

**The Christian Theory of History in the Political Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd**

Zane A. Richer  
Liberty University  
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### 1. *Introduction*

Though often unacknowledged, the view one takes of *history* as a theoretical science profoundly informs the way one evaluates cultural developments and political ideas. Without an underlying conception of continuity which gives expression to cultural-formative power in concrete time, political theory as such could not exist. The theoretical attitude out of which all political science arises is bound in an unbreakable coherence to the other experiential aspects in the cosmic order of time established by God at creation.<sup>1</sup> The State, as an historically founded institution, is not the product of abstract or autonomous theoretical thought as the pagans and rationalists had fondly dreamed, but of cultural-formative power *in history*.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the view one takes of history and the norms which govern its progress cannot but inform one's perception of political ideas, philosophies, and values. It is highly doubtful, for instance, that Karl Marx's cultural ramblings or political screeds could ever have achieved the unrivaled semblance of plausibility they now enjoy had he not first developed his meticulously materialistic analysis of history for them to rest upon. In other words, as Martin notes, it is probable that most people in the modern West find Marx's *political* theories intuitively apropos because they have *already* believed in—often unknowingly—his entire interpretation of *history*.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1.2 The Human Heart as Religious Root of Creation

The example of Marx is also instructive for another reason. His openly confessed belief in materialism allows us to see that one's view of history is not neutral or purely abstracted from human reason claiming to be autonomous from faith. Rather, history as a special science is

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, vol. 13, The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd, B (Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2012), 65-66.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. David H. Freeman and H. De Jongste, 3rd ed., vol. 3, 4 vols. (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1984), 414.

<sup>3</sup> Glenn R. Martin, *Prevailing Worldviews of Western Society Since 1500*, 3rd ed. (Marion, IN: Triangle Publishing, 2006), 165.

entirely preconditioned by the same foundational *religious* commitments of the human heart which provide basic directionality to all temporal existence. The Bible describes the heart (or soul) of man as the central depth-level of the human consciousness, the seat of his whole personality, and the religious concentration-point of the entire world-order in which all creation is directed back to God in spiritual worship and devotion.<sup>4</sup> Contra all reductionistic tendencies, therefore, the core of the human being is not rational, emotional, biological, sexual, etc., but *religious*. He is *homo religiosus*: a vision advanced against the humanist conceit of the *homo sapiens*. The basic direction of this religious orientation—either towards God in faith or away from Him in apostasy—then necessarily informs all other aspects of our being, including our theoretical activity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, our interpretation of history is not neutral, but remains firmly caught up in the religious battle of spirits that has driven the entire development of human civilization. This view also must enlist itself in the cause of Christ or oppose itself to Him according to the royal decree: “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.”<sup>6</sup>

In modern times, the seed of this recognition first re-emerged powerfully in the West with the Protestant Reformation. Calvin and the tradition that followed him especially must be credited with laying the foundations for a whole world-and-life system that self-consciously rooted itself in the central Christian confession of God’s cosmic sovereignty. This foundation received much-needed elaboration through the pioneering work of Dutch Neo-Calvinists such as Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. However, it was the legal philosopher Herman

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<sup>4</sup> H. Evan Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, 5th ed. (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1982), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 12:30.

Dooyeweerd who first saw the need for and attempted to construct a systematic theory of *understanding history* (one that could rival the dominant humanist perspectives) on the basis of the authentic Christian ground-motive of Creation, Fall into sin, and Redemption of all things by Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit. This paper investigates the contours of Dooyeweerd's theory of history and discusses its contributions to the development of a uniquely Christian political philosophy.

## 2. *History and Antithesis*

In his landmark work, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, Dooyeweerd begins his exploration of Western history with a recognition of what Kuyper had earlier described as the *religious antithesis*—i.e. the spiritual opposition which necessarily forms between that which is Christian and that which is anti-Christian in this age.<sup>7</sup> “There is in human life,” writes H. Evan Runner, “a divergence of ways—a way of life and a way of death...”<sup>8</sup> At the crossroads of this dividedness stands the Lord Jesus Christ as the Word of God and the One with Whom fundamentally men have to do. As Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the world, God in Christ publishes and maintains His law-Word for the creation over against the demonic *antithesis* (counter-word), even in the face of man's rebelliousness, defection, and sin.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the principle of absolute sovereignty is lodged not in man who is created, but in God Who is Creator.<sup>10</sup> “Only God,” writes Vollenhoven, “is the creator of all things and of every reality. Only He can give real laws to the cosmos. Only he is the true sovereign. Between him and the

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<sup>7</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, ed. D.F.M. Strouss, Mark Vander Vennen, and Bernard Zylstra, trans. John Kraay, vol. 15, *Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd*, B (Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2012), 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> H. Evan Runner, “The Radical Christian Facing Today's Political Malaise” (Lecture, Student for Political Education Through Christian Thought and Renewing Action, Grand Rapids, Michigan, October 25, 1972), 21.

<sup>9</sup> H. Evan Runner, *Point Counter Point* (United States: Paideia Press, 2020), 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 79.

cosmos there is a real ‘boundary.’”<sup>11</sup> This boundary comes to actual expression in the laws and norms which God has established for His creation; laws which only He as Creator-Lord is competent to set.

It is to this “creation motive” of the Christian religion that Dooyeweerd points for the origin and purpose of human society. In all creaturely things—objects, animals, people, institutions, ideas, feelings, historical events, etc.—man encounters again and without possibility of escape that great boundary between the creature and the Creator, and is thus cast before the Face of God in the totality of his existence. In every finite thing and relationship, man confronts the law-Word of God (the “Let there be...” which rules, restores, and reveals itself in that thing. This law-Word alone makes it to be what it is. Despite man’s vain attempts to alter, oppose, or violate it, the human being as male and female, the family, the State, the market, the church, the academy, etc. will remain unshakably what God has decreed them to be.

This root-principle of divine sovereignty worked centrally in Dooyeweerd’s thought to establish the ineradicably religious character of every sphere and aspect of life.<sup>12</sup> A neutral realm of natural reason or existential experience was therefore unthinkable. In every creational structure, God approaches man with His law-Word as the boundary between Himself and His creature, and man’s interaction with that structure is posited solely on the basis of a response: either faith and submission to the law-Word of God, or apostasy and revolution against it. This dividedness of response reveals the religious antithesis—the spiritual opposition—that runs through every aspect of created reality.

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<sup>11</sup> D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, “The Foundations of Calvinist Thought” (Amsterdam, 1934), <http://dooy.info/voll/foundations.calv.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, ed. Rousas J. Rushdoony, trans. John Kraay (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1968), 30.

## 2.1 Cultural Apostasy

When the heart of man, seduced by sin to seek its own autonomy, rejects the law-Word of God for reality, it does not thereby eliminate its own central religious character. God has created man *homo religiosus* and no amount of sin or apostasy can unmake what God has decreed. Humankind remains stubbornly and ineradicably religious. Yet instead of beholding the fullness of religious meaning in the Triune God of Scripture, the eyes of the unbelieving heart are collapsed in darkness, bent downward upon the temporal horizon of experience, and forced to seek a new absolute of origin and meaning *in the creation* instead of in the Creator.<sup>13</sup> This fulfills the scriptural definition of idolatry. Apostate man does not lose the need for a fundamental word by which to live in this world; but in rebellion he seeks to utter his own counter-word in place of God's eternal Word. Thus, the kingdom of man arises against the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus, positing its own self-given law-word (the antithesis) as its only rule of life, and seeking to re-create reality in humanity's own image. The prolonged combat between these two spiritual powers for the destiny of human civilization (and in it, all created reality) thus becomes the definition of *history* in its philosophical sense. In other words, to rehabilitate a famous phrase, the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of *spiritual* struggle (between Christ and the powers of darkness).<sup>14</sup> The fundamental recognition of this driving spiritual antithesis is the starting-point of Dooyeweerd's uniquely Christian analysis of Western history.

## 2.2 Idolatry, Reductionism, and the World-Judgment of History

A key feature of Dooyeweerd's social philosophy, however, is that all idolatrous perspectives are ultimately self-destructive since they fail to account for the true nature of

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<sup>13</sup> Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> This phrase adapted from the (in)famous opening line of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*.

created reality in all its fullness, unity, and interconnectedness.<sup>15</sup> In Mark 3, Jesus proclaims that “if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.”<sup>16</sup> From Dooyeweerd’s perspective, statements such as these are not merely illustrative but indicative of the real condition of Satan’s kingdom in this world. Despite appearances of increasing cultural hegemony, the lord of darkness and his whole *civitas terrana* is coming to an end simply because *all idolatry* (the work of Satan) is *inherently* divided against itself and therefore cannot stand. When a whole society falls into the grips of idolatry, it calls forth “the world-judgment of history” upon itself: a process by which these inner divisions are progressively realized in culture, finally resulting in the total collapse of civilization.<sup>17</sup> The dialectical mechanism for *how* this judgment takes place forms the substance of Dooyeweerd’s analysis of history and is worth some discussion.

As mentioned above, when man rejects God he does not cease to be religious. He still must comprehend himself and all reality on the basis of some absolute source of origin and meaning. If he does not find this absolute in God, he must seek it in some aspect of the creation. This *absolutized* (idolized) aspect then becomes the basis on which all other reality is explained and by which all theoretical thought is preconditioned. Yet this idolatrous attempt to understand reality on the basis of just one of its aspects can only ever be partial and *reductionistic* (i.e. it *reduces* reality to only one of its parts).<sup>18</sup> By denying independent ontological validity to each structural element of God’s creation-order, these apostate approaches invariably end up repressing vast areas of human life. For example, rationalism which sought to comprehend all of

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<sup>15</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 3:26.

<sup>17</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 105-06.

<sup>18</sup> Zane A. Richer, “Orienting Sphere Sovereignty: The Synthesis of Kuyperian and Augustinian Theories as a Solvent for Modern Social Tensions,” *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* 2, no. 2 (2021): 114-16.

life on the basis of reason alone ended up totally flattening the rich worlds of emotional, social, sexual, economic, aesthetic, jural, and pistical meaning *per se*.

Yet these meaning-sides of reality cannot be easily banished from our experience. They were not created by man and do not depend on his recognition for their existence. Therefore, their presence within created reality cannot be ignored with impunity. When they are discarded or suppressed by one reductionistic (idolatrous) approach, they will invariably reassert themselves in another counter-approach.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in our own history, e.g., romanticism arose to oppose rationalism by absolutizing the emotional and aesthetic aspects—aspects which rationalism had denied.

The guarantee for this reassertion of reality is given in the fact that Jesus Christ *sustains the world* by the Word of His power; no creational reality *within* that world can be suppressed indefinitely.<sup>20</sup> Any reality which is denied will avenge itself culturally on the philosophy that denied it. Yet if this inevitable re-assertion of reality occurs without a simultaneous cultural (re)discovery of the truths of the Christian gospel (Creation by God, Fall into sin, Redemption in Christ Jesus in the communion of the Holy Spirit), it can only ever be reactionary, equally reductionistic, increasingly tumultuous, and serve to hasten the collapse of civilization. Without an incisive spiritual insight into the unity and sphere-sovereignty of the cosmos under the law-Word of God in Christ Jesus, apostate man can only offer competing reductionisms which deepen the judgment on his society and ensure his cultural ruin.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, every idolatry which divides reality against itself is sentenced by the world-judgment of history to summon forth its own adversary from whose censure it cannot escape.

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<sup>19</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 1:3.

<sup>21</sup> Richer, "Orienting Sphere Sovereignty," 116-17.

### 2.3 Dualism

The life and vitality of every civilization depends on its inner unity, which itself must be grounded in a commonly acknowledged religious absolute. Without this unity, its strength is broken and it enters the process of decay. The world-judgment of history, as we have seen, sentences all reductionistic and one-sided perspectives to summon forth their own adversaries (i.e. opposing reductionisms). These rival poles each posit a different aspect of created reality as their religious absolute. The unity of society is thereby broken in two, and its strength begins to abate. The ensuing spiritual dual between these competing idolatries for dominance within a single society must consume that civilization.<sup>22</sup> Over time, its two religious poles are driven further and further apart in a dialectical movement until there is no longer any common ground left between them.<sup>23</sup> At this point, such a civilization has *de facto* expired beneath the weight of its own idolatries. It may continue to exist nominally for some time. However without the vitality and unified vision needed to drive the course of human events on the world-stage of history, it must gradually recede from significance until it no longer plays any substantial role in the broader advance of human civilization, or else be overtaken by another civilization whose inner unity is more intact and whose spiritual energy is more robust and irresistible.

As we have mentioned, all civilizations are ultimately driven by their underlying spiritual commitments to a true or false religious absolute (God or idols). Dooyeweerd refers to this basic driving force within every civilization as its “ground-motive”—the source of its deepest motivations.<sup>24</sup> When a culture falls into the clutches of a stronger or weaker idolatry, its ground-motive splits in two and becomes *dualistic*—i.e. it becomes divided against itself or internally

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<sup>22</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 8-9.

conflictual.<sup>25</sup> Rapidly fluctuating between two religious absolutes that it cannot reconcile, the spiritual division at the heart of culture widens and the social unity among its people begins to strain.<sup>26</sup> A civilization in the grips of a dualistic ground-motive is defined by this inner spiritual tension between competing (reductionistic) religious absolutes. While it remains captive to such a dualism, this spiritual crisis drives the entire history of that civilization including its politics, its art, its education, its family life, its entertainment, its economic development, its view of the individual, and its cultic worship.<sup>27</sup> Unless these warring poles can be reconciled to one another, the struggle between them must consume the whole civilization and tear it apart.<sup>28</sup>

This crisis may possibly be averted for a time by an attempted synthesis (combining) of these poles into some form of unity. However, no true higher unity is ultimately possible so long as the finite creation, in one form or another, is posited as the absolute source of origin and meaning in the cosmos. So long as this is the case, the absolutized aspect must work to reconstitute all other reality as merely part of or produced by itself.<sup>29</sup> As soon as this happens, it descends back beneath the judgment of history, doomed to produce counter-reaction against its reductive approach in the form of competing reductionisms, and the process of internal division and collapse begins anew. We hope it is clear at this point that the only salutary influence which may be expected for a society sunk in dualism is the graciousness of God which regenerates the human heart to hate and oppose *all* idolatries and to find in Him the only absolute ground of all being.

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<sup>25</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 11-14.

<sup>27</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 7-9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 11-14.

<sup>29</sup> Richer, "Orienting Sphere Sovereignty," 115-16.

### 3. *The Ground-Motives of Western Civilization*

Using this progression of apostasy, idolatry, reductionism, dualism, judgment, and collapse as his analytical model to understand the process of human history, Dooyeweerd then enters into a detailed investigation of Western civilization itself where he sees this pattern constantly playing out. He identifies four distinct religious ground-motives that have dominated and directed the course of Western society since its inception in ancient times to produce the world as we know it today.<sup>30</sup> Of these four, three have been internally dualistic and apostate in nature. While a thorough study of these ground-motives is not possible here, it will be helpful to at least briefly examine each one in turn as it arose in history, discussing its main contours and lasting impact on our civilization.

#### 3.1 The Greek Form/Matter Dualism

The first spiritual ground-motive which Dooyeweerd identifies within the Western tradition is the Greek dualism of form and matter.<sup>31</sup> Between these two poles, the matter motive arose first in the form of primitive nature worship.<sup>32</sup> This motive absolutized the elemental forces of nature—the wind, the thunder, the stream, etc., and held the material world to be eternal.<sup>33</sup> Here, the idolatrous absolutization of the *material* world (or *matter*) totally denied legitimacy to the more *immaterial* aspects of human existence, such as the rich life of the mind, the emotions, and the spirit, etc. As such, it produced a sensual ethic—an obedience to the ‘absolute’ claims of the body over the mind and of nature over culture. Importantly, this trend—originating in the religious depth-level of the apostate heart—worked itself out across all of primitive Greek society; the so-called opposition between philosophy and mythology was only

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<sup>30</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 15-16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

ever a relative difference in means to achieve the same spiritual end. Both of these methods were caught up in the same religious struggle of life that produced all of Classical culture.<sup>34</sup> As such, this matter motive found its most sophisticated *mythological* expression in the cult of Bacchus imported from Thrace with its orgiastic revelries of the flesh, and its highest *philosophical* expression in the materialist school of, inter alia, Thales of Miletus, Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Epicurus. But the driving religious commitment to a material universe was the same.

This one-sided absolutization of matter produced a counter-reaction which held up the *immaterial* as ultimate. Eternal, rational mind (i.e. *form*) unhindered by the trappings of the material body became the supreme reality. This drove the production of culture—of rational order imposed on the Dionysian wilderness of nature. The Greek city-state became its fixed expression, with political life arising as the total-community of all human society.<sup>35</sup> Culturally, this motive was embodied in the worship of the Olympian gods—immortal, radiant beings of pure form embodying cultural activities of order and harmony—and climaxed in the Delphic oracles of Apollo.<sup>36</sup> Its philosophical expression came in the Socratic tradition, and arrived at its highest development in Aristotle. Within the form motive of ancient Greek life, order, beauty, harmony, and goodness were associated the rational mind, while chaos, decay, and anomaly were identified with matter, especially the human body. The key to salvation—as taught to us by Plato—was to escape the dark cave of the body into the disembodied light of pure mind.

The religious opposition that arose early on in Greek culture between form and matter drove the entire dialectical development of its civilization. The inability to reconcile these two

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 21.

religious absolutes formed the crisis in the heart of Classical civilization that eventually brought about its collapse.

### 3.2 Biblical Christianity

As we have seen, authentic Christianity is the only religious ground-motive within Western history that is not dualistic. Since it locates ultimate sovereignty only in the Triune God of Scripture, Who, as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the cosmos in Christ Jesus, reveals Himself to the human heart within cosmic time by the things that have been made, its ontological theory can therefore be nothing else but the *sphere-sovereignty* of experiential aspects and typical structures rooted in a cohesive creation-order of unified diversity.<sup>37</sup> By refusing to absolutize anything within this creation-order, Christianity becomes the only religious perspective in the West that is actually anti-reductionistic. Instead, it recognizes the importance and validity of all aspects of reality under God as the complete fulfillment of His creational intent for that thing. Unlike Greek thought, therefore, the Christian sees both body *and* mind as good creations of God that each have a distinct place in human life. Only when one is idolatrously elevated above the other—i.e. outside its own sphere—do these forces receive a sinful direction and become destructive.<sup>38</sup>

Having decisively refused to reduce reality to any one of its aspects, Christian civilization is not subject to the world-judgment of history. Its central religious commitment to God provides society with a single, undivided point of spiritual unity while its simultaneous acknowledgment of His law-Word for reality requires the recognition of the rich aspectual and typical diversity of created order (*sphere-sovereignty*). The religious adversary of Christianity is therefore emphatically *not* any aspect of the creation *per se*, but only the sinful misuse of that

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<sup>37</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 41-61.

<sup>38</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 57-58.

creation by the idolatries of the apostate heart.<sup>39</sup> It seeks not the destruction of the heathen world, but its liberation from the narrow and collapsed ruins of reductive visions. Likewise, it does not seek to shun the genuine insights of pagan wisdom, but to liberate these insights as well from their captivity to idolatrous ground-motives that confine and stifle their genuine worth.<sup>40</sup>

While the power of this religious unity for civilization was enormous and explosive, as envisioned especially in the work of men such as Irenaeus and Augustine, its duration of ascendancy in the West has been comparatively short. Prominent in the fourth and fifth centuries and revived again in the sixteenth, it has nearly always succumbed to the temptation of synthesis with other non-Christian ground-motives, which sap it of its strength and vitality.

### 3.3 The Scholastic Nature/Grace Dualism

Even in its historical infancy, Christianity faced the profound temptation to compromise its essential unity with pagan religious ideas. While this urge was powerfully resisted by the ecumenical councils, over time it came more and more to dominate Christian philosophical reflection. By the time of the Middle ages, serious attempts were being made to accommodate the Christian ground-motive especially to the form motive of ancient Greek thought. The

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<sup>39</sup> Runner, *The Relation of the Bible to Learning*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Consider here the verse from G. K. Chesterton's epic poem, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, where the Christian King Alfred is speaking to the invading pagan Danes:

“Therefore your end is on you,  
Is on you and your kings,  
Not for a fire in Ely fen,  
Not that your gods are nine or ten,  
*But because it is only Christian men*  
*Guard even heathen things.*

*For our God hath blessed creation,*  
*Calling it good. I know*  
What spirit with whom you blindly band  
Hath blessed destruction with his hand;  
Yet by God's death the stars shall stand  
And the small apples grow.”

pinnacle achievement of this attempt was the Scholastic tradition of Medieval belief as meticulously systematized by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>41</sup> This synthetic-Thomistic position of high medieval scholasticism is still the official position of the Roman Catholic Church today.

Thomas accepted the fundamental dualism between form and matter as it appeared in Aristotle, but transformed it into a division between the realms of nature and grace.<sup>42</sup> *Nature* here represented the material world and is comprehended through natural law and natural reason, whereas *grace* is represented by the Roman Catholic Church and comprehended through faith and sacrament. Correspondingly, he constructed an ingenuous scheme for society, arranging the Church at the apex of a great hierarchical chain of being, descending down from the realm of grace (the kingdom of heaven) into the realm of nature (the kingdom of this world).<sup>43</sup> In this scheme, while nature is subordinated to grace, it is also considered autonomous. In other words, faith was not necessary to comprehend the things of nature, but natural reason alone—common to Christian and heathen alike—understood it by way of natural law. Thus, only in the *donum superadditum* of grace did the Christian differ from the non-Christian; in the realm of nature, no distinction was imaginable. The existence of a distinctly Christian *philosophy, business, or polity*, e.g., was therefore critically denied.

The idea that reason could comprehend the cosmos neutrally without reference to faith (that is, without reference to the fundamental religious commitments of the heart as the root of the human being) caused a clear rupture between these two realms of life. Unity between them could not be found other than through the artificially imposed and totalistic domination of the Roman Curia over all temporal society. Still, despite easing some practical tensions for a time,

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<sup>41</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 116-19.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 122-27.

even the most totalitarian popes could not resolve the underlying *theoretical* conflict that two religious absolutes were posited within a single society: the Christian God over the realm of grace and autonomous theoretical thought (natural reason) over the realm of nature. The tension between nature and grace thus becomes characteristic of all Scholastic thought. The eventual unraveling of the unified ecclesiastical culture which resulted from this tension set the stage at the end of the Middle Ages for the emergence of the final ground-motive of Western Civilization.

### 3.4 The Humanistic Nature/Freedom Dualism

Scholasticism had separated the realms of nature and grace. *Humanism* kept the idea of autonomous reason but divorced it altogether from the idea of grace. Emerging youthfully in the Italian Renaissance, humanism first posited the religious absolute of the autonomous human personality—i.e. the ‘freedom’ or ‘personality’ ideal.<sup>44</sup> This pole believed in the total liberation of the human person who should be bound by no law other than what he prescribes for himself.<sup>45</sup> Yet like all reductionisms, this absolutization of the free human personality very quickly involved itself in irreconcilable antinomies.

From very early on, this freedom of the human person was sought in his increasing mastery over the forces of nature.<sup>46</sup> Man was no longer to remain subject to the inscrutable natural powers like storms, floods, fires, etc., but through the advancement of *science* was to become progressively liberated from servitude to these powers. This mastery was to be gained through scientifically identifying and understanding the universally constant laws which governed all natural phenomena.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 151-52.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet precisely in this did humanism call forth its primary (dualistic) adversary. If mastery was to be achieved by scientifically identifying the laws that governed all natural things, these laws must also hold *for human beings*, who are themselves natural things.<sup>48</sup> Humans are thus reduced to mere biotic machines, pre-programmed and determined by the same natural causes and following the same natural laws as everything else.<sup>49</sup> This, of course, banishes any possibility of genuine free will. Thus, the ‘science’ ideal, characterized by a reductionistic absolutization of natural-scientific laws, emerged as the second pole of the humanist dualism.<sup>50</sup> In a somewhat ironic turn, science, which was originally called up in service of humanism’s freedom ideal, ended up negating and eliminating the very possibility for human freedom by viewing him as a natural product like everything else: a natural machine subjected and even determined by universal natural laws.

Currently, Western society is still in the grips of this dualistic humanism. Since the Renaissance, these two poles—the personality ideal and the science ideal—have battled each other for dominance, splitting society further and further apart. In the Enlightenment, for instance, the science ideal took the leading role.<sup>51</sup> This, however, quickly provoked the Romantic reaction, in which the freedom ideal again became dominant.<sup>52</sup> With the discoveries of Darwin, the science ideal again began to lead, and was bolstered by the theories of Marx and, later, Freud.<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, however, places science again in the service of absolute human freedom in his famous “will to power,” so heavily influential of Germanic National Socialism. In the post-war era, the science ideal arose to dominance with the theories of John Dewey in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 162-70.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 175-78.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 195-98.

field of education, and the abundance of material goods seemingly produced by the increase of technology. Yet the devastating critiques of the existentialists and their intellectual offspring, the post-moderns, denied all meaning in the universally constant and reverted to subjective will alone as the absolute source of all meaning in the universe. Currently, the idol of science and the idol of human autonomy still exist in an increasingly unstable tension. Neither can dispose with the other, yet nor can they coexist together. It is unclear how this unresolvable antinomy will continue to play out in the future. Without a fundamental reemergence of the Christian ground-motive, this dialectical tension will continue to erode the energy of Western Civilization.

#### *4. Conclusion*

The view one takes of history invariably influences one's interpretation of political and cultural developments. Any world-and-life view which desires to advance a compelling and decisive political philosophy with relevance for today must also produce a theory of history on which this conception of political life can rest. It was precisely the emergence of such a theory in the materialist camp that made Marxism, e.g., so potent as a political force. It provided a frame of reference through which one could judge the otherwise disconnected and inscrutable events of the day in light of broader intellectual, philosophical, and ultimately *religious* currents.

In his philosophical reflections, Herman Dooyeweerd provides an analytical model by which history may be evaluated from a uniquely Christian vantage point, and applies this model in a detailed survey of Western history. His analytical model, in keeping with the basic starting point of all genuinely Christian thought, begins with a recognition of the sovereignty of God over His creation. It emphasizes the responsibility and indeed the inescapability of man, faced with this sovereignty, to respond with a choice: either faith or apostasy. Those who reject God, however, do not destroy their religious nature; they merely misdirect it. Without God, apostate

man is forced to identify some aspect of the *creation* as the absolute of origin and meaning in the cosmos, and comprehend all reality around this one absolutized aspect. Yet such a reductionistic idolatry is doomed by its own narrow one-sidedness to produce counter-reactions against it.

Without the reconciliatory effects of the gospel of peace, these opposing religious absolutes must contend against each other for dominance in society, breaking apart the religious unity which is the only source of all civilizational strength. The dualistic tension splits society further and further apart until all common ground is gone, and civilization, lacking a stable base, collapses into the chasm.

This pattern can be traced in the dualistic Greek ground-motive of form vs. matter, the synthetic Roman Catholic ground-motive of nature vs. grace, and the dualistic humanist ground-motive of nature vs. freedom.

The only hope for Western society, Dooyeweerd proposes, is a fundamental reawakening of culture to the central knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. This entails not only a narrow application of the doctrine of justification to the individual soul, but an entire societal re-imagining of human life and history that gathers together what apostasy and idolatry have broken apart. The calling to oppose sin cannot remain restricted to the personal devotional lives of pious individuals. God in Christ is also Lord of history. His honor is at stake in every facet of society's formative development. When our theory of historical interpretation does not reckon with Him as the great Pivot of world history Who summons all cultural-civilizational power to Himself and subjects it to His sovereign law-Word, it has committed apostasy and become an idolatrous affront to His honor in the earth. The struggle for a Christian politics is therefore the epochal struggle against the antithesis—the demonic counter-word uttered in defiance of God. It is the struggle to wrestle our analytical approaches (our theories) also out of the clutches of sin

and apostasy into which they have been plunged by the Fall, and enlist these too in the service of Christ the King.

The battered and fragmented condition in which the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has handed over Western Civilization is not arbitrary or even unexpected. It is a product of the judgment of world history which must break every power that raises itself against the honor of God, even if it takes many centuries. Life in Western civilization has fallen under the disintegrating censure of such a judgment. It requires an equally radical (i.e. religious root-level) integrating force to avert the final collapse. Nothing but a renewed submission to God and His law-Word for creation, issuing in a recognition of reality's unity and sphere-sovereignty, can accomplish such an integrating task and avert the calamity which awaits Western man if he yet clings to his pride and apostasy. To conclude in Dooyeweerd's own words: "There would be no future hope for mankind and for the whole process of man's cultural development if Jesus Christ had not become the spiritual center and his kingdom the ultimate end of world-history. This center and end of world-history is bound neither to the Western nor to any other civilization. But it will lead the new mankind as a whole to its true destination since it has conquered the world by the divine love revealed in its self-sacrifice."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, ed. D.F.M. Strouss, vol. 16, *Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd*, B (Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2012), 75-76.

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