



Gijsbert van den
Brink

LEYDEN UNIVERSITY, THE
NETHERLANDS

Vakfilosofie van de geloofswetenschap

By A. Troost

Subtitle: Prolegomena van de theologie, Budel: Damon, 2004; 484 pp.; hb. € 24.90; ISBN: 90-5573-502-7.

[1] The author of this book, retired professor of philosophical ethics at the Free University (Amsterdam), was born in 1919. It is, therefore, a remarkable achievement that he recently managed to finish this major study on the nature and philosophical foundations of theology as an academic discipline. The author is a pupil of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), and in this study he attempts to elaborate the implications of Dooyeweerd's 'philosophy of the cosmonomic idea' for theology.¹ Since this has never been done so thoroughly and extensively before, the appearance of this volume is an event.

[2] According to Dooyeweerd, faith is one of the fifteen 'modal aspects' or 'spheres' that can be distinguished in our temporal experience. Just like feeling, logical analysis, aesthetic sensibility etc. faith is an anthropological category that can be abstracted from the fullness of temporal reality and examined in a scientific way. The latter is what happens in theology, or the 'science of faith' (*geloofswetenschap*) as Troost preferably calls the discipline. After an introductory part in which the genre of the book is clarified and a survey of Dooyeweerd's philosophy is given, the main part of the book is therefore devoted to an examination of the field of theology (faith/religious belief) and of theology's specific nature and tasks. The book concludes with a third part, in which the author discusses the implications of his view for the encyclopaedia of theology (i.e. the unity and plurality of its various subdisciplines).

[3] Again and again in the course of his argument Troost repeats his view that a sharp distinction should be made between faith and theology. Faith, on the one hand, is the existential human directedness towards God, based upon God's self-disclosure in revelation. It is by faith that *knowledge* of God is possible. Theology, on the other hand, does not lead to knowledge of God, nor does it deepen or improve such knowledge (p.354f). For as the 'theoretical analysis of the human life of faith' (p.339), theology differs structurally from practical faith. Whereas (ideally) God is the object of faith, faith rather than God is the object

1. On Dooyeweerd's philosophical thought see e.g. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 volumes, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1953-1958; C.T. McIntire (ed.), *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd*, Lanham 1985; D.F.M. Strauss & M. Botting, *Contemporary Reflections on the Thought of Herman Dooyeweerd*, New York 2000. Cf. J. Glenn Friesen, 'The Mystical Dooyeweerd', *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003) <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000088/index.html>.

of theology. Although the author acknowledges that the propositional content of faith (the *fides quae*) forms part of the object of theology, he argues that theology is only of a very limited importance to the life of faith.

[4] I think I understand why the author so forcefully emphasizes this particular distinction. In the past it has happened all too often that theologians identified their specific theological constructions (for which they sometimes even claimed scientific correctness) with the true faith that should be accepted by all believers. For example, the neo-Calvinist tradition (originating from Abraham Kuyper), in which the author stands, has known quite a number of theologians who did not excel in modesty when it came to the validity of their theological claims.

[5] Nevertheless, the solution Troost proposes for this lamentable overestimation of theology is artificial, and therefore misguided. Although no doubt theology *does* abstract from the life of faith, there is no clear-cut division between the practical attitude of faith and the theoretical attitude of theology. If God is known by faith, and if theology is aimed at elucidating that faith, then surely theology is directed at (the knowledge of) God no less than faith. The only alternative here is to identify theology with the scientific study of religion (or certain aspects of religion) from an outsider's perspective. Indeed, Troost sometimes seems to embrace this alternative, and as a result he finds himself in this respect (as an orthodox Christian!) in the company of a good many liberal theologians and philosophers.

[6] It seems to me that the serious problem the author wrestles with should be overcome in other ways. First of all, it should be made clear that theology is not a concern of professional theologians only, but in principle of all those who share the faith. As Karl Barth rightly insisted, theology is a matter of the community of faith (viz. the church), and from a protestant perspective there are no laypersons in that church. Of course some persons are exempted from other work in order to specialize in theology, but it is their task to help the church in its orientation rather than to rule over its faith. And second, the overestimation of theology in the past was largely due to the (unconscious) adoption of a positivist understanding of science by theologians. It is this obsolete understanding of science that should be contested, both from a classical theological and from a contemporary philosophical point of view. Unfortunately, however, Troost does not pay the slightest attention to recent developments in the philosophy of science (nor e.g. to the collapse of foundationalism) – as one might have expected from an inquiry into the nature of theology as a science.

[7] All in all, there is a lot that can be learned from this book. For example, Troost convincingly argues for the inevitability of a *philosophical* determination of the nature of theology – this being the reason why he does not present his book as a study in fundamental theology or as (theological) prolegomena. The main thrust of Troost's argument, however, is unconvincing.