

Chris Gousmett:

A Reformational Scholar among Other Christians¹

Anonymous

One of the authors quoted frequently in Part 2 is Chris Gousmett, a New Zealand scholar. The materials I quote were prepared for a course on political theology at the University of Otago in his home country. Gousmett tells me the following story:

What impressed me most was the response of the students. After the lecture on sphere sovereignty/structural pluralism where I expounded on a Christian view of society, some of the New Zealand students berated me for exposing the Pacific Island students to views which were of little relevance to anyone in this part of the world. Meanwhile, the same Pacific Islanders waited meekly at the back of the class until the others had finished their “response” and left, at which point they came forward and expressed their appreciation for my lecture, which they found most helpful. They then explained how they had to contend with a situation in their home islands where the clergy were ranked above every other social sphere, in which without their consent nothing could be done. As the ministers of God, everyone deferred to their views in everything, with severe constraints on democracy, social development, political maturity, economic growth, and so on. They said that the sphere sovereignty I had explained had at last given them a means to critique this situation, without having to resort to the

secularization that other New Zealand Christians expounded to them. As deeply pious people, they found it hard to criticize their clergy, but also recognized that unless an alternative social perspective was developed, the whole of their societies would be bound to a model imported by missionaries!² Through providing a Christian option to either acquiescence in this spiritual dictatorship, or secularization on the Western model, I had reached them at a deeper level than their other lecturers. Subsequently I was accepted as a friend and confidant for these students, and was able to pass on more of the reformational vision to them than to my fellow New Zealanders! Several undertook research projects with my support.

Gousmett also told me about his experience at the same university with respect to his doctoral dissertation. On the whole, his use of a Kuyperian framework was very unpopular with most of the faculty there so that he “ended up with a rather strained relationship with my supervisor, and an evaluation of my PhD of five words – ‘Seems fine – it should pass.’” He then went on as follows:

Strangely enough these Reformed (Barthian) scholars were less sympathetic and supportive than my joint supervisors, and the eventual three examiners, all either Catholics or high church Anglicans, who were very appreciative of my views, and even stated that my exposition of a Reformational philosophy, if right, was a

¹Boer: I found this article in my archives but have no idea where it came from. I include it on this page because, in my experience, it is very typical in its description of the reaction of various types of Christians to Reformational thought. The title is mine.

²The exclamation point is well taken and significant. For all full explanation of it I invite you to peruse my Boeriana page of this website, especially vol. 2 of our memoirs, *Every Square Inch*. The Islanders’ reaction runs parallel to Nigerian reactions to my ministry among them.

serious challenge to their Thomistic views and needed to be evaluated further.

Gousmett concluded his letter with this story: “Such are the vagaries of scholarship! In fact, even more bizarre, my Catholic supervisor was at the time writing a book demonstrating that in the first centuries of the church it was governed by elderships, while his Presbyterian counterpart was writing a similar book arguing that the original governance of the church from the beginning was by bishops.”³

I thought you may enjoy these humorous tidbits from behind the scenes.

³C. Gousmet, Email, 15 Nov/2004. Admittedly, the last paragraph is an inside story. To appreciate the humour you need to be familiar with Christian denominations. This situation is similar to a two-volume series written some years ago and published by the same company. One “proved” that the early church baptized infants; the other, that they baptised only adults! Both of them were solid scholars and both of their argumentation was right on!