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1. THE BACKGROUND OF BERKHOF'S THEOLOGY

The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof, professor of dogmatics and biblical theology at the State University of Leiden in the Netherlands (1960-1981) and distinguished ecumenical theologian, is challenging (Hasselaar 1975:36), if not controversial (Flesseman-Van Leer et al, 1974:8). Since the publication of his book: *Christelijk geloof. Een inleiding tot de geloofsleer* (1973a)¹, the fruit of his theological labours of many years, his views have aroused much interest, varied criticism, and widespread debate. Some hailed him a “Church Father new-style...with the accent on that ‘new-style’...” (Flesseman-van Leer et al, 1974:7) a pioneer and pontoneer, a bridge and bridgehead builder “in the no-man’s land between one-sidedness and extremism (Flesseman-van Leer et al, 1981:9). Others, however, are of the opinion that his views deviate from the orthodox Reformed tradition to such an extent, that “in each of his works there is at least one bold heresy”! (G. Rothuizen quoted by J.T. Bakker 1976:143). Then again there are those who maintain that at some stage or other even Church Fathers are deemed heretics, only to be honoured as Church Fathers once again later on (Flesseman-van Leer et al, 1981:10). Such widely divergent assessments naturally and forcefully pose the question: What indeed does Berkhof's theology involve? Can it be categorized or characterized as representing one or other trend in theology or school of thought? If so, what does Berkhof aim to achieve, and does he achieve his aim? This dissertation is an attempt to provide possible answers to these questions.

As H.W. de Krijff (1974:90) has succinctly stated, Berkhof was not only literally, but also theologically a ‘much-travelled’ man. His vision is panoramic and there is very little that escapes his notice. At an early age Berkhof was already well-known in a broad circle. This he remained, largely because of his unique ability to fathom the issues of the period, and to interpret and express them in a most lucid manner. His gripping style, his warmth and humility, his curiosity and clarity are characteristics which rendered him almost irresistible (Flesseman-van Leer et al, 1981:8-9). No wonder that his books and articles are widely read, and that churches were crowded when

¹ Seven revised editions have since been published, the 7th in 1993. An English translation by Sierd Woudstra: *Christian Faith. An introduction to the study of the faith* appeared in 1979, revised in 1986, 1990, and 2010. Where relevant, reference to the various editions will be indicated as 1985⁵ or 1993⁷ or E.T.1979b. Letters a, b, c, distinguish between articles or books published in the same year or in compilations.

he conducted the service (Flesseman-van Leer et al, 1974:7). As a leading theologian, Berkhof was highly esteemed in his fatherland. During and directly after the Second World War he was one of the younger generation of theologians who played a major role in the renewal within the Netherlands Reformed Church² (Blei 1983:325). In 1948 Berkhof represented his Church at the founding of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam (Berkhof 1976b:8). In 1974 he was elected chairman of the Netherlands Council of Churches, a position which he held until 1983 (De Kruijf 1984:179). Berkhof also won international acclaim. Honorary doctorates were awarded to him by the Reformed Theological Academy of Budapest (1955) and by the Universities of Edinburgh (1960), Aberdeen (1965), and Bern (1968) (Flesseman-van Leer et al, 1974:248). He lectured in the United States of America, the German Democratic Republic (the former East Germany), Finland, Switzerland, and Indonesia. After initial problems to obtain a visa, he was at last also able to visit South Africa to attend the 1979 SACLA Conference in Pretoria (Scheeps 1981:4).

From the above it is abundantly clear that in order to do full justice to the work of a man of Berkhof's stature and standing, many and various considerations have to be taken into account when assessing his theology. Not the least important among these is to have insight into the background and the roots of the man behind the theology. Indeed, as Berkhof himself stated, his life-story and his theological development, though not identical, are interwoven (Berkhof 1981g:11).

Hendrikus Berkhof was born on June 11, 1914 at Appeltern in the province of Maas and Waal (Flesseman-Van Leer et al 1974:247). His parents were knowledgeable members of the Netherlands Reformed Church and, as he put it, of a mild confessional type, who, after settling in Amsterdam, were steadily influenced more and more by the preaching of the Ethical movement (Berkhof 1981g:12). After attending school at De Lier and at the *Gereformeerde Gymnasium* in Amsterdam, the young Berkhof decided to study theology, his reason being that he saw in it a kind of *studium generale* of fundamental questions (13). Having passed his propaedeutics in June 1932 at the Urban University of Amsterdam, he continued his theological studies at the State University of Leiden until 1938, with a brief interim-period of research for his doctor-

² The two Dutch words *hervormd* and *gereformeerde* both mean literally "reformed." With the term 'Netherlands Reformed Church' I refer to the *Hervormde Kerk* in contrast to the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* which I will refer to as the 'Reformed Churches of the Netherlands'.

ate at the University of Berlin and at the prohibited *Kirchliche Hochschule der Bekennende Kirche* in 1937. His studies in Germany were interrupted after six months, however, due to the fact that Berkhof was being sought by the Gestapo on account of “incendiary activities”, as he put it (14).

On October 16, 1938 Berkhof was invested as minister of the Netherlands Reformed Church at Lemele, and in September 1939 he attained his doctorate with a dissertation entitled: *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea*. A little more than a month after his marriage to Miss Cornelia van den Berg in September 1940, Berkhof was arrested by the security police of the German occupying forces on account of a *deutschfeindliche* sermon, and held in custody for six months. He utilized this period of internment to complete the greater part of his book: *Geschiedenis der kerk*³, which was later published in 1942.

From April 1944 until March 1950 Berkhof served as minister of the Netherlands Reformed Church at Zeist. In addition, from 1945 until 1960 he was also attached to the institute *Kerk en Wereld*, lecturing in Dogmatics, Ethics, Church History, and Ecumenics. It was during this period (1946) that his book: *De kerk en de keizer*, appeared, although it had been written mainly between 1942 and 1943, when Berkhof had been compelled to “go underground”. In this ecclesiological monograph he analyzes the relation between the Church and the State during the fourth century, advocates a theocracy in which the state is guided by the principles of the Gospel, and attempts to establish how the Church was able to reconcile theocracy and toleration after the reign of Constantine (Berkhof 1981g:16).

Berkhof’s career reached a peak in 1950, when he became the first Rector of the newly established Theological Seminary of the Netherlands Reformed Church at Driebergen. During the ten years of his rectorship, he played a leading role in the dialogue between the various trends within the Netherlands Reformed Church, and in compiling many of his Church’s pastoral and theological statements and policies. He made frequent contributions, both as editor and as author, to the theological journals

³ Many reprints of this book have been made. An Indonesian edition appeared in 1950 largely as a result of the efforts of Dr.J.H.Enklaar. In co-operation with Prof. Dr. Otto J. de Jong, a seventh (1967) and an eighth (1973) revised edition was published. An entirely new ninth edition under the same title, but with Otto J. de Jong as sole author, appeared in 1980.

Wending and *In de Waagschaal*, and received much publicity through his books: *Crisis der midden-orthodoxie* (1952), *Christus en de machten* (1953)⁴, *Christus de zinder geschiedenis* (1958)⁵ and *De mens onderweg. Een Christelijke mensbeschouwing* (1960a).

A momentous achievement for Berkhof was his appointment by the Netherlands Reformed Church as Professor of Dogmatics and Biblical Theology at the State University of Leiden, in succession to Professor K.H. Miskotte, on July 1, 1960. G.G. de Kruijf (1984:178) has pointed out that from the time of his inauguration, with his address entitled: *God voorwerp van wetenschap?* (October 7, 1960b), Berkhof undeniably worked toward developing his own study of the faith. According to De Kruijf, Berkhof's works: *De leer van de Heilige Geest* (1964)⁶ and *Gegronde verwachting* (1967b), compiled from lectures held in the United States of America, together with his booklet: *Om het verbond* (1966), his article: *Openbaring als gebeuren*, in the collection: *Geloven in God* (1970), and various essays on Christology, supplied the necessary methodological (and we might add theological) materials to that end (178). In this connection Berkhof states that for many years he had entertained the idea of writing a dogmatics, but that he had always felt himself inadequate for such a task (Berkhof 1981g:19). The 1960's, however, saw a strong shift toward empiricism and a theology a "from below", the advent of the "Death of God Theology", the "Theology of Revolution", the "Liberation Theology", widespread student unrest, riots and violence. The student protests stirred Berkhof deeply (19). Apart from his normal responsibilities at the University — lectures, examinations, and graduations — he became actively involved in the discussions and the decision-making in connection with the student demands, firstly as chairman of *Pro Civitate* (1962-1966), an umbrella-body for social affairs at the University, and later as a member of the first University Council (1971-1973). It was precisely the agitation and unrest in the student world which supplied Berkhof with the final impetus and incentive to fulfil his long-cherished ideal. In his theological autobiography: *Om de waarheid en om de kerk* he recalls:

⁴ An English translation has been made under the title: *Christ and the powers*, by John H. Yoder, and reprinted in 1977.

⁵ A fifth impression appeared in 1966. It was translated into English under the title: *Christ the Meaning of History*, by Lambertus Buurman (1966), and reprinted in 1979.

⁶ A second impression appeared in 1965, and a third reprint of the English translation by M.E.Bratcher under the title: *The doctrine of the Holy Spirit* in 1982. A German translation by Hans-Ulrich Kirchhoff appeared in 1968 under the title *Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*. It was reprinted in 1988 with a supplementary up-date of the discussion of this subject in German theological literature by Uwe Gerber.

“One evening in May 1969, as I was cycling home from one of our mass meetings in the Peter’s Church, the idea suddenly came to me: now you must write a dogmatics! ...Why at that stage? How could the unrest in the student world ever occasion such an idea? Yet, that was precisely what happened. I realized that we could only risk involvement in a broad criticism of society if our starting point and our counterbalance were based on a strong inspiring and normative conviction. ‘Identity’ and ‘engagement’ belong together, just like faith and works. I had to prevent a break-up between the ‘verticals’ and the ‘horizontalists’ in the church by means of the basic structures of the Gospel” (Berkhof 1981g:19).⁷ In his article: *Een kwarteeuw theologie* he states: “With this book I hoped to get the traditionalists and the radicals to think again about the same themes, and thus to get them talking to one another once more” (1975a:125).⁸

Within a mere four years, 1969-1973, Berkhof produced his *opus magnum*: *Christelijk geloof. Een inleiding tot de geloofsleer*. In admiration of this remarkable achievement, J.M.Hasselaar states: “To publish a complete dogmatics is a life-work which presupposes an acquired mastership over detail and coherence” (1975:36). Indeed, the fact that it has undergone no less than seven revised editions, and has also been translated into English, is proof enough not only of the urgent need for a concise dogmatic compendium such as this, but also of its surprising accessibility to more people than merely theologians, and of the widespread interest in and the importance and influence of this Dutch ecumenical theologian's thought (W.D. Jonker 1975:99).

As a token of esteem, colleagues and friends presented Berkhof on his 60th birthday (June 11, 1974) with: *Weerwoord*, a collection of critical reactions to *Christelijk geloof* by various Protestant and Catholic theologians. As W.D. Jonker has rightly observed, the fact that Berkhof preferred a critique such as this above any other form of veneration, and that he was willing and prepared to be guided by the

⁷ “...toen ik in mei 1969 op een avond van een onzer massale samenkomsten in de Pieterskerk naar huis fietste, kreeg ik ineens de ingeving: nu moet je een geloofsleer gaan schrijven! ...Waarom dan nu wel? Hoe konden de beroeringen in de studentenwereld daartoe ooit aanleiding zijn? Toch was het zo. Ik besepte, dat wij ons alleen in de wijidheid van het maatschappij-kritisch engagement konden wagen, als we ons uitgangspunt en ons tegenwicht vonden in een sterke inspirerende en normerende overtuiging. ‘Identiteit’ en ‘engagement’ behoren bijeen, zoals geloof en werken. Ik moest het uiteenvallen van ‘verticalisten’ en ‘horizontalisten’ in de kerken vanuit de grondstructuren van het Evangelie tegengaan.”

⁸ “Ik hoopte traditionelen en radikalen via dit boek weer denkend op dezelfde thema's en daarmee weer sprekend op elkaar te betrekken.”

criticism of others, not only says much for his magnanimity and spiritual maturity, but also bears witness that for Berkhof the matter concerned was of greater importance than himself or the prestige of his own endeavours (1975:99-100).

On September 1, 1981 Berkhof retired as Professor at Leiden. To mark the occasion, he was presented with: *Bruggen en bruggehoofden*, a selection from his articles and lectures covering the period of his professorship and representing, according to the editors of this book, a part of the history of theology in the 20th century (Flesseman-Van Leer et al, 1981:7). Although retired, Berkhof remained untiring. Evidence of this lies in the publication in 1985 of his: *200 Jahre Theologie. Ein Reisebericht*.⁹ In this book he reviews two centuries of *Vermittlungstheologie* (English: Mediation Theology — my translation) (De Kruijf 1984:180) in his quest to discover “...the relationship between the gospel and modern thought...how these two can coexist, though modern theology in its leading ideas of course presupposes such coexistence both as a possibility and as a reality. Is this assumption well-founded?” (Berkhof 1985:11).¹⁰

In the half-century of active engagement in the theological debate, shifts in emphasis, different nuances, and even changes in the basic trend of Berkhof’s thought are naturally to be expected. The above résumé of his career as theologian must therefore necessarily be supplemented with a brief outline of the main influences which have at various periods been brought to bear upon the development of his views and have compelled Berkhof to make his choices and to set his own course.

Fortunately, Berkhof himself has at various stages of his career undertaken a “non-narcissistic self-evaluation”. Indeed continuous reassessment of his thinking lies at the heart of his theology (De Kruijf 1984:177). This is not surprising when one considers that for Berkhof “revelation consists of a cumulative process of events and their interpretation” (Berkhof 1985⁵:66; E.T.1979b:62), a process which continues even after the formation of the canon (De Kruijf 1984:177), as “in constantly chan-

⁹ An English translation by John Vriend appeared in 1989 under the title: *Two Hundred Years of Theology. Report of a personal journey*.

¹⁰ “*das Verhältnis zwischen dem Evangelium und dem modernen Denken ... wie diese beiden Grössen überhaupt koexistieren können, während doch die neuzeitliche Theologie in der Mehrheit ihrer führenden Gedankengebilde eine solche Koexistenz als Möglichkeit und als Wirklichkeit voraussetzt. Ist diese Voraussetzung begründet?*”

ging situations...(and) new experiences...his (God's) deeds of judgement and of grace are again understood in new ways...and what has happened in Christ is worked out worldwide” (Berkhof 1985⁵: 67; E.T.1979b:63-64). Since theology (i.e. dogmatics), as “interpretive transmission”, is in his view “an element in the revelational event” (Berkhof 1985⁵:94-97; E.T.1979b:91-93), it is always of great importance for this theologian to establish his position in this ongoing process (De Kruijf 1984:177).

From the title of his theological autobiography: *Om de waarheid en om de kerk* (1981g:11), it is clear that Berkhof regards these two, the questions concerning the “truth” and the “church”, as the main themes of his theological interest and as the basic lines of his thinking. At times the one predominates; then again they merge and are treated as one. Thus, in his early period, while attending the *Gereformeerde Gymnasium* in Amsterdam, it was the question regarding the church, occasioned by the events and discussions surrounding the Synod of Assen (1926), which first aroused his interest in theology. As he stated: “I heard...much criticism of the Netherlands Reformed Church which did not exercise doctrinal discipline and was hopelessly weakened. My involvement with the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands dates from these years, but to the same extent also my interest in my own church and in general in the church’s creed and calling in the world. While in these years the ministers of the Ethical movement (besides A.H. de Hartog) captivated me, I was disappointed that they apparently had no interest in the ecclesiological question” (Berkhof 1981g:12).¹¹

Soon, however, due to a shift of interest from classical literature to philosophy via Plato, and as a result of his reading Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the question as to the ultimate truth and the meaning of life became predominant for him. To such an extent, that during his first student years the matter of the Church receded entirely into the background (13), although it never really disappeared altogether (15). Then two events of major significance for Berkhof followed, which caused both these issues with which he was theologically concerned, to blend and to even almost coincide (14, 15).

¹¹ “Ik kreeg...veel kritiek te horen op de Hervormde Kerk, die geen leertucht uitoefende en hopeloos verwaterd was. Vanaf die jaren dateert mijn betrokkenheid bij de Gereformeerde Kerken, maar evenzeer mijn interesse voor de eigen kerk en in het algemeen voor het belijden van de kerk en voor haar roeping in de wereld. Terwijl in die jaren de ethische predikanten (benevens A.H.de Hartog) mij boeiden, stelde het mij in hen teleur, dat zij voor het kerkelijk vraagstuk geen oog leken te hebben.”

The first of these events was his brief stay in Berlin to study under Hans Letzmann and H.G. Opitz. These Berlin months, Berkhof states, represent the most decisive period in his theological development [14]. For there, by way of his experiences and “illegal activities”, as he put it, he became aware for the first time of the significance of Christ as Lord and of the political relevance of the Gospel (14). In an interview with H.M. Kuitert and G.Th. Rothuizen, Berkhof said concerning this period: “...There I received a mentality that I could not shake off again” (1963:197).¹² And in a selection of essays in honour of C.F. Beyers-Naudé, he recalls: “There I came ...into contact with a profound conflict between state and church unknown in my own country. This experience to a great extent determined my spiritual direction, so that fully a year later I decided to enter the ministry with conviction” (Berkhof et al 1985:133).¹³ In the Germany of 1937 he discovered how the Gospel with its yeas and nays touches men’s lives in their entirety (133). His contact with Martin Niemöller and his attendance of Niemöller’s evening meetings in Dahlem played a major role in determining the course of Berkhof’s thinking (134 and Berkhof 1981g:14).

The second event which led to the confluence of the two main streams of his theological interest — the “truth” and the “church” — was the Ecumenical Youth Conference held at Amsterdam in 1939. In his Berkelbach-Lectures, *Herinnering en verantwoording*, held at Utrecht in 1975, Berkhof declared: “Amsterdam 1939. There you must begin, for there I began. How it came about that I began there, at the Youth Conference in Amsterdam, is not yet clear to me. I think it was because I had studied in Berlin and became acquainted with the Confessing Church about which I later wrote much, especially in the NCSA’s *Eltheto*. I must say: that (the Youth Conference) was a tremendous experience for me, and for many others. What impressed me especially was the universal vision of a great brotherhood that one received there” (Berkhof 1976b:8).¹⁴

¹² “...daar heb ik een mentaliteit meegekregen, die ik niet meer van me af kan schudden .”

¹³ “Daar kwam ik...in aanraking met...een diepgaand en in mijn eigen land geheel onbekend conflict tussen staat en kerk. Die ervaring heeft in hoge mate mijn geestelijke richting bepaald en mij ertoe gebracht om ruim een jaar later met overtuiging predikant te worden”

¹⁴ “Amsterdam 1939. Daar moet u beginnen, want daar ben ik begonnen. Hoe het mogelijk is dat ik daar begon, op de jeugd-conferentie in Amsterdam, is mij nog niet duidelijk. Ik denk dat het kwam omdat ik in Berlijn had gestudeerd, daar in kennis was gekomen met de Belijdende Kerk en daarover later, vooral in het NCSV-orgaan *Eltheto*, nogal wat had geschreven. Ik moet zeggen: dat is een geweldige belevenis voor mij geweest, en voor vele anderen ...Wat vooral indruk op me maakte, was dat universele gezicht op een grote broederschap dat je daar meekreeg.”

Whereas in Germany he had come into contact with the radical nature of the Gospel through his association with the *Bekennende Kirche*, at the Youth Conference he experienced its universal character. It was this experience that convinced him of the necessity to relate divergent theological and ecclesiastical traditions and trends to one another in a complementary way. Largely as a result of his association of many years with the ecumenical movement, and especially with the World Council of Churches (1948-1974), to whose Central Committee he was elected in 1954 in succession to Professor Berkelbach van der Sprenkel (Berkhof 1976b:7), this conviction grew in strength. Indeed, "complementary thinking" (Berkhof E.T.1979a: 80) has remained characteristic of Berkhof's theology (Jonker 1975:103). In a series of articles entitled: *Enkele modellen van Pneumatologie: Noordmans en Berkhof*, K. Blei declares: "In contrast to the decisive, sharp-edged one-sidedness of Noordmans stands Berkhof's pursuit of what we may call 'many-sidedness'; his quest for elements of truth in others. In this respect Berkhof's theology carries the stamp of his intense involvement of many years with the ecumenical movement. Noordmans sought the decision: either-or; Berkhof the connection: and-and" (Blei 1983:448).¹⁵ Berkhof himself endorsed this view in his article in *Areopagus* entitled: *Van Ruler en ik*, when he said: "Van Ruler thought speculatively, rhapsodically, contrapuntally, even contradictorily...I was calmer, more prosaic, a man of the: and-and" (1981i: 56).¹⁶

In this respect G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes is of the opinion that Berkhof has much in common with the Reformer from Strasbourg, Martin Bucer, whom Berkhof frequently quotes with appreciation, and who also sought to bring the extremes into contact with one another in order to reconcile them (1974:57). On this point, however, it is important to bear in mind Berkhof's own great affection for the Ethical Theology (Scheps 1981:2), especially of the type that Noordmans advocated (Berkhof 1981g:13), and the fact that he had at first considered writing a dissertation for his doctorate on the theology of Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye Sr. (14), the father of the Ethical Theology (Noordmans 1981: 379). Significantly, H. Bavinck has pointed out the connection between the Ethical Theology of De la Saussaye and the *Ver-*

¹⁵ "Tegenover Noordmans besliste, kantige eenzijdigheid staat bij Berkhof wat we zijn streven naar 'alzijdigheid' zou kunnen noemen; zijn zoeken naar waarheidselementen ook bij de ander. In zoverre draagt Berkhof's theologie het stempel van zijn jarenlange intense betrokkenheid bij de oecumenische beweging. Noordmans zoekt de beslissing: of-of; Berkhof zoekt de verbinding: en-en."

¹⁶ "Van Ruler dacht speculatief, rapsodisch, kontrapuntisch, zelfs kontradictorisch ... Ik was bedaarder, prozaischer, een mens van het én-én."

mittlungstheologie which had originated in Germany in association with Schleiermacher. According to Bavinck, De la Saussaye's theology practically fully coincides with that of the *Vermittlung*. Theologically, and specifically in the field of doctrinal history, De la Saussaye sought to mediate between the strongly opposing parties throughout the history of the church...All the antitheses had to be subsumed in a higher synthesis. In this higher synthesis which combines and includes all the truths present in the relative contrasts, lies the principle of the *Vermittlungstheologie* (1903:7, 11, 19).

It would thus appear that Berkhof's passion for reconciling divergent views, was born of various contributing factors: his lasting interest in the Ethical Theology and / or *Vermittlungstheologie*; his intense engagement with the ecumenical movement; and last but not least, the fact that it was typical of his parents to maintain positive relations with divergent groups within their community and that they taught their children to appreciate the good qualities in others (Berkhof 1981g:12).

In another respect, too, Berkhof's 'Berlin-period' was formative in moulding his views concerning 'the church and the truth', and thus also in the development of his theology as a whole. For it was there that, due to his personal experience of the conflict within the church in Germany, Karl Barth became a great source of inspiration to him (Berkhof 1981i:55). Of course Berkhof had already become acquainted with the work of Barth while still a student at Leiden and mainly through the second edition of Barth's *Römerbrief*. At this stage, however, he felt no more at home with Barth than he did with the worn-out relativism of Troeltsch which was in vogue at Leiden at that time (Berkhof 1981g:13). In fact, Barth's *Römerbrief* seemed to him a somewhat slanted reaction to the theology of the 19th Century (13).

In preparation for his doctorate, however, F.W.A. Korff assigned him to read the first volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I.1). This time Barth impressed him greatly. As Berkhof himself testified: "This Barth spoke to me...I devoured each volume of the C.D. as soon as possible after its publication" (13, 17).¹⁷ Then followed his brief stay in Berlin, after which, he recalled, he became totally engrossed with the course set by Barth. Working closely with the Dutch barthians, espe-

¹⁷ "...deze Barth had mij wat te zeggen...Ik verslond elk deel van de K.D. zo gauw mogelijk na de verschijning."

cially Eykman and Koopmans, he endeavoured, first legally and later illegally, to gain access in the Netherlands for the ideas and practice of Barth, Barmen, and the Confessing Church (16).

Much too Reformed than Lutheran, Berkhof was not satisfied merely to defend the freedom of the church and its proclamation of the Gospel. As an alternative to secularism, which in his view had erupted in the demonic ideology of ‘blood and territory’ in Nazi-Germany, he envisaged for post-war Netherlands a political system based upon the truth and upon the values of the Gospel, i.e. a theocracy (16): “A confessing national Reformed church, a vision of theocracy, the conflict in the German church, the theology of Barth — those were the realities and visions which at that time...occupied us (Berkhof 1981i: 55).¹⁸

Although it was disappointing to Berkhof that Barth did not favour the idea of a form of democracy based on theocracy, in the Netherlands Reformed Church the idea gained ground largely due to the efforts of A.A. van Ruler (Berkhof 1981g:16-17). Soon after the war, however, Berkhof’s vision of a theocracy faded away. The reason for this was partly that since the time of his writing *De kerk en de keizer*, he had begun to emphasize what he viewed as the equally evangelical concept of toleration alongside theocracy. But the main reason was that Berkhof became more and more aware that theocracy could not supply the answers to the many and complicated ecclesiastical and social issues confronting the church and theology at the time. On this point Berkhof admits that he had to concede to Barth for whom the political design of theocracy (a word which Barth avoided) coincided with democracy (Berkhof 1981g:17).

“Barth remains my great teacher,” Berkhof declared (17). Indeed as K. Blei has pointed out, Berkhof, like most contemporary theologians, was profoundly influenced by Barth. In fact, Blei maintains, one cannot understand his theology without Barth (1983: 323). Berkhof’s admiration for Barth is strikingly stated in an article which he wrote in 1946 under the title: *Die Bedeutung Karl Barths für Theologie, Kirche und Welt* (*The significance of Karl Barth for theology, church and world*) and which was later (1947-1948) translated into Dutch and published in the theological

¹⁸ “Een belijdende Hervormde volkskerk, een visioen van theokratie, de duitse kerkstrijd, de theologie van Barth — dat waren de realiteiten en visies, die ons...toen bezighielden.”

journal *Wending*. In the opening paragraph he states: “Karl Barth...is one of those figures whose significance cannot be estimated by their contemporaries. Their greatness can only be properly understood from a specific historical distance. At the same time Barth is also one of those figures who mean so much in the lives of their contemporaries, that one cannot neglect to estimate their significance while they are still alive. Aware of the limited possibilities, an attempt should be made to say something regarding Barth’s significance. We do so in the hope that we will convince our readers that in Karl Barth we have a gift of God for Protestantism as a whole and for the entire world” (Berkhof 1947-1948:10).¹⁹

In another article: *Een kwarteeuw theologie* (1975a), Berkhof reviews the overwhelming influence which Barth exerted in post-war Netherlands in respect of the church (especially the Netherlands Reformed Church), of theology, and of politics. He points out, however, that this influence did not result in a mere rash emulation of Barth. “Men did not want to repeat Barth’s theological insights so much, but rather relate them to other concrete problematic areas...which he had left out of consideration” (116)²⁰ Thus, according to Berkhof, Barth’s great significance for the Netherlands lies in the fact that he inspired Dutch theologians to think further independently (116).

Despite his lasting admiration for and his gratitude towards Barth, Berkhof also entertained his own critical reservations concerning Barth’s theology (Blei 1983:323). In his theological autobiography he wrote that due to Bible study and his ecumenical experiences he became more and more aware that the Gospel itself draws wider borders than Barth’s strict Christocentric systematic (Berkhof 1981g:17). As Blei (1983:327) has aptly pointed out, Berkhof expressed his criticism of Barth in his book: *Crisis der middenorthodoxie* (1952). As we already stated above, during and after the Second World War, Berkhof, inspired by Barth, played a major role in setting a new course within the Netherlands Reformed Church. Gradually, however, he

¹⁹ “Karl Barth...behoort tot de figuren, wier betekenis door hun tijdgenoten niet overzien kan worden. Men kan hun grootheid pas van een bepaalde historische afstand geheel begrijpen...Barth behoort echter tegelijkertijd tot die figuren, die ook in het leven van hun tijdgenoten zoveel betekenen, dat men niet kan nalaten om reeds tijdens hun leven naar hun betekenis te vragen...Bewust...van de beperkte mogelijkheden, behoren wij toch een poging te doen iets over Barth’s betekenis te zeggen. Wij doen dit in de hoop, onze lezers er van te overtuigen dat wij in Karl Barth een geschenk van God aan het gehele Protestantisme en aan de gehele wereld, bezitten.”

²⁰ “...dat men Barths theologische inzichten niet zozeer wilde repeteren als wel relateren aan allerlei concrete probleemvelden...die hij zelf nog buiten beschouwing had gelaten...”

experienced a growing discontent, not so much with Barth himself, but with the Dutch Barthians, who had especially been instrumental in determining the course of the Netherlands Reformed Church in the post-war years, and to whom he broadly refers as the “middle-orthodox” (*middenorthodoxie*). Berkhof’s main reproach of the Barthians was the objectivistic preaching from many Barthian pulpits that neglected to relate Christ and our reality to each other, or to let them clash with each other (Berkhof 1981g: 17).

According to Berkhof, in “middle-orthodox” preaching the proper relation between Gospel and Law had been disturbed. Not only did the Law lose both its accusing and guiding or formative function, but their proclamation of the Gospel had degenerated into a Gospel of *billige Gnade* (‘cheap grace’, cf. Bonhoeffer’s *Nachfolge*) (Berkhof 1952:26, 29-31). It had become a Gospel which hovered above our existence. Men were left untouched by it, being neither smitten nor revitalized (29). The struggle of the faith, the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh, the pursuit of the Christian goal, the reality of temptations, the fruits of the Spirit, growing in grace, of which so much is heard in the letters of the Apostles, was heard too little in “middle-orthodox” preaching. In brief, the application was lacking (32, 35). Their proclamation had become to a large extent a proclamation of “Gospel without Law” (49). On the other hand, even amidst all the new activity within the church, their proclamation had also become one of “Law isolated from the Gospel” (46). Indeed, he dared to state that the vigorous, almost American-like, activity in the church issued from a view of the Law loose from the Gospel, a view emanating from the fact that on Sundays a Gospel loose from the Law was preached. So, as the Gospel began to lead an independent existence in the Sunday preaching, so too the Law during the week in the feverish activation of community life, in the self-accusations and the admonishing and inciting appeals so typical of the spiritual life of the “middle-orthodox” (46). The Law of “activation” is...not the Law of God’s love toward us and toward others. Therefore this activity remained so conspicuously barren (47). Thus middle-orthodox life vacillated between a Gospel without Law and a Law without Gospel (49).

Although Berkhof’s criticism was mainly directed at the Barthian “middle-orthodox”, he stressed the fact that the danger of derailment which confronted them, as he had indicated, was largely due to the tendencies inherent in the theology of Karl

Barth himself (37). Barth's emphasis on the directness and superior power of the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and the way in which he spoke of God having taken the judgement of man upon himself, so that we are snatched away from under it, was indeed, according to Berkhof, a salutary correction of the traditional presentation of God which could be misconstrued as being a "merciless" and "arbitrary" God. Nevertheless, in this way, Berkhof points out, the proclamation of the Gospel threatened to attenuate to a mere announcement of eternal salvation in Christ Jesus as a matter of course, without any demand of a definite decision on the part of man. While Berkhof admits that this had not been Barth's intention, in his view Barth did come very close to a doctrine of universal salvation (38).

In two respects Berkhof differed from Barth. Firstly, he argued that the Gospel does not merely announce salvation in Jesus Christ, but also always confronts man with a choice of either 'yes' or 'no'. Indeed, God's decision in favour of man does not annul our decision, but renders it of eternal significance (39). Secondly, Berkhof emphasized that in faith man is not aloof from the Christ-event, either in judgement or in salvation. Otherwise man's salvation in Christ would never be a liberating reality. In faith we are so really involved in that event, that we 'suffer with Him' (Rom.8:17), 'have been planted together in the likeness of His death' (Rom.6:5), and 'are buried with Him' (Col.2:12). This does not happen in some mystical fashion. It is a reality only through faith and for faith, but indeed a reality (38.39). Barth, Berkhof states, because of his strict Christocentric approach, had not done justice to this, the proper work of the Spirit, through whom we are involved in the work of Christ (39).

Berkhof's *Crisis der middenorthodoxie* was thus an appeal that in preaching and theology more justice should be done to especially two elements of the Gospel: the Spirit and the Law. What he envisaged was that which he had formulated shortly before in the compilation *Geloofsinhoud en geloofsbeleving* (1951). There in the closing pages he had 'predicted' that in the coming years theology would, after and next to its Christological focus, strongly converge upon pneumatology as its centre. In any case, he emphasized, sooner or later, one had to explain how God spanned the bridge between Christ, the one New Man, and our humanity within our experiential world. Thus, according to Berkhof, he held on to the Christological starting point of Barth,

but from there, however, he wanted to develop the Pneumatological dimensions to a wider extent (Berkhof 1981g:17).

From these words it is clear that, although Berkhof had his reservations, he had no desire to break away from Barth entirely. On the contrary, he intended to think further along the lines that Barth had set, but with the purpose of extending and supplementing Barth's theology in fields where it was lacking, and of broadening and deepening it especially in respect of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. According to Berkhof, many of his publications during the fifties and sixties must be understood within this context. Thus his *Christus en de machten* (1953) was an attempt to develop socially, culturally, and politically Barth's views in connection with "*die exemplarische Existenz der Gemeinde*" (the exemplary existence of the church) on the basis of Paul's doctrine of the 'powers' (Berkhof 1981g:17-18). A still greater endeavour was his *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* (1958), in which, with great Biblical and theological competency, he gives a brilliant statement of the Christian interpretation of history — a field which, in his view, Barth had left theologically uncultivated (Berkhof 1975a:116). Other publications soon followed, which Berkhof intended as a broadening of Barth's theology: in the field of anthropology: *De mens onderweg* (1960a); in the field of ecclesiology: *De katholiciteit der kerk* (1962); in the field of pneumatology: *De leer van de Heilige Geest* (1964); and in the field of eschatology: *Gegronde verwachting* (1967) (Berkhof 1981g:18).

Nevertheless, despite all these considerations, in the development of his theology and in his own presentation of a study of the faith Berkhof inevitably set his own course. At the end of his theological autobiography he declared that he could not begin where Barth began; that, no matter what, he had to begin with 'man'. He added, however, that he could not end anywhere else than where Barth stood. In the first sentence, he said, he let go of Barth; in the second sentence he once again returned to Barth (1981g:21).

Naturally, apart from Karl Barth, there were many others who, to a greater or lesser degree, played a role in the growth and (or) correction of Berkhof's views concerning the great issues of the "truth", of the "meaning of our existence" and of the "church", with which he was involved throughout his theological career. Although

Berkhof called attention to the fact that since about 1950 he had been influenced less by specific people and more by spiritual trends and the challenges which they posed (Berkhof 1981g:11), he admitted unabashedly and with due gratitude towards “powers and people”: “I am more product than producer” (12).

While still a student, he exposed himself to all kinds of influences ranging from the membership of the *Societas Studiosorum Reformatorum* of Amsterdam to discussion groups with liberal leftwing fellow-students and visits to various sectarian groups and trends (13). Upon hearing J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink’s inaugural address on Irenaeus, Berkhof decided to major in the history of dogma for his doctorate (Berkhof 1959:214). This has convinced G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes that Irenaeus is the quiet inspirer behind Berkhof’s theology (1974:61).

On more than one occasion Berkhof referred to the fact that he began very close to Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge (Kuitert & Rothuizen 1963:197). In this regard he says: “I came from a type of experience theology via the ethical ministers. In the long run I became averse to it, because one could never get a grip on the experiences. They were always subjective and vague...Then I discovered Kohlbrugge. It was a glorious liberation” (Berkhof 1981d:16).²¹

Berkhof also mentions others who, as he put it, each in his own charismatic way served him during his lifetime and in his quest (Berkhof 1981b:186). Among these he mentioned H. Kraemer, who prevailed upon him to write his *Geschiedenis der kerk* (1942:5; cf. also Berkhof 1981g:15), and K.H. Miskotte, his predecessor at the University of Leiden; also C.J. Dippel, a chemist at Philips and one of his fellow-editors of the journal: *Wending* (Berkhof 1951:135); and J. Koopmans, who died so tragically and prematurely after being struck down by a stray bullet in 1945. Then, too, there was J.M. de Jong, his colleague and co-rector at the Theological Seminary of the Netherlands Reformed Church in Driebergen, as well as J. Eykman, who inspired the founding of the *Instituut voor kerk en wereld* (Berkhof 1951:132).

²¹ “Ik kwam uit een soort ervaringstheologie van de ethische dominees. Op den duur was ik daar beu van, want die ervaringen waren nooit te grijpen. Dat was altijd wat subjectief en vaag...Toen kwam ik bij Kohlbrugge uit. Het was een heerlijke bevrijding...”

Mention must also be made of A.A. van Ruler, to whom Berkhof referred as: “deze siervogel in onze theologische voliére” (Berkhof 1975a:117).²² Berkhof describes his relation to Van Ruler as ambivalent: “We were continually engrossed in the same issues. But we invariably came up with different answers...We reviewed each other's work courteously but also disapprovingly...We might have become mail-clad opponents, had it not been for our mutual opposition to polemics, and our mutual attraction based on respect for each other even where we disagreed due to our being different” (Berkhof 1981i:55).²³

But according to Berkhof, among all these names the greatest was that of O. Noordmans (Berkhof 1975a:118). On the occasion of his confirmation, Berkhof received Noordmans' *Geestelijke Perspectieven* as a gift from his father with the following exhortation: “This is a profound theologian whom you must read” (Berkhof 1981g:12). Although he does not always agree with Noordmans' views, he does find him exceptional (Kuitert & Rothuizen 1963:198), and in his opinion Noordmans may be considered the most gifted reformed Dutch theologian (Berkhof 1951:122) — an independent congenial spirit of Karl Barth (129). An excellent comparison of Noordmans and Berkhof is to be found in K. Blei's series of articles: *Enkele modellen van Pneumatologie: Noordmans en Berkhof* (1983).

Berkhof also acknowledged the inspiration of Teilhard de Chardin in his articles on the relation of creation, sin and evolution (Berkhof 1981g:18). The list of those who brought their influence to bear upon Berkhof's thought and views would, however, not be complete without the name of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher. Berkhof quoted A.F.N. Lekkerkerker as having stated as early as 1951 that the 19th Century had been disposed of too quickly; that as the 20th Century progressed we would continually discover that the former had only seemingly been left behind; and that it is doubtful whether the questions of our time really do differ so much from those of the 19th Century. Can we safely say that we are done with Schleiermacher and Ritschl? (Berkhof 1983:168).

²² *This peacock in our theological aviary.*

²³ “We waren voortdurend met dezelfde vragen bezig; en we gaven daarop bijna steeds tegengestelde antwoorden... Wij hebben elkaars pennevruchten hoffelijk en afwijzend besproken... We hadden geharnaste tegenstanders kunnen worden. Dat werd verhinderd, enerzijds door ons beider afkeer van polemieken, anderzijds door een wederzijds aantrekkings, gegrond op respect voor de ander ook in zijn anders-zijn.”

As regards Schleiermacher, it would appear that precisely the opposite is true for Berkhof. In his article: *Karl Barth, 'zwischen den Zeiten'*, written on the occasion of Barth's 80th birthday, Berkhof referred to Barth's complaint that the 19th Century had returned amongst us. Berkhof's comment on this complaint is significant: "Is it true that the 19th Century has returned amongst us? That is merely a misconception. It could not return, because it has never left us" (Berkhof 1966-1967:160-161).²⁴ However much Barth remained his greatest tutor, it appears that Berkhof could not entirely free himself from the grip of Schleiermacher. Indeed, in his *opus magnum, Christelijk geloof*, he admitted "the similarity, both in method and result" between his *Prolegomena* to the study of the Christian faith and the access which "Schleiermacher made for himself in the opening paragraphs of his *The Christian Faith*" (Berkhof E.T.1979b:24, 25). Berkhof does point out differences between his and Schleiermacher's approach, but he states: "...in broad outline we follow Schleiermacher..." (26). According to G.G. de Kruijf, it was this following of Schleiermacher which led Berkhof to confront Schleiermacher and Barth in his article: *Schleiermacher - Barth, vice versa* (1978b) and to indicate a far greater similarity between the two than is usual in a clear attempt to justify the theological method of his study of the faith (De Kruijf 1984:179).

In Berkhof's view a dogmatician is in a certain sense "a conductor and an amateur" (*dirigent en dilettant*) (Berkhof 1981g:20). It is therefore not surprising that in view of his vast knowledge of the history of dogma and of contemporary and ecumenical theology, a vast number of theologians and thinkers from various traditions and disciplines are called forth under his masterful "baton" to play in his "theological opera".

Underlying his quest for the truth and his concern for the church, however, is Berkhof's life-long fascination with history as a concept of theology (Berkhof 1981g:18). As G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes has aptly pointed out: "Berkhof began as an historian" (majoring in the history of dogma for his doctorate under J.N.Bakhuizen van den Brink), "but became a dogmatician" (1974:55). Reference has frequently been made to the extensive role which history plays in Berkhof's theology. Thus A. Geense states in his article: *Geschiedenis en verbond*, in reaction to Berkhof's *Christelijk geloof*, that long before history was officially elevated to a theme of revelation

²⁴ "Is het waar dat de negentiende eeuw onder ons teruggekeerd is? Dat is slechts schijn. Zij kon niet terugkeren, omdat zij ons nooit verlaten heeft."

in German theology (which normally sets the trend), Berkhof had already laid the foundation for it (1974:20). Geense then goes on to illustrate how history occurs again and again as a theme in Berkhof's works. In his dissertation on: *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea* ([1939]), according to Geense, history is given a place in theology through this 'father of church history', because ecclesiastical history is the place where the kingdom of God takes shape in profane history. The same theme is once again taken up in: *De kerk en de keizer* (1946), in the preface to which Berkhof stresses the importance of history as a means of clarifying the calling of the church in the present-day world. But it is in: *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* (1958) that Berkhof first attempts to produce a theology of history. In this pioneering work, history as a theological presupposition is justified systematically. An even more comprehensive treatment of the theme of history, according to Geense, is to be found in *Schepping en voleinding* (1961), Berkhof's contribution to the valedictory volume for K.H. Miskotte, in which he suggests for the first time that a combination of the idea of evolution and the elevation theology, as it is found in Orthodox Anglican theology, need not necessarily be in contradiction to the intentions underlying the theology of Karl Barth. Geense furthermore calls attention to the fact that whereas in *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* Berkhof treated history from a Christological point of view, in his: *De leer van de Heilige Geest* (1964) he does so pneumatologically. Hermeneutical questions regarding history receive greater attention, according to Geense, in Berkhof's articles: *Om het verbond* (1966), *Openbaring als gebeuren* (1970), and *Hermeneutiek van het Oude Testament* (1971). But in Geense's view it is in: *Christelijk geloof* (1973a), Berkhof's life-work, that history systematically finds its most complete expression. Here history has been anchored in the will of God, so that creation, revelation, the covenant, the appearance of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit, and even the renewal of all things are embedded in history (Geense 1974:21-24).

The extent to which Berkhof remained captivated by history, by the progress of events, and by the progress of reflection on events (De Kruijf 1984:180), is illustrated by the fact that after a lull following the publication of: *Christelijk geloof*, when he feared that he had spent himself and that his thinking had stagnated, his love of history once again came to the fore. This time it was especially his love of the modern history of theology which inspired him to search for the materials for a theology of history once more. Thus towards the end of his career he again undertook the long

march through history (Berkhof 1981g:19, 20), along which he lectured and published articles on the relation between Schleiermacher and Barth, the development of the young Barth, the hermeneutics of K.H. Miskotte, and the interpretation of O. Noordmans (Berkhof 1978b; 1980b; 1980a; 1981f respectively). It was a march which finally culminated in his book: *200 Jahre Theologie* (1985), characteristically carrying the subtitle: *Ein Reisebericht*.

For Berkhof his theological development and the choices he had to make ecclesiastically, ecumenically, and politically are all ‘history’, “one burning interest in the shape, expansion, and effect of the Word of God in the reality in which we live” (Geense 1974:21). It must indeed always be borne in mind that due to his appreciation of history, progress for Berkhof is not synonymous to improvement. For this reason he was always a staunch protagonist of what he called: “dated” theology (Berkhof 1982:59-62). It is precisely this attitude which, according to De Kruijf, attests to Berkhof’s modesty, his discernment in matters of tradition, his openness for new impulses, and his continuous awareness of God’s critical assessment of all our reflection (De Kruijf 1984:180). Significantly, the motto of his *Christelijk geloof*, a quotation from Alfred Tennyson, reflects this assessment:

“Strong son of God, immortal Love
Whom we that have not seen Thy face
By faith and faith alone embrace
Believing where we cannot prove
Our little systems have their day
They have their day and cease to be
They are but broken lights of Thee
And Thou, o Lord, art more than they.”

Closely linked to his interest in history as a theological concept, is the question which intrigued Berkhof intensely over the years: how to relate relevantly the truth of faith to modern man in his situation “within an extremely secularized ‘brave new world’” (Jonker 1975:102; Berkhof 1951:145). In his lecture on: *The catechism as an expression of our faith* he stated: “The Catechism, with admirable precision, exactly chose those words which could help people to recognize the relevance of the Gospel. We need not repeat their words, but we must do with our words today what they did

with theirs for their time” (1963:95). This sentiment is characteristic of Berkhof’s approach to theology. He continually related his work to the present situation (Bolkestein 1974: 228). In fact his aim, also as historian, was always to indicate direction, to bring clarity, and to offer consolation to the actual church of the day. He was interested in history because, and in so far as, history can supply the church with a clear insight into its calling in the present-day world. From beginning to end he pursued and regarded history with a view to its functional value for the present message of the church (Posthumus Meyjes 1974:56). His *Geschiedenis der kerk* is an attempt to furnish the church with an instrument to pinpoint her position in history (De Kruijf 1984:177). His: *De kerk en de keizer* is an historical justification of the attitude of the church to the occupation forces during the Second World War (Berkhof 1946:5). One of his earlier articles carries the significant title: *Europa de verlorene zoon* (1948), in which he draws the analogy between the Biblical parable and secularized Europe. The aim of his *Christus en de machten* is to demonstrate the significance of that part of Paul’s preaching, which until now has appeared strange, obsolete, and even mythological, for the questions that confront the church of Christ in the 20th Century (Berkhof 1953:5). So too, his *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* is an attempt “to put into words the continuing mutual involvement of God’s actions and words, and what we call our reality” (Berkhof E.T.1979a:11). In his *De leer van de Heilige Geest* he stated that the deepest reason “for a new reflection on the work of the Holy Spirit” is that “true theology, which desires to serve the church, can never cease to think of God’s inexpressible gift in the Holy Spirit” (Berkhof 1964:12). In *Gegronde verwachting* he stated: “Since Schleiermacher...systematic theology has entered a fundamental new phase. From now on the many-sided unfolding of salvific truth and the polemics with heresy no longer stand in the centre, but the interpretation of this truth with regard to secularized culture...We cannot interpret salvation if we do not proceed from and connect to what I simply call here the ‘understanding of life’ in the world around us — which is also our own understanding of life” (Berkhof 1967b:85, 86).²⁵

²⁵ “...sinds Schleiermacher...is de systematische theologie in een principiële nieuwe fase getreden... Van nu af aan staan niet langer de alzijdige ontvouwing van de heilswaarheid en de polemiek met de dwaalleer centraal, maar de vertolking van deze waarheid ten overstaan der gesecculariseerde cultuur...We kunnen het heil niet vertolking als we niet uitgaan van en aanknopen bij wat ik hier maar noem: het ‘levensbesef’ van de wereld om ons heen — dat ook ons eigen levensbesef is.”

Many more instances can be quoted from his *oeuvre*, but the most significant and explicit is to be found in his opus magnum *Christelijk geloof*. When giving an account of the major considerations that prompted him to write this study of the faith, he stated: “Relative to our secularized age, my aim was to present a restatement of the Gospel which is as up-to-date and lucid as possible, stripped of all the ingrained misconceptions which obscure it to so many. Relative to the church, this book aims to articulate the Gospel in such a way that the reader will see how it goes its own way between rigid traditionalism on the one side and rudderless modernism on the other” (Berkhof E.T.1979b:xi). To which he added: “Classic dogmatics gave profound answers to questions which no one asked anymore. A modern study of the faith must necessarily seek a Christian answer to the questions that are being asked by everyone at present. Such an endeavour has hardly been undertaken” (Berkhof 1973a:xvii). It is precisely such an endeavour which Berkhof undertook. As Bolkestein put it: “In him we have a dogmatician who, aware of the questions posed by modern man, is prepared to contemplate with him in order to find ‘a Christian answer’ (1974: 229).

Naturally, in his quest for new avenues by which modern man may be approached and along which his specific questions may be answered, Berkhof was compelled to take his stance in the situation within which he found himself. The position which he chose is clearly stated: “Between us and the Reformation lies the period of the Enlightenment and everything that followed” (Bolkestein 1974:229). This means that in trying to produce a modern study of the faith — an interpretation of the Gospel in our time and situation which lays no claim to expressing the whole truth of the Gospel, or to being acceptable to all times and in all situations — it is no longer possible for Berkhof to follow the theology of the Reformation for the simple reason that we live in different times (Jonker 1975:102; Berkhof E.T.1979b:4). On the other hand it also means that Berkhof not only recognizes the insights of the modern sciences which have developed since the Enlightenment (e.g. biology, anthropology, the theory of evolution), but that he also accepts the challenge which they pose for dogmatics (Bolkestein 1974: 229). Furthermore it means that Berkhof does not attempt to disregard, minimize, or dispute theologically the results of modern Bible research as it manifests itself in the *Traditionsgeschichte* and the *Redaktionsgeschichte*. On the contrary, he accepts them positively and assimilates them (229). Indeed, Berkhof tries very hard to do justice as far as possible to every prevalent modern-day trend of

thought, while yet maintaining continuity with the Christian faith in general (Jonker 1975:103). This does not imply that Berkhof simply accepts everything. He can also reject sharply and critically that which he finds unacceptable. Nevertheless, his new interpretation of the Gospel is profoundly influenced by prevailing trains of thought in theology and philosophy (103). As J.M. Hasselaar aptly states: “Berkhof has placed the clay of dogmatics on the potter's wheel of Biblical Theology and with a steady hand he has moulded the shape of his pastoral theology” (1975:36).

A crucial question arises at this point. Has Berkhof succeeded in his aim? Has he really been able to combine all the elements such as exegesis, Biblical Theology, dogmatics and philosophy, in such a way that his restatement of the Gospel indeed addresses modern man relevantly without merely accommodating him, while still remaining broadly true to Scripture and the Reformed tradition? Berkhof himself would perhaps not have been perturbed greatly by questions such as these, for they are similar, according to him, to the questions posed in connection with the theology of Schleiermacher and that of Karl Barth. For the main criticism which both these theologians heard, was that they had not really achieved their aims (Berkhof 1978b:252). It does, however, remain a crucial question. For however much Berkhof claimed to keep as close as possible to Biblical Theology²⁶ and to do full justice to Biblical exegesis, the fact remains that he definitely abandoned ‘a Theology of the Word’ (Geense 1974:21; Berkhof 1970:98 seqq.) and opted to follow, to a large degree, the views of the historical-critical study of the Bible and its leading advocates (Berkhof E.T.1979b:88). The result is that even though he is not as radical as many of the protagonists of Biblical criticism, his appeal to Scripture, being more discriminate and selective, and often more indirect and general than usual in dogmatics (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:89), tends to become problematical and even in some cases subjective (Jonker 1975:104). However, it must always be borne in mind that it was Berkhof’s firm conviction: “What God has given us is inexhaustible, but we are only little people, still on the way toward fully understanding everything, while the Gospel needs restating in ever new situations. There are bound to be many theological articulations of the faith,

²⁶ According to Berkhof, Biblical Theology investigates that which the various authors of the Bible and layers of tradition, separately and together, considered to be authoritative statements of faith that had to be proclaimed, and it attempts to relate these statements of faith in systematic coherence (Berkhof 1965:77).

all of them pointing to the same thing, and by their multiplicity relativizing and complementing each other” (Berkhof E.T.1979b:xii).

Thus his theology is but ‘one articulation among many’ (xii). “What is to the one traditional Christian jargon may sound like heresy to the other” (xii). Berkhof therefore felt free to say things differently to what has been customary in the past, even though this may have resulted in his saying different things which do not stand up to the test of Scripture. Where others may have disagreed with him, he nudged them to move beyond what he has said and to correct his judgement (xii-xiii).

For Berkhof theology was the act of loving God with the entire mind, but with Augustine, Thomas, and Calvin he emphasized that theology is always a *theologia in via*, a *theologia viatorum*. As regards himself, he said: “I am a man en route...my thinking is not static, I am constantly moving on. But the principle: choose now who you wish to serve, has always remained decisive for me” (Scheeps 1981:1).

Tragically, in 1990 Berkhof suffered a debilitating stroke (A.W. Berkhof 1994: 213). His impaired health, however, did not prevent the Commission Leiden Lectures to express their appreciation for Berkhof’s contribution to theology nationally and internationally by dedicating their 7th Annual Study Day (November 7, 1994) to a central aspect of Berkhof’s Theology (A. van de Beek *et al* 1994: 7). On this occasion, a compilation of the Leiden Lectures under the title: *Waar is God in deze tijd? De betekenis van de geschiedenis in de theologie van dr. H. Berkhof* was presented to him in commemoration of his 80th birthday. Sadly, after five years in a nursing home, Berkhof passed away on Sunday December 17, 1995 (E.P. Meijering 1997: 7).