

Christine Boshuijzen-van Burken & Darek M. Haftor (Eds) ~ Reason, Faith And Practice In Our Common Home - Festschrift for Dr. Sytse Strijbos ~ Biography Of Dr. Sytse Strijbos



Dr. Sytse Strijbos was born in Rotterdam, Netherlands, on March 28, 1944. He is the seventh child in a family of eight children, where the eldest and youngest were girls. His father was a hardworking tailor, and his mother worked as a nurse before she married. When Strijbos was about one year old, he stayed temporarily with relatives outside Rotterdam to recover from the effects of the Dutch famine winter at the end of the World War II. Strijbos was raised in the Calvinist faith, and in his youth, was shaped by the postwar Dutch mentality that emphasized citizens' contribution to the reconstruction of society, and an attitude that disciplined work is central in life.

In September 1961, after finishing high school, the young Strijbos moved to Delft, where he started his studies in applied physics at Delft University of Technology. He defended his master's dissertation at the Department of Physical Transport Phenomena, in April 1967. During his years as a student, the young Strijbos was an active member of the student society *Civitas Studiosorum Reformatorum*, where he was the president of the board from 1964 to 1965. Still, each year, he meets former board members and colleague students. Those younger years shaped Strijbos' thinking and attitude. This shaping would later influence Strijbos to search for an *integrative approach*, where the Christian faith's tenets of human dignity and compassion are combined with the human intellectual capabilities to reason and the human intentional action that transforms and intervenes in our

reality - the crucial step from thinking and believing to action and the consequences thereof.

Philips Years

After his graduation in 1967, Strijbos started his career as a researcher at Philips *Natuurkundig Laboratorium Eindhoven*. [i] About one year later, in December 1968, Strijbos married Harma Bosker, whom he met in the Reformed Church in Delft. They started their married life near Eindhoven, first in Heeze and later in Aalst-Waalre. The first three of their four children were born there. During his studies in Delft, Strijbos was strongly inspired by the philosophy classes of Professor Hendrik van Riessen. Shortly after his marriage, he decided to enroll as a student of philosophy at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*. He studied almost all evenings and on his days off, in addition to his fulltime job at Philips. About five years later, in the spring of 1975, he received his master's degree in philosophy.

At Philips Research Laboratories, Strijbos conducted applied research in the research group on "*ceramic materials*" led by Professor Stuijts. One of the topics he worked on was compaction of powders, that is, one of the stages in the fabrication process of advanced ceramic materials.[ii] Initially, he planned to write a doctoral dissertation on this topic; however, he abandon this plan without much hesitation when he was unexpectedly invited to apply for a job at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*. Strijbos left Philips Eindhoven after ten years and took up the position as assistant professor in the Department *Systematic Philosophy and Cultural Philosophy*, led by Professor Van Riessen. In the summer of 1977, the family moved to Maarssen, a small city near Utrecht.

Academic Years

During his career in the Faculty of Philosophy at *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, Strijbos established and managed several teaching and research initiatives in cooperation with other faculties and universities, which would clearly manifest his search for the integration of thinking, believing, and action. An initial and important initiative was the cooperation with the *Faculty of Dentistry*, now known as *Academic Centre for Dentistry Amsterdam*, (ACTA), which is a joint venture of the *Faculty of Dentistry of the University of Amsterdam*, the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, and the *Faculty of*[iii] *Exact Sciences* for students of computer science and artificial intelligence. On behalf of the ACTA, Strijbos developed a special ethics education program in cooperation with colleagues from social dentistry and the clinical staff. Eventually, this program led to an important

achievement, namely, the publication of *“Kiezen en Keuzen: Ethiek in de Tandheelkundige Praktijk,”* the first book on dental ethics in the Dutch language.[\[iv\]](#)

Almost at the beginning of his work at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, Strijbos conceived a plan to conduct a doctoral research project on *Systems Thinking*, which was a quickly and strongly emerging field. An initial impetus for this research direction was from a conference held in 1979 at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* on *“Systems Thinking and Societal Problems,”* that was held on the occasion of the third anniversary of the *Faculty of Philosophy* [\[v\]](#). In the initial years of his doctoral research, Strijbos attempted *“to build a bridge to the special sciences and seriously address the problems that arise there,”* he writes in the preface of his doctoral dissertation. He was specifically faced with the challenge of delving into the fields of dentistry and medicine, which were unknown fields to him. Strijbos writes in the preface of his dissertation, *“In order to become familiar with the problems of health care I not only processed much professional literature in recent years, but I also had many discussions with dentists and doctors.”* Supervised by Professor Sander Griffioen and cosupervised by Professor Egbert Schuurman, Strijbos received his doctoral degree in 1988 with a dissertation entitled *“Het technische wereldbeeld: een wijsgerig onderzoek van het systeemdenken”* (Eng. *“The technological worldview: a philosophical study of systems thinking”*).[\[vi\]](#) Partly inspired by his contacts at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, in particular the physician and medical historian Professor Gerrit Arie Lindeboom [\[vii\]](#), he devoted the last chapter of his dissertation to a comprehensive analysis of the *“technologization process”* (Dutch *“vertechniseringsproces”*) of modern medicine. This is a further development of his earlier reflections on medicine and medical ethics, which he published earlier in 1985, in the book *“Nieuwe Medische Ethiek”* (Eng. *“New Medical Ethics”*) [\[viii\]](#).

The retirement of Professor Van Riessen at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, followed shortly by the departure of his younger colleague and pupil Dr. Egbert Schuurman, also meant a change for Strijbos. More specifically, Strijbos’ initial plan to further develop the pioneering work of Van Riessen’s philosophy of technology and culture together with Prof. Van Riessen had to be changed. Instead, Strijbos joined then the Department of *Social-Cultural Philosophy*, headed by Professor Griffioen. At about the same time, Strijbos sought

international cooperation with colleagues with whom he could share his philosophical interest in systems thinking and the philosophy of technology. One of the first contacts was with Donald de Raadt, whom he traced through a publication in an academic journal in the field of systems thinking. This contact and subsequent dialogs led to their establishment of the *Centre for Philosophy, Technology and Social Systems* (CPTS), in 1995, an international, interdisciplinary academic cooperation in the fields of philosophy, technology, social sciences in a framework of systems thinking.

Centre for Philosophy Technology and Social Systems

In 1995, Strijbos was the principal organizer of the annual conference of the International Society for Systems Sciences (ISSS) at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*. Donald de Raadt was then the president of the ISSS. The dialogs with Donald de Raadt culminated in a long-term collaboration. Strijbos presented courses on systems thinking at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden, where Donald de Raadt resided. Andrew Basden, from Salford University, UK, who also had a keen interest in philosophy and the use of information and communication technologies, soon joined this cooperation. In this cooperation, Amsterdam, Luleå, and Salford expanded to include a dozen doctoral students, with annual working conferences held in Maarssen, Netherlands. Central to this cooperation was the three founders' shared interest in the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. The CPTS initiative can be regarded as a second major achievement (the ACTA initiative was the first), and represents an integration of faith and theology with thinking, where philosophy interacts with several specialized disciplines and their actions.

At the ISSS conference in Budapest in 1996, Strijbos met Professor Dries de Wet and Dr. Annemarie Potas from the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, Vaal Triangle Campus, South Africa (now known as the North-West University). They shared similar interests and the view that science and faith should not be isolated. This relationship was formally established in 1997, through an interdisciplinary research project where Strijbos cooperated with his new South African colleagues. At that time, Strijbos formulated his ideas and termed them "*disclosive systems thinking*," on which he wrote scholarly contributions [\[ix\]](#) that attracted several scholars from the Centre of Science and Faith at North-West University to participate in the annual working conferences of the CPTS in Maarssen. This long-lasting cooperation with South African

communities manifested another dimension of the integration pursued by Strijbos: an integration between the Southern and Northern hemispheres, with all their peculiarities.

From the Netherlands, there was a keen interest in the CPTS' unique cooperation and attempted integration from the *Institute for Culture Ethics*, especially from Dr. Jan van der Stoep. The intellectual cooperation between researchers within the CPTS resulted in a millstone publication of a book in 2016, edited by Sytse Strijbos and Andrew Basden, entitled "*In Search of an Integrative Vision for Technology*." For the first time, this volume presents, in a systematic and comprehensive manner, the unique research program of the CPTS. This program proposes a conception of humans, society, and technology and its use in an alternative mode to the prevalent contemporary approaches and their struggle between the intentional-constructivist and the material-determinist approaches. After a decade of operations, the CPTS was transformed into the current "*International Institute for Developmental Ethics*" (IIDE).

International Institute for Developmental Ethics

Encouraged by his entrepreneurial brother Aad Strijbos, and with support from Aad's company CHR Investment B.V., based in Rotterdam, Strijbos started an initiative that led to the establishment of the IIDE in 2004. The IIDE is a scholarly institute with a practical mission, researching the extent, nature, and normative aspects of poverty, inequality, and injustice through local, regional, national, and international channels. In that sense, Strijbos succeeded in achieving a fuller integration of the concrete action, with faith and reason dominating the endeavors of the CPTS.

Although the IIDE is a fully independent organization without ties to any religious denomination, it takes Christian principles and values as its primary source for guidance and reference. As such, its views on Christian social responsibility lead the way to its vision, its mission, and its concrete services and products for the benefit of society. The IIDE's mission is to offer expert capabilities to enable people and organizations in the development environment to become more caring, creative, and free in the context of development, by operating on the basis of Christian values, such as service, love, justice, equality, freedom, human dignity, and solidarity.

The IIDE has two legally independent departments: one in South Africa and one in

the Netherlands. The department in South Africa resulted from Strijbos' collaboration with Rev. Kiepie Jaftha, then chief director of community service at the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein), and his interactions with North-West University, based on an informal level and through personal contacts and incidental conferences on developmental issues. Prof. Annette Combrink, then rector at North-West University, served as one of the board members of the IIDE. Strijbos' leadership is manifested by the memoirs of Prof. Lucius Botes, as follows:

"When I think of Sytse Strijbos when he first approached me while I was the Director of the Centre for Development Support at the University of the Free State, South Africa the following thoughts and impressions came to mind. I was immediately impressed with Sytse's knowledge of the South African faith-based development scene. At that stage, he already networked with some 80 plus people and organizations in South Africa. I was also struck by his focus that we should create some space where faith-based development practice should reflect on the ethics of the practice. He constantly reminded me how important it is to pursue an engaged scholarship that attempts at bridging the gap between scholarly and conceptual views and practical experience. This means mobilizing practitioners to have more theoretical reflections on their practice and encourage development scholars to reach out to practitioners."

Professor Lucius Botes, former "Director of the Centre for Development Support" and Dean Faculty of the Humanities, University of the Free State, South Africa.

Strijbos succeeded in engaging the "Noaber Foundation" as a donor and investor for the projects pursued in South Africa, such as helping small business owners in Qua Qua with their start-up investments. That work produced an academic book titled *"From Our Side,"* 2008, edited by Steve De Gruchy, Nico Koopman, and Sytse Strijbos. In the book, several scholars from South Africa and the Netherlands present their vision of social and cultural development.

International Engagements

In his academic work, Strijbos has been invited to deliver lectures and full courses on various aspects of normativity, technology, and systems thinking in various countries for a number of years. On an invitation from Professor Donald de Raadt, one major engagement toward the end of 1990's was the development and annual delivery of a unique course on systems thinking to undergraduate students at Luleå University of Technology in Sweden. He has delivered multiple

guest lectures in Asia, for example, in China at the invitation of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and at several universities in South Korea and Japan. He also has presented guest lectures in North America.

From 1997 to 2014, Strijbos visited South Africa two to three times per year, usually for two weeks. In that context, Strijbos was appointed as an associated professor in the newly established *Centre of Science and Faith* at North-West University, providing him with the context where science and faith could be addressed in an integrated manner. Together with the director of this centre, Professor Pieter Potgieter, Strijbos developed annual workshops for newly appointed academic staff at North-West University, that is, workshops addressing the relation between science and faith.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the government of South Africa introduced a new educational mode for institutions of higher education called the “The South African Qualifications Authority” (SAQA), which required all academic staff to have had exposure to the following:

Identifying and solving problems in which responses display that responsible decisions using creative and critical thinking have been made.

Using science and technology effectively and critically, showing responsibility toward the environment and health of others.

Demonstrating an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognizing that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

Contributing to the full personal development of the learner and the social and economic development of society at large, by making it the underlying intention of any program of learning to make the individual aware of:

- participating as responsible citizens in the life of local, national, and global communities;

- being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts.

Prof. Daan van Wyk, dean of the Faculty of Natural Science of North-West University, appointed the then retired rector of the PU vir CHO, Prof. Carools Reinecke, to develop new material for the prescribed course in philosophy of science for third-year undergraduate students to comply with the new SAQA regulations. Moreover, all the students in the Faculties of Natural Science, Health Sciences, and Engineering had to pass that course. Prof. Reinecke recommended that Strijbos act as an advisor and collaborator in the development of the new course. Based on his wide experience in this field, Strijbos proposed an

alternative focus to the course: Science, Technology, and Society (STS). In addition, he advised that at least four other collaborators from the Netherlands be appointed by the university to partake in the development of the new course - a proposal approved by the university. Strijbos acted as scientific coordinator and Prof. C. Reinecke as managerial coordinator of a team that included Dr. Ir. F.K. Boersma (*Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*), Prof. Dr. M. de Vries (Technical University Eindhoven and Technical University, Delft), Dr. H. Jochemsen (Director of the Centre for Medical Ethics at the G.A. Lindeboom Institute, Ede), and Dr. J. van der Stoep (Director of the Institute for Cultural Ethics, Amersfoort). Under Strijbos' initiative North-West University was the first institution that formally complied with the new SAQA requirements.[\[x\]](#)

Strijbos' social awareness has been well known throughout his academic life, through his continuous focus on practice-oriented research and additional activities. Among others, he was a guest lecturer for several years at the *Foundation of Christian Philosophy*, where he taught courses at the University of Twente and Wageningen University, Netherlands. He has served as member of the Provinciale Staten in Utrecht (States-Provincial, which is the provincial parliament in the Netherlands), acted as an external advisor of a hospital ethics committee in the Utrecht region, and served many years as elder in the local church community.

Strijbos has always been interested in the relation between technology, philosophy, and theology. His primary hobby is reading books that are intellectually challenging or about history. He enjoys reading to his grandchildren and loves hiking and multiday tours.

Strijbos' Message

Strijbos' book on the ethics of dentistry is a bold manifestation of his vision for the interaction between faith, intellect, and action. A starting point is that theoretical reflection should begin with a pretheoretical concern in the context of human affairs, which is fed into an intellectual reflection unconditionally founded on creedal convictions that require critical reflection. The results from such intellectual reasoning should be fed back into social intervention for the sake of humans flourishing. Strijbos is not against the use of technology and development of social affairs but is always critical about the way development and technology are conceived, used, and pursued in human affairs; he stresses the importance of an explication of a normative direction of development and the use of technology.

His book on the ethics of dentistry contains a plea for a modern version of professional dentistry that applies to any profession. Its pages provide a guide, not a solution, for normative reflection on daily professional practices, where emphasis is placed on the practical situation and contact with the patient in the sociocultural context, where the latter conditions human actions in the clinical practice.

Notes

[i] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philips_Natuurkundig_Laboratorium

[ii] Some data can be found in manuals on ceramic technology: R.J. Brook (ed.) Concise Encyclopedia of Advanced Ceramic Materials, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1991, page 113-117 and page 383-384. And also in: M.N. Rahaman, Ceramic Processing, Taylor & Francis, London/New York, 2007.

[iii]

[iv] Kiezen en Keuzen: Ethiek in de tandheelkundige praktijk. Houten/Diegem, Bohn, Stafleu, Van Loghum, 1999. - In Dutch, the word "kiezen" translates both as "choosing" and as "molars"; thus, the title can be translated as "Choosing (or Molars) and Choices: Ethics in Dental Practice"

[v] From this congress resulted the volume "Systeemdenken en samenlevingsproblematiek," edited by S. Strijbos, VU Boekhandel, Amsterdam, 1981.

[vi] S. Strijbos, "Het technische wereldbeeld: Een wijsgerig onderzoek van het systeemdenken". Amsterdam, Buijten & Schipperheijn. An English summary can be found here: <http://hdl.handle.net/1871/15599>

[vii] See introductory Chapter 1 in the volume "De Medische Ethiek in de branding, Een keuze uit het werk van Gerrit Arie Lindeboom," edited by S. Strijbos, Buijten & Schipperheijn, Amsterdam, 1992.

[viii] See Chapters 2, 3, and 7 in "Nieuwe Medische Ethiek," edited by S. Strijbos, Buijten & Schipperheijn, Amsterdam, 1985

[ix] Strijbos S. 2003 Systems Thinking and the Disclosure of a Technological Society: Some Philosophical Reflections in *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 20: 119-131.

[x] The positive outcomes of the innovative approach to education are documented in Proceedings of the Annual Working Conference of the CPTS (Reinecke, C. (2008). Critical cross-field outcomes for all graduate education at the North West University of South Africa. In: *Proceedings of the 13/14th Annual Working Conference of CPTS*, Basden, A., Eriksson, D., Strijbos, S. (eds). CPTS:

Maarssen, 66-81).