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PERCEPTIONS OF REFORMATIONAL PHILOSOPHY – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Abstract

This is a presentation of the findings of a 2016 survey of Reformational scholars. There were a total of 119 respondents; the majority were male, over 25 and living in North America, although there were a significant number from South America. The ways they came into contact with Reformational philosophy, what attracted them to it, and what they perceive as its strengths and weaknesses are examined. The respondents were self-selecting and it was accessible only to those who had access to the Internet, but despite this it provides an interesting perspective on Reformational philosophy by those sympathetic to it.

Keywords: *Reformational philosophy, survey, questionnaire*

1. Introduction

In August-September 2016 I carried out a survey on Reformational philosophy utilising a questionnaire. As far as I am aware this is the first survey done on those who are sympathetic to Reformational philosophy.

The questionnaire was written with Google forms. The sample was taken from numerous social media sources – twitter, two Facebook groups,¹ a blog request and a posting to the ThinkNet mailing list and to the ReformationalsUK yahoo group.

The responses were anonymous, although the majority left their e-mail to receive feedback. The respondents were self-selecting and it was open only to those who had access to the Internet.

The link for the survey is: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdlw0Wqd8BaKZ111eRD5DzDfLI9rp5UHn7uCvbYEsr8VrbYsg/viewform?c=0&w=1> and was accessible to any who had the link.

2. Demographics of respondents

There were a total of 119 respondents – some didn't complete all the questions, which accounts for the missing numbers in some categories (one person completed the questionnaire twice – with the same responses).

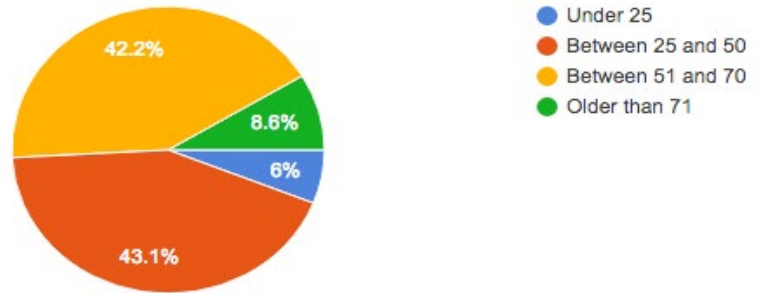
2.1 The age range

Encouraging was the number aged between 25 and 50, but despite this the vast majority were over 25 and over a half were over 50. The questionnaire was Internet-based, so this may have reduced the age profile.

¹ *I'm grateful to Gregory Baus for posting the questionnaire to these two groups.*

FIGURE 1. Age profile of the respondents.

How old are you? (116 responses)

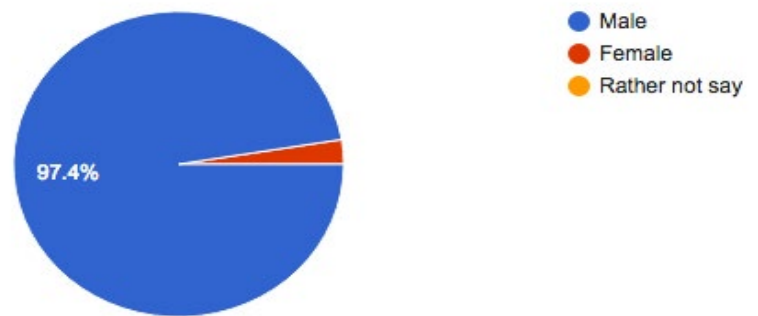


2.2 The gender make up

The gender breakdown is shown in Figure 2. Over 97% were male.

FIGURE 2. Gender breakdown of the respondents.

Are you male or female? (116 responses)

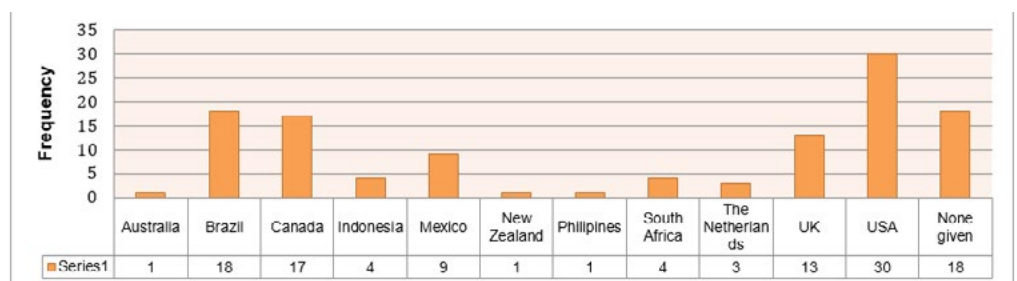


This shows an area of concern for the movement: the vast majority are male.

2.3 The national makeup

It is no surprise that the majority of respondents were from North America (at least 39%), but encouraging were the numbers from Mexico (7.5%) and Brazil (15%) (Figure 3). It seems that Reformational philosophy is experiencing a resurgence in these areas.

FIGURE 3. Respondents by Country



3. Designations

Two questions were designed to ensure that those who responded to the survey were those familiar with Reformational philosophy – hence the self-designation question and the ‘What do you understand by Reformational philosophy?’ Almost all those who answered

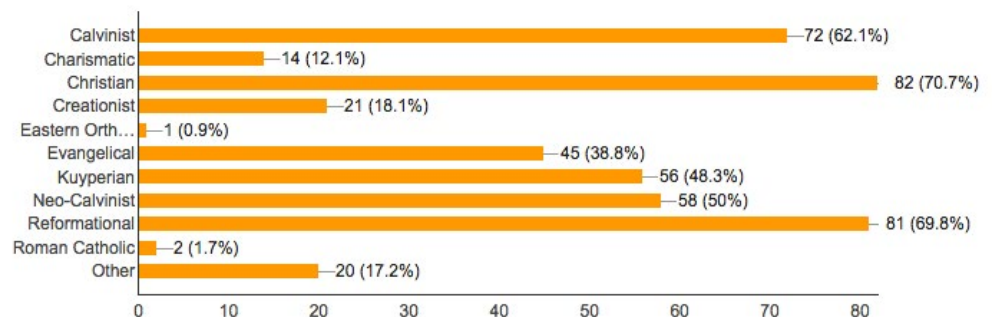
the latter question showed an understanding of Reformational philosophy. Typical responses to describing Reformational philosophy included:

- *The Christian philosophy initiated by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.*
- *The Cosmonomic idea.*
- *A philosophical perspective from a Calvinistic basis.*

Of those who responded to this question only two didn't seem to be fully familiar with it: one person seemed to confuse it with theology and another answered 'I am trying to answer this question'.

FIGURE 4. Self-designations.

How would you describe yourself (tick all that are appropriate) (116 responses)



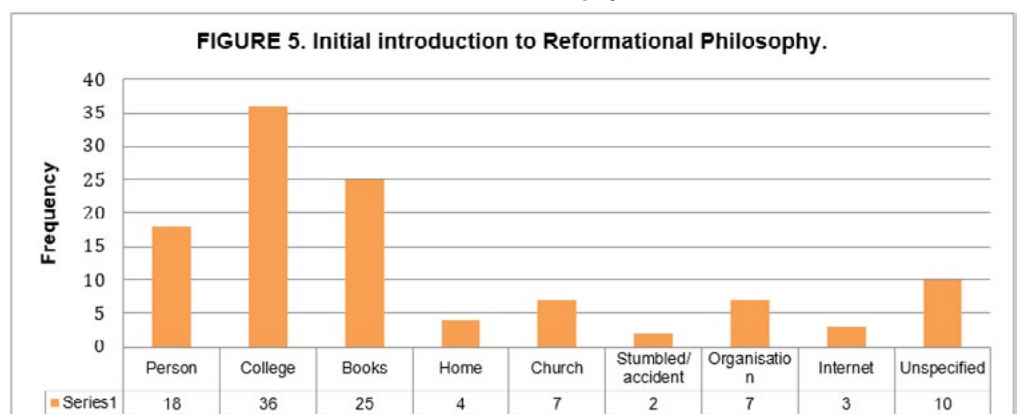
The self-designation question – shown in the bar chart (Figure 4) shows that most would prefer the term Christian and Reformational. Interestingly the majority described themselves as Calvinist and a minority as Roman Catholic (2 people) and Eastern Orthodox (1 person), one person (in the other category) described him/herself as Jewish (Figures 4). It seems Dooyeweerd's desire that the approach should be ecumenical and not primarily associated with Calvinism is bearing some fruit.

A significant minority were happy to describe themselves as Charismatic and as Creationist. One wrote 'I don't like to be called a creationist because the term has unpleasant connotations. However, I am also not an evolutionist'. Neither of these approaches is usually associated with an academic philosophical approach.

4. Introduction to, and an appreciation for, reformational philosophy

4.1 How did you come into contact with Reformational philosophy?

FIGURE 5. Initial Introduction to Reformational Philosophy



The three main areas that were instrumental in introducing people to the Reformational perspective were colleges, books and other people (see Figure 5). Key people mentioned were Richard Russell (who has been particularly influential in the UK, see Bishop (2016)), John Paul Haine and among some of the older respondents, Herman Dooyeweerd and H. Evan Runner. Colleges mentioned included Dordt, Calvin College, and the Institute for Christian Studies, Trinity Christian College, Geneva College, the VU, John Calvin University in Coyoacán, México City and Bethel College. Among the authors of books mentioned were E.L. Hebden Taylor, Francis Schaeffer, Hans Rookmaaker, R.J. Rushdoony and Cornelius Van Til – interestingly not all names one would associate with ‘pure’ Reformational philosophy. The organisations mentioned by name were WYSOCS (now ThinkingFaith Network), the Open Christian College and L’Abri.

4.2 What attracted you to Reformational philosophy?

The vast majority of responses could be classified as follows:

1. *Its biblical basis, the fact that it provided a Christian orientation or perspective. Some specifically mentioned its Calvinist base (28 responses)*
2. *Its holistic, integral and non-reductionist and non-dualist perspective (18 responses)*
3. *Its comprehensiveness and its ability to explain life, the cosmos and everything (26 responses)*

Other multiple responses were:

- *It enabled them to understand their own discipline better (six responses)*
- *The emphasis on the sovereignty of God (three responses)*
- *It provided a shift in perspective (two responses)*
- *An appreciation of the grace restores nature position (two responses)*
- *To escape liberal views (two responses)*

Single responses included the following: relationships with others, one was with a woman (whom he later married); a love for truth; its logical nature; and the resemblance to Judaism.

4.3 How has Reformational philosophy influenced you?

The responses to this were open-ended and so displayed a wide variety of responses that can't be displayed in a table or chart. So, I will summarise most of the responses and add typical responses as illustration.

Many respondents mentioned how their writing, thinking, studies and lecturing had been shaped by this perspective.

- *I wrote my PhD on Marx using Vollenhoven's problem-historical method.*
- *I am devoting my retirement to writing a Calvinistic philosophy, modal analysis based on the religion of the Shorter Catechism.*
- *Since writing the first PhD dissertation in the US on Dooyeweerd, I have spent 45 years trying to: 1) get it a wider hearing, and 2) see the difference it makes for many sciences, especially theology. In short, the WdW has directed my thinking and writing throughout my entire life's work.*
- *It has given me a worldview that enables me to engage with the most important questions of our day.*
- *It's been the primary context for my higher academic education, and so shapes*

most of my theoretical convictions in Reformational terms; in non-theoretical terms, it helps me come to know God and myself better.

- *I think it's made my worldview more robust and coherent and given me confidence to take my faith into all kinds of scholarly contexts (socially as well as intellectually). It's given me a framework that helps me ask better questions in seminars and think of research topics.*
- *In how [I] teach my classes.*
- *It's how I do my job.*
- *My thesis was "The religious ground-motive underlying the inspiration theory of Friedrich Schleiermacher", so it influenced me by giving me better weapons in the fight against the theological liberalism that is in the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico.*

For others it had helped them to see reality afresh or from a different perspective. One mentioned that it was like being 'born again twice'!

- *It made me re-think all of my previous conception about theology and philosophy.*
- *Totally shifting my worldview and way of thinking.*

Several suggested that it changed them to a creation-affirming perspective and that it opened many up to thinking philosophically.

For others it provided a framework and a validity for seeing Christian ministry as being outside of church activities

- *I find myself branching out from the church as the centre of my life to being involved in "the world". I no longer embrace a separation of religious and secular all of life is religion. Unbelievers are no longer my enemies they are simply humans who are in need of the kingdom of God. We wrestle not against flesh and blood but principalities and powers.*
- *It helps me to see how the Common Grace of God works in his creation and between decayed men, also making me understand the world in its plurality.*
- *Gave me a way to think and act in a complex world.*

And for some it helped to be better church ministers.

- *How I think & act as a minister to my churches & community.*

But for three respondents it had had little or no effect:

- *I don't think it currently has any.*
- *It really hasn't.*
- *Not sure.*

5. The perceived strengths and weaknesses of reformational philosophy

5.1 The strengths of Reformational philosophy

There were 106 responses to the question: 'What are the strengths of Reformational philosophy?'

The responses are summarised in Table 1 (some made more than one suggestion).

TABLE 1. Identified strength of Reformational Philosophy

Biblical roots (including creation, fall and redemption motif)	14
Comprehensiveness	14
Integral approach	9
Enables dialogue with other disciplines	8
Modal analysis/ aspects	8
Acknowledges role of faith/ religion/ divinity beliefs	7
Non-reductionist approach	7
Cosmic scope	6
Explanatory power	4
Appreciate truth in all disciplines	4
Critique of western thought/ history of philosophy	4
The development of a Christian worldview	4
Its ontology	4
Identifying absolutisations/ idolatries	3
Avoids and critiques dualism	3
Systematic nature	3
Christ/ God centred	3
Appreciation/ understanding of creation	3
Endorses non-church activities	3
Disciplinary insights	3
The sovereignty of God	2
Its anthropology	2
Transdisciplinary	1
Sphere sovereignty	1
Tools for analysis	1
The critique of theoretical thought	1
Individuality structures	1
Grace of God	1
Doctrinal consistency	1
Books written	1
There are many	1
Calvinian commitment	1
Pride	1
Many	1
It's great	1
Not sure	1
N/A	1
Don't know yet	1
None	1

Not many of the factors mentioned above would be a surprise to those familiar with Reformational philosophy. Its integral, comprehensive biblical approach comes across as being its major strength. It clearly provides the tools for several to engage with culture and with the special sciences.

5.2 The weaknesses of Reformational philosophy?

It is important for a movement, or philosophical school, to be aware of its shortcomings.

It is clear from the majority of the responses that Reformational philosophy did have perceived weaknesses, although, two respondents didn't know or were not sure that there were any weaknesses and one thought that there were none. One thought that he couldn't comment yet as he'd only recently been introduced to it, another stated 'depends' and another 'several', but unfortunately, these were not elucidated. Other responses are summarised in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Identified weaknesses of Reformational Philosophy

Insular, elitist, isolationist and a ghetto mentality	16
Too cerebral and academic	12
Theological issues	12
Too difficult to understand; an overuse of jargon	11
Lack of engagement or dialogue with other perspectives	9
Little known	8
The relationship with theology	3
Lack of resources	3
Lack of reach	2
Inability to put ideas into action	2
Lack of heart/ grace	2
Diminishes the institutional church	1
Other	12

These responses could frame an agenda for future work.

Some identified the need to clarify certain issues:

- *The conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology.*
- *It can be too much of a system and needs to listen to the [physical] sciences.*
- *A ... poor understanding of medieval philosophy.*
- *It is unclear in its use of the Bible as a guide or aid to philosophy.*
- *Reformational philosophy doesn't seem to have much to say about ethics.*

Typical responses included:

- *[It] can be too cerebral and devalues (to its own demise) the experience of the individual.*
- *It's not easy to understand without being a Calvinist.*
- *[It] can be too rigid.*
- *It can be perceived as a know-it-all, better than thou way of thinking that is removed from the actual world.*
- *The weaknesses of Reformational philosophy are, in my opinion, entirely based on the fact that many avenues of thought first brought forward by Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, and Kuyper and developed by the second generation of Reformational philosophers (Klapwijk, Griffioen, Hart, Olthuis, Strauss, Tol, etc.) have not been further explored by subsequent generations of philosophers. Thus to many observing the tradition from outside or studying the tradition as a student of the history of philosophy, it may seem that Reformational philosophy is unwilling or unable to interact with certain streams of thought, such as contemporary philosophy of science for example.*
- *At times, ideological purity is too important.*
- *Tended to become somewhat scholarly and inflexible, with too much emphasis on systematics.*

- *Needs more interaction with other contemporary philosophies.*
- *The way is taught as a better Truth, it is very little understood by the Christian community, even harder to practice in less-educated contexts.*
- *Its sometimes viciously combative sectarian dogmatism which has cost it opportunities to offer its gifts more broadly.*
- *Tends to generate a mentality (in some) in which close adherence to inherited systematic framework is mandatory, thus inhibiting critical revision, and restricting ecumenical openness. Not grounded enough in empirical analysis (two exceptions: Maarten Verkerk, Andrew Basden). Has failed largely to generate significant theoretical advances in empirical disciplines, e.g. social sciences.*
- *It exists only in small pockets so has great impact on only a few. More ideas need to get to the general public - perhaps through blogs, etc.*
- *It seems to be less attractive to women which is troubling and is seen as too intellectual for most Christians.*
- *The tendency to be too heady and difficult to apply practically to everyday challenges God presents to us. Also most people, even Christians have mostly a reductionist worldview, so there is very little real communication. So that has been frustrating.*
- *Jargon; insularism; epistemology in a neo-Kantian mode.*
- *[It] can be used too dogmatically or scholastically.*
- *Somewhat smug, standing above others.*
- *There is still a lot of work to do in reforming and reconceptualising some aspects of its thought and it carries a rather dated flavour as much of its content has not been updated from the 1930s-1950s when the main texts were completed. Also limited engagement with Anglo-Saxon thought and so is still too 'Continental' in its flavour.*
- *It has yet to be translated into the language of everyday, working class people. It is primarily (at least in America) written and discussed by the educated elite.*
- *It lacks the features that thoughtful 21st century Christians expect of a 'system of ideas': i.e. you can't communicate it as sound-bites, strap-lines or elevator-pitches.*
- *Sometimes it encourages people to forget important biblical themes such as personal holiness and spiritual warfare.*
- *Some strands/ proponents tend to be isolationist/ ghettofy. It is thus easily identified with conservatism while it is actually neither conservative (right etc.) nor its opposite (progressive, liberal, left). Its third way message is sometimes not well communicated.*
- *The common weakness of considering the rational to be the most important aspect of (Christian) life.*
- *The great statement of this philosophy is Dooyeweerd's New Critique. Not only is that work daunting because of its size (1948 pages not including the index), but it is difficult to read.*

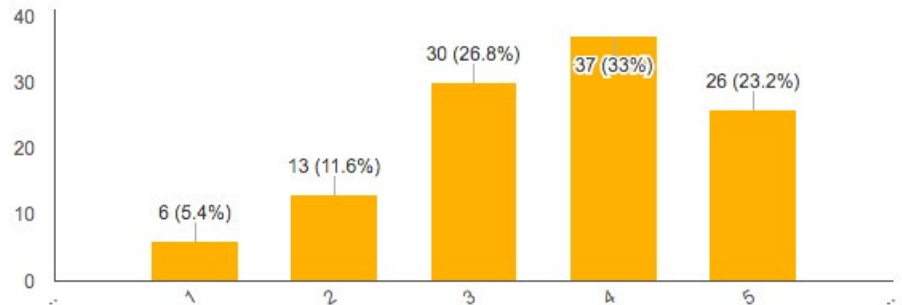
6. The Future?

How rosy is the future for Reformational philosophy? In an attempt to gauge people's perspectives of the future I posed the question: 'How optimistic are you about the future or Reformational philosophy' There were 112 responses. Encouragingly many seem to be optimistic about its future. Only 18% scored less than 2 (5 being the most optimistic and

1 the least.)

FIGURE 6. Optimism scale (1 = least optimistic)

How optimistic are you about the future of Reformational philosophy?
(112 responses)



There were many reasons given for the pessimism. These included:

- *I feel isolated outside of Thinknet.*
- *All the Reformational philosophers seem to be retiring at the moment with very few young scholars coming through. As a movement it seems to have lost the 'little people', the general biblical way of life and vision that is needed to nourish a culturally formative movement.*
- *We don't capture people's imaginations and we are unpopular with both evangelicals and liberals.*
- *It lacks institutional support, unlike Van Tillianism, Kuyperianism, and post-Reformational analytical philosophy (e.g., the work of Plantinga and Wolterstorff).*
- *Too many scholars, in the Canadian/American context have pushed Reformational philosophy in the arms of post-modernist rather than the work of philosophers like Michael Polanyi. Except for the work of Jonathan Chaplin on Dooyeweerd's social philosophy, most students of the Reformational philosophy have not worked through Dooyeweerd's systematic philosophy and its import for the contemporary philosophical context. And too many scholars in that same context have abandoned Reformed theology, particularly of Kuyper and Bavinck, but also of Reformed scholasticism.*
- *From afar, it seems to me that scholars at the VU Amsterdam, the ICS, and the Association for Reformational Philosophy, have to some extent lost faith in Dooyeweerd's vision for Reformational philosophy. At the other end of the spectrum, I worry that popular presentations of Reformational philosophy by non-philosophers assimilate it to a kind of "worldview apologetics" that is prominent within evangelical Christianity but which Reformational philosophy was never intended to be (and, I would argue, is at odds with).*

7. Conclusion

The aim of this survey was to see what insider views were regarding Reformational philosophy. It is clear that the movement is alive and well and many are making use of this perspective and appreciate its fruitfulness. However, there are some areas of concern. This is particularly illustrated in the demographics: there is a lack of female respondents and few of the respondents were under 25. This means that for the future to be more secure the movement needs to attract more females and younger students.

The respondents were self-selecting and it was accessible only to those who had access to the Internet, but despite this it provides an interesting perspective on Reformational

philosophy by those sympathetic to it.

It shows clearly that there are also some areas of work to be done. These include:

- Strengthening global ties.
- Work on a biblical perspective.
- The need for clear accessible introductions to Reformational philosophy.
- The need for interaction with other Christian and non-Christian philosophies.

It is hoped that this survey will act as a catalyst for some of these projects to be initiated.

8. Bibliography

Bishop, S. 2016. A History of the Reformational Movement in Britain. II: The Post-World-War II Years to the end of the Twentieth Century. *Koers, Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*, 81(1).

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.81.1.2251>

APPENDIX: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Reformational philosophy

This survey is anonymous unless you want to leave your e-mail address.

Thanks for doing it.

1. Where are you from?

2. Are you male or female?

Male

Female

Rather not say

3. How old are you?

Under 25

Between 25 and 50

Between 51 and 70

Older than 71

4. How would you describe yourself (tick all that are appropriate)

Calvinist

Charismatic

Christian

Creationist

Eastern Orthodox

Evangelical

Kuyperian

Neo-Calvinist

Reformational

Roman Catholic

Other:

5. What do you understand by the term 'Reformational philosophy'?

6. How did you come into contact with Reformational philosophy?

7. What attracted you to Reformational philosophy?

8. How has Reformational philosophy influenced you?

9. What are the strengths of Reformational philosophy?