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2010

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citation for published version (APA)

Gavera, J. (2010). *The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof: A critical analysis of aspects of a contemporary design of Mediation Theology*. [PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

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2. THE DESIGN OF BERKHOF'S THEOLOGY

In the previous chapter an attempt was made to describe the *Sitz im Leben* of the theology of Hendrikus Berkhof. Now we must consider his theology itself. Here, however, we are confronted with a problem similar to that which Berkhof himself encountered when he undertook to produce an own study of the faith. It is the problem of method: how to find an access, a *met-hodos* (Berkhof 1985⁵:1; E.T.1979b:1), which can reveal Berkhof's total design and simultaneously do justice to the salient features of his theology. In this regard various possible approaches present themselves which need to be examined.

The first, seemingly obvious, course to take would be to give as complete a survey as possible of Berkhof's systematic thought as it is reflected in his *opus magnum: Christian Faith*. For, as G.G. de Kruijf has rightly pointed out, this is the garner in which the full harvest of Berkhof's theology is gathered (1984:178). In an approach such as this there is, however, a disadvantage. Due to its cursory nature not everything can be said, and trying to achieve completeness carries with it the very real danger of a tedious and uncritical repetition. In the process, the view of the design is lost.

C. Graafland, in his article: *Nieuwe bezinning op het Christelijk Geloof* (1974:89-90), suggests another possibility. That is to take as starting point a theme from Berkhof's theology, e.g. his concept of revelation, or his doctrine of God, or his Christology, or some other aspect, and use it to shed light on his theology as a whole. This way probably has merit, too, as long as care is taken not to force the issue. Graafland himself, however, does not follow this line of approach but rather prefers to stick to a general discussion of Berkhof's theology as a whole against the background of orthodox reformed protestant theology.

An interesting approach is that of J.T. Bakker. In his view, a study of the frequently recurring keywords in Berkhof's *Christian Faith*, such as "leap" (Dutch: *sprong, sprongvariatie*), "complementarity", "provisionalness" (Dutch: *voolopigheid*), and "elevation", provides a most intriguing access to his theology. For it is precisely in this regard, Bakker states, that Berkhof arouses the greatest controversy

(1976:144). Without detracting from its intriguing character, an approach such as this is undoubtedly prone to be fragmentary and thus also limited in scope.

In 1958 the well-known Dutch theologian, Herman Ridderbos, wrote a series of articles in the journal *Gereformeerd Weekblad* on Berkhof's then recently published and widely acclaimed book: *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* (1958; E.T.1979a). In the first of these articles Ridderbos points out that Berkhof deals with a subject which lay at the heart of the theology of Abraham Kuyper, namely the relation between faith and history, particularly the cultural aspect of history. Ridderbos emphasizes, however, that he does not suggest that what we have here is a return of Kuyper's view of faith and reality. In fact there is a considerable difference. Whereas culture, progress, and the opening-up of life originated for Kuyper in common grace, Berkhof attributed these to the resurrection of Christ. Also, while in Kuyper's view the lordship of Christ became operative and apparent in the faith and conversion of His followers in the world, Berkhof placed all the emphasis upon the so-called objective significance of Christ's work of salvation in culture and history, independent of faith or of un-belief. This was a totally different approach than that of Kuyper. Nevertheless, in Ridderbos's opinion it did represent without doubt nothing less than a spectacular turning-point in theological thinking. For, as he put it, what was previously cast aside by the so-called Ethical Theology as an all-too-human anticipation of the future eschatological Kingdom of God, and what was disdained by Barthian Crisis Theology as an attempt to link essentially un-linkable elements (i.e. God and the world), was apparently now being welcomed back with truly new enthusiasm through wide-open doors. Indeed, Ridderbos regards Berkhof's book as one of the clearest and best substantiated expositions of this new theology of culture. It is therefore not surprising that Ridderbos's first article carries the significant title: *Eerherstel voor cultuur-theologie* (rehabilitation of the theology of culture) (Ridderbos 1958a: 74).

Should the design of Berkhof's theology be sought in this direction? Berkhof himself stated that his earlier publications served as the building blocks for his more comprehensive work and that what he deals with briefly in his *Christelijk geloof* had been discussed in broader context in those previous works (Berkhof 1973a:xix–xx). Also, it cannot be denied that the relation of the Christian faith to western culture has intrigued Berkhof throughout his theological career and that reflection on its signifi-

cance for man and society has always been a vital concern in all his major works. Yet it is doubtful whether, on the basis of a work which Berkhof himself regards as an attempt at a theology of history, his theology as a whole may simply be described as a revival of an albeit modern type of theology of culture. In this regard it is important to distinguish between design and feature. While it is without doubt a feature of Berkhof's theology to relate the Christian faith in a very meaningful manner to modern man living in an increasingly secularized world, the design by means of which he intends to achieve this aim involves much more.

There can be no doubt, however, that Berkhof's reflection on God, man and the world may be typified as salvation-historical theology, although it should be kept in mind, as Bakker has pointed out, that it is a salvation-historical theology which Berkhof has modernized to a great extent (1976:145). Briefly, for Berkhof, God "began small" as the tribal god of semi-nomads. He induced people to put their trust in Him, and He rewarded that trust beyond expectation by deeds of protection and deliverance. These acts stimulated further trust, which was likewise confirmed. So God's revelational deeds cut a trail through history. Events led to insights, and insights shed a particular light on events. So a special history is formed and passed on through interpretations and applications. Such a cumulative process happened in Israel; reached a decisive climax in Jesus' proclamation, His sufferings, death and resurrection; is now set forth in Christ's church and is headed for the crisis and liberation of all human history in the consummation (Berkhof E.T.1979b:62-64). As De Kruijf aptly put it, Berkhof does not expound eternal, objective truth in all its beauty, nor does he push the truth to existential extremes via a Theology of the Word, but he sees God at work in (as?) a history extending from creation to consummation in a series of deeds which consist in Spirit-evoked interpretations of events (1984:181).

Clearly, Berkhof stems from the salvation-historical school which has eminent credentials (Bakker 1976:144). In his article: *De heilshistorische theologie* (1968a: 90), he maintained that salvation-historical theology is as old as the Bible itself. From antiquity to our time, the line of outspoken salvation-historical theologians runs, according to Berkhof, from Irenaeus and the Augustine of *De civitate dei*, through Cocceius and Witsius (17th Century), Bengel and Oetinger (18th Century) and, among many others, Menken, Beck, Auberlen, and J.C.K. von Hofmann (19th Century), to

Schlatter (beginning of the 20th Century). But, in his opinion, the three most important types of modern salvation-historical theology are to be found in Oscar Cullmann (*Heil als Geschichte*, 1965), Gerhard von Rad (*Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 1957), and Wolfhart Pannenberg (*Offenbarung als Geschichte*, 1961). In Jürgen Moltmann (*Theologie der Hoffnung*, 1965) and Gerhard Sauter (*Zukunft und Verheissung*, 1965) Berkhof saw a new type of salvation-historical theology emerge in which, in his view, history is totally absorbed by the future. According to Berkhof, this new development clearly indicates how even the most modern sense of life has distanced itself from existentialism, to become involved once again with renewed joy in the stream of history, on the way to the year 2000. In his view, this proves that salvation-historical theology is capable of continually rejuvenating itself and of bearing new fruit. Nevertheless, according to Berkhof, the great challenge to this type of theology is to make it even more clear that the essence of the salvific facts becomes explicit precisely in their on-going influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), i.e. that only in the existential vertical encounter which the salvific fact intends to bring about, does it become in relation to us what it essentially is (Berkhof 1968a:100, 99). Later, in his *Christian Faith*, Berkhof gave account of his own position. There he stated that he tried to continue in the converging paths of Pannenberg and J. Barr (*Old and New in Interpretation*, 1966), because in his opinion the current concepts of “salvation history” were trailing behind the insights in the biblical disciplines (Berkhof E.T.1979b:64-65). Thus, Berkhof opted for the salvation-historical method, because in his view it offers an optimal combination of biblical base-lines and modern awareness of life. Indeed, he was convinced that, if theology was to be understood by that generation, it would have to avail itself of the language of salvation history (Berkhof 1968a:99,100).

This last statement has a kerygmatic ring to it. Indeed, Berkhof's theology may in a certain sense be viewed as a kerygmatic theology. Naturally, this depends on what is understood by the term ‘kerygmatic theology’. According to Eybers, König and Stoop (1982:212), contra the Bultmannian demythologizing existentialistic view, “kerygmatic theology implies, demands, and presupposes a theology of the history of salvation, for what the Church must proclaim is precisely God's history with man and with the world.” Thus, it may be concluded that kerygmatic theology aims to facilitate, not uncritically but in righteousness, the church's proclamation of the history God has made, is still making, and will yet make with man and the world, until that

day when the whole of creation acknowledges his reign, and his goal for creation, i.e. the covenant, has been completely realized (Eybers *et al*, 1982:209, 214).

If understood along these lines, then Berkhof's theology certainly bears a kerygmatic trait. As Bakker has pointed out, Berkhof's theology is a continuous attempt to communicate the full substance of the Christian faith to the people of our time, people for whom that faith and the traditional jargon is no longer self-evident, and yet people whom God, no less than the people of the 16th Century or of the 4th Century, has destined and purposed to be the hearers of the Gospel (Bakker 1976:142). At the beginning of his *Christian Faith*, Berkhof wrote: "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,...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...I would like...to help those who have been theologically trained for a special role in the interpretation and transmission of the gospel: preachers and pastors and, seeing how much all of us share the same questions, also priests...I have in mind theological students...Yet I could not forget the many 'ordinary' church members... They have a tougher time than ever before. They look to the theologians for help. And of what value is our theology if it is not also meant to equip the saints for service?" (Berkhof E.T.1979b:xi).

Yet, having said this, it is not enough to enable us to complete the picture of Berkhof's theological design. For it is also possible to characterize it as covenantal theology. In the preface to the first Dutch edition of *Christian Faith* Berkhof clearly stated that "covenant" is a central concept in his study of the faith (Berkhof 1973:xvii). He even considered giving his book the title: *Verbond en Vernieuwing* (Covenant and Renewal) (Berkhof 1981g: 19). In this regard James Barr notes that the pervasiveness of this concept in Berkhof's study of the faith is very strongly marked. In point of content, he states, "covenant" is absolutely central to Berkhof's statement of his position. It recurs again and again in a variety of connections (1974:13). Thus, "covenant", which Berkhof defined as being unilateral in origin but bilateral in purpose, is the biblical designation of the relationship of God and man (Berkhof E.T.1979b:231, 217). "Covenant" and "history" are the two integral constituents of

the way of Israel. Through all of Israel's history runs the awareness that it was covenantally related to its God (229, 230). The Old Testament Canon is covenantally structured. Thus the *law* or *Torah* is the story of God's gracious coming to Israel in deliverance and law-giving and in the establishment of the "covenant". The *prophets* convey the story of what has happened to this "covenant" in history, a story of judgement and grace, of apostasy and accusation, of human faithlessness and faithfulness and new promises from the side of God. The *writings*, especially the Psalms and the Wisdom literature, show how the believer relates himself to the God of the "covenant" in confession of guilt and thanksgiving, in doubt and exultation, in meditation and lament (229-238). In contrast to Israel's failure as the human covenant partner, Jesus is the saviour of the "covenant" (307). He is God's liberating answer to the covenant problematic of the Old Testament as a whole (282). For Jesus' sonship, too, stands in the covenant tradition. He is pre-eminently the obedient and therefore beloved covenant partner (283). The combination of the three names of Father-Son-Spirit (or with equal validity: Father-Spirit-Son) is the comprehensive description of the covenantal event, both as to its historical and its existential aspect. Thus, the classical doctrine of the Trinity is replaced with the *Covenant as "Tri-(u)nity"* (330, 331). With the statement: "Speaking of covenant we speak of community", Berkhof introduced his whole section on ecclesiology, namely *The New Community* (339 – 422). "Covenant" and "justification by faith" are also closely linked. Man has a decisive role in the "covenant", otherwise it would not be a real "covenant". "Faith" is the central term for man's role in the constitution of the covenant relationship. Without faith there is no justification (443, 439). The consummation is depicted as the consummated covenant communion of God in Christ with those who have become conformed to Christ's image (488). Indeed, God's ultimate covenant purpose is that we shall share in His sphere of life — a staggering and unimaginable perspective (536). The "covenant" thus has a universal purpose. The God of the "covenant" is at the same time the God of the whole world. In the end it will be seen that his special concern with Israel also served the purpose of eventually including *all* people in his redemptive work (231).

For those who are acquainted with Berkhof's doctoral thesis: *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea*, this centrality of the "covenant" may seem very strange. For in that early work proposition ix in the appendix reads: "The use of the word 'covenant' as *terminus technicus* in dogmatics is, from an exegetic and dogmatic point

of view, “precarious” (Berkhof 1939:208). Berkhof is aware how surprising, if not enigmatic, the prevalence of the “covenant” in his *Christian Faith* must seem in the light of this statement. Thus, he attempted to clarify his apparent change of view. In his theological autobiography, *Om de waarheid en om de kerk*, he pointed out that while writing his study of the faith, certain constant lines of thought became predominant, especially “covenant”, “encounter”, and “inter-subjectivity” (Berkhof 1981g: 19). This was probably occasioned by the fact that in 1966 (some time before his *Christian Faith*) Berkhof wrote an article for the Theological Study Group of the Council for the Relations between the Church and Israel entitled: *Om het verbond* (About the Covenant). Here we find the significant statement that the theme “covenant” is perhaps the most gainful in the dialogue between the Church and Israel, and in the theological reflection on the Old Testament (Berkhof 1966:3). In the preface to the third Dutch edition of *Christian Faith*, he explained his position further. There he stated that no keyword in dogmatics can be used heedlessly or be deemed unprecarious. Indeed, each keyword points beyond itself and it is precisely in such a keyword that we attempt to grasp that which in principle transcends expression. Thus, in the arrangement of his material the dogmatician has to make risky choices. The reason for his own choice in favour of “covenant” is that he was convinced that precisely in this period of her pilgrimage, the notions of “inter subjectivity”, “partnership”, “historicity”, and “changeableness” should be brought home to the Christian community. God in his association of salvation has given us access to these ideas. Yet He is more than all of them. He disposes over them, limits them, and can even abolish them. It is a matter of ‘God’s peace which is far beyond human understanding’ — thus also beyond words. But precisely *that* should be said with our inadequate words. Each dogmatician will have to choose his keywords, relativizing them frequently, correcting them, and complementing them, in order to keep on using them. It is in this light, Berkhof maintained, that he used words such as “covenant”, “history”, “way”, “renewal”, among others, until such time as he would be convinced of better. For such convincing, Berkhof emphasized, he was in dire need of the reactions and dialogue of others (Berkhof 1979⁴: xix, xxiii)

Yet, even if we were to speak, as indeed we may, of ‘the triumph of the covenant in the theology of Hendrikus Berkhof’ — to coin a phrase in the vein of G.C. Berkhouwer concerning Karl Barth — the term covenantal theology would still be

inadequate to describe Berkhof's theological design. Clearly, we are compelled to look for the solution in another direction. This opens up a most intriguing and exciting possibility — one that, in our view, embraces all the features of Berkhof's theology mentioned above, and so much more. Close reading of his extensive *oeuvre*, together with certain significant pointers in his theological autobiography, and interviews held with him at various times, indicate that the key to his design is to be found in what came to be known in 19th Century German Protestant Theology as *Vermittlungstheologie* (Mediation Theology),¹ and in its parallel in the Netherlands, the Ethical Theology.

The *Vermittlungstheologie*, or Mediation Theology, was “a very productive and many-sided movement” (Berkhof 1989:64). The personalities whose names were linked to it were numerous, the variety of subjects treated was extensive, and the publications aroused wide interest. Its roots are to be found in Hegelian philosophy and especially in the theology of F.D.E. Schleiermacher. The catchword ‘mediation’ was of course coined by Hegel, in whose thought it played a significant role. However, historians in the field of theology are agreed that the name Mediation Theology, as a description for a theological trend, is undoubtedly connected to the founding of the journal *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* in 1827/28 by students and followers of Schleiermacher (E. Hirsch 1960: 375; C. Welch 1972:269; H. Berkhof 1989:63). Among these were the Heidelberg professors, Karl Ullmann and F.W.K. Umbreit, also Schleiermacher's close friend G. Ch. Friedrich Lücke, C.I. Nitzsch and others. For more than a century this journal, which bears the hallmark not of Hegel but of Schleiermacher, exerted much influence in theology and in the church. The aim of its founders was to serve the ‘true mediation’ (*wahre Vermittlung*) between the modern scientific consciousness and the idea of Christianity, i.e. to effect the valid reconciliation of historical Christianity and contemporary culture. Hirsch points out that this

¹ Claude Welch (1972:269) and Sierd Woudstra who provided the English version of Berkhof's *Christelijk geloof* (Berkhof E.T.1979b:110, 144, 335) speak of “mediating theology”. John Vriend, the translator of Berkhof's *200 Jahre Theologie - Ein Reisebericht* in English, renders the term as “Theology of Mediation” (Berkhof 1989:63). In view of this apparent freedom of translation, I prefer the term “Mediation Theology”; on the one hand, because the so-called “genitive theologies” were not yet in vogue at that time, and on the other hand, because of Berkhof's criticism of such theologies (Berkhof 1976a:85) Furthermore I am of the opinion that Mediation Theology is a linguistically more correct rendering of the German *Vermittlungstheologie* than ‘mediating theology’.

clearly also “signified a mediation between theological opposites...but only as a secondary goal” (1960:375)².

Berkhof quotes Ullmann’s definition of ‘mediation’ as “the scientifically executed reduction of relative contrasts to their original unity; as a result an inner reconciliation and a higher standpoint is achieved in which the contrasts are resolved. The resulting scientific state which proceeds from this mediation is the true and sound middle...This lies in the nature of the case: synthesis ever follows thesis and antithesis; atomistic dispersion ever evokes the need for a gathering in the centre” (Berkhof 1989:63). To this Berkhof adds the significant comment that from such a methodological stance one would expect the development of a marked Hegelian theology. However, “though at times the reader may be touching the hands of Hegel — covered with dialectical hair — the voice is nonetheless that of Schleiermacher” (63).

It is thus apparent that among those who more or less shared the goal of mediation some were primarily influenced by Hegel, while the majority were more indebted to Schleiermacher. Hirsch distinguishes between those speculative theologians “who as pupils or also friends of Hegel paved the way for the mediation theology proper, but who as yet reveal no sign of being influenced by Schleiermacher at all.” (1960:366).³ Foremost among these, in his view, were Philipp Marheineke (1780 - 1846) and Karl Daub (1765-1836). The Mediation Theology proper, which was characterized by a strong biblical orientation fused with revival impulses and with the influence of Schleiermacher, features such prominent names as August D.C. Twisten (1789-1876), Schleiermacher’s successor in Berlin; the Zurich theologian, Alexander Schweizer (1808-1888); Julius Müller (1801-1878), professor at Halle; K.H. Sack (1789-1875), professor in Bonn; Daniel Schenkel (1813-1885), of Heidelberg; the French-Swiss thinker Alexandre Vinet (1797-1847), of Basel and Lausanne; Dorner’s associate in the founding of the *Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie*, Karl T.A. Liebner (1806-1871), of Göttingen, Kiel and Leipzig; the Dane H.L. Martensen (1808-1884) professor in Copenhagen; and in the Netherlands the theological faculty at Groningen, under the leadership of Petrus Hofstede de Groot (Welch 1972:272, 273).

² *Daß dies auch eine Vermittlung zwischen den theologischen Gegensätzen bedeutet, ist klar, aber erst Merkpunkt zweiter Hand.*

³ *An den Anfang stelle ich die spekulativen Theologen die als Schüler oder auch Freunde Hegels der eigentlichen Vermittlungstheologie stark vorgearbeitet haben, aber von einem Einflusse Schleiermachers noch keine Spuren zeigen.*

To this by far incomplete list may still be added Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, the friend and pupil of Richard Rothe, who in his early Mediation Theological stage wrote *Die synoptischen Evangelien* (1863) which led to the triumph of the two-sources-doctrine, and Karl Hase (1800-1890), professor at Jena (Hirsch 1960:413). But the two great men, by whose efforts the systematic achievements of the Mediation Theology won lasting importance, were without doubt Isaak August Dorner (1809-1884) and Richard Rothe (1799-1867).

Rothe, Berkhof wrote, “must probably be regarded as the greatest systematician among his theological allies, and...more than the others, sensitive to the spirit of modern secularism...His principal and comprehensive work, *Die theologische Ethik* (1845-1848) ...is a synthesis of philosophy, natural science, dogmatics, Christian and general ethics... He sought to claim this entire world for Christ. His passion for a cosmic *philosophia sacra* brought him in closer proximity to Hegel than to Schleiermacher...By his theory of ‘pure matter’ as the creative basis of ‘stages growing exclusively out of each other,’ he anticipated Darwin’s theory and the theological discussion of it...With his well-known ideas about the desacralization and socialization of the gospel and about the provisionality of the church, and with his struggle against the attempt to bring life under ecclesiastical control, he seems rather to belong to our own century than to the previous one” (Berkhof 1989:66).

In comparison, Dorner, Berkhof states “is not the man of cultural breadth but of evangelical depth...His theory of the relationship of the ‘absolute personality’ of God as holy love to the Trinity and its attributes...his fresh development of the doctrine of the immutability of God, his teaching of the impersonal (anhypostatic) humanity of Christ and its historical development, and of Christ as the central individual of the human race — these and other lines of thought, when stripped of their idealistic clothing, remained relevant for succeeding generations right into the present” (Berkhof 1989:66-67). Indeed, as Barth has pointed out, Dorner “while standing amidst the problems of the nineteenth century, points beyond them in his contribution to theological method and poses new questions to us by the new answers that he gives” (Barth 1972:577).

Nitzsch's *System der christlichen Lehre* (1829, 1851) and Ullmann's *Die Sündlosigkeit Jesu* (1828, 1863) and *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1845, 1865) were among the most widely read works of their day and embodied the characteristic themes of Mediation Theology (Welch 1972:270; Hirsch 1960:375). Especially the last mentioned work of Ullmann affords a quite comprehensive collection of Mediation Theology slogans. "Christianity is not a doctrine, but a creative principle of life. Its centre is the person of Christ, the perfect Mediator, in whom the permeation of the divine and the human is portrayed"⁴ (Hirsch 1960:376). Thus Christology is basic for the entire structure of theology. "In its essence and origin Christianity is divine and supernatural, but in its actualization, its development, it is human and natural"⁵ (376). Scripture, too, may not be viewed one-sidedly. "Divine infallibility and human fallibility merge in Scripture, so that it is theandric"⁶ (376). Thus the strict old doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture was replaced by vague representations that allow great latitude. Nevertheless, Scripture was given so much esteem that these theologians could even develop a biblically stamped dogmatics which claimed to be objectively valid (376).

These men shared Schleiermacher's lifelong concern: "Shall the tangle of history so unravel that Christianity becomes identified with barbarism and science with unbelief?" Thus they did everything within their power "to guard against a hopeless estrangement between the Christian faith and modern immanentistic, rational thought" (Berkhof 1989: 64). Yet, as Welch remarks, "with respect to the deepest level of theological need, the holding together of the demands of faith and culture, these thinkers did not judge Hegel and Schleiermacher to be greatly at odds, and they drew freely from both the great synthesizers. Their common mind, or better the commitment that they acknowledged and that often led to a sense of sharing in a common theological direction, set them off sharply from both the 'free theology' and the confessionalists...(They) sought not simply mediation between rationalism and supernaturalism, or between Hegel and Schleiermacher, but...(their) efforts were directed to a genuinely critical renewal of Christian theology" (1972:269-270). To that end they wished

⁴ "Das Christentum is nicht Lehre, sondern schöpferisches Lebensprizip. Sein Mittelpunkt ist die Person Christi, des vollkommenen Mittlers, in dem das sich Durchdringen des Göttlichen und des Menschlichen sich dargestellt hat"

⁵ "Nach seinem Wesen und Ursprung ist das Christentum göttlich und übernatürlich, aber nach seiner Verwirklichung, seiner Entwicklung ist es menschlich und natürlich"

⁶ "Göttlich-Unfehlbares und Menschlich-Irriges mischen sich in Ihr, so daß sie gott-menschlich ist."

to learn and did learn from all, from Hegel and Schleiermacher and the Revival, from the church fathers and the Reformers and the representatives of the newer science, and sought their honour not in exclusiveness, but in comprehensiveness (Hirsch 1960: 411). Part of their program, too, was to mediate between theology and the church, and in this respect their accomplishments were astonishing. Almost all the protagonists of Mediation Theology occupied important and influential posts in the church. “For almost half a century, with their clear and practically focused ideology, they were the competent church leaders who were able to prevent the church from falling apart into confessionalism and liberalism” Berkhof 1989:64-65).

In the Netherlands a parallel to the German *Vermittlungstheologie* arose through a movement shaped by two prominent ecclesiastical and theological personalities — its founder, Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818-1874), pastor of the French Reformed Churches in Leeuwarden and Leiden, later minister of the Netherlands Reformed Church in Rotterdam, and professor in Groningen, and his younger friend and pupil, Johannes Hermanus Gunning (1829-1905), pastor in the Hague and later professor in Amsterdam and Leiden (Berkhof 1989:106). Dissatisfied with the supernaturalism prevalent among Dutch theologians at the time, De la Saussaye sought a new theology, born of the life of faith and liberated from arid intellectualism. Influenced to a large extent by Schleiermacher, for whom he had the greatest esteem, and by the theology of the Groningen School via Van Oordt, but especially nourished by the French-Swiss Revival, in particular its theological leader, Alexandre Rodolphe Vinet, he felt himself increasingly akin to the Mediation Theology. Indeed, he clearly indicated that in principle and direction he was completely at one with men such as Nitzsch, Dorner, Julius Müller, Lange, Rothe, Schenkel, Martensen and others in Germany, and also with those in France and Switzerland who genuinely followed in Vinet’s footsteps. In De la Saussaye’s opinion the theology which these men practised was what was needed in the light of the sad state of affairs in theology in the Netherlands. Although he was aware that they did not as yet have the complete answer for their time, Schleiermacher tending too much toward subjectivism and Vinet too much toward individualism for his taste, he was convinced that *in theologicis* they were moving on the track of the future as representatives of the mediating theology, which for Saussaye meant the Christological, Ethical Theology (Bavinck 1903:1, 2, 4, 5; Berkhof 1989:105,106).

Thus, “much of Saussaye’s thinking is reminiscent of German mediation theology, which he followed closely, and to which he owed a great deal for the development of his own insights.” However, Berkhof states, “we should not look too much for ‘dependencies’ among European mediation theologians. A common spiritual climate and the estrangement between church and world that came with it drove convinced and at the same time modern Christians everywhere, with inherent necessity, in the same direction” (Berkhof 1989:107, 108).

According to J. Veenhof, De la Saussaye’s aim was to provide an own theology which could establish rapport between the reformed heritage and the culture and spiritual life of the day. He thus directed his efforts toward a “Christological-anthropological” reorientation of dogmatics which would enable the church to bring the message of the Gospel home to modern man in a modern world. In this reorientation De la Saussaye sought to find a solution for the problem that intrigued him: that of the relationship between Christian faith and humanity, Christology and anthropology, theology and science, the old and the new man. His goal throughout his dogmatic labours was to elucidate from various perspectives the “holy synthesis” between the human and the Christian. Deeply aware that repristination was impossible he wanted to produce a new dogmatics attuned to his time, yet bearing a reformed stamp (1968:64).

So retaining his freedom and independence, while yet striving to remain true to the Reformed tradition, De la Saussaye founded, by means of numerous articles in the journal *Ernst en Vrede* (established in 1852) and in various brochures, what came to be known as Ethical Theology and in the church the Ethical Movement as an original variation of Mediation Theology. It was his sincere view that only in the ethical development of the *dogmata* could their Reformed character and idiom more effectively and more truly be brought to light. Throughout he considered the Reformed outlook on doctrine and life as one of the purest and richest revelations of the life of the Spirit in the congregation. In his view the starting point in Reformed dogmatics must not be Schleiermacher’s God-consciousness, but the God-concept as this is revealed and understood through faith. Indeed, according to Saussaye, the power of the Ethical Movement lay precisely in its concurrence with the Reformed church-consciousness of the community (Bavinck 1903:5). In his endeavours he was greatly

assisted by Gunning “who promoted the ideas of ethical theology and, by his various talents and impressive personality, helped secure for them wide theological and ecclesiastical influence” (Berkhof 1989: 106). Other noted representatives of the Ethical Theology were De la Saussaye Jr., Valetton, Isaac van Dijk, A.J.Th. and G.J. Jonker, De Sopper, A.M. Brouwer, J. Riemens Jr., and O. Noordmans.

Bavinck points out that according to De la Saussaye there is actually only one absolute contrast, or antithesis, namely that between Christ and Satan. But before the final separation in the Day of Judgement, there is here on earth nothing absolute. Neither evil nor good stands absolutely alone. They are always intermingled. Everything on this earth is thus relative. There is in history no ‘*Entweder-oder*’, no ‘either-or’. No one side can lay claim to the truth alone. In fact, for error and lie to exist completely on their own is an impossibility. In every error there is fundamentally an element of truth upon which it rests. In our present human existence, which is not diabolic, the lie can only be propagated by being clothed with the truth. Naturally, this line of thought led De la Saussaye to attempt to mediate between every antithesis in every field (except of course the one great absolute contrast) and to rid them of their sharp edges (Bavinck 1903:9).

The means by which he aimed to achieve this goal was the ethical principle in which, according to Saussaye, all the elements of truth are united and in which the whole truth is entirely present. In the ethical, which he variously identifies with the metaphysical, the Israelite, the Christian, the Reformed, the truly anthropological, lies the reconciliation of all the relative contrasts: the speculative and the empirical, Judaism and paganism, religion and philosophy, confessionism and modernism, the anti-revolutionary and the liberal (Bavinck 1903:25). Indeed, for De la Saussaye “the truth is ethical”. Berkhof, however, calls attention to the fact that, apart from De la Saussaye’s ponderous diction, it was precisely his main thesis “truth is ethical” which gave rise to much misunderstanding among his friends and his foes. “Many believed his aim was to emphasize the ethical implications of the gospel, or to say that only the pure in heart were able to understand the Word of God. But for Saussaye the word *ethical* was not derived from the Greek *εθος* (custom) but from *ηθος* (character)...‘Ethical’ meant for him something close to what we mean by ‘existential’ ” (Berkhof 1989:106).

Bavinck emphasizes that precisely because De la Saussaye considered the ethical as fundamental for reformed theology and attempted to rebuild the entire theological structure on this ethical basis, the essential character of Reformed theology necessarily eluded him. In fact, for this reason, contrary to his desire and intention, he failed entirely to do justice to even one essential aspect of Reformed dogmatics. Much had to be excised before one retained that which Saussaye considered to be truly reformed (1903:7).

In Saussaye's view, "...the goal of a new theology should be 'to humanize the divine without removing its divine character' (*humaniser le divin, sans lui enlever son caractère divin*)...In his deepest self man has a sense of duty...He knows (however) that there is this (for him) insurmountable chasm between 'what ought to be' and 'what is' which robs him of peace. Only Jesus Christ, the mediator between God and humanity, who reconciles the 'is' with the 'ought' (*Sollen und Sein*), can overcome this crisis of conscience. The ethical viewpoint is thus at bottom a Christological one" (Berkhof 1989:107).

Suffice it to say that De la Saussaye, the father of the Ethical Theology, attempted to mediate between every thinkable contrast. All antitheses had to be reconciled in a higher synthesis. As Bavinck has pointed out, one could never expect a cordial, unconditional assent from De la Saussaye. Whatever he found acceptable and meritorious, he always had his reservations and doubts. That, Bavinck states, could be grievous and even trying in the long run, yet in view of his principle De la Saussaye could not do otherwise (Bavinck 1903:19).

As stated at the beginning, the primary concern of this chapter is methodological, i.e. to establish the design of Berkhof's theology. After all that was said above, is it possible at this point to indicate this design? Considering the quest of the *Vermittlungstheologie* and its Dutch counterpart, the Ethical Theology, for 'true mediation' between historical Christianity and contemporary culture, between relative theological opposites and contrasts, between theology and church; and bearing in mind what was stated in chapter 1 regarding Berkhof's aim to present a restatement of the Gospel relative to our secularized age; his passion for reconciling divergent views; his complementary thinking; his intense involvement with the ecumenical movement; his

lasting love of the Ethical Theology; and the fact that on more than one occasion he described himself as a man not of the ‘either...or’ but of the ‘and...and’ (a description reminiscent of Chantepie de la Saussaye), it may be said without fear of contradiction that the design of Berkhof’s theology stands firmly in the tradition of Mediation Theology. Indeed, since Berkhof always tried to integrate the results of modern Biblical and theological research in his theology, to address issues which in the past were either continually neglected or did not receive due attention, and to relate all this in a meaningful manner to man in his present situation, Berkhof’s theology may even be called a “modern”, or more correctly, a contemporary design of Mediation Theology. Indeed, evidence of this is widespread throughout his extensive *oeuvre*.

As a theologian who took the position of mediation, Berkhof sought synthesis (C. Graafland 1974b:88). Throughout his theology there are always two poles, two sides, but as A. van de Beek has pointed out, Berkhof did not take an extreme position on either side (1994:13). In his practice of theology, he continually weighed, listened critically, referred to, and remained in discussion with the contra-elements in theological traditions and trends, in modalities and movements, in churches and sects, in Biblical and modern philosophical thought. He wanted to neutralize...tendencies and aimed to do that by retaining the elements of truth inherent in them and to integrate these in a theological concept which combined them with the Christian faith which has been handed down to us by centuries of tradition (C. Graafland 1974b:88). J. Veenhof points out that it is typical of a *Vermittlungstheologie* to give and take on both sides (Dutch: *gevend en nemend naar beide kanten* (1968:29). Interesting, however, is H.M. Kuitert’s ‘playful’ remark that Berkhof is a theologian “*die van twee wallen weet, ik zei: ‘weet’ en niet ‘eet’*” (1994: 69).⁷

From the outset it is important to note that Berkhof’s theology involves mediation in a broader and narrower, or a general and particular sense. In a broader general sense, Berkhof, like the thinkers and theologians whom he reviewed in his *Two hundred years of theology*, also tried to build a bridge between the Gospel and the secularized cultural environment, between Christian faith and modern thought. Ever and again, with increasing intensity, he asked himself how these two worlds can coexist,

⁷ This is a reference to a Dutch adage about a cow standing in a ditch and grazing now on the one side and then on the other. According to Kuitert, Berkhof is well aware of the two sides, but does not ‘graze’ on both.

and whether, in view of their essential features, one must not assume that they are radically inconsistent with each other and mutually exclusive. In his view, however, relationships in our world can be of many different kinds: synthetic, antithetic, dialectic, complementary, and the Christian faith is related to the totality of our experiential reality. Indeed, divine salvation and earthly reality are complementary concepts and it is only in relation to each other that they become visible (Berkhof 1989: xi-xiii; E.T.1979b:4).

In the process of describing how and where the Christian faith ‘lands’ in our reality and becomes a part of it (albeit a very strange part), Berkhof, however, faced not only what is known in classic Protestantism as the *loci communes* and in Roman Catholic Theology as the *tractates*, but also greatly divergent dogmatic insights packaged in particular themes, models and proposals (Berkhof 1982:84). For as J. B. Webster has pointed out in his article *Contemporary Theological Trends* (1988:162), much modern theology is pluralist, spanning different confessional and sometimes religious traditions, because theology’s conversation partners are no longer simply history, ethics, and philosophy, but also for example sociology, anthropology, and political science. Berkhof, as a theologian versed in the history of dogma, and having kept in touch as much as possible with the theological trends of his time, and being intensely aware of the changes and challenges presented by an increasingly secularized world, knew that if progress is to be made in the business of theology, then it will have to be sought there where, from the alternative of his own choosing, each theologian must, as attentively as possible, eavesdrop on the other alternatives, and then himself try to integrate the truth which he has discovered there (Berkhof 1975:126). How Berkhof goes about doing so in particular instances, is what we mean by mediation in the narrower and particular sense. Since the general and the particular aspects of Berkhof’s mediation theology are so closely associated with each other — the particular serving the general — his theological design may be described as: Mediation through reinterpretation.

Inevitably, the question arises whether synthesis is possible in every case, whether Berkhof actually accomplished true mediation, and whether he succeeded in bridging the gap between the contrasting and even contradicting positions? Some, like A.van de Beek, would answer in the negative (1994:14). Others would maintain that

in so many cases Berkhof's bridges would inevitably turn out to be only bridgeheads (E. Flesseman-van Leer, *et al* 1981: 9). Or does Berkhof's attempt at mediation simply involve "a smoothing down of the rough edges of the two sides"? (J. Veenhof 1968:30). Or is it rather the case that the renowned remark of Isaac van Dijk: "in the ethical movement each one spoke graciously for himself"⁸ (quoted by J. Veenhof 1968: 90), can also be applied to Berkhof, i.e. that he takes note of the two sides, recognizes the degree of truth which they represent, but in the end steers his own course between the two?

Previously, we stated that evidence of Berkhof's mediation design is widespread throughout his extensive *oeuvre*. The wide range of his writing, however, makes selection inevitable. Not everything can be said. Such a selection is, without doubt, bound to be subjective. Nevertheless, it is done in complete confidence that it will supply sufficient support that Berkhof's design is one of mediation and that it will enable us to arrive at conclusive answers to the questions posed in the previous paragraph. In the following chapters I shall therefore examine Berkhof's treatment of the salient contra-elements with which he is confronted in his attempt to mediate between Christian faith and modern thought in a secularized cultural environment. These are: *Religion, atheism, and Christian faith; Revelation and experience; Christianity and secularization; and Jesus — man and (also?) God.*

⁸ The Dutch reads: *in de ethische richting spreekt ieder minzaam voor zichzelf.*