in the Canons of Dordt and a detection of its hidden philosophical “landmines”; (3) their detonation from a Reformational philosophical perspective.

## **2. THE CONSISTENT PROBLEM-HISTORICAL METHOD AS A PHILOSOPHICAL “MINESWEEPER”**

I have to say in advance that I am not at all an expert but only an admirer of Vollenhoven, fascinated by his philosophy. (A part from Prof. J.J. (Ponti) Venter, I am unfortunately the only one in Africa.) Thus an open invitation to the experts to correct my paper wherever I have misinterpreted or misused his historiographical method or left out important aspects.

### **2.1 Vollenhoven’s thetical-critical method**

Let me begin by mentioning that, according to his thetical-critical method, Vollenhoven’s own systematic philosophy and his analysis of Western philosophical concepts should not be separated from each other. Vollenhoven emphasised that one cannot philosophise without a preliminary own thetic viewpoint. At the same time he also stressed the fact that one should be critical about the results of the Western history of philosophy. “Critical” does not imply only rejection, since one’s own thetical perspective can be tested and even enriched.

## 2.2 Vollenhoven's development

Regarding the *thetical side* of his methodology, Vollenhoven already started changing his own views from 1923, rejected Scholastic thinking at about 1926, and finalized his own systematic position at about 1930, with only minor changes up to the 1941-edition of his *Isagôgè Philosophiae* (cf. Tol, 2010:8, 13, 15, & 20).

From then onwards he struggled to acquire and appropriate method for the *critical part* of his philosophy. According to Bril (1986:181 ff) Vollenhoven's semi-final concept of a method was – after five previous efforts! – ready in 1943. It was more or less rounded off in his *Schematische Kaarten* (of 1962, republished in 2000) as well as in his guest lectures at Potchefstroom of 1963 (cf. Vollenhoven, 2011). He, however, continued till he was too old to “cut and paste” on the “warp” and “woof” of the complicated “weaving” of Western philosophy. He also did not have the time to update his own systematic philosophy. (Perhaps one can try to do so today by carefully studying his analysis of other's philosophies!)

## 2.3 Vollenhoven's historiography in a nutshell

Since Vollenhoven's method has been explained by himself and many others, I only have to repeat here very briefly its basic outlines, following mainly the exposition by Bril (1986). (This part of my paper is only aimed at novices interested in Vollenhoven.)

In Vollenhoven's own systematic philosophy a basic distinction is made between the *structures* of cosmic reality and their *direction*. In agreement with this his historiographic method distinguishes between different *types* and different *currents* of Western philosophy. Types indicate a thinker's view on the *ontic structures* of reality, while currents describe his/her commitment to a specific *normative direction* of thinking. (Every serious thinker, according to Vollenhoven, has to reflect firstly on *what is* and, secondly, on how one *ought to* think and act.)

### 2.3.1 Types

A type is like a magnet: it attracts (or repels) certain themes around itself. If we apply again the image of a weaved cloth, one can call types the red threads.

These vertical threads (the ontic core or nucleus) “colour” the cluster of ideas attached to it.

The same type may recur during the history of Western thought and therefore reflects a certain continuity, a “family resemblance” between different philosophies. We may therefore find today, for example, a similar type of philosophy as that advocated by Plato or Aristotle 2500 years ago. But, since it is not identical to the original viewpoints of Plato or Aristotle, they should be called Platonising or Aristotelising concepts or Plato-/Aristotle-interpretations. (In the case of Reformed Orthodoxy, some biblical ideas were of course added.)

Vollenhoven distinguished about 19 different main types of philosophy in Western history.

### **2.3.2 Periods or currents**

Vollenhoven’s two-dimensional historiography identifies, apart from the above diachronic element, also a synchronic aspect. The weaved cloth of Western intellectual thinking includes, apart from the red (vertical) “wrap”, also the blue (horizontal) “woof” or different periods or currents of thought. These reveal a thinker’s idea of law, order, normativity or values. They indicate the “spirit” of an age. Examples are Rationalism (from about 1600-1900), containing different sub-currents, or irrationalism or contemporary postmodernism.

While the types of worldviews and philosophies have a more constant character (they can pop up again throughout history), the views about normativity changed throughout history; they are responsible for the dynamic character in the patterns of the Western mind. Vollenhoven distinguishes about sixty such currents in Western philosophy.

Structure (type) and direction (current) should be distinguished, but should not be separated. Stated differently: fact and value are closely connected. To describe something as “a murder” is not simply stating a fact, but implies also the value that a murder is something wrong. Or a simple traffic stop sign is not merely a brute physical fact, but contains a normative prescription to a driver.

The implication is that, although the same type of philosophy may reappear during a later phase in history, it will to some extent be transformed according to the new spirit or current in which a thinker is philosophising. (To continue with our previous metaphor: the blue “woof” can change the red “wrap” to purple.)

In conclusion then: the *conception* of a thinker consists of two aspects, viz. a specific *type* of philosophy as well as the *current* it reflects. This method can be visualised (as in Vollenhoven’s *Schematic Maps*) in a diagram consisting of intersecting horizontal lines (for different currents) and vertical lines (indicating the various types of philosophy).

Many thinkers, however, developed during their lifetime by moving to a different type or a new current or to both.

## **2.4 Application to the present study**

The above methodology will now be tested in an analysis of the CD. It will focus on a central problem at Dordt, viz. the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

It should be noted beforehand that the relation between God and mankind is very difficult to explain and has therefore kept pagan and Christian thinkers busy from times immemorial. Outside God’s revelation it is *insoluble*, but at the same time *inevitable*, and therefore continued to bother people of many religious convictions through the ages. Because of limited space, merely the results of the research can be mentioned.

## **3. THE LANDMINES IDENTIFIED BY A PHILOSOPHICAL MINESWEEPING OF DORDT**

As an introduction the audience/reader is referred to the following two papers available to those interested in the details supporting this summary.

### **3.1 An overview of two supporting papers**

- Van der Walt (2011b) provides a description of Aristotle’s philosophy.

- Van der Walt (2011a) gives a general overview of the theological struggles of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Beza, Ursinus and the *Synopsis* to gain clarity about the divine-human relationship. This overview clearly indicates the influence of the Aristotelian “revolution” (different Aristotle interpretations) from the time of Beza onwards.
- The theological and their underlying philosophical viewpoints of two prominent figures, F. Gomarus and J. Arminius, at the SD is discussed in Van der Walt (2011b).
- He (cf. Van der Walt, 2011a) then provides from a philosophical perspective a detailed analysis of the Canons of Dordt.
- In the same paper (2011a) he also explains the viewpoint of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1625), a “purified”(?) dogmatics, written on request of the SD by four Reformed theologians at Leiden. (The *Purioris* indicates that this systematic theology was purified from the Arminian heresy, rejected at the SD.)
- Lastly (in 2001a) it is indicated that no real solution could be given to the issue of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. The SD tried to compromise different speculative views, accepting a slightly modified late-medieval solution.

### **3.2 Not the Bible but philosophy has the final word.**

One should keep in mind that the SD employed the philosophical insights of many past centuries at their disposal in trying to solve a vexing problem. Simultaneously they searched in a Biblicist way through the Bible for guidance.

Unfortunately they (both the orthodox and heterodox theologians) read the Bible through spectacles coloured these unbiblical philosophical presuppositions. God’s revelation lost its true guiding role. In the final instance (cf. e.g. the differences between Gomarus and Arminius) it was a struggle not between a correct interpretation of the Bible (the Calvinists) and a wrong interpretation (the Arminians), but a deep-seated clash between different (unbiblical) philosophies.

(Reading the CD in its original Latin terminology enhances the identification of its underlying philosophy.)

### **3.3 The main results**

A few of the most important conclusions of the above two papers are the following.

#### **3.3.1 A wrong direction (synthesis)**

The period of about 1550-1700 in Reformed thinking is not identified by Vollenhoven as a separate period or (sub)current. Perhaps this is because it was a synthesis between the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, Medieval scholasticism and early scientist rationalism. Rationalism absolutised the human mind to become Reason as directive for human thought and practice. Scientialis was an overestimation of the scientific over against the practical reason.

Also the Calvinists and Arminians at Dordt were synthetic thinkers, trying to accommodate ancient pagan (Aristotlising and Platonising) philosophy as well as the contemporary, early rationalism with the Scriptures, considered as a textbook for theology. This synthesis was achieved by way of the method of eisegesis-exegesis as well as the dualistic motive of nature-supernature (or grace). The implications were a struggle between what can be believed and reasoned, between theology (as the queen) and philosophy as merely a servant to theology.

The rationalistic tendency at the SD and the CD is evident from the strong speculative character of their theologies. In agreement with their view of theology, even God should be the object of rational analysis. Theologians had to describe exactly how He is ontologically structured, how his intellect and will operates, etc. They were not satisfied with his revelation about himself in his Word.

Apart from the wrong *direction*, secondly, also a wrong *type* of philosophy underlies the CD.

#### **3.3.2 A wrong type of philosophy underlying the Canons**

A whole cluster of ideas about the ontological structure of God and cosmos determined Reformed scholastic theology at the time of Dordt. Amongst them were the following:

- *A dualistic ontology*

The CD clearly operates with only two realities: God and cosmos. In such a kind of ontology the tendency is either to emphasise the divine (transcendent) or the human (non-transcendent). When this happens, God and humans can become *competitors*. Either divine sovereignty or human responsibility is one-sidedly emphasised or even eclipsed. Or, to avoid these extremes, one tries to maintain an uneasy, often unstable balance between them – God and man then become *co-operators* – with the basic problem unsolved!

- *An all-determining God as the first cause*

The resurgence of various Aristotle-interpretations (by inter alia Melanchton, Ramus, Suarez, Zabarella) had a decisive influence on the following four facets of Reformed Orthodoxy: (1) hierarchically structured being; (2) God, (3) cause, medium, effect, final goal, and (3) syllogistic logic.

In his hierarchical ontology Aristotle regarded God as the apex of all movement. Since everything moves, there should be a final, unmoved mover. He moves everything to himself. However, because his highest pleasure is only to think about himself, he is in no way concerned about the cosmos. He is merely the first ontic cause of everything, without any religious relationship to mankind. Because the theologians who gathered at Dordt were Christians, they tried to modify, but could not get rid of this idea about God and its deterministic implications for creation, man included.

- *Two different methods based on the same ontology*

In agreement with the above ontological starting-points, two main methods were acknowledged at the time of Dordt. In theological discourse the synthetical (a-priori) method, which argued from causes to their consequences. Or the popular (a posteriori) analytical method (for “ordinary” believers), which followed the

opposite direction: from the affects back through intermediary causes and finally to the final cause, God. This, I think, was similar to the routes followed (according to a dualistic ontology) by the so called Supernatural and Natural theologies of the past – from God to creation or from creation back to God.

- *A static view of creation*

While Dordt acknowledged that the cosmos was the creation of God, it was viewed as static, eternally determined by God. They thought cosmologically and could therefore not acknowledge the genesis or development of creation or the cultural task God gave to man to unfold the potential of creation. Both their view about God and their view about mankind therefore resulted in hampering human responsibility. It encouraged passivity, quietism, resignation, the acceptance of a preordained divine resolution. This deterministic view was strengthened further by a next important idea:

- *The “hidden” idea about law*

Because of their synthetic thinking (cf. 3.3.1 above) the theologians of the time missed the biblical idea of God’s law as the order (boundary and bridge) to which his whole creation is subjected. They did not distinguish God’s law-order either from God or from his creation. According to a long preceding tradition the law was regarded (1) *ante rem* (before creation) as the essence of God, *in rebus* (in every created thing), and *post rem* (in the reason of human beings – clear influence of rationalism). On the one hand law was confused with God (and God with law), while on the other hand it was (as thing-laws) confused with creation (or creation with order). In both cases law lost its real nature and character as God’s guiding rule for the direction of life.

Since all these ideas cohere in one “cluster”, the idea of the law *in* God intensified the deterministic character of Reformed Orthodoxy. It was called God’s eternal plan, decision or decree, according to which he predestined everything on earth, including the election and reprobation of humans. Taking this as a starting point, theologians only differed on whether God decreed *after*

Adam and Eve fell into sin (infralapsarianism) or even *before* their creation (supralapsarianism).

It should be noted that this scholastic idea about law not only resulted in a deterministic view of creation. Also God became its captive, subjected to his own law or decree! It further strengthened the idea of God as static, unmovable (*Deus immutabilis*).

- *The universal-individual distinction and its implications*

Another idea complementing the whole cluster of this type of thinking was how these theologians viewed the individual aspects (*this* tree) and its universal side (e.g. *trees* in general). They were neither individualist's (which regarded the individual aspect as of primary importance), nor universalists (the reverse viewpoint – the individual derived from the primary universal), but partial universalists (the universal and individual stand either in a vertical or horizontal relationship to each other).

Scholastic thinkers usually preferred the vertical relationships, but did not totally agreed because some of them (the intellectualists) regarded the universal as the higher and the individual as the lower one, while other proposed exactly the opposite viewpoint: the lower one was the universal, while the higher was identified with individuality. Examples of this difference were the viewpoints of Gomarus (an intellectualistic semi-mystical thinker) and Arminius (an empiricist).

Before I say more about empiricism, one side-remark. Since a law functions universally, in scholastic thinking confusion occurred between law and universality. And because intellectual knowledge was aimed at knowledge of the laws, the three abovementioned different ontological positions lead to three different theories about knowledge: An individualistic ontology mostly to nominalism; a universalistic to realism; a partial-universalistic to limited realism. Because, according to Arminius (a dualist), the lower part (creation) was regarded as the universal, and because the universal was regarded as of primary importance, the place and responsibility of the human being (his reason and free will) was viewed by him as more important than in the view of Gomarus.

In spite of the fact that Arminius' viewpoint was labelled as Pelagianism in the Canons, it was not correct. The difference between the two was that Pelagius (a *consistent* empiricist) overrated the human pole, while Arminius (a *non-consistent* empiricist) still tried to give divine sovereignty and supernatural revelation its full due.

- *A dichotomistic anthropology*

In spite of the fact that the Dorthian theologians had different views on exactly *when* God's decree was fulfilled (prior or after the fall), most of them accepted the above idea about God and his eternal decree. The variations became more obvious when one considers their differing views of being human, because in dualistic thinking (see above) the relationship between God and man is not determined only by God but also from the human side.

This is clearly illustrated again in my comparison of the anthropologies of Gomarus and Arminius. The first believed that part of the human being (his intellect, the highest part of the soul) is derived from the transcendent God and can be united with him again. I have described this viewpoint as (intellectualistic) semi-mysticism. ("Semi" since not the entire human being contains a divine element.) Such a viewpoint is not much concerned about one's responsibility here on earth, but primarily about a mystic, intellectualistic unification with God. It therefore merely strengthens the already mentioned quietism, resignation and passivity.

In contrast, Arminius, as non-consistent empiricist (see above), could put more emphasis on the human will and human responsibility. (It may be that this was the result of the stronger influence of a Platonising trend in Arminius than in the Aristotlising theology of Gomarus.) Compared to Gomarus' intellectualism, he may be called a voluntarist.

### **3.3.3 Aristotle redivivus?**

If the above identified "landmines" are real, the last surprising discovery I have made is that they were not new at all in 1619. If Vollenhoven is correct, the

philosophical viewpoints of Gomarus and Arminius were (apart from their Christian orientation) similar to two phases of Aristotle's thought during the last part of his life.

### ***3.3.4 Unsolved problems***

As already said, the CD contains a slightly modified late-medieval solution for our problem (cf. Sinnema, 1985:459). Many crucial problems therefore remained unsolved (cf. Sinnema, 1985:430 et seq.).

These problems – the result of the above kind of philosophy underlying the CD – continue to haunt believers and divide churches up to the present day, since they did not remain merely abstract speculations. A few examples are the following:

#### *Problems from God's side*

- Is God really such a far away, uninvolved, static being, or is he according to his own Word a God of love with compassion for his creatures, who doesn't want any one to be lost?
- Is the whole idea of an eternal, divine decree not totally unbiblical speculation?
- Logically speaking, it seems as if God (the first cause of everything) is also the cause of sin and reprobation. What then about the Bible which tells us that God hates sin?
- If God decreed from eternity, even before we were born, who will be rejected or saved, what then was the sense of sending Jesus Christ as our saviour, calling *everyone* to come to him and be saved?
- What could be the sense of preaching the gospel to those already rejected from eternity?

#### *Problems with the human side*

- Does this kind of theology not severely undermine human responsibility?

- Don't we have an own responsibility in, for instance, our conversion and sanctification?
- On the one hand a person may (since s/he believes to be elected from eternity) become careless and passive.
- On the other hand he/she may be a Christian, but experiences great anxiety because of the always present possibility of already being rejected by God from eternity.

#### **4. DETONATION OF SOME LANDMINES AT DORDT**

First an alternative for the *direction* and then for the *type* of philosophy at Dordt.

##### **4.1 An alternative direction**

The preceding exposition has hopefully indicated how powerful and deceptive the synthetic spirit was at Dordt. It should also be clear that the synthetic direction of the SD and its Canons could not really solve its central problem. It could not indicate clear normative direction because of its alliance with a mixture of Aristotelian, medieval and Rationalist tendencies and a consequent divided normative loyalty. But even more: It confused, scared and paralysed many Christians; it caused ecclesiastical schisms. Most important of all: It obscured the real message of God's Word.

Every kind of synthesis therefore has to be rejected. But we should also be aware of *why* people tend to think in this way – especially in the light of the resurgence of scholastic thinking amongst Reformed people today.

##### **4.1.1 Some reasons for synthetic thinking**

Various reasons can be mentioned (cf. Vollenhoven, 2011): (1) Some Christians are not even aware of the fact that they try to combine biblical and unbiblical ideas in their thinking; (2) Other do so consciously because they want to be regarded as “within it”, in line with the (secular) spirits of their time. (3) For others again it is the easiest way out – to consistently think Reformationally in obedience to God's threefold revelation is not easy. (4) Still others, egoistically,

are of the opinion that to be critical and against the current is too tiring. However, the final result is always detrimental. As a Christian thinker one may try to accommodate Plato, Aristotle or a post-modern philosopher's ideas. The outcome, however, is that your own philosophy or theology is annexed by Aristotle or a modern-day secular thinker.

#### **4.1.2 Not antithetical**

If I understand Vollenhoven correctly, he was, however, not an *antithetical* but an *antisynthetical* thinker. He did not simply propose his own viewpoint as correct and final, and (antithetically) rejected all others. One of the aims of his involvement in the history of philosophy was not simply to criticise, but to learn from others and enrich his own viewpoint.

#### **4.1.3 Also the methods employed rejected**

The SD's stated intention was that God's Word, the Bible, should have the final word. It became clear, however, that because of the method of eisegesis-exegesis employed the true Word of God was obscured. Such a Biblicist approach sometimes expects *too much* from the Bible and therefore often says more than what the Bible teaches. Or it can ask *too little* from God's Word and therefore says less than what God reveals, minimising its directive power. In both cases its message is muffled. The Bible becomes the ventriloquist of its human reader! Even in theology the slogan *sola Scriptura* can be misleading. Thus, to insist on the importance of the Scriptures in scholarship is not to take it as a source of data, but to reckon with its orientating – direction providing role.

Stating the same in a different way: Christians are not supposed to look biblisitically *into* the light of Scripture. They have to study the realities of God, law and cosmos *in* the light of the Bible. In the same way as I am not looking *into* the light of my reading-lamp, but I am doing my writing *with* its illumination. (Limited place does not allow to discuss here God's threefold creational, inscripturated and incarnated revelation and their relationship.)

Also the second method employed at Dordt – that of a lower realm of nature and a superior realm of supernature (grace) has to be rejected. It is basically a confusion between structure and direction, since, according to such a dualism, a part of the world (the natural) is regarded as by nature neutral or even evil, while the higher part (grace) is viewed as by nature good and the only realm in which one can really be related to and serve God.

#### **4.1.4 The most important directive**

I have indicated already that the directional and structural aspects of our life should not be confused nor be separated. One is missing the directional at the SD and in die CD. Or rather, because of its different loyalties (e.g. to Greek, Medieval and Rationalistic philosophies) it reflects clashing normative directions. This confusion strengthened by its emphasis on the *ontological* instead of *religious* relation between God and mankind (cf. semi-mysticism, which aspires at an *ontic* union with God).

Together with this goes to my mind a lack of emphasis on God's central and foundational command of love to God and our fellow humans. This command, diversified into many forms of love, should be the central directive force in one's entire life.

## **4.2 An alternative type of philosophy – also as a basis for theology**

Since this part should be well-known to Christians thinking in Vollenhovenian lines (cf. Vollenhoven, 2005), I will only briefly indicate the alternative (for the details, cf. the second part of Van der Walt, 2011b).

### **4.2.1 Alternative to a dualistic ontology**

In the place of the two-factor ontology Vollenhoven – this is the “hallmark” of his philosophy (Tol) – proposes a clear distinction and close relationship between three “factors”: God, his creation and his law-order for creation. God's laws function both as a border and as a bridge between God and the creation, subjected to his law-words.

God's central law of love – and not an eternal decree – governs the relationship between himself and mankind. God loves us and as religious beings we have to respond with love by being obedient to his laws.

Vollenhoven, therefore, firstly does not view the relationship between God and humans as an *ontological* one, but as *religious* in character. He *defines* religion as follows: "... religion is the relationship of humankind to the God of the covenant in obedience or disobedience to his fundamental law of love" (Vollenhoven, 2005:76).

Secondly, religion to him is not confined to the sphere of grace (above a secular domain of nature), but one's entire life is of a religious nature, *service to* – and not *union with* – God.

In the third place, when we replace a dualistic ontology in this way, there is no need to visualise God and man either as competitors or co-operators. Our complete dependence on God and our relative and responsible independence go hand in hand. Also God's law does not lessen our human accountability for the course of our lives. It rather heightens it. Precisely because God is the sovereign giver of law, we are the more responsible! (cf. Spykman, 1981:270).

#### **4.2.2 Alternative to an all-determining God**

God according to the Bible is not a *Deus immutabilis* at all. He goes along with human history. He felt sorry not only for its people, but even for the animals in Nineveh and changed his mind to destroy the entire city.

He did not decide in a deterministic way from eternity the lot of every creature, but He continues to reveal himself throughout history. If one follows the biblical line of creation-fall-redemption-consummation this is very clear. His covenantal word already at the beginning was a two-sided "yes" (in the case of obedience to his law) a "no" (when disobedient). At the fall his judgement ("no") became a reality, but also, his election ("yes"). From the beginning, in his single word of love, election was a revelation of his mercy and reprobation a revelation of his

justice. But election is always the “overtone” (he does not want that anyone should perish), and reprobation the “undertone” (cf. Spykman, 1981:190).

God the Father also fully revealed his will in Jesus Christ. We do not have to look speculatively “behind” Christ for an eternal decree.

#### **4.2.3 Alternative to a static view of creation**

Vollenhoven rejects (purely) cosmological thinking since it entails not a dynamic but a static ontology. If God is not a *Deus immutabilis*, why should He create a fixed, static world? He created it to unfold (from a garden to a city), and to be developed by human beings, his vicegerents on earth. Not quietistic passively but responsible activity in God’s world is the Biblical message. Human beings have a calling to walk with God in every aspect of their lives – from the past, through the present, towards the future.

#### **4.2.4 An alternative to scholastic realism**

It was already indicated that at the SD God’s law was “dissolved” in God, in creation and the human mind, while Vollenhoven regarded it as a separate entity, given by God to be obeyed by his creation. In such a perspective the idea of an eternal, divine, deterministic decree is not needed. God is also not anymore subjected to his own law, but “above” it. It does not mean that he is not faithful to his commands – he blesses obedience and punishes disobedience.

At the same time the door is fully opened to human responsibility; flourishing in obedience and suffering divine judgement if not.

God the Father created everything and posited his *laws*; the Son indicates the basic *direction* (of love); the Holy Spirit guides towards *obedience*. Human beings have the responsibility to positivise or concretise God’s love command in different professions and social relationship. In this way love flourishes in many colours in human life.

#### **4.2.5 An alternative for the individual-universal debate**

The universal and individual are considered by Vollenhoven to be *aspects* of every created being – he rejects all the above-mentioned theories about what they are (separate *entities*) and how they are related to each other.

#### **4.2.6 An alternative to a dichotomist anthropology**

As already indicated, a specific anthropology plays an important role on how one views one's relationship with God. Tol (2010:224 et seq.) indicates how the fact that Vollenhoven was influenced by Janse's "holistic" anthropology changed his whole philosophy and therefore his view on the divine-human relation.

Limited time and space do not allow me to give even the barest outline of Vollenhoven's more biblically-oriented anthropology (cf. Van der Walt, 2010:259-409 for details). Suffice it to mention only the following:

In the first place, according to Vollenhoven, a human being is a multi-dimensional being, reflecting about fifteen different facets. To be human does not consist of two components only, viz. body and soul. And to be renewed in the image of God, does not imply to become spiritual or divine, but simply to obey God's commandments.

Secondly, Vollenhoven rediscovered the biblical meaning of the heart as the religious center of being human, which determines the whole direction of life. It replaced the speculation about a mystical unification with God and also the age-old debate about the dominance of either will or intellect.

Thirdly, he rejected the higher-lower distinction of soul and body in favour of an inner-outer distinction.

Fourthly, his distinction between human structure and direction is of great value. When applied to the debate at Dordt about a "free will" it offers the following solution. Structurally and functionally our wills are *free*, yet directionally they are

not *freed* from the bondage of sin. It is an “enslaved freedom” – unless one is liberated by the grace of God to obey his laws.

Fifthly, every human being has a divine office, calling and task in this world.

## 5. IN CONCLUSION

What, then, should be one’s view about the authority of the CD? Should we try to correct only the *wording* since the *contents* (according to many Reformed theologians) is fine? I think this is impossible. Should we try to update it? How should this be done? Rewriting it? With an appendix? Should we still (as ministers, elders and deacons) subscribe to its authority, since it is in *full agreement* with the Bible (the *quia*-viewpoint) or only *in so far as* it is in agreement with God’s Word (the *quatenus*-position)? Can one really regard the authority of any fallible human confession fully or even to a degree as equal to God’s authoritative revelation?

My personal opinion is that the CD should be left as it is. But at the same time we badly need a contemporary, relevant confession or testimony (or whatever it may be called), inspired by a genuine Reformational worldview and philosophy.

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