

# On Being a Reformational Philosopher: Spirituality, Religion, and the Call to Love

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Outline and Summary (November 14, 2014)

## 1. Biography

Dates	Places	Schools	Churches
1950-1968	Escalon, California	Ripon Christian Schools	Escalon Christian Reformed Church
1968-1972	Sioux Center, Iowa	Dordt College	
1972-1977	Toronto, Ontario	Institute for Christian Studies	Hart House Fellowship (CRC)
1977-1981	Berlin and Amsterdam	Freie Universität Berlin; Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam	Hendrik-Kraemer-Haus & Kirche zur Heimat
1981-1985	Edmonton, Alberta	King's University College	Garneau United Church
1985-2002	Grand Rapids, Michigan	Calvin College	Church of the Servant (CRC)
2002-now	Toronto, Ontario	Institute for Christian Studies & University of Toronto	Beach United Church
2012-now	Grand Rapids, Michigan	(Calvin College)	Westminster Presbyterian Church (PC-USA)

## 2. Spirituality and Religion

### Connections

- Often organized religion seems less than spirit affirming or spirit filled.
- Yet spirituality without religion is hard to sustain.

### Definitions<sup>1</sup>

- Spirituality: One's connected orientation and all-encompassing direction toward what matters most, which can show up in many different ways, both religious and non-religious.
- Religion: Institutionalized worship and faith, involving a distinctive array of practices and organizations that have their own legitimacy and worth in relationship to other institutions.

### Refinements

- The normative task of religion in a differentiated society is to help people worshipfully disclose the ultimate meaning of their lives—to find what ultimately sustains them in the face of both good and evil—and to do this while placing their hope and trust—their faith—in this source of ultimate sustenance. Stated more simply: religion should help people worshipfully find and have faith in “God.”
- The authoritative touchstones of *scriptural* religions are the **inscripturated stories of faith**, in which “God” speaks and around which worship revolves. A religion's **rituals of worship** help their adherents reenact the disclosure of religious meaning, remember and celebrate their “God,” and participate in “God's” appearance.

### 3. Faith and Scripture

- “Faith and scripture” is a truncated theme: we also need to discuss worship.
  - Illustration: a story of liturgical liberation
- The scriptures come alive for people of faith within the practices of worship, as they hear God speaking to them through the scriptures.
- The Bible is the authoritative touchstone for the Christian life of faith.
  - Touchstone: It serves to test the quality of our faith, and it is the very heart and summation of what our hope and trust come to.
  - Authoritative: The Bible is a reliable and vibrant medium for God’s call and guidance and inspiration. Someone who wishes to follow Jesus will heed the call to love resounding in the scriptures, relying on them to point one’s responses in fruitful directions, and receiving strength from the inspiration they offer.
- The Bible is authoritative *within* its highly mediated character (historical, literary, and hermeneutical mediation).
- To lead the life of Christian faith is to have one’s spiritual orientation set by the Christian community’s inscripturated stories of faith and shared rituals of worship insofar as these disclose the God who calls and guides and inspires us, and to let this orientation permeate everything one is and does.

### 4. Christian Scholarship

- A Christian scholar is someone who seeks to have the spiritual orientation of one’s scholarly work set by the scriptures and worship of the Christian community, insofar as these disclose the God of love. This is more complicated than it might first seem:
  - Scholarship involves many different practices (e.g., teaching, research, writing, administration) and many different results (e.g., curriculum and courses, research findings and published writings, governance decisions and policies), and these are embedded in institutional, sectoral, and societal patterns over which an individual scholar has little say.
  - Christianity includes many traditions of scriptural interpretation and liturgical practice and many different understandings of how these (should) inform scholarship.
- Facing such complications, Christian scholars need to embed their work within a religiously inflected tradition. I locate my own scholarship in the Kuyperian and reformational traditions.
- Three Kuyperian *Leitmotiven*:
  - Creation and re-creation
  - Cultural renewal
  - Societal transformation
- Three reformational guiding themes:
  - Unfolding structural diversity (cf. “sphere sovereignty”)
  - Human responsibility for the direction of unfolding (cf. “societal principles”)
  - Societally embedded evil and goodness (cf. “interconnected flourishing”)
- Example: my approach to “truth” as a dynamic correlation between (1) human fidelity to societal principles and (2) a life-giving disclosure of society.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. Reformational Philosophy

What are the contours of Christian philosophy? Attempted answers within the Kuyperian tradition:

- Vollenhoven: Christian philosophy should be “in line with” scripture.
- Dooyeweerd: Christian philosophy should express the “biblical ground motive” of creation, fall, and redemption via central philosophical ideas of origin, unity, and coherent diversity.
- Henk Hart: Christian philosophy should articulate an ontology whose ultimate categories give consistent expression to ultimate assumptions of one’s ultimate commitment.<sup>3</sup>
- Nicholas Wolterstorff: Christian scholars (including philosophers) ought to let the “belief-content” of their “authentic Christian commitment” function “as control” within their “devising and weighing of theories”—authentic Christian commitment being “the complex of action and belief” in which one’s following of Jesus Christ “ought to be realized.”<sup>4</sup>
- Jacob Klapwijk: Christian philosophy should be “transformational” as it critically assesses, selects, and appropriates “existing intellectual goods” into “a Christian worldview.”<sup>5</sup>

Questions in response:

- *Ad* Vollenhoven: How should Christian philosophers seek to align the practices and results of their scholarship with the Bible? Is it sufficient to pick out a few key themes in one’s own *theological* tradition and use these as the central content of a *philosophical* touchstone?
- *Ad* Dooyeweerd: Are the philosophical ideas of coherence, unity, and the origin the crucial ones for a Christian philosophy today? Might other ideas be more important for expressing the “biblical ground motive”?
- *Ad* Hart: Doesn’t giving expression to one’s ultimate Christian commitment in an integral ontology run the double risk of overly systematizing the life of faith and overly theologizing the categories of philosophy?
- *Ad* Wolterstorff: To equate the project of Christian scholarship with using certain beliefs to devise and test theories reduces the scope of both scholarship and the life of faith, doesn’t it?
- *Ad* Klapwijk: Does this approach treat a Christian worldview as a static litmus test, as if it, and not the scriptures-within-worship, were the authoritative touchstone?

Two broader reservations about Kuyperian characterizations of Christian philosophy:

- They neglect the importance of worship and its relevance for philosophy.
- They do not do justice to how religion and spirituality intersect.
  - The scriptures-within-worship are authoritative *insofar as they disclose the God of love*.
  - The life of faith needs to remain *open to being spiritually reoriented by God’s self-disclosure*.

There are multiple ways in which God’s self-disclosure—divine revelation—occurs:

- Creation, scripture, and Jesus Christ
- Insofar as creation includes human history, culture, and society, God’s self-disclosure can occur in other religions as well as in scholarship that either ignores or actively rejects an alignment with scriptures-within-worship.

- Example: reading Adorno in late-1970s Berlin. Thanks to this experience, both my life of faith and my work in philosophy underwent a profound spiritual reorientation, as God’s call to love came through to me in new and challenging ways.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Conclusion: Christian Philosophy

*A Christian philosopher continually seeks to align the spiritual orientation of his or her philosophical practices and their results with the scriptures-within-worship of the Christian community, insofar as this authoritative touchstone discloses the God of love—preferably doing this within a religiously inflected tradition of scholarship—while remaining vigilant in the pursuit of alignment and open to having one’s philosophy spiritually reoriented by God’s self-disclosure.*

*Christian philosophy is a spiritually oriented response, both in practices and in results, to the God of love, faithful to the scriptures-within-worship, and ever open to the surprising ways in which God calls and guides and inspires us to follow Jesus along the pathways of love.*

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of spirituality and religion, see Lambert Zuidervaart, “Religion in Public: Passages from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” *University of Toronto Journal for Jewish Thought* 1 (April 2010), <http://cjs.utoronto.ca/tjtt/>. A revised version of this essay will appear in Lambert Zuidervaart, *Religion, Life, and Society: Essays in Reformational Philosophy, Volume 1* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> I give a brief reflection on why the topic of truth is important for both Christianity and philosophy in “Truth and Goodness Intersect,” *ICS Perspective* 48.2 (September 2014): 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 325-59.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 76, 72. Wolterstorff, 72-3, succinctly summarizes what he takes authentic Christian commitment to be.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Klapwijk, “Reformational Philosophy on the Boundary between the Past and the Future,” *Philosophia Reformata* 52 (1987): 105. See also Jacob Klapwijk, “Antithesis, Synthesis, and the Idea of Transformational Philosophy,” *Philosophia Reformata* 51 (1986): 138-52.

<sup>6</sup> That helps explain why my ICS inaugural address is subtitled “Suffering, Hope, and Wisdom.” It also helps explain why, in one of the first speeches I gave to Christian educators after becoming a professor of philosophy, I reformulated the reformational theme of creation, fall, and redemption in terms of alienation/solidarity, creativity/partnership, and liberation/communion—implicitly reversing the order of priority from creation to fallenness and, via the notion of “future liberation,” explicitly giving the reformational theme an eschatological variation. See Lambert Zuidervaart, “Salt for Humankind: Challenges of Academic Discipleship” (1982/2002), the revised version of “Salt for Humankind: Blessings in Educational Discipleship,” a keynote address given at the Annual Convention of the Christian Educators Association of Alberta, October 21, 1982.