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The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof

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2010

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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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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3. RELIGION, CHRISTIAN FAITH, AND ATHEISM

3.1 Atheism in the theological auditoria

Berkhof recalls an incident during a lecture in the fall of 1965 when he asked his students what they made of Schleiermacher's *das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl* (the feeling of absolute dependence), and a student replied: 'How does he actually know that we are dependent on something absolute?' A-theism, Berkhof comments, had made its entrance into the lecture hall of theology! (Berkhof 1981g: 18). Previously, when Berkhof was visiting Union Theological Seminary, New York in 1962, Henry P. van Dusen, the retiring president of Union, remarked that they had a growing number of students for whom even the existence of God was problematic. They were studying theology not because they intended to become pastors, but because they sought clarification for the fundamental questions of their existence (Berkhof 1981h: 59).

Berkhof mentions these incidents to indicate the radical change in the sense of life in Europe and America *post* World War II. What had previously been the attitude of small groups now became the common property of the masses. It is of great significance and a sign of exceptional intuition that, behind the heavy ideological facades of the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had already become aware of the emergence of a new type of man which, as Berkhof put it, 'most of us would only discover fifteen years later: man who had come of age, who solved his own problems, and needed no God anymore to fill the gaps in his acumen and ability.' What Bonhoeffer suspected, Berkhof states, has become a widespread sense of life: that we no longer need God as a working hypothesis. The new impulses provided by scientific thought during and after the Second World War, the breathtaking speed of technological progress, and the rapid rise of prosperity in Europe, swept away the sense of life of the war years. It was tantamount to a *zweite Aufklärung* (a second enlightenment) *à la* Friedrich Heer. What extended beyond the limits of man's acumen and ability, directed as it was toward experienceable reality, did not concern him. God then also does not concern him. This man is a-theistic, but totally different from the earlier combative atheists who could better be called anti-theists; totally different, too, from Nietzsche, for whom the 'God is dead' was an extremely shocking and liberating discovery. For our generation,

Berkhof says, there is not even the certainty of Nietzsche and the atheists. Man is agnostic. He simply does not know. And it hardly interests him, because he cannot see how God could have a relevant function within our predictable and controllable existence (1981h:60, 61).

In his student years, Berkhof states, theology could still rely on belief in God being indisputable, resting either on Schleiermacher's *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsge föhl*, or Troeltsch's religious Apriori, or Rudolf Otto's experience of *das Heilige*. The issue then was whether the Christian faith could be more than merely one of many variations of the general religious awareness. Now that entire awareness has become problematic. It would seem that God has been adequately explained away psychologically, sociologically, or anthropologically either as projection, or as 'the opium of the masses', or as father figure, or as *Lückenbüßer* (stop-gap), or as metaphysical breach-piece. It begs the question whether it is not more honest to do a thorough heart-searching and to live as Anselmus said: *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if there is no God). The intense honesty and consistency of atheism is apparent everywhere. With its questions and corrections it has robbed theism of its self-evidence, let alone its provability (Delfgaauw, quoted by Berkhof). In this regard, Berkhof mentions the statement by A. Th. van Leeuwen that due to the spreading of the Gospel we have entered a planetary a-theistic world period and that therefore the world religions principally belong to the past, so that the future dialogue will take place between the Gospel and its bastard child atheism (61).

3.2 Three symptomatic extremes

It may seem that the Christian church and its theology only have to deal with this atheistic world as an outsider who needs to be converted. Berkhof points out, however, that the situation is much more serious. Daily, Christianity has to think and act *etsi Deus non daretur*, for all of us function in this atheistic climate. Even our theologizing, if it does not happen entirely outside our reality, will reveal its footprints. The Bonhoeffer of the *Letters and Papers from Prison* was the precursor. Since then the suction of atheism has increased enormously. Against this lure, foothold is sought in history or in existence. For some this has not proved successful. The result is that the word 'God', and even the reality to which it points, has begun to lose its rele-

vance. Berkhof admits that these are extremes, but, he points out, the extremes are always an indication of the direction in which the spirit of the time is moving (61, 62).

According to Berkhof the three most prominent examples of these extremes (c.q. symptoms) are: Rudolf Bultmann and his school in Germany, the New Testament scholar, Herbert Braun, and from America, representing a hybrid between Barth and the English linguistic analysis or analytic philosophy, Paul M. van Buren (62)

Bultmann and his followers, Berkhof states, abandoned God in the objectifiable world, but tried to demonstrate His relevance through the so-called *Existenzverständnis* (the way in which man perceives his existence in the world, his relationship to God, his fellow man, and himself). Our existence can only be liberated from its *Weltverfallenheit* (sell-out / defection to the world), from its enslavement to the horizontal objectifiable reality through an encounter with God in the crucified Christ. This raises the question, Berkhof points out, whether the word 'God' is not once again an indication of something objective and heteronomous which is foreign to existence and thus deprives it of its freedom (62).

Herbert Braun argued that even the New Testament belief in God is a metaphysical relic which should be demythologized, in order to reveal the *glaubende Selbstverständnis* (lit. the believing self-understanding) in its pure form. This *Selbstverständnis* is characterized by a polar movement between carefreeness and obligation, between 'may' and 'must', between Law and Gospel. It is activated through the encounter with fellow-man. This carefreeness and obligation to which one's fellow-man brings one, has its origin in God. To abide in God is thus interpreted as being continually directed toward others. According to Braun, Berkhof states, one can only speak about God anthropologically, i.e. by speaking about man. Man as man, man in his being fellow-man, implies God. God would then be a specific form of compassion toward one's fellow-man. It is clear, Berkhof states, that for Braun God is the name for the experienceable mystery of the fellowship with one's fellow-man, a fellowship which involves surrender on the one side, and responsibility on the other (62).

For Van Buren, Berkhof states, God is not another name for compassion toward fellow-man, but for the one new, free man, Jesus, and the liberating and renewing influence emanating from Him. These are experienceable realities which can be expressed in meaningful language. It is all about the good tidings of a free man who liberated others. Based on the principle of verification of linguistic analysis, that is essentially all that can be said about Jesus. Van Buren, Berkhof points out, saw fit to develop an entire dogmatics (including Christology, reconciliation, justification, election, etc.) from this short description. Only, he avoids the word ‘God’ because it is ambiguous and misleading. Van Buren’s book *The secular meaning of the Gospel*, Berkhof comments, is probably the first atheistic dogmatics in the history of Christian theology. The paper, *Christian Century*, summed its content up with the words: There is no God and Jesus is his Son (62, 63).

3.3 Religion and atheism — hostile brothers

Culturally, Berkhof maintains, atheism is almost as old as religion. There is not a single period or culture in which it has not manifested itself. It continually takes on other forms: Buddhism, Epicurism, the court of Frederick II, the later Renaissance, the French Enlightenment, Marx, Nietzsche, dialectical materialism, positivism, etc. Merely putting atheism’s global spread down to our technological civilization and its presuppositions, however, does not say everything. According to Berkhof, technological progress in India and the United States has not had massive atheistic consequences. In his view, the reasons for this are probably India’s deep religious culture, and in the case of the United States, the fact that scientific and technological thought has been assimilated and seen to have its limitations. Spengler’s idea that the diffusion of atheism is a phenomenon of cultural fatigue may well be the reason, Berkhof states, why Europe in particular is the most atheistic part of the world. Indeed, Europe has much more in common with Russia than it would admit, at least as regards its atheistic attitude toward life. He emphasizes, however, that he cannot surrender to Spengler’s biological culture-pessimism. He would rather take into account the possibility that Western Europe’s atheistic sense of life is a passing phase. At the same time, however, he allows for the possibility that most of us will probably not be witness to the eventual next phase. It is Berkhof’s conviction, however, that for the consciously alive Christian it is forbidden to take the current *Gottesfinsternis* (God-

eclipse) as starting point of his thought. He has the responsibility to view his own time from the necessary critical distance (64, 65).

From the perspective of the history of religions and, to a certain extent, the philosophy of religion, the phenomenon of atheism has to do with the *problematic inherent in religion* (my italics). Berkhof defines religion as: *the relationship to the absolute* (Berkhof E.T.1979b:6). According to him, this description expresses both what is unique about religion and what its function is in human life. Human life is after all living in relationships — to the world, fellow human beings, jobs, societal structures, culture, science, and nature. Religion, as relationship to the absolute, is our awareness that we stand in yet another altogether different relationship to something which is not part of our phenomenal world, though it cannot be known apart from it either, a reality which is the ground of our existence (7).

But is there, amidst all the limitations, finitude, and relativities of the phenomenal world, a power which is absolute, self-contained, not dependent on something else, and which upholds this world of relativities? Berkhof emphasizes that in this regard we cannot say more than that the search for this absolute seems to indicate that it is part of being human to want to think and to need it, and that with it there is the certainty that this absolute can be found and that man can enter into a relationship with it (7).

Viewed in this way, Berkhof states, religion is simultaneously a question *and* answer. Indeed, man's inner need and questioning attitude may well be the most enigmatic and fascinating aspect of his being. Repeatedly his relationships with the phenomenal world, to which he belongs and which he needs, do not seem to be enough for him. He cannot help reaching beyond this world and thereby beyond himself. The answers the world gives to his questions and the satisfaction it offers him leave him unfulfilled. There is within him a permanent restlessness, a thirst, a void, clamoring for filling and fulfillment (7).

The reverse side of religion, Berkhof points out, is its certainty, its being-an-answer. Religious man experiences that he receives a final answer, that the absolute enters into a relationship with him, and that in this way he is initiated into a depth of

knowledge and life in which his humanity finds the fulfillment for which it is made. Indeed, man's fundamental discontent, Berkhof states, is related to knowledge and life. His thirst for knowledge is too great to be quenched by the knowledge that can be gained from this world of relativities. He keeps asking all the way to the absolute ground. And his yearning for fulfillment is too great to be satisfied by the satisfactions and happiness which his limited, faltering, earthly, care-filled existence can offer him. He keeps pressing for knowledge of the absolute and for complete self-fulfillment. For him the two quests are apparently one. He hankers after truth and happiness, revelation and salvation. And in his religion, through his relationship with the absolute, he hopes to find both of them together: the revelation of the divine is at the same time, in some way, revelation of the way that leads to salvation and bliss (7, 8).

Religion, Berkhof explains, is thus a relationship which goes beyond phenomenal relationships, while being complementarily most intimately connected with these. This explains the bewildering variety there is in religion. Religions, being both question and answer, belong complementarily to widely differing human situations, in each of which the questions concerning knowledge and salvation are put differently. Religion is thus embedded in a specific cultural-anthropological pattern, while breaking through it in one way or another at the same time. In respect to its manifestations (not its essence) religion is conditioned in many ways: geographically, psychologically, socially, culturally, and historically — hence the great variety of questions, particularly concerning salvation, and the even greater variety of answers. Now man finds rest in the tribal bond, or in the belief in an immortal soul, or in knowing himself as part of the world of his ancestors which supports and surrounds him; then again in the eternal cycle of nature, or the cosmic order in the solar and stellar world, or the correlation of act and fate, or the polarity of light and darkness; or else in the life of the nation, or the idea of a universal humanity, or man's spirit as a divine spark, or losing oneself in the world-soul, or in redemptive history as in Judaism and Christianity (8).

Yet, apart from the variety in content, structurally, Berkhof maintains, the religions exhibit a great uniformity. Nearly all have three elements: (1) the element of myth, teaching, or proclamation, i.e. the manner in which the absolute opens up; (2) the element of a sacred rite or cult, i.e. man's immediate response; (3) the element of

rules for moral conduct, i.e. the consequences of knowledge and salvation for man's everyday life. Inner experience, the mystical component of religion, is sometimes mentioned as a fourth element. This, however, presupposes a measure of individuality and a corresponding contact with the deity which, according to Berkhof, was and is by no means found in all religions (8).

It is precisely the variety in religion and its causes which constitute the problematic inherent in religion. The religious answers that are given differ greatly, varying with the kind of world in which the people, the tribes, nations or cultures giving the answer live. The absolute cannot be known or experienced apart from the world in which one lives. By its very nature it is that which infinitely transcends the phenomenal and the relative, but which at the same time, due to the fact that we are bound to the phenomenal world, can only be known when and insofar as it appears in these relative phenomena. Here, Berkhof points out, is where the differences begin, since for some these phenomena are only secular matters, while for others they are sacral happenings. But behind these differences lies a much more serious problem. Is it not contradictory to look for the absolute in the relative? Yet, where else can man, bound as he is to the phenomenal world, find the absolute? This leads to the further question: does it not mean that man looks for something which, by definition, cannot be found, thus making religion a subtle form of self-delusion? For the absolute is simply nowhere and trying to find it in a secular fact or happening, brings with it the danger of overemphasizing and sacralizing the secular and of misunderstanding its secularity; and simultaneously of relativizing and secularizing the absolute. It is precisely at this juncture that the phenomenon of atheism emerges in the field of religion (8-9).

Atheism, Berkhof points out, is commonly presented as the enemy that totally denies religion. In doing so, Berkhof maintains, one fails to recognize that religion and atheism belong together as *feindliche Brüder* — hostile brothers (Berkhof 1981h:65); that they are dialectically related as opposite answers to the problematic inherent in religion. According to Berkhof, this polarity is clearly seen in the atheistic religion of Buddhism, and equally evident in the Graeco-Roman and Enlightenment atheism. The fact is that *atheism shares in the religious questions, but not in the religious answers* (my italics). It, too, asks for the absolute, but observes that it is nowhere. It is characterized by a passionate desire to do complete justice to the bare

facts and the relativity of the profane world. It also often exhibits a deep piety which seems to grasp how absolute the absolute would really have to be, a piety which does not want to offend the deity by believing in its existence after the manner of religion. This *religious root of atheism* (my italics) explains why so often it issued in new forms of religion, forms in which the totality of the profane and relative phenomenal world was mystically experienced as an absolute process or as a birth from an absolute abyss. Generally speaking, Berkhof states, in history sacralizing and secularizing tendencies continually alternate as the answers to the universal and ineradicable question articulated by religion (Berkhof E.T.1979b:9).

Everywhere religion sees the sacral, while atheism soberly confirms the secular. One moment the sacral is seen as an illusion, but then again the bare secular quickly gives the impression that the depth-dimension of existence is misappreciated. So religion and atheism revert to one another. Indeed, Berkhof maintains, it is difficult to draw the boundaries between atheism and pantheism, for there is not much difference between calling everything God, or nothing. Wrongly, atheism as a phenomenon of the history of religion has not been taken seriously in the theological faculty. Yet, just as much as religion, atheism can also be said to be an 'existential' of being human. Both are constitutive of humanity. The man in distress turns to God. The man who deems himself independent turns his back on God. Anthropologically, religion and atheism both have their right. They belong together as the two poles of one movement (Berkhof 1981h: 65).

Seen in this light, Berkhof is convinced that determining the location of atheism belongs in the theological faculty, and that that is the primary task of the phenomenology of religion. Significantly, it was especially Karl Barth, Berkhof points out, who gave thorough attention to atheism within the framework of phenomenology. Barth, he says, saw the phenomenon of religion in its further development branching out into mysticism and atheism. In both, according to Barth, a radical or seemingly radical de-projection in the portrayal of religion takes place, with the result that both continually revert to one another and both always return to religion. Miskotte, Berkhof states, developed a similar view in his *Als de goden zwijgen* (When the gods are silent). In Miskotte's view, the modern sense of life is not atheistic, but nihilistic. But, according to Berkhof, Miskotte qualifies it as artificial nihilism (*onecht nihilisme*),

because it ever again backslides to religion and reaches back to the God that it denies. Berkhof quotes Miskotte as saying that the modern sense of life exists in a position of ambivalence: ‘there is no God...how disturbing that there is no God...but He is not there. Well then, let us dispute His every alibi, and indict Him’ (65, 66).

Thus, according to Berkhof, we should necessarily learn to recognize and accept atheism as the radical and inescapable co-star and opposite pole (Dutch: *tegen-speler en tegenpool*) in the world of religion (66).

3.4 Religion, Christian faith, and atheism

Theologically speaking, Berkhof states, the Christian faith does not take sides in the never-ending issue between religion and atheism. It takes a positive stance towards religion in its numerous manifestations, because in these it hears God speaking to man, because they express a groping, a searching, a sensing (Dutch: *bevroeden*) aroused by God’s hidden presence. On the other hand, the Christian faith takes a negative stance towards atheism, because it suppresses this elementary turning towards the transcendent. But then again the Christian faith dismisses religion, because man projects himself in it, and because he elevates his worldly experience to the power of the divine by localizing the absolute in stars and seasons, in life and death, in nature and state, in vitality and spirit. This is what the apostle Paul described in his Letter to the Romans: “...they worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25). According to Berkhof, Paul’s line of argument runs parallel to that of his atheistic contemporaries. For the Christian faith, together with atheism, de-deifies the world. It alternately takes stance *contra* religion *pro* atheism and *vice versa*. It does so, by virtue of the knowledge of a new God who has appeared in our history in such a way that, in the midst of our reality, He has unveiled this reality as non-divine, as desacralized, as laid bare in its created secularity. In Berkhof’s view, the Christian faith and atheism have at least just as much in common as the Christian faith and religion. At least, indeed, for while in large parts of the world the Christian faith has displaced the religions, it has also paved the way for atheism by de-demonizing reality. Indeed, Berkhof maintains that modern atheism, like so many other modern phenomena, can be regarded as the stepchild of Christianity. Berkhof agrees with the idea expressed in the article *Neuzeitlicher Atheismus* (Modern atheism) in *Die Religion in*

Geschichte und Gegenwart (Religion in history and today) that it is only in the Christian world, liberated from powers and free for a completely transcendent God, that a previously unthinkable control of the world could come about by means of modern science and technology; and that it is only on this basis that consequently the existence of God, which science deems neither affirmable nor necessary, could generally be denied (Berkhof 1981h: 66, 67).

Following the views of Van Leeuwen (*Christianity in World History*), Berkhof maintains that the roots of this desacralization of reality lie in the Old Testament. The stories in Genesis 1-11 (especially the confusion surrounding the temple-tower of Babel) are apparently directed against the ontocratic religions of the Near East. Deutero-Isaiah (44-48) ridicules the gods as products of man's need to worship, and in Proto-Isaiah they are summarily called *elilim* ('nothings'), which begs the question whether this word originally meant 'gods' and whether Israel contemptuously twisted it to mean 'nothings'. The study of the Old Testament is thus indispensable for establishing the relevance of the Gospel for our modern world. It stands much closer to our experience of reality than was previously thought. It gives answers to questions that we, of late, have only begun to ask. It is precisely from the Old Testament that another, a non-religious God approaches us —a hidden God, who appears in history, shows concern for a people, a land, and the earth; who meets us in concealment and approach, in assailment and in suffering; who goes through the world revolutionizing, asserting the rights of the poor, disturbing our religious projections, and teaching us to live by the Word (67).

3.5 A Christian approach to Atheism

Since Gospel and religion are often thought of as more or less identical, and atheism as the mortal enemy of both, many, Berkhof states, see a dismal future for Christianity. Thus the call rings out: 'Devout of all religions unite!' But in these irreligious times, Berkhof emphasizes, our God, the God of Israel, does not stand closer to the religions than to atheism. Failing to make this discovery on the basis of the Old Testament, the church will neither really understand our atheistic world, nor be effective in the modern world. However, the important question is: how can the Gospel be preached and believed in a relevant manner in an atheistic age? That cannot be

achieved by sticking boldly to our traditional categories over against this world. It is even less attainable by adapting the Gospel to this world. Neither of these, Berkhof points out, is necessary. It is a fact, according to Berkhof, that so often new insights into the world outside the church, while at first appearing to be anti-church, have proved upon closer consideration to be a purification for Christianity and an enrichment of its presentation of the Gospel. What current atheism objects to, Berkhof states, is what is known as ‘theism’, by which is meant a God ‘up there’, who falls beyond our experienceable reality, a metaphysical being whose existence or not is discussed and to whom men try to gain access via so-called divine proofs. But that, Berkhof points out, is the God-image of the *theologia naturalis*, which developed in scholasticism under inspiration of Aristotle and became common property in European and American thinking via the theology of the Contra-Reformation and the scholasticism of the Protestant Orthodoxy. Currently, Berkhof states, there is a calm but radical resistance to this ‘highest being’, for it has no significance for man anymore, is not needed, and nowhere does it show its relevance in our world of experience (Berkhof 1981h: 67, 68).

This rejection, Berkhof claims, reminds Christian theology in a salutary manner that it stands in the service of a totally other God. For the God of Israel has nothing to do with divine proofs and projections. He cannot be sought ‘up there’. He must be encountered here below, in His deeds and words, in the field of concrete history. On this basis, Berkhof maintains, Biblical faith and modern atheistic sense of life can understand each other: only that which presents itself within the horizon of our experienceable reality and there effectuates an existential renewal can count as truth. For Berkhof, Paul’s response to the Corinthian Gnostics (1 Corinthians 2:10-16) illustrates the direction which our approach to atheists should take. Their deep religious aspiration was to penetrate to the ‘depths of God’, to the spirit, the *nous* of God. Paul, however, replies with a play on the word *nous*: “Who knows the *nous* of the Lord? ...But we have the *nous* of Christ.” In the first part of the sentence, according to Berkhof, *nous* means the spirit, the depth, the essence of God. In the second part the *nous* of Christ means: His attitude, His disposition in His historical existence, the attitude in which He humbled himself (Dutch: *zichzelf ontledigd heeft*) so as to assume the guise of a slave and was obedient even to the death of the cross (Phil 2:7-8). Thus Paul points away from the spirit up there and the depth down below to the field of our

history. There, in the one unique man, with His love and obedience, His passion and exaltation, there is where we must seek God. He, in the power of His spirit, is the only proof of God. It is this un-metaphysical, this *diesseitig* historical character of the God whom we know in the countenance of Jesus, of which we remind our neo-positivist and agnostic contemporaries. This in no way means that we can eliminate the offense and the folly of the Gospel for them. But it does mean that we can now confront them with it in a purer manner, without mention of a 'religious need' which they do not feel, and without metaphysical trains of thought which in any case must appear nonsensical to them. Rather, we refer them to an event which runs through from Abraham to the present, to a new man who has risen amongst us, and who, in the Spirit, is working worldwide. And we invite them to see God active in that, and therefore to join the movement (68, 69).

3.6 Disclosure-situations

Berkhof concedes that we cannot talk one another into accepting that in our experienceable world 'disclosure-situations take place, i.e. situations in which a reality is disclosed which transcends by far whatever horizontal experiences we may have. It can only be gathered from the Word which comes to one, and is discerned through faith. In these concrete historical encounters a new depth and height is revealed, and in the form of human encounters the countenance of an, as yet, unknown God becomes visible. If, however, God is assimilated in and identified with horizontal realities such as compassion towards fellow-man (Braun), or the contagious power of freedom and liberation (Van Buren), then the vertical dimension, the disclosure-character, and simultaneously the essence of the matter is removed. Then, precisely, the experienceable reality is short-changed. Apparently, Berkhof states, many (like Braun and van Buren) have become so used to thinking of God only as a theistic, metaphysical being, that they can no longer discern a *tertium*, a third position between their isolated verticality and their equally isolated horizontality: the *tertium* namely of the disclosure of Revelation in the field of our history. Yet, according to Berkhof, it is exactly this narrow, but real and liberating *tertium* which has to be proclaimed to our atheistic contemporaries (Berkhof 1981h: 69).

For our atheistic contemporaries, Berkhof points out, the experienceable reality is detached from what one eventually can or cannot believe. If there is a God, whose countenance becomes visible in specific disclosure-situations, then His relevance must be demonstrated in that He has a decisive say concerning, for instance, evolution and nature-control, the meaning of history and the future of mankind, compassion towards fellow-man and nuclear weapons. Whereas between both World Wars, Barth had emphasized the exclusivity of the salvation history, now the task is to consider the inclusivity of salvation: its relevance for the reality we experience. Indeed, it is à la Thils a matter of a theology of earthly realities. In this regard, Berkhof points out, the Old Testament (Genesis 1, Psalm 8, the nature-Psalms, the prophetic view of history, social and political ethics, and eschatology) and the way in which the New Testament extrapolates the relevance of the appearance of Christ even to the furthest corners of our cosmic existence (John 1, Col.1, Hebrews 1, and Ephesians) come to our aid. We may not be able to design a Christian philosophy of nature and history for centuries to come, but we can draw lines and open up perspectives, so that by virtue of salvation the reality which we experience may be recognized. Naturally, this recognition will have ethical consequences too (69, 70).

3.7 Faith always involves repentance and a leap

All this, Berkhof emphasizes, cannot eliminate the *σκανδαλον* (offence) of the Word which comes to us from Israel and from Christ. It accompanies the Word in every period. If we try to hide behind the fact that the Gospel ‘is not according to man’, we run the risk of interchanging two entirely different matters: taking offence at the Gospel either because we do not understand what it demands of us (a pseudo-offence), or because we jolly well do understand (the Biblical offence). Only he who is prepared to clear up the pseudo-offence, who dares to engage in dialogue with the outsider, who knows that, through this dialogue, God is also cleansingly operative in himself, can discern the offence-character of the Word in a purer manner and lay it bare in a more matter of fact way. He cannot eliminate the offence, nor may he attempt to do so. The tragedy of so much contemporary theologizing, Berkhof maintains, is that in the eagerness to eliminate the pseudo-offence, the offence, and together with it, the relevance of the Gospel itself is eliminated. Then one degenerates to adapting the Christian faith to the spirit of the time. The history of the Church has

let us see how the salt then becomes tasteless, and how quickly such an adapting theology passes into oblivion. The forces in the history of the church, still active today are those which dared to theologize above and against the spirit of the times. To observe this from a historical distance is one thing, to do the same in the present time is another. Theology, Berkhof stresses, may never row alongside the stream, or with the stream, but always against the stream, for that is characteristic of the matter which it represents. This should not discourage the theologian, nor tempt him to avoid the issue. Indeed, we must understand our atheistic contemporaries better than they understand themselves. We must proclaim the Gospel to them in new tongues. They must understand what concrete way out of their situation is presented to them, and what conversion c.q. repentance involves for them. We cannot spare them this repentance or the offence. We cannot replace the Holy Spirit. The faith which believes that in this experienceable, predictable, controllable world secrets are disclosed which transcend our horizontalness by far, *that* faith will always involve repentance and a leap. All our thinking is crucified by the Word, so that we may arise to a new life. Similarly, the atheist must sacrifice his horizontal way of thinking, in order to live in a multi-dimensional life (70, 71).

Hopefully, Berkhof states, these considerations will afford us some intellectual assistance. Yet, in the great issue of our time we are only then assisted truly, if we are assisted existentially. That we are so fiercely assailed by our time is largely due to the fact that we lack an existential counterbalance. This, Berkhof emphasizes, lies in personal reading of the Bible, and in prayer, and last not least, in participation in the life and tasks of congregation and church. For how can one think about God without participating in His salvation movement? Then it will become clear that it is not our theological arguments that accomplish anything, but what Paul has called ‘the convincing proof of the power of the God’s Spirit’ (1 Cor.2: 4). This proof, however, can only be furnished, if we have first received it. And we do not receive it unless in personal fellowship with the Lord and with His community, the congregation of very ordinary people in whom the Spirit nevertheless abides in order to preserve them in this atheistic period of time. Concretely, that means that we are snatched away from the loneliness and the attenuated humanity of this closed horizontal existence, to new fellowship, new joy, and new hope. That, Berkhof emphasizes, is where the proof of the power of the Spirit begins (71, 72).

According to Berkhof, there is no better way to express this theologically than in the closing words of Helmut Gollwitzer's impressive book, *Die Existenz Gottes im Bekenntnis des Glaubens* (The existence of God in the Confession of the Faith). Freely translated it runs: 'The Christian will understand that his atheistic partner, who has shut himself out of the joys and griefs of the world in which the Christian lives, is in fact shut out of the only fellowship which makes life really life. He will speak to him filled with the same hope which he has acquired from the message he himself received. He will not contradict the convictions of the atheist with his own personal convictions. With his words he will endeavour to let him hear the divine message which contradicts us all. Therefore he will emphatically bring to the fore the extraordinary Christian message in its unpolished, unadapted, and undiluted meaning. That is, he will proclaim the living God who is in our midst in a strange, non-self-evident, peculiar way, so that both (atheist and Christian — my insertion) are confronted anew with this God and are struck by the message concentrated in the cry: He is!' (Berkhof 1981h:72).¹

3.8 The vital leap

A survey of Berkhof's thinking with regard to the issue of atheism would be incomplete, if mention is not made of his article *Salto Vitale*. This was Berkhof's response to a request for critical comment on R.F. Beerling's book: *Niet te geloven – wijsgerig schaatsen op godgeleerd ijs* (1979).² This book was intended as a critique of Berkhof's *Christelijk Geloof*, which Beerling considered not only to be representative of Christian dogmatics, but also as 'unbelievable'. Page after page, Berkhof states, Beerling attempts to point out how untenable and contradictory the position of the believer is (Berkhof 1979:233).

¹ The German reads: *Der Christ wird die Selbstausschliessung – oder, vorsichtiger gesagt: das faktische Ausgeschlossen-sein seines atheistischen Partners aus der Freude und dem Erschrecken, aus dem Lebensbereich also, in den er sich selbst versetzt sieht, als einen Ausschluss aus einer Gemeinschaft verstehen, die ihm das Leben erst zum Leben macht. Er wird zu ihm in Hoffnung sprechen, in der gleichen Hoffnung, die er für sich selbst Kraft der Anrede, unter der er steht, haben darf. Er wird nicht den Widerspruch seiner Ueberzeugung gegen die des Atheisten aufrichten, sondern ihn durch seine Worte hineinzuziehen versuchen in den Widerspruch, in dem die göttliche Anrede zu uns allen steht. Eben darum wird er den besonderen, nicht zurechtgemachten, nicht angespassten, nicht reduzierten Sinn der christlichen Botschaft als der Verkündigung des lebendigen Gottes mitten unter uns in seiner Fremdheit, Unselbstverständlichkeit und Eigenart heraus arbeiten, damit sie beide aufs neue mit ihm konfrontiert seien und unter die dieser Botschaft eigene Anrede geraten, deren konzentrierten Ruf lautet: 'Er ist!'* (Gollwitzer 1963:198).

² Literally: Unbelievable / impossible to believe — skating philosophically on theological ice.

In his response, Berkhof first of all emphasizes that he doubts whether dialogue between an unbelieving c.q. atheist (or agnostic? — my insert) philosopher (Beerling) and a believing theologian (Berkhof) is possible. Since the time of Celsus and Origen, until that of Vestdijk and Miskotte, Kraemer and Sierksma, it appears that one has to do with the dialogues of the deaf. Beerling, too, is thoroughly aware of this and, Berkhof states, has repeatedly pointed out that argumentation cannot bring the two positions closer together. In Beerling's view, believer and unbeliever must accept to live patiently alongside each other. According to Beerling, the believer sees man as the ascertainer / perceiver (Dutch: *vernemer*), while the unbeliever sees him as the fabricator (Dutch: *verzinner*) of the holy narrative which lies at the heart of religions of every kind. While that is aptly said, Berkhof states, all dialogue must then seem meaningless. To his mind, however, even Beerling would not accept that people live like that, as in two worlds hermetically isolated from one another. For him that, too, would be '*niet te geloven*'. Apparently, Beerling does not believe that a person coincides with his deepest convictions. Yet, however these may differ, as people we still have experience and reason in common, and to that the unbeliever may and must continually appeal. On this point, Berkhof fully agrees with Beerling. Fortunately, he states, we do not live on different planets. He, however, seeks that which men have in common elsewhere than Beerling (233, 234).

Berkhof considers it unnecessary to go into Beerling's many criticisms of his *Christelijk Geloof*, firstly, because so often polemics deteriorate into a grossly boring game of 'is-isn't', where the reader eventually cannot see the wood for the trees; secondly, because not being a fellow philosopher, he could not hope to have any success by employing the devices in which Beerling is a master; thirdly, and primarily, because he agrees with Beerling that the two positions cannot be brought together through argumentation. "Beerling knows from the start that his arguments will not make me give up my faith, just as I know that I could not make a Christian of him even if he viewed my way of reasoning satisfactory" (234).³

For Berkhof the common ground between Beerling and himself does not lie superficially in the manner of their reasoning, or profoundly in the source of their ul-

³ The Dutch reads: "*Beerling weet al van te voren, dat hij mij daarmee niet van mijn geloof afbrengt; zoals ik weet, dat een in Beerlings ogen veel bevredigender redeneertrant mijnerzijds, van hem geen Christen zou maken.*"

timate convictions. It lies somewhere in between: in the climate and sense of life which they have in common. They live in the same period, in the same culture, in the same city. They are both products of West European culture which has been moulded by Christianity, humanism, and enlightenment. Over great distances their paths of life run parallel and they walk within earshot of each other in the same landscape. There they both look around with amazement — ecstatic and baffled at the same time. They agree about a great deal: that the world or existence (Dutch: *de wereld of het zijn*) cannot be interpreted unambiguously — a fact which keeps the metaphysical and religious problematic going (Beerling); that this ambivalence also keeps men questioning and alive (Berkhof); that there is an unfathomable horror in evil (Beerling and Berkhof). Suddenly they come upon a ditch. It seems that they have reached a dead-end. Beerling is convinced that they can go no further and that they should turn back. Berkhof, however, is certain the path continues on the other side of the ditch and wants Beerling to jump across with him as they had already done with many little furrows along the way. But what is a little jump for Berkhof, is a huge leap for Beerling. Berkhof jumps across, while Beerling stays back warning him that he will not find a path in the dialectical undergrowth on the other side. Berkhof assures him that he clearly sees a path, narrower and meandering indeed, but still there. But for Beerling that is ‘impossible to believe’ and he returns to the landscape through which they have come (234, 235).

This, Berkhof explains, is how he experiences the difference and similarity between Beerling and himself. With his reasoning, Beerling has attempted to call him back to their common reality, as if he had disappeared into another and as yet imaginary world. He, on the other hand, attempts to make it clear to Beerling that he is principally still in the same reality in which their walk began, in the hope that he can get Beerling across the ditch. In this attempt he also avails himself of reasoning, but of another kind — existential in character rather than rational. He and Beerling are thus broadcasting to each other on different wavelengths. They can receive, but not answer each other. But that need not be a totally cheerless situation (235).

Puzzling, Berkhof points out, is Beerling’s statement: ‘But thank God, I count it as one of the gains in my life that I have remained exempt from this type of belief in

God, thereby not knowing what I have lost'.⁴ But can something be called a gain without weighing it against the eventual loss? Berkhof suspects that Beerling, as a great music lover, would be quite unhappy if someone in a like manner expressed his gratitude for being impervious to music. The fact is, Berkhof points out, infinitely more people have a religious rather than an aesthetic awareness. Probably 90% of the human race lived or live to a lesser or greater degree in a relationship with a transcendent reality. Should this, Berkhof asks, be construed as a meaningless gesture of despair, something like catching a cold, or contracting an infection? Apparently, Beerling does, since he explains religion with the theory of projection. In Berkhof's view, however, he who thanks god (!) that he is not burdened with belief in god (probably meaning the theistic or Christian belief) adds nothing new to the concept of 'projection'. In fact, this theory (of projection) is the projection of his gratefully asserted 'no-need' (Dutch: *niet-behoefte*) (235, 236).

For Berkhof it is most unlikely that there is nothing in the realm of existence c.q. Being (Dutch: *het Zijn*) that corresponds to religious self-transcendence. Can it be, he asks, that by virtue of this dimension of existence which is common to humanity we are a misprint in the universe — a universe which is then in itself without meaning and irrational? The Greek saying *pisteue tèi psuchèi sou* (trust your own soul), Berkhof states, conveys his own conviction, for he believes that one's deepest promptings and one's highest ideals (not the most individual of course, but rather the most existential) correspond to signals which reach us on all sides from within reality (236).

As to the different religions, Berkhof maintains that this frequently raised problem can only be discussed relevantly among those who have already made the jump across the water ditch. Only then can the question be discussed where the main road runs. Life is full of frontiers and frontier-crossings. Time and again we make new jumps which open up new fields of reality for us. In puberty, children ask their parents to explain what it means to fall in love, and parents usually answer that they must wait until it happens. And when it happens, no further explanations are asked. The same may be said concerning right and wrong. Especially in youth, people continually leap into new fields of reality. It would appear, however, that in our rapidly

⁴ The Dutch as quoted by Berkhof reads: *Maar goddank van dit soort godsgeloof verschoond te zijn geble-ven reken ik tot de winsten van mijn leven, zonder te weten wat ik daarbij ingeschoten ben.*

developing pluralistic culture there is no longer any age restriction on this leaping (236).

Beerling's valedictory address made a deep impression upon him, Berkhof states, especially the conclusion where he stated: 'Perhaps it has never been as applicable as now, that one can only hold out in the world by holding another against it. Facts and events on their own are crushing. Their weight must be made lighter by giving them meaning, and their lack of transparency must be elucidated, so that through that which appears still something else may become apparent.'⁵ What Beerling had in mind, Berkhof points out, is 'nature, love, and art'. But, Berkhof asks, can we arbitrarily hold the other world against the one (half)? Is it not rather the case that the one reality, apart from its horror, also provides us consolation, and indeed not only in the form of nature, love, and art, but also (and why not) in the form of religion? To give meaning to something (Dutch: *zingeving*), Berkhof points out, is in itself a contradiction, if it is not based upon the perceiving of meaning (Dutch: *zin-verneming*). The world is full of metaphysical signals, which immediately lose their power as anti-dota if they merely become mirrors which we place around us. As he jumps over different water ditches, Berkhof states, he sees the world still opening up. But then there is that one ditch which he jumps across with a *salto vitale* (a vital leap), while Beerling stops there before the ditch with a gratified feeling (237).

Beerling, Berkhof states, also reproaches him that he can only express certain convictions of faith (such as 'omnipotence' and 'revelation') by means of a dialectical '*sic et non*'. As regards the concept of revelation, Berkhof agrees indeed that it cannot be described without employing dialectical reasoning which to the outsider may seem artificial. On the one hand, we only know God *via* our situation in the earthly reality of which we ourselves are a part. On the other hand, by definition, God can never be identical with this reality. Religion and faith, Berkhof points out, always mean that within the boundaries of our temporary reality, man becomes aware of another, eternal reality. Even Beerling, he remarks, speaks of an 'elucidation...so that, through

⁵ The Dutch quoted by Berkhof reads: *Misschien heeft nooit zozeer gegolden als nu, dat de wereld alleen uit te houden is door er een andere tegen te houden. Feiten en gebeurtenissen, op zichzelf genomen, verpletteren. Hun zwaarte moet door zingeving worden verlicht en hun ondoorzichtigheid opgehelderd, zodat door wat verschijnt nog iets anders heen schijnt.*

that which appears, something else becomes apparent'. In the framework of religious experience that is known as 'revelation' (237).

But, as Berkhof puts it, try to explain that to someone who only sees *one* reality! People discover the 'footprint' of God. But what is a footprint? It is really nothing and yet at the same time it is very much. And what is the footprint in the undergrowth on the other side of the ditch? It is the footprint of someone who has gone on ahead. Who can refute someone who only sees grains of sand blown whimsically either together or apart? It may be said that one must look from the correct distance. But who can determine with authority what that distance is? If one cannot help but see the footprints of God running through the world (and want to follow them, because believing and doing, faith and action, belong together), then one can only speak dialectically about 'the-footprint-of-God' and 'the-God-of-the-footprint': the footprint is not God, and yet it is too. That, Berkhof states, is the basic form of the theological dialectic. We 'circle around the mystery'. We would rather do otherwise, but apparently that is not possible in the current period of our created reality — and that not only on account of sin (as Beerling would have us say), but also on account of God's creative will. Man has been set upon a way. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin have repeatedly pointed out the limits of our religious reflection. As humans we are on the way (*in via*). We wander in the twilight, not yet *in gloria*, or *in visione*. That is the reason for our stammering in a strange mixture of knowing and not knowing, and naturally theologians are divided concerning the mixture of the composition (237, 238).

Does that not mean that we make a dialectician of God himself? Indeed, we do, Berkhof states, but as believers we would not speak of 'make'. We would rather say: in view of the non-self-evident yet visible footprint, the God of whom we are aware is busy here in a strange dialectical manner. It is indeed difficult to expect anything else from a faith in which the cross is the central symbol. 'God moves in a mysterious way', as William Cowper has so beautifully said. Can God not do it in another way perhaps? He cannot, Berkhof states, firstly, because of creation which creates a distance between God and us. God is not boxed-in in our reality. Secondly, He cannot because of sin. God must seek contact with creatures who sometimes do long for Him,

but who at the same time definitely do not want Him to come too close to them. That, Berkhof states, creates a double dialectic (238).

That it must always remain like this, Berkhof points out, does not correspond to God's ultimate purpose. How real the dialectic may be, it is not the last word. That the footprints continue on the other side of the ditch indicates that this God has not yet achieved His goal with us. We are still on the way, because God is still on the way with us. The twilight comes from a sun that is yet to rise. The Christian faith tells of 'a seeing face to face' after sunrise. Yet, that, too, is a 'mediated immediacy' (à la Adriaanse). But if that goal is not reached, it would amount to nothing less than that the image of God in every person is nipped in the bud. 'Our heart is ever restless, until it finds rest in Thee' (Augustine). Finding that rest already happens now, and at the same time not yet. That is the basic form of the theological dialectic on our human side (238).

It seems, Berkhof points out, that Beerling's resistance to the faith is primarily linked to the way in which faith, in his opinion, divests evil of its ultimate gravity. In order to give a fair rendition of Beerling's sentiments, Berkhof quotes him where he enquires after the relationship between 'omnipotence' and 'love' in God: "could he (God) have prevented it (i.e. evil), and can he still remedy it? If he can still remedy it, why does he take so long about it, and why does he give so few indications that he can?"⁶ (239).

Regarding the dismay over evil, Berkhof states that he and Beerling face the same reality — something that believers and unbelievers have not always admitted. Beerling's spiritual ancestors reproached believers, that by one-sidedly emphasizing the sinfulness of the world they were paralyzing the driving force of ethical inspiration. Beerling, on the other hand, thinks that believers treat evil too lightly, and that they do not place the responsibility for it clearly enough on God. According to Berkhof, Beerling sees a world in which evil indisputably has dominance over good; in which God has set no or insufficient counter forces at work; and in which there is therefore no well-founded hope of progress, let alone of a definite future banishment of evil (239).

⁶ "Heeft hij het (nl.het kwaad) kunnen helpen en kan hij het alsnog verhelpen? Indien hij het alsnog kan keren, waarom doet hij daar dan zo lang over en laat hij dienaangaande zo weinig tekenen zien?"

Both reproaches — that of progress frustrating pessimism and that of utopian optimism, which both conflict with reality — have the same basis, Berkhof states, and should thus be combined. The Christian faith, however, did not construct this combination, but experiences it on the trail which it follows through the wilderness of life. It is the trail of Moses and the prophets, of Jesus' way and work, His cross and resurrection, of the Holy Spirit and His works in the world. On that trail it appears that evil is an even greater basic problem for God than for man. The situation is much graver than formerly imagined. Simultaneously, due to the way in which God concerns himself with it, it is divested of its ultimate cosmic, historical, and personal gravity. Here once again there is the dialectic which Beerling comes up against (239).

Does that mean then that evil is not so grave after all? On the contrary, Berkhof states, it is indeed very grave, because it presupposes good. For it is only by virtue of good that evil exists, and it is only by its negation of good that evil is revealed as evil. Berkhof is convinced, however, that he who sees the trail of the Father of Jesus running through the world even until this day, is not only equally impressed by the power of good, but also loses his belief in the ultimate might of evil, even though he cannot tell how this might will eventually be broken. As to 'why God takes so long about it', and 'why He lets us see so few signs of it', Berkhof asks: 'what is long?', and 'are there really so few or no signs of it?' The pessimists with their negativity, Berkhof points out, always have a head start. For evil after all calls out much louder and is so much more supple and fascinating than good. Dante's *Hell* is still widely read, but not his *Paradise* because it is boring. So often, Berkhof states, it is concretely demonstrated how evil and foolishness contaminate life. What the millions of charitable deeds accomplish to make and keep life livable are for the most part not mentioned, and if they are mentioned they do not have any 'news value'. In this way an optical illusion is created in which the Christian cannot participate. By virtue of our common experience, the Christian can at least expect his fellow men to give good the benefit of the doubt. He can speak up not only for the feeling of dismay, but also for that of amazement concerning a variety of phenomena in nature and culture. For that does not disappear in face of evil. On the contrary, without it mankind would not always and everywhere have known what evil is and that it is evil. Berkhof is convinced that besides nature, beauty, and love, Beerling would also attribute ontological significance to the scientific laws of our physical and spiritual existence, to social aware-

ness, to conscience, to expressions of outstanding morality and faithfulness. We all live in a twilight, Berkhof states, in some sort of equilibrium between good and evil. On the trail that he follows — and that is precisely where the difference between him and Beerling lies — Berkhof sees the world in a morning twilight, or as the apostle Paul would say, in a birth process, and he believes that the scale often tips and finally will tip discontinuously and definitely. Beerling, however, does not and cannot recognize the facts upon which he bases this belief (239).

Not as argument, but merely to illustrate his point, Berkhof mentions the conversion to Christianity of Stalin's daughter. He quotes her saying: 'In the world there is as much madness, evil, and malevolence as progress, reason, knowledge, humanity, and friendship. The one as well as the other lie in the balance. All of us, our children, our generation, our time live in this hellish equilibrium. It is imperative that everyone believe in the power of good and goodwill. I think that at this moment in our time belief in God means belief in good, in the fact that good is mightier than evil and that sooner or later it will triumph and conquer...Now one should distinguish between those for whom God exists and those for whom the existence of God is absolutely non-essential (rather than classifying them according to language or race — H.B.). At the age of thirty-five, having experienced and gone through much, and although being acquainted from childhood with materialism and atheism in society and family, I nevertheless chose the side of those for whom it is unthinkable to live without God. And I am happy that it happened to me...'⁷

One notices, Berkhof points out, the 'dialectic' in these two sentences: she 'chose', and 'it happened' to her. What we see here is 'a personal choice' by virtue of 'a-not-being-able-to-do-otherwise'. It involves a *salto*, a leap, but not an arbitrary or

⁷ Dutch: '*In de wereld heeft zich net zoveel waanzin, kwaad en kwade wil als vooruitgang, verstand, kennis, menselijkheid en vriendschap opgehoopt. Zowel het een als het ander ligt op de weegschaal. In dit helse evenwicht leven wij allen, onze kinderen, onze generatie en onze tijd. Het is nodig, dat iedereen gelooft in de macht van het goede en van de goede wil. Ik denk dat nu, in onze tijd, geloof in God – geloof in het goede betekent en in het feit dat het machtiger is dan het kwaad, dat het goede vroeg of laat zal triomferen, dat het zal overwinnen...Nu kun je de mensen eerder (dan naar talen en rassen, H.B.) indelen in diegenen voor wie God bestaat, en diegenen voor wie het bestaan van God helemaal niet nodig is. Toen ik 35 jaar werd en ik al het een en ander had beleefd en meegemaakt, heb ik, hoewel ik van jongsaan door maatschappij en gezin aan materialisme en atheïsme gewend werd, toch de zijde gekozen van diegenen voor wie het ondenkbaar is zonder God te leven. En ik ben gelukkig dat dit met mij gebeurd is.'* (The quotation is from Swetlana Alliloejewa: *Twintig brieven aan een vriend*, Amsterdam, 1967, p.94).

willful leap. There is no risk of a *salto mortale*. You simply leap because you see the fullness of life beckoning in that direction (240, 241).

This last sentence raises the question: will one's belief later be disappointed or confirmed? While Berkhof emphasizes that here, too, nothing can be proved, he nevertheless considers himself to be one of those whose faith has been confirmed, and he is convinced that he can and must make that plausible. For him, he states, God has let the conflicting feelings which assail him and Beerling fall into their proper place in a manner which shows him a road and gives him a goal. Mainly four feelings have continually determined his life. *Firstly*, there is amazement (Dutch: *verwondering*) over our reality, over the mystery of life, over the boon of human existence. The scientific explanations given for these wondrous things merely transpose them into a different field of concepts. They do not take away the wonderment, but simply afford a way to express it more precisely. *Secondly*, there is the feeling of dismay (Dutch: *verbijstering*) at the horrors which dwell in our reality, and at the lust for evil in the hearts of men. Nevertheless, this abhorrence does not annul his amazement or *vice versa*. Both confront him with an enigma which he, as a human being, cannot fathom. *Thirdly*, there is the feeling of obligation (Dutch: *verplichting*), because the preceding feelings do not paralyze him, but are rather an inspiration to deeds. Indeed, the feeling of amazement suggests that life must and can be entirely different to that which the feeling of dismay would have him believe and frequently lets him believe. *Fourthly*, there is the feeling of expectation (Dutch: *verwachting*), because together the feelings of amazement and obligation, vaguely or concretely, keep the existential of expectation, *das Prinzip Hoffnung* (the principle of hope) alive in him. For obligation anticipates an existence which he as yet cannot see realized anywhere (241, 242).

With these feelings (which Beerling probably shares more or less), Berkhof states, he takes the leap across the water in the ditch, and thus a fifth existential is added to his life: the relationship to God. In the Bible this is known as *faith*, which means *trust* — not in this or that, or this one or that one, but in the ultimate purposes of life. This existential is neither detached from his other feelings, nor does it push them aside. Rather, in fellowship with God, he gains 'experience with his experience' (as current German theologians would say), and notices that here his feelings are confirmed. For however vague or conflicting they may be, here they apparently converge

and are included in a higher relationship where his amazement evidently corresponds to the miracle of creation, his dismay to the provisionalness of existence and especially to the sinfulness of man, his obligation to the change for the best which this world must undergo, and his expectation to the promise of God that he has another world in mind (242).

At the same time, Berkhof states, all his experiences come together in another framework indicated by the words 'cross' and 'resurrection'. These words reflect both the ambivalence of existence and at the same time the victory over that ambivalence. For those who see the footprint of God in Jesus, His cross absolutely frustrates the hope that man could achieve victory over evil. But the upturn and obverse of this is His resurrection, through faith in which Christianity came into existence, and without which it cannot survive. It would seem that a miraculous theme such as this allows no room for discussion, for whatever 'resurrection' may signify, it has opened perspectives to that which transcends our reality. These perspectives, however, appeared in our reality, and sober eyewitness reports about it (e.g. Paul and Mark), without the later apologetic embellishments, can be discussed. Something extremely startling must have happened which is difficult not only to explain, but also to explain away. The witnesses mention 'appearances'. Whoever believes that the footprint of Jesus coincides with that of God becomes aware of a footprint *par excellence*, a trail pointing to the future. Berkhof is convinced that the unbiased neutral reader of the Bible sees this trail not only in Jesus' cross and resurrection, but even before that in His words and deeds, and before that, too, in the Old Testament storytellers, prophets, and psalmists, and afterwards in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit through whom the trail leads to the present time and to the future (242).

In this way, Berkhof states, he gains a new experience with his experiences. They receive their place in a conflict situation in which the 'hellish equilibrium' is broken in favour of the 'yes' of everlasting love. That 'Love' is the key to the labyrinth of the world would seem 'impossible to believe', if only his first four experiences were taken into consideration. Seeing that it is indeed to be believed, he needs far more 'dialectic thinking-power' than he has, to give an at least meaningful expression to the relationship of the four experiences to Love. And yet he notices that in the midst of his four conflicting experiences he still secretly hoped that they would once

again be seen to converge in such a way that even the cross, as the ultimate endorsement of evil, would turn out to be the way to the victory of good (243).

The word ‘God’ (i.e. the God of the prophets of Israel and the Father of Jesus) confirms his experiences, but at the same time has a relativizing and inspiring effect on them. For he can neither absolutize any single experience, nor may he orientate himself to any of them out of hand. And furthermore, God does not only provide him with a converging and systematizing ‘view of life’, but has set him in motion towards a goal to which he dares to dedicate himself. Entirely unlike the case of Feuerbach, Berkhof states, God does not undermine his humanity. Rather his relationship with God elevates his humanity beyond measure. “I want to be disturbed and guided by this love,” he says, “and in the process reach out beyond myself. I can now admit my failings without despairing or giving up the battle. I get shorter toes ⁸ and longer breath. I feel I am growing in the direction of my destiny” (243).

As to whether it is possible that others may have similar confirmations and upliftments without the word ‘God’ necessarily being attached to it, he has no idea. In contrast to many fellow Christians, however, he has no need to deduce from the ‘yes’ of God which he deems to hear various ‘no’s’ against those who think otherwise and who are for whatever reason traveling on a parallel course. Indeed, he can only be glad that God is greater than he sees Him to be. All he asks is that those who are of another opinion do not push his experiences and those of millions of Christians past and present aside as not discussible. We do not live on different planets; we walk through the same reality (243).

But what difference does that make, Berkhof asks, if we are still so deeply divided regarding our answers to the basic questions of existence? Are we still within reach of one another and what remains of the possibility of communication? What will always remain, Berkhof states, is to try to listen to one another patiently and closely. That is not insignificant. It is something. Yet, for Berkhof it is not enough to abide with that which remains. He hopes for a new beginning, and although he does not believe in ‘progress’ in the usual sense of the word, he is convinced that he and Beerling have come a way further than Celsus and Origenes! (244).

⁸ In Dutch the expression *hij heeft erg lange tenen* (he has very long toes) indicates someone who is easily offended.

Supplement

I have given a comprehensive account of Berkhof's response to Beerling, because of its significance in two respects. Firstly, it indicates how Berkhof, not only with academic fairness, but also with a clear pastoral concern, endeavoured to bridge the gap between believer and unbeliever c.q. Christian faith and atheism. Secondly, it provides us with a graphic background to Berkhof's frequent use of the term 'leap' or 'jump', not only in his exposition of the development of the Christian faith within the wider field of religion, but also in his restatement of the Gospel as a whole in his *Christelijk geloof*. It is especially this last reason that prompted me to give a brief supplementary overview of Berkhof's leap-terminology, even though in many instances the following excerpts may not be directly related to the issue of faith and atheism discussed above. The significance of this leap-terminology, however, does not in the first place lie in its pervasive application, but in the fact that it is precisely this element in Berkhof's mediation theology which has evoked the most protest and criticism (Bakker 1976:144), and in my opinion clearly reveals a major weakness in his theology.

1. Christian faith — a leap into a strange reality

Reference to the term 'leap' already appears on the very first page of *Christelijk geloof* where Berkhof discusses the problem of the legitimacy and contents of the so-called "Prolegomena" to Dogmatics. Since the Christian faith expresses itself normatively in the New Testament, it is from the very outset opposed to the presupposition that it is only a particular form of the general phenomenon of "religion". It presents itself as a gift of the Holy Spirit, a fruit of election, a special revelation, an insight which no human heart has conceived. The big question is: how can access be gained into something which presents itself as *a leap into a strange reality*? Conversely, how can we abandon such an attempt if at the same time this Christian faith somehow and somewhere "lands" in our reality and becomes a part of it, though perhaps a very strange part? (Berkhof 1973a:1, 2; E.T.1979b:1).

2. Schleiermacher's encounter of a "leap" and Berkhof's following his trend

According to Berkhof, Schleiermacher inaugurated the modern tradition of Prolegomena by anchoring the Christian faith in "the feeling of absolute dependence", regarding it as its highest developed form. Schleiermacher later revised his standpoint stating that he did not want to give the impression that he used a common religious consciousness to account for Christian piety. From this Berkhof concludes: *'thus there lies a leap between the general religious consciousness and the Christian faith.'* And calling the latter the highest form of the former is not making a general statement, but a statement of faith (Berkhof 1973a:2; E.T. 1979b:2).

In his discussion of the similarity and difference between Schleiermacher's approach and his own, Berkhof states: "after having walked to the end of the long road of the Prolegomena, Schleiermacher admits that *on the way to the Christian faith he has come upon a chasm and that taking a leap is the only way to get across.*" For Schleiermacher there lies *a leap between factuality and having insight into it...*and there is *a leap between contemplative objectivity and existential choice.* Berkhof then mentions that while he follows Schleiermacher in broad outline, the difference between his way of tackling the subject and that of Schleiermacher is, among others, that due to the study of religion in the century and a half after Schleiermacher he cannot place religions in a harmonious hierarchy from lower to higher. He does not deny that there is some truth in an evolutionary development, but this does not exclude, rather includes, *breaks, religious leaps, and antitheses* (Dutch: *breuken, sprong-varianties, en tegenstellingen*); and his vision of the evolution is decisively dependent on the choice which he makes at a number of crossroads and intersections (Berkhof 1973a:26, 27; E.T.1979b:25).

3. Religion as an irreducible mental leap

Berkhof defines religion as *the relationship to the absolute* (Berkhof 1973a:7; E.T.1979b: 6). He points out, however, that positing the absolute and a relationship to it amounts to *an irreducible mental leap* (Dutch: *een onherleidbare sprong in het menselijk bewustzijn*), one which as such is not required by the segment of reality from which it is made, since that segment belongs to the secular phenomenal world

(Dutch: *de profane fenomenaliteit*). Unless one assumes that in this phenomenal world there is already a latent tendency toward the absolute. But in that case it would no longer be a matter of reduction but of circular reasoning (Berkhof 1973a:11; E.T. 1979b:10).

4. Faith as the greatest religious leap-variation originates from Abraham's great transmigration leap

With regard to the origin of the Christian faith, Berkhof states: within the wide field of religion, the area of reality which constitutes the context within which the Christian faith has occurred is the area of faith... It so happens that in the history of religion we are able to point with considerable precision to a period, a geographical area, and a group of people that were involved in one of the greatest, if not the greatest, *religious leap* (Dutch: *sprongvariatie* — *leap-variation*, my translation) that has ever occurred in religious history...A Babylonian shepherd prince...with the...name Abraham dared to undertake *the great transmigration-leap* (Dutch: *de grote transmigration-sprong*) in a strange, new confidence that he would be led and protected by a higher, nameless God who called him, a God who ruled over the old country he had left and the new country to which he was going as well as over the dangerous desert lying between, a God who was not confined to a particular territory, but who because of his transcendence was mobile and able to protect him as he trekked to new worlds. This trust was not disappointed. Therefore it could afterwards be nourished and enriched by continually new experiences (Berkhof 1973a:13-14; E.T. 1979b:12-14). The term religion could no longer adequately express the human correlate of this mode of Yahweh's association with His people. The customary designation for this correlate is *faith*, which contains the notion of distance between the deity and man. It is not so closely linked to experience as 'religion'. It suggests a reaching beyond experience, even a holding on against experience. It speaks of trust which at times can become totally blind. It has the undertone of the 'not yet', of living by a promise. The Christian faith of the New Testament is derived from this faith-religion of the Old Testament (Berkhof 1973a:16-17; E.T.1979b:16).

As regards the relation of religion and faith, Berkhof points out that previously he used the term "*leap-variation*" (Dutch: *sprongvariatie*). This was to indicate both

the continuity and the discontinuity. Faith is not just a variant or a “higher rung” of the multiform and richly diversified phenomenon of religion. One who says that does not do justice to the structure of faith and its awareness of an uncompromising opposition to all sorts of religious forms. But one who is keenly aware of that can by way of reaction go so far as to regard faith and religion as opposites. Then we must not forget, however, that these are opposites within one field because they give contrasting answers to a religious problematic they have in common. Thus there exists a dialectical relationship between faith-religion and other forms of religion (Berkhof 1973a:19; E.T. 1979b:18).

5. Christian theology as a leap across a chasm into a closed circle

According to Berkhof, when we are engaged in the study of the faith, we enter a closed circle, and without embarrassment we find ourselves in a circular argument. In token of that we might do well to *jump* (= *leap*—JPG) without further ado into the subject. Many theologians, also when they have already entered the circle, want to present a methodological account of what they do before they plunge completely into the subject. Rather confusingly, such an account-within-the-circle also goes by the name of Prolegomena. To guard against confusion this second “start,” which in contrast to the first is made *after the jump / leap across the chasm* (Dutch: *kloof*), is called the *internal* Prolegomena (Berkhof 1973a:43; E.T. 1979b:41).

Christian theology is based on the conviction that in the coming, humiliation, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth we have to do with the revelation of the very heart of God, and that therefore this event must be the starting point and guide for our thinking about revelation in general. This conviction is not at all unreasonable, Berkhof states, but just as with many deep-seated human convictions it cannot be rationally proven beforehand, because it concerns an encounter which as such is not predictable and which cannot be made rationally transparent. If we can speak of proof at all, then faith itself implies it and consequently it can only be seen as proof in retrospect. Refusing to make a choice in this regard on the ground that revelation is inherently un-provable, would entail the end of one’s thinking...Only *when the leap across the chasm* has been made can our thinking proceed again (Berkhof 1973a:53; E.T. 1979b:50, 51).

6. Revelation entails a creative leap of man's cognition

Revelation as an event of encounter always involves two parties, and the approach must come from two sides. Therefore it can never be described only as a divine (objectivistic) or a human (subjectivistic) happening. It differs from what we usually call an encounter in that in this case the initiative is entirely from one side. It is God and God alone, who by entering in a hidden form into our reality makes the encounter possible — “makes possible”, not “effects”. For God cannot effect this encounter unless his partner, man, from his side responds to the revelation. In fact, revelation is not even revelation if it is not perceived and acknowledged as such from the other side...Structurally the revelational event hardly differs from our encounters, even though in this case the initiative to it is strictly unilateral. There is another and much more radical difference: as a result of the earthly distance and man's guilty estrangement from God, revelation now takes place indirectly and in a hidden manner, while man, owing to the way in which his cognitive faculties function in this situation, is himself either unwilling or unable, or in any case fails to recognize the revelation. *To God's coming down into our world must therefore correspond a creative leap of our cognition beyond its own limitations.* Both a heightening and liberation of our cognitive faculty are needed; and that is beyond our ability. Beside the revelation we need the illumination of our mind to be able to perceive the supernatural in the natural and the divine majesty in the humiliation. No revelation will be effected unless God works in us with this double revelational activity. He must make himself present in our reality *and* he must open our eyes to make us see his presence. For this double activity dogmatics uses the concepts *Word* and *Spirit* (Berkhof 1973a:59, 60; E.T. 1979b: 56, 57).

Experience can never bridge the gap between itself and revelation...we need the miracle that comes from the other side *which urges us to take the leap of surrender*, ahead of all our experiences (1985⁵:56).

7. Creation as the leap of decision of the will of God

God is also creator. What does knowing this mean for our knowledge of God? The answer must be: in his holy love God has decided to live with a reality outside

himself, a reality which as created is of a totally different order. It has pleased him to enter into a relationship with something outside himself and so to make another reality share in the glory and love of his own being. The act of creation is an act of condescension. The creative act thus bears the same stamp...discovered in the revelational encounter as originating in the very being of God. To create means that God stoops down, that he limits himself, that he provides living and breathing space for the other which as such is imperfect and will even be rebellious...God decided this, wanted it. *Between God and creation lies the leap of a decision of the will.* God's will is not something arbitrary; it is the expression of his being as holy love. But as the will of God it is at the same time irreducible ...Existence cannot be traced back further; from our perspective it rests on contingency and not on necessity. We cannot make transparent why there is something and instead of nothing. But this stumbling block for the mind becomes much greater yet when we are faced not only with something irreducible, but with an irreducible break, a discontinuity in existence, *a jump of the infinite into the finite.* The created world is an imperfect world, a reality happening in time. It comes from the perfect and eternal God. How can we ever trace back to him that which is temporal and imperfect? ...We cannot comprehend what it means that God is the ground of our existence. We cannot penetrate this mystery; we can only make it our starting-point. ...One who takes his starting-point in the revelational encounter, by which the Christian faith orients itself, cannot think otherwise about the world and its origin than in terms of *creation, person, will, leap, duality*...The idea of creation is indeed the limit of our thinking, but only if we willingly accept this limit as an intellectual crux are we able to make a new start, and can we do justice to the secularity of the world, the personality of man and to God as the God of the encounter and the covenant (Berkhof 1973a:159-161; E.T.1979b:152, 153).

8. Sin as the leap of misused freedom

Creation and *sin* do not coincide. Between them lies *the leap of (misused) freedom.* Sin is no incident — therefore it is discussed in the same chapter as man. Sin is not a creative given — therefore it is discussed separately after man (Berkhof 1973a:199; E.T.1979b:188).

9. **Concurrence with Peter's Christ-confession is a leap**

Then we stand again where the crowds stood, the disciples, the scribes, the poor. And we hear the two questions: Who do men say that I am? And who do you say that I am? The study of the faith in its own way aims *to concur with Peter's answer...This concurrence is a leap*, a decision, which is not implied in the results of the historical research. It is, however, even less in conflict with it. And *it is least of all a leap in the dark*. It rests on and is justified by the totality of the image which the person and life of Jesus evoke — whereby in the final analysis it matters little or nothing whether with this picture one thinks of the faith testimony of the New Testament writers or of the manner in which it is being sifted and corrected by the historical quest. The concern is the picture in its totality (Berkhof 1973a:295; E.T.1979b:280).

10. **With the advent of Christ history makes its most decisive leap forward**

Jesus is the Son in virtue of a new creative act of God. What does this mean? (That—my insert) Jesus is more than a man among men, called by God like Moses and the prophets, and adopted as son because of his obedience. In that case there would have been no basis for the realization of the covenant. It did however have such a basis; therefore Jesus rests on a new creative act of God. And that newness implies that he does not restore an imaginary, perfect covenant relationship from prehistoric times. *History is not turned back, but instead makes its most decisive leap forward*. The “last Adam” is infinitely more than the first. What is realized here as covenant relationship is an entirely new beginning, something totally unique, which is at the same time a pointer to and a promise for a future which even now is still unrealized (Berkhof 1973a:302; E.T. 1979b:286, 287).

11. **The future (renewal) of the world is a leap-event from God's side as an extrapolated analogy of the provisional leap of Jesus' resurrection-through-raising and effected through the new leap of the Holy Spirit**

The world is heading for the crisis of a stalemate between its two opposing trends (sanctification and secularization). Only God is able to deliver the world from this crisis by causing what is possible with him to triumph in this dilemma. By raising

Christ, he caused the resurrection power that was in Christ to triumph. God raised precisely him to justify him on account of the work the Son had accomplished in the name of the Father. *The leap was at once a consequence and a crowning reward.* By way of analogy we may conceive of *the future of the world as a leap-event from God's side* to free the forces his Spirit is activating in the world...The *leap* does not break the continuity; on the contrary, it saves it...We live *after the provisional leap in Jesus' resurrection*, but *before the definitive leap of our world* that is guaranteed in it (Berkhof 1973a:540, 541; E.T.1979b: 518, 519).

The chasm which separates our world from the world to come, can only be overcome by a *leap from God's side*...The future involves the two complementary realities of Christ and the Spirit. Christ: that is, Jesus, who in the way of obedience unto death by virtue of *the leap of resurrection-through-raising* reached the goal that God has in mind for humanity...And the Spirit, *who as a new leap* becomes available from Christ, is the great pioneer of that future, because everywhere in the world he orients people to Christ's new sonship. Both Christ and the Spirit find their ultimate justification in the future. And both are anticipations of that future (Berkhof 1973a:543; E.T.1979b:521).

Only since the previous century has the study of the faith increasingly begun to reckon with the extrapolation-structure of biblical eschatology...Meanwhile this method should not make us forget *the leap that is necessary* to extend this Christological-Pneumatological line into the eschatological (Berkhof 1973a:545, 546; E.T.1979b:523).

12 The consummation as the big leap into the realm of freedom and love

In *a combination of continuity and leap*, Christ and the Spirit move toward the future... Christ and the Spirit are instrumental in preparing individuals as well as mankind as a whole *for the leap to come* (Berkhof 1973a:547; E.T.1979b:525).

We should realize, however, that *we are ignorant of what "time" means beyond the leap* (Berkhof 1973a:548; E.T.1979b:526).

When finally *the big leap into the realm of freedom and love* takes place, it will become manifest that numberless human lives on earth were not headed for that (Berkhof 1973a: 551; E.T.1979b:529).

It has been repeatedly asserted that God's work in Christ and the Spirit is foundational for the coming renewal. But what are we to say of all the struggles as well as the results of social and cultural life? Do these contribute anything to the coming consummation? If already in our treatment of the earthly work of salvation we had to bear in mind that our speaking is on *this side of the eschatological leap*, how much more should we do this when we consider the input of human achievements, sinful and ambiguous as they are? Even so, though *by way of a leap with radical consequences* (Dutch: *sprongvariatie*), the new world will be born out of this world; it will not be another, a new world, but this old world renewed. It will rise up out of the great crisis toward which this world is heading. Its birth is thus not wholly disjoined from the technological and cultural achievements and from the progress of the sanctifying forces in this world. What is certain is that one day the relation between this entire cultural development and eternity will be disclosed and shown to be meaningful. But we are not able to look beyond *the great leap*. It is wonderful enough to know that all the true, the good, and the beautiful we receive and achieve in our cultural development is a distant foretaste of the fullness of life and the world which God has in store for us (Berkhof 1973a:561, 562; E.T.1979b:538, 539).

We are used to calling that which *lies beyond the great leap* "the end of the world" or "the end of time". It is better to avoid those expressions. When God has lifted his human creature out of this provisional and alienated form of life and brought him home into His very presence, then, at last, life really begins (Berkhof 1973a:563; E.T.1979b:540).