



# Wolterstorff's critique of the reformational view of scholarship in his essay *On Christian learning*

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## Abstract

### Wolterstorff's critique of the reformational view of scholarship in his essay *On Christian learning*

*In this article I analyse Wolterstorff's criticism of aspects of the reformational approach to science and scholarship as expressed in his essay "On Christian learning" (Wolterstorff, 1989). I argue that those allegations by Wolterstorff are not always well-founded, fully justified or supported by rigorous arguments. In particular, I examine Wolterstorff's complaints concerning the "connection between religion and scholarship", religious "totalism", expressivism and the issue of a "uni-directional" view of science and religion. The purpose of this article is to remove obstacles that would hamper dialogue and cooperation between scholars in the traditions of reformational philosophy (Dooyeweerd et al.) and reformed epistemology (Wolterstorff et al.).*

## Opsomming

### Wolterstorff se kritiek op die reformatoriese siening van wetenskap in sy opstel *On Christian learning*

*Ek analiseer Wolterstorff se kritiek op aspekte van die reformatoriese benadering tot wetenskap soos uiteengesit in sy opstel "On Christian Learning" (Wolterstorff, 1989). Ek argumenteer dat Wolterstorff se bewerings nie altyd goed begrond is, ten volle geregverdig is, of deur stewige argumente ondersteun word nie. Meer spesifiek: ek ondersoek Wolterstorff se besware teen die "konneksie tussen religie en wetenskap", religieuse*

*"totalisme", ekspressiwisme en die probleem rondom 'n eenrigtingsiening van wetenskap en religie. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die struikelblokke in die pad van dialoog en samewerking tussen wetenskaplikes in die tradisies van reformatoriese filosofie (Dooyeweerd et al.) en reformatoriese epistemologie (Wolterstorff et al.) te verwyder.*

## 1. Introduction

Nicholas Wolterstorff<sup>1</sup> developed his philosophy within the reformed tradition. During his long career, he entertained a complex set of relationships with several reformed circles. One of his sources of inspiration came from Scotland, from Thomas Reid and the school of commonsense realism. In South Africa, he had close ties with Allan Boesak, but he also worked in close dialogue with reformational circles following the tradition of Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, Hart, et cetera.

Twenty years ago Wolterstorff's essay *On Christian learning* (1989) was published. In that essay Wolterstorff expresses some critique of and reservations towards the neo-Calvinist approach to scholarship and suggests a few alternatives on some specific issues. Without excluding other sources, this article focuses especially on the criticism contained in that essay. In fact, in no other essay one finds a deeper and more explicit critique, by Wolterstorff, of the neo-Calvinist view of *scientia*.

By reading *On Christian learning*, one may sometimes wonder to whom precisely Wolterstorff's criticism is directed. Which authors and which schools of thought does he have in mind when he refers to the neo-Calvinist and reformational movements? Fortunately, a footnote (n. 1 on p. 64 added to the 2004 republication of the text<sup>2</sup>) clarifies the issue considerably. Wolterstorff uses the term *neo-*

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1 Born in 1932 (Minnesota), Nicholas Wolterstorff has been professor of philosophy at Calvin College from 1959 to 1989, then Noah Porter Professor of philosophical theology at Yale University (1989-2001). As a prolific writer (a list of his publications is available, e.g. in Sloane, 2003:255-257), he has been president of the American Philosophical Association and of the Society of Christian Philosophers. He has often collaborated with Alvin Plantinga.

2 This text appears in Wolterstorff (2004:64-86) with the title *The point of connection between faith and learning*. When I quote the original (1989) text, references to the republication are also provided.

*Calvinist*<sup>3</sup> as a synonym of “Kuyperian”, thus indicating all schools of thought (not only the reformational one) recognising Kuyper as a “father”. Then he uses “reformational” to refer to the specific “branch” of neo-Calvinism deriving from Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven. These are the recipients of his criticism. In this article I adapt to Wolterstorff’s use of these terms, trusting this will result in a clearer exposition.

In the title, I refer to Wolterstorff’s criticism of the reformational approach. Admittedly, in his essay Wolterstorff does not only/always address his criticism directly to Dooyeweerd or to the “reformational branch of neo-Calvinism” (Wolterstorff, 1989:64, 65, 66; 2004:71, 72, 73). In some cases his critique concern “neo-Calvinism” in general and in one case the even broader category of “the Calvinist” (1989:65; 2004:72). However, as the reformational school is both a Calvinist and a neo-Calvinist school and as it is never exempted from those critique, in the following pages I assume that all critique expressed in that essay concern the reformational movement as well.

The scope of this article is limited to a discussion of Wolterstorff’s allegations in relation to the reformational “branch” of neo-Calvinism (not to other neo-Calvinist or Kuyperian circles). The fundamental question will be to know to what extent Wolterstorff’s criticism is fairly applied to the reformational school (or scholars).

A considerable section at the beginning of *On Christian learning* is dedicated to a critique of Kuyper’s view of scholarship. If I understand Wolterstorff’s approach correctly, however, Kuyper is not included in the reformational movement, as the trunk of a tree is not considered part of any one of the branches. This is the main reason why I will not examine Wolterstorff’s allegations against the Dutch theologian and statesman.<sup>4</sup>

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3 About his attitude towards the neo-Calvinist movement Wolterstorff (1989:68; 2004:76) writes: “I myself was reared intellectually within this movement”. The criticism contained in *On Christian learning* shows that, at least for a period, he partially distanced himself from that tradition. However, Wolterstorff also clarifies that he agrees on several important tenets of neo-Calvinist thinking. For example, he maintains “the denial of the neutrality and autonomy of scholarship with respect to religion is something I embraced early on and which I continue to embrace” (Wolterstorff, 1989:68; 2004:76).

4 A second reason is that alternative assessments of Kuyper’s views on scholarship are already available, for example Ratzsch (1987) and Strauss (1999). Finally, Wolterstorff himself has expressed more appreciative evalu-

Although I certainly appreciate several aspects of Wolterstorff's philosophy of scholarship and many other aspects of his view of education, society and art, in the following pages I am going to express some reservations towards some of Wolterstorff's critique to the reformational movement. I will argue that often such critique is not fully justified, or supported by rigorous arguments. It is also fair to state beforehand that my own reflections and comments are delivered from a reformational point of view.

The main purpose of this article is to promote renewed reciprocal recognition between scholars in the two traditions. I am encouraged in this task by noticing that Wolterstorff himself, in recent writings, has toned down, reconsidered or at least rephrased several aspects of his criticism of the neo-Calvinist view of *Wissenschaft*.<sup>5</sup>

There is one final methodological issue which I would like to point out. In his criticism, Wolterstorff focuses only on the "first and second generations" of the schools he criticises. Sometimes he creates the impression (at least in this author) that whatever *vitium originis* initially had affected these circles, it was automatically transmitted to the next generations. Although the reformational movement, for example, has produced a third and a fourth generation of thinkers (Van der Walt, 2007:222-223) Wolterstorff does not mention anyone of them. The implication seems to be that not much has changed since Kuyper and Dooyeweerd.

In the following pages I will try to adjust the chronological barycentre of the discussion by including at least some reformational authors whose publications were available at the time when Wolterstorff's criticism was delivered. My intention, however, is to a certain extent limited by the necessity of responding first of all to Wolterstorff's allegations concerning the older authors explicitly mentioned in his essay. This will be the case already in the next section, in which the

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ations of Kuyper's understanding of scholarship in other essays (cf. Wolterstorff, 2004:117, 199-225).

5 The present contribution remains helpful, however, because these reconsiderations (which I often acknowledge by quoting them below) often consist of paragraphs scattered in many articles and written at different stages. As they have not yet been properly articulated and collected in a coherent text, often the impact of the criticism contained in *On Christian learning* is still very much present in the minds of scholars in both traditions. Sloane (2003:111-126) gives that criticism a prominent position in his commentary on Wolterstorff's philosophy.

connection between religion and scholarship is the main topic and Dooyeweerd is the main author discussed by Wolterstorff.

## 2. The connection between religion and scholarship

### 2.1 Two wrong approaches in the reformational tradition

Wolterstorff says he was “reared intellectually” within neo-Calvinism (Wolterstorff, 1989:68; 2004:76). What made him more reluctant towards it, at a certain stage in his career? This has everything to do with the connection between Christianity (i.e. religion) and scholarship.

I have come to feel acutely that the first- and second-generation founders of the movement did not succeed in pinpointing the connection between religion and the practice and results of scholarship. (Wolterstorff, 1989:68; 2004:76.)

In his view, the neo-Calvinist attempts at linking religion<sup>6</sup> and scholarship can be classified under two main chapters. “Some have argued that the link between religion and scientific inquiry lies in worldviews”, says Wolterstorff (1989:66; 2004:73). “The second attempt (...) takes the concepts of *faith* and *idolatry* to be central instead of worldview” (Wolterstorff, 1989:67; 2004:75).

Wolterstorff classifies Dooyeweerd’s philosophy as belonging to the first “chapter”. In his opinion, “Herman Dooyeweerd’s explication and use of the concept of *ground-motive* is best placed within the context of the worldview approach” (Wolterstorff, 1989:67; 2004:75).<sup>7</sup>

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6 The adjective *religious*, related to scholarship may create some perplexity in a reader who is not acquainted with neo-Calvinist terminology. In Wolterstorff (and in reformational philosophy as well) it does not refer only to the “classical” religions (Christianity, Islam, etc.). It also refers to all types of ultimate commitments (e.g. of humanists, atheists, positivists, Marxists and whoever “interprets” life in some way or the other). From this point of view, therefore, all human beings are religious and hold religious commitments, beliefs, et cetera. According to Clouser (1991:22-23) “a belief is religious provided that (1) it is a belief in something(s) or other as divine or (2) a belief concerning how humans come to stand in proper relation to the divine”. *Divine*, according to Clouser (1991:22-23), should be defined as “... having the status of not depending on anything else”.

7 In this quotation Wolterstorff seems not to see a big difference between worldviews and ground motives. It should be pointed out, however, that they differ in important ways and play different roles in scholarship. For a distinction between worldviews and religious ground motives see, for example Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:68-168). Klapwijk (1989) and Wolters (1989) discuss the re-

Contrary to Wolterstorff, Klapwijk (1987:108-109) however, explains that his own idea of legitimating a "mediating role of worldviews" is a rather recent proposal within reformational philosophy. One may add that it has attracted considerable criticism as well (cf. Geertsema, 1987; Groenewoud, 1987). Wolters (1989:22 ff.) too maintains that such a view is not common among reformational scholars. Indeed, it cannot be regarded as an established pattern of thought within this philosophical school.

As a matter of fact, Dooyeweerd (1984, 1:114-164) did not want to insert any worldview between religion and scholarship, the reason being that in his opinion this move would relativise and historicise Christian scholarship. So whose approach is Wolterstorff describing? In this case, unfortunately, he does not support his argument with precise references. After saying that "some have argued" for this solution, he (Wolterstorff, 1989:66; 2004:73) just mentions his "former teacher, William Harry Jellema".

Complicating the issue, he places Dooyeweerd in the second group as well, among those who use the concepts of *faith* and *idolatry* as the link between religion and science. Concerning this second group, once again, one wonders which reformational philosopher ever proposed faith (or misdirected faith) as a link between religion and scholarship. One might perhaps say that Dooyeweerd proposed the idea that a religious ground motive (but not faith)<sup>8</sup> is the link between Scripture and scholarship. For the rest, I cannot recall any other example and Wolterstorff does not provide any references.

As far as reformational philosophy is concerned, the idea of a connection between religion and scholarship was proposed quite rarely.<sup>9</sup> One might rather say that religion and scholarship were regarded as always/already connected. Concerning Christian scholarship the discussion focused rather on the connection between

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spective roles of these two frameworks in philosophy and the type of influence they exert.

8 The distinction between faith and religion is crucial in reformational thought. While faith is an aspect of experience, religion encompasses all the aspects of experience. By distinguishing between faith and religion (e.g. Dooyeweerd, 1984, 2:303) one is allowed to retain the particular "religiosity" of faith without limiting religion to faith.

9 I can only recall Klapwijk's above-mentioned proposal on the mediating role of worldviews and Van der Walt's (e.g. 1994:572) model, which is, however, open to different interpretations.

Scripture and scholarship. In fact, religion itself was considered the link between Scripture and scholarship. For example, in Dooyeweerd's model, a religious ground motive (i.e. religion) constitutes the connection, and the two terms to be linked are Scripture and scholarship. In Vollenhoven's model for scholarship even the mediating role of ground motives or other "bridges" is not considered that necessary or even helpful (cf. Klapwijk, 1987:106-108). Neither Dooyeweerd nor Vollenhoven, therefore, saw any need to link "religion and scholarship" as Wolterstorff argues. The idea was probably suggested to Wolterstorff by his own wish to propose a further connection between religion and scholarship, which is constituted by control beliefs (Wolterstorff, 1976:63 ff.).

## 2.2 The issue of reductionism

According to Wolterstorff (1989:69), for those who follow this faith-idolatry approach (the second group mentioned above) "idolatry manifests itself in the academic disciplines in (futile) reductionist attempts to treat some dimensions of created reality as the clue to the whole" (Wolterstorff, 1989:68; 2004:75). The problem is, says Wolterstorff, that it is not possible to show that "whenever scholars fail to take God as absolute, their scholarship will display the tell-tale structure of being illicitly reductionist". In his opinion there are, on the contrary, many examples of non-reductionist science outside Christian circles. "Neither Dooyeweerd, who especially embraced and elaborated this approach, nor anyone else has ever succeeded in showing otherwise" (Wolterstorff, 1989:68; 2004:76).

What Wolterstorff means, I believe, is that non-Christian thinkers do not always reduce the multiplicity of modal aspects to a specific one. On this point he is right, but this is a radical form of reductionism. There are milder forms in which the recognition of multiple aspects is limited to just three or four.<sup>10</sup> In practice, it is not easy to quote a single philosopher who does recognise all the modal aspects of experience and reality. In this sense, reductionism is a rather wide-

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10 Clouser (1996:77-78, footnote 23) distinguishes between "strong reduction" and "weak reduction". He then distinguishes, within the former, the two sub-categories of "meaning replacement" and "factual identity". Within the mild version of reductionism he distinguishes between "causal dependency" and "epiphenomenalism". Clouser specifies that these first-aid distinctions do not include all forms of reductionism, but only those who are blatantly unacceptable from a Christian point of view. The reformational analysis of these issues is a much more complex and serious attempt than Wolterstorff's essay suggests (cf. also Clouser, 1996: footnote 10).

spread characteristic of Western scholarship (as Wolterstorff recognises, 1989:68; 2004:75).

However, Dooyeweerd did nowhere maintain that reductionism is always present in non-Christian philosophy. In this context, Dooyeweerd does not speak of "non-Christian" philosophy but of "immanence" philosophy. The latter is philosophy which does not recognise an "Archimedean point" outside philosophy itself. Quite obviously, some non-Christian authors do not fit into this category (e.g. non-secular Jewish philosophers). The fact that Dooyeweerd does not speak of non-Christian, but of "immanence" philosophy is a clue to the fact that he may not identify the two.

There is another factor which should induce to prudence: many of the authors who, according to Dooyeweerd, resort to absolutisations or reductions are in fact Christians! Descartes, Locke, Kant and many more were Christians of some sort. This simply illustrates what Dooyeweerd had said already on different occasions: Christian and non-Christian scholars are not divided in two well delimited groups. In fact, the antithesis challenges the Christian scientific community as well (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:524). Scientists who are Christians sometimes adhere to unbiblical ground motives when it comes to science. Apart from that, they are still under the influence of the fall. Non-Christians, on the other hand, can be right on many issues, because religious ground motives are not the only source for scientific knowledge (Dooyeweerd, 1959:69). There are structural "states of affairs" which can be discovered by anyone. Furthermore, it should be noticed that according to Dooyeweerd the only radical kind of antithesis is the religious one (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:123). Theoretical antithesis can only be relative.

In addition, Dooyeweerd never said that reductionism is the only feature of immanence philosophy. For example, in a specific passage where he (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:45) discusses immanence philosophy, he mentions the problem of absolutisation, not of reductionism. One should therefore start by distinguishing the related yet different mechanisms called reductionism, absolutisation, paradox and functionalism.<sup>11</sup> In this way, one will avoid "reducing to reduc-

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11 For a detailed discussion of these processes (and the difference between them) see Hart (1984:86 ff.). Hart defines reductionism as "dealing with an irreducible manifold as though it fundamentally were a variety of one kind"; absolutisation as "dealing with one aspect of one relational situation as unconditionally determining the other aspects"; functionalism as "dealing with entities as reified functions" (Hart, 1984:86); and paradox as "dealing with one level of



tionism” Dooyeweerd’s elaborated analysis of Western philosophy. As a matter of fact, that analysis does not focus on reductionism but on the dialectical conflict between the rival poles (nature and freedom), constituting the humanist ground motive.

Contrary to Wolterstorff’s caricaturelike sketch, therefore, reductionism is certainly not the only feature to which reformational philosophers pay attention when interacting with “rival” philosophies, and certainly not the only problem they try to avoid in their own theorising.

### **3. Religious totalism and the obsession for difference**

#### **3.1 Understanding the allegations**

Wolterstorff (1989:65; 2004:72) accuses the neo-Calvinist of “religious totalism”. Religion plays too big a role, in his opinion, in the neo-Calvinist tradition. In fact, observes Wolterstorff, religion is supposed to create differences everywhere. “Anyone who says, ‘Lo, here faith makes a difference, but not there’ can expect from the Calvinist an intuitive aversion” (Wolterstorff, 1989:65; 2004:72).

This obsession for difference, according to Wolterstorff, creates the expectation that faithful Christian scholarship must always be “different”. Difference thus becomes a kind of aim of scholarship, while at this point Wolterstorff suggests that fidelity is what the Christian scholar should try to achieve.

He does not deny that Christian scholarship, as a whole, will show its distinctive character. But one should not expect the differences to manifest themselves in each and every “segment” of scholarship (Wolterstorff, 1989:70; 2004:78). If a Christian scholar realises that he/she agrees with his/her non-Christian colleagues on a specific segment of academic work, why worry? The only question one should ask is whether one has been faithful to the gospel. There is no need to be “constantly querulous” and “suspicious” about the agreements emerging among scholars of different persuasion.

Wolterstorff’s allegation is that if we regard religion as controlling scholarship in a rather totalising way, the moment we deal with

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functionality in terms of another” (Hart, 1984:129). It should also be realised that some forms of reduction play a positive and necessary role in science, and cannot be regarded as reductionist strategies.

different religious positions we expect differences in the practice of scholarship to emerge all along the way.

### **3.2 Religious totalism? A reply**

Reformational philosophers regard religion as the ultimate root of human being and acting. It must be said, however, that by accepting such an all-encompassing role of religion one does not have to view all actions, ideas, conceptions and cultural realisations as determined in a "totalitarian" way by religion. In other words, one has to distinguish properly between the religious commitments of a community (or individual) and their fallible and provisional cultural realisations in history. If it were not so, one would find no point of contact between people holding to different religious starting points, either for communication or cooperation. In addition, the Christian could presume, in principle, that his views and theories are always right while the non-Christian would be always wrong. Of course this is very far from any reformational view.

I would like to mention a theme in Stafleu's work, which sheds light on this matter. In his philosophy of science Stafleu (1987:26-29) avers a "relative independence" of statements and concepts with respect to theories (and a relative independence of theories with respect to "frameworks" like paradigms, religious ground motives or worldviews). The idea simply means that theories, concepts and statements are not "totally" dependent on the paradigms (or theories) originating, inspiring or suggesting them.

Stafleu takes a distance from both positivist and more recent relativist trends in philosophy of science. Positivists believed that frameworks had no influence at all on theories or concepts (but this is not the point we want to stress here). On the other hand philosophers like Kuhn and Feyerabend regarded scientific knowledge as completely conditioned by the paradigms or frameworks which originate it. Stafleu disagrees with both positions: he argues in favour of a certain "independence" of scientific elaborations from paradigms and frameworks. This is the reason why, he argues, theories and concepts can still be compared, and there can be dialogue between different schools.<sup>12</sup> I will return on this theme in section

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12 Although I have referred only to Stafleu, to respect the limits of space, I would like to clear the eventual suspicion that his position may be unusual within reformational circles. Not only is Stafleu's position nothing "eccentric", but it is in full agreement with (and actually founded on) fundamental tenets of re-

4.2, to show that commitments are not the only factors that shape theories and that reformational philosophy has insisted on the crucial theme of a created structural order.

Reformational philosophers do certainly argue that scholarship is never religiously neutral. This, however, is argued by Wolterstorff as well (cf. 1989:68; 2004:76). A “totalitarian” understanding of religion, on the contrary, cannot be attributed to the reformational movement.

### 3.3 A reply on the “obsession for difference”

Curiously, Wolterstorff’s discovery of an obsession for difference is not supported by references to the writings of any (reformational) author. As a matter of fact, I have hardly “met” scholars in this tradition arguing that difference<sup>13</sup> should be among the aims of Christian scholarship,<sup>14</sup> or that it confirms one’s faithfulness. Here Wolterstorff is possibly trying to capture a psychological attitude, rather than a conviction.

At this point, my problem is: how does one proceed to demonstrate that the anxiety about differences has not affected an author or a movement? Would it be sufficient to quote an author saying “I am not worried about differences”, or the like? I doubt it. One would probably like to get something more “concrete” than mere declarations. Declarations might even be a subtle way to conceal a problem.

Perhaps one should look at the amount of distinctive theories devised by a certain author and on that ground decide whether he was obsessed by “difference”. Should this method, however, be applied to Wolterstorff himself, would it be sufficient to prove that he had no anxiety concerning “difference”? The answer is not so obvious to me, as Wolterstorff has devised, for example, a distinctive theory of education (Wolterstorff, 1980a), and scholarship (Wolterstorff,

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formational philosophy, like the distinction between the pre-theoretical and the theoretical levels of thinking (cf. Coletto, 2007:139-140).

13 In 75 years of reformational philosophising one may of course come across occasional statements which may be regarded as supporting Wolterstorff’s point. For example Hart (1988:17) says that Christian scholars should “aim for actual, concrete, practical differences and effects within the disciplines”.

14 On the issue of the aims of science/scholarship, Stafleu (1987:152) and Botha (1996:333) help in understanding the reformational approach.

1976), and aesthetics (Wolterstorff, 1980b). How would one show, therefore, that Wolterstorff has not been obsessed by "difference"?

Would it be sufficient, perhaps, to show that (notwithstanding the distinctive theories he produced) in some "segments" of his scholarship Wolterstorff did agree with non-Christian colleagues and has peacefully accepted the fact? At least in his ontology he (Wolterstorff, 1970) has endorsed a certain version of realism, and therefore he finds himself agreeing with several non-Christian colleagues. Hart (1984:426, footnote 5) still remarks that there remains a substantial difference between Wolterstorff's realism and (e.g.) Armstrong's realism, and that the difference is due to Wolterstorff's theist position. Once again, we deal only with "segments" of agreement. However, would those segments be sufficient to prove that he was not obsessed by "difference"?

If they are not, then Wolterstorff is in the same position as the authors he criticises. If they are sufficient, then one also has to recognise that reformational scholarship too shows several moments of agreement with non-Christian scholarship.

I would mention as random examples Dooyeweerd's (1984, 1:118) recognition that his transcendental critique has clear links with Kantian philosophy. In the same way, Dooyeweerd admits that his development of the principle of sphere sovereignty would not have been possible "without the entire preceding development of modern philosophy and of the different branches of modern science" (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:118). Admittedly, he also adds that there are differences as well (between the reformational and Kantian views) but if segments of agreement are acceptable, then the above examples are surely valid. Another example is constituted by Hart's recognition of the merits of both realism and nominalism, aspects of which are acknowledged in his own ontology (Hart, 1984:19).

And if we consider not only the non-Christian, but also those who theorise on the basis of a different religious ground motive, then one must admit that the search for convergence with Catholic thinkers has led the reformational movement not only to appreciation of theoretical similarities, but to common action as well. For example, the political party founded by Kuyper and the Christian Historical Union are nowadays united to a catholic party to form the *Christian Democratic Appeal*. In this process, the contributions of reformational authors like Dengerink (e.g. 1948) and Chaplin (e.g. 1995) have played their role.

We may have different opinions on and different appreciations of Christian democratic politics, but this is not the point. The point is that the obsession for difference does not seem to constitute any relevant trait of reformational thought and praxis.

My impression is that on this issue the agreement between Wolterstorff and his reformational colleagues is broader than what appears from his 1989 essay (may one say in this case he has been too anxious to detect a difference?).<sup>15</sup> For its part, the reformational movement has never rejected Wolterstorff's intuition that difference is not the aim of scholarship and that faithfulness is a key concept. On the contrary, this suggestion has been normally accepted (cf. Van der Walt, 1994:578-579). The reason, I believe, is that it reflected a conviction that was already present among reformational scholars, even though it had not been formulated as clearly as Wolterstorff did.

It would be simply unfair, in my opinion, to argue that reformational thinkers are obsessed about differences. I would rather say that they keep their eyes open on the possibility of a different approach in the diverse disciplines. After all, if difference is neither the aim of scholarship, nor a guarantee of faithfulness, the same must be said about agreement or consensus.

## 4. Expressivism: science as expression of the self

### 4.1 Ignoring the world and the social practice of science

Another allegation, contained in *On Christian learning*, is condensed in the term *expressivism* (or *expressionism* – Wolterstorff, 2004: 216). Expressivism regards cultural achievements like philosophy, or scholarship in general (but also the cultural tradition of a nation, community, etc.) as the “expression” of a spirit, religion, worldview and so on. It is “what Charles Taylor (...) calls the *expressivist* vision of life. In this vision human activity and life are considered expressions of the self” (Wolterstorff, 1989:72; 2004:80).

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15 After all, Wolterstorff has pointed out already in 1976 that there are different levels in science and scholarship. There are low-level theories and high-level theories (Wolterstorff, 1976:79). Although it is not always immediately apparent, the two levels are always linked. Even when we seem to agree on states of affairs that are the same for all, we might differ in the interpretation of data, in the conclusions we draw and so on. In all this Wolterstorff argues in a pretty reformational way.

In the specific case of the reformational movement, science or scholarship are regarded, according to Wolterstorff, as a mere expression of the religion of a particular community. In this way science becomes a mere expression of a (communal or individual) *self* who expresses that religion. As a consequence, two other fundamental factors for the elaboration of scientific theorising have been ignored or heavily underestimated: namely the world and the social practice of science (Wolterstorff, 1989:73; 2004:81).

#### **4.2 Expressing the self while ignoring the world? A reply**

Although Wolterstorff's analysis of expressivism is commendable, in Dooyeweerd's epistemology science is never simply the expression of convictions, not even of religious convictions. According to Wolters (1989:22-23) and Klapwijk (1989:50-52), for example, Dooyeweerd fought precisely the expressivist view of science. As mentioned above, Dooyeweerd did not consider it appropriate, for example, to legitimise the mediating role of a worldview between Christian philosophy and its religious ground motive (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:114-164). The reason was exactly that this solution would come too close to an expressivist position (though he doesn't use the term). This is also the reason, by the way, why he preferred to speak of a "Christian" (not of a Calvinist) philosophy (Dooyeweerd 1984, 1:524). He was not only aware of the problem, but acted in order to avoid it.

According to Wolterstorff, in its expressivist attitude reformational philosophy and scholarship have not paid sufficient attention to "the world" and to the social practice of science. Limits of space oblige me to respond only to the first (and more relevant) allegation, the one concerning the world as object of scientific investigation.<sup>16</sup>

One might be justified in saying that "the world is not taken into account" sufficiently in the philosophy of Feyerabend or some other highly subjectivist<sup>17</sup> philosopher of science. The statement, however, does not fit Dooyeweerd's or reformational philosophy. They surely did not ignore "the world", in their ontology and epistemology.

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16 Concerning the second allegation (science as a social practice) my impression is that Wolterstorff has softened his allegations in the section "Kuyper: science as a social practice" (Wolterstorff, 2004:117-118).

17 The term *subjectivist* refers to authors who anchor their epistemological views especially to the human agent of knowledge (individual or community). It is not, therefore, a synonym of "individualist".

To realise it, it is sufficient to take note of the role played in this philosophy by the theme of a *structural order for creation or reality* (cf. e.g. Stafleu, 1987:238 ff.; Van Riessen, 1992:54 ff.; Botha, 1986:85-86; Coletto, 2007). It was exactly the pre-scientific theme of creation which provided the reformational school with the idea of structures which are not the product of the human subject (or of his “religion”).

According to Dooyeweerd science has to do with “states of affairs” that are the same for all scholars, irrespective of their views, convictions or theories (Dooyeweerd, 1959:72 ff.). “Once these states of affairs have been discovered” says Dooyeweerd, “it would be futile to deny them”. Dooyeweerd’s epistemology is anchored to both the knower (with his/her point of view) and the structural states of affairs which are never totally dependent on specific views. This is why such states of affairs are accessible to all scholars, independently of their religious orientation. This is why they can be discovered by all and there can be interaction and cooperation between scholars of different persuasion (Dooyeweerd, 1959:73).

In this context, Hart’s ontological work represents very well the reformational tradition as it appropriates and elaborates themes from the ontology of both Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. According to Hart (1985:155), science constitutes “our understanding of structures, our grasp of general patterns, our insight into laws, kinds and properties”. These laws and structures are irreducible to the human subject and are certainly not mere expressions of a “self”. On the contrary, they are “nomic conditions” (Hart, 1984:1-83). Reformational philosophy has typically insisted that when scientific thinking is not in tune with the structural realities it tries to account for, all sorts of paradoxes, anomalies and incongruences will emerge.

On this topic too, therefore, the allegations contained in *On Christian learning* are disputable, to say the least. The next section will consider two last allegations.

## **5. A one-directional, non-interactive view of religion and science**

### **5.1 Religion influences science, but not vice versa**

According to Wolterstorff, in the neo-Calvinist tradition the expressivist malaise is related to another problem, namely to a “one-directional, non-interactionist view of the relationship between religion and the practice of scholarship” (Wolterstorff, 1989:72; 2004:80). In

other words, Wolterstorff argues that the expressivist approach (discussed above) leads many neo-Calvinist scholars towards the belief that while religion shapes and determines every cultural realisation, religion itself is never modified or influenced by anything in culture. This view is also uni-directional: only the road from religion to science is recognised. The "second direction" (from science to religion) is simply ignored.

In a chapter dedicated to "theory and praxis" Wolterstorff (1983:162-176) says that neo-Calvinism had the merit of questioning one of the most fundamental beliefs of the "post-Enlightenment West":

That if ever one discerns conflict between one's religious convictions on the one hand, and the results of reputable science on the other, then one is obliged, as a rational person to resolve the conflict by revising one's religious convictions. (...) the neo-Calvinists have had the imagination and courage to ask the provocative and deeply unsettling question of whether it is not sometimes the right and even the duty of rational individuals to restore the harmony by revising their theoretical conclusions. (Wolterstorff, 1983:170.)

Yet Wolterstorff is under the impression that nowadays these scholars have created a new unbalanced view of the relationship between science and religion. Speaking about "Kuyper and many of his followers", he says:

Their picture of the relationship between Christian conviction and scientific practice and result is entirely one-directional, from faith to science. Kuyper's emphasis, you will recall, is entirely on the way palingenesis influences science. (Wolterstorff, 1989:72; 2004:80.)

Therefore, to regain the balance:

I also insist that in cases of conflict between religion and science, people may sometimes alter not their scientific but their religious convictions, and that they may do so justifiably; sometimes they may even be obliged to do so. (...) At a certain point, for instance, it was no longer epistemically permissible for Christians to believe they were religiously obliged to hold to the geocentric theory. (Wolterstorff, 1989:77-78; 2004:85.)

Wolterstorff, therefore, does not only argue that neo-Calvinism promotes a non-interactionist view. He also proposes, more positively, a few criteria for a good interactionist model. The latter is obtained when scientific "convictions" are recognised as factors which may



(legitimately) modify or even dismiss “religious” convictions. In the next section I am going to reply (as far as the reformational school is concerned) to the allegations concerning a “non-interactionist” view of religion and science. In the section following that, I will briefly discuss Wolterstorff’s own proposals for a proper interactive view.

## **5.2 Do reformational thinkers hold a non-interactionist view?**

Did Dooyeweerd really ignore that there is a “second direction”; an influence of theorising (and I would add: of experience in general) on our most fundamental commitments? It should be noticed that if one does not at least take into account the possibility of this influence, one would have difficulties even explaining why sometimes some people do change their religious commitments. Did Dooyeweerd flatly ignore these things?

For sure he (Dooyeweerd, 1984, 1:565-566) acknowledged the influence of the special sciences and of philosophy on religion. For example, once scientific reflection detects antinomies in its own results – one might ask oneself whether the problem does not start in the ground motive itself. Philosophy and science, in other words, can indicate that an anomaly is taking place, and this fact can then put into questioning the ground motive which may be ultimately responsible for it.

From a reformational point of view, however, religion was not the only element which was regarded as modifiable by the “second” direction (i.e. by scientific theorising). The discussion, in reformational circles, about the impact of scientific knowledge on worldviews started quite early (Kalsbeek, 1975:170-171). The idea that worldviews are influenced, not only by religion, but also by daily experience (including scientific knowledge) has been one of the most popular within reformational circles. These are just a few notes, but they surely point towards an awareness of the influence of science on religion.

It can therefore be excluded that reformational philosophy promotes a non-interactionist view of the relationship between religion and science. It might be argued, rather, that it does not endorse Wolterstorff’s solution completely, especially when it comes to the issue of the alteration or elimination of religious beliefs. On this point the crucial question is whether Christians are entitled to formulate the hypothesis that they could legitimately “give up” their religion.

### **5.3 Wolterstorff's interactive view of science and religion**

Before answering the previous question, one should make sure about Wolterstorff's intentions. What does he mean when he says that (Christian) "religious" beliefs can be altered or even eliminated by science? In some instances he gives the example of the geocentric theory, defended by the church but challenged by scientists like Galileo. In other instances, however, what may be changed or even "given up" is one's "Christian commitment" (Wolterstorff, 1976: 89), one's "religious convictions" (Wolterstorff, 1989:77; 2004:85) or beliefs.

The question is what exactly can be altered or even refuted by science, according to Wolterstorff? Is it only beliefs which are peripheral (yet perhaps wrongly regarded as essential in a certain epoch by a certain Christian community), or is it our very faith, commitment, the Christian religion itself? If Wolterstorff means the former (i.e. peripheral beliefs) he is not saying much. This is what has happened for the last 2 000 years and no objection would be raised from a reformational point of view. If he means the latter (i.e. religion itself), however, in my opinion he is saying too much.

As "official" commentator<sup>18</sup> of Wolterstorff's philosophy, Sloane (2003:223-232) avers that Wolterstorff defends the possibility of losing one's Christian religion. Sloane explains Wolterstorff's views by using a "medical metaphor" (Sloane, 2003:224 ff.). An organism (i.e. a religious commitment) can die when one of its most important organs are affected. Even a disease affecting marginal organs can lead to the death of an organism when it spreads to or affects vital organs.

On the basis of this clarification, what would it mean that the reformational movement holds a non-interactionist view? It means that reformational thinkers have not been as prepared as Wolterstorff to admit that one's Christian commitment (i.e. religion) can be lost. On this point, however, one should also admit that there are theological and confessional objections to the idea that the Christian religion can be "lost". In fact, the latter is definitely in contrast with the doctrine of the "final perseverance of the saints". For reformed theology, there is not such a thing as "dis-conversion". If this may be called a control-belief, I am afraid it does not play the role it should

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18 Sloane's commentary on Wolterstorff's philosophy has been "approved" by Wolterstorff himself in the foreword to the book (Sloane, 2003:xiii-xiv).

in Wolterstorff's view of the relationship between science and religion.

Here we may have reached a crucial characteristic of Wolterstorff's philosophy. As Hart has noticed long ago (Hart, 1979:190 ff.), in this tradition the power of rationality seems to border on autonomy. This, however, is material for another discussion. As it is not my purpose to criticise Wolterstorff's philosophy, it is advisable to conclude my "apology" here.

## 6. Conclusion

There are many aspects of Wolterstorff's contributions which can be and are appreciated from a reformational point of view. As a matter of fact, many of Wolterstorff's suggestions have been welcomed by various reformational thinkers, e.g. Wolterstorff's critique of foundationalism. In this regard Venter (1994:262) admits that Wolterstorff's critique may concern some of the "fathers" of the neo-Calvinist movement. In particular Kuyper might have been exposed to the temptation of regarding the Bible as a deposit of logical truths from which true propositions might be derived and applied to science. Van der Walt (1994:44-45; 578-579) too appropriates several insights from Wolterstorff's philosophy. More recently Botha (2006:28-30) shows appreciation for Wolterstorff's notion of control beliefs (cf. also Duvenage, 1985:35).

On the other hand, this article has tried to show that some of Wolterstorff's allegations are not fairly applicable to the reformational tradition. I hope it will help overcoming eventual obstacles and prejudices, in view of renewed dialogue and interaction.

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**Key concepts:**

expressivism in science and scholarship  
reductionism in science and scholarship  
relationship: science-religion  
Wolterstorff: critique of reformational philosophy  
Wolterstorff: philosophy of scholarship

**Kernbegrippe:**

ekspressiwisme in wetenskap  
reduksionisme in wetenskap  
verhouding: wetenskap-religie  
Wolterstorff: filosofie van die wetenskap  
Wolterstorff: kritiek van reformatoriese filosofie