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## **Johannes Verkuyl (1908-2001): een leven lang zending en dialoog**

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## Summary

Johannes Verkuyl (1908-2001): a lifelong commitment to mission and dialogue  
The development of his ideas on religions and worldviews

1.

This study is a chronological and systematic survey on the development of the theology of religions or *theologia religionum* of the late Dutch theologian Johannes Verkuyl. The survey starts in 1939, the year Verkuyl completed his masters in missiology at the VU University Amsterdam. Based on Verkuyl's thesis *De tegenwoordige stand van het vraagstuk der Anknüpfung en adaptatie in de zendingswetenschap* ('The current discussion on 'Anknüpfung' and adaptation in missiology'), he defines a set of parameters which enabled him to examine the articles and books Verkuyl wrote on theology of religions in general, on Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism in particular and on worldviews such as communism, anthroposophy and the New Age Movement.

He distinguishes three periods in Verkuyl's life: a. 1940-1962: the years he worked as a missionary in Indonesia; b. 1963-1978: the years he was general secretary of the Dutch Missionary Council and professor in Missiology and Evangelism at the VU University Amsterdam; c. 1978-2001: his life and work as professor emeritus. For each period the author describes and analyses Verkuyl's writings. By means of the parameters he shows the development of Verkuyl's thoughts in each particular period.

Beginning with an extensive biographical sketch, the author examines the theological and the political context within which Verkuyl's theological reflections took place. This is followed by an analytical description of his writings in the three distinguished periods. The author compares Verkuyl's vision with the thoughts of those missiologists and scholars of religions he relates to or opposes to. The latter is followed by an analytical description of his writings on world religions, especially Islam and Judaism and on worldviews. The summarizing evaluations at the end of this dissertation not only deal with the matter of the development of Verkuyl's *theologia religionum* but also with the question whether and, if so, to what extent his thoughts are relevant for the contemporary discussion.

2.

In the second chapter the author sketches Verkuyl's life in the theological and political context of his time. He describes the missionary thinking, which had been developed within the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands since the Synod of Middelburg in 1896. He not only portrays those theologians and scholars who influenced the debate on *theologia religionum* within the Reformed Churches, such as Abraham Kuiper (1837-1920), Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964), but also those who played an important role in the debate on an international level, like Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), Karl Barth (1886-1968), Emil Brunner (1889-1965) and Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965). The author outlines the developments after World War II and describes the thoughts of Karl Rahner (1904-1984), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft (1900-

1985), Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-1995), John Hick (1922-2012) and Paul Knitter (1939).

Johannes Verkuyl was born on the 16th of January 1908 in the village of Nieuw-Vennep, to the south of Amsterdam. The Verkuyl family was rooted in the church schism of 1834 (*Afscheiding*), which was characterized by an emphasis on personal piety and faith experience, as well as in the church schism of 1886 (*Doleantie*) led by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper wanted to awaken the church from its focus on piety and proclaimed the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all aspects of life. In his personal faith and in the development of his theology Verkuyl was influenced by both of these movements. In 1932, after finishing his bachelor in theology at the VU University Amsterdam, he was ordained minister. In 1935 he was asked by the missionary department of the Reformed Church to work as a pastor for Indonesian students who studied in The Netherlands. Through his work as a student pastor he not only got to know Christian but also many Muslim students. Inspired by Eli Stanley Jones he organized roundtable meetings to bring students of both religious backgrounds together. In this period Verkuyl got acquainted with the religious scholar Hendrik Kraemer, at this stage professor at Leiden University. Kraemer and especially his famous book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian world* (1938) had a major influence on the development of Verkuyl's theology of religions. In December 1939 right after he completed his masters on missiology he moved with his wife and children to Indonesia to work as a missionary on the island of Java. At that time Indonesia, then named the Dutch East Indies, was a Dutch colony. Some months before he left The Netherlands, Verkuyl, together with hundreds of students from all over the world, participated in the first World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam. At the end of this conference he had an experience that had an enormous impact on his life and thoughts: During the celebration of the Lord's Supper at the closing service, a Chinese student stood up and unexpectedly passed the cup to a Japanese student. This gesture made a huge impression on all the participants because they realized that Japan and China were at war. At that very moment Verkuyl knew that reconciliation with God through Christ meant more than the forgiving of sins. It meant that 'enemies' could overcome their hatred and reconcile. This experience motivated Verkuyl to participate in the ministry of reconciliation during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1942-1945) and also during the conflicts between the Republic of Indonesia and the Dutch government (1945-1949 and 1957-1962). It also motivated him in the Sixties to protest against the Apartheid ideology in South Africa and to demonstrate against the American intervention in Vietnam. Due to his outspokenness Verkuyl was on the one hand admired and on the other reviled by many in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and in the protestant *Anti-Revolutionaire Partij*

In the years following the capitulation of Japan and the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia Verkuyl worked in Jakarta as professor at the protestant theological seminary and he participated in setting up the Christian Publishing Company. During a one-year leave in The Netherlands he wrote his dissertation *Enkele aspecten van het probleem der godsdienstvrijheid in Azië* ('A few aspects of the problem of freedom of religion in Asia'). In April 1948 he received his PhD at the VU University Amsterdam. In 1962, after more than twenty years in Indonesia he and

his family moved back to The Netherlands. Verkuyl became General Secretary of the Dutch Missionary Council and professor Missiology and Evangelism at the VU. In that period he took part in the World Missionary Conference in Mexico City (1963) the assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala and the World Missionary Conference in Bangkok (1972/73). During these years he wrote his magnum opus *Inleiding in de nieuwere zendingswetenschap* (1975), which was published in English as *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (1978). At the age of seventy he became professor emeritus. In the Eighties and Nineties he continued participating in the debate on theology of religions and wrote several articles and books on the Christian-Muslim dialogue, on the dialogue between Church and Synagogue, etcetera. He died on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2001 at the age of 93.

3.

In the third chapter the author focuses on the development of Verkuyl's thoughts on *theologia religionum*. In 1939 the starting point of Verkuyl's theology of religions was the Reformed doctrine of 'common grace'. God's common grace was seen in his continuing care for his creation; in the restraint of sin in the life of the individual and in society; in the fact that fallen mankind retains a conscience indicating the differences between right and wrong. It was by common grace that man kept a sense of God's existence. According to Verkuyl religion started when people began to search for the God they sensed. In the theology of religions based upon the concept of common grace Romans 1: 18-24 and 2: 14-16 played a key role. On the basis of these texts Verkuyl said that in religion man not only searched for God, but also deliberately rebelled against God. However this didn't mean that religion was totally corrupted. But, although some of God's light was still visible in the various religions, it was only by faith in Jesus Christ that man could be saved.

Based upon Verkuyl's thesis in 1939 the author defines the parameters: common grace; antithesis; God's light in religion and salvation only through Christ. By means of these parameters the author analyses the books and articles Verkuyl wrote in the three distinguished periods. He shows that Verkuyl *on the one hand* throughout the Forties and Fifties firmly maintained this concept of religion. In the articles and books published in this period he stresses again and again the absoluteness of God's revelation in Christ. Verkuyl was convinced that abandoning the idea of the absoluteness would undermine the Great Commission. *On the other hand* during these years Verkuyl wrote about God's patience with people and his personal involvement with every human being. Verkuyl also became more and more convinced of the idea that the Holy Spirit was moving far beyond the boundaries of the church and Christianity.

In the Sixties and Seventies inspired by Hendrikus Berkhof's *Christus, de zin der geschiedenis* ('Christ, the meaning of history', 1958) and by Karl Barth's *Licht-lehre* (Church Dogmatics IV/3, 1959) Verkuyl continued to explore a less antithetical and a more inclusive *theologia religionum*. Their notion that all people are living within the power range of Christ, that He is the *Pantocrator*, whose light shines in the farthest corners of the world, opened to Verkuyl new perspectives. Another theologian that inspired him to move further on the road to a more inclusive theology of religions was Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft, the first secretary general of the

World Council of Churches. In his book *No other name* Visser 't Hooft introduces the concept of Christocentric universalism. The fundamental thought in this concept is that God reconciled the world to Himself through the death of Christ.

Based on II Corinthians 5 Visser 't Hooft uses the phrase: 'One for all and once for all'. To explain this concept he pictures Christ as the center of two concentric circles. The first circle represents the church and the second and wider circle represents humanity. He states that the smaller circle must become wider and wider. The divine act on which reconciliation depends has happened once and for all and is unrepeatable, but the ministry of reconciliation is to go on till the end of time. Verkuyl embraced this concept and called it the answer of the church and theology against the spirit of relativism, skepticism and syncretism.

In this period Verkuyl was also inspired by the idea Hendrik Kraemer expressed in his book *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1958) about God's ongoing dialogue with people. Based upon the thoughts of Kraemer Verkuyl stated that dialogue between two persons of different faiths is in fact a *trialogue*, because God is the third participant in the encounter. Or rather that God is the *first* person in the *trialogue*, because he takes - as Verkuyl emphasized - the initiative.

In the Eighties and Nineties, in response to John Hick's ideas on a theocentric theology of religions and to Paul Knitter's plea for a soteriocentric theology of religions Verkuyl underlined again and again the importance of a Christocentric or a Trinitarian *theologia religionum*. He argued that with their ideas Hick and Knitter crossed the line and broke with the Christian tradition. In Verkuyl's opinion their theologies of religions were no longer Christian theologies. In his opposition to the theocentric and soteriocentric tendencies in modern *theologia religionum* Verkuyl called for a reevaluation of the doctrine of common grace and also for the reintroduction of 'elenctics' or apologetics in missiology.

At the end of the third chapter the author evaluates the development of Verkuyl's *theologia religionum*. By means of the parameters he notes that Verkuyl moves from an antithetical theology of religions in the Thirties, to an inclusive *theologia religionum* in the Sixties and Seventies. Although Verkuyl called for a reevaluation of the doctrine of common grace and pled for a reintroduction of apologetics at the end of his life, he did not return to his earlier antithetical position. He used the notions of common grace and apologetics as critical elements in his synthetic *theologia religionum*.

4.

In the fourth chapter the author describes the development of Verkuyl's thoughts on the major world religions and worldviews. Throughout his life - despite the fact that he was a missiologist and no scholar of religion - Verkuyl published articles and books on Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etcetera. His purpose was to inform his fellow Christians about the non-Christian religions and to equip them for interreligious dialogue. The author starts his analysis of Verkuyl's writings with a paradigm he used in his approach to the world religions and worldviews. In his master thesis (1939) and in his dissertation (1948) Verkuyl used the works of phenomenologists such as Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), Ignác Goldziher (1850-1921), Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920), Maximilian Carl Emil Weber

(1864-1920), Jan Jakob Maria de Groot (1854-1921) Marcel Granet (1884-1940) and Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950). The purpose of phenomenology of religion was to search for the essence of a distinct religious phenomenon and the essence of religion as a whole. Hendrik Kraemer denied the existence of one essence in all religion. He believed that every single religion was a 'world in itself' with its own center, axe, and structure, not to be reduced to other religions or to a common denominator which expresses its inner core and makes it all translucent. This means that, although Kraemer rejected the existence of one essence in religion, he accepted the idea that every single religion has a heart of its own. He believed that all elements of specific religions were related to this heart. In his book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) he sketches the centres of the various religions. The author states that Verkuyl followed Kraemer's vision and used his description of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. In the Forties and Fifties e.g. Verkuyl defined the heart of Islam - exactly as Kraemer did in the Thirties - as 'hyperbolic theocentricity' and as 'secularized theocracy'. The result of this approach was, that it enabled Verkuyl to speak of 'the' Islam, 'the' Hindu religion, 'the' Buddhist philosophy, 'the' communist doctrine etcetera. In the Sixties a different paradigm on religions emerged. In his book *The Meaning and End of religion* (1962) the Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith rejected the idea of the essence of religion and the idea that every single religion was a 'world in itself', a 'system' in which all elements were related to one centre. In his opinion a difference should be made between the religious 'cumulative tradition' someone belongs to and 'the faith' of the individual believer. He was convinced that everyone experiences his religious tradition in his own specific way. Smith accepted the fact that each cumulative tradition includes a set of rules, dogma's and practices, but stressed that every believer deals with these rules, dogma's and practises in his own manner. He concluded that 'the' religion didn't exist and refused to speak about 'the' Islam or 'the' Hindu religion. In his opinion the study of religions is not about systems but about *people* with an Islamic or Hindu or Christian background. The author shows that Verkuyl in the Mid-Sixties fully embraced this new paradigm. From that moment on in his speeches and his writings about the different World Religions Verkuyl stressed again and again the importance of making the distinction between faith and cumulative tradition. His choice for the new paradigm had consequences for his evaluation of the world religions. On the one hand he was reserved in his judgment about someone's personal faith, because he realized he couldn't look into the soul of a fellow Christian or a Muslim, a Hindu or a Buddhist. One can never tell how God works in the soul of another human being. On the other hand he gave his opinion on the cumulative traditions of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, but also of Christianity. Verkuyl's criterion was the Gospel of Jesus Christ, his life, his message of the Kingdom of God, his ministry to the sick and to the poor, his death on the cross, his resurrection and his ascension.

In the Eighties and Nineties Verkuyl focused on the relationship between Church and Mosque and between Church and Synagogue. Inspired by Kenneth Cragg's book *The Call of the Minaret* (1956) Verkuyl wrote about the Christian dialogue with Muslims. He gave an outline of the Muslim cumulative tradition and an overview of their 'misapprehensions' of the Gospel. Verkuyl was convinced that only if

a Christian could explain the Gospel and the Christian doctrine better to Muslims, they would be able to make a faire choice in favour or against Christ. It is noticed that in this period Verkuyl used the same terms to describe Islam as he did in the Thirties, i.e. 'hyperbolic theocentricity' and as 'secularized theocracy'. Verkuyl was highly criticized for this by his colleagues. Did Verkuyl return to the old paradigm again at the end of his life? Or did he - although he embraced the approach of Wilfred Cantwelle Smith - never fully set it aside? The author concludes that the latter is in fact the case.

5.

The summarizing evaluations in the fifth and final chapter of this book starts with the question if 'the' *theologia religionum* of Johannes Verkuyl exists. Should it not be better to speak of his distinct *theologies* of religions, because during his lifetime he wrote about this subject in totally different contexts? The answers here is that, although Verkuyl in the three periods of his life put the emphasis on distinct aspects, there are some basic thoughts that resonate throughout his work. By means of these basic thoughts he is able to formulate 'the' theology of religions of Verkuyl and to evaluate it.

The first aspect of Verkuyl's *theologia religionum* the author mentions is his dialectic view on religions. On the one hand Verkuyl is positive about religions. He sees them as expressions of the human quest of God, the human desire to get in touch with man's Creator. In this human search for God Verkuyl detects the work of the Holy Spirit. God is moving in the world religions. On the other hand Verkuyl sees the religions as human and therefore as 'impure' answers to God's call. He is convinced that the only way to really get to know God is by His revelation through His son Jesus Christ. In the third chapter the author showed that Verkuyl embraced the concept of Christocentric universalism. This resulted in a more inclusive and synthetic theology of religions. It did not mean that Verkuyl fully omitted the dialectic view on religions. Within the concept of Christocentric universalism the dialectic view enabled him to have a critical mind-set first of all towards his own religious life and towards Christianity, but further more to all other religions. The author agrees with Verkuyl on his inclusive Christocentric theology of religions. He is convinced that this concept does justice to the rich diversity of the Biblical witness. He notes that although there are texts, which condemn the Egyptian, Canaanite or Babylonian religions, there are passages, which show that God works *in* and *through* the lives of people of other faiths. The author also agrees on Verkuyl's choice to use the dialectic view as a means to keep a critical mind-set within an inclusive *theologia religionum*.

The second aspect of Verkuyl's *theologia religionum* is his emphasis on God's revelation in Jesus Christ. He believed that, although God reveals himself through nature and history (*General Revelation*), only his 'Special Revelation' in Christ could save mankind. Throughout his work Verkuyl used the term 'absoluteness' in combination with 'God's revelation in Christ'. It is explained how this term via Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and other philosophers started to play an important but controversial role in the theology of religions at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. It would be better

to skip this term, because: a. it isn't a biblical term; b. the rich diversity within the New Testament witness is not reducible to one common philosophical denominator. Does the deletion of 'the absoluteness' undermine the Great Commission and the missionary work around the globe? The author is convinced that this is not the case. The claim of 'the absoluteness' is not needed to legitimize mission. The biblical witness, in its rich diversity, invites us to learn the different aspects of Jesus' life, work, teachings, death and resurrection and to discover - together with people of other religious backgrounds – the work he does amongst us today.

The third aspect of Verkuyl's theology of religions is 'the reconciliation with God through Christ'. This is not only the centre of Verkuyl's personal belief, but also of his missionary and political work. It motivated him to denounce again and again all forms of political, social, religious and ideologically motivated injustice. It inspired him to commit himself to the fight for the right to freedom of religion. In Verkuyl's opinion the right to freedom of religion not only meant the freedom to express and to practise one's religion in society, but also the freedom to express one's personal faith *within* an organized religion. It also meant the freedom to convert from one religion to another.

The author states that Verkuyl's commitment to the ministry of reconciliation and to the fight for the right to freedom of religion is an example for us today. In our society populist parties and religious extremists raise their voices. The result is that people of different cultural and religious backgrounds turn their backs on each other. Verkuyl's example challenges us to participate today in the ministry of reconciliation and to stand up for the right to freedom of religion.

The fourth and last aspect of Verkuyl's theology of religion is 'dialogue'. During his work as a student pastor in the Thirties, as a missionary in the Forties and Fifties, and as professor at the VU University Amsterdam in the Sixties and Seventies worked on dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths. He often took the initiative to organize roundtable meetings to get Christians and Muslims together. The author is convinced that Verkuyl's choice for Wilfred Cantwell Smith's vision on religion in the Sixties helped him to focus in dialogue on someone's personal faith rather than on his religious tradition. As we saw Verkuyl introduced in these years the word *trialogue* because he believed that in every heart-to-heart dialogue among people of different faiths God is the third participant. The author believes that Verkuyl's commitment to dialogue and especially his willingness to take the initiative to gather people of different faiths around the table is an example for us today.

At the end of his dissertation the author expresses the hope that his work may challenge the readers to get involved in dialogue with people of other faiths.