THE POSSIBILITY OF A CALVINISTIC PHILOSOPHY

THE philosophical contributions of Calvinists betray that they often—too often—confuse theology and philosophy; that they many a time either adopt a merely negative attitude of criticizing opposite theories, or that they seem to be satisfied with merely tackling some detail problem or other—without giving to the world their own constructive and comprehensive system; finally, that they sometimes accept systems of other philosophers—systems bearing no definite and direct relation to the fundamental principles of Calvinism at all. As long as this is all that Calvinistic philosophers achieve, a genuine Calvinistic philosophy does not exist.

I

Is a Calvinistic philosophy possible?—If this should be the case, it must have a domain and task of its own and it must be definitely distinguishable from a Calvinistic theology, notwithstanding the necessarily reciprocal relations between these two systems of knowledge. It must also be distinguished from and bear definite relations to the particular sciences (e.g. physics, biology, history, ethics, logic, etc.). It must furthermore have a fundamental principle of its own, which guarantees its formal unity as well as its formal comprehensiveness—a principle definitely of Calvinistic origin. This principle must lodge the formal possibility of a rich and energetic development of this philosophy.

Notwithstanding the high philosophical merits of Calvinists like the late Professor H. Bavinck, one must, I am convinced, give to Professor Vollenhoven as well as to Professor Dooyeweerd, both of the Free University of Amsterdam, the honour of having convincingly shown for the first time in the history of philosophy that a genuine Calvinistic philosophy is possible—and of attempting to construct such a system. With their achievements, I feel assured, a Calvinistic philosophy has at last become of age and can begin its own life relatively independent of its parent theology. This does not necessarily mean that one should accept their system in its entirety (Professors Vollenhoven and

Dooyeweerd admit that their system is still in its developing stages and still suffers necessary changes), but it does mean that they have laid the foundations on which the building of a Calvinistic philosophy has to be constructed. Their own construction may or may not prove to have lasting significance, but their method and fundamental principle have, I think, come to stay. The case of giving this principle its unique and fundamental position in a Calvinistic philosophy may even seem to be a case of the egg of Columbus in so far as the truth of this principle was acknowledged in all Calvinistic thought. But still it is these two Amsterdamers who have for the first time explicitly and consciously placed this principle at the basis of a genuine Calvinistic philosophy. Also to the other principles elaborated in their system a high value must be attached, but as this article concerns only the possibility of a Calvinistic philosophy, their system (original in many aspects) cannot be discussed any further here.

II

The basic principle of their philosophy Professors Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd term the (philosophical) principle of Archimedes. It has the function of definitely distinguishing between God and cosmic reality. Whatever is God is not creation, and whatever the created cosmos may be, it is not God. This principle draws a very distinct boundary line between God and created reality. Every confusion of God and of the cosmos (so abundant in modern and almost in all philosophy) is thus excluded. This principle has also the function of revealing the relation between God and the cosmic universe. Whether this first principle of a Calvinistic philosophy should be taken to be *the principle of law*—God being the law-giver and creation a kingdom of law-subjects—as Professors Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd take it to be the case, or whether, as I prefer to take it, this first principle should be taken to be the principle of creation—God being the Creator and the cosmos a kingdom of creatures,—this question is here of secondary importance, the main point being the explicit acknowledgment of this principle in its formal aspect. It must, however, be noted that these two further determinations of this principle do not exclude each other, and that the only question here is which of these should be taken to be the more fundamental. This principle furthermore gives to cosmic

reality its deepest meaning, grasps it in its extrinsic unity, formally embraces everything given and possible in the created universe and gives us a unique survey of this cosmos—an ideal survey, such as is only possible from the philosophical position of an ideal Archimedes. This (philosophical) principle of Archimedes has many more advantages, as will be seen as we go on.

This principle gives to philosophy a domain of its own, viz. the cosmos as a unique whole and the relation of any particular being to this whole. Genuinely philosophical questions are, for instance: "What is the cosmos, what is the status of man or of life or of matter in this universe?" Questions such as the following: "What is the nature of God, what are His attributes?" do not belong to philosophy but to theology. Theology investigates all that can be known of God, and of the religious relation of man to God. Calvinistic theology will investigate these problems according to the revelation of God in the Scriptures. Theology is not philosophy, nor philosophy theology. The contention of many philosophers that religion is the philosophy of the uneducated mass, whereas philosophy is the religion of the learned, is accordingly a confusion of thought. The absolute of cosmic reality belongs to cosmic reality and is not God and a study of God the philosopher must leave to theology. Any philosophy of God must be considered to be un-Calvinistic.

III

Theology and philosophy, though distinct, are in Calvinism necessarily related. These relations must be postulated *a priori*. They cannot be taken to be results of independent investigations of these two branches of knowledge. The unity of truth presupposes *a priori* the unity and relatedness of all objective bases of all knowledge. It is, for instance, absurd to expect that the unity of truth will ever be discovered by a collaboration of a positivistic, mechanistic and evolutionary biology, of a Freudian psychology, of a Kantian ethics, of a phenomenological logic, of a monistic philosophy and of a Calvinistic theology. The *a priori* different frames[1] of these sciences (Wissenschaften) exclude *a priori* the possibility of ever attaining the unity of knowledge. Calvinistic theology and Calvinistic philosophy will both accept nature (as revealed to us in our consciousness) and the

[1] Re the term "frame" see my articles on "Freudian Psychology" in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 113-123.

Scriptures (as the divine revelation of God) as sources of knowledge and include in their frame the relation of God to cosmic reality and especially to man. Of all the different relations necessary and possible between theology and philosophy, only one will be considered here, this one being of fundamental importance to the answer of our question concerning the possibility of a genuine Calvinistic philosophy.

Philosophy investigates the cosmos as a whole. But to grasp this object of knowledge as a whole and in its formal unity, one must be able to grasp it from the outside, i.e. transcendently. This truth is unfortunately not always acknowledged. As a member of a mob you cannot command a view of it, but the outsider, the bystander, can ; human personality is unintelligible from the " view-point " of a blood corpuscle, however much this corpuscle may have travelled through all parts of the human body ; the beauty of a painting can never be " enjoyed " by one of its paint-patches. Likewise the ultimate meaning, significance and unity of cosmic reality can *never* be understood from a mere human viewpoint, i.e. as long as man (as a part of it) views it " from the inside ", from a cosmically immanent standpoint. The whole is more than the sum of its parts—(this truth enjoys a widespread acknowledgment to-day)—and the whole cannot be understood from the viewpoint of one or of more of its parts. When, however, the whole is grasped from a transcendent point of view, the ultimate meaning of every part is revealed at the same time. To understand the cosmic universe as a unique whole as well as in its parts there must be a transcendent source of knowledge supplying the necessary transcendent point of view—the necessary (philosophical) point of Archimedes. Such a transcendent revelation can only be given by a transcendent Personality —by God. The Calvinist maintains that this necessary condition is fulfilled by the Bible, the genuine *Verbum Dei*. Calvinistic philosophy accordingly accepts his most fundamental principle, viz. that cosmic reality is a creation of God and that this is the ultimate meaning of cosmic reality, from theology. There is nothing humiliating to philosophy in accepting its first principle from theology, just as there is no humiliation to any of the particular sciences in accepting its first and fundamental concepts from philosophy. Philosophy even generally finds its unifying principle in the concept of the divine, of deity—and the philosopher's faith in this principle is not only acquired by

philosophical speculation but also and even more fundamentally by his pre-philosophical religious experience. Philosophy demands its religious or theological *a priori* in the same way as the particular sciences demand their philosophical *a priori*.

IV

Should a philosopher reject a transcendent revelation of the formal or extrinsic unity of the cosmos, he is compelled to find the guarantee of the formal unity of the cosmos somewhere within the cosmos, i.e. cosmically immanent. This means that he must have recourse to some particular principle manifest within cosmic reality. He may grasp the " idea " and may be convinced that this principle guarantees the formal unity of reality and he may thus become an idealist ; or may be of opinion that " matter " will serve his purpose and thus develop into a materialist ; in the same way he may become any one of the following kinds of " *-ists* " : a rational*ist*, an empiric*ist*, a real*ist*, a voluntar*ist*, an evolution*ist*, a human*ist*, a vital*ist*, a mechan*ist*, a mon*ist*, a plural*ist*, etc., etc. ; he may even speculatively construct new principles in his thought and become a monad*ist*, an atom*ist*, etc. From a genuinely transcendent point of view all these views of reality indicated by an " *-ism* " become unnecessary, as the unity of cosmic reality is guaranteed extrinsically. This view therefore allows a profoundly objective attitude towards the many, towards the diverse, and towards *all* the differences given in the cosmos. A Calvinistic philosophy can consequently steer clear of all these " *-isms* " founded in some immanent principle of reality. (The " *-ism* " of Calvin*ism* is only a nominal epithet denoting this view.) The " *-isms* " of all immanent philosophies promote some particular principle of reality to the status of a unifying universal principle with the result that the meaning and import of such a principle is unlimitedly exaggerated and even " divinely " idolized, and with a further result that the other and essentially different principles of immanent reality are seen in the light of this universalized or idolized principle, thus giving a forced and an artificial view of these other principles. This means that all immanent philosophy is in one way or other guilty of subjectifying and falsifying reality. This is clear when you endeavour to follow an idealist interpretation of matter, or a materialist interpretation of mind, or a mechanist interpretation of life, or a vitalist interpretation

of matter, or an evolutionist interpretation of man, or a humanist interpretation of God, etc., etc. Philosophy is to-day (and always has been) a chaos of opinions, because most philosophers endeavour to explain the unity of reality from different cosmically immanent points of view, whereas the unity and ultimate meaning of cosmic reality ought to be grasped from the outside, i.e. transcendently. This chaos is the tragedy of the struggle of man to attain truth in his own strength and from his own point of view while he rejects the transcendent point of view revealed by God in the Scriptures.

V

These arguments tend to show that not only a Calvinistic philosophy is possible, but that such a philosophy can be genuinely objective in a way in which immanent philosophy can never be objective. In a Calvinistic philosophy there is no need to exaggerate and idolize the meaning and import of any part of creation at the expense of the meaning and import of the other parts of cosmic reality. The Calvinistic philosopher need not analyse matter from an idealist point of view, nor mind from a materialist point of view, etc. He can see matter as matter and mind as mind, spirit as spirit and life as life, man as man and he can believe in God as God. He can allow full scope to all the differences, distinctions and diversities manifest in reality and can welcome the discovery of any new distinction or difference as a further manifestation of the richness and grandeur of God's creative power. There is no monistic tendency in his thought to reduce all the differences to some idolized principle or other. He has no need of giving an artificial or forced explanation of any part of the cosmos. He can acknowledge the principle of plurality and of diversity *as fundamentally as* he maintains the principle of extrinsic unity.

The many and the diverse, however, are not unrelated. The different relations between the manifold are as unlimited as the manifold itself. This means that reality is not only extrinsically a unity, but is intrinsically a unity too—a unity based on the definite existence of the untold many and diverse. A Calvinistic philosophy hence has to discover the nature of this intrinsic unity in relation to the extrinsic unity accepted *a priori* and to the fundamental diversity existent within reality. These points will be developed in a future article. It is necessary in

this connection to point out that the relation of philosophy to the different particular sciences must be revealed by an analysis of this principle of intrinsic unity.

In so far as the many and the diverse within the cosmos are unlimited, the interrelatedness of the manifold is unlimited too, and therefore the task of analysing the intrinsic unity of the cosmos is unlimited as well. Hence the task of a Calvinistic philosophy will never find an end; the more this philosophy progresses the more it will reveal the greatness and glory of God, our Creator.

A genuine Calvinistic philosophy is not only possible; its principles also lodge the promise of an energetic and rich development. With this answer to our question it is clear that a great task and an urgent duty devolve upon the shoulders of every Calvinistic philosopher. When we compare Calvinistic philosophy with Calvinistic theology, it cannot be denied that the former is yet very inferior to the latter—it is yet even inferior to the most philosophical systems prevalent to-day. When one keeps this in view and is at the same time sensitive to the urgency of our modern problems in all spheres of human activity—problems which the Calvinistic philosopher must endeavour to solve in his way—he will be aware of how pressing the duties of the Calvinistic philosophers are. It may be noted, in conclusion, that Calvinistic philosophy may never present speculative solutions of the problems, because Calvinism is *positive* in every domain of reality and always has its recourse to *positive* facts, to *positive* principles, to *positive* values, and to the *positive* revelation of God. Speculative philosophy is un-Calvinistic. In furthering a *positive* solution of the problems of the world the Calvinistic philosopher promotes the honour of God and leads mankind.

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