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Reformed Epistemology

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When Abraham Kuyper delivered his famous Stone lectures at the end of the nineteenth century, he was articulating one of the great strengths of Reformed thought, at least in its Dutch form. He showed that the Christian cannot neutrally pursue the great goals of culture as if everybody was agreed about the fundamental issues of life, as if deep down the Christian and the non-Christian were not in disagreement. Kuyper sounded the trumpet call to recognize the intellectual impact that Calvinism presented:

There is no doubt then that Christianity is imperiled by great and serious dangers. Two *life systems* are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat. Modernism is bound to build a world of its own from the data of the natural man, and to construct man himself from the data of nature; while, on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship Him as the Son of the living God, and God himself, are bent upon saving the 'Christian Heritage'. In this struggle Apologetics have advanced us not one single step. Apologists have invariably begun by abandoning the assailed breastwork, in order to entrench themselves cowardly in a ravelin behind it.

From the first, therefore, I have always said to myself, – If the battle is to be fought with honor and with a hope of victory, then *principle* must be arrayed against *principle*; then it must be felt that in Modernism the vast energy of an all-embracing *life-system* assails us, then also it must be understood that we have to take our stand in a life-system of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power. And this powerful life-system is not to be invented nor formulated by ourselves, but is to be taken and applied as it presents itself in history. When thus taken, I found and confessed, and I still hold, that this manifestation of the Christian principle is given us in *Calvinism*.¹

Those Stone lectures, together with the wider writings of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, were a rallying point for the next generation of Reformed theologians and philosophers. In taking the Reformed doctrines of God and the State as a starting point rather than a conclusion, these Reformed thinkers were able to produce much more *Christian*

1 A Kuyper 'Calvinism as a Life System' *The Stone Lectures* (Eerdmans) p 11

systems of thought than the previous generation. Herman Dooyeweerd's four volume *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, published in 1935-6, is one of the most astonishing and profound pieces of Christian thinking ever attempted, let alone completed. He argued that the revelation of humanity in Scripture entails a radical revolution to the whole of Western philosophical thinking. Ever since Dooyeweerd became professor of the philosophy and history of Law in 1926 at the Free University of Amsterdam, it had been very clear that developing a specifically Christian approach to legal thinking would involve a specifically Christian approach to the whole of the philosophical enterprise.

Cornelius Van Til's rejection of the apologetic method of Warfield and Hodge was another key moment in the development of Reformed thinking in the early twentieth century. He recognized that one cannot build upon a hypothetical common ground existing between the Christian and the non-Christian mind because the Bible tells us that the unbelieving mind is fundamentally opposed to the believing mind. What makes perfect sense to the believer, strikes the unbeliever as total foolishness, and *vice versa*. What counts as good evidence for the living God to the believer, seems wholly irrelevant to the unbeliever. Of course, this has provoked a vigorous and ongoing debate in contemporary Christian philosophy, between those who still believe that it is not intellectually credible to argue for Christianity on Christian grounds (in that it seems to beg the question) and those who have been part of the Reformed rejection of this classic approach to apologetics.

So, Reformed epistemology is a specific response to the question about the basis for our knowledge of God. Of course, many of the thinkers apply this not just to religious knowledge, but to the whole gamut of human intellectual life (as Dooyeweerd had done). Nevertheless, to keep the discussion within manageable limits, we will see what Reformed epistemology has come to mean in religious philosophy.

In 1976 Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff produced a book called *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (published by Eerdmans). It was a direct rejection, of course, of the approach to religious knowledge that had been dominant ever since Kant wrote *Religion within the Bounds of Reason*. In the post-Kantian world, religion could only be regarded as intellectually responsible if it conformed to the canons of rationality that were held to be foundational. That is, the western approach to knowledge has been built upon the assumption that there are certain things that everybody can know with absolute certainty, without any faith commitment, regardless of who they are. In 1879 William Kingdon Clifford, in his *Lectures and Essays* said 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' – 'evidence' here meaning that which is self-

evident or incorrigible. As Wolterstorff puts it:

The goal of scientific endeavour, according to the foundationalist, is to form a body of theories from which all prejudice, bias, and unjustified conjecture have been eliminated. To attain this, we must begin with a firm foundation of certitude and build the house of theory on it by methods of whose reliability we are equally certain.

In Wolterstorff's seminal book he shows that there is no foundation of certitude upon which the modern approach to knowledge may build. The foundationalist approach to knowledge has been revealed as untenable. Reformed epistemology is an attempt to develop a Christian philosophy in a post-foundationalist context.

Professor Alvin Plantinga and Wolterstorff produced a collection of essays in 1983 called *Faith and Rationality* (published by the University of Notre Dame Press). This book has been another key step in the development of Reformed epistemology in that it tries to develop more of the shape of a Reformed post-foundationalist philosophy. Plantinga has done more than anybody to set out this new approach to determining what constitutes an adequate warrant for believing something. During the 1990s he has produced a variety of pieces of philosophical work that push forward the project of Reformed epistemology.

He begins by rejecting the old foundationalist system. Foundationalism claimed that a belief is properly basic only if it 'is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses'. 'Properly basic' means a belief that is not founded upon any other belief. However, Plantinga asks why we should accept this foundationalist challenge. What is self-evident about such a limitation of knowledge? Can the foundationalist challenge be demonstrated according to its own demands? Plantinga concludes that since the foundationalist system does not pass the foundationalist test, we are not compelled to accept that kind of approach to knowledge. According to Clifford's maxim of 1879, it would be wrong to be a foundationalist!

However, Plantinga's more fruitful work has been in positively developing the shape of Reformed philosophy. He says that every person comes to philosophy with belief commitments already formed, commitments about what beliefs are properly basic and what are not:

'Philosophy' as Hegel once exclaimed in a rare fit of lucidity, 'is thinking things over'. Philosophy is in large part a clarification, systematisation, articulation, relating and deepening of pre-philosophical opinion. We come to philosophy with a range of

opinions about the world and humankind and the place of the latter in the former; and in philosophy we think about these matters... Of course we may come to change our minds by virtue of philosophical endeavour; we may discover incompatibilities or other infelicities. But we come to philosophy with prephilosophical opinions; we can do no other.²

But, what has this to do with the Christian philosopher? The big problem that the Christian religious philosopher has traditionally grappled with is the issue of the existence of God. During the period of logical positivism this question was all but dismissed, but now it is allowed back onto the mainstream agenda, even if it gets little serious attention in the academic institutions. What is the Christian philosopher to do about this? Must they simply regard belief in God as a highly contestable subject unless or until sufficiently powerful arguments may be formulated to convince the non-theists. Plantinga finds this ridiculous:

And the point is: the Christian has as much right to his prephilosophical opinions as others have to theirs. He needn't try first to 'prove' them from propositions accepted by, say, the bulk of the non-Christian philosophical community; and if they are widely rejected as naïve, or pre-scientific or unworthy of 'man come of age' that is nothing whatever against them. Of course, if there were genuine and substantial arguments against them from premises that have some legitimate claim on the Christian philosopher, then he would have a problem... But in the absence of such arguments – and the absence of such arguments is evident – the Christian philosophical community, quite properly starts, in philosophy, from what it believes.³

In order that we do not overestimate the programme of Reformed epistemology we should realize that the only kind of beliefs that these Reformed philosophers really begin with are the existence of God and a handful of philosophical divine attributes. We must not imagine that these Reformed thinkers are attempting to think from the rich profundity of the Trinitarian God or the doctrine of justification or the nature of the Incarnation. Plantinga really only wants to have Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* as a properly basic belief – that is, because everybody (according to Calvin) has a sense of God, therefore believing in God is as basic and instinctive as belief in logic, other minds and sense data:

What Calvin says suggests that one who accedes to this tendency

2 Alvin Plantinga's inaugural address as John A O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame – delivered November 4 1983.

3 Alvin Plantinga's inaugural address

and in these circumstances accepts the belief that God has created the world – perhaps upon beholding the starry heavens, or the splendid majesty of the mountains, or the intricate, articulate beauty of a tiny flower – is quite as rational and quite as justified as one who believes that he sees a tree upon having that characteristic being-appeared-to-treely kind of experience.⁴

Of course, such a view of rationality is peculiar to a person who approaches philosophy from a theistic perspective – that this perspective is not accepted by the major centres of philosophy is of no relevance to the theistic philosopher. They are no less rational just because others do not share this perspective: ‘The Christian philosopher does indeed have a responsibility to the philosophical world at large, but his fundamental responsibility is to the Christian community, and finally to God.’ Thus, it is wrong for the Christian philosopher to spend all his time following the projects and agendas of the non-Christian philosophical world, because the Christian philosopher has questions and projects to pursue that are peculiar to the Christian community. Those general questions that interest Christians and non-Christians alike, will still be handled quite differently by the Christian than the non-Christian. For example, the question of personhood is approached very differently by a philosopher who is beginning with the Christian God as the starting point for thought than by an atheist who is trapped within the two poles of chance and determinism.

The great challenge of Reformed epistemology is for Christian philosophers to take seriously what they know to be true from the fact that they are Christian. Too often they have given their primary allegiance to the prevailing trends of philosophy and have put their allegiance to God in second place. Plantinga and Wolterstorff, with the increasing band of Reformed philosophers argue that this is not proper:

The Christian philosopher quite properly starts from the existence of God and presupposes it in philosophical work, whether or not he can show it to be probable or plausible with respect to premises accepted by all philosophers, or most philosophers at the great contemporary centres of philosophy.⁵

Plantinga goes on to provide his two key challenges. If the Christian philosopher has a primary commitment to Christian beliefs rather than philosophical trends, then he must pursue specifically Christian philosophical issues and must actively resist the temptation to get sucked into alien methods and assumptions:

4 Alvin Plantinga’s inaugural address

5 Alvin Plantinga’s inaugural address

We must display more integrity. We must not automatically assimilate what is current or fashionable or popular by way of philosophical opinion and procedures; for much of it comports ill with Christian ways of thinking... We must display more Christian self-confidence or courage or boldness. We have a perfect right to our pre-philosophical views; why, therefore, should we be intimidated by what the rest of the philosophical world thinks plausible or implausible?⁶

Conclusions

The twentieth century has seen a great deal of thought on Christian epistemology, and the Reformed epistemology movement must be seen in this context. If we present the major epistemological options we can see where Reformed epistemology fits into the picture.

| | Classical Christian Epistemology | Modern Foundationalism | Reformed Epistemology | Presuppositionalism |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Starting Point | Reason; especially philosophical proofs for God | Evidence; scientific and historical research | Belief in God – usually based on Calvin's <i>sensus divinitatis</i> | The Bible as the basis for all rationality |
| Main Emphasis | Right reason leads to truth | Careful investigation leads to truth | Reason with a sense of God leads to truth | Believing the Bible leads to truth |
| Apologetics | To show the reasonableness of theism | To show the reasonableness of Christianity | To show that 'neutral' reasoning is ungodly | To show that only God's Word makes sense |
| Main Philosophical Background | Plato; Augustine; Aquinas – Rationalism | Aristotle; Bacon; Locke; Butler; Scottish Common Sense Realism; Warfield | Calvin; Kuyper; Bavinck; Plantinga; Wolterstorff; Alston | Cornelius Van Til |
| Arguments drawn from | Philosophy | History and Science | Philosophy | Scripture |

From this we see that Reformed epistemology is a definite improvement on classical and foundationalist epistemology. However, in spite of Plantinga's call to take Christian beliefs as the starting point for philosophical thinking, he only ever uses the god of philosophical theism

6 Alvin Plantinga's inaugural address

as his starting point. Has philosophical theism got anything to do with the Christian confession of the One God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit? It is not apparent that there is any connection. To believe in a god would be a shared feature of the thought of the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal, but it does not describe a common structure of thought. The same must be said about a Muslim and a Christian theologian. To believe in a god is fairly unimportant – what really matters is what god a person believes in. The philosophers of Reformed Epistemology have been faced with institutionalized post-enlightenment atheism for so long that getting theism onto the agenda seems like a great victory. However, and this may sound a little unsympathetic, getting theism onto the agenda has nothing to do with thinking about the God whose being is a community of Three Persons.

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