

ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

NOVEMBER 2023 | 27.5

Why We Should Read Vollenhoven Today

STEVE BISHOP

Thanks to recent translation projects, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck have almost become household names within the academic Reformed Christian community. However, there are other lesser-known but equally important figures who deserve recognition. These Dutch Christians, including Herman Dooyeweerd, Dirk Vollenhoven and Antheunis Janse, built on the foundations laid by Kuyper and Bavinck and developed a Christian philosophy that is profound and insightful. It's time for us to give these visionaries the recognition they deserve and appreciate the depth of their contribution to Christian thought. In this article, I want to examine five good reasons why we should be reading Dirk Hendrik Theodoor Vollenhoven (1892–1978) today. Vollenhoven has often been in the shadow of his brother-in-law Herman Dooyeweerd. Now is a good time to reassess Vollenhoven's contribution to Christian scholarship. But first, some brief biographical information.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Vollenhoven's upbringing was deeply rooted in the Kuyperian tradition, his father often regaled him with

stories of Kuyper. He was the youngest of eight children and attended the same primary school as Herman Dooyeweerd's sister, Hermina Maria, who later became Vollenhoven's wife. He went on to study classics, philosophy and theology at the Free University and was the founding editor of the student magazine *Opbouw*. His doctoral dissertation was "The Philosophy of Mathematics from a Theistic Standpoint," supervised by G. H. J. W. J. Geesink, who took over from J. Woltjer after Woltjer's death.



In 1918, Vollenhoven married Hermina Maria Dooyeweerd and became a pastor in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Oostkapelle. However, a call to The Hague enabled him to fulfil his curiosity and intellectual passions:

there he had many discussions with his brother-in-law, Herman Dooyeweerd. These discussions laid the foundations for a “Calvinistic philosophy,” now better known as Reformational philosophy.

Vollenhoven was greatly influenced by Antheunis Janse (1890–1960),¹ who was one of the founders, with Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, of the Association for Calvinistic Philosophy. Janse’s anthropology led him into conflict with the implicit scholasticism² of many in the Gereformeerde churches. Under the influence of Janse, Vollenhoven also began questioning the immortality of the soul. This brought him into conflict with the more scholastic-influenced theologians at the VU. Janse and then Vollenhoven stressed the unity of a human being, which was not appreciated by the dualistic approach supported by the VU theologians, V. Hepp, H. H. Kuyper and J. Ridderbos. During this time, Vollenhoven suffered a nervous breakdown in 1923 while preaching. He took almost a year to recuperate.

He returned to pastoral work, but then in 1926 Vollenhoven took up a post at the VU where he was appointed as the first full-time philosophy professor. In his inaugural lecture in 1926, he coined the term “Calvinistic philosophy,” a phrase that would become his signature in the years to come.



Vollenhoven in 1926 as first professor of philosophy at the VU, Amsterdam

1. On Janse see, for example, B. J. van der Walt, “Antheunis Janse of Biggekerke (1890–1960). Morning star of a 20th-century reformation,” in *Like the First Gleam of Dawn: Reformation Studies - a B. J. van der Walt Reader*, ed. Steve Bishop (Potchefstroom: The Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa, 2011).

2. Scholasticism is a slippery term. Vollenhoven uses it in a derogatory sense.

Vollenhoven’s appointment came with the luxury of time and he poured his heart and soul into his work, producing the first version of his *Isagogè Philosophiae* in 1930 and continuing to work on revisions until 1945.³ The *Isagogè* was originally Vollenhoven’s lecture notes on the Introduction to Philosophy. The definitive version has since been published in English and Dutch-English versions, with a critical edition in Dutch edited by Anthony Tol. Vollenhoven’s Calvinistic philosophy was developed in his *Calvinism and the Reformation of Philosophy* (1933).⁴ He later developed a unique and innovative method of systematizing philosophers and their works, known as the consequent problem-historical method (1940s) and then on the *Schematische Kaarten* (systematic charts).⁵

Why then should we read Vollenhoven today? Here are five good reasons.

1. HE WAS COMMITTED TO THE SCRIPTURES AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Vollenhoven often used the term scriptural or biblical philosophy to describe his approach – he regarded the Scriptures as a foundation. For Vollenhoven a scriptural philosophy teaches the total sovereignty of God who has revealed himself in his Word. It teaches a sovereignty “which is exercised over all things in every context and relationship.”⁶ Consequently, scriptural philosophy distinguishes sharply between God as sovereign and his creation.

Vollenhoven took the Scriptures so seriously that he distinguished two kinds of philosophy: scriptural and non-scriptural.

In his speech to the inaugural meeting of the Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte (VCW) (Association of Calvinistic Philosophy) he made clear his commitment to God and his Word; the primary focus is:

... the bond to God’s Word, because we have learned by grace to want to live only from Christ, and religion has become the core of our existence. We have learned that only by obeying the Lord’s commandments we can find peace and

3. Published in English from the 1945 version as *Introduction to Philosophy*. J. H. Kok and A. Tol, eds. (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 2005).

4. *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte*. (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1933). Chapters from this were published in English in “The significance of Calvinism for the reformation of philosophy,” in *Evangelical Quarterly* 3(4) (1931), 387–403; 4(2) (1932), 128–160, 398–427.

5. *Schematische Kaarten. Filosofische concepties in probleemhistorisch verband*, K. A. Bril and P. J. Boonstra, eds. (Amstelveen: De Zaak Haes, 2000).

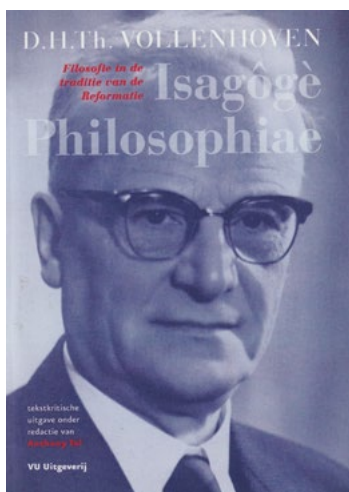
6. D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, “The ground motives of biblical philosophy,” in *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte*, Chapter II, 22. English translation available here: <https://www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/Vollenhoven/HetCalvinischme.pdf>.

life, not only for the individual but also for all the relationships in which we stand. Therefore, philosophy is not number one. It has never been in our circle, and if the association we now want to establish remains faithful to its task, philosophy will not become number one either.⁷

Vollenhoven's commitment to faith was noted by the mathematician, and central figure in the Significs Circle, a Dutch variant of the Vienna Circle, Gerrit Mannoury, who remarked of Vollenhoven's dissertation:

Dr. Vollenhoven has travelled a road that no one has ever trod before: the road that leads from the often-rigid dogmatism of the theologian to the scientific theories of the matematicus. And he did not travel that way as a theologian, nor as a mathematician, but as one who loves faith, but without despising thought. Dr. Vollenhoven has successfully completed his bravely undertaken task.⁸

2. HE WAS COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP



Vollenhoven took seriously both the Scriptures and scholarship. As we shall see below, he developed a fresh approach to the history of philosophy based on his Christian faith. Vollenhoven cautions against merging Christian thinking with secular thinking. He firmly believes that

trying to combine these two approaches would undermine Christian beliefs and distort what Christians understand to be true, given the fundamental differences between their commitments and the projects of contemporary thought.

Vollenhoven passionately emphasizes that a synthesis between the Christian faith and contemporary philosophy is simply impossible.⁹ This placed on him the necessity of developing a philosophy based on the foundation of

7. Cited in Johan Sellinger, *D. H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) Reformator der Wijsbegeerte* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1992), 124. This inaugural meeting was held on 14 December 1935. See Stellingwerff's note (128) on where to find the full quote.

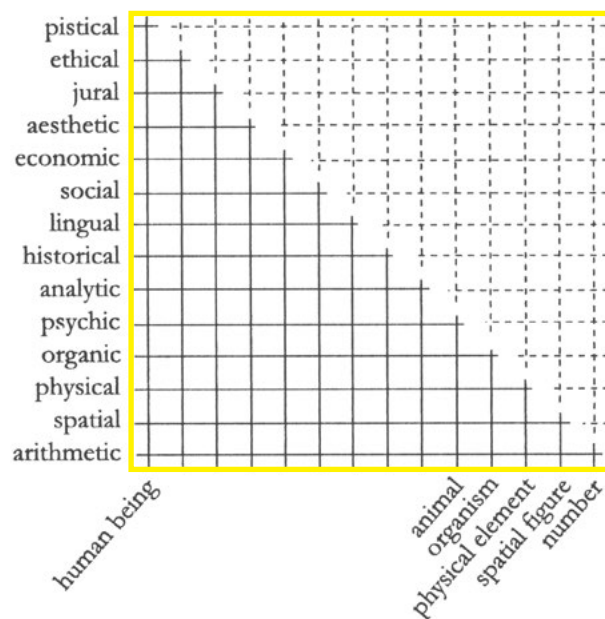
8. G. Mannoury, "De Wijsbegeerte der Wiskunde van Theïstisch Standpunt," in *De Beweging*, 373–374.

9. D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, *Evangelical Quarterly* 3(4) 1931, 388.

Word-revelation. He thus embarked on an attempt to forge a philosophical framework that harmoniously integrates Christian conviction with rigorous intellectual exploration. He vigorously maintained that a Calvinistic philosophy is no contradiction in terms.¹⁰

3. HE HELPED DEVELOP THE THEORY OF MODAL ASPECTS

Vollenhoven was an anti-reductionist before anti-reductionism was fashionable. The development of modal aspects is one way in which Vollenhoven (and Dooyeweerd) showed that reductionism was flawed. All of reality reflects different modal aspects and thus reflects the unity within diversity of God's good creation. Vollenhoven realised that any attempt to condense reality into a single, unified system or worldview will inevitably oversimplify and distort it because reality is a diverse creation. For many the theory of modal aspects is closely associated with Dooyeweerd. However, the theory was jointly developed by Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. As Vollenhoven's biographer, Johan Stellingwerff, comments: "I would characterize their individual contribution as follows: Dooyeweerd also made fruitful use of the material that Vollenhoven collected and analysed."



Vollenhoven's list of modal aspects (from J. H. Kok, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 49)

It was from the 1920s onwards that they both developed the theory of modal aspects. All of these aspects are present in reality, and none can be reduced to another, that is, they are irreducible. Each of the higher aspects presupposes the lower. For example, economic activity is impossible

10. Vollenhoven, *Evangelical Quarterly* 3(4) 1931, 388.

without some form of social interaction which presupposes some form of communication and so forth. These aspects illustrate the diversity of creation in terms of their sphere sovereignty and their sphere universality illustrates the unity of creation – in each one there are echoes of each other (Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven call these retrocipations and anticipations).

4. HE DEVELOPED A FRESH WAY OF APPROACHING THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

In the late 1940s Vollenhoven was developing a new and revolutionary way of examining philosophical issues. Known as the *consequent-probleemhistorische methode* (CPHM). Vollenhoven’s method has been variously translated into English as the consistent, consequent or consequential problem-historical method. But what does that all mean? At its core, the *method* represents a systematic procedure for examining key philosophical problems throughout history. And the *historical* facet is crucial – it provides a roadmap for understanding the development of philosophy and how various ideas are interconnected. As Vollenhoven himself put it, “connections are the most important” when it comes to understanding philosophy’s rich history.

Vollenhoven describes his own method thus:

... every philosopher is dependent upon his predecessors and contemporaries and exerts an influence both on his contemporaries and succeeding generations. These observations applied to the field of history of philosophy necessitate an analysis which takes account both

of the predominant philosophical climate and the specific philosophical approach of a particular philosopher. A systematic investigation of this fact leads to a consequent problem-historical method.¹¹

In order to analyse and understand various philosophers and philosophical schools, Vollenhoven identified **periods**, **trends** and **types**. Periods are based on how people respond to Scripture; trends are determined by the view of law, and by how one views the cosmos.

He identified three main periods: pre-synthetic, where the Scriptures were unknown; the synthetic where the Scriptures were mixed with non-Christian thought, and post- or anti-synthetic which were subdivided into rationalism and irrationalism.

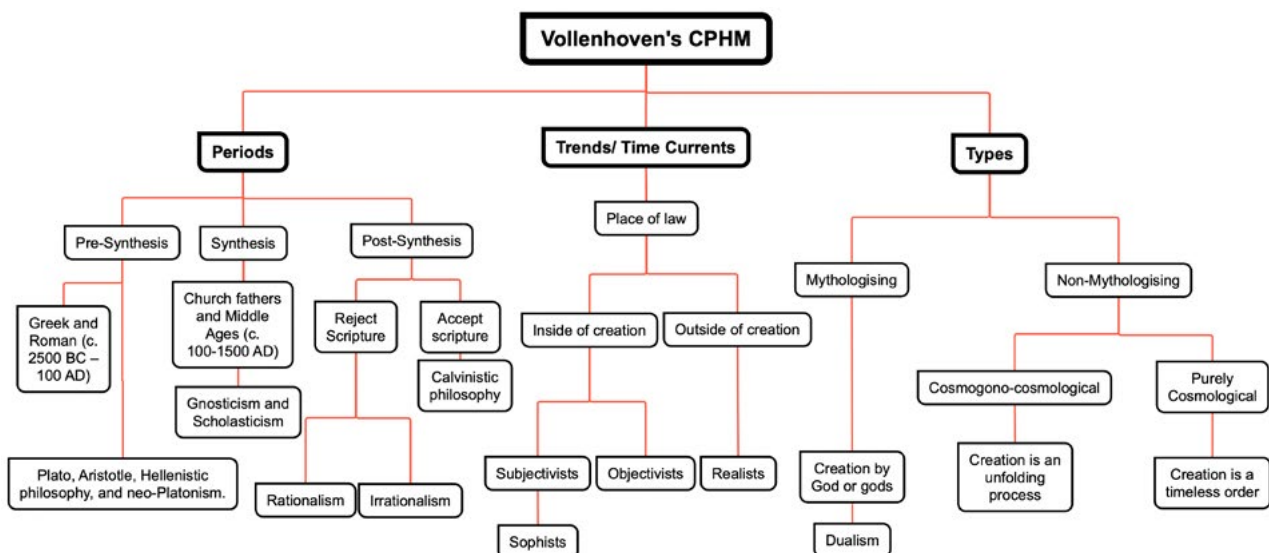
Trends or time currents revolved around the role and place of law. Vollenhoven recognized three main responses: subjectivism, objectivism and realism. Subjectivists and objectivists sought answers within the creation, while realists perceived the answers to lie outside of the creation.

Types explored ontological questions regarding the nature of reality and often represented distinct traditions of thought. They grappled with inquiries such as the origin of reality, the relationship between universals and individuals, the nature of knowledge and the connection between humans and animals.

Regarding the origins of reality, Vollenhoven classified them into three main categories:

1. *Mythologizing*: This category included various types (18 in total), where God or gods were seen as the origin of the universe, often

11. Cited in K. A. Bril, “A selected and annotated bibliography of D. H. Th. Vollenhoven,” in *Philosophia Reformata*, 38 (1973), 213.



accompanied by creation accounts or myths.

2. *Cosmogono-cosmological*: Within this category, which included 39 different types, the universe was perceived as an unfolding process.
3. *Purely cosmological*: Comprising 30 different types, this category viewed the universe in terms of a timeless order, without any creation stories or myths.

Each of these groups could be further divided into *monistic* or *dualistic* categories. Monists regarded the universe as consisting of one fundamental element (such as only mind or only matter), while dualists posited the existence of two distinct elements. The challenge for dualists lay in explaining the interrelation between these two components.

After Vollenhoven retired and passed away in 1978, a publication of his *Schematische Kaarten (Schematic Charts)* was released in Dutch in 2000. Kor Bril, with the help of P. Boonstra, was responsible for making this happen. The *Schematische Kaarten* is a reference source that lists and briefly describes the views of 16,000 philosophers. It was created by closely examining the fragments and works of these thinkers and categorizing them based on their ideas. Unfortunately, at the moment, the publication is only available in Dutch.

5. HIS LEGACY LIVES ON

In the sixties, Vollenhoven took his message overseas. In 1961, he headed to North America and in 1963, he made his way to South Africa, where he delivered 24 lectures in Dutch between August and September.¹² John Kok and others have translated these lectures into English for the Vollenhoven Foundation.

Vollenhoven's ideas have inspired a host of brilliant minds to work with and develop them. In North America, luminaries such as H. E. Runner, John Kok, Calvin Seerveld, Hendrik Hart, James Olthuis and John Vander Stelt picked up the baton. These were instrumental in setting up "The Association for Reformed Scientific Studies," which paved the way for the Institute for Christian Studies, in Toronto. In South Africa, scholars such as N. T. van der Merwe, J.

A. L. Taljaard, J. J. (Ponti) Venter, and B. J. van der Walt have all contributed to the ongoing conversation around Vollenhoven's work. Meanwhile, in Europe, the likes of Kor Bril, Anthony Tol and Jeremy Ive have made significant

contributions to the field.

Vollenhoven was also instrumental in setting up the special chairs for teaching Calvinistic Philosophy at Utrecht, Leiden, Groningen, Rotterdam, Delft and Eindhoven.

The Vollenhoven Foundation, established in 1997 by Vollenhoven's son-in-law, Herman Nijenhuis, has been instrumental in promoting the publication of Vollenhoven's work and encouraging the study of his thought. Under the stewardship of Sander Griffioen, Kor Bril and Rob Nijhoff the foundation has produced several newsletters and has been involved in translating and publishing a number of books by and on Vollenhoven.

CONCLUSION

One of the key takeaways from the work of Vollenhoven, Kuyper and Dooyeweerd is that a distinctly Christian approach to scholarship is not only necessary but also possible, albeit difficult. Their ideas have inspired a generation of scholars to engage with the world around them in a way that is informed by a deep Christian faith. The richness and depth of their work are apparent, and it is exciting to imagine what further insights may be gleaned from their ideas in the years to come.

Steve Bishop, PhD, maintains the website www.alloflifereedeemed.co.uk, is a trustee of Thinking Faith Network, and an Associate Fellow of the KLC. Resources on Vollenhoven are available on the Vollenhoven pages: <https://www.alloflifereedeemed.co.uk/vollenhoven.htm>.



Roeland Koning, Portrait of Vollenhoven. Photo: René den Engelsman (By kind permission of the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam)

12. D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, *Gastcolleges Wijsbegeerte. Erfenis voor het heden*, eds. K. A. Bril and R. A. Nijhoff (Amstelveen: De Zaak Haes, 2011). An English translation is currently in progress.