Hendrik van Riessen (1911–2000): An Introduction

Steve Bishop

Van Riessen's work provides a level of achievement that to date has failed to be as generally appreciated as it deserves, and constitutes a model of informed reflection that I can only aspire to emulate.
Carl Mitcham[1]

Abstract: Hendrik van Riessen was a prominent figure in Christian philosophy of technology and one of the first to analyse technology as a human activity. He challenged common misconceptions about technology, exposing the myth of technological neutrality, and emphasising the importance of human responsibility in its development. His work examines the complex relationship between freedom and authority; he advocated for a balanced societal structure based on sphere sovereignty. Van Riessen's insights on technology as a field of human responsibility guided by the command to love God and our neighbours offer a Christian perspective on the ethical implications of technological advancement.

1. Introduction

The development of a philosophy of technology only really began to take shape in the early twentieth century. A key figure in this development was Dr Ir.[2] Hendrik van Riessen (1911–2000), who pioneered a Christian philosophy of technology. At the time, few were interested in technology from a theological or philosophical view—two notable exceptions were Jacques Ellul[3] and Martin Heidegger.[4] Both had a largely negative stance towards technique and technology. In contrast, van Riessen saw the creational value of technology. This article provides a brief introduction to his work and serves as an introduction to a new translation of his "Creation and Science"—first, some biographical details.

2. Biography

Hendrik van Riessen, one of the second generation of reformational scholars,[5] was born on 17 August 1911 in Bloemendaal. His home life fostered in him a respect for books and learning. There he learned an appreciation for Abraham Kuyper:

> Among the valuable principles that Kuyper instilled in his like-minded followers was the insight that religion has an integral significance for all of life. Likewise, those followers inherited from Kuyper a deep respect for science and books in general.[6]

1 Carl Mitcham, "Placing Technology In Religious-Philosophical Perspective: A Dialogue Among Traditions." *Philosophia Reformata* 75 (2010) 1: 10–35.

2 Ir indicates an Engineer.

3 Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. tr. John Wilkinson. (New York: Vintage, 1964).

4 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in *Basic Writings*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977).

5 The first generation of reformational scholars would be Herman Dooyeweerd, D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, and Antheunis Janse. The second generation would comprise Van Riessen, K. J. Popma, S. U. Zuidema, and J. P. A. Mekkes.

This Kuyperian spirit shaped Van Riessen's approach to the fields he later developed, including technology, philosophy, politics, and society.

He attended the Christian Lyceum in Harlem, and upon completing his exams, he pursued engineering studies in Delft. He lamented, "In lectures, I increasingly noticed that they were making me into an engineer without any connection to my identity as a Christian. I couldn't tolerate that."[7]

At Delft he came into contact with the work of Klaas Schilder (1890–1952) and S. G. de Graaf (1889–1955),[8] but it was the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven that captivated him the most.[9] Consequently, he studied philosophy at the Free University in Amsterdam under Vollenhoven's guidance.

Before the Second World War, he worked for Bell Telephone in Antwerp. During the Nazi occupation[10] of the Netherlands, he became an active participant in the Underground Movement, overseeing communications for the resistance movement. His efforts led to imprisonment by the Gestapo on two occasions.[11] As Vlot and Griffioen observed:

> He rose to the top of the National Organization for Aid to Undercover Agents in North Holland and became closely involved with the National Combat Groups. In February 1944, he was captured: "A German stood behind me and said, 'Take a good look at the sun, because you will see it for the last time. You will be shot.' I said, 'Then I will be with the Lord Jesus tonight.' That thought had never occurred to me before, and I now know that the Holy Spirit gave it to me." He was miraculously released. He spoke sparingly about his role in the resistance, only intimates grasped what it meant to him.[12]

During the war he met his future wife, Hermien van Dongen Torman. They were married on 16 August 1945, as Van Riessen remarked, it was "one day before my birthday, so as not to forget. Well, I've almost always forgotten that day."

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6 G. Puchinger, "Dr Ir. H Van Riessen", *Perspectief: Feestbundel van de jongeren bij het vijfentwintig jarig bestaan van de Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeere*. (Kampen: J H Kok, 1961), 164.

7 Cited in Ad Vlot and Sander Griffioen "Hendrik Van Rissen in Memoriam", *Philosophia Reformata* 65 (2000): 121–125.

8 On de Graaf see, H. T. Wendt, *S. G. de Graaf: Life, Influences, Theology*. (Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 2020). On Schilder see, J. Geertsema, ed. *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teaching of Dr Klaas Schilder*. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995). Rudolf van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*. Trans. by Theodore Plantinga. (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990).

9 G. Puchinger "Dr Ir. H. Van Riessen", *Perspectif,* 191.

10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Dutch_resistance_members Date of access 17 June 2024.

11 He was one of the editors of *Het Grote Gebod: gedenkboek van het verzet in LO en LKP,* vol. 2, (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij H.J. Kok, 1979). This was written to document the history of the resistance in the National Organisation for Assistance to People in Hiding (LO) and the National Knokploegen (LKP) during the German occupation, with a special aim to commemorate those who fell in this resistance.

12 Vlot and Griffioen, "Hendrik Van Riessen In Memoriam".

In 1940 he gave a lecture to the Association for Calvinist Philosophy. [13] Dooyeweerd was impressed and encouraged him to study for a doctorate. Consequently, during 1946–1949 he studied for his doctorate at the VU Amsterdam, under Vollenhoven and G. J. Sizoo (1900–1994).[14] After being awarded his doctorate in 1949 he took up a post as professor of Calvinistic philosophy at the Technological Institutes in Delft and Eindhoven.

At his inauguration as professor of Calvinistic Philosophy at Delft in 1951, he outlined his approach:

> The path to the philosophy of technology is long and arduous. I am aware that I am still close to the beginning. What I expect from you is that you walk this path with me. If you take the trouble to walk this undoubtedly difficult path as far as possible, you will eventually find that you have not only served yourself but also served technology. I will try to contribute to ensuring that technology gains your affection, and by ensuring that more than just technology finds a place in your heart.
>
> If I could lead you to knowledge of philosophy, even to philosophizing itself, much would be gained. But more is achieved if, in this way, the awareness of the breadth and depth of the responsibility that you, as engineers, will bear, comes to your mind and never leaves.[15]

When Vollenhoven retired in 1963, van Riessen took up the vacant chair of systematic philosophy at the VU. A student of van Riessen, Henk Geertsema, comments:

> In a way one could say his main task at the VU was to teach the philosophy of Dooyeweerd. I think it is important he did this in his own way, not just having some differences in relation to Dooyeweerd, but in principle every part of Dooyeweerd's philosophy was open for discussion. Although he had his own view, he was not dogmatic about Dooyeweerd in any sense, he could even admit sometimes that his own interpretation was wrong. That open approach had a very positive effect: people did not reject Dooyeweerd because he was taught in a dogmatic way.[16]

At the VU he supervised the doctorates of James Olthuis (1968), Elaine Botha (1971), Egbert Schuurman (1972), Danie Straus (1973), Jaap H. Santema (1978), Onno Zijlstra (1982), and Bas Kee (1982).[17]

He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Potchefstroom in 1979, much to the alarm of the VU's Council[18] as it could have been seen as an endorsement of apartheid. Van Riessen had previously visited and lectured at Potchefstroom in 1975.[19] Elsewhere outside of the

13 H. Van Riessen, "Herinneringen, een Zelfportet". The lecture may have been: "De Werkelijkheid in den Toren," *Correspondentiebladen* 6 (1941) 4: 81-82.

14 Sizoo was the first professor of physics at the VU Amsterdam (from 1930 to 1965). From 1965 he was chair of the board of directors.

15 Cited in G. Puchinger, "Dr Ir. H Van Riessen," 168.

16 Henk Geertsema, message on Reformational Scholarship Discussion List 18 June 2024.

17 Vlot and Griffioen. "Hendrik Van Riessen In Memoriam."

18 A.Th. Van Deursen, *The Distinctive Character of the Free University in Amsterdam 1880-2005. A Commemorative History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 339.

19 Hendrik. Van Riessen, 1976. "The University as it is and as it Ought to Be." In *Christian Higher Education: The Contemporary Challenge, Proceedings of the First International Conference for*

Netherlands, he was the main speaker at three of the Unionville "Christian Perspective" camps in Toronto.[20] These lectures were influential in providing a foundation for the desire in North America for a Christian Higher Education Institution. He also visited the UK several times under the auspices of the International Association for Reformed Faith and Action (IARFA), including lectures at All Souls Church House, Langham Place, in January 1974 and at Leeds in February of the same year. He was also the lecturer at an IARFA Conference at Coleg Trefeca[21] in the Brecon Beacons (Bannau Brycheiniog) in Wales.

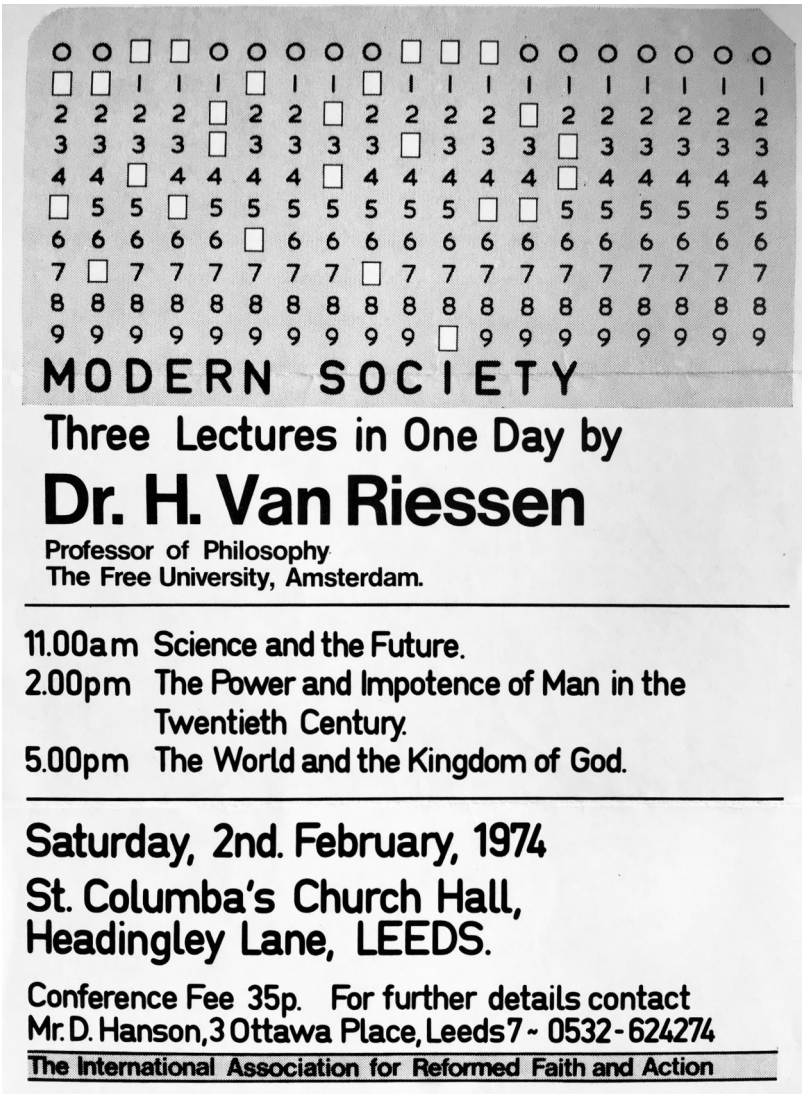


Figure 1. Advertisement for Van Riessen's lecture in Leeds, UK under the auspices of IARFA. The image at the top shows a computer punch card.

In 1976 he revisited North America and lectured at Dordt College, Reformed Bible Seminary, Trinity, Calvin College, and the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS).[22] His lectures at the ICS

Christian Scholarship, Potchefstroom, 9-13 Sept. 1975. (Potchefstroom: Institute for the Advancement of Calvinism, 1976) 29–43.

20 Hendrik Van Riessen, "The Relation of the Bible to Science." *Christian Perspectives* 1960, 3–54. (Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing, 1960); "Philosophy." *Christian Perspectives* 1962, 73–131. (Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing; 1963). "The University and Its Basis." *Christian Perspectives* 1962. (Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing, 1962).

21 This was the home of Howell Harris (1714–1773), a Calvinistic Methodist leader.

22 Mark Okkema, "Van Riessen Lectures at ICS", *Perspective* 10 (1976) 7: 1–3.

focused on “What is Man?” “How to Philosophize” and “The Power and Powerlessness of Modern Man.”

Gerrit Glas, a student of van Riessen’s in 1981, said of him:

> What I learned from van Riessen was to put transcendental critique to practice ... We had to read one book every two weeks, each week one of the students (or couple of students) had to summarize the book, give an analysis of its philosophical (conceptual, logical, argumentative) strengths and weaknesses, let the analysis amount into an internal critique (i.e., analysis of inner contradictions), and then formulate a hypothesis about the obvious and/or hidden presuppositions behind the text. This transcendental approach (working your way from within to the implicit and explicit supratheoretical points of view) could then be followed by an external (transcendent) criticism, based on the student’s own convictions.[23]

“One distinctive feature was his inseparable pipe,” note Vlot and Griffioen.[24]

Although not much of van Riessen’s work is in English, a 30-page bibliography, compiled by L. D. Derksen, exemplifies his voluminous output in Dutch.[25] In what follows I will outline some of his key works published in English.

3. Key works

On Technology

Van Riessen’s doctoral dissertation was published as *Filosophie en Techniek* by J.H. Kok in Kampen. His first published paper was on the philosophy of technology and published in 1938 in *Philosophia Reformata,”*[26] this was followed by "De structuur der techniek" in 1961.[27]

In his 1961 article, he laments the lack of studies on technology and identifies several misunderstandings of technology: that technology is economic in nature, that technology is a science, and that technology is applied science. He also notes the polarisation of views on technology:

> Optimists like Dessauer expect from technology what it can never provide. Pessimists, such as Spengler, ascribe to technology, as a threat to our civilization, qualities which it does not possess. And it doesn't stop there. For while one sees it as

23 Gerrit Glas, message on Reformational Scholarship Discussion List 16 June 2024.

24 Vlot and Griffioen, “Hendrik Van Rissen in Memoriam”. David Hanson notes that “Henk began smoking a pipe at 14 years old. Henk told me that he had hardly ever had a pipe out of his mouth (except when eating) other than during his two imprisonments by the Gestapo.” Reformational Scholarship Discussion List 15 June 2024.

25 L. D. Derksen, *Bibliografie H. van Riessen*. (Filosofisch Instituut V.U., 1978).

26 “Philosophie der techniek.” *Phi1osophia Reformata* 3 (1938) 3: 202-224.

27 “De structuur der techniek.” *Philosophia Reformata* 26 (1961) 1: 114-130. An updated version was later published in English in Van Riessen, H., 1979. “The structure of technology” was translated into English by Donald Morton, *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 2: 196–313 (my thanks to Calvin Jongsma for making this available to me).

a scapegoat, the other (e.g. Rickert) regards it as only a means or as a territory without human responsibility (e.g. Jaspers).[28]

Van Riessen sees the strengths of technology in its potential to create and develop potentialities within creation and in offering fresh avenues for innovation and progress. On the other hand, it can cause social bondage, through forms of organisation and standardisation; it also provides limited and restricted freedom as it imposes restraints on individuals. Misconceptions and superficial analyses can lead to unfounded judgments regarding its nature and impact. It seems to promise much but often fails to deliver. He rightly contends that a critical examination of its nature and impact is necessary.

He rejects the idea of the neutrality and autonomy of technology. Technology is a field of human responsibility; it cannot be used independently of God. Responsibility in freedom has to guide technology. The true meaning of technology is the development of the creation to the honour and glory of God. We are commanded to love God and to love our neighbour; hence the development of technology is to be used in the service of our neighbour.

Society of the Future (1957)

This is the first major work of van Riessen's to be published in English. He states in the Preface, "The motif elaborated in this book is the conflict between freedom and security."[29] He reflects on the future—but not as a forecast, but to clarify the present.[30] He aims to investigate the organised structures of society, which he defines as everything excluding the state and church.

He examines several utopias, including those of Plato, Thomas More, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and the lesser-known Bellamy's (1850-1898) *Looking Backwards*. He also discusses twentieth-century works such as *Brave New World* and *1984*. Van Riessen points out that "The truth of sin and grace are the Achilles heel of all utopias." He then addresses the balance of authority and freedom and Kuyper's sphere sovereignty. These he sees as important biblical principles for healthy societal relationships. He makes some important points as he responds to common objections and misconceptions about sphere sovereignty, asserting that "Sphere sovereignty is a principle, a guidepost at the beginning of the history of humanity. It has to be brought into practice, unfolded, in the course of history."[31]

In the chapter on "The history of Western society", he examines individualism and collectivism, capitalism and socialism, identifying their strengths. He views the efforts to change society by revolution or evolution as "the great error of our age."[32]

He makes an interesting observation, "The nineteenth century is, in a social sense, the century of economics. Money is the measure and value of everything." He argues that this economism was replaced by "strong organization as the dominating tendency in society."[33]

28 "De structuur der techniek." *Philosophia Reformata* 26 (1961) 1: 114.

29 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 14.

30 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 19.

31 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 74.

32 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 109.

33 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 110.

He concludes: “The nineteenth century is distorted in an economic sense, the twentieth in an organocratic sense.”[34]

Inevitably, as a philosopher of technology, he examines technology. He again stresses that the notion of technology as a neutral activity is false. He takes care to distinguish between science and technology. In particular, he disagrees that technology is merely applied science.

He poses the question, “What is science to do with ... freedom?” concluding, “*Freedom is a fundamental limitation of science.*”[35] He is aware of the limitations of science, and the consequences of ignoring these limits. A deterministic conception of science leaves no place for a God involved in history. Such a view leads to atheism. Science should not be used as a tool for a select few to control society: “… a science that exceeds its limits is the necessary preparatory condition for a modern dictator who exceeds the limits of power.”[36]

He offers a pertinent warning, science may initially respect human diversity and freedom, however, its application eradicates diversity and undermines human freedom. Likewise, if psychology and sociology are regarded as all-embracing sciences of humanity and society, then they threaten human freedom.[37]

In many ways, this book is largely a defence of Kuyper’s sphere sovereignty. Van Riessen argues that society faces a crisis; a crisis marked by the disintegration of human values and increased secularism. The tension between authority and freedom has caused societal strain. The society of the future may be characterised by nihilism and collectivism. Secularisation, as seen in the loss or neglect of the Christian faith, has eroded human values and paved the way for nihilism. The remedy, he suggests, is a restoration of Christian faith and values to counter the de-Christianisation of society. There needs to be a balance between authority and freedom, this can be achieved through the adoption of sphere sovereignty.

Summarising his work Van Riessen comments:

> It was a plea for the free responsibility of the ordinary man and his small communities, and against the growing state power, the idea of the welfare state. In that lies the expectation that the state can take care of everything. At its core, this is the robbery of people and their communities and organizations of their free responsibility. It is also the denial of sovereignty in their own sphere, which is the independence according to their own nature of, for example, state and business, or church and family, in relation to each other. Kuyper recognized this sovereignty in the reality, Dooyeweerd much later laid the foundation for it, the argument, in the theory of the modal aspects of reality. This concerns the own nature of the state, the law, or of the business, the economic, or of the church, the faith. These modal aspects are irreducible to each other. That is the argument for the independence of the state and the business in relation to each other, or such in the relationship of church and family.[38]

34 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 115.

35 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 124–italics in original.

36 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 129.

37 Van Riessen. *Society of the Future*, 130.

38 Van Riessen. “Herinneringen, een Zelfportet,” 79.

Nietzsche (1960)

This was originally part of the Dutch series Modern Thinkers, edited by S. U. Zuiedma. The English edition was part of the International Library of Philosophy and Theology. Van Riessen writes out of a respect for Nietzsche the thinker, while acknowledging he stands in complete contrast to Christianity and van Riessen's own views. Nietzsche took humanism to its ultimate conclusion. As van Riessen astutely observes:

> Nietzsche threw overboard this ballast of humanism, and he pushed ahead to what he took to be the essence of humanism: the living man, who is himself self-sufficient, who makes the law *himself*, who *himself* is sovereign.[39]

And

> Nietzsche proclaimed the man, who maintains *himself* as sovereign over against Christ who preached a *lost* humanity, a humanity whose salvation is possible only through His crucifixion and resurrection. Rationalism camouflages the choice facing modern man; positivism ignores it, Nietzsche faces it squarely. He comes to an open confrontation of the arch-enemy of the idea of an independent and sovereign humanity which can save itself. He puts himself in a position of opposition to Jesus, though he sometimes seems to respect him. Until the end of his life he fought him implacably, though this Jesus was in the deepest sense a riddle to Nietzsche.[40]

Van Riessen writes in an attempt to understand Nietzsche's own standpoint and how he came to adopt it. In doing so he shows how Nietzsche's distaste for Christianity is understandable. Van Riessen is able to understand Nietzsche and show how his arguments ultimately fail, as must any atheist's arguments against God.

Nietzsche realised that there are no objective facts, no brute facts, but only interpreted facts. Van Riessen argues that Nietzsche's "works are primarily the residue, the deposit, from a terrible spiritual struggle. And the hopelessness of this struggle certainly helped bring about his insanity" ... "sickness has peeled off the protective covering of this man, who neither conceived nor wished any possible course of action than to glorify man: to glorify himself. That was his religion."[41]

He also explores the question as to why Nietzsche had such a low view of Christianity:

> How did it come about, then, that Nietzsche had such a perverted idea of Jesus, of Paul, and of Christianity? It must be remembered, in the first place, that the Christianity with which Nietzsche came in contact had little to do with religion, at least in most of its followers. It had become, as Nietzsche himself says, nothing more than a meek moralism, in which aquiescence [sic] and modesty had been given divine status. God, freedom, immortality, had given way to amiability and a reasonable disposition; and men believed that these governed the whole cosmos. Only an adulterated form of religion remained, which was honored simply as tradition.

39 Van Riessen. N*ietzsche*, 10.

40 Van Riessen. N*ietzsche*, 10–11.

41 Van Riessen. N*ietzsche*, 14.

> It is understandable that this sham irritated Nietzsche and that he thus rejected Christianity. But he went on to project this sham and pretense on to the whole history of Christianity, so that he would be able to explain the decadence of his time by the decadence of Christianity. That is to say, religion was also a sham for earlier Christians, just as it is in these days; but this sham was finally unmasked and exposed, and the result is the present decadence of culture.[42]

He concludes his study of Nietzsche with this profound statement:

> Nietzsche wandered to the edge of the abyss, but he walked there with his eyes wide open. Much worse is the decadence of those who wander there with their eyes closed, or those who think they can avoid the problem by taking a safe way far from the chasm. For them, God does not exist even as a problem, and Jesus is not even worth attacking.[43]

The Relation of the Bible to Science (1960)

These lectures were delivered in September 1958 to the first Association for Reformed Scientific Studies Conference in Unionville, Canada. Van Riessen's lecture "The Relation of the Bible to Science" was published in Christian Perspectives 1960. He begins by stressing that by science he has in view something broader than the natural sciences but includes all forms of scholarship and learning. In it he develops the view that science is never neutral and that it is determined by faith, hence the need for a Christian approach to science. The belief in the autonomy and superiority of human theoretical thought has its roots in the Enlightenment and in scholasticism. A more modern form of this autonomy theory is found in positivism. Hence, Van Riessen takes time to examine positivism, with its assumed faith in progress. He shows that it is undermined by the notion that there are no bare facts. The positivists' emphasis is on facts only and yet we arrive at them by selection and interpretation, the scientists is involved and the scientist determines the starting point. The failure of positivism then led to pragmatism; the notion that if science works it is true. Modern theories of science, such as relativity, quantum physics, and the uncertainty principle, have given rise to a crisis. A crisis, as van Riessen states, is not a crisis of science but of the so-called objectivity and neutrality of science. As well as a crisis, we have secularisation, there is, allegedly, no room for God. This is a consequence of science seen as neutral, self-sufficient, independent and superior to all else. He comments that:

> The twentieth century believes in redemption by applied science in a planned society. Christ or science: that is the choice thrust upon us.[44]

His final lecture is on "Christian Faith and Science." For the Christian the aim of science is to understand the God-given laws that govern the creation. Here he also examines the limitations of science and unpacks the role of faith in science. One key point he makes is that freedom and responsibility is not determined by science, freedom is a presupposition to be believed in. The Bible, he states, is not a book of science, but science has no competence to decide what is true in the Bible.

42 Van Riessen. N*ietzsche*, 48.

43 Van Riessen. N*ietzsche*, 51.

44 Van Riessen. *The Relation of the Bible to Science,* 34.

Science is always guided and inspired by faith—a key question is not does faith play a part, but what kind of faith is guiding the scientist?

Philosophy (1962)

These three lectures were delivered at the third Association for Reformed Scientific Studies in August 1961. The lectures cover the goal of philosophy, philosophy and religion, and philosophy's basic ideas. He begins by stating philosophy is not an easy task. It is perceived as being difficult, and as being impractical, useless and difficult. Nevertheless, its concern for ultimate questions is important for Christians.

He examines logical positivism with its "stick to the facts and trust only the experience of facts" approach. He identifies a key problem with positivism: "how is it possible to start from facts and to arrive at a theory that contains knowledge of these facts?" Positivism provides little aid in identifying the goal of philosophy. He next turns to existentialism and finds little help there. He contends that

> *Philosophy is literally the love of wisdom and the philosopher is the friend of wisdom. The final goal of philosophy therefore is wisdom. The philosopher tries to become wise by means of philosophy.*[45]

Wisdom, he argues, has two important elements: insight and doing. Wisdom is understanding truth and acting in truth.[46] Understanding likewise has two elements: insight into what is and into what has to be done.[47]

He goes in to look at four objections regarding the usefulness of philosophy. The first: philosophy is not sufficient for wisdom. All sciences deal with an aspect of reality; whereas philosophy constructs a coherent map of the different sciences. The second: philosophy is redundant, as it is the Lord who gives wisdom. However, "the Bible … is not a coherent system of universally valid answers". Third: theology will suffice. But, he contends, "Theology needs philosophy and philosophy needs theology". Theology needs philosophy to be able to understand the coherent whole. Fourth: philosophy is concerned with final questions, questions which are unanswerable as they are final questions. Van Riessen comments that this view is "too congenial with rationalism to be true".

In the second lecture on "Philosophy and Religion", he poses the question how can philosophy find the road to the source of wisdom? How can it arrive at wisdom's truth? Thus philosophy is dependent on religion and faith.

Despite what some claim, philosophy is not, van Riessen contends, independent and autonomous. Immanence philosophy — philosophy that places its starting point in some aspect of creation — stands and falls with the autonomy of theoretical thought. For philosophy to be autonomous it must prove it can get to the truth about reality and it can arrive at truth without the use of something prescribed from outside man.[48] He shows that pure thought is impossible and any autonomy is imaginary. He concludes that everything, including philosophy, is of a religious character.

45 Van Riessen. *Philosophy*, 83—italics in the original.

46 Van Riessen. *Philosophy*, 84.

47 Van Riessen. *Philosophy*, 85.

48 Van Riessen. *Philosophy*, 100.

The third and final lecture explores some of philosophy's basic ideas. Law is the first basic idea of philosophy,[49] meaning is the second, sin and redemption the third. In these he clearly shows his debt to Dooyeweerd, even though at some important points he takes issue with Dooyeweerd.

As he states in *The University and its Basis*:

> Philosophy, the all embracing science, provides the background for the special sciences and is the field of the fundamental problems. It gives the general scientific approach to reality.[50]

The University and its Basis (1963)

This was the third series of lectures delivered by van Riessen at Unionville. The context was the desire for North Americans to have a Christian University. Van Riessen maintains:

> that the proper goal of the university must be the cultivation of the mind in order that the universally or philosophically trained man, having acquired the habit of the scholar, be formed.[51]

In these lectures he deals with the university, the institution where science and philosophy are studied. "The scientific training of the student is the true meaning of the university."

He provides eight points that sum up his view—it is worth quoting them here in full:

1. The university is the place for training in science.
2. This training should be performed in a learning community.
3. The object of university training is the student who is the reason for the existence of the university.
4. Investigation and research should be introduced to support and serve this training.
5. The inner purpose of the training of the student's mind is the building of a wise man or woman of culture who masters the tools of science.
6. For this purpose the approach to science ought to be both universal and special.
7. The external purpose should be the training for general leadership in society combined with training for a profession.
8. Study at the university is directional. The direction is mainly determined by the university, a faculty or the individual professor.[52]

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49 Van Riessen. *Philosophy*, 113.

50 Van Riessen, "The University and Its Basis." *Christian Perspectives 1962*. Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing, 1963. An updated version was edited by Keith Sewell. Victoria: Association for Christian Higher Education, 1997. Available online:

https://tukampendatastore.blob.core.windows.net/neocalvinism/allofliferedeemed/UB.pdf, subsequent page numbers are for this edition.

51 Van Riessen. *The University and its Basis*, 8.

52 Van Riessen. *The University and its Basis*, 13.

Sadly, he argues, the university has been replaced by an organisation, the general approach of science has been replaced by specialisation and a system of cramming has replaced the "liberal character of study."[53]

He concludes his lectures, after providing a history of the university, by calling for a distinctly Christian University. He wants to see a reconsideration of the foundations of the university, for it to be a place where faith and academic study and research can coexist and thus resist creeping secularisation.

"Creation and Science"

This is a paper presented to the Congress: Le Dieu créateur et notre foi [The Creator God and our Faith] in Paris, in March 1976, and published in French as "Création et science."[54]

It is published in this journal in English for the first time.

This was one of the last papers published by van Riessen and as such represents his mature thoughts.[55] In it, he covers some familiar themes and it provides an excellent summary of his approach. He explores the relationship between creation and science from a Christian perspective, making clear that science is a creation of God. Van Riessen delves into the limitations of science and underscores the role of philosophy in addressing questions that science cannot answer. He emphasises the importance of faith and dependence on God as essential elements in navigating the complexities of science and society, even though at times van Riessen seems to confuse anticipations of the pistic mode with faith.[56]

Worldview questions

In an attempt to summarise van Riessen's approach we can see how he would respond to some of the key questions that shape a world-and-life view.

Where are we?

In God's good, ordered creation. We are in the period between the cross and resurrection of Jesus and his return.

Who are we?

We are God's creation, created to rule and cultivate the creation in honour of God. Humans are moulders of the society of the future. Humanity's uniqueness within the creation is the freedom–power which is humanity's cultural mode of being.

What's wrong?

Secularisation, the de-Christianisation of society, leads to nihilism. The diminishing influence of Christianity on society is a cause of the problem. There is a disruption of balance between authority and freedom. There is a disintegration of human values and a loss of connection with our historical roots.

53 Van Riessen. *The University and its Basis*, 14.

54 "Création et science." *La Revue Réformée* 27 (1976) 3: 117-127.

55 He continued to contribute to the Dutch magazine *Beweging* until 1978.

56 I am grateful to Chris Gousmett for drawing my attention to this.

What's the remedy?

A biblical understanding of human dignity is needed. This will provide a balance between authority and freedom. He sees the importance of reaffirming the Christian faith and values. This he sees as the only remedy for society. The loss of faith and the de-Christianisation of society needs to be addressed.

What then of the influence of van Riessen, how has his approach been appreciated?

3. The Ongoing influence of van Riessen

Perhaps the most significance influence van Riessen has had is on two of his doctoral students, Egbert Schuurman and Danie Strauss. Schuurman has taken up van Riessen's mantle, offering a critique of the scientific-technical culture and provides a call to focus on the "spiritual-historical background of technological culture."

Schuurman succeeded van Riessen as professor of Calvinistic Philosophy at Delft; Schuurman's successor was Marc J. de Vries.[57] In an article in *Philosophia Reformata,* de Vries wrote about van Riessen's work in the philosophy of technology.[58] Volume 75 (1) of *Philosophia Reformata* was devoted to van Riessen:

> The content of this issue makes clear that van Riessen's work is appreciated not only in reformational philosophy circles, but also by many philosophers outside this tradition. Van Riessen wrote his reflections on technology in a time when the philosophy of technology was still in its infancy. Although language barriers caused his work to be underappreciated for a long time, there is now a rediscovery of the importance of his work. It is the intention of the editors of Philosophia Reformata that this issue will contribute to that.

Danie Strauss, another of van Riessen's students, is one of the most prolific Dooyeweerdian writers. His personal website contains over 330 academic articles.[59] Strauss taught philosophy at Redeemer University College where he also served as director of the Dooyeweerd Centre. He is general editor of the Collected Works of Dooyeweerd.[60]

De Vries, along with Marteen Verkerk, Jan Hoogland, and Jan van der Strop, published *Philosophy of Technology*, drawing upon the work of van Riessen and Schuurman and bringing them into conversation with several other key philosophers of technology.

Regarding van Riessen, Haaksma comments:

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57 Maarten Verkerk, Jan Hoogland, Jan Van der Stoep, and Marc J. De Vries, *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction for Technology and Business Students*. Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2016. De Vries describes himself as Van Riessen's "spiritual grandson." Originally Ad Vlot was to take up the post, but sadly he died before he could do so.

58 De Vries, Marc J. (2010). Introducing Van Riessen's work in the philosophy of technology. *Philosophia Reformata* 75 (1):2.

59 https://daniestrauss.com. Date of access 18 June 2024.

60 Like van Riessen, Strauss took issue with Dooyeweerd's version of the *Gegenstand*. See, for example, D.F.M. Strauss, 1984. "An analysis of the structure of analysis (The *Gegenstand*-relation in discussion)." *Philosophia Reformata*, 49 (184) 1:35–56 and H. Van Riessen, H. 1970. *Wijsbegeerte*. Kampen: Kok, pp. 110-138

> The reception of *Filosofie en Techniek* [van Riessen (1949] was therefore not as good as one would expect based on the quality of the work. What reasons can be given for this very mediocre reception? Perhaps the Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea, which had provided support for the development of the author's analysis of the structure of technology, was still a hindrance to the reception of this work by the public outside that circle. And yet it was also intended for them because it contained a message even for engineers and philosophers who did not adhere to this philosophy.[61]

The misunderstanding, maligning of Reformational philosophy and ignorance towards it have certainly hampered awareness and acceptance of van Riessen's work. Haaksma also suggests, "It may also be the case that the field of technology is still unfamiliar to most practitioners of philosophy."[62] However, the philosophical climate has slowly changed, and the philosophy of technology is becoming a recognised area of research.

Indicative of this change is a series of lectures begun in 2006 at Delft University of Technology in remembrance of van Riessen. Carl Mitcham, one of the foremost philosophers of technology alive today, gave the inaugural Hendrik van Riessen Memorial Lecture. [63] Other lecturers included Bronislaw Szerszynski,[64] and Paulo Ribeiro.[65]

Conclusion

In his "Herinneringen, een Zelfportret" [Reflections: a self-portrait] Van Riessen concludes with the following, which is worth quoting here:

> Just something to conclude about the reformational philosophy. The problem, of course, was what significance the Bible should have in that philosophy. Vollenhoven had no problem with that. He allowed the Bible to speak in his philosophy. Dooyeweerd viewed it differently. He had concluded from the text "He has also set eternity in the human heart (Eccl. 3:11)" that the heart is eternal, beyond time. At a meeting, a minister said that Dooyeweerd had misinterpreted that text. Another minister contested the first with a different interpretation. Dooyeweerd then decided never to use a text again. Was the Bible then closed to him? Certainly not, but he believed the main issue was captured in the biblical ground motive: creation, fall, and redemption. Also, the future perspective, the sanctification by the Holy Spirit,

61 H. W. H. Haaksma, "De Oorspronkelijkheid Van Het Werk Van H. Van Riessen: Deel II—De Actuele Betekenis van Zijn Werk." *Philosophia Reformata* 16 (1997) 2: 166–191. **(Haaksma 1997, 174)**

62 Op. cit.

63 Carl Mitcham, "Placing Technology In Religious-Philosophical Perspective: A Dialogue Among Traditions." *Philosophia Reformata* 75 (2010) 1: 10–35.

64 Second Van Riessen Memorial Lecture: "Technology And Monotheism: A Dialogue With Neo-Calvinist Philosophy" *Philosophia Reformata* 75 (2010) 1: 43–59.

65 Third Van Riessen Memorial Lecture: "Why Christian philosophy can make a difference for engineering practice: the case of smart grid technology." Unpublished, but a version is available here:

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/some-philosophical-considerations-regarding-design-smart-ribeiro-ag04f/

> was sometimes added. That is, of course, the heart of the faith. The coming of the Kingdom could also be added.[66]

Van Riessen has provided significant contributions to the field of Christian philosophy of technology, science, philosophy, and society. He challenged conventional views on technology, rejecting the notion that it is neutral. He emphasised the ethical implications and human responsibility for its role in opening up the creation. His insights into the intersection of Christianity and technological progress offer a perspective that resonates in contemporary discussions on the societal impact of technology. By advocating for an approach guided by biblical principles and a commitment to serving others, van Riessen's legacy serves as a useful foundation for further reflection on the role of technology in shaping our world.

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66 Van Riessen, “Herinneringen, een Zelfportret,” 95.

English Publications of Hendrik van Riessen

1955

"Modern Society in the Light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ." In L. Coenen, ed., International Association for Reformed Faith and Action. Detmold (1955) 92-115.

1957

The Society of the Future. Philadelphia: P&R.

"The Church and the Social Problem." *Christianity Today* 1 (1957) 21: 3-5.

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"The Relation of the Bible to Science." *Christian Perspectives 1960*: 3-54. Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing (1960).

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"Philosophy." *Christian Perspectives 1962*: 73-131. Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing, 1962.

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"The University and Its Basis." *Christian Perspectives 1962*. Pella, Iowa: Pella Publishing, 1963.

"Student and Professor." *Focus: Magazine of the Federation of Calvinist University Clubs,* 3 (March 1963).

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Christian Approach to Politics. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 1965.

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The Christian Approach to Science. Hamilton: Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, 1966.

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"Science Between Presuppositions and Decisions." *Philosophia Reformata* 38 (1973) 114–126.

1976

"The University as it is and as it Ought to Be." In *Christian Higher Education: The Contemporary Challenge, Proceedings of the First International Conference for Christian*

Scholarship, Potchefstroom, 9–13 Sept. 1975. Potchefstroom: Institute for the Advancement of Calvinism, 1976, 29–43.

1979

“The Structure of Technology (1961)”, translated by Donald Morton, *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 2 (1979) 296–313.

“Technology and Culture (1961)”, translated by Donald Morton, *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 2 (1979) 313–328.

1992

“Science in the Light of the Relation Between Thinking and Believing.” *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap* 28 (1992) 1: 27–95.

1997

The University and Its Basis: Studies in Christian Higher Education number 1. Edited and revised by Keith Sewell. (Victoria: Australia).

The article as published in September 2024 inadvertently included a death notice for a different "Henk van Riessen" who had the middle name of "Jan." This was then incorporated into the title of the article.

The author apologises for this error.