

A.C. Flipse

Christelijke wetenschap. Nederlandse rooms-katholieken en gereformeerden over de natuurwetenschap, 1880–1940 [Passage Reeks 44]. Verloren, Hilversum 2014, 328 pp. ISBN 9789087044152. € 29.

For almost a decade Ab Flipse has been known as a scholar in the history of science. He made his debut with an excellent monograph on the then 75 years old history of the department of physics and astronomy of the VU University Amsterdam under the title *Hier leert de natuur ons zelf den weg* (Zoetermeer 2005).¹ Since his graduation in 2003 at the same faculty Flipse has been involved in academic research in the history of science and the relationship between science and religion in particular. In 2013 Flipse was appointed university historian at the VU University where, in May 2014, he obtained his PhD.

The aim of his thesis² focuses on answering three questions concerning (1) the nature and content of ‘neo-Calvinist’ and ‘neo-Thomist’ scientific ideals and purposes, (2) their adoption as ‘Christian science’ by Dutch Roman Catholic and Reformed scientists and (3) understanding of the origin and practical results of their implementation in the context of contemporary changes in culture, society, and science in general.

In chapters 2 to 5 the background of neo-Calvinist and neo-Thomist views on science is dealt with in more detail. As Flipse argues, both movements may be seen as a reaction to science which, in the mid-nineteenth century, had distanced itself from its original purpose, which was to demonstrate God’s presence in the physical world. To regain the lost ground, after much effort, they succeeded in establishing their own universities: the aforementioned Reformed VU University (*Vrije Universiteit*) (1880) and, some decades later, the Roman Catholic University in Nijmegen (1923). Neither of them, however, was equipped with a faculty of science until 1930 and 1957 respectively. In the meantime Roman Catholic and Reformed scientists had organised themselves in powerful non-academic scientific societies. Mainly absorbed as they were in their daily professions, they had to create sufficient spare time to meet the mainly university-based theologians and philosophers on an equal footing in academic debate.

In chapters 6 to 8 the adoption, rethinking, and elaboration of neo-Calvinist and neo-Thomist ideas by these scientists is studied and commented upon. The

¹ Translation: *Here Nature itself teaches us*.

² Translation: *Christian Science. Dutch Roman Catholics and Calvinists about the Sciences, 1880–1940*.

debate focused on causality in physics and, above all, on teleology in living nature. Great effort was made to integrate Darwin's evolutionary theory into neo-Thomism and neo-Calvinism. Reformed scientists and theologians, however, did not succeed in this attempt. According to Flipse, this was due in part to the fact that, much to their disadvantage and in contrast with their Roman Catholic colleagues, they lacked a common philosophical background. Independently of each other, some scientists and theologians looked for solutions to (neo-)vitalistic and so-called holistic theories and to American creationism, without much satisfaction. This struggle resulted in a stalemate between Reformed scientists and theologians at the end of the studied period. As Flipse argues, Roman Catholic scientists eventually were more successful in the integration of the evolutionary theory in their far wider accepted neo-Thomist philosophy. Whereas the Reformed scientific society was dissolved in 1971, its Roman Catholic counterpart still exists up to the present day.

Flipse should be complimented on this thorough study. The description of the origin and development of the concept of Christian science in Reformed and Roman Catholic circles is convincing. Similarities and interaction between the two most prominent groups in this field are clearly demonstrated. As expected, the influence of the outside scientific world on the two movements turned out to have been far more significant than their own rather modest outward influence.

I would like to make a few observations. Firstly, I do not agree with Flipse's statement that Abraham Kuyper was not absolutely opposed to the evolutionary theory. Although Kuyper indeed did not definitely reject the possibility of a God-guided descent of the species, he strongly contested the principle of natural selection and autonomous development. Since natural selection is a key feature of Darwin's evolutionary theory this theory cannot be adopted without accepting natural selection.

Another point of concern stems from the author's aforementioned statement that the Reformed scientists were hampered by the lack of a common philosophical system. In the 1920's a 'Calvinistic philosophy' eventually emerged, but as Flipse demonstrates this was not favourably regarded by most Reformed scientists. In the 1960's VU biologist Jan Lever finally came to the conclusion that this philosophy was incompatible with the theory of evolution. One wonders whether this also implies incompatibility with neo-Calvinism itself, thus disclosing a fundamental flaw in neo-Calvinism. I would have appreciated the author's comment on this noteworthy difference with neo-Thomism.

My last objection refers to the self-imposed framework of this study. Whereas the origin and development of Christian science are discussed in depth, its decline after the end of the study period is only given a glancing

mention. According to the author, the subject just disappeared from the public domain (pp. 236–237; 288–290). In my opinion Flipse has not adequately justified this contention. Admittedly, the cut-off point of the study at 1940 is not inconsistent with its primarily descriptive nature as set out in the Introduction. As the author argues he wants to avoid big narrative and oversimplification. But in so doing Flipse leaves the reader without a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of the dedicated and able performance of the Christian scientists of that time to the present day. Moreover, the concept of disappearance from the public domain suggests that as soon as interest were to re-emerge, the discussion could just resurface at the point where the author had left it in the 1940's. However, it should be realized that the concept of Christian science as portrayed in this study was abandoned by mainstream neo-Calvinists only after considerable conflict in the 1960's and 1970's as a result of new developments in scientific and theological thought.

Nevertheless, within the parameters set by the author, Flipse's study is an important and impressive contribution to the ongoing debate on the relationship between science and Christian faith.

Hittjo H. Kruyswijk

Aerdenhout

hhkruyswijk@hetnet.nl