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Gavera, J.

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## 4. REVELATION AND EXPERIENCE

### 4.1 The nature and background of the problem

In 1970 Berkhof wrote an article entitled *Openbaring als gebeuren* (Revelation as events), which appeared in the compilation *Geloven in God. Studies op instigatie van de Raad voor de zaken van Kerk en Theologie van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*<sup>1</sup> While it is predominantly a biblical-theological survey of the information regarding revelation in the Old Testament, in the last paragraph he touches on the revelation-events in Jesus Christ. Under the heading: *the nature and background of our problem*, he states that the issue at hand concerns the ‘how’ of divine revelation. How did the Word of God come to Abraham, Moses, Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist? How did they recognize it as the Word of God? Can the Word still come to us today? If it was not by means of a supernatural voice from above, did it involve a voice from within, and how does one distinguish it from the many voices within which do not come from God? These questions, he points out, are raised by people living in a world, where only that which can be experienced and verified in some way or another is considered as reality. For them the connection between Word and reality has disappeared, and to find it again the connection will have to be expressed in clear experiential terms. But what terms will these have to be? (Berkhof 1970: 97). What, indeed?

Reviewing the results of his survey in the above mentioned article, Berkhof points out that he undertook the inquiry in the hope that the accounts in the Old Testament about the revelation-events would become more transparent and more tangible when approached with the categories of causality and verification with which we as modern people usually work. And indeed, he states, it was possible to draw nearer to these phenomena, though that did not render them less strange. In fact, the search for the source from which Israel’s faith welled, led to a marshland which hampered pinpointing the exact location of the fountainhead. The ultimate secret of the source-revelation evaded detection — to such an extent that at times there was doubt whether anything but a marshland had been discovered. Only the reality of the brook, broaden-

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<sup>1</sup> *Believing in God. Studies initiated by the Council for matters concerning Church and Theology of the Netherlands Reformed Church.*

ing into a mighty stream, showed that there was more. Apparently the marshland revealed and concealed a very special event (150).

On the one hand, the concept of revelation contains precisely that presupposition of all speaking about God which modern man regards as strange and debatable. To modern ears the term ‘revelation’ has intellectualistic, supernaturalistic, and sometimes also mystical overtones. Consciously or unconsciously, this man lives in a world which is everywhere governed by the same laws and is intelligible by itself. The offence for his thinking is that there is a God who should enter this world from the outside and interfere in its affairs. Yet, this conviction is precisely the presupposition that forms the basis of all Christian speaking about God’s dealings with man in judgement and in grace (Berkhof E.T.1979b:43; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 44, 43).

On the other hand, Berkhof quotes A.N. Whitehead’s remark: “the word ‘experience’ is one of the most deceitful in philosophy” (1985<sup>5</sup>:52). Previously, in his article *Schleiermachers ervaring met de ervaring*<sup>2</sup> Berkhof wrote: “...experience itself is an infinite sea”<sup>3</sup> (1983:168). So much depends on what one understands under this concept. Indeed, he comes to the conclusion that while Schleiermacher, the father of the theology of experience, hoped to find and establish a viable uninterrupted passage from experience to revelation, he experienced, however, that the more he let the two converge, the stronger the resistance from both sides became (186, 187). Only a year before this, in his *Inleiding tot de studie van de Dogmatiek* (Introduction to the study of Dogmatics), Berkhof declared: “As I am writing this (1982), the controversy concerning the relationship between revelation and experience is fiercer than ever”<sup>4</sup> (80). It seems that in the light of this situation, together with other criticisms and considerations, Berkhof felt the need to insert an entirely new paragraph in the fifth edition of his *Christelijk geloof* under the heading *Revelation and experience*. Significantly, in his valedictory address, *God voorwerp van Wetenschap? II* (God object of science? II), he states: “It so happens that in Dutch these two words (*openbaring en ervaring*, revelation and experience — my insert) rhyme. For many, unbelievers and

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘experience with experience’ was apparently in vogue among German theologians in the nineteen-seventies (Berkhof 1979:242).

<sup>3</sup> Dutch: “*De ervaring zelf is een oeverloze zee.*”

<sup>4</sup> Dutch: “*De strijd over de verhouding van openbaring en ervaring is nu ik dit schrijf (1982) feller dan ooit.*”

believers, however, these concepts do not rhyme at all, but rather seem to exclude each other. Is that correct?"<sup>5</sup> (Berkhof 1981c:4).

It is interesting to note that in various books and articles, dating from 1970 to 1985, Berkhof frequently refers to the to-and-fro-motion between experience and revelation as *fundamentalia* in the history of theology. According to him, it already began with the apologists in the first centuries of the history of the Church. The young and often persecuted Christendom defended herself against foe and despiser by appealing to mutual experiences of life and philosophical insights to which she herself gave a new significance. This was followed by the scholasticism of the Middle Ages which, in a process of some centuries from Anselm to Occam, observed how the pursued harmony between revelation and reason or experience became evermore unattainable. The Enlightenment, which sought the harmony *via* the *ratio*, heralded a period which has endured to the present day in secularized western culture (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>: 53).

Soon after the Enlightenment, in Protestantism *man* was taken as the fundamental angle of incidence. Schleiermacher began this trend by taking as his starting point man's religious experience, "*das schlechthinige Abhängigkeitsgefühl*", which he considered as the heart of our existence. For Berkhof, the most impressive modern example of this approach is to be found in Paul Tillich's (1886-1965) method of correlation in his *Systematic Theology*. For Tillich the very essence of being human is man's never-ending questioning, to which God's revelation correlates as the answer to this questioning (Berkhof 1982:78). With the ebbing of this trend since *circa* 1870, access was sought, after the example of A. Ritschl, rather in man's moral experience, in his conscience or awareness of values, by which his responsibility and failing is discovered (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>: 53).

After World War I, especially under the leadership of Karl Barth, who denied any point of contact for revelation in man (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:53), the so-called dialectical theology, which took its starting point in the Word of God, "*senkrecht von Oben*" (plumb from Above), ousted the theology of experience, and with that also Schleier-

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<sup>5</sup> Dutch: "Toevallig rijmen deze beide woorden in het Nederlands op elkaar. Maar voor velen, ongelovigen en gelovigen, rijmen die begrippen allerm minst, lijken ze elkaar veeleer uit te sluiten. Is dat juist?"

macher as its inaugurator (Berkhof 1983:167). It now became a matter of radically beginning from the side of revelation, for it was held that if one did not begin with God, you could also not end with God. Thus, to a large extent the concept of experience was banished from dogmatics (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>: 53).

A change, however, was unavoidable. Berkhof mentions that already in 1951 A.F.N. Lekkerkerker wrote: “The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was all too hastily disposed of. The further we advance in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the more we become aware that we have only seemingly left the previous one behind, and the more doubtful we become as regards the claim that our questions are so totally different than in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Are we really done with Schleiermacher and Ritschl?”<sup>6</sup> In the mouths and pens of Barthians, Berkhof maintains, “*das Wort Gottes*” (the Word of God) all too frequently became an easily manageable ideogram far removed from the reality of our experience. To such an extent, that in his *Letters from Prison* Bonhoeffer already spoke of Barth’s “*Offenbarungspositivismus*” (revelation-positivism). Since 1965, Berkhof states, “*das Wort Gottes*” was dethroned and “*die Erfahrung*” (experience) reinstated (Berkhof 1983:168). In his valedictory address Berkhof emphasized: “But as I have already pointed out to you: the wind has changed. Currently, dogmatics which cannot appeal to experience is thought of as punching air. Since *circa* 1970, in our field of study, experience has been elevated from Cinderella to princess”<sup>7</sup> (Berkhof 1981c:5, 6). New connecting lines were sought between revelation and experience. These attempts, Berkhof points out, were partly strengthened and partly obstructed by the rapid rise of theological designs stemming from the non-academic world of oppressed groups: the blacks, the exploited, and the women, from which groups the black theology, the liberation theology, and the feminist theology developed. Since then, all over the world the relationship between revelation and experience became a central theme — in the third world mostly under the name of “contextualization”. While the theological reflection in the first world concentrated on experiences concerning the meaning or meaninglessness of existence, in the third world (and feminist theology) the accent is on ‘contrast-experiences’— poverty, exploitation, and discrimination.

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<sup>6</sup> Dutch: “*De afrekening met de negentiende eeuw is te snel gegaan. Hoe verder wij voortschrijden in de twintigste eeuw, des te meer komen wij tot de ontdekking, dat wij slechts schijnbaar de vorige achter ons gelaten hebben, des te onzekerder worden wij t.a.v. de bewering, dat onze vragen zo heel anders zijn dan in de negentiende eeuw. Zijn wij werkelijk klaargekomen met Schleiermacher en Ritschl?*”

<sup>7</sup> Dutch: “*Maar ik zei u al: de wind is gekeerd. Tegenwoordig geldt dogmatiek als een slag in de lucht, als ze zich niet op ervaring kan beroepen. Sinds ongeveer 1970 is in ons vak de ervaring van Assepoester tot prinses verheven.*”

Among the experience-theologians, Berkhof distinguishes two groups: on the extreme right, those who lean toward Barth and maintain a strict separation between revelation and experience; on the extreme left, those for whom revelation and experience almost seem to coincide (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:53-55). Berkhof's evaluation of these trends will be dealt with later on.

For the present, we must ask: Has Berkhof found the connecting link between the 'marshland of revelation' and the 'sea of experience'? Has he been able to build a bridge so that "*openbaring*" and "*ervaring*" rhyme — not only linguistically, but more importantly also theologically? In order to determine this, we must follow Berkhof's line of thought with regard to revelation and what he understands under the concept of experience.

#### **4.2 Revelation as the basis of our knowledge of God**

Classical dogmatics, Berkhof points out, was usually preceded by a discussion of the source and norms for our knowledge of God. The epistemology which is implicitly given in the relationship between God and man was abstracted ('*ausgeklammert*') from it and considered first. Berkhof follows this usage because, as he puts it, the estrangement between the Christian faith and the secularized cultural mentality in the Western world and in our time is so strongly felt that it is necessary to shed some light on the situation of estrangement. Precisely because modern autonomous thought likes to reject the Christian faith on methodological and formal grounds, theology should be willing to walk the second and the third mile with modern man — not in order to agree with him, but to be able to firmly contradict him exactly in that area in which he wants to oppose Christianity. Berkhof thus begins his study of the faith with the epistemology, i.e. the formal structure of the relationship which God in Christ has established with us (Berkhof E.T.1979b:40-42; 1985<sup>5</sup>:38-42).

According to Berkhof, this formal structure was mainly sought in three directions. From the Counter Reformation until World War I, Berkhof states, Roman Catholic theology mainly sought the basis of our knowledge of God in the doctrine of the (one, infallible) church. For the relationship of God with man is effected in and through the church as the guardian of salvation and revelation. In a rationalistic-

apologetic manner it was demonstrated that the four marks of the church — unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity — are only found in the Roman Catholic Church. In the same rationalistic-apologetic manner, the Reformation theology on the other hand sought the formal structure of our knowledge of God by way of the doctrine concerning Scripture — the four characteristics of the Bible guaranteeing its infallibility being: divine authority, necessity, perspicuity, and perfection or sufficiency (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:43; 1985<sup>5</sup>:42-43). Sooner, however, than the Roman Catholic structure, that of the Protestants began to show cracks. The emerging method of historical criticism forced breach after breach. Later both these structures were more or less supplanted by others: revelation, the history of salvation, the Spirit, religion or anthropology, as so many likely centres of perspective from which salvation as a whole could be viewed. But none of these, Berkhof points out, can serve as foundation and norm in isolation from the others. One is continually pressed forward from the one to the other. No matter at which station we board the train of dogmatics, we always stop by the others. Apparently the train moves in a circle along the various stations. And so we ride around the open midfield of the so-called material dogmatics. We do not move from the basis of simpler to more complicated problems and insights. Everything follows from everything, and everything presupposes everything, without anything preceding it from the outside, except God himself and the coming about of His Word (Berkhof 1982:73, 71, 80-81). Berkhof himself, following the trend at the time of his writing his *Christelijk geloof*, decided to climb aboard at the station of revelation as the source and norm of our knowledge of God.

In the Bible, Berkhof points out, the concept of revelation is so much a matter of course, that it does not play a central role. For centuries such was also the case in the study of the faith. That it has become such a central concept is because it has lost its self-evidence. Anyone who now posits it as the summary of the Christian epistemology is thereby confronted with all the opposition of modern immanentistic and empiricistic thinking, and can neither ignore nor resolve the questions that he faces (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:43). It must also be kept in mind, he states, that in the Bible revelation is a marginal concept. Nowhere does the Bible speak of God as totally unknown, and if there is something like revelation, it happens in secret, always hidden in the forms in which the life of man and the world take place. The real revelation will happen only in the great future (44). In the fifth revised edition of his *Christelijk*

*geloof* Berkhof added to these considerations the fact that the concern of the Bible is with the content of the words and deeds which the witnesses believe and experience as originating from God. In the context of their life there was very little need for reflection on revelation as a concept. This fact, however, should not prevent such reflection in another context, such as ours. Naturally, he warns, one must be aware of the dangers and limits of such reflection. It may not isolate itself from the content of salvation or even replace it. In other words, the epistemological (the know) question may not overrun the ontological (the being) question and the soteriological (the salvation or redemption) question. For we only know about revelation when it has happened to us and liberated us. Indeed, the broadening of our knowledge is but a part of the renewal of our lives (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:44).

### 4.3 Revelation in Christ: normative but not exclusive

Taking revelation as the basis of our knowledge of God seems to imply that only the Christian faith rests on revelation, and that therefore all other religions are illusions and misconceptions. Contrariwise, it is argued that all religions are based on revelation, which often implies that all religions are equally true or equally untrue. Berkhof points out, however, that the statement: ‘all religions are based on revelation’, derived as it is from the phenomenology of religion, can be more accurately formulated as: ‘all religions live by the conviction that the absolute (God — my insertion) is known through revelation’. While this is true, Berkhof states, it sounds almost like a tautology. For if religion is a relationship with a world which far transcends us and which appears in the phenomenal world, then human religiousness is always dependent on such an appearance, disclosure, manifestation, epiphany, revelation, or whatever one wishes to call it. Whether a real revelation of the true God corresponds to what is held as revelation by the religions, is a question that can neither be asked nor answered by the phenomenology of religions. For as G. van der Leeuw has pointed out, Berkhof states: “Phenomenology comes to a stop when it encounters revelation,”<sup>8</sup> (Berkhof E.T.1979b: 45-46).

As human beings we want to know more than phenomenology can tell us. Thus the question arises whether the idea of revelation common to all religions can be

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<sup>8</sup> “Vor der Offenbarung macht die Phaenomenologie halt.”



subsumed under one denominator in such a way that it offers universally valid criteria for truth. In other words, can we objectively determine the verity of the limitless variety of pretensions to revelation? For what we have here is not only a diversity of phenomena, which become the vehicle for revelation, but a diversity and even a contrast of experiences of the divine. Does this variety itself yield a criterion for truth? Previously, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Berkhof maintains, this criterion was assumed to be: whatever is thinkable and acceptable as revelation in accordance with the life-style of secularized European-American culture. But, as Berkhof shows, this criterion has no deeper basis and cannot be further verified. It is quite elusive, since modern man, precisely because of his cultural pattern, has very few experiences of revelation. Here one comes up against the epistemological crux: that he who places himself above the pretensions to revelation with an objective criterion, stands as such outside the experience of revelation. On the other hand, he who has such an experience finds in it the criterion for which the neutral observer searches in vain (Berkhof E.T.1979b:46-47).

The full weight of this crux places one before a fork in the road, as Berkhof puts it. One must either drop the whole subject of revelation as to its truth content and limit oneself to the phenomenology, or make one's own experience of revelation the starting point of one's reflection. For Berkhof there is another alternative. It has often been thought, he states, that the Christian faith, owing to the fact that it finds the relationship with God in Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit who proceeds from Him, rejects as illusory every other claim to a divine revelation. But such a conclusion, he emphasizes, is neither logically compelling nor materially correct. The Bible, he points out, contains statements to the effect that there is a revelation from God also outside of Israel and Christ (e.g. Melchizedek, Balaam, Job, and texts such as John 1:4, 10; Acts 14:16; 17:27, 29 seq.; Romans 1:18-22). The belief that Jesus Christ is *the* way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him, seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no revelation apart from Him. At the same time, however, that same belief pushes us in a seemingly opposite direction. According to Berkhof, if in Jesus Christ the Father is revealed who is the Creator of heaven and earth, then also in Christ the ultimate mystery of created reality must be revealed. But then it is impossible that this reality, which inalienably remains God's creation, should not in all kinds of ways, no matter how fragmentary, incidental, or broken, bear witness to the purpose of its creator. Then it must also be a fact that man,

who with his thirst for the absolute moves about in this created reality, is regularly bound to detect in it signs, rays, and disclosures of God's nature and purposes. Precisely because we believe that Jesus Christ is the central revelation of the Creator of the world, we cannot believe that outside of Him and the history of which He is the centre there would be no inkling at all of this central creative will. Christ is the key to the understanding of the world, and this world is the door to which that key fits (Berkhof E.T.1979b: 47-48).

That however, Berkhof points out, is something that can only be believed and thus more or less perceived by the person who believes in Christ. One who does not believe in Him sees the same reality, but of necessity will have to understand its revelation caliber from a different perspective and must thus (from the standpoint of the Christian faith) misunderstand it. But *misunderstanding* is not the same as *not* understanding. Positively stated, Berkhof maintains, one would have to say: *the divine revelation in Christ is not exclusive, but indeed normative* (48 — my italics). That Christ is *the* truth, Berkhof explains, does not mean that there are no truths to be found anywhere outside of Him, but it does mean that all such truths are fragmentary and broken unless they become integrated in Him as the centre. Therefore, he who in Christ has found the Father will with a perceptive mind look around in this world to discover in it traces of the character and work of the Father. These would not be real traces if men could not also perceive them outside of God's revelation to Israel and in Christ. At the same time, however, apart from this revelation they cannot be understood in their true context and significance. So the Christian belief in revelation, Berkhof concludes, stands necessarily in a dialectical relation to the beliefs in revelation as these are found in the world around (48).

This dialectical character clearly comes to light in the Biblical data. According to Berkhof, the passage in Romans 1:18-22 presents the clearest reflection on the dialectic relationship between the revelation of God and the alienation from God. It stresses the fact that one cannot simply say that God did indeed reveal Himself, but that somehow it did not get through to man. On the contrary, man becomes guilty because something essential does reach him, something which he, however, cannot endure and therefore must encase (Dutch: *inkapselen*) in his self-chosen view of life. Whatever the tradition from which the few Biblical passages derive which touch on

this matter (John, Luke, or Paul), they all speak a dialectical language which has seldom been maintained in the history of the church. Either men saw only demonic darkness outside the Christian faith (so especially orthodox Protestantism), or the relation was interpreted as a harmonious preparation leading to Christ (especially in Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and liberal Protestantism). A much more dialectical view, Berkhof maintains, is to be found in Justin Martyr (circa 150 A.D.), Zwingli (1484-1531), Calvin (1509-64), and in present-day thinkers such as H. Kraemer (1888-1965) and H. Thieliicke (1908-65). In this regard, Berkhof points out, K. Barth (Church Dogmatics I. 2) regards human religion outside Christ as ‘unbelief’, as the one concern of godless man in which, both by his idolatry and self-justification, he contradicts the revelation. For Barth religion is not a response to a transcendent event, but a projection of autonomous man. Only much later (Church Dogmatics IV.1 and IV.3 *The doctrine of the Lights*) did Barth clearly express the thought that revelation in Christ not only throws a negative light on the world, but also presupposes a worldwide engagement of God with the world (Berkhof E.T.1979b:48, 49). In his article: *Barths Lichtelehre im Rahmen der heutigen Theologie, Kirche und Welt*, Berkhof considers this change in Barth’s view as “a concession” and “a confession” (Berkhof 1978a:36).

According to Berkhof, the changed cultural climate and the broadened global perspective after World War II led to a shift of accent in the direction of a more positive evaluation of the dialectical relation between the Christian faith and other religions. The awareness of the oneness of mankind is so great that many find it hard to conceive of a breach between Biblical revelation and human religions. It is correctly pointed out that Biblical revelation derives its religious vocabulary, including the name ‘God’, from its pagan environment. Currently, Berkhof points out, Christ is related as ‘critical catalyst’ to the religions (H. Kung, M.M. Thomas) or as the cosmic principle of ‘creative transformation’ (J.B. Cobb) (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:49).

The ‘dialectical relation’ mentioned above, Berkhof points out, also turns out to be dialectical in this sense that consideration of the one pole inevitably points to the other. He who understands the religions as rebellion against God, must assume that there is some consciousness of this God; otherwise there can be no rebellion. Conversely, one who takes the view that religions are expressions of revelation, as soon as he wants to do more than speak in generalities, will have to distinguish between what

he regards as true and untrue, as pure and impure, and then it will have to come into the open where he finds his criterion for truth. In the meantime, Berkhof emphasizes, one must not forget that between Christ and the Christian churches there exists a dialectical relation which, though not identical to, is analogous to that between Him and religions (49).

#### 4.4 The earthly character of revelation

Christian theology is based on the conviction that in the coming, humiliation, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth we have to do with the very heart of the revelation of God, and that therefore this event must be the starting-point and guide for our thinking about revelation in general. Berkhof emphasizes, however, that while this conviction is not at all unreasonable, 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 one can speak of proof at all, he states, then faith itself implies it. Thus it is only in retrospect that it can be seen as proof. Refusing to make a choice because it is inherently indemonstrable would entail the end of one's thinking and leave one stuck in a hodgepodge of unorganized and contradictory statements about revelation. Only when the leap across the gap has been made, can our thinking again proceed. Having taken this leap, Berkhof continues to trace and formulate the presuppositions that underlie the Christian faith in revelation. He juxtaposes a (by no means exhaustive) series of elements of revelation, which he considers to be the most significant in the hope that their coherence will become clear. Foremost among these is what he terms 'the earthly character of revelation' (Dutch: *de aardseheid van de openbaring*) (Berkhof E.T.1979b:50; 1985<sup>5</sup>:50).

Revelation, Berkhof points out, is not an event in heaven, but one which takes place on earth and in modes (Dutch: *verschijningsvormen*) that are peculiar to this earthly life. Due to his present mode of existence and dependence on the phenomenal reality within and around him for the inspiration and nourishment of his spirit, man is not constituted for a direct encounter with God, only one that is mediated. Passages such as Ex.19:21, 33:18-23; Judges 13:22; John 1:18 and 1Cor.13:12 take the form of a profession of the principial indirectness of all revelation. The direct vision of God is indeed a biblical theme, but then as a promise to be fulfilled at the consummation. In

the present dispensation, however, a direct encounter is unimaginable. Even if God, for instance, would reveal himself in a mysterious voice, a blinding flash, or an experience of rapturous ecstasy, these would still be phenomena that are part of our earthly reality, thinkable also apart from an encounter with God, and thus offering no definite proof. Simultaneously they *mediate* and *veil* revelation (Berkhof E.T. 1979b: 51).

The problematic of this earthly ‘hampering’ of revelation, Berkhof states, has often been related to man’s sinful alienation from God. In his view, however, it is just as much and in the first place related to our creaturely bondage and finitude. It belongs to the provisionalness of the first creation, the ‘natural’ material mode of existence (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 44-49). God certainly reveals himself, his essence. His accommodation does not involve a ‘doing-as-if’. But his revelation takes place within the limits of this provisional existence and is thus determined and limited by that context (51, 53).

It has often been pointed out, Berkhof states, that the earthly forms of revelation in the Bible (trees, natural catastrophes, thunder and lightning, a burning bush, a voice in the night, a vision, and so forth) became increasingly more spiritual in character with the passage of time, eventually consisting mainly of audible words and inner experiences. But this, Berkhof maintains, does not cancel the earthly character of revelation, for even then we still have to do with earthly phenomena. Earthliness even applies to the central revelation in Jesus, for he appeared as a man, a Jew, and a Jewish rabbi (51).

The problematic of the earthly character of revelation is not specifically Christian, for it presents itself wherever there is an experience of revelation. The earthliness of the revelation in Israel and in Christ thus shares in the general religious problematic inherent in earthliness. Therefore it also shares in the defencelessness and the contradictability of everything that offers itself as revelation. Indeed, it is always “a sign that is spoken against” (Luke 2:34). Therefore, in Berkhof’s view, atheism and agnosticism cannot be regarded by faith as abnormal attitudes. The earthliness of revelation evokes such attitudes. They are salutary reminders of the non-self-evident ground upon which faith rests (51, 52).

With regard to the question: how the supernatural can be perceived in natural phenomena, Berkhof, on the one hand, rejects the view that the supernatural forces the natural away, or absorbs it, or infringes on it. On the other hand, he also rejects the view that a normal earthly event was “afterward shown to be revelation from God” by certain witnesses. The first, he states, is an objectivistic, and the second a subjectivistic misconception of what happens. The real event, he maintains, is an encounter in which the natural becomes the transparency of a divine word or act. The person, who perceives that, is thus by means of the earthly brought to an encounter with God, which outsiders can neither confirm nor deny. Although transcending experience, such an encounter is always connected to experience (52).

#### **4.5 Revelation and hiddenness**

Berkhof maintains that the concept of revelation cannot be defined if it is not considered in relation to its opposite and correlate: the concept of hiddenness (Dutch: *verborgenheid*). It is a subject which is closely related to the earthliness of revelation, but it covers another and broader problematic (Berkhof E.T.1979b:53). It is found in both the Old and New Testament (Ex.3 and 33; Job 38-42; Psalms 77 and 139; Isaiah 45:15; 1 Cor.2:6-16). It has also been broached by Luther and Kohlbrugge, Von Rad and Kuitert Barth and Bonhoeffer, and even in the Death-of-God theology (53-56).

According to Berkhof, revelation and hiddenness accompany each other in a dialectical relationship, more correctly in three different dialectical relationships:

##### **4.5.1 Revelation presupposes hiddenness**

Only that which is hidden needs to be revealed. Revelation confirms what we could already surmise beforehand, or after a long search sadly had to discover: that apart from the revelation-event, God is for us the hidden one. It may be that a mysterious indirect light shines through the earthly reality, nevertheless the face of God does not become visible in it. Reality is poly-interpretable and not transparent all the way to God. This is not due to our shortsighted imagination. It is a confirmation of our doubt at the moment it abolishes it. Because God makes himself known, we know once and for all that “*God can only be known by God*” (53).

#### 4.5.2 Revelation reveals hiddenness

God's revealing himself does not annul his hiddenness, but accentuates it. To use Luther's words, the *Deus revelatus* is precisely *Deus absconditus*, the opposite of a *Deus publicatus*. In revelation that which before we could at the most only surmise, now becomes clear certainty for us: how immensely exalted and hidden God actually is, how unutterably surprising his gracious condescension is, how unimaginably glorious the future is which He thereby discloses to us. Revelation initiates us into a great mystery which, instead of making the initiate proud, with each step makes him smaller and humbler. God would not be God, if it were otherwise. The more we come to know God, the less we are able to comprehend him with our intellect (53-54).

#### 4.5.3 Revelation assumes the form of hiddenness

As already mentioned, in Berkhof's view the veiled earthly character of revelation is not a consequence of man's guilt, but is entirely related to the creation itself. Here he adds, however, that through man's guilt the earthliness is as it were intensified so that it becomes hiddenness, resulting in a double hiddenness of God. He can be present in his world only as a stranger, the suffering servant, the crucified one. This aspect of revelation, Berkhof states, can only be expressed paradoxically. God is present contrary to (*para*) the appearance (*doxa*) of the opposite. All appearance to the contrary, God is present in the suffering and crucified Christ. According to Berkhof, this appearance is forced upon God because man, by his thinking and striving, contradicts the thoughts God reveals about him. Thus, in the history of salvation the stumbling block and the foolishness of the cross stand in the centre. So too, in the personal association of the individual with God, man constantly experiences that God must hide his face from him, because in this association man tries to force his will on God. Even in the judgments which he sends upon his people and the world, God is present in a hidden manner as the one who has no other choice but to let us walk in our self-chosen way, thereby revealing how things stand between him and us (54, 55).

In view of the above, Berkhof admits, it may seem that the hiddenness threatens to negate the revelation and that under these circumstances one can no longer speak of revelation. In fact the opposite is true. For it is Berkhof's firm conviction that

only when we are deeply aware of the hiddenness of revelation, can we speak in a meaningful manner about the necessity of God himself opening our eyes to it through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, he points out, we will be inclined to base our revelational insight on our own powers and so construct a less hidden revelation which intellectually or in some other way would be at our disposal. Only if we know of the unveiling by the Spirit can we bear this hiddenness of God in this provisional world which, moreover, is estranged from him (56).

In conclusion, Berkhof draws attention to the story of Yahweh's revelation to Moses (Ex.3) in which the hiddenness of God in His revelation is so strongly emphasized. The burning bush speaks of the earthliness of revelation. But the hiddenness deepens when God refuses to mention His name and wants to be known only as "I AM" (אֶהְיֶה) or "I AM who I AM" (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) (v.14). With that He withdraws Himself from the possibility of human manipulation. That is, however, something else than a basis for agnosticism. For this name-which-is-no-name which cannot be manipulated is at the same time a testimony to God's faithfulness and a pointer to the future, in which he who responds to it in faith and trust will see this faithfulness again and again confirmed in the deeds of God. Thus the revelation-encounter occurs in a sphere of hiddenness which provides a screen between God and man, but which precisely in this way serves as the protective layer within which God can become a real covenant partner for His small and guilty creatures (56).

#### **4.6 The duality of revelation: Word and Spirit**

For Berkhof revelation is an event of encounter always involving two parties approaching each other. Like all other forms of encounter, revelation is a getting together. Therefore it can never be described only as a divine (objectivistic) or a human (subjectivistic) happening. Unlike other encounters, however, here 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. Berkhof's emphasis is on the words 'makes possible', for in his view 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. Thus, in Berkhof's



view, the revelation-event is structurally hardly different from our encounters, although the initiative to it is entirely unilateral (56-57).

Man, from his side however, due to the indirectness and hiddenness of revelation, and owing to his cognitive function in this situation, is of himself either unable or unwilling to recognize the revelation, or in any case does not do so. To God's coming down into our world must therefore correspond a 'creative leap' of our cognition beyond its own limitations. Such a necessary heightening and liberation of our cognitive faculty is, however, beyond our ability. Beside the *revelatio* there is necessary the *illuminatio* of our mind to be able to perceive the supernatural in the natural and the divine majesty in the humiliation. So, to effect revelation, Berkhof states, God must work in us with a double revelational activity: He must make himself present in our reality *and* He must open our eyes to make us see his presence. This double activity is described in the study of the faith with the paired concepts of 'Word and Spirit' (57).

In the Bible 'Word' is often used as the common denominator for the whole revelational event (including words, events, visions, cultic rites, and persons — especially Christ). By labeling all this as 'word' the communicative nature of revelation is emphasized. It happens as an appeal to our existence to be heard, understood, and obeyed. To bring this about is the work of the Spirit, i.e. of God who not only comes to us from the outside, but who is also the one who transforms our life and existence, giving us ears and enabling us to let Him come to us as the speaking and revealing God (57).

For Berkhof this duality and 'biunity' of Word and Spirit is thus the description of the encounter-event that takes place in the act of revelation. In fact, when two people genuinely meet each other, an analogous interplay of 'outside' and 'inside' takes place which can to a certain degree serve as an illustration of the Word-Spirit relation. Believers, he states, have always lived out of this dual reality (57-58).

Theology, however, has often had great difficulty with the dialectic of Word and Spirit, especially on the following two points. *First* there is the problem of *the mutual relation of Word and Spirit*. Berkhof rejects the view that this duality indicates two cognitive sources of revelation. Indeed, he warns of the dangers which lurk in the

separation of Word and Spirit, whereby the illumination by the Spirit threatens to become a pseudonym for subjective personal notions, and the objective Word revelation tends to be thought of as having a convincing power of its own. The fact is, Berkhof points out, that the Word can also leave its hearers cold or even provoke to resistance. The incarnate Word certainly evoked the most diverse reactions. There is no such thing as ‘word-magic’. Thus, Berkhof emphasizes, neither does the Word work automatically (this *contra* the Lutheran *per verbum*), nor is the operation of the Spirit autonomous (this *contra* the Reformed *cum verbo*). Word and Spirit, he states, are not interchangeable. They are one and at the same time complementary. For the Word is already the work of the Spirit, who incites our spirit to listen to what he says to us in the Word. In this way man discovers the revelation outside himself in the hiddenness. We make this discovery by the Spirit, however, within the structures and limitations of our spirit. Our subjectivity is thus put to work in understanding the Word. All understanding is subjective, Berkhof points out, but it is the subjective understanding of a trans-subjectively experienced reality. Through the ‘biunity’ of Word and Spirit man becomes involved in a process of encounter and understanding in which his subjectivity is fully engaged and at the same time divested of its biases and projections, making it increasingly more open to the saving event it has encountered. This ongoing interplay of Word and Spirit, Berkhof states, brings about the encounter and continually purifies and deepens it (58).

*Secondly*, there is the problem of *the relation between the Spirit and our spirit* — something which has already been indicated and in principle also answered in the above. Speaking of the necessary and dominant role of the Spirit of God in the perception of revelation might give the impression, Berkhof states, that no room is left for any activity of the human spirit. This would be a fundamentally erroneous presentation, since it threatens to deny the very aim of the work of the Spirit, namely to effect a real encounter between God and man. To save the human subject, mention has also been made of a co-operation and interaction between the Spirit and the spirit, with an appeal to Paul’s statement in Rom.8:16. Words like ‘co-operation’ and ‘interaction’ can be used, Berkhof states, provided they are given the proper meaning. The intention of the Spirit is not to displace our spirit, but to awaken it to a new life of its own that continuously interacts with the Spirit. It is not the Spirit who believes in us. *We* believe, illumined by the Spirit. In the encounter we are not treated as objects, but

are respected as subjects and lifted to the true and highest level of our being subjects (60).

The problems uncovered here, Berkhof points out, have for centuries, until today, engaged western European theology and the theology influenced by it. The Western spirit is inclined to apply its subject-object-scheme also to the relation with God. Then either God must be subject and man purely the object of His love or wrath, or man is subject, in which case the decision about the encounter with God and his salvation rests ultimately in his own hands. The conflicts have always been fierce: between Augustine and Pelagius, between Luther and Erasmus, between Calvin and Bolsec, Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants, Molinists and Thomists. It becomes increasingly clear that we are here the victims of a wrong alternative. According to Berkhof, a happy formulation is that of the Canons of Dort which profess: “Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active” (III/IV, 12)<sup>9</sup>. What is said here of the renewal of the will also applies to the renewal of the mind. In the Netherlands, in the previous century, especially the older ethical theology (Chantepie de la Saussaye, Sr. and Gunning) tried to do justice to man as subject beside and under God (60-61).

#### **4.7 Revelation as history**

From his repeated use of the expression ‘revelation-events’ (Dutch: *openbaringsgebeuren*), it is clear that from the outset Berkhof wanted to emphasize that revelation comes to us on the plane of history, in consecutive and connected historical events. This fact, however, is not exclusive, as if revelation is limited to history. God is as much the God of nature, as he is of history. For us he is hidden in both and traces of his presence can be expected in both. For God both can become the stage of his revealing presence. In the Old Testament the divine revelations in natural events (Abraham’s sacred trees, Moses’ burning bush, the wind upon the waters of the Sea of Reeds, the thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai) were more in the nature of phenomena accompanying God’s association with his people in a history to which they continually pointed. Here then with increasing emphasis the revelation in history became

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<sup>9</sup> Dutch: “*De wil die nu vernieuwd is, wordt dan niet alleen door God gestuwd en bewogen, maar door God bewogen werkt hij ook zelf.*”

the guide and touchstone for discerning the revelation in nature and we find a loosening of the revelation in history from its matrix, the revelation in nature, from which primitive religions lived. The difference between the primitive religions and the Old Testament, Berkhof maintains, was that while the former regarded history as a part of revelation in nature, the latter saw revelation in nature as an element in the historical revelation-process (61).

In order to gain a clear picture of the revelation of God in history, Berkhof finds it necessary to reject three models as being in conflict with the nature of the revelation- event as portrayed in the Bible.

Firstly, *contra* Hegel, Berkhof states, *revelation does not coincide with history*. Since history is first of all the sphere of man's activity in his alienation from and rebellion against God, it has in itself no revelation-power. The inkling that there are 'lessons' to be learned from history has so much which conflicts with it, that history as such must be regarded as the sphere in which God is hidden (62). But what is true in this sphere, however, is that beside and over against man God, too, establishes himself as 'factor', as 'doer', and traces his own course through history (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:65, 68).<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, *contra* the salvation-historical theology of J.C.K. von Hofmann, *revelation is not an organic-evolutionary historical process which is clearly distinguishable from the rest of history*. The lines between the revelation-process and 'profane' history, Berkhof states, is much too blurred and fluid. Not only is salvation history entirely interwoven in ordinary history, but the revelation-process is far from organic-evolutionary. There is nothing here of a gradually unfolding principle, as with a living organism. Rather, it is full of twists, gaps, and repetitions, giving more the impression of decline than incline. It looks much more like a battle, a continuous struggle on the part of God to bring his unwilling creature into line and keep him in his way. Nevertheless, the battle takes place in the field of history (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:62).

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<sup>10</sup> This sentence forms an addition in the 5<sup>th</sup> revised edition of *Christelijk geloof*.

Thirdly, *contra* Barth (in his younger years) and especially Bultmann, *revelation does not consist in a series of purely punctual or momentary and vertical incursions into history*. In the revelation-process the salient points are not detached from each other. What follows presupposes what preceded and sheds new light on it. Headway is made which is the direct result of the nature of God and man and their interaction. This headway has nothing of a biological unfolding; it rather resembles the movement in the plays of classical writers: the themes are developed to a climactic crisis, from which a new beginning is then made. But there is clearly an irreversible coherence in which, for example, Moses cannot be understood without the promises to the patriarchs, or the prophets without the law, or Christ without the Old Testament (62).

Berkhof chooses to take up a position somewhere along the converging lines of W. Pannenberg (*Revelation as History*) and J. Barr (*Old and New in Interpretation*) and describes revelation as *a cumulative process of events and their interpretation*. As Berkhof puts it, God began 'small' as the tribal god of semi-nomads, establishing his own history through deeds which inspired people to put their trust in him, and rewarding that trust beyond expectation with deeds of protection and deliverance. Events led to insights by which other events were understood as revelation, and later events threw light on earlier events by which they were better and more correctly understood. By this process a special history developed, which was passed on through prophecies beforehand or interpretations and applications afterward. This history, Berkhof states, follows the regular laws of history, while establishing its own tradition within that history. Such a cumulative process happened in Israel, reaching a decisive climax in Jesus' proclamation, His suffering, death, and resurrection. These events are interpreted in the light of all Old Testament history with its blessings and deliverances, its curses and calamities, while conversely in the light of Christ the whole Old Testament is now reinterpreted as the history leading up to Him (62-63).

In his valedictory address Berkhof described revelation in a similar, but simplified manner. "With *revelation* then I understand an event in which God makes himself known to people by way of telling them something which transcends every prospect of their existence and their knowledge, but which nevertheless touches the very heart of their existence and understanding. The Christian community finds the foot-

prints and the trail of revelation primarily...in the Bible...in that which Israel of old discovered about God, and in the history which she experienced with Him, which became decisively concentrated, intensified, and universalized in Jesus as the envoy of God *par excellence*, in His work, His way, His fortunes; and then also in the Spirit, who on behalf of God, emanates from Him, and who even today enlightens, inspires, and leads people”<sup>11</sup> (Berkhof 1981c:4, 5).

Berkhof emphasizes, however, that this cumulative process issuing in cross and resurrection and then continuing from that point, cannot be described in terms of a harmonic evolutionary model. There is indeed progress and development in this process, but it is a story of repeating and deepening conflicts, defeats, and deliverances through which a sharper picture of the countenance of God and his thoughts about His people and mankind becomes visible. This does not mean, Berkhof states, that for example, Ezekiel’s contemporaries knew God much better than Abraham. In each revelation-event God indeed reveals Himself, His very heart, but these revelation-deeds create ever-new encounter situations, making more of the implicit aspects of God’s self-revelation explicit. To this must be added, Berkhof points out, that revelation as history, owing to its disclosing function, regularly forces the relationship between God and man into a crisis situation and that God then confirms his will of salvation by the way in which by his grace he overcomes the crisis (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:63).

It is Berkhof’s firm conviction that this cumulative process, often called ‘history of salvation’, continues even after the decisive and redemptive coming of Christ. Now, Berkhof points out, it is Christ’s Church, living by His salvation and under His lordship, which in constantly changing situations gains new experiences with her Lord, in which His deeds of judgement and of grace are again understood in new ways. We are now in the ‘between the times’ phase in which what has happened in Christ is worked out worldwide. What has happened in Him is and remains the basis, the limit, and the norm for all revelation-events after Him. Here, too, though not exclusive, Christ is normative (63-64).

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<sup>11</sup> Dutch: “Onder **openbaring** versta ik dan een gebeuren waarin God zich aan mensen kenbaar maakt doordat hun van Gods wege iets gezegd wordt, dat hun bestaans- en kenmogelijkheden te boven gaat en dat toch hun bestaan en inzicht centraal raakt. De christelijke gemeenschap vindt de sporen en het spoor van openbaring primair. . .in de bijbel. . .in wat het oude Israel van God ontdekte en in de geschiedenis die het met Hem doormaakte, beslissend geconcentreerd, verhevigd en geuniversaliseerd in Jezus als de Gods-gezant bij uitstek, in zijn woord, zijn werk, zijn weg, zijn wedervaren, en dan ook in de Geest die namens God van hem uitgaat en die tot vandaag toe mensen verlicht, bezielt, en leidt.”

In Berkhof's view, the cumulative model also suggests that the 'inter-testamentary period', at least as connecting link, does have theological significance. Indeed, the New Testament cannot be understood without considering the meaning which central concepts in it, for example law, kingdom of God, messiah, son of man, wisdom, aeon, etc., received in this period. It was a period in which historical revelation was considered past tense and many were seeking the precise actualizing interpretation. However, gauging the revelation-content of this period, Berkhof points out, will have to be done on the basis of what precedes it (Old Testament) and what follows it (New Testament) (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>: 68).<sup>12</sup>

Berkhof also points out that modern biblical science teaches that much which is presented as history in the Bible, should be regarded as interpretation. In his view that has not changed the fundamental relationship between revelation and history. In any case, the interpretations focus on historical explosions, swings, and rapids in which revelation is observed (exodus and eisodus, kingship of David, exile as punishment, return as salvation, the appearance and resurrection of Jesus). The interpretations of these events put into words that which eyewitnesses or later generations experienced as salvation in these salvific facts; and these could vary in accordance with the situation, and correct and complement each other (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:68).

#### **4.8 The symbolic language of revelation**

For Berkhof revelation occurs in an interaction of experiences and insights which are continually retold in such a way that the hearer can understand their liberating power for his life. So if revelation is going to be revelation for man, it has to be expressed in such a language that it can be understood as revelation. But like everything human, language, too, is tied to this earthly experiential world. We have words for these earthly experiences and only for these. Therefore, with words borrowed from his 'ordinary' world, man aims to facilitate this transfer of revelation — but with these he can equally obstruct it (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:65).

Using figurative language, as in poetry, to compare God to earthly things such as a rock, a shield, and a light, or to speak of God's throne, His house, His eyes, His

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<sup>12</sup> This was newly added in the revised 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Christelijk geloof*.

right hand, poses no great problem. The real linguistic difficulties arise when we try to express in human language what the essence, the heart, and the character of God is. Can we apply, as the Bible does, words (such as ‘lord’, ‘judge’, ‘creator’, ‘king’, ‘father’, ‘shepherd’, ‘love’, ‘wrath’, ‘repentance’, ‘mercy’), derived from man’s personal and social relationships, to God? Are we not merely applying what Depth Psychology calls ‘projection’— i.e. projecting onto a blank screen an enlarged image of our earliest childhood experiences and desires? Are our words ‘father’ and ‘shepherd’ still sufficiently meaningful for modern city man in a secularized and industrialized world? Although many attempts have been made in theology to evade the linguistic difficulties either by using other words (‘omnipotence’, ‘unchangeable’), or substituting impersonal abstract concepts for concrete personal expressions (the ‘ontic’, the ‘absolute’, ‘the universal’), the symbolic character of the language of revelation cannot be escaped. This fact, Berkhof emphasizes, need not perplex us. For revelation occurs hidden in the structures of our earthly reality. It does not eliminate this reality, nor does it occur outside or beyond it. God expresses Himself in, with, and through earthly realities. Everywhere revelation and earthly reality go together. This makes that reality *sym-bolic*, that is, *co-inciding* with another reality. The only adequate language for a symbolic event is symbolic language (65-67).

Whether the symbolic language of the biblical interpreters of the revelational event is functionally the most adequate, or whether it needs to be replaced by other expressions, is in Berkhof’s view a question that cannot be answered from the outside. Principially, we find ourselves here within a closed circle: for the functional adequacy of a language can only be judged by the person, who through the medium of this language understands what this language tries to say. While Berkhof is continually aware of this, he maintains that the anthropomorphic language of the biblical witnesses corresponds to the nature of the encounter which they describe — an encounter in which the God who enters into a personal relationship with them, behaves very human-like. Their figurative language may not be absolutely adequate, but it is certainly analogically adequate to describe the event in which they are involved and the person whom they meet in it. In both Old and New Testament there is no conscious reflection on the use of language, but there is an awareness that through God’s creative and saving fellowship with man, our earthly, human realities are made the ‘image’ and ‘mystery’ of his essence and work. The fact that we can meet God is evidence that from His side



there is analogy, because He projects Himself in us. Therefore we can speak meaningfully about him by means of projection. As F.H. Jacobi put it, Berkhof points out: “*Making man, God theomorphized; of necessity, therefore, man anthropomorphizes.*”<sup>13</sup> Outside the reality of the encounter, Berkhof states, this image-language is bound to be construed as ‘projection’ in the modern Feuerbachian sense (67-68).

But what does this analogical adequacy consist of and how far does it go? To this Berkhof responds by stating that God, in his revelation-association with us in the present world (before the full revelation in the *eschaton*), creates a relation of analogy, in that He forms us in His image, deals with us accordingly, and then inspires His witnesses to give back to Him, as it were, certain elements of our world as being made in His image. Therefore, we may speak of God as ‘Father’, but as God he is infinitely more ‘Father’ than any earthly father. God is always more than is expressed in names such as ‘Father’ and ‘Lord’ and in symbolical terms such as ‘righteousness’ and ‘compassion’— but not essentially different. In Berkhof’s view, God’s revelation-association with us is itself the ground, the norm, and the limit of the symbol language. Outside this context every symbolical term loses its relevance and transparency. Functioning within this context, however, the symbolical terms are no longer used figuratively, but in their most original sense. For then they share in the true analogy as it is grounded in the creation and actualized in the revelation-encounter. God is not ‘as it were’ a Father; he is *the* Father from whom all fatherhood on earth is derived. Thus the symbol language of revelation has a critical function regarding our earthly reality. This is clearly illustrated in the parables of Jesus, in which God who is presented as father, as landlord, as farmer, as employer, at the decisive moment reacts surprisingly differently than his earthly analogues are wont to do. That He is different does not mean that God is not really a father, etc., but that we are estranged from its essential meaning. The biblical writers, Berkhof points out, are clearly conscious of the permanent distance between God and man without which the encounter with him would not be what it is. Speaking anthropomorphically remains analogical speaking. Man is not God, nor even the image of God — so Christ is called in the New Testament — he is created in his image and after his likeness. God cannot be captured in the image through objectification or by manipulation. The image language always points to what goes beyond the image. Therefore, too, not all images derived from

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<sup>13</sup> German “*Den Menschen bildend theomorphisierte Gott: notwendig anthropomorphisiert darum der Mensch.*”

man and human associations are applicable to God in a more than figurative sense. In the Old Testament images from the animal world and that of sexuality are nowhere analogically applied to God. This fact, Berkhof maintains, does not mean that we have to limit ourselves in a biblicist manner to the images used by the biblical writers, but it does imply that in our choice of new images we let ourselves be guided by their vision and norms (68, 69).

#### 4.9 Self-revelation or revelation of truths?

In the history of the church ‘revelation’ was and is considered as a *plural*, a series of ‘truths’, a number of propositions on a variety of ‘supernatural subjects’: God, creation, angels, providence, sin, the incarnation, the Trinity, the consummation, etc. The focus of such a plural concept of revelation is necessarily on impersonal intellectualistic ideas, while encounter and trust happen to be directed to a personal *singular*. The implication of this is that if the Christian faith is regarded primarily as an encounter of trust with the living God, there is no longer room for the plural concept of revelation. Thus, instead of speaking about ‘revealed truths’, one begins to speak about the Truth as a person or as a singular event, with an appeal not first of all to the understanding intellect, but to the loving heart, to the self-surrender of the person, to the human existence risking itself and winning (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:71, 72).

With this sharp distinction, Berkhof points out, a wholesome change and purification have come about. The intellectualizing plural has made way for the personalizing singular. One no longer speaks of revealed truths, but of the God who reveals Himself, and preferably of God’s self-revelation. In Berkhof’s view, it is in any case inappropriate to think in terms of opposites in this regard, because when it comes to saying what revelation is like, singular and plural do not exclude each other. They should rather be described as in combination with each other. For while the revealing God is indeed singular, in His infinite fullness He cannot possibly be described in a singular human word. Man, too, in a creaturely-analogical manner comprises in his unity a plurality and fullness of aspects and situations. Thus in the encounter between God and man this combination of singular and plural also applies, especially where this encounter takes place in history with its constantly changing situations, constellations, and challenges. In revelation the ‘eternally rich God’ enters the plurality of our

human existence with its physical and psychical, its spatial and historical aspects. Yet in all this it remains one encounter. Therefore, Berkhof emphasizes, the Christian concept of revelation will always have to be described in a tension between singular and plural (72).

In Christian dogmatics, Berkhof maintains, it is entirely to the point, in many cases, to use the plural ‘truths’. As long as it is realized that this plural can be compared with the many segments into which a circle can be divided, which all radiate from the one central point and point back to it. Taken out of context, these truths turn into aspects of a world view and theory, differing from other such conceptions and constructions only in the supernatural authority they are invested with and the *sacrificium intellectus* they demand. He, however, who shrinks the circle, limiting it to the centre, being only concerned with the existential encounter, evaporates the encounter, since it occurs and evolves in the concreteness and plurality of insights and perspectives. The Person has a circumference, and the truths have a centre. As a rule, Berkhof emphasizes, we who are the recipients of revelation will do well not to begin with the singular, but with the plural, not in the centre but at the periphery. From there we should try to find the revelation-content of the various themes. For example, in the theme: ‘the earthly work of Jesus’, our concern is not all kinds of historical details, but how in the words and deeds of Jesus the encounter between God and man is disclosed. The convergence of the singular and the plural, Berkhof acknowledges, is not easily expressed in a usable formula. Nevertheless, he is convinced that the study of the faith must seek to bring about a fruitful combination of Truth and truths. Currently, in many systematic theologies this has fortunately been achieved (72-73).

#### **4.10 General and special revelation**

Normally, the distinction *general and special revelation* is discussed extensively in theology. Berkhof does not follow this tradition. In his view this couplet of terms is not suitable to express what is meant. *General revelation*, he points out, is usually understood both as a revelation which does not depend on a special act of God, but which is given with His relation to His creation, *and* as a revelation which people can everywhere and always experience. On the other hand, *special revelation* refers both to the revelation which is based on a special act of God *and* to the revela-

tion which comes only to particular individuals or groups (in Israel, in Christ, in the Bible, and through the church). Usually, Berkhof maintains, it is suggested that the special is to be regarded as a specification of the general. But that is by no means always the intention. Rather, it is to contrast the special with the general as that which is fuller and richer over against that which is dimmer and poorer (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:74).

Apart from the linguistic arguments, Berkhof mentions four theological considerations which confirm that the distinction general-special is untenable:

- a) The term 'revelation' is too strong to indicate the manner in which God is knowable in his works of creation. The indirect light which shines through our experiential reality is so indirect and diffuse that one can have the most diverse ideas as to its source and can even deny the existence of a separate source.
- b) If revelation is an encounter-event, each revelation is a very 'special' event in which an individual or a group experiences the presence of God in a most striking way. Then 'general' revelation is a *contradictio in terminis*.
- c) According to Berkhof, there is no reason to think of God's revelation-encounters with man as limited to the history of Israel and of Christ in the Old and New Testament. We believe, he states, that in that revelation the last truth about God is expressed, and that through it we have received the deepest possible look into the very heart of God. The revelation in Christ is normative, but not exclusive. Confusing both these concepts has been the burden of the general-special problematic.
- d) The contrast general-special suggests such a break between biblical revelation and what passes for revelation outside of it, that it is unable to express the continuity between the two; in other words, how the revelation-event is rooted in its surrounding world. The terminology is too imprecise to indicate the historical connection and the dialectical relation between God's concern with the nations and his concern with Israel (75).

Berkhof's contention is that we live by the revelation of God in Israel and in Christ. This is for us *the* revelation, *the* self-disclosure of God. What we know about other revelations can only confirm our conviction that here the deepest word has been spoken. We cannot, however, characterize those other revelations with a term like 'general'. Even words like 'partial', 'groping', 'dim', 'unfulfilled' say very little. Is it

then still necessary to apply dogmatic categories to phenomena of which we have no inner experience ourselves? (75).

#### **4.11 The provisional character of revelation**

According to Berkhof, the term ‘revelation’ cannot simply and self-evidently be used to capture the encounter with God as this is experienced in the Christian faith. Adjectives (‘earthliness’, ‘hiddenness’, and such) are needed to make it more specific and to delimit it. These appositions almost obliterate the concept of revelation, but not quite. In the hiddenness and indirectness of revelation, he states, faith discerns just enough to long for and expect much more. Fellowship with the self-revealing God inspires in us the confidence and the certainty that he is on the way with us to a much more direct and fuller encounter, in which the sun of His presence will break through the thick fogs of the present and we shall see Him face to face. This means that the revelation-fellowship is not only temporary, provisional, and imperfect, but also that it prepares for what is higher and that in this contact God anticipates what He has laid up for us in His future: that which at last can fully and really be called revelation (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:100-101).

Labeling revelation as provisional, however, calls forth a new series of questions to which, Berkhof states, we are not able to give final answers. Why we can only come in touch with God in a hidden and indirect manner is partly due to our sinful estrangement from God, but also because of the earthliness and the historicity of our human existence. It is Berkhof’s contention, however, that apart from sin, God also cannot in this life realize the destiny for which He has created us, because for some to us unfathomable reason He does not want to. Apparently He has decided to go through a process with us. By what we know of revelation through faith, we also know of this process and that He is present in it and from a distance we know its destiny too. The biblical terminology which describes the goal of this process as ‘seeing God face to face’, Berkhof maintains, involves concepts drawn from the world of our present imperfect knowledge and give no further clarity. Indeed, the question arises whether throughout eternity our fellowship with God will not be a mediated and indirect one. Will we ever know God otherwise than by orienting ourselves to a man, to Jesus Christ who became man? We could even ask whether we will ever cease to be

historical beings and whether the full revelation should not perhaps be conceived of as a progressive discovery, forever penetrating deeper. Thinking along these lines, Berkhof states, revelation must apparently unavoidably be seen as an eschatological concept (101-102).

From the above, Berkhof concludes that if revelation is provisional, then man's faith response is even more so, and then conceptual reflection on it is entirely provisional. In its fragmentariness and incompleteness, systematic theology will have to reflect the provisional character of the revelation to which it directs itself, otherwise its system collapses as history and reflection continue and its unintentional provisional nature becomes evident. The dogmatician will do well to remain aware of this and stay open to new insights (102).

#### 4.12 Experience

At this stage it is necessary to trace Berkhof's line of thought concerning 'experience'. Remarkable in this regard are the following aspects. *First* of all, in comparison with his comprehensive treatment of the concept of revelation in *Christelijk geloof*, his exposition on experience is notably shorter — one paragraph as opposed to ten! *Secondly*, while the concept of experience hardly seemed to play a role in the first edition of *Christelijk geloof*, a decade later (as mentioned earlier) Berkhof added this new paragraph on experience to the fifth revised edition of his *opus magnum*; and it is interesting to note that it is inserted between the existing paragraphs about the *earthliness* and the *hiddenness* of revelation. *Thirdly*, in his valedictory address, *God voorwerp van wetenschap? II* (1981c), in his book *Inleiding tot de studie van de dogmatiek* (1982), and in his article, *Schleiermachers ervaring met de ervaring* (1983) all of which preceded the revision of *Christelijk geloof*, Berkhof devoted considerable attention to the concept of experience. While there is a certain amount of overlapping and repetition, these writings must be taken together to form a clear picture of how he views experience and its relation to revelation. *Fourthly*, the question arises why Berkhof thought it necessary to add a paragraph on experience to his *Christelijk geloof*, especially in view of the fact that, despite the changes and insertions, the substance of his book remained unaltered. Indeed, in principle he stood by his original insights, trying only to render them more clearly with revised or adjusted formula-

tions. As E.P. Meijering has pointed out, Berkhof was neither induced to greater radicalism by those who thought he had not distanced himself enough from tradition on certain points, nor did he heed the call of those who wanted him to return to the fold (Meijering, 1997:187).<sup>14</sup> It would then seem that apart from an up-date in view of the ongoing struggle over the relationship between revelation and experience, the purpose of the additional paragraph on experience was to avoid any possible vagueness or confusion as to what he meant with recurring expressions such as ‘event’ (Dutch: *gebeuren*), ‘encounter’ (Dutch: *ontmoeting*), and the combination of the two, ‘encounter-event’ (Dutch: *ontmoetingsgebeuren*), which he used to describe revelation. For do these not already include the idea of experience?

Experience, Berkhof states, is an ambiguous word that continually evokes confusion (Berkhof 1981c:5; 1985<sup>5</sup>:52). In the Bible faith and experience are frequently contrasted, the former being ‘the proof of things we do not see’ (Heb.11:1), the latter as ‘that which is seen’ or as ‘beholding’. Yet, faith as such, Berkhof points out, does not exclude experience. Faith is pre-eminently an experience, albeit an experience of a different kind. Similarly, although revelation transcends experience, it is always connected to experience (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:51, 52). Our experience of reality has become so secularized, however, that for many ‘experience’ as an approach to revelation seems to be a blocked avenue. Berkhof, however, maintains that in theology the concept of experience can legitimately come up for discussion in relation to revelation in three ways:

- (a) As an experience which precedes, but also leads up to the revelation-encounter.
- (b) As another name for the faith-encounter itself.
- (c) As an indication of the experiences that the faith-encounter evokes within ourselves and with the world.

In the context of the discussion of the relationship between revelation and experience, Berkhof limits himself to the first of these three alternatives (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>:52).

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<sup>14</sup> Dutch: “Juist op die punten, waarop hij zich enigzins van de traditie had gedistantieerd, heeft hij zich door diegenen, volgens wie hij daarin nog niet ver genoeg ging, niet tot een grotere radicaliteit laten bewegen, en door diegenen, die hem op het oude erf terug wilden hebben, niet terug laten roepen.”

In his valedictory address, Berkhof states that he does not understand experience in the accepted, broad and vague sense in which it is normally used, namely: as that which one recalls from the fortunes of one's forebears or from the events of one's own life, which serve as the norm of one's actions and behaviour. Also, he does not think of experience as that which at certain times we encounter as strong impulses from the world around us, for instance: love, war, beauty, and death. He thinks rather of experience as the material for reflection and structuring. In his view, experience and reflection are the two sides of scientific labour. In addition, Berkhof deems it necessary to distinguish between what he calls the *detail-experiences* in which we are experimentally and experientially engaged, and the broader, more deep-set experiences in which we consciously or unconsciously arrange our detail-experiences. These he names *total-experiences* or *coherent-experiences* or *source-experiences* (Dutch: *bron-ervaringen*), which include such concepts as *causality, life, soul, justice, history, good and evil*, etc. Precisely because these afford room and coherence for our detail-experiences, they belong inseparably to our experiential world. They, too, must be objects of inquiry and reflection, otherwise in our detail-research we may look like blind, border-shifting moles. Many empiricists are terrified to venture into this field for fear of 'speculation' and 'drifting in space'. But if we do not consider such source-experiences thematically, everything else we do is set on a loose footing. Therefore, Berkhof maintains, we shall have to run the risk of speculation and individualism, in order to subsequently avoid these as far as possible (Berkhof 1981c: 5).

According to Berkhof, the word 'God' also expresses such a comprehensive source-experience. This statement may seem strange, he points out, for with the word 'God' we do not think of experience, but of revelation. And revelation transcends our experience, if indeed it does not contradict it. In the past, that was how the relationship between the two was more and more expressed — out of respect for the divine strangeness of revelation. But this contrast, which fifty years ago had such a liberating effect, is now felt to be stifling. Berkhof emphasizes that in principle he has no objection to the new emerging approach — evidence of which is his use of the term source-experience. Even if he did have, it would make little difference, because, as he points out, in the field of religion we are being inundated with experiences which lay claim to being source-experiences. However, the question is whether these experi-



ences may be considered as divine revelation and whether they may be treated as scientific topics. Does God present Himself here as the object of science? (5, 6).

Berkhof divides these religious experiences into two groups. The *first* includes many forms of oriental religion: Zen Buddhism, Bhagwan, Hare Krishna, transcendental meditation, Yoga in its several forms. The current pursuit of these religions, Berkhof states, reveals a lack of such peak experiences in our neat technological and functionalistic civilization. But does this religiosity really offer an encounter with the principally other or the Wholly Other (Dutch: *gans Andere*)? Is there a source-experience which may be considered a divine revelation here? In Berkhof's view, that which is promised and provided is much rather self-discovery, self-expansion, self-realization. He points out that this may be liberating and enriching, but along this route, the only encounter is with oneself. A Christian theologian, who believes that God and our 'I' do not stand in a relationship of identity, but in one of encounter, cannot base his reflection on experiences of this nature (6).

The second group of religious experiences is to be found within Christianity itself. Here, as mentioned earlier (*vide* pp.81-82), Berkhof calls attention to three particular groups who treat their experiences as themes of source-experiences and combine these with their Christian faith: the blacks, the poor, and the women. Berkhof sees this development as a remarkable event in the history of the church: previously disadvantaged groups have become the bearers of religious expression and theology. This, he maintains, has never occurred to such an extent before — and that while the Gospel is the good news precisely for the downtrodden! But, he points out, (and here we come across his criticism of these trends which we indicated on p.82), that is something entirely different than the good news coming forth from the downtrodden. Their experiences of being black, being exploited, being women are not, he emphasizes, *per se* revelation. They can indeed create awareness of revelation, but the access to the Gospel is always 'the narrow gate' of an about turn and surrender. At this gate the emotions of the downtrodden must be divested of their normativity, in order to make room for revelation from the other side. For Berkhof it appears that the majority of the representatives of these liberation theologies have not yet reached this critical point through which all true theologies must always pass. They give the impression of being self-affirmative expressions of group-experiences, rather than of a self-critical

surrender to experiences which transcend us. There is then in these groups, no less than in the first, no evidence of *revelation-unlocking-experiences*. Are such revelation-unlocking-experiences to be found indeed? (6).

According to Berkhof, this is indeed the case. For instance, the miraculous way in which any number of tribes of the later Israel escaped through the Sea of Reeds from the pursuit of their Egyptian exploiters, is seen to this day by Judaism and Christianity alike as a revelation of the liberating power of God — an experience of divine revelation. Modern views, Berkhof points out, tend to separate these two concepts. They distinguish between ‘facts and their interpretation’. In this case, the facts possibly entailed that the Israelites were benefited when a part of the sea was laid dry by a strong east wind, and that the pursuing Egyptians were engulfed by the ensuing flood when the wind turned (Ex.14). The Israelites then sang the so-called Song of Miriam (Ex.15:21), which is taken as the first interpretation of this narrow escape. The interpretation views the experience as a revelation. Later still other and more developed interpretations followed. In many places where the Bible speaks of revelation, Berkhof points out, theologians separate fact and interpretation. But in this way they pass up the actual experience, and retain only a husk. For in the great source-experiences it never happens in such a manner that people first have a fact and then subsequently project their interpretation upon it. For those who lived through it, the experience at the Sea of Reeds was, from the beginning, an experience which interpreted itself. To call it a projection, is to project one’s own narrow-empiristic concept of experience on a strange incident (7).

Regarding the question as to the value of all the later, often converging yet some-times strongly diverging interpretations, it is Berkhof’s view that a revelation-experience is also recognizable from its inexhaustibility. The source keeps flowing and makes ever more riverbanks fertile. The depth of events can only be expressed by a multiplicity of interpretations. We must therefore not subtract the interpretations from the experience for then we have no experience left. Rather, we must add up, or multiply them by each other, in order to discover the depth of the events. To prevent arbitrary interpretations and subjectivistic distortions, Berkhof states, we need a community in which experience lives from revelation, and therefore can provide the necessary testing and screening of the interpretations (7).

According to Berkhof, he gradually came to rebel against the neat separation of experience and revelation. On the one hand, he emphasizes, he does not consider calling various religious experiences revelation upon their authority alone. But on the other hand, he points out, he discovered that revelation is a specific type of experience — a very specific type indeed. That is why the writers of the Bible speak of ‘the Word’ as the central symbol for this experience. The ‘Word’, indeed, expresses a personal encounter. It speaks of un-manipulability and un-apprehensibility. Often it stands in a relation of tension to our everyday experience. But even then it still remains a human experience (7, 8).

In the fifth revised edition of *Christelijk geloof*, Berkhof mentioned three aspects which the study of the faith should always keep in mind when trying to establish the structure and reach of the relation between revelation and experience:

(a) *Revelation is aimed at man in the concrete reality of his field of experience.* There the revelation-encounter begins. There it is received, only to pass far beyond the limits of this field. Man brings his experiences with him, which colour and determine the encounter with God to a large extent. The superior power of the Spirit ensures that every possible experience, whether personal or universal, negative or positive, can become the portals to salvation. The study of the faith should respect this fact and recognize it with gratitude. It may point out specific experiences which in general or contemporarily illustrate the encounter with revelation, but it may not canonize any one or some experiences. Twentieth century biblical research, Berkhof states, has opened our eyes to various differences related to the different fields of experience and language among the authors or the readers of the Bible or both. The same message is expressed differently in the case of nomads, agrarians, exiles, city dwellers, citizens of free nations or in occupied territories, owners, the oppressed, the philosophically schooled, etc. The small differences between the three synoptic gospels are largely related to the nature and situation of the addressees. In his view, there should be no attempt to harmonize these differences. Instead, they should be understood as an invitation to bring human experience to bear in the proclamation of the Gospel in our time (Berkhof 1985<sup>5</sup>: 55, 56).

(b) *Experience determines and limits revelation.* Every interpretation of the Gospel is consciously or unconsciously related to the field of experience of its interpreter, otherwise the interpretation would be left hanging in the air. The theologian who is

aware of this can apply this experience-relationship in a very fruitful way. At the same time, however, this involves limitations which can be detrimental if one is unaware of them; more so, if only one field of experience (e.g. oppression, liberation) or certain philosophical or sociological theories concerning experience are taken as the sole legitimate correlates or presuppositions (German: *Vorverständnisse*) of revelation. These limitations, Berkhof maintains, must be overcome through revelation in progressive revelation-experiences. Otherwise revelation threatens to change from an encounter to a self-affirmation (56).

(c) *Experience can never bridge the gap between itself and revelation.* An encounter with God, being unpredictable and un-manipulatable, and due to our limitations and sinful estrangement, is startling, threatening, and liberating. Our experiences can therefore only have a preparatory meaning, and one of which we can only afterward and in retrospect become aware. According to Berkhof, we should live by the wonder which comes from the other side and which urges us to make the leap of surrender ahead of all our experiences (56).

Significantly, Berkhof mentions that the above considerations anticipate the scope of the concept of the covenant which plays such a huge role in his exposition of the Christian faith. In a covenant, he points out, two parties come together from two sides. From man's point of view, in the covenant between God and man everything depends on the initiative and perseverance on the side of God. At the same time, however, in the Bible God is depicted as being dependent on us. Much is said in the Bible about God and Christ seeking, enlisting, pleading, and knocking. How God's seeking of us and our seeking of God are related, he does not state here. What he does mention, is the remarkable fact that converts, especially in cultures without Christian tradition, in retrospect frequently say two apparently contradicting things: 'Long before my conversion, God was already busy with me', and: 'Only through Christ I have come from the darkness to the light'. Berkhof also states that the three perspectives mentioned above can be found in Paul's address in the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34) (56-57).

Finally, we cannot leave the subject of revelation and experience without taking note of some remarkable statements which Berkhof made in this regard and which, in my view, are not without significance. One is to be found in an interview

with Berkhof in the paper *Kerknieuws* (January 9, 1981). Referring to Paul's approach to the Athenians as described in Acts 17, he points out that Paul did not begin with a sermon challenging them to choose whom they would serve. Instead he called attention to their altar to 'the unknown God' and said that it was *this God* whom he proclaimed. It soon became apparent that *this God* is quite different from what they had thought. Then Paul began to speak about Christ. This filled the Athenians with resentment and they left. Berkhof's subsequent comment is significant: "God always leads us via experience to revelation"<sup>16</sup> (Scheeps 1981:2).

The other statement occurs in Berkhof's article *Schleiermachers ervaring met de ervaring*, where he traces Schleiermacher's view of the relationship between revelation and experience. He states that for this thinker "faith is...beyond reason (*ausservernünftig*); which does not mean that reason cannot process and express it in sound terms ...Reason is not divinely-productive, but humanly-receptive. Reason (*Vernunft*) is derived from perceive (*Vernehmen*) (Jacobi). Reason lives from that which is beyond and above it, namely: from experience. This is passed on to it, among others, by history. The highest that reason can receive, is the redemptive experience which has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth. *This experience is the highest revelation; this revelation is the highest experience*"<sup>17</sup> (Berkhof 1983:181 — my italics). A few pages previously he states that his conclusion was that in Schleiermacher's *Speeches* divine revelation is the highest experience for which man has aptitude. Most people, however, are blind to it. Apparently, there is a gaping chasm between world-experience and god-experience. Schleiermacher tried to bridge this chasm, with little hope of success (177). At the end of his article Berkhof mentions that the apostle Paul, too, could not find an uninterrupted road from experience to revelation. His experiment in the cultural capital of the world at that time failed (Acts 17:16-34). And yet, Berkhof points out, Paul's message was accepted by a small group. Was that due to his philosophical approach, or in spite of it? We do not know. Like Paul, Berkhof states, Schleiermacher also tried to be a Greek for the Greeks, only to become foolishness for the Greeks in the end. Berkhof asks, however, whether we would do bet-

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<sup>16</sup> Dutch: "Altijd weer voert God ons langs de weg van ervaring naar openbaring."

<sup>17</sup> Dutch: *Het geloof is... 'ausservernünftig'; wat niet wegneemt da het wel degelijk door de rede verwerkt en verwoord kan worden ...De rede is niet goddelijk-productief, maar menselijk-receptief. 'Vernunft kommt von Vernehmen' (Jacobi). Zij leeft van wat haar te buiten en te boven gaat, nl. van ervaring. Die wordt haar o.a. door de geschiedenis aangereikt. Het hoogste wat zij ontvangen kan, is de verlossingservaring die in Jezus van Nazareth is verschenen. Deze ervaring is de hoogste openbaring, deze openbaring is de hoogste ervaring.*

ter, having become 'sadder and wiser' after such an outcome, to refrain from traveling this road because it is deemed un-traversable. But then, he points out, one would have to do the same as Barth who, having also made the long journey of experience, when he stranded or landed on the shore of revelation, pushed the little boat back which had carried him there over the waters of experience. Then again there are many others who must make the same journey to run aground on the same shore. They must first share Schleiermacher's experiences before they can, like Barth, be done with them (187).

We have seen that for Berkhof the revelation in Jesus is not exclusive but indeed normative. Of his great admiration for Schleiermacher there is also no doubt. Which raises the question: was Schleiermacher's 'the redemptive experience in Jesus is the highest revelation; this revelation is the highest experience' at the back of Berkhof's mind in his attempt to rhyme *openbaring* and *ervaring*? Was his writing of *Schleiermacher's ervaring met de ervaring* a concession and a confession of his own shipwreck on the shore of experience?