A Final Lecture at Trinity Christian College
By Dr. Cal Seerveld
October 2009 A.D.

There are a few stitches in the horse-hair shirt I wove while teaching at Trinity for 13 years (1959-1972) I’d like to mention in about 23 minutes of remarks, maybe with time for a few questions from any former students....

philosophical systematics: Convicted eye-glasses for experiencing the real world
Psalm 148:7 Ecclesiastes 3:15

When Trinity opened for classes I was given an incredible opportunity to teach an introductory systematic philosophy course, to be required of incoming freshmen and freshwomen, that would be a Scripturally led philosophical analysis of the interrelated meaning of things in God’s world of creatures.

Sometimes I mailed out ahead of registration an assignment students were to bring to the first philosophy class: a one-page précis of the Older Testament book of Ecclesiastes, and their thought on what it meant. That Bible book highlights, in my judgment, the joyful goods of creation in its sevenfold refrain, the violent unjust waste our human sin has wrought historically, and the need for redemptive wisdom already in our youth.

That assignment set up my mnemonic for examining how we temporal creatures exist in the theatre of the Covenantal LORD God who faithfully provides by setting the ordinantal limits for all creatures enacting God’s purposes, as the psalms put it (e.g., Psalms19, 148), in a one-time history headed for the eschaton, which is cursed by sin yet mediated by Jesus Christ, our Archimedian Point of meaning, whose Holy Spirit can grip us human mortals at heart to persevere corporeally in the task of serving our neighbors by obeying God.

For those of you who know about the tin-can man, which broke conceptually with the traditional yet unbiblical soul-body dichotomy: in later life our eldest daughter convinced me in a student reading she gave at Dordt College (1982) that there should be a tin-can woman in the picture too. The latest development is that I have begun to use the metaphor of I Corinthians 4:7: the clay jar man and woman.

I am still firmly committed to this Reformational Christian vision as a good set of glasses, John Calvin would say (Institutes I,5:14), for conceiving our life tasks among the societal institutions we inhabit in our dated/located existence. And the Social Action Seminars we held at night in the mid/late ’60s at Trinity, inviting in the surrounding community, were the lab sessions for the philosophy and history courses which with Bible and English were at the core of the Trinity curriculum. Those were evenings when Canadian Christian labor leader Gerald Vandezande debated an AFL/CIO bigwig on open versus closed shop policy, Back to God Hour radio minister Joel Nederhood shared the platform with NAACP director Roy Wilkins, and student Mark Dykstra responded to evangelist Tom Skinner’s packed-out presentation.

historiography: A struggle not against flesh and blood, but against evil spiriting powers
Ephesians 6:12, Romans 8:28-30

The best brief way for me to sum-up the importance of studying the history of human reflection and culture, if you in your generation will to be outfitted with Christian wisdom might be, I thought, to cite a few representative quotations. Just because one may be outfitted with a
biblically directed, systematic Christian philosophical perspective does not mean you cannot learn from others not so gifted. And just as you can’t jump out of your skin or avoid a slant to your committed vision, you can’t avoid entering world history either. The ignorance of history, if it be a willful amnesia, is sinful, I dare say, born out of a revolutionary or pragmatistic vanity supposing we can create our own cultural world de novo.

En passant I should say: the different languages are not meant to show off I know almost as many languages as my wife, but to witness to the Pentecostal incentive to practice hospitality and careful scholarship: don’t be proudly stuck in one language; if possible, show you love your neighbor by learning his or her speech--else we may compound misunderstandings, and one is at the mercy of (revisionist) translators, for example, of the Bible or Qur’an.

Plato and Aristotle were most exciting to teach: big encyclopedic thinkers, thoroughly pre-Christian pagan theists whose perspectives have shaped Christian Western civilization and traditional Muslim culture too. After my wife and I visited Egypt in 1967 with a German archaeological study group I always started, before examining the Pre-Socratic Greek thinkers, with Egyptian wisdom literature, which pre-dates but ties into Older Testament biblical writings like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Παις· **Εμοιγε δοκεῖ οὕτω (Meno, 83d1-2)  
Σοκρατῆς· Καλῶς, τὸ γάρ σοι δοκοῦν τοῦτο ἀποκρίνου.

Mouthpiece Socrates for ventriloquist Plato (427-347 B.C.) often misused this good pedagogical advice by allowing his respondents only enough room to say “Yes” or “No” in Plato’s dialogues. And it has taken me many years to realize that the “sophist” Isocrates’ (436-338 B.C.) contribution on “rhetoric,” depreciated by Realist philosopher Plato’s prejudice for logically achieved ἔπιστήμη, needs to be critically retrieved and validated to correct so many philosophers’ Rationalistic dependence on argument to get at “the Truth.” Winsome imaginative thinking (which Plato often practiced!) may be more conducive to interactive communication and the peace of what is true than the opposition of analytically certified beliefs. [These are fighting words, some of you will know, needing various supplements.]

[...*άλλα χρή...· ἔρ’ ὧσον ἐνδέχεται ἄθανατιζειν...  
(Nicomachaean Ethics X,7, 1177b33)  
[Rather than act as a human mortal] an anthropos must, in so far as it is possible, pursue divine life (Werner Jaeger: make oneself divine), i.e., become noetic contemplation.

Unlike mathematic Plato, biologist Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) trusted the senses, but since Aristotle also believed reasoning is divine his intelligent philosophical framework reinforced centuries of Humanist vanity.

1200s Catholicism meant to curtail such hybris of philosophy by conceiving philosophy, according to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.), as a subservient ancilla (hand-maiden) to the authority of theology, for Theology articulates the grace dispensed by the Church, which does not destroy but perfects/completes natural reasoning  

However, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1491) rejected any ecclesial controls on humans and promoted a creed which resounds like a loveless bronze gong throughout recorded history--
East/West/North/South: we philosophically contemplative humans can, if we will, by *ambitio sacra* invading our souls become angelic beings and veritably merge with the very Godhead which made us.\[2][2]

This driving, dynamic principality--To-Become-like-God (the Serpent’s opening gambit, Genesis 3:5)--in a legion of empowering, captivating Faustian disguises has spooked world cultural history and dominates, I dare say, North American, Chinese and Japanese, Russian, Arab, and African dictatorship cultures today, in our Machiavellian politics, Darwinian economics, Double-speak media, Selfish Hedonistic entertainment--And if you don’t know that this long-standing protean unholy spirit is the very cultural air we breathe, how can would-be followers of Jesus Christ not catch the prevailing toxic pandemic virus of “Godly-Me-First”?

A good dose of earthy gutsy Martin Luther (1483-1546) talk and song can inoculate a person against sheep-like following the bellwether crowd. *Maior est spiritussanctus quam Aristoteles.*\[3][3] The Holy Spirit is more important, is more significant than Aristotle, says Luther disarming, in analyzing the eucharistic sacrament, and in the process Luther enunciates a fundamental Reformation change in Christian understanding of the Church: the Word of God preached changes humans at heart to become God’s adopted children in Jesus Christ; salvation is not effected by sacraments performed by clerics!

Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein, / und lasst uns fröhlich springen, 
dass wir getrost und all in ein / mit Lust und Liebe singen: 
Was Gott an uns gewendet hat, und seine süsse Wunderthat, 
gar theur hat ers erworben....

It cost God every bloody nickel to save us, so prance around joyfully!--that’s Martin Luther’s take on the Christian faith alternative to ambitious Pico Della Mirandola, Inc  The historic European Reformation did not just change a few doctrines, but re-directed patterns of daily life and the grip of societal institutions! Monk Luther married nun Katerina von Bora and suddenly raised marriage to its biblical prominence instead of giving priority to the solitary life.  
Reformer John Calvin’s (1509-1564) deep-going thought, the one I treasure most, gives underlying grit and body to Luther’s direct simplicity: ...*omnis recta Dei cognitio ab obedientia nascitur!*\[4][4] Knowing God is not esoteric γνῶσις, but is living in obedience to God’s Word. And the most holy vocation--lawyer! John Calvin speaking--the most God-honoring task by a long shot, is to become a civil magistrate dispensing restorative justice to all and sundry, to believing and disbelieving neighbors.\[5][5] Do you realize what that opens up? All of life is to be faith in operation! Preparing meals in the kitchen, filling bureaucratic routines in the office, teaching mathematics to children, can be as holy an activity as praying *matins* at 4:00 a.m. in the monastery. No wonder the Reformed Church Heidelberg Catechism (1563) stated answer #32 to “Why are you called a Christian?” does not mention “the church” (as ecclesial institution)!

\[2][2] *Invadat animum sacra quaedam ambitio ut mediocribus non contenti anhelemus ad summa, adque illa (quando possimus si volumus) consequenda totis viribus emitamur. ...ut per eam ipsi homines ascendentes in caelum angeli fierent.... De hominis dignitate, 1487.


The Dutch brand of Reformational thought is well-formulated by Abraham Kuyper: “...what we need is to be building up the whole of theoretical thought on a Christian foundation. What we really need is a seedling of scientific theory thriving on Christian roots. For us people to be content with the act of shuffling around in the garden of somebody else, scissors in hand [to cut the other’s flowers], is to throw away the honor and worth of our Christian faith.”

Kuyper believes Scripture can break through the hold on our consciousness bedeviled by “the traditions of men,” and give us fallible servants a fresh start for a committed world-and-life vision of God’s world and our dated/located human task, not to be successful in bringing on the philosophical or societal millennium, but in being faithful to prepare a welcome for the returning Lord of glory. It could be that our reforming sinful-obedient meals will look as severe as the diet of Daniel, Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego next to the high cholesterol gourmet feasts and sweets of Nebuchadnezzar’s courtiers, but maybe we Christ followers will know better than others, as Bruce Cockburn’s song has it, “wondering were the lions are” (1979).

My philosophy professors at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, D.H.Th. Vollenhoven and Sietze Zuidema, taught me, standing in this Kuyperian Reformational Christian tradition, a most important truth that has guided me my whole life in Christ: “stel maar de thesis; dan zul je wel de antithese thuis krijgen” (“Just posit the Christian thesis; then you shall get antichristian theses thrown back in your face”). And I also learned from Karl Barth, with whom I studied during a post-graduate Wanderjahr (1955-56), when he explained why he himself was not a Barthian, the importance for a community of Christian scholars to work out of a faith-thought tradition with an identity, but not to be narrow-minded or fixated by the past: Scripturally directed scholarship will keep its ear cocked to the enlivening, on-going re-directing, modifying power and focusing of God’s Holy Spirited Word upon one’s philosophical task.

philosophical aesthetics: God’s aesthetic injunction to be playful and allusive, imaginative adoptive children

After moving on from teaching at Trinity to the graduate Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto (1972-1999), I was able to concentrate on exploring God’s creational ordinance of ludicity/allusivity for our imaginative responsibilities. I spent time reflecting on our human “aesthetic life” which underlies “art making,” and grappled with “the history and task of artistry and literature in society.” Let me mention just a couple of theses in this field of investigation:

(1) Not everybody needs to be art-smart, but God does ask everybody to be aesthetically obedient, that is, to sound a note of redeeming imaginatively in your varied activities—perception

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(Philippians 1:9-11), speech (Colossians 4:6), parenting (Ephesians 6:4), friendship (Proverbs 17:17), or whatever.

(2) If you have the calling and determination, and develop the competence to become an artisan, an artist, an amateur or professional writer of literature, your happy stressful task is to provide nuanceful knowledge for the neighbor, especially those in societies who are imaginatively handicapped, the unimaginatively obtuse or strait-laced.

(3) Authentic artwork is fallible metaphoric knowledge of nuanceful matters permeated by an awareness of the surd of sin and the joy of God’s grace touching creatures.

(4) For artistry to be a wholesome presence in society there will best be a communion of sound artists, charitable art critics, down-to-earth art theorists, generous art patrons, and an informed or educable art public, intent together on giving away this normal gift to whoever will receive it....

There are a host of wonderful, complicating problems: from my ποῦ στῶ Willem Claeszoon Heda’s nature morte (1634) is a profoundly Christian painting, thankfully relishing the glory of the creatural texture of pewter, glass and linen tablecloth, wine and food, while simultaneously calling the viewer to remember with the drying out lemon peel’s memento mori that we who eat and drink so gladly are mortal. Or a late Rembrandt (1606-1669) portrait captures the hurting gravity of elderly life which like Job or the apostle (thorn-in-the-flesh) Paul’s travail remains waiting not for Godot, but for the awesome blessing of God. That is, one does not need to produce liturgical art fit for Church worship, a fortiori not need to try to induce a transcendent numinous experience, to be fulfilling a godly artistic vocation.

With my particular picaresque bent I appreciate the comic relief--exaggerating what happens at a fiery “enthusiastic” Methodist church service--outsider William Hogarth (1697-1764) brought to the British scene at the time of genteel Academicians Reynolds and Gainsborough. Hogarth gave dignity to his servants! (1759) and to a girl selling shrimp! Hogarth was art historically important in getting through Parliament a graphic artwork copyright law (1735). Käthe Kollwitz’ Mother with dead child (1903) makes me quietly cry, since it tunes me deeply into the wretched misery of the lonely pain of the helpless worldwide, and nearby, I am bound to mitigate, at least by showing to you this, her artistic offering to God. An artist from Inès and my local congregation comments in oil on wood panel the bittersweet trials (Joanne Sytsma 2001) the biblical letter booked by James says it is good for us to go through, since God keeps all our tears in God’s bottle--outfitted with the label of Matisse’s “Dance of life”! And Trinity’s David Casstleman uses a brilliant red-painted steel pipe perforating cell doors on site in a defunct Philadelphia prison, weaving in and out of grey cinder blocks to leap over the prison wall surrounding the exercise yard (as Psalm 18:29 has it) and turn into a concert of organ pipes on the other side—a solid red thread of hope called “End of the tunnel” (2004) for the forgotten jailed in a labyrinth of confined, punished, suspended life.... Rainbow-rich artwork and events can tell hard truths as well as sweet lies.
I’m glad for this ante-mortem rather than post-mortem opportunity to give a “final lecture” at Trinity. I’ll end as I began, coming back to Scripture which points to the source of everlasting life and insight: God revealed in Jesus Christ and made known in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The yearning pathos of King David’s final words would be my penultimate words. II Samuel 23:2-7 records how David failed doing what the LORD God required: rule justly (teach wisely) in awe of God so that his subjects (my students) would sparkle like fresh grass shining after a good rain as the sun rises on a cloudless morning. That speaks to me, interested in our generational responsibility to carry on and ramify the Lord’s work, because I resonate deeply with Augustine’s moving plea: “Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo” (Give me chastity and continence, [O Lord,] but not yet!). Given our failings, it is a miracle to pass on truly the treasures we hold in us clay jars.

A good brisk translation of Ecclesiastes’ opening “vanity of vanities” phrase (1:2) would be: “Hot stinking air! Utter stupidity! It’s all a fart!” To which the refrain of the book answers (in 3:15): “Yes, but God picks up the pieces”...of our lifelong activity, and will redeem the faithful false starts and the smell.

So my final testimony as philosophy teacher and aesthetician would be from Psalm 31: “My life time, my times, the timings for me, [LORD,] are in your hand” (vv. 14-15). And when the temporal earthly journey for me ends (Psalm 31:5): “Into your hand, [Lord,] I entrust my very life-breath,” which the LORD gives and the LORD takes away; blessed be the Name of the LORD (Job 1:21).

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presented with power point diagrams and artwork images, 3 October 2009 A.D.
Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois USA

A FINAL LECTURE

philosophical systematics: Convicted eye-glasses for experiencing the real world
Psalm 148:7  Ecclesiastes 3:15

historiography: A struggle not against flesh and blood, but against evil spiriting powers  Ephesians 6:12

[9][9] My own grappling with this problem referred to in footnote 8 above, has been to try to reform Herman Dooyeweerd’s threefold conception of “historical development” (differentiate, integrate, individualize) with the formulation: “regenerate, speciate, diaconate” one’s inherited state of your cultural preoccupation or faith-thought tradition. Cf. my “Cities as a place for public artwork: a gloacal approach,” in Globalization and the Gospel: Probing the Religious Foundations of Globalization, eds. Michael W. Goheen and Erin Glanville (
Romans 8:28-30
Παπίς ἔμοι γε δοκεῖ οὕτω.
Σοκράτης: Καλῶς, τὸ γὰρ σοι δοκοῦν τοῦτο ὑποκρίνου.
(Plato, *Meno* 83d1-2)

[...*αλλὰ χρή...] ἐφ’ ὃσον ἐνδέχεται ἰθανατίζειν...
(Aristotle, *Nicomachaean Ethics* X.7, 1177b33)

Cum enim gratia non tollat naturam, sed perficiat, oportet quod naturalis ratio subserviat fidei....
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q 1, a.8 ad 2)

Invadat animum sacra quaedam ambitio ut mediocribus non contenti anhelemus ad summa, adque illa (quando possumus si volumus) consequenda totis viribus emitamur. ...ut per eam ipsi homines ascendentes in caelum ngeli fieren....
(Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*, 1487)

Maior est spiritussanctus quam Aristoteles.
(Martin Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium*, 1520).

Nun freut euch lieben Christne gmein / und lasst uns fröhlich springen
dass wir getrost und all in ein / mit Lust und Liebe singen:
Was Gott an uns gewendet hat, und seine süsse Wunderthat, gar theur hat ers erworben...
(Martin Luther, song, post 1517)

...omnis recta Dei cognitio ab obedientia nascitur
(John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis*, 1536, I.6:2)

Quare nulli jam dubium esse debet quin civilis potestas, vocatio sit, non modo coram Deo sancta & legitima, sed sacerrima etiam, et in tota mortalium vita longe omnium honestissima.
(John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis*, 1536, IV.20:4)

“Wat we behoeven is een plant der wetenschap, tierend op Christelijken wortel.”
(Abraham Kuyper, “de Wetenschap,” in *De Gemeene Gratie*, 1931)

stel maar de thesis; dan zul je wel de antithesis thuis krijgen.
(Vollenhoven and Zuidema conversation, 1950s)

philosophical aesthetics: *God’s aesthetic injunction to be playful and allusive, imaginative adoptive children.*

Authentic artwork is fallible metaphoric knowledge of nuanceful matters permeated by an awareness of the surd of sin and the joy of God’s grace touching creatures.

postlude

Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo.
(Augustine, *Confessiones*, 8:17)

רָעָלָה יְהוָה בַּעֲלֵי יִשְׂרָעֵֽל
(Exodus 3:15)

“God picks up the pieces.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:15)
“My life time, my times, the timings for me are in your hand, [LORD].”
(Psalm 31:15)

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