The Phrygian mode in music is often used to express mourning. This book mourns how reformational philosophy has had to abandon its idea of a religious antithesis between a purely biblical philosophy and non-Christian philosophy, between an “us” and a “them.” The book is based on presentations at a 1995 Toronto conference on “Antiquity and the Reformed Tradition.” The book looks at the way that reformational philosophy interacts with non-Christian philosophy, and with Greco-Roman philosophy in particular. The main premise of the book is that reformational philosophy has been influenced and formed by the very philosophies that it purports to criticize. We are left with “religious ambiguity”—especially if religious choice only has meaning within religiously plural worldviews (11, 275-284).

The editor, Robert Sweetman, begins and concludes the book with a framework for discussing reformational philosophy’s “antithetical habit.” He divides reformational thought into five overlapping periods: 1. classic reformational thought 2. rationalistic or Cartesian reformational thought influenced by the Enlightenment 3. the pietistic reaction against the Enlightenment 4. romantic and liberal reactions to the Enlightenment and 5. orthodox Christianity. Sweetman does not mean the Orthodox Church, but a Christianity that claims, for political purposes, to be following in a straight line from classic reformational thought, and which does not acknowledge any intervening influences. Neo-Calvinism claims to go back in a straight line to classic Calvinism, and to a purely biblical view. But Sweetman says that the very idea of an antithesis between a “biblical” and a non-Christian way of thinking is similar to liberal and romantic ideas in Adolph von Harnack (8, 10, 268-69). And he finds the influence of Aristotle in Vollenhoven, despite Vollenhoven’s “dichotomizing language of religious antithesis” (274).

Sweetman says that neo-Calvinism was “born with Antiquity in its breast” (267). This is shown by the contributions in chapters 2, 3 and 4. Harry Van Dyke writes about Groen van Prinsterer’s appreciation of classical antiquity. But Sweetman is not correct that Groen van Prinsterer was one of Dooyeweerd’s heroes (7); Dooyeweerd criticized his ideas. John Kok writes about Jan Woltjer and his classical Christian gymnasium. Kok discusses some interesting ways that Woltjer influenced Vollenhoven, who was one of his students (62-63). Woltjer “compares creation to a book of God’s thoughts that everyone created in God’s image can read and understand” and explains this by a Calvinistic view of the logos, distinguishing the human logos from the divine Logos. Kok says that although Dooyeweerd criticized this Logos idea, Woltjer was in fact following Calvin (50). In chapter 4, Johan Zwaan writes about Alexander Sizoo, who taught Latin language and literature at the Free University. Sizoo argued that Dutch culture was rooted in Greco-Roman culture and that it was essential to maintain a connection with this past (72). Christians must use this heritage like the way that the Israelites took with them the vessels of gold and silver of the heathen Egyptians (82-83).

Chapter 5, by A.P. Bos and D.F.M. Strauss, is entitled “Greek Ontology and Biblical Cosmology: An Unbridgeable Gap.” It combines two presentations from the conference, and the authors do not always agree (105). They defend the idea of religious antithesis, and they reject Jacob Klapwijk’s alternative idea of “transformation” of what they continue to regard as “apostate schemes of thought” (107). Non-biblical philosophy
absolutizes or deifies one temporal aspect of reality at the expense of other aspects (103, 109) and so sets up an “unbridgeable dialectic” (104). Pythagoras absolutizes the numerical, Parmenides the spatial, and Plato the analytical aspect. But the article runs into difficulty when, following Vollenhoven, the authors criticize Dooyeweerd’s failure to include the universal as a side of the factual (115). The authors acknowledge that this idea comes from Aristotle. But they don’t seem to recognize how this undermines their argument against recycling “neutral forms of thought” from non-Christian backgrounds (103). They also incorrectly attribute to Dooyeweerd the view that theoretical abstraction is the same as logical analysis (112, 119). The reference (119 fn37) doesn’t mention Dooyeweerd’s own sharp critique of this interpretation of his ideas. To substitute the analytical subject-object relation for the Gegenstand-relation brings “insoluble genuine antinomies” and “logicism” into reformational philosophy. Dooyeweerd says in this 1975 article that the irreducibility of the aspects and their mutual coherence cannot be separated from their root-unity in the religious center of human existence, which transcends time. Strauss (unlike Bos?) interprets “root and branch” without distinguishing this supratemporal root from its temporal branches (105 and 110, fn16). The root is merely “ultimate commitment” underlying the functions (110). It is “our entire existence” and not just one of the rays of the color spectrum of our lives. But this fails to acknowledge Dooyeweerd’s repeated point that the root is not just the sum of all rays, but the supratemporal concentration point, the white light in which all rays converge and from which they issue, refracted by cosmic time. The authors also blur Dooyeweerd’s distinction between our religious heart motivation (which is always supratemporal) and our temporal function of faith (104 fn7).

Chapter 6, by Anthony Tol, is a valuable discussion of Vollenhoven’s problem-historical method. Vollenhoven categorized philosophers according to different philosophical types and time currents. Tol analyzes discrepancies in Vollenhoven’s uses of these terms. But by 1952, Vollenhoven distinguished between God’s structural law and His law of love. Types then relate to conceptions of the structural law and currents reflect ways that humans normatively respond in cultural positivization. These normative strategies differ over time (132, 139), although it is difficult to detect such strategies in early antiquity (143, 149). Tol argues that the themes of ontic universality versus individuality should also be typological, but that Vollenhoven regarded them as both types and currents (154-55). Word revelation only orients our philosophical thought but gives no unique ontological (type) insights, since both Greek and Christian thinkers confront the same reality. (157). Christians should therefore have no sense of superiority towards ancient thought (158). But doesn’t this mean that Christian philosophy can then only make statements about normative values? Contrast this with Dooyeweerd, who uses the ontical distinction of supratemporal/temporal in order to confront immanence philosophies.

Wendy E. Helleman discusses K.J. Popma’s opposition to ancient philosophical ideas. Like Vollenhoven, “Popma labels the whole period of patristic philosophy as one of synthesis” (178). Popma therefore rejects the spoliatio idea of taking the gold of the Egyptians; there is an antithesis between biblical and Hellenistic culture and (182). And yet Greek culture had a pedagogical task to fulfill in developing theoretic thought. Helleman asks how Popma can maintain the idea that Greek thought was a praeparatio evangelica and yet regard it as an enemy of the gospel (176,187, 189). She gives qualified support to Klapwijk’s views on transformation (186).
David T. Runia writes about “Philo in the Reformational Tradition.” Runia argues that Dooyeweerd, who opposed Philo’s philosophy, read Philo from the perspective of later Patristic theology (197, 199). Vollenhoven and Popma saw Philo as representative of “Jewish synthesis philosophy” (200-202). Runia summarizes the views of Bos, Al Wolters and Helleman regarding Philo. He expresses appreciation for Klapwijk’s view that Philo may not have regarded his use of Greek philosophy as synthesis (205). In fact, Philo wanted to preserve the distinction between God’s transcendence and immanence (208).

William Rowe writes about “Vollenhoven’s and Dooyeweerd’s Appropriation of Greek Philosophy.” The belief that Christian philosophy is possible only if it is independent of Greek thought is much stronger in Vollenhoven than in Dooyeweerd (218). In fact, some of Vollenhoven’s displeasure with Dooyeweerd was his lack of appreciation for the pre-Socratic nature of 20th century Christian philosophy; his criticism of Dooyeweerd’s view of time partly turns on this. But Dooyeweerd criticized Vollenhoven’s method as “overestimating the part that logic plays in historical research” (219). Rowe’s own opinion is that Vollenhoven’s problem-historical method is more akin to philosophical “systematics” than to “historiography” (221).

Finally, Calvin Seerveld argues against Klapwijk’s idea of transformation. Seerveld discusses several works of art in order to show how Reformed artists and theorists dealt with antiquity (232). The artist Nicolas Poussin incorporated a pagan antiquity with no idea of sin (235). The results of the spoliatio Aegytorum idea are shown very concretely by his painting “Dance around the Golden Calf.” The spoils of the Egyptians ended up being used for idolatry! Seerveld contrasts Jan Vermeer, who did not use the Greco-Roman-Egyptian world that Poussin was trying to renew. Vermeer’s art does not show the world as “brute nature,” but as a “miracle of a provident Creator to be received gratefully” (250). Finally, the artist Anselm Kiefer incorporates Nordic antiquity in his art. The spoliatio motif is “wrongheaded” because it does not recognize the extent to which Western civilization “is on the skids” (254). We cannot “shell like peas” the fruits of Poussin’s or Kiefer’s artistry (255). We need to exorcise rather than appropriate their insights. We should only “conserve and present anew what is worth keeping” (259).

This book is an important analysis of some ways that reformational philosophy has been influenced by other traditions. We need to explore these historical sources, as well as others. Recent scholarship, such as Lieuwe Mietus’s doctoral dissertation (reviewed in Philosophia Reformata 71 (2007) 87-92) has shown that Kuyper’s idea of the centrality of our heart derives from the tradition of Christian theosophy. And the critique of the autonomy of thought is not, as Henk Geertsema suggests, a fruit of reformational philosophy (282), but an idea that derives from that same theosophical tradition, as Kuyper himself acknowledged.

These ideas, which Dooyeweerd adopted, do not fit within any of Sweetman’s five categories. And they also provide a solution to the problem of religious antithesis, although Dooyeweerd says that his idea of antithesis is “entirely different from what has hitherto been supposed,” “not a line of personal classification” but a line based on fundamental principles, which “passes transversely through the existence of every Christian personality” (NC I, 114, 524). For Dooyeweerd, religious antithesis does not depend on whether one is influenced by other philosophies. He acknowledges his own
ties to perennial philosophy (NC I, 118). His only concern is that perennial philosophy not be used in a historicistic way to relativize the religious ground-motive [which is supratemporal] by confusing it with the forms given to this ground-motive in historical relativity.

For Dooyeweerd, Christian philosophy is based on our experience—in “religious self-reflection”—of our supratemporal selfhood in its enstatic relation with the temporal cosmos and in its relation of meaning and dependence on God as Origin. Christian philosophy must “give an account” of this experience by theoretical ideas. Already in 1931, Dooyeweerd said that the idea of the supratemporal selfhood must be the presupposition of any “truly Christian” view of society. He emphasizes that the idea of cosmic time is the basis of his philosophical theory of reality (NC I, 28), and that his philosophical anthropology is the beginning and end of philosophical reflection (NC III, 783). In our heart, we truly transcend time, and in our heart, our temporal functions coincide in a radical unity. We are both supratemporal and temporal beings. Anyone who imagines human existence as no more than a complex of temporal functions centering in the “heart” has not understood him (NC III, 784). Dooyeweerd expressly rejects Vollenhoven’s view that the heart is merely pre-functional but not supratemporal (NC I, 31 fn1). Without the idea of the supratemporal heart, even if we acknowledge a transcendent Creator, we necessarily get involved in synthesis with immanence philosophy, which views man as completely temporal. It does not help to oppose a “biblical” philosophy to non-Christian philosophies if we do not correctly understand the Christian ground-motive. In Twilight and in his 1964 talk, Dooyeweerd says that without the key idea of the supratemporal heart, we cannot understand the radical meaning of creation, fall and redemption, and we cannot understand Christ’s incarnation or the operation of the Word of God in our heart.

But In the Phrygian Mode does not discuss these key ideas. There is no discussion of God’s eternity, the supratemporal, and cosmic time, except to criticize any idea of eternity as “timelessness” (113 fn21). Man’s heart is referred to as “supramodal” (104). But our heart is supramodal only because it is supratemporal. Supratemporality cannot be rejected on the basis of modal theoretical analysis, for the irreducibility of the aspects cannot be separated from their root-unity in the supratemporal religious center of human existence. The philosophical anthropology assumed throughout the book is that man is a thoroughly temporal being. In Dooyeweerd’s terminology, it is therefore immanence philosophy. In his 1975 article, Dooyeweerd says that reformational philosophy, in rejecting the Gegenstand-relation (which relies on the supratemporal selfhood), has accepted “the most current presuppositions in modern epistemology” which have only darkened our insight. The lament sounded in this book demonstrates an awareness of this problem. If reformational philosophy cannot distinguish itself from non-Christian philosophy, and if it is embedded in historicistic relativism, then it can only lament the passing of its past glories.

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