

Reviews & Opinions

Dooyeweerd Comes to Zumi's

September 28, 2011 - Paul Brink

Comment asked two leading Christians who work in politics—Paul Brink, a theorist and Associate Professor of Political Science at Gordon College, and Ray Pennings, a practitioner and Director of Research at Cardus—to reflect on how Jonathan Chaplin's new book *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (UND Press, 2011) might illuminate the work and theory of politics for this, and coming, generations. The week-long series began with Monday's graphic introduction to Dooyeweerd.

—*Editors*

## **Dooyeweerd Comes to Zumi's**

Paul Brink

I read most of Jonathan Chaplin's *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Society* at Zumi's Espresso and Ice Cream, a coffee house and ice cream shop in Ipswich, Massachusetts. It offers the best coffee north of Boston, and the combination of good coffee and ice cream has been a great success: kids and parents, locals and tourists, students and seniors all can be found there. Even more appealingly, the Nepali owner, Umesh Bhaju, serves only organic, fair trade coffee. Quite simply, the place is a delight, and some day when Chaplin makes his way to Gordon College where I teach politics, I hope to take him to Zumi's for a visit. I think he might enjoy hanging out in a place where his book has such wide application.

Here's why: while Zumi's may be a great place to contemplate political and social theory, most political and social theory has a lot of trouble contemplating Zumi's. Political theory, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, has made great strides since it emerged out of the darkness of post-war logical positivism: ask any of your neighbourhood political theorists, and you will be provided with a small library of first-rate thinkers who have made important contributions and vital correctives to the tradition.

And yet, walk into Zumi's and your library begins to feel curiously inadequate. Consider: Zumi's is a store and restaurant, established by Mr. Bhaju to turn a profit. But it is also a vital social space in our small town—the variety and depth of the social interactions that take place there would delight any urban sociologist. Zumi's offers its walls to local artists, public school children, and art professors. Its emphasis on fair trade goods and organic food takes a clear position on a vital economic and ethical debate. Its economic impact is also clear for the various part-time and full-time employees—including the high school students Bhaju employs, some of whom are in the process of learning how to hold a first job. Scattered

throughout the store are even hints of Bhuju's spiritual path: a smiling Buddha surveys the clientele over the ice cream counter.

One might imagine a short story about Zumi's—perhaps by John Updike, who lived in Ipswich for over twenty years—but social theory? How can we provide a theoretical accounting for the place? Enter Herman Dooyeweerd, a twentieth-century Dutch Christian philosopher re-introduced to us by Chaplin. What Dooyeweerd offers is a theory of social "things" that does not reduce those things to either the individual or the state. In this respect, it is novel. Much of the tradition of Western theorizing has historically taken the reductionist path; indeed one of the more encouraging trends in contemporary thought is the recognition of that path's inadequacy. In response, theories of civil society have appeared that attempt (with varying degrees of success) to account for the rich diversity of institutions, associations, and communities that are such a vital part of our daily experiences.

Dooyeweerd has much to offer, both to those theorists and to the rest of us. Zumi's, he might say, is a business, and as such it has a place within the full range of social institutions that populate our social world. It is different from other institutions such as the non-profit, the church, or the school; indeed, it has an irreducible identity—it is a business. As a business, it operates according to certain principles appropriate to it, and, significantly, these principles are not simply assigned (by the state, for example) or arbitrarily chosen (by Mr. Bhuju or anyone else), for they are part of what it means to be a business. If they are ignored, Zumi's would not be Zumi's much longer.

But even though its primary identity is as an economic entity, Zumi's also is involved in all the other ways we experience reality. To the degree to which it does so, and does so normatively, it should not only experience continued success as a business, but will also contribute to "full human flourishing" as an institutional member of the Ipswich community and as a contributor to our common life.

What Dooyeweerd is able to do is provide a theoretical account, not just for Zumi's, or even for economic enterprises more generally, but for all social—and non-social—things, "rooting them in the order of cosmic time." This is highly valuable, of course, to those working on theories of civil society, even apart from Dooyeweerd's further articulation of a theory of the state (to which Chaplin devotes three chapters). More remarkable is that his account avoids both the individualist and collectivist temptations.

But Chaplin pushes Dooyeweerd further. When we study Dooyeweerd, even when we study Kuyper, what we typically study are "things"—the structures, the types, or even "the tree" or "the song." This is well and good: Dooyeweerd offers us an unusually sophisticated account of "things."

But this is only half the story. According to Chaplin, accounting for the relationships between things (such as between Zumi's and the Ipswich Middle School, or Zumi's and the town government) is just as important as accounting for the things themselves. In

Dooyeweerd's original theory, these relationships (with the unfortunate label of "enkaptic interlacements") don't receive the full attention they need. Dooyeweerd is much more concerned with the "things" themselves (more technically, "individuality structures") or the ways they function in reality ("modal aspects").

Chaplin corrects this deficiency. Zumi's, Chaplin might say, possesses an irreducible identity as an economic enterprise. As an individuality structure, it functions in all the modal aspects in ways appropriate to that structure (art on walls, social meeting place, and so on). But more than that, Zumi's also engages in all kinds of interlinkages with other structures, and these are indispensable to its own flourishing as well as theirs. Says Chaplin, "the notion of irreducible identity does not imply self-sufficiency or self-enclosure; social structures are not fortresses pitted against invaders but institutionalized foci of functionally qualified responsibility." Zumi's is thus an integral part of a web of institutions and relationships, possessing responsibilities for the health of other structures and persons, while also benefitting from the concern of those others. And, crucially, these relations are not incidental; they are inherent to the nature of what Zumi's is.

Here then is a new theory of civil society, based in a modified reading of Dooyeweerd on social institutions, but moving beyond it to an investigation of the interconnectedness of the entities of which civil society is constituted. The point, says Chaplin, is to understand the "normative requirements of modern interlinkages," or, as Chaplin revises, of independencies. Here Chaplin makes a helpful linkage of his own by taking this modified version of sphere sovereignty and bringing it together with a modified version of the Catholic principle of subsidiarity: communities, by being themselves, provide distinctive forms of aid (*subsidium*) to each other. The narrow notion of "enkaptic interlacement," inherited from Dooyeweerd, is taken up into a broader account of interdependencies—relationships undertaken not as expressions of autonomy, but rather as the fulfilling of a social vocation.

The resulting picture is a compelling one, though to be persuaded fully, we would need to unpack several of the other inquiries Chaplin explores: the importance of understanding properly how social structures appeared in history, the timeliness of his critique of the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought, the risks of the radical nature of the state's call to public justice (hint: it's about relations, not institutions), and the bracing reminder that it is the task of theory to make sense of "naïve experience," and not the other way around.

Here's the remedy: get hold of a copy, head for your local Zumi's, read deeply, and don't stop looking around.

Posted in Culture, Institutions, Philosophy

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