

A Brave New World

Albert Dondeyne's Christian Humanism in the University and Society

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"When students leave class, professors warn them of the dangers of university life. They gather over the university city as thunderclouds, threatening to strike at any moment. At dusk, they lie in wait around street corners, spying upon the students like leopards at the edge of the forest. Apparently students must be on their guard against three things in particular: freedom, girls, and beer".¹ With these alarming words, the Leuven professor of philosophy Albert Dondeyne began one of his articles on the complex relationship between faith and university life. Despite – or perhaps precisely because of – the precarious context described, Dondeyne was committed to introducing and developing a presentation on Catholic doctrine and a life of faith that was worthy of university

students and their action in society. Dondeyne's effort not only aimed to create an intellectual framework, it was also successfully put into practice in the *Universitas*-movement, a pray-think-work-community for university professors and students of which he was the source of inspiration. The intellectual richness of this movement can be seen in the influence it had on various prominent figures in Belgian society (e.g. ministers Gaston Geens and Wilfried Martens), at the Catholic University of Leuven (e.g. KU Leuven honorary rectors Pieter De Somer and Roger Dillemans) and in the Catholic Church (e.g. Cardinal Godfried Danneels and Bishop Heusschen).

In numerous contributions describing Dondeyne's intellectual impact, two limitations are often repeatedly raised.² On

- 1 "Wanneer een student het college verlaat, wordt hem door zijn professoren met zorg gewezen op de vele gevaren van het universitaire leven. Ze hangen over de universiteitsstad als zware donderwolken die op elk ogenblik kunnen uitbreken. Bij de avondschemering liggen ze aan de hoeken van de straten de student te belooien als luipaarden aan de rand van het woud. Naar 't verluidt zijn er vooral drie voor dewelke de student zich op de hoede moet houden: de vrijheid, het meisje en het bier." Dondeyne, 'Voor een zuiver geloof', 19.
- 2 Balcaen and Vuye, 'Luisteren en spreken'; Boudens, 'Dondeyne en "Universitas"'; Buyse, 'De laatste jaren'; Id., 'Professor Dondeyne 25 jaar priester'; 'Curriculum vitae van A. Dondeyne'; Grootaers, 'Een bewogen mens'; Id., 'La réflexion religieuse et l'action pastorale du professeur Dondeyne'; Id., 'L'engagement et contribution du professeur A. Dondeyne à Vatican II'; Ladrière, 'In memoriam Albert Dondeyne'; Leemans, 'Denkend aan Professor Dondeyne'; Roeffaers, 'Universitas en professor Albert Dondeyne'; Schramme, 'Universitas'; Servotte, Abraham and Dhondt, 'De uitvaart'; Wylleman, 'Hulde bij het emeritaat van Professor A. Dondeyne'; Id., 'Dondeyne, Albert'.



Albert Dondeyne at the age of 35.

[G. Van Riel & B. Raymaekers, Pluraliteit, tolerantie en waarheid: Denken in het spoor van Albert Dondeyne, 2006, CD-ROM: Photo 6]

the one hand, in presenting Dondeyne's own thinking, many authors identify this simply with the ideas of the *Universitas*-movement as a whole. This is a questionable practice since this movement assumed almost mythical proportions in later years, making it, as forerunner of *De Maand* (1958), a progressive journal for left-winged Christian ideas and a centre for Christian intellectuals. Moreover, even the viewpoint of *Universitas* is not univocal. As Annick Schramme has already successfully shown, the *Universitas*-movement also had its own development. On the other hand, when Dondeyne's thinking is described, this is often done solely from the point of

view of his book *Faith and the World*, published in 1961.³ To focus only on his magnum opus can be seen as a one-sided approach. This book was not only written later in his life – Dondeyne was already 61 years old at the time and at the end of his career – it also contained hardly any reference to the university and its role as an institution concerned with shaping its students towards the ideal of Christian humanism, a theme dear to Dondeyne in previous years. Was this book thus truly exemplary for Dondeyne's thinking as a whole and, if not, what then was his understanding of this Christian humanism within the university and society in general?

To answer this question, this article will examine Dondeyne's own ideas concerning a student's Christian way of life of and the reciprocal relationship with the university. This article will argue that Dondeyne's ideas concerning Christianity and the university were part of a broader vision that promoted a Christian anthropology. This theological reflection on the human being would enable persons (in this case students) to deal with the problems of their time and to develop a Christian understanding of society in a constantly evolving world. Moreover, in his development of a Christian anthropology, which he generally refers to in his writings as a 'Christian humanism'⁴, Dondeyne connected with a broader current searching for a renewed theological understanding of the human being *an Sich*, in history, and in society and culture. In this way Don-

3 Dondeyne, *Geloof en Wereld*; Id., *Faith and the World*.

4 In this article the concept of 'Christian anthropology' is used as an umbrella-term to designate several synonymous theological thought-currents (e.g. Christian humanism, theology of the laity, theology of history, theology of the temporal, etc.). This choice is based upon the description of this current in Aubert, *La théologie catholique*, 52.

deyne contributed to what the Church historian Roger Aubert considered the major work of theological renewal in the mid-twentieth century.⁵

This article will first sketch a brief biography of Dondeyne with a special focus on the years he was responsible for the *Hoogstudentenverbond voor Katholieke Actie*, or HVKA. This contextual framework will be used to study Dondeyne's publications prior to publishing *Faith and the World*. The Second World War will be used as a turning point in this framework, separating Dondeyne's works into two periods and offering the opportunity to point to the inherent development of his thinking. Finally, this account of Dondeyne's general ideas will be confronted with some of the views put forward in *Faith and the World*. In dealing with this book both Edward Schillebeeckx's review and Dondeyne's own retrospective account of 1971 will be brought into dialogue.

Albert Dondeyne: Between Professor and Spiritual Mentor

In 1901, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Dondeyne was born in the Belgian village of Lo, in the province of West-Flanders. After secondary education in Poperinge and, due to the war, Versailles (France), he entered the seminary of Bruges and was then sent to the Leo XIII seminary in Leuven to obtain a doctorate in philosophy at the Higher Institute of Philosophy. His dissertation

dealt with the agnosticism of Kant. Hereafter he returned to the Major Seminary of Bruges for his theological training, but was again sent to Leuven to finalise his *licentiate* (comparable to a Master's degree) in theology in 1928. He then subsequently returned to Bruges to become a teacher in the Major Seminary himself. He taught the courses of Dogmatic Theology, Church History, and Pedagogy. Five years later he was called to Leuven once again and became a professor at the Higher Institute of Philosophy. This appointment was strongly linked with the foundation of the *Hoogstudentenverbond voor Katholieke Actie* (High Student Union for Catholic Action) (HVKA) by Karel Devriendt in 1932. Indeed, it was the task of Dondeyne, together with Paul Sobry, to lead this student union of Catholic Action. It gained support fairly quickly among the younger generation of university students since these students had already been influenced by the Catholic Student Action initiated five years previously in Catholic secondary schools. Among the Flemish students in Leuven, the HVKA soon became the most influential student association and one of the pillars of the overarching student union *Katholiek Vlaamsch Studentenverbond* (KVHV). On the basis of Catholic doctrine, HVKA devised a formula for the creation of 'a new man in a new society', the only basis 'complete and totalitarian enough' to defeat the spirit of liberalism that was dominating society and politics as well as the newly formed movements inspired by the 'Revolution von Rechts' idea, Verdinaso, and *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond* (VNV).⁶

5 Id., 'Les grandes tendances théologiques', 36.

6 Cf. Vos, *Idealisme en engagement*, 69-70.

The HVKA aimed to become an organisation within the Catholic University in which students and professors could meet, cooperate, and give expression to their Christian identity.⁷ One of the main platforms to promote their ideas was the periodical *Universitas*, first issued in November 1933. Its title was programmatic and indicated the students' pursuit to achieve a wholeness in their being Catholic students at a renewed Catholic university, the *Universitas*.⁸ This ideal was also envisaged in the pray-think-work-community, which soon centred around the person of Dondeyne. This community would take on the same name as the publication. The *Universitas*-group was born. Dondeyne's position as mentor of the *Universitas*-movement made him in a way the Flemish counterpart of similar francophone groups. In Leuven, francophone students gathered around the sociology professor Jacques Leclercq and his periodical *La Cité chrétienne*, and in France Emmanuel Mounier and his journal *Esprit* likewise inspired young intellectuals with his personalist ideas.⁹ In view of the great influence of Dondeyne on the *Universitas*-movement, it is hardly surprising that a parallel development of his intellectual interest and the movement can be observed.

During a first period, situated before the Second World War, Dondeyne engaged, in line with the topic of his doctoral dissertation on Kant's agnosticism, in a dialogue with this philosopher's idealism. This gave rise to

Dondeyne's continuous interest in the conditions of metaphysical knowledge, a context in which he would bring this idealism into dialogue with the neo-Thomism in which he was educated. He engaged his view on society, shared by the *Universitas*-members, in a similar dialogue: the ideas shaping society had to be identified and their Christian reform had to be promoted. This concurred strongly with the thought of the French neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, who in 1936 published the famous book *Humanisme intégrale*. Maritain's search for the integral effect of Christian principles on the human being and society would create a furore among the Catholic intelligentsia during the interbellum, both left and right of the politic spectrum,¹⁰ an influence which was also noticeable on Dondeyne and *Universitas*.

This position had changed by the outbreak of the Second World War and resulted in a focus on non-political social engagement. Activities in this period would reinforce his attention to two groups in particular: the laity and the working class. Through his involvement in *Universitas*, Dondeyne became very acquainted with the increased self-consciousness of the laity within Church and society. This also led to his involvement in the foundation in 1942 of the Higher Institute for Religious Sciences, of which he became the first secretary. This autonomous institute, which was closely connected with the Faculty of Theology, wished to introduce students from

7 Balcaen and Vuye, 'Luisteren en spreken', 33-34.

8 Cf. *Universitas*, 'Bij een titel: Universitas'.

9 Cf. Grognaard, 'Jacques Leclercq'; Sauvage, *La Cité Chrétienne*; Rauch, *Politics and Belief in Contemporary France*.

10 Cf. Floucat, *Maritain*.



Solemn session, dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the Hoogstudentenverbond voor Katholieke Actie (HVKA), Leuven, 1942.
[KADOC-KU Leuven: KFA19037]

other faculties through an additional training in the essentials of the Catholic faith in line with their experiences in the world.¹¹ Dondeyne's expertise in the dialogue between Catholic faith and culture also made him an interesting conversation partner for the members of the French *Centre Catholique des Intellectuels Français*, which aimed, from 1941 onwards, to bring Catholic intellectuals together to consider the exigencies of the time and contemporaneous currents of thought from a Christian perspective.¹² At the same time, Dondeyne also developed a strong affinity with the work of – the later – Cardinal Jozef Cardijn. Both men shared a similar concern for the situation of young workers during the German occupation. As noted by Grootaers, historical research on the

joint study groups of their movements – *Universitas* and JOC respectively – during the Second World War is still a work to be accomplished.¹³ The interest in the working class would remain central in the thought of Dondeyne, who would increasingly emphasise the importance of the social question and the emancipation of the working class.

After the Second World War, openness and respect for pluralism became an increasing focal point for *Universitas*. In retrospect, a symbolic moment in the transition towards this new phase of *Universitas* can be identified on 4 September 1949, with the inauguration in Orchimont of a chapel for Jan Daelemans, a member of *Universitas* who was killed during the Second World War because of his involvement in

11 Gevers, 'Vijftig jaar Hoger Instituut voor Godsdienstwetenschappen', 5.

12 Toupin-Guyot, *Les intellectuels catholiques dans la société française*.

13 Cf. Grootaers, 'Een bewogen mens', 118-119.

the resistance.¹⁴ In Dondeyne's work dialogue with non-scholastic currents increased, in particular with existentialism (Sartre, Camus, Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel) and phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Levinas). In this regard his 1951 article, 'Les problèmes philosophiques soulevés dans l'Encyclique *Humani Generis*', is of interest. Here he argued in favour of a positive interpretation of this restrictive papal encyclical, which would, despite the apparent ban, still allow the use of new philosophical currents in Catholic philosophy and theology. Dondeyne envisaged in particular the acceptance of tendencies within the current of existentialism that could be reconciled with Catholic faith and thought.¹⁵

In July 1957, Dondeyne left his apartment in the Jan Stasstraat and his position within the *Universitas*-movement.¹⁶ In his opinion, a younger generation, in this case Professor Antoon Vergote, needed to assume the leadership of the movement. Dondeyne would however remain active within the university, society, and the Church: he served as dean of the Faculty of Theology (1961-1964), was president of the Higher Institute of Philosophy (1965-1971), and contributed to the Second Vatican Council. His involvement in the preparation and elaboration of the documents *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitatis humanae* continues to remain noticeable.¹⁷ The *Universitas*-group itself was absorbed in the newly founded Leuven University Parish

while, in September 1960, the periodical shifted from a monthly to a weekly publication.¹⁸ Dondeyne would continue his intellectual career within the university, teaching and forming a generation of students. For his dedication he would be recognised both in Church and society: in 1965 he became an honorary prelate of the pope and in 1966 a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts. Then, thirty years ago, after a long and fruitful career, he passed away in Leuven on 12 February 1985.

Catholic Action at the University and in Society

When Dondeyne arrived in Leuven in 1933 to assume his position in the HVKA, he encountered a generation of students that was attracted by the ideas of the 'Revolution von rechts'. These students shared a broader feeling present at that time in society of dejection with the establishment. This was largely due to the economic crisis of the 1930s. From their perspective, the cause of this crisis could be found in the diverse expressions of liberalism. These were to blame for the fragmentation of society and the loss of an organic coherence. Catholicism, and the ideal of a medieval organic Catholic society, was seen as a solution to overcome this problem. The Catholic Action and its different expres-

14 Cf. Grootaers, 'Een bewogen mens', 120.

15 Dondeyne, 'Les problèmes philosophiques soulevés dans l'Encyclique *Humani Generis*'.

16 Balcaen and Vuye, 'Luisteren en spreken', 22-24; Grootaers, 'Een bewogen mens', 131; Wylleman, 'Dondeyne', 163.

17 Esp. Lamberigts, 'De opvattingen van Albert Dondeyne'.

18 Grootaers, 'Een bewogen mens', 123.



Albert Dondeyne giving a speech, July 1955.
[KADOC-KU Leuven: KFB859]

sions in the student milieu became the main instrument of its realisation. From 1934 onwards Dondeyne would publish repeatedly on this theme, making the *Universitas*-periodical his main platform. In his publications he indicated in particular how these students could develop their own personality in the service of this harmonious ideal.¹⁹

Dondeyne also took up the battle against this 'liberal atomism' as the point of departure in his writings.²⁰ As a consequence of this liberalism one could see, according to Dondeyne, the rise of laicism, spreading as a new paganism, everywhere in society, including the domain of higher education. This paganism was later associated by Dondeyne with the pagan humanism present in the success-

ful philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche and Marx that also offered an intellectual foundation to the totalitarian regimes. In the end, Dondeyne depicted the crisis of society not only as an economic or political crisis, he situated it in a larger, intellectual (religious) '*Kulturkampf*' or 'cultural struggle.' A reigning, pagan humanism had to be defeated by a Christian, gospel-based humanism. This understanding of the situation was also shared in other ranks of the Catholic Church. In particular Cardinal Van Roey showed a true concern for the situation and tried to offer some solutions. He considered the Catholic University one of the pillars in this battle against these anti-Christian ideas. In 1937, he and Rector Honoré Van Waeyenbergh founded a chair of 'contemporary pseudo-mysticisms' at the Faculty of Theology, which had to prepare Christianity and Catholic theology for their confrontation with these philosophical and socio-cultural currents. Professor Franz Grégoire, the first chair holder, would engage especially in the study of the ideologies of Marxism and National-Socialism on the basis of their founding fathers.²¹ Similarly, Van Roey oriented the magister study (doctorate)²² of Roger Aubert towards the study of a classical theological problem from the perspective of contemporary philosophical and theological currents in service of the development of a new apologetics.²³

19 The characterisation of this period is based on the following articles: Dondeyne, 'De K.A. aan de Universiteit. Haar beteekenis voor onszelf en voor ons volk'; Id., 'De K.A. aan de Universiteit'; Id., 'De sekte van de Katholieke Aktie op het Kongres te Mechelen'; Id., 'Universitaire Katholieke Actie'.

20 A same perspective can be found in Dondeyne, 'Katholieke problemen van dezen tijd'.

21 Coppens, 'Le chanoine Franz Grégoire'; Ponthot, 'In memoriam Franz Grégoire'; Van Waeyenbergh, 'Hommage de l'Université Catholique à M. le chanoine Grégoire'.

22 Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi*.

23 Esp. Dumoulin, 'Roger Aubert'; Pirotte and Delville, 'Le sens d'un hommage'.

While these two scholars primarily aimed to give a mere description of (the underlying principles of) the contemporary currents, Dondeyne went one step further. He also offered a counter-proposal to solve this fragmentation of society and personalities, namely his Christian humanism. For Dondeyne, this humanism consisted of an aspect of both internalisation and externalisation. On the one hand, it would offer a harmonious anthropology based on a renewed understanding and experience of the Catholic faith. This true internalisation of Catholic faith would offer the student, or even every human being, a new synthesis of his personality, which would supply a Christian life-orientation that would cover every domain of one's worldview. On the other hand, this internalisation of faith also aimed at an externalisation. The "Christian-social revitalisation of society"²⁴ was the ultimate objective. According to Dondeyne, the instilling of values such as charity, fraternity, a sense of oneness, duty, and organic coherence in society depended entirely on the Christian humanist. Through active involvement in politics and media, he could contribute to the re-Christianisation of culture and society. In sum, the Christian humanist would reform society again in line with the ideal of medieval Christian society. Despite the questionable depiction of this ideal, at times appearing to be more a myth than a historical example²⁵, it served as a wonderful image to encourage Catholic students to be active in the

apostolate. This presentation of the new Christian civilisation, of a new Christian culture, reflected parallels with the ideas of a 'new Christianity' expressed in Jacques Maritain's *Humanisme intégral* or Nikolai Berdiaev's *Nouveau moyen âge*. Like these two authors, Dondeyne did not envisage a mere return to the Middle Ages, but hoped for a renewal of Christianity in its context. One of the conditions was agreement with the absolute primacy of the supernatural vis-à-vis the natural. This primacy led to the subordination of the temporal realm to the divine and emphasised the working of grace.

The university, and in particular the Catholic University, played a twofold role according to Dondeyne. Intellectually students had to be formed as Christian humanists and introduced to a life of faith that was in line with the most recent scientific developments. The university was the preferred milieu where students could be warned against the reigning false supernaturalism, which Dondeyne considered to be one of the main characteristics of the 'temporal mysticisms' promoted by the modern ideologies and totalitarian regimes.²⁶ By taking part in initiatives of the Catholic Action movement, students could install this ideal in everyday society in practise as well. One of the first examples of this was implemented in the *Universitas*-community, which Dondeyne envisaged as a pray-think-work-community where university professors and students would live together, inspired by the medieval

24 "De Kristelijk-sociale gezondmaking van de maatschappij". Dondeyne, 'De Katholieke Actie aan de Universiteit', 8.

25 For a discussion of this ideal of the Christian Middle Ages see: Raedts, 'De christelijke middeleeuwen als mythe'.

26 Cf. Dondeyne, 'Religieuze en aardsche mystiek', 25-41.

ideal of the *universitas professorum et scholarium*. This group served as a practical context in which students could easily be formed. In sum, at the Catholic University a new *corps d'élite* of independent personalities would be trained in a highly developed Christian humanism that would incorporate all aspects of life.

One peculiarity of Dondeyne's presentation of Christian humanism in an international context is his insistence on the contribution this revitalisation would offer to Flemish society. At the university, an intellectual elite or aristocracy was formed that would be able to give a new self-understanding to the Flemish people from a Christian perspective. This would even lead to their emancipation as social group within society, an ideal that was not strange to the context of the HVKA milieu. It is remarkable that in his description, Dondeyne clearly insists that only the intellectual elite is able to guide and direct all segments of the population of this new Flemish Christian culture and make it a popular movement: "Never before did the Catholic intellectual in Flanders speak so much and so beautifully on the solidarity of the people, and never before was he so greatly alienated from his own people. Therefore the Catholic Action will teach you this: that it is your sacred duty to return to your own people, to live among them, and to work for them by active

participation in the activities of the people."²⁷ He also repeated this idea at the beginning of the Second World War, a decisive time according to Dondeyne. Now the importance of the guiding role of the Flemish community²⁸ was stressed in a worldwide context: "We, Christian Flemish people, once again have to teach the world of tomorrow."²⁹ Dondeyne envisaged in particular the promotion of a 'university' orientation of life that would lead, despite the international tensions, to a fully Christian civilisation. The term 'university' should be considered here as an adjective, which described the fully developed Christian personality. Flemings would be outstanding promoters of this, since they were, according to Dondeyne, true, 'human' men.

Christian Humanism in Service of a Social and Unified Society

The turmoil of the Second World War had put, as Étienne Fouilloux indicated, not only this idea of a 'new Christian civilisation' into question, but the idea of 'Christendom' in general.³⁰ First one became aware of the de-Christianisation of certain social classes, in particular the working class. Consequently, at the end of the 1940s, a new focus on

27 "Nog nooit heeft de katholieke intellectueel in Vlaanderen zoo veel en zoo mooi over volksgebondenheid gesproken en nog nooit is hij zoo-zeer van zijn volk vervreemd geweest. Dit zal U dan ook de K.A. leeren: dat het voor U een heilige plicht is naar uw volk terug te keeren, midden in uw volk te gaan leven, er voor te arbeiden door aktieve deelname in de volkswerken." Dondeyne, 'De K.A. aan de Universiteit', 7.

28 In this period only one article concerned with our general theme was published: Dondeyne, 'De Katholieke Actie aan de Universiteit', 1942.

29 Ibid., 60.

30 Cf. Fouilloux, 'Feu de la "nouvelle chrétienté"?'

interior missionary work had emerged in countries with a formerly strong Catholic presence. This movement was significantly influenced by the publication of the French Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard's Lenten pastoral *Essor ou déclin de l'Église* and the book *La France, pays de mission*³¹, that sketched an eye-opening account of the actual situation of the working-class. This state of affairs sparked off the desire among theologians to address this phenomenon and to propose solutions. A second experience, manifesting itself mostly in the 1950s, was that the world was at a turning point. Despite the global division between a Western and an Eastern Bloc, the prevalent conviction was that the world was in full progress towards a greater unification between people, cultures, and civilisations. Dondeyne would express this as follows: "The world of today is involved in an inescapable struggle: a struggle for more equality in existence, more justice and fraternity, more wealth and effective freedom, in one word, a struggle for a truer recognition of men by men, which should be the spirit and purpose of every human society."³²

The experience that the working class had turned away from the Church and Dondeyne's own experiences with young workers during the Second World

War made him aware of the 'social question' as well. Dondeyne understood this phenomenon, however, in a very broad sense. He defined it as "contemporaneous humanity in as far as it has become a problem for itself, in the sense that it aspires and battles for a more human social order, a more authentic recognition of the human being by the human being."³³ Dondeyne sympathised with the laments of the working class, but at the same time he feared that their emancipation could lead to a depersonalisation of the human person. He was worried in particular that the emergence of the proletariat would ultimately lead to the reign of the masses, in which the human person would become a mere number. This view was clearly influenced by Dondeyne's understanding of the Communist state as it came to expression in the Soviet Union. In his opinion, it must therefore be avoided that the working class determined the future of humanity independent of the elite. If the world and the Church engaged in taking the 'social question' and the working class seriously, this would have to be done in cooperation with the elite. A harmonious existence of the community remained for Dondeyne thus a primary goal.

At the same time Dondeyne warned that increasing unification of communi-

31 Godin and Daniel, *La France, pays de mission?*; Suhard, *Essor ou déclin de l'Église*. Cf. Guérend, *Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard*.

32 "Zo komt het dat de wereld van vandaag in een onomkombare [sic.] strijd gewikkeld is: een strijd voor meer gelijkheid in de bestaanskansen, meer rechtvaardigheid en broederlijkheid, meer welstand en effectieve vrijheid, in één woord, een strijd om een waarachtiger erkenning van de mens door de mens, wat toch de ziel en het doel zou moeten zijn van elke menselijke samenleving." Dondeyne, 'De betekenis', 482.

33 "Il [le problème social] est l'humanité d'aujourd'hui en tant que celle-ci est devenue en quelque sorte problème pour elle-même, du fait qu'elle aspire vers et lutte pour un ordre social plus humain, une reconnaissance plus authentique de l'homme par l'homme." Dondeyne, 'L'Église et le problème social', 409. Cf. Id., 'Het sociaal probleem als cultuur-historisch verschijnsel'.



Albert Dondeyne and his colleagues, 1935.

[G. Van Riel & B. Raymaekers, *Pluraliteit, tolerantie en waarheid: Denken in het spoor van Albert Dondeyne*, 2006, CD-ROM: Photo 23b]

ties and cultures could go hand in hand with a growing secularisation, for global unification involved the encounter with other worldviews. He expressed this experience as follows: “His study, his reading, his contact with science and literature – and in all this the Catholic view of life occupies but little place – will in a short time elevate him to the position of world citizen, initiate him not in a new part of the world, but in the world itself, with its immense dimensions of time, space and depth, with its inexhaustible variety of civilisations, cultures and

religions, and above all with the greatest wonder of the world, the incomprehensible mystery of nature that is man.”³⁴

The discovery of these other dimensions could bring the proper worldview into question both in time and space. Historically there was a growing awareness that one’s own culture was not given once and for all, and it was also necessary to recognise geographically the local rootedness of one’s own perspective. This double experience was perceived by Dondeyne as a logical, even a necessary, consequence of this process of global

34 “Zijn studie, zijn lectuur, zijn omgang met de wetenschap en de letterkunde – en in dat alles neemt de katholieke levensvisie gewoonlijk maar weinig plaats in – zullen hem in korten tijd tot wereldburger verheffen, hem binnenvoeren niet in een nieuw werelddeel, maar in de wereld kortweg, met haar onmetelijke tijd-, en ruimte- en dieptedimensies, met haar onuitputtelijke variëteit van beschavingen, culturen en godsdiensten, met bovenal het groote wereldwonder, het onbegrijpelijke natuurraadsel dat de mensch zelf is.” Dondeyne, ‘Godsdienstige vorming’, 270.

unification. A certain scepticism and relativism towards one's own perspective, avoiding an over the top absolutism, was considered as a healthy attitude. In Dondeyne's view, this applied, however, only to the human 'culture'. In this context, he understood culture as an essential element of "our 'mundane existence,' our existence in as far as we humanise and cultivate the world to reach the full development of our own existence."³⁵ Dondeyne feared that this relativism would be carried too far and would also lead to the questioning of religious faith. People could falsely conclude that faith was also a mere cultural phenomenon and could be put into question. Therefore he repeatedly insisted that faith transcended culture. It was what drew man to God and to the world beyond.³⁶ Dondeyne's worries were even enlarged because of the progress of science and technology in recent times. The consequent emerging belief in the idea of progress and its attributed salvific force for humans and the world made him fear even more that people would turn away from faith and would adopt instead an extreme belief in functionalism and materialism.

This possible deviation of the 'social question' and global unification had to be adjusted in a humanist sense

according to Dondeyne. Again, a mere humanism would not be sufficient, as the true meaning of the human being and his role in the world could only be understood from a Christian perspective. As we will see in what follows, the rediscovering of this Christian humanism would guide Christians and the world to a better, more harmonious future.

In line with his altered view on the world and culture, Dondeyne's ideas on Christian humanism had undergone changes as well.³⁷ From an initial proximity to the ideas of Maritain, including his at times contested political views linked with the French *Action Française*, Dondeyne developed his post-war views on Christian humanism more in line with the thinking of François Charnot, Eugène Masure and Jean Mouroux and was increasingly influenced by existentialist philosophy. In the end, Christian humanism not only served a higher political goal, such as the restoration of society, but it was increasingly considered as being in the service of the development of a human person. The central importance of this formative function in the life and culture of a human person was something Dondeyne shared with some of his colleagues. Scholars such as Charles Moeller³⁸ and Jan Hendrik Walgrave³⁹ also developed a theory of

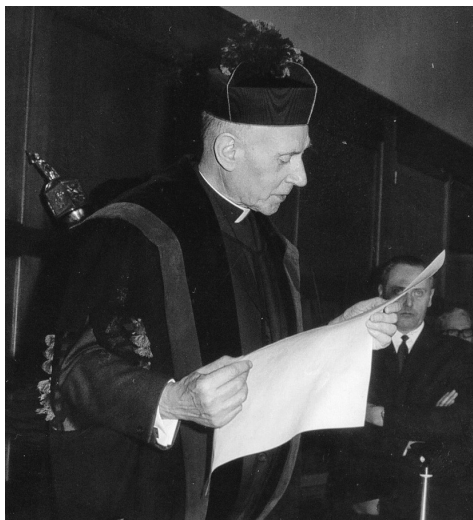
35 "Cultuur behoort tot de orde van ons "mundaan bestaan", d.w.z. van ons bestaan voorzover wij een wereld te humaniseren en te cultiveren hebben om tot de volledige ontplooiing van ons mens-zijn te komen." Dondeyne, 'Voor een zuiver geloof', 27.

36 "Geloof richt ons op God, naar de wereld van hierboven: stijgt uit boven de profane cultuur." Ibid, 28.

37 Id., 'L'humanisme de demain'; Id., 'Het humanisme van morgen'; Id., 'Christelijk humanisme'.

38 Esp. Colleye, *Charles Moeller*; van Canghai (ed.), *In memoriam Mgr. Charles Moeller*; Tordeur and Colleye, 'Moeller, Charles'. His main publication in this view is Moeller, *Humanisme et sainteté*.

39 On Walgrave's humanism, see: De Clercq, 'De vlag van het christelijk humanisme'. His main publications in this field were Walgrave, *Op menselijke grondslag*; Id., *Op de grondslag van het woord*.



Albert Dondeyne giving a speech, 1970.
[G. Van Riel & B. Raymaekers, *Pluraliteit, tolerantie en
waarheid: Denken in het spoor van Albert Dondeyne*,
2006, CD-ROM: Photo117b]

'Christian humanism' in which they sketched the ideal development of the human person in light of Christian revelation. Whereas the argumentation of these two authors depended strongly on contemporaneous (existentialist) literature and a preference for the Greek-Roman culture, Dondeyne built further on the foundations that were laid by the more social expressions of humanism, in particular on the ideas of the French personalist Emmanuel Mounier. It seems therefore that Dondeyne developed his Christian humanism not so much as a mere intellectual concept, but as a reality to be achieved, with social implica-

tions. Through an authentic religious life, Christians needed to engage in constructing the world of tomorrow in dialogue and in collaboration with the whole of humanity. Dondeyne's shift in understanding 'Christian humanism' as a countercultural identity to that of a contributive attitude towards the world was also in line with the larger shift of paradigms in society, from a 'Revolution von rechts' to a 'Left Catholicism'.⁴⁰

While the installation of this Christian humanism in society was in this period often considered as something that could be realised in the humanities at high schools⁴¹, by assembling communities (e.g. the *Universitas*-group or the *Esprit*-groups), or through publications in engaged periodicals (e.g. *La Revue Nouvelle*)⁴², Dondeyne's position was marked by a strong insistence on the role of the university therein. The university was for Dondeyne the ideal place to promote a Christian humanism, since it was "a historical reality, a restlessly searching, time-bound thinking and working community in the service of humanity"⁴³: "a school for a high humanism, a research and knowledge centre for civilisation and culture"⁴⁴. A university was therefore, according to Dondeyne – in Heidegger's terms – a 'zu Sein' with a threefold cultural task and purpose. In addition to academic research and education of professions with university 'standing', it also needed to 'educate the

40 Cf. Horn, 'Left Catholicism in Western Europe'.

41 Cf. Thils, *Sagesse chrétienne et humanités*.

42 For more information on the Belgian context, see Jadoulle, *Chrétiens modernes?*

43 "Universiteit, althans indien zij haar zending getrouw blijft, is een historische werkelijkheid, een rusteloos zoekende, tijdgebondene denk- en werkgemeenschap in dienst van de mensheid." Dondeyne, 'De betekenis', 480.

44 "Toch blijft de oorspronkelijke zending van de Universiteit een school te zijn voor hoogstaand humanisme, een navorsings- en scheppingscentrum voor beschaving en cultuur." Id., 'Apostolische opleiding', 456.

mind,' as Newman described it. The university had to form intellectuals who would be identifiable by their constant search to comprehend the essence of the whole of reality. Moreover, because of their broad perspective, these intellectuals were also considered as being responsible for the masses and their ethical discernment concerning the future of society from a Christian viewpoint. It is interesting to note another shift in Dondeyne's thinking here. While in the years prior to the Second World War the protection and promotion of Christianity in society had been the responsibility of an intellectual elite, this responsibility was now also left in the hands of the masses. This can be considered as a democratisation of the humanist culture. It also implied that the training of this culture had to be democratised. Previously only the elite were entrusted with this training at the university, but now they were in turn made responsible for the training of the workers. Thus Dondeyne called for the creation of a new elite: a "workers-aristocracy".⁴⁵

Dondeyne distinguished two areas for which this Christian humanist attitude would have consequences: religious faith and the world. The Christian humanist formation would, according to Dondeyne, have an impact on the whole human person and his personal life of faith. To start with, the faithful – in this case Dondeyne's students – had to pursue a theological study in which the true

object of faith was sought, namely the living God.⁴⁶ This was envisaged through thorough study of apologetics, dogmatics, and moral philosophy. One of the main goals here was to acquire the skill to discern between relative and absolute truths. Dondeyne was in this way already anticipating one of the demands Pope John XXIII presented when inaugurating the Second Vatican Council in 1962 with *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the Deposit of Faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."⁴⁷ This aspect of study always served a second one, that of a life of faith that would reflect the standards of the university. In Dondeyne's view this meant that it had to appeal to the pure essence of Christianity: a personal relationship with the living God, now considered as the true subject of faith. Striving towards this ideal was, according to Dondeyne, a fundamental task of the university student: "the attitude of an ostrich is not an appropriate one for the university student, especially not with regard to his faith".⁴⁸ It was, however, not only a personal endeavour to realise this ideal; students needed practical assistance on their path of study and prayer. The *Universitas*-periodical and group were considered to be excellent instruments for this.

In the world, the university offered a threefold apostolate of renewal. Referring to what he called an 'apostolate of witness,' an understanding of modern

45 Dondeyne, 'Het humanisme', 332.

46 "Godsdienst als levende verhouding tot den levenden God." (Id., 'Godsdienstige vorming', 278); "Gelooven is God aankleven, leven *voor* god en *van* God." (Id., 'Voor een zuiver geloof', 23).

47 "Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates, quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia." John XXIII, 'Gaudet Mater Ecclesia', 11 October 1962.

48 Dondeyne, 'Voor een zuiver geloof', 22.

currents and values had to be pursued within the university. This would then serve an apologetic purpose. A second apostolate was that of reflection. The university had to promote Catholic lay-thinkers, philosophers, and essayists to clarify the relationship between faith and science. They could then establish contacts with contemporaries, including non-Catholics, in the humanities. Dondeyne even considered this contact with non-Catholics, with their writings and their thoughts as a *conditio sine qua non* for the penetration of Christianity in the modern world. He himself gave expression to this idea by engaging in the academic world in discussion groups with professors of the *Université libre de Bruxelles* and in politics with the socialist movement. This willingness for dialogue was, as was his involvement in the pluralist periodical *Synthèses*, in line with his attention to the notion of tolerance. These experiences probably also contributed to his nomination as consultant for the Roman *Secretarium pro non-credentibus* in 1966. Finally, a social apostolate was needed, which would socially form the minds of intellectuals to understand the 'social turn'. The recognition of this turn was decisive, according to Dondeyne, for the historical evolution of his time. In the end, this improved knowledge of humanity and the course of history would lead to a universal recognition of man by man. He considered this universalism among others to be expressed in an exemplary way in the Brussel's World Fair, Expo 58.⁴⁹

Christian Humanism: A Matter of Faith and/or the World?

Four years after Dondeyne ceased his work for *Universitas*, he published the work *Faith and the World*. The reception of the book was mixed. On the one hand, his ideas became accessible for a broader audience. It could be considered as the democratisation of his ideas, because now a larger group had the opportunity to be formed by Dondeyne and not only the select *Universitas*-group. Internationally, theologians such as the theologian Edward Schillebeeckx considered the book to be groundbreaking. He even considered it to be a 'beacon of light' on the eve of the Second Vatican Council.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the book was also confronted with a non-reception. Many Belgian intellectuals were already familiar with the ideas of Dondeyne, and they considered the book as coming too late, and therefore no longer being revelatory. Philippine Van de Putte, General Secretary of the *Kristelijke Arbeidersvrouwen* between 1943 and 1959, among others, felt disillusioned by the book.⁵¹

Dondeyne described his book as the dialogue of a Christian believer with the present world, which he understood as a "play of listening and talking, of receiv-

49 Id., 'Het Kristelijk universalisme'.

50 Schillebeeckx, 'Ter school bij prof. A. Dondeyne', 83.

51 Philippine Van De Putte cited in Grootaers, 'Notes on Philippine Van De Putte', in *Archives of Jan Grootaers: De Maand* 15. This was not retaken in the final article: Grootaers, 'Philippine Van De Putte'.

ing and giving”⁵² Three aspects were important in this, namely that the Christian believers would function as a living witness of the gospel message; that he be considered as a *Weltbindend* human being among and in relation to other human beings, and finally that humanity as a whole was at a turning point. This last aspect was clearly in line with Dondeyne’s earlier works. This is however hardly surprising, since the book was composed of re-edited, yet reviewed, articles. Nevertheless, it did form a new synthesis of his thinking, which was now centred on an integral Christian anthropology. Dondeyne again made the effort to search for the essence of things, and thus to focus once again on this vertical relationship with the living God as the basis of the Christian worldview and the Christian humanist civilisation. Apparently, however, Christianity was no longer the essence that had to be instilled in the university and society; it had become a more personal value.

It is striking that, in comparison to his previous articles on Christian humanism and its relation with the university and society, this book strongly emphasised the autonomy of both Christianity and culture. Its title rightly focused on ‘faith and world’ and not so much on ‘faith in the world.’ Chapters that gave an elaboration of the present world were incorporated in an opening chapter on contemporary faith issues and the Christian message and in a closing chapter on the question of whether faith was still relevant. Subsequently,

in the second part of the book, more socio-cultural issues were discussed: the turning point in history (characterised by the increasing technological evolution, the increasing unification of the world, the socio-economic revolution and communism); the emergence of a universal solidarity; the increase of historic consciousness; freedom and truth; the socio-cultural problem and the challenges it poses for Christianity. The third part was devoted to the relationship between the spheres of faith and politics, the concept of tolerance, and confessional political parties. Thus it seems that Dondeyne’s epistemological description of the present world and the related sociological, cultural, and philosophical questions were almost distinct – maybe even separated – from the more theological, faith-related themes. This distance was often only bridged by discussing the encounter between both realms. Dondeyne situated this link between temporal and eternal values mostly in the *Ethos*. In his reaction to this volume, though overall laudatory, Schillebeeckx remarked critically that this seemed a weak link. In Schillebeeckx’s own words: “The theistic moment as low point of the human-in-the-world [...] and as basis of the factual religious relation to God is lacking in the work of Prof. Dondeyne. Precisely this natural moment – climax of the inner-worldly capacity and low point or basis of the mere-in-grace-capacity or of the theological religiosity – seems to be the connection between the temporal

52 “Een spel van luisteren en spreken, van ontvangen en geven.” Dondeyne, *Geloof en Wereld*, 5.

and the religious.”⁵³ In this respect, even Dondeyne’s own work seems to fall victim to the diversification or even laicisation between culture and Christianity he once condemned so strongly.

Another striking element of this book was the complete absence of any reference to the Catholic Action movement and its role in the elevation of a Christian civilisation. Instead the individual faithful Christian was emphasised. He was considered as equal in dignity to all members of humanity and as one individual in a world struggling for unification. It was the individual who should be elevated both in society and in his relation to God. This development was in line with Dondeyne’s growing focus on human existence and experience. Ten years later, in his article ‘Tien jaar na ‘Geloof en Wereld’ (‘Ten years after ‘Faith and World’), he gave even more emphasis to the necessity of discussing the problematic nature of faith and world in the light of human existence, and addressed this no longer as being only an academic topic.

In brief, the biggest difference between the book and his articles is that the former, in dealing with the risks of a supra-naturalistic experience of faith and

a Church that was often accused of clericalism, overlooked the growing problem of horizontalism and mere naturalism. At times it even ran the risk of stimulating these developments. Dondeyne himself would in 1972 admit that a revised version of *Faith and the World* should take this upcoming danger more carefully into account: “Rightfully one has blamed the pre-conciliar Church of living too far from the world, in a kind of extreme supra-naturalism and a clerical ghetto-mind. ‘Geloof en Wereld’ [Faith and the World], just as the ‘Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,’ reacted explicitly against this mentality. Currently, however, the Church is threatened by the opposite danger, the danger of a disguised horizontalism. [...] When ‘Geloof en Wereld’ would be revised, these horizontalistic currents should be taken into account seriously.”⁵⁴

Conclusions

Dondeyne’s vision of the relationship between Christianity and the university was permanently marked by his wish to provide students at the university with a holistic Christian education that would

53 “Juist dit *theïstische* moment als *dieptepunt van de mens-in-de-wereld* (men zou ook kunnen zeggen als hoogtepunt) en daarom tevens als *basis* van de feitelijke religieuze verhouding tot God mis ik bij prof. Dondeyne. En juist dit *natuurlijke moment* – hoogtepunt van het binnenwereldlijke kunnen en laagtepunt of basis van het slechts-ingenade-kunnen of van de theologale godsdienstigheid – lijkt mij de eigenlijke bindingsfactor tussen het binnenwereldlijke en het religieuze.” Schillebeeckx, ‘Ter school bij prof. A. Dondeyne,’ 82.

54 “Terecht heeft men aan de vóórconciulaire Kerk verweten te ver van de wereld te leven, in een soort van opgeschroefd super-naturalisme en een klerikale gettogeest. Tegen die mentaliteit werd in *Geloof en Wereld* zeer uitdrukkelijk gereageerd en hetzelfde kan gezegd worden van de *Pastorale Constitutie over de Kerk in deze wereld*, *Gaudium et Spes*. Thans echter wordt de Kerk door een tegenovergesteld gevaar bedreigd, het gevaar voor een verkapt horizontalisme. [...] Bij een herzien van *Geloof en Wereld* zou natuurlijk met die horizontalistische strekkingen zeer ernstig rekening moeten worden gehouden.” Dondeyne, ‘Tien jaar na ‘Geloof en Wereld’, 21-22.

have a broader socio-cultural scope. Unlike the characters and the 'utopia' presented in the Aldous Huxley novel, Dondeyne aimed at forming autonomous individuals who would take the lead in the construction of a brave new world on the premise of a (Christian) humanism. This permanent line in Dondeyne's thinking was, however, expressed differently in shifting contexts.

Prior to the Second World War, Dondeyne's ideas, the HVKA, and the *Universitas*-movement strongly focused on the development of an integral Christian society. This was strongly influenced by success of the Catholic Action movement during the interbellum. Catholicism was hereby depicted as a radical option in which horizontalism and verticalism stood in a permanent and fruitful tension. Dondeyne stimulated university students to contribute to the elevation of the Flemish people and thus of civilisation as a whole. They were, as an elite group, the Church's *avant-garde* in a profane world in which anti-Christian currents were taking the lead. Thus, they had to instil Christianity once again in society and make it healthy once more. They were the bearers of a true Christian humanist culture and the faith of Christianity lay in their hands. The Catholic university played a pivotal role, by being both the centre of society and progress, and the apparatus of Christianity and the Church's missionary task within the world.

After the Second World War the focus on the societal role of Christianity shifted towards the existence of the believer. This went hand in hand with Dondeyne's increasing knowledge of

the philosophical current of existentialism. Nevertheless, while man's personal engagement in faith was stressed and the resulting commitment in society and the 'world' at large were seen as a logical consequence, the role of the Catholic Church or the movement of Catholic Action was downplayed. From now on it would be through the active promotion of a Christian humanism that the universal process of unification could be guided towards a harmonious culture and society. This harmony was considered both socially – the 'social question' had to be dealt with by the intellectual elite in collaboration with the working class – and regionally – the focus on the emancipation of the Flemish people was exchanged for a new universalism.

In sum, the Christian humanism presented by Dondeyne in his years as a spiritual mentor of the *Universitas*-movement cannot be considered as univocal, but does testify to a permanent interest in the well-being of the human person in society from a Christian viewpoint. The role of the university in the elaboration of this well-being was another continuum. It remains striking that the publication primarily identified with Dondeyne's thinking, *Faith and World*, seemed to separate the aspects of Christianity and culture into two autonomous entities. They were still capable of dialogue and connected by the *Ethos*, but their harmonious intertwinement had become less evident. Christian humanism had truly become more a 'supplement of the soul'⁵⁵ that could bear witness in society, but was no longer the essence of every human being taught at the university and integrated in the whole of society.

⁵⁵ Dondeyne, *Faith and World*, 316.

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Summary

This article discusses Albert Dondeyne's view of Christian humanism and its role in the university and society. The development of this view is considered in terms of its contribution to the revival of the Christian anthropology that was characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century. After a short biographical sketch of Dondeyne, the theme will be discussed in three major sections: First the theme will be situated in the period before the Second World War, during which it served in particular to further an integral Christian society and the development of a Catholic (Flemish) elite. Subsequently, in the post-war period, a subjectivising and a universalising can be observed, in which human existence and the development of a just social society become the important focus in Dondeyne's thought. In conclusion, an evaluation is made of the reception of these ideas in Dondeyne's *magnum opus* 'Geloof en Wereld' (*Faith and World*). Through this approach, a number of consistent lines of thought – such as the quest from a Christian perspective for the welfare of the human person in society – receive a varying interpretation in a continually developing context.

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