

## The Searching Maestro

### M. C. Smit and the Meaning of History<sup>1</sup>

By Roel Kuiper

Translated by Jan H. Boer

*Comment by the original editor: "On the Shoulders."*

Amongst both readers and writers of *Beweging*, Christian philosophy is often associated with the names of Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven. These VU<sup>2</sup> professors are regarded as the founders of Reformational Philosophy (RP). They are the maestros of many adherents to this philosophical school that, among others, operates the Society for Reformational Philosophy, publishes the journal *Philosophia Reformata* (transl: as well as *this* magazine *Beweging*) and sponsors special university chairs for RP.

It is clear that these two men gave the original impetus to a community of scholars who made their contributions to the newly-developing school of RP. These scholars include the occupants of these special chairs, such as Van Riessen, Zuidema, Mekkes and Popma. These in turn became the teachers of subsequent generation of students interested in Christian philosophy. However, their works are not referred to as often. Who were these Reformational philosophers in the wake of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven? They *also* taught, wrote and published.

---

<sup>1</sup>Original title "De zoekende meester: M. C. Smit en de zin van de geschiedenis." *Beweging*, summer 2005, pp. 37-39. All footnotes in this article are from the translator.

<sup>2</sup>"VU" is the acronym for "Vrije Universiteit," or the Free (Reformed) University in Amsterdam founded by Abraham Kuyper. It is there that this translator received his doctorate.

This series will draw attention to their teachings, their contributions to Christian thought and their significance today for us who stand on their shoulders. In this issue of *Beweging* it is about M. C. Smit.

When I began my study of history at the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam in September, 1981, the small sub-faculty was still in deep mourning because of the death of Professor Dr. Meijer C. Smit two weeks earlier at the age of 69. The esteem with which people spoke of him made it clear that a great scholar had passed away. The announcement was made by *doctorandus*<sup>3</sup> A. J. van Dijk during a session of the course Encyclopedia of Historiography.

Though posthumously, this was my initial introduction to M. C. Smit. However, somehow the above course did not help me retain that strong impression of this initial (posthumous) contact. The syllabus we had to acquire was not a systematic introduction to the place and environment of the historiography so much as it was an introduction to the search pilgrimage of the maestro. It was a pilgrimage after the essence and meaning of history with imprecise defined excursions into all sorts of related themes past and present. Captivating, but at the same time difficult to grasp for a first-year student, let alone work with.

It was not until the end of my undergraduate studies that I returned to Smit's work. I found his inaugural oration, "The Divine Secret in History"<sup>4</sup> magnificent. From there on my interest in his publications, which were very few, were aroused and developed. There is a dissertation, an inaugural lecture and a compilation of various articles, some of which were published during his life but most of them posthumously. In 1987, some of his students compiled the bundle *The First and Second History*,<sup>5</sup> comprising the writings he left unpublished. This is the most important book from which

---

<sup>3</sup>"*Doctorandus*" is a Dutch degree for one who has completed all requirements for a doctorate, except the dissertation. She is "doctoring."

<sup>4</sup>Actual title: "*Het goddelijk geheim in de geschiedenis.*"

<sup>5</sup>Actual title: *De eerste en tweede geschiedenis.*

we become acquainted with Smit as a philosopher of history. A comparable but wider bundle appeared in North America.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Genuinely Christian Scholarship***

Smit was a classic representative of Kuyperian Reformed culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was born the son of a farmer in Haastrecht and grew up in a Kuyperian milieu. His early life destined him for the VU, where he enrolled in 1932 and came under the influence of the work of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. He especially loved listening to Dooyeweerd's lectures. The philosophical stamp that he received here remained recognizable in his later scholarship.

Smit combined his philosophical interest with the historical. His interest in history was further aroused by professors A. A. van Schelven and A. Goslinga. After World War II, he passed his *doctorandus* exam in history under H. Smitskamp, under whom he subsequently obtained his doctorate as well in 1950. However, the subject was more philosophical than historical, the title of his dissertation being *De Verhouding van Christendom en Historie in de huidige Rooms-Katholieke geschiedbeschouwing*.<sup>7</sup> This book established his reputation as an expert in the Roman Catholic philosophy of his day, resorting to leading figures like Jacques Maritain and Maurice Blondel.

---

<sup>6</sup>An internet search produces the following: M. C. Smit (author), H. D. Morton and H. Van Dyke (eds.). *Towards a Christian Conception of History*, 2002. An Amazon summary: "Toward a Christian Conception of History presents the harvest of his scholarly output. The relation between God and history and the problems inherent in articulating that relation in a manner consistent with historic Christian belief and modern ideas of historical existence is the central theme of Smit's writing. Smit discusses the influence of one's world view on the practice and appreciation of history, the significance of the question of the meaning of history as an answer to the a-historical-mindedness of our time, and the fundamental flaw of the modernist theory of knowledge and philosophy of science."

<sup>7</sup>An English title might be *The Relationship between Christianity and History in Contemporary Roman Catholic historiography*.

For some years he served as Librarian at the Abraham Kuyper Institute, the research bureau of the Anti-Revolutionary Party,<sup>8</sup> after which he was appointed in 1955 as professor in medieval history and the philosophy of history. With this, Smit was assigned to cover part of the teaching loads of both Goslinga and Van Schelven. Already in his dissertation he had indicated that “Christian scholarship for me is not a mere slogan but reality.” It was in this spirit that he began his work. Since then, his work assignment was changed twice. In 1964 the disciplines of Philosophy of History was added and in 1972, due to the sickness of professor Zuidema, he also took on medieval and contemporary Roman Catholic philosophy.

All these shifts in his assignments forced a broad range of subjects on him. He read much and wide. Nevertheless, his work gives evidence of remarkable continuity. In this thought he keeps circling around a few fundamental questions in the philosophy of history. He already formed these questions in his 1950 dissertation. In his defense, he characteristically described his mandate in these words, “The primary task for a Christian approach to historiography is a dual one. On the one hand, the scholar must give an account of the religious orientation of historical reality. On the other, he must engage in critical research in the influence that the denial or ignoring of the lack of self-sufficiency of history has on the practice of historiography.” This grew into Smit’s entire philosophical programme. On the one hand, there was the research journey into the nature of this religious orientation of history. On the other, critique of the thinkers and schools of thought who maintained that history is an autonomous process that can be explained from within itself. These were the central questions in the syllabus that fell into my (Roel Kuiper’s) hands in 1981.

---

<sup>8</sup>Original names of these two entities: “Abraham Kuyper Stichting” and “Anti-Revolutionaire Partij.” The term “Anti-Revolutionary” refers not to opposition to revolution in general, but exclusively to the French Revolution which was seen as anti-God, which, of course, it was, but for the good reason of an oppressive church. The Kuyperian movement of which all of this was a part, does not reject the notion of revolution in general, but recognizes that there may be a need for it under severe circumstances. The labour unions within this movement will occasionally call for strikes if that is the only way to overcome unfair working situations. It has happened in Canada. Now you’re curious, I bet.

## ***Unity and Connectedness***

Without a doubt, Smit was in one way or another existentially smitten by these questions. Might the sermons of the Amsterdam preacher S. G. de Graaf have influenced this orientation perhaps? Smit speaks somewhere of the deep influence this Reformed preacher had on his thoughts. And indeed, in his preaching and writings De Graaf saw God closely involved in the concrete world events with history having a direct religious significance. This was also the case with Smit. In his approach to this question, Smit made use of the transcendental philosophy of Dooyeweerd, who posited that reality is not self-sufficient but through and through religious. In the work of Smit, Dooyeweerdian concepts such as origin, transcendental relationships and meaning are given key functions.

All of this is especially noticeable in his inaugural address, which is undoubtedly the most important of his lectures and which underwent a second printing in *De eerste en tweede geschiedenis*. With historians as his target audience, in his book *Het Goddelijk geheim in de geschiedenis* Smit occupies himself with developing new ground for those who continue to speak of God's presence in history. Among Christian historians speaking about God's hand in history had yielded disappointing results. The inductive method employed in modern historiography left little room for a consideration of God's work in history. Smit observed that there remained place only for a fragmentary understanding of God's activity, while history itself was essentially to be understood as an autonomous process, surrounded by causal relationships.

Smit broadened the discussion by positing that God is the pulsating ground of all events, the ever present actor and indeed the secret of world history. Humanity is taken up into the transcendent relationship; it is anchored, safe, secure in God and cannot be fully defined in terms of intra-mundane relationships. Here we find an interpretation of Dooyeweerd's concept of the transcendent heart as the secret of humanity. The denial of this sure security of humanity in God means that meaning is lacking when interpreting history. Human freedom and responsibility reside in that relationship with the Transcendent. Thus is humanity indeed in essence a

*responding* creature. But there is more: God Himself is also present in the orderings and facts of history. The unity and cohesion or connectedness in history are the work of God, but how we must imagine this remains unknowable in principle, a divine secret.

### ***Eerste en tweede geschiedenis***<sup>9</sup>

The quarter century following this beautiful inaugural illustrates the search pilgrimage of the professor for further interpretation and clarification of what has been said here so far. They became years of much reading, lecturing and discussion, but few publications. In 1970 Smit came up with a typewritten document that circulated among students and in which he gives his own vision under the title *Beschouwingen over de geschiedenis en de tijd der geschiedenis*<sup>10</sup> This is an important document in which the distinction between “first: and “second” history is first introduced.

The first or primary history is the connection between all that exists with its origin, with God. Historical reality is taken up in this and permanently defined. It is this first history that establishes connectedness and gives things their historical identity, the normative that constantly crystallizes itself, that continues to anchor and repeatedly establishes anew the meaning of the facts and events.

The second history is the history in which the response or answers emerge from that first history. It can exist only as a correlate to that first history. It is the history that we see daily with its struggle, striving and conflict, which can be understood, according to Smit, only in the light of the first history. How this perspective on history as “channel of meaning” precisely must be made operational within historiography remains an open question. Smit himself continued to search for further scholarly clarification of this foundational scheme and hardly had the time for moving beyond this.

The philosophical questions that are associated with the proposition of a first and second history have still not been clarified. In this article we lack

---

<sup>9</sup>See footnote 5.

<sup>10</sup>This title could be translated as “Considerations about History and the Time of History.”

the room to delve into this further. Nevertheless, it is a unique and neat proposal that the first history, which is fully history, must be regarded as a *relationship* to its origin. That spares us from a platonizing as well as from a relativizing perspective on what is transcendent in history. It would be worthwhile to relate this depiction to the relational and dialogical moment of the human and creation that is repeatedly emphasized in Jewish philosophy. Indeed, history is the response of humans to a situation that did not originate with them. That is the secret of history and the challenge, not to say calling, to us humans. Gradually did Meijer C. Smit, the searching maestro of Christian historiography, open our eyes to that secret and that challenge.