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## 5. CHRISTIANITY AND SECULARIZATION

It can be said without fear of contradiction, that the confrontation with and the challenge posed by the phenomenon of secularization — the first wave of which lapped the shores of Europe’s church and culture with the rise of Averroism (Berkhof 1982:60) — played a significant role in Berkhof’s mediation theology. Indeed, it is safe to say, that it was the primary motive behind the publication of his *opus magnum: Christelijk geloof* (1973a; E.T. *Christian Faith* 1979b). For as he points out in the preamble: *Ter verantwoording* (E.T. *Why this book?*), much of systematic theology since the Enlightenment may be regarded as taking on the challenge ‘to give the reason for the hope we have’ (1 Peter 3:15) in a secularized culture. “Relative to our secularized age,” he states, “my aim was to present a restatement of the gospel which is as up-to-date and lucid as possible, stripped of all the ingrained misconceptions which obscure it to so many” (Berkhof 1973a: xv; E.T.1979b:xi). It is not surprising then to find the theme of secularization recurring again and again in connection with many of the *loci theologici* which he discusses.

Naturally, Berkhof’s view regarding the relationship between secularization and Christianity has a history and in a certain sense has undergone development. As in so many other aspects of his mediation theology, here too the building blocks are to be found in his previous works and articles. Thus these must be examined first.

### 5.1 Europe the prodigal son

In June 1948 Berkhof published a booklet with the striking title: *Europe the prodigal son*.<sup>1</sup> As he points out in the preface, it is not an exposition of Jesus’ well-known parable in the ordinary sense. Pondering over the enormous questions with regard to the church and the world, his thoughts continually reverted to this inexhaustible parable. In it, he states, he found the answer concerning many of the issues confronting the church and the world in Europe at that time (1948:5).

Berkhof sees a parallel between the prodigal son and secularized Europe. Where God reveals Himself and carries out His acts, He does not remain alone. He

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<sup>1</sup> The original Dutch title is: *Europa de verloren zoon*

has sons and daughters — indeed many of them. Yet, in the final analysis, He has but two. We see them alongside each other, first of all in the Bible, then in our own history: Cain and Seth, the Pharisee and the publican, the congregation and the world. There is an antithesis between these two sons, but as the parable begins this has not yet come to light, for they have not yet grown up, and no decision has fallen. That, Berkhof states, is how the tale of Europe began in the early Middle Ages. The Gospel spread from land to land, and from tribe to tribe. An entire continent acquiesced in its authority. A mighty spiritual unity developed. There are still two sons, but as yet there is no distinction between congregation (church) and world. Society is one huge *corpus Christianum*. All submit to the authority of the God and Father of Jesus Christ (7).

Gradually, Berkhof points out, a different spirit began to stir in Europe. A difference between the two sons was revealed. It was already clearly visible in the late Middle Ages as the great cultural unity dissolved in a tendency toward repressing *and* renewing the church, a tendency toward secularization and reformation. Soon they stood clearly alongside, but largely opposite each other in Humanism and Reformation. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the last could still stem the first. Thereafter the youngest son could no longer be held back. It had become too restrictive for him under the authority of God the Father and Mother Church. Overstepping these boundaries promised greater freedom and greater prosperity. An endless world lay open and waiting. So the son demanded his portion of the inheritance. He desires autonomy and independence, to be more than son, to dispose in his own right over the powers from which he lived by the grace of the Father. He is no longer content to live from contributions and commandments. He seeks to be as the Father himself, determining for himself what is right and what is wrong. Not God's Word, but man himself with the infinite possibilities of his intellect will establish the truth and bring prosperity and be the measure of all things. According to Berkhof, this was the new spirit which broke new ground throughout Western Europe *circa* 1700 AD (8).

God, Berkhof states, is a wonderful Father. No earthly father would, while still alive, divide the inheritance between his sons. Yet God does. He is the creator of freedom. It was His pleasure and honour to create not only inanimate things and beings of instinct, but also man as a being who received the freedom to love and obey God, and thus also the freedom not to do so. Man received independence and responsibility and

he must use these to subject himself to God voluntarily. In doing so he would become truly independent and responsible. If not, if he turns away from God, he founders in a life without independence and responsibility, while under the impression that he has attained true independence. Without this abyss at his feet, man is not man. Only the Father knows the consequences of the son's bid for independence. Will He forbid it? No, for He is the creator of freedom whose only desire is that His sons should be bound to Him with voluntary love. Force has no place in His plan. Voluntary or not at all — that is His honour and the honour of His creation, man. He who accuses the Creator for this, desires to be not man (at least not an independent and responsible being), but an animal or puppet. The son is thus not impeded in his desire for emancipation. Likewise, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the spirit of secularization surged ahead mightily. No voice sounded from heaven. No angel appeared. God looked on and allowed man the glory of his voluntariness and independence (9-10).

Like the youngest son, the eldest, too, gained his independence. Also confronted with a decision, he, however, used his freedom to remain under the authority of the Father. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Berkhof points out, the church in Europe was also faced with a choice. But, henceforth, church and world went their separate ways. The era of the *corpus Christianum* was over. It was now the time of the little church in the big world (10).

The youngest son has the money at his disposal, but for a time (“not many days”) still remains home. Inwardly loose from the father, outwardly he still complies with the father's authority and house rules. It is, however, a pose without conviction, subjection without respect, form without content. This strange “not many days”, Berkhof states, is evident, too, in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. God, virtue, and immortality are still recognized. Christian morality is still respected. As yet the Enlightenment cannot simply free itself from a centuries-long tradition, despite being long since estranged from the forces from which this tradition emerged. This time passes by, however. For newly autonomous man it is but a period of brief hesitation between fear for the unknown and nostalgia for the familiar Christian tradition. But the new content must sooner or later break with the old form which had come to its end. The mighty possibilities of thought and action which stir in man must be realized. On the road of

secularization there is no stopping half-way. The Father knows it and accepts it; and the son is about to discover it (10-11).

The internal rift between father and son fast becomes an open break. The son goes off to “a far land”, enticed by the promise of an infinite variety of possibilities which the freedom and the boundless, the strange and the far-off beyond the confines of the father’s house conjure up before him. So, too, Berkhof points out, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and especially the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the European culture evolved in an abundance of unprecedented achievements in thought, verse, and capacity: science and technology, industrialization and commerce, colonization and trade, literature and philosophy. Man did not achieve this varied multiplicity, this titanic height, within the theocratic culture of the Father’s house, but through secularization — letting go of God for the choice of self and own possibilities (11).

Even if the prodigal son had not wasted his fortune through loose living in the distant land, but, for instance, dedicated himself to philanthropic deeds, he would have sinned no less, according to Berkhof. We, for whom civil morality is usually the measure of sin, would call him ‘good’. Sin in the Biblical sense, however, indicates the broken relationship between God and man. The prodigal son’s sin was that he wished to take charge of his own life and thus left the father’s house. The greatest deeds of neighbourly love in the distant land would not have diminished his sin by a hair’s breadth. Life by faith, Berkhof emphasizes, is something totally other than the noblest humanism (12).

The prodigal son took a different course, squandering his father’s estate with prostitutes. Having once severed ties with the father, he could ultimately no longer abide by morality. He who abandons home, usually also abandons the rules of home. Berkhof maintains that when Europe turned its back on Christian teaching, it could ultimately not uphold Christian ethics. The Christian sense of good and evil cut off from its root — the revelation and authority of God — is like a flower which can for a time still bloom in a vase, but in the end must inevitably and irrevocably wither. Thus, Europe’s humanistic phase sped swiftly to an end. A nihilistic denial of all values sapped the foundations of European life. Humanism was followed by nihilism and nihilism by bestialism. This, at a time, Berkhof states, when human prowess reached

greater heights than ever before. At the precise moment when man soared so high, he also sank to such deep depths. Having cut himself loose from God, he was also cut off from the meaning of existence. His life was doomed to purposelessness. The relationship to God, the vertical line, fell away in European society. Perspective disappeared. Inspiration fled. The technical powers, soaring to dizzying heights, outgrew man and stifled him, because the moral forces were no longer there to control and guide them. Life, no longer a gift from God or holy mandate, becomes a thing with which man goes about at will. Indeed, when man no longer has a counter (Dutch: *een tegenover*), everything becomes a game. Existence becomes formless and without boundaries. Love, justice, regard for the neighbour, for marriage, property, and honour, for body, soul, authority, and labour — all these recede. Gradually but inevitably life is hollowed out (13).

Initially, the prodigal son still has reserves to fall back on. He can live lavishly, but only due to what he received in the father's house. These reserves, however, run out and there is no replenishment. Having abandoned the father's house, he no longer has a future. Such, Berkhof points out, is also the case with Europe. In its digression, it still lives on its Christian past. As long as this influence is still felt, Europe is capable of great achievements. Its natural sciences issued from the belief in and reverence for the order in God's work. Its technical prowess was only possible, because it did not see nature infused with gods as early non-Christian peoples did, but recognized it as that which God has set outside of Him. The European culture of individual personality could only evolve in an environment where, in the light of God's compassion, man learnt to recognize the infinite worth of every human being. Europe's belief in progress, and thus in the meaning of history, was awakened by the Christian expectation of the Kingdom of God which pushed aside the ancient view of life as an endless cycle. Its struggle for social justice issued from the knowledge of a God who upholds "the right of the poor and the oppressed", from the awareness of a higher right than that of group interest. Europe left the Father's house, but lived on its legacy, but now that legacy must run out (13-14).

A great "emaciation process" (Van der Leeuw) set in. Science left the service of God to serve the art of war. Technology grew mightier, controlling everything but controlled by no one. Individualism led to the uprooting and decay of the organic rela-

tionships of life. The organism was pushed aside by the organization. The person became an individual, and the individual a number in a collective. Life lost its perspective, because Europe had for two centuries already been committing over-cropping. It had achieved much, but left its source. Now, its cultural heritage must rapidly peter out (14).

In a strange combination of circumstances, precisely when he has nothing left, the prodigal son discovers that his entire surroundings also stand at the brink of destitution. In Europe, Berkhof states, something of this strange coincidence was also experienced. The spiritual reserves ran out. Suddenly, Europe was plunged into a terrible war. This was followed by an enormous economic crisis. Then an even more terrifying war came; a total contempt of everything that Christians and humanists alike held dear; concentration camps, massacres, and actual starvation. The prodigal son had sought true fortune outside the Father's house. All he found there was his own misfortune. Leaving home and starvation, Berkhof declares, lie on one and the same line, even though that may be a very long line. Guilt and need go hand in hand — so, too, estrangement from God and chaos in society (15).

In his need, the prodigal son can assume various attitudes. Cursing, he can ball his fist against the father and ask why he does not keep him alive with his money and his gifts. In Europe, at any rate, Berkhof points out, this question and accusation were frequently heard. The prodigal son, however, does not do so. He cannot, for he is fully aware that his dire circumstances are of his own making. Soon he will even see that it was precisely due to his love that the father did not intervene before he had come to his senses. Of course, such introspection, about-face, and repentance form the second attitude which the prodigal son can assume. He does not want to, however. He cannot admit that his new life has been one huge mistake. His self-esteem will not allow it, despite the plight in which he finds himself. Indeed, it is a lie, Berkhof says, that suffering on its own teaches us something. In fact, suffering alone achieves nothing. It only sharpens and speeds up that which, apart from suffering, is at work in man. For the prodigal son that means that for the time being he clings to his pride and rather pursues what appears to be a solution than return to the father's house (16).

In his efforts to fend for himself, the prodigal son applies for work among the food suppliers and becomes a tender of pigs. This most humiliating of jobs for a Jew, is nothing compared to the humiliation of returning to the father's house. Last mentioned would involve admitting that he could not go it alone. Tending pigs at least gave him the feeling that he could save himself. On the whole, a poor solution! Morally, of course, tending pigs seems better than the lascivious living of before. Now at least he is working and his life is of necessity sober and modest. From a distance it seems like an internal renewal. Close up, however, it is only semblance. No moral ideal, let alone repentance, motivates the son; only fear, fear of total ruin. He wants to salvage what he can. A hard fatalism, Berkhof points out, forms the background of this phase of his life. In the foreground stands the restless toil, the organization, to avert the chaos (16, 17).

Behold, post-war Europe! Generally speaking, Berkhof states, here, too, it was the case that the suffering taught nothing. Instead of the steady progress which the 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw beckoning, the atomic bomb now cast its ominous shadow over Europe. A silent despair, a weary surrender, a resigned fatalism (Dutch: *een gelaten noodlotsgeloof*) spread everywhere. Yet, at the same time, life became more pressing than ever before, organized to its furthest reaches, in an attempt to still avert the total chaos. The use of loftier words and slogans than were heard for a long time seemed to herald a new moral ideal. But that was not true. It was nothing but fear that brought them to men's lips. Soon, when the ethos proved to be of no avail, recourse was taken to religion, as previously in Germany and Japan, now, too, to a growing degree in Russia and the Far East. Thus, Berkhof maintains, religious sanctity was given to a new totalitarian heathendom. In the words of Berdjajew, Europe now stood on the threshold of "the new Middle Ages". It was headed for a pseudo-messianic, pseudo-theocratic ordering of life. Though people themselves did not believe in it, it was unavoidable, because fear was the driving force behind it. Men were prepared to do anything, tend pigs and eat draff (pigswill), if only they could survive, if only Europe could come through (17).

Strangely enough, no one is concerned about the prodigal son in his distress. The friends, with whom he squandered his father's property, give him no thought. Apparently, he is worth less than one of the swine. A pig has a right to his swill. Jeal-



ously, the son watches these beasts as they feed. To stay alive, he will have to steal pigswill, for no one gives it to him. He is absolutely lonesome. His activity, his organizing talent, his resourcefulness can camouflage his dire need for a moment, but it cannot eradicate it. This, too, Berkhof states, was the experience in Europe. Fear does wondrous things, but never so great as to uplift Europe above fear; ultimately it again leaves behind the paralyzing feeling that in reality nothing happened. We can activate, organize, and galvanize life, yet still: nothing happens. The fundamental problem remains unchanged and unresolved. The chaos remains ever threatening and leering. Prospectlessness continues to hang like a thick mist. Fatalism continues to haunt. Loneliness continues to distress, and the fear continues to dominate us (18).

Here, Berkhof emphasizes, the parallel between the prodigal son and Europe ends. A son can repent, a continent cannot; at least, we have no promise of something like that, and in any case such a situation is not expected unfortunately. But where the parallel ends, there the calling of the church begins. With her vision of the Kingdom of God coming to fill the earth, the community of Jesus Christ dares to dream the wildest dreams and to speak about the re-Christianization of an entire world. Now that disillusioned Europe eats pigswill in the shadow of her downfall, the church may not lower the sights of her calling one bit. What will come of it is in God's hands. The believer must be able to endure, to fight at a post even though its importance for the strategic whole may not be clear. Blind as to the outcome, looking only to the commandment: "Go forth then, teach all the nations!" — that, Berkhof states, is the calling of the church (18, 19).

Berkhof is convinced that the repentance of the prodigal son, the example of the father, and the attitude of the eldest son provide significant indications as to how the church is to accomplish this. The prodigal son came to repentance not by reason of his suffering, hunger, and fear. These are in themselves neutral things and not conducive to repentance. They can become instruments of God *and* of Satan. The prodigal son came to repentance, Berkhof points out, upon remembering the superabundance of the father's house. No old-fashioned fear of hell or new-fashioned fear of chaos, but solely the superabundance of life through God's compassion can draw men's souls and bring rebellious hearts to capitulation. All re-Christianization efforts stand and fall by whether they are nourished and sustained by this joyful knowledge, by this

seemingly superficial optimism. Indeed, it is only from a church, which lives unintentionally (Dutch: *onopzettelijk*) and unconstrainedly (Dutch: *onkrampachtig*) in and by the joy of redemption through Christ, in and by the freedom of the children of God, that recruiting power (Dutch: *werfkracht*) will emanate; from such a church and no other, however well-equipped (Dutch: *geoutilleerd*) and organized it may be. Merely preaching repentance will no more bring Europe to change her ways than preaching chaos. Only the copious and joyous proclamation of the staggering richness of God's mercy, of Jesus Christ who bears, changes, and conquers all, can renew the heart and face of Europe. If the church begins with the abundance of God's house for a world which no longer knows what happiness is, then we shall observe that the chaos is acknowledged ("I am dying of hunger") and guilt is confessed ("I have sinned"). For repentance has two aspects: liberty (Dutch: *vrijmoedigheid*) and humility (Dutch: *deemoedigheid*). God's compassion (Dutch: *barmhartigheid*) evokes the first, His justice (Dutch: *gerechtigheid*) the second. They belong together even as both the attributes of God belong together: "Do you not realize that the clemency of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom.2:4). Liberty does not become brutality, and the abundance of the father's house, once frittered away but now regainable, keeps them together and ensures their clear tone. The prodigal son may dare to return to the father's house, but he may only arrive there with a confession of guilt (19-21).

The father now takes centre stage. Like the father in the parable, so God treats the man who, because his life has run aground, turns to the Father's house with liberty and humility. That is how God is. The church in Europe will have to see in the Father the example for her own attitude, just as the world of Europe is mirrored in the image of the youngest son. In sketching the attitude of God the Father, the parable at the same time sketches the calling of Mother the Church. Significantly, the Father did not follow the son to the strange land, neither did he contemplate keeping him alive during the famine there by sending him money or food. Out of compassion He remained stern; did not obscure the boundary which the son drew; took absolutely seriously the antithesis which was thereby set. That, Berkhof emphasizes, is how the church should be. That she should, with all the means at her disposal and in the context of her environment, go after the world passing by her doors, is certainly her calling, as sure as Jesus dined with publicans and sinners. But that is not the issue here. Reaching out to the world, Berkhof states, may never mean conforming to, or falling in with the

world. Neither may it mean flinching from calling that which is dear to the world unequivocally sin. The church which must necessarily venture into the midst of the world, must also with unwavering honesty assert the antithesis. She may not mark time in her proclamation of sin and grace otherwise she does not follow the Father and will not be able to help the world. Out of compassion she has to be stern, otherwise she becomes the church of Dostojewski's great inquisitor, a 'national church' (Dutch: *volkskerk*) in the most objectionable sense of the word (21, 22).

By mentioning that he already saw the returning son when he was still far away, the parable evidently suggests that the father was continually on the look out, grief stricken, and yet full of expectancy. Neither concealing the antithesis nor in any way acquiescing in it, he cannot accept that the strange land will have the last word, even though all the facts seem to affirm it. So he waits, anticipates, and is prepared to embrace the prodigal son to his bosom. That, Berkhof states, is how the church must act. Together with her Saviour and Lord she will be moved with compassion for all the sheep which have no shepherd. She will focus on the crowds, prepared to accept the lost. She will wait and anticipate, hoping against hope. While she does not mark time in her preaching, and preserves undiminished the offence of the cross, she will in her language and style, in her organization and activity, never forget the world around her. In the good sense, she has to be 'national church'. She will look beyond the boundaries of her isolation, moved by the inner compassion which she learnt from the Father (23).

When men, whose lives have run aground, begin to live from the inner compassion, wonderful, festive things happen. They begin to celebrate. In the strange land, the prodigal son also celebrated. His feasts in the strange land, however, were at the expense of his means, leaving him poorer, not richer, camouflaging and thus increasing his misery. Similarly, that must be said about the various joys in degenerate Europe: they leave their participants only emptier behind. Their intensity is only the thermometer of the inner emptiness. But, Berkhof emphasizes, the feast with the father is one of abundance. It does not aim to fill an existing emptiness. For this feast has but one origin: the kindness of the Father. His compassion is celebrated. Such a feast never ends; it enriches instead of impoverishing. Outside the Father's house the

emptiness is celebrated away — without success. In the Father's house the fullness of compassion is celebrated (23, 24).

Now the son has become alive. How alive he looked while living excessively in the foreign land! What an impressive and varied activity did he not display there! But the prophetic church, Berkhof states, was never misled. She saw behind this aliveness the emptiness of death. Despite all vitalists, man's life by nature and of itself does not deserve the name: "life". Life is only lived in the Father's house. Outside it we are with all our aliveness stone dead. Only life in the favour of God deserves the name: "life". That which humanism seeks — the genuine and truly alive humanity — is not to be found there where it is sought by itself and for itself, but there where man surrenders himself to God's favour and subjects himself to His authority. "Your promise gave me life" (Psalm 119:30) (24).

If the youngest son portrays the world, does the eldest son then represent the church? Berkhof emphasizes that such a conclusion may definitely not be drawn. Through all the ages the true church of Jesus Christ has existed in various forms. But while she deemed that her being church consisted in remaining in the Father's house, and while she considered the fellowship with the Father of the highest importance, at the same time she was moved by inner compassion for the world and looked forward to her return. The first is apparently true of the eldest son, but not the second. He is not the church in the sense of the true congregation of Jesus Christ. The eldest son represents the false church, which for a long time can be as like as two peas to the true church, just like the eldest son seemed to be the true son throughout the time that the prodigal son was in the far land. But when the world once again comes into view, the decision falls and the parting of the ways between the false and the true church takes place. In the eldest son we are confronted with the terrible possibility which slumbers in being church; the sin which is committed not in the world, but in the church; the diabolic caricature of the church, which in this dispensation continues to accompany the true church like her shadow (25, 26).

What then is the sin of the eldest son? The loyal service, to which he appeals, was simply self-interest. He considered staying in the father's house a merit. His words reveal that he, too, had longed ever so much for once to live excessively. But

he had decided to do better and play the role of the well-behaved (Dutch: *de brave*). Would that all have been for nothing? Is there no reward that he had so respectably suppressed his worldly fancies (Dutch: *complexen*)? So that everything should not have been in vain, his brother must remain branded as the profligate and the antithesis be maintained. That is why he does not speak of “my brother”, but calls him “your son”. He does not recognize a relationship with the profligate any more. The father, however, disregards the antithesis and speaks of “your brother”. For the father both sons are equally close and both must discover life by his grace (26, 27).

The parable, Berkhof points out, has no conclusion, because a parable is a sermon. Jesus told this parable with the Pharisees and the professional devout of Israel in mind. They were the ones, depicted in the eldest son, whom He called through this parable to come back from their isolation of merit to being truly church, to live together with publicans and sinners by the grace of the Father. He called them with a warning, for it could come about that they might yet be proven right with their enduring antithesis between church and world, but then in such a way that the world would become church and the church become world. According to Berkhof, the possibility within the church of becoming the false church is *the* great temptation of the church at this juncture in which Europe finds herself. Humanly speaking, he states, the future of Europe depends upon whether the church will reveal herself as the true church or as the eldest son. At present the eldest son is well aware that he must assume the allures of the youngest, so that something of his merit may still be salvaged. Indeed, we shall no longer be able to recognize the false church from the confession of her merit. For after 2000 years of Christendom the Pharisee has indeed adapted to the role of the publican. And yet, he cannot remain hidden as a Pharisee. Who he is will become apparent from his look, his language, his gesture. The false church is there where the church looks down upon the world, instead of considering her departure with sorrow and looking forward with joy to her return. The false church is revealed by the cold, high-hearted, and smug tone with which she speaks about the “world”. It is precisely the tone which the church may never assume when speaking about the world. The father was filled with sorrow when the prodigal son went forth, and he was overjoyed at his return. This sorrow and this joy, as the two ways of expressing the inner compassion, are together the only tone with which the church can speak about the world (27, 28).

The false church does not live from the abundance of the Father's house, but out of fear that the established forms, which life has taken on due to the antithesis between church and world, can once again be broken and throw everything into confusion. Indeed, the eldest son's greatest fear is that he will once again no longer be sole master of the farm. For the false church the isolation has changed from a sad necessity into an ideal, in any case into a fact which gives form and rest to life, the abolition of which is no longer really desirable, only to be feared. This church will not cease to recall the past, the black days when the youngest brother squandered his assets with prostitutes. Secretly, she wants nothing rather than that the youngest son should still be like that. It would spare her so much concern, and the tranquility of her isolation would then be less threatened. For the false church is neither set nor disposed to overstep her boundaries, to break through her isolation, to look forward to the world (28, 29).

The parable, Berkhof points out, ends as an open question. So too, at this turning-point of the times in Europe, the relationship between church and world is still an open question. But then it is a question of such enormous importance that not a single church may withdraw from it. For it involves the future of Europe, the salvation of the world; but above all it is a matter of the salvation of the church itself. For the parable begins with the antithesis between the eldest and the youngest son, as between the true and the wayward son. It ends with it too. At the end the antithesis is still there, but now the wayward son has become the true, and the true the wayward. That is how it happened in the relationship between Pharisees and publicans, and between Israel and the pagans. So strange are the works of God. The antithesis remains, but before we know it, we stand on the wrong side of the dividing-line. The last becomes the first and the first the last. Will the history of church and world in Europe reveal the same spectacle? (29, 30).

Berkhof ends his *Europa de verloren zoon* with the admonition: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in His kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (Rom. 11: 20, 22, and 23).

## 5.2 Marginalia

(a) The time of publication of his little book — June 1948 — reminds us that Berkhof was writing against the background of a Europe just emerging from the devastation and chaos of the Second World War (1939-1945) and embarking on the reconstruction and renewal of society. It was a time of tense expectation — which Berkhof also shared — that the isolation in which the Christian section of the population found themselves would be overcome and that Christians would participate in the establishment of a new social order (E.P. Meijering 1997:65). Thus Berkhof speaks of “a disillusioned Europe... in the shadow of her downfall” and of “the community of Jesus Christ (which) dares to dream the wildest dreams and to speak about the re-Christianization of an entire world” (Berkhof. 1948:18).

(b) Already in this early work, Berkhof gives a clear and uninvolved definition of secularization: “letting go of God for the choice of self and own possibilities” (11). This brief statement contains *in nuce* what Berkhof calls (*à la* Van der Leeuw) the great “emaciation process” which, despite the heights attained by human prowess, accompanies secularization: emancipation, autonomy, humanism, nihilism, bestialism (13, 14). Ultimately, when the ethos fails, a desperate counteraction to avert chaos ensues in the form of a pseudo-messianic, pseudo-theocratic ordering of life which gives religious sanctity to a new totalitarian heathendom, but finds no credibility and offers no solution (17).

(c) One also notices a certain ambivalence in Berkhof’s thought. On the one hand, Europe’s unprecedented cultural achievements are ascribed to the process of secularization. On the other hand, they were only possible due to Europe’s Christian past (11, 13, 14). This is suggestive of a palpable though indistinct concomitance, a link of sorts, between secularization and Christianity.

(d) It remains to be seen whether and to what extent Berkhof maintains, changes, or develops further the aspects mentioned under (b) and (c).

## 5.3 The “Powers” and Secularization

In his *Christus en de Machten* (1953)<sup>2</sup> Berkhof explores a part of the proclamation of the apostle Paul hitherto thought of as strange, out of date, and even mytho-

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<sup>2</sup> E.T. *Christ and the Powers* (1962 and 1977). Unless otherwise stated I quote mainly from the 1977 translation.

logical, but which, in his opinion, is of great significance for the questions confronting the church of Christ in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is the cosmic aspect of Paul's message, especially as it is found in his letters to the churches at Ephesus and Colossae (1953:5). In these Paul repeatedly alludes to cosmic Powers (*ἐξουσίαι*), also called "principalities", "thrones", and "dominions", which play a definite role in relation to his faith in Christ (1977:13). Paul, Berkhof states, borrowed his powers-terminology, though not directly, from the Jewish apocalyptic writings of his time (17). However, a certain "demythologizing" took place in Paul's thought, for while he avails himself of terms well-known at that time, he filled them with a significantly new meaning. This was Paul's own creation (23).

Berkhof rejects the customary view that Paul's "Powers" are angels and doubts whether the apostle even thought of them as personal or real beings, for the personal aspect of the word "Powers" is unaccented in his letters. To Berkhof's mind, it is possible that Paul was using figurative personification, or that he paints the Powers with personal traits, because he sees them as the tools of a personal Satan, or because he is thinking of earthly beings, visible authorities, in and behind which invisible higher Powers are at work. For Paul the Powers are structures of earthly existence (Dutch: *aardse levensverbanden*) whose influence on earth is as broad and as deep as life itself, and especially connected to human affairs. Paul's Powers are thus realities which are part of our earthly existence and whose role is one of domination. His emphasis does not lie on their personal-spiritual nature, but rather on the fact that they condition earthly life (1977:18-26).

Thus, according to Berkhof, Paul observes that life is ruled by a series of Powers (*στοιχεῖα*): time (present and future), space (depth and height), life and death, politics and philosophy, public opinion and Jewish law, pious tradition and the fateful course of the stars (Rom.8:38 seqq.; Gal.4:1-11). Without Christ, man is at the mercy of these Powers, which encompass, carry, and guide his life. The demands of the present, fear for the future, state and society, life and death, tradition and morality — they are all our "guardians and trustees" (Galatians 4: 2), the forces that hold together the world and the life of men, and preserve them from chaos. Indeed, the Powers are the framework of creation, the canvas, which invisibly supports the tableau of the life of men and society (22, 23).



Though Paul does downgrade the Powers because of Christ, at the same time he recognizes their positive significance. He confesses Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as the ground and goal of the universe, as the key and secret of all creation (Col.1:15-17). Creation, however, comprises a visible and an invisible, an earthly and a heavenly part, a visible foreground, which is bound together with and dependent on an invisible background. This invisible background comprises the Powers. These also were created through and unto Christ. God's love for us in Jesus Christ is also the ground and goal of the Powers. From their very creation, by their very nature, they were made to serve as instruments of God's love, as the invisible weight-bearing substratum of the world, as the underpinnings of creation. Berkhof emphasizes that Paul by no means thought of the Powers as evil in themselves. They are the linkage between God's love and visible human experience. They are aids to preserve life within God's love, to bind men fast in His fellowship. They are intermediaries (Dutch: *tussenmachten*) — not barriers, but bonds — between God and men; signposts toward the service of God and the framework within which such service must be carried out. That Paul can speak so positively about the Powers, which elsewhere he judges more negatively, is not as strange as it may appear. The fact, Berkhof states, is that human traditions, the course of earthly life as conditioned by heavenly bodies, morality, fixed religious and ethical rules, the administration of justice, the ordering of the state — all these *can* be tyrants over our life. In *themselves* they are not. They are not the devil's invention, but the dykes with which God encircles His good creation to keep it in His fellowship, protect it from chaos, and preserve us in Christ's love. By doing so, the Powers fulfill their own destiny. Thus the believer's struggle is not to do battle against the Powers, but rather to battle for God's intention for them and against their corruption (27- 29).

Paul, however, more frequently depicts the Powers not in this divinely intended role, but as bound up with the enigmatic fact of sin. Through the fall in sin not only have men turned away from God, but a demonic reversal has taken place on the invisible side of creation. The invisible side of the cosmos now functions in diametric opposition to its divinely fixed purpose. The Powers are no longer instruments, linkages between God's love, as revealed in Christ, and the visible world of creation. They no longer bind man and God together, but separate them. They stand as a roadblock between the Creator and His creation. They continue to fulfill one half of their

function. They still undergird human life and society and preserve them from chaos. But, Berkhof states, by holding the world together, they hold it away from God, not close to Him. Paul calls them “the rulers of this age” (1 Cor.2:6) and in their desire to rule, they are in enmity toward the Lord of Glory, who can suffer them only as instruments, not as lords. They have become gods (Gal.4:8), behaving as though they were the ultimate ground of being, and demanding from men an appropriate worship (30).

In Germany under Hitler, Berkhof recalls he experienced how the Powers of *Volk*, race, and state took a new grip on the inner and outer life of men; how they intruded as a barrier between God’s Word and man; how they acted as if they were the ultimate values, calling for loyalty as if they were the gods of the cosmos. Even today, Berkhof points out, in every realm of life, it is possible to perceive these Powers which unify men, yet separate them from God. The state, politics, class, social struggle, national interest, public opinion, accepted morality, the ideas of decency, humanity, democracy — all these give unity and direction to thousands of lives. Yet, precisely by doing so, they separate these many lives from the true God, letting us believe that we have found the meaning of existence, whereas they really estrange us from true meaning (1977:32, 33).

So even in the fallen world the Powers retain one side of their divinely established function. They are still the framework of creation, preserving it from disintegration; the dyke which prevents the chaotic deluge from submerging the world. Since man outside of Christ is a “minor”, unable to find his way, helpless and without direction, his life would be abandoned to dissolution if the Powers were not there, to whom men instinctively entrust themselves. For God has made for each other the visible and the invisible sides of the cosmos, i.e. men and the Powers. Man outside of Christ stood, thanks to God’s preserving care, “under guardians and trustees” (cf. Gal.4:1-11). So then, Berkhof explains, the Powers take us in trust, hold our lives within a secure enclosure, saving them for the time when preservation will be overtaken and included in the more far-reaching work of redemption. In the world alienated from God, the Powers have a very positive function: they keep men alive. Yet such a life, a life under guardians, a life in slavery, where man falls short of his destined end, is not fully worthy of the name “life”, especially when compared to the life of being chil-

dren of God. However, in contrast to the chaos to which our enmity toward God has condemned us, life under the Powers is tolerable, even good. For it is still a part of God's preserving mercy, holding life in line where men do not know Christ's liberation. However, it must not be overlooked, Berkhof states, that in a world where Christ is preached, the Powers reveal their tyrannical character. For then there is no longer room for them in the positive function they fulfilled in the pre- and extra-Christian world. They then either lose their totalitarian conserving hold on life, or they become anti-Christian Powers as it has happened with the Powers of race, class, state, and "volk" in Nazism and Communism (33-35).

The centre of Paul's teaching concerning the Powers is that since the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and wherever this saving event is proclaimed, the domination of the world Powers is at an end. Indeed, this event not only reveals the enmity of the Powers toward God, but by the same token also puts an end to their working. In Col.2:13-15, Berkhof points out, Paul uses three different verbs to express more adequately what happened to the Powers at the cross. *Firstly*, Christ made a public spectacle of them. The previously accepted belief that the Powers were the most basic, ultimate realities, the gods of the world, was founded on deception. Now that the true God appears on earth in Christ, it becomes apparent that the Powers are inimical to Him, acting not as His instruments, but as His adversaries. At the cross the Powers are unmasked as false gods by their encounter with very God. *Secondly*, at the cross Christ triumphed over the Powers. Their unmasking is actually already their defeat. But this is only visible to men when they know that God Himself had appeared on earth in Christ <sup>3</sup> So here, Berkhof states, one must think not only of the cross, but also of the resurrection, for the resurrection manifests what was already accomplished at the cross. In Christ, God challenged the Powers, penetrated their territory, and displayed that He is stronger than they. *Thirdly*, at the cross, Christ disarmed the Powers. Heretofore, the Powers derived their strength from illusion, i.e. their ability to convince men that they were the divine regents of the world, ultimate certainty and ultimate direction, ultimate happiness and ultimate command for small, dependent humanity. Since Christ we know that this is illusion. We are called to a higher destiny, to follow higher orders, and we stand under a greater Protector. No Powers can separate

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that the way in which Berkhof speaks of Christ here is in stark contrast to his view of Jesus in his *opus magnum* (cf. my chapter *Jesus-man and (also?) God* ). Of course the question is whether this is Berkhof's view or is he merely stating that of the apostle Paul.

us from the love of God in Christ (Rom.8:38, 39). Unmasked, revealed in their true nature, the Powers have lost their mighty grip on men. Wherever the cross is preached, the unmasking and the disarming of the Powers take place (36-39).

The unmasking and disarming of the Powers does not mean that with one blow their ungodly working has been put to an end. In principle the victory of Christ over the Powers is certain. Yet the battle continues until the triumph will have become effective on all fronts and visible to all. Because of what happened in the cross and the resurrection of Christ, the godless dominion of the Powers shall one day come to an end —completely and definitively (cf.1 Cor.15:24, 28). Berkhof doubts whether in Paul's thinking the Powers are destroyed in the consummation. As the invisible aspect of God's good creation, should they be annihilated in the ultimate consummation, the whole undergirding of creation would fall away. In fact, Berkhof points out, in Col.1 Paul uses the term "reconciliation" not merely as an act relating to persons, but as meaning a restoration of proper relationships. Through Christ's death God reconciles not only men, but also the Powers, with Himself. For the Powers, too, are the objects of God's plan of redemption. By virtue of this purpose, they will no longer lie as a barrier between God and man. They can and shall return to their original function as the instruments of God's fellowship with His creation. According to Berkhof, Paul says in so many words (cf. Eph.1:21) that the Powers have their role also in the age to come. For there, too, there will be formed and ordered life, but in such a way that these forms and orders are nothing more than the undergirding of the perfected communion between God and His creation. The Powers are not destroyed, but dethroned, i.e. put out of commission as enemies (cf. 1 Cor.15:26). At the same stroke, according to Berkhof, they are reinstated in their proper function within the Lordship of Christ. How this shall be and what function the structures of our life shall have in the age to come, Paul does not state. Shall even death have a place in the restored creation? Berkhof merely states that Paul's whole interest is solely that death as enemy, as curse, as judgement, as wages of sin is utterly divested of its power, and that Christ and the Father shall be radically and unambiguously Head and Lord. The seductive and enslaving effect of the Powers is broken for good (39-43).

Paul thus proclaims that the Powers are already unmasked and disarmed (through the cross and resurrection of Christ), and shall imminently be dethroned (in

the consummation). “Already” and “not yet” — these are the poles of tension which dominate the entire New Testament proclamation, and form the basic problem of New Testament theology. For faith this is no contradiction, any more than it was contradictory for the population in the Netherlands during the “hunger winter” (1944-45) that the already defeated Nazis were still oppressing them. With the term “the limiting of the Powers”, Berkhof attempts to combine the “already” and the “not yet”. The Powers are still present; but wherever Christ is preached and believed in, a limit has been set to their working which is the sign and the promise of their defeat. Primarily, the Powers are limited in the continued existence of the church — men and women, who by virtue of their fellowship with the Lord of all Powers are able to see through the deception and anti-Christian dimension of the Powers and refuse to run after isms. For among the various gifts (1 Cor.12:8-10) bestowed upon the church is the discernment of the spirits. While this is a special gift of the Holy Spirit, which not everyone possesses, nor in the same measure, it involves especially the discerning of the Powers which hold the hearts and actions of men under their sway in specific times and places. From this discernment, Berkhof states, there springs forth a basically different way of dealing with creaturely reality. The Holy Spirit “shrinks” the Powers before the eye of faith. The Powers have inflated themselves into omnipotent total value systems, but the believer sees them in their true proportions as nothing more than a segment of creation, existing because of the Creator, and limited by other creatures. Where the Spirit of Christ rules and the victorious kingship of Christ is confessed, there changing customs, slogans, and isms of the moment are seen as ideas, worth no more and no less than the older slogans they replaced; there consistent doubt as to the efficacy of military power prevails, and national or international armament is grudgingly seen as a bitter duty of responsible citizenship. Anxiety over the fearsome future gives way to a simple carefulness, since we know that the future too is in God’s hands. In faith life is seen and accepted in its smallness and modesty. The believer does not flee the world, but he avoids deifying it. For him the world is “de-deified”. While the individual believer is “still but a man”, and as a sinful man senses in his own flesh the seduction and the threat of the Powers, by the might of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the strength of the Powers is limited in his life. Somehow he escapes their temptations and threats; somehow his Christian liberty bursts through their enslavement, at times so mightily as to be externally tangible, for instance, when a Christian church must live in the midst of a demonically nationalistic society, or in a communist

world poisoned by terror and espionage. Thus, by her very presence, faith, and life within a community or culture, the church questions the legitimacy of the Powers and labels their dominion as un-self-evident. She is the turnstile which shuts off all return to the unconscious taken-for-granted-ness of the Powers in former cultures (43-49).

Berkhof adds that even outside the church the Powers are limited. There, too, are men and women who no longer let themselves be enslaved, led astray, and intimidated by the Powers. Against them certain Powers are ineffective. But that is no fundamental shipwreck. In these persons another Power may be working more powerfully than those which entirely dominate the life of others at the time. Thus Power strives against Power, and inevitably the Powers resort to oppression and persecution. However, in this very act of desperation, the unmasking of the Powers is repeated and confirmed. They are forced to reveal their true nature, and thereby to abandon their role as gods and saviours. Christ brings the Powers to a crisis (44).

In a still more important sense the Powers are limited. Since Christ the Powers can no longer attain their goal. With a “pseudo-Messianic counter-revolution” they may seek to banish the memory of Christ and the signs of His Lordship from men’s awareness in order to renew their own unchallenged dominion. But this does not succeed. At every turn, there remains of their effort only that which can find its place in God’s plan of redemption. All the anti-Christian Powers can achieve nothing except what fits into the saving divine counsel. Even in their opposition the Powers are God’s collaborators. Their function as instruments of God, given them in creation, and which shall be fully restored in the new creation, is already inescapable since the victory of Christ. Closely related to this is the fact that the Powers are limited in that God repeatedly stops them in their tracks. The shadow of the great “Halt!” at the end of the times falls already today repeatedly upon Christ’s adversaries. Even where it does not ring out, the “halt” which the Powers seek to oppose Christ’s advance fades away powerless as they are fitted into God’s kingdom plan in spite of themselves (45, 46).

According to Berkhof, there is a real place for Christian avoidance of the world, but only in the sense that the believer avoids deifying it. The weak, he states, need to avoid certain realms of the world, because the Powers that reign there would draw them away from their fellowship with the Lord. The strong can express this

avoidance of the world in another way. Like the young men in the fiery furnace, they can walk through its force fields unscathed, offering resistance by their very presence and actions, constantly reminding themselves that they do not belong to the nation, the state, the technique, the future, the money. For all this is ours, given us by God as means of living a worthy life before God and in fellowship with our neighbour. Berkhof admits that this element of withdrawal which predominates in the Christian's stance toward the Powers seems negative. Does the Christian not have a more positive and aggressive responsibility? He points out, however, that Paul says nothing of a positive or aggressive approach to the Powers. Such an approach is superfluous, because the very presence of the church in a world ruled by the Powers is a superlatively positive and aggressive fact. For it is a sign of the end-time, of the Powers incipient encirclement and their imminent defeat. For the Christian, this fact is freighted with meaning. All resistance and every attack against the gods of this age will be unfruitful, unless the church herself *is* resistance and attack; unless she demonstrates in her life and fellowship how men can live freed from the Powers. She can only preach the manifold wisdom of God to Mammon, if her life displays that she is joyfully freed from his clutches; she can only resist social injustice and the disintegration of society, if justice and mercy prevail in her community life and social differences lose their power to divide. Paul, Berkhof states, is not ignorant of a more direct encounter between the faithful and the Powers (cf. Eph.6:10-18). He is aware that the war against the Powers must be waged seriously. However, the arms with which the believer must arm himself denote that Paul does not contemplate an offensive against the Powers. In fact, the believer can only assure his defence against the Powers by simply standing by his faith. His duty is not to bring the Powers to their knees. That is Jesus Christ's own task of which He has thus far taken care and will continue to do so. We, as believers, Berkhof maintains, are responsible for the defence, because Christ takes care of the offence. Our task is to hold the Powers, their seduction and enslavement, at a distance. Our weapon to do so is to stay close by Christ and thus remain out of reach of the drawing power of the Powers (1977:49-52).

All this does not mean that Christ's church stands as a solitary island amidst an unbroken sea of hostility. Simply by being the church she is the instrument whereby Christ brings to crisis the rule of the Powers, and thereby manifests His victory even far outside her borders. For Paul this victory is not only future, but already

effective in this dispensation, involving not only the “limitation of the Powers” but, by virtue of Christ’s incarnation and self-sacrifice on the cross, already also the restoring of the heavenly Powers to their proper position (cf. Col.1:20; Eph.1:10). According to Berkhof, this is awesomely illustrated when the Christian mission breaks through in a pre-Christian or extra-Christian culture. A complete disintegration of social life previously ruled by the Powers takes place. Life is stirred up, desacrilized, “de-deified”, in that the new Lord makes His entry for the good of all. Men are released from the bondage of the Powers to freedom and humanity. New patterns of life are created within which the Powers take the modest and purely instrumental place, which was meant for them. Berkhof points out, however, that the proclamation of Christ as Lord over the Powers can with time lead to directly opposite, fatal results. When the new Lord does not or can no longer lay His claims on men and on the Powers, one would expect that the former life under the Powers as “guardians and trustees” should return, and that conditions should be restored as they were before the preaching of the Gospel. But this does not and cannot happen. Once Christ’s rule has come on the scene, there is no return. The desacrilizing of the world cannot be undone. The Powers, once dethroned, cannot return as if nothing has happened. Everywhere the preaching of Christ as Lord has brought an end to the stable reign of the Powers. The crisis of the Powers still remains in effect even where Christ can no longer (as in Europe), or not yet (as in Asia), lay hold on the life of peoples. The proclamation has gone out from Europe, but even more has its negative aspect: the dethroning of the Powers. Where the latter is not accompanied by the former, there thus exists a cultural crisis of the greatest seriousness: life has lost its old unity without finding another (1977:53-55).

One possible solution to this crisis, Berkhof states, is secularization — a life in which many Powers have a certain place, but no single one plays a total, unifying role. It is a life — characteristic of today’s “cultured world” — which goes on with no centre. The Powers of a humanistic ideal of personality, of a decent human existence, of a public morality (derived from Christianity), of Mammon, Eros, and technology limit and presuppose one another, maintaining a certain tolerable, but obviously extremely unstable equilibrium. Secularized life can, however, become nihilism, by reason of the fact that the basis of this peculiar balance of Powers is a disbelief in the deity and the binding authority of any one of the Powers. Where this disbelief



gains the upper hand, life becomes a spiritual desert. This, however, does not necessarily lead to despair. It can be a very heroic attitude. Man has no handhold outside of himself. If indeed he grants any weight at all to the claims to authority and to obedience coming from outside of him, it is only to ensure that the tolerable equilibrium of the Powers, which gives him breathing space, does not break down (1977:55-56).

Can man survive in this nihilism which is the threatening background and for many, in fact, the very climate of secularized life? The conviction that there is no other choice, if he wants to live, somehow or other enables man to hold out for a long time in the above mentioned two postures. But they are unnatural postures. Therefore, there lurks in men a frequently unconscious, but at times fiercely flaring longing for a “restoration of the Powers”; for the secure purposefulness of a life which is lived under and bears the stamp of an inspiring and unifying idea. Nazism, Fascism, and Communism have proved how near the surface of the human spirit this longing for authority slumbers. But to speak of “a restoration of the Powers”, Berkhof states, is inexact. There is no “return” after the Powers have been unmasked and disarmed by the proclamation of the Gospel. Wherever the Powers seek to regain their control by counter-revolution, they are of necessity something different from what they were before the encounter with Christ. Instead of solid “guardians and trustees”, they have become angry anti-Christian usurpers, for their authority is no longer self-evident. With more powerful means they must counter the profound disbelief in their saving virtue, which since Christ lives ineradicable in the human spirit. Thus, propaganda, terror, and the artificial ideologizing of life are inseparable concomitants of the rule of the Powers since Christ. We cannot return to the old China, or the old Babel. “Who the cup to his lips has once set, his soul now of innocence is bereft” (Marsman). Thus, the restoration of the Powers cannot be a solution to the crisis. The grim artificiality of their reign robs human life of such essential values that for millions of people the price of their restoration is higher than they are ready to pay (1977:56, 57).

Berkhof posits a fourth possible solution besides that of secularism, nihilism, and the restoration of the Powers — the “Christianization of the Powers”. It is possible, he argues, that Christ’s church, by her preaching, presence, and patterns of life prevailing within her fellowship, may represent such a mighty witness and so forcefully address the consciences of men far beyond her borders, that they generally orient

themselves by this reality, tacitly accepting it as a landmark. For, indeed, they know of no better guarantor of a decent life, of mercy, freedom, justice, and humanity, than a certain general acknowledgement of the sovereignty of Christ or (as they prefer to call it) of “Christianity” and “Christian values”. This is not only a conceivable possibility beside the others. It has become and still is real and effective in numerous forms of apparently fully secularized behaviour. Christianization, he cautions, can mean no more than that the Powers, instead of being ideological centres, are what God meant them to be: helps, instruments, giving shape and direction to the genuine life of man as a child of God and as a neighbour. The Powers are made instrumental, modest, even “neutralized”, oriented by and pointed toward God’s dealings with men in Jesus Christ, and to men’s life in fellowship with this same God (1977: 58).

Berkhof emphasizes that the Christianization of the Powers cannot mean the same thing in every case. For the state it means “de-ideologizing”, no longer enslaving men to the world view it propagates, but simply becoming a means of staving off chaos and ordering human relations in such a way that we can lead a quiet and stable life and follow God’s call unhampered by external hindrances. In law it will mean that legislation and the upholding of justice will be based on what God’s Word calls good and evil; in economics and technology, the utilization of resources to serve man according to God’s intention; in education, offering to children a view of God’s redeeming works and of His will for their lives. The relevance of God’s revelation will be nearer and more direct in one case than in another. In every case, however, the Powers are relativized. They no longer pretend to offer an inspiring centre for all of life. That centre is now somewhere else, above the Powers, and life receives its inspiration and its hope from a higher sphere. Only then can life’s liveability be assured. (1977: 59).

Such an order of things, Berkhof points out, is not automatic. While Christianization is much more strongly present than we may suspect, the borderline between the Christianized and the secularized life is so fluid that no one can say where the one ends and the other begins. As a matter of fact, Christianization is itself a form, indeed the only legitimate form of secularization. In what he calls “secularization”, Berkhof states, the connection between the Powers and Christ has again been broken and they have regained something of their former position. Secularization is a more “natural” order of things than “Christianization”. The restoration of the Powers would be the

most natural arrangement, were it not that since Christ the powers can only operate in an angry and perverted way. But Christ's Lordship (or Christian values) is still so much in so many people's blood that the Powers' return to power in our society, as prevalent as is the tendency in that direction, will always meet fierce resistance as men attempt with all their might to escape their chilly grasp. Such a pendulum movement is characteristic of a culture above which the Name of Christ has been proclaimed (1977: 60).

While this pendulum movement is in a sense normal, Christianization is not and therefore cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, a life whose structures and institutions are open to God's revelatory deeds does not come into being automatically. It is only "open" as long as it is held open by Christ Himself, who conquered the Powers and to whom all authority in heaven and earth is given. For the exercise of this authority God does not need the church, yet He repeatedly chooses to use His church to that end. Thus the constant challenge to the church is to occupy herself in such a way that through the openings which are held open, where there is something to see, the sight may be inspiring. Indeed, Christianization is inconceivable apart from the prophetic, living testimony of a vital church in word, deed, and presence. Less is too little. To strive to neutralize the Powers and de-ideologize life, without taking as point of departure and as goal the reality of God in Christ, will take us no further than a certain degree of "humanization", which at some time or other will fall prey to a new Power — "humanity". To strive to neutralize the Powers and de-ideologize life by shoring up the prophetic message with coercive measures and thereby enthrone Christ without passing by the detour of preaching and conversion, will achieve too much and thus too little. For this would only replace one Power with another — a Christian ideology whose legalistic character would tend to veil from sight the Lord's salvation and to degenerate into hypocrisy. The minimum, and at the same time the maximum, to which we are called, according to Berkhof, is what Paul himself teaches: to be a church which in word and deed lives from the fact that Christ has overcome the Powers, and which holds them at arm's length by virtue of this faith. Then Christ, thanks to His objective sovereignty, will see to it that the very existence of the church will limit and thereby in reality break the hold of the Powers. In this sense the church is ultimately responsible for the contemporary crisis (1977: 60-62).

The battle with the Powers continues. Christianized here, they burst out elsewhere. Each Christianizing has only a partial and temporal value. The church's great question is always which Powers are now attempting to get life under their control. The church, which resists in word and deed the ideological poisoning of her life, can pray and can expect that Christ will endow with far-reaching efficacy the limitation of the Powers that she proclaims. The idealist, who considers the Powers (Communism) harmless, misunderstands their strength completely. The pessimist, who considers the Powers (Communism) incorrigible, misunderstands the Lordship of Christ completely. The living, prophesying Christian church goes her own way despite optimism and pessimism alike (1977: 63, 64).

#### 5.4 Comparative remarks

Whatever else may have motivated Berkhof, there can be little doubt that the power struggle and the arms race between the so-called super powers during the period later to be known as the Cold War, *circa* 1946-1989, (in which Western Europe was involuntarily caught up) formed the ominous background against which Berkhof wrote his *Christus en de machten*. In his review of this period in Berkhof's theological biography, E.P. Meijering mentions Berkhof's pronounced scepticism toward the Netherlands government's political reliance on NATO and atomic armament. Significant, too, is Meijering's remark that Berkhof's sentiment throughout his life was to remain free from all political movements so that he could be pro something only incidentally and not be permanently bound to it (E.P. Meijering 1997:82 and 65).

While the background — the issues and challenges confronting post-war Europe — is more or less the same in both *Europa de verloren zoon* and *Christus en de machten*, in last mentioned the perspective in which secularization is depicted is elevated from the personal to the cosmic sphere. In *Europa de verloren zoon* secularization involved *letting go of God for the choice of self and own possibilities*, in *Christus en de machten* it is seen as a product of the cultural crisis following the dethroning of the Powers by virtue of the preaching of the Gospel (1977: 54, 55). In this form of secularization the connection between the Powers and Christ has again been broken and they have regained something of their former position (60). But while many powers have a certain place, no single Power plays a total, unifying role. They limit and

presuppose one another in a tolerable but extremely unstable equilibrium where the scales can tip in either direction — nihilism on the one hand, or the “restoration” of the powers on the other; nihilism, because disbelief in the deity and the binding authority of any one of the Powers is the basis of their peculiar equilibrium, and because it is the threatening background and the very climate of secularized life; restoration of the Powers, because in secularization life goes on without a centre, and in nihilism life becomes a spiritual desert, in view of which man again hankers after a secure and purposeful life under the banner of an inspiring and unifying idea (55, 56). The emaciation process of *Europa de verloren zoon* thus figures here, too, while the pseudo-Messianic, pseudo-theocratic counteraction there becomes here the restoration of the Powers, i.e. a pseudo-Messianic or anti-Christian and thus artificial ideologizing of life (56, 57).

Remarkable, however, is Berkhof’s suggestion of a fourth possible solution besides secularism, nihilism, and “restoration”, namely: the Christianization of the Powers, which he describes as: the general acknowledgement of “Christianity” or “Christian values” due to the mighty and forceful witness emanating from the preaching, presence, and patterns of life obtaining in the fellowship of Christ’s church. Here “Christianized” means, instead of being ideological centres, the Powers are made instrumental, modest, relativized, even neutralized, oriented by and pointed toward God’s dealings with men in Jesus Christ and to men’s life in fellowship with this same God (57, 58). Christianization, though not automatic, is real and effective in numerous forms of apparently fully secularized behaviour and is much more strongly present than one would suspect. In fact, Berkhof emphasizes that the borderline between the “Christianized” and the secularized life is so fluid that no one can say where the one ends and the other begins. He even goes so far as to state that “Christianization” is itself a form, indeed the only legitimate form, of secularization (59, 60). So here the concomitance between secularization and Christianity is even more boldly stated than in *Europa de verloren zoon*.

## 5.5 Secularization as a Christian and anti-Christian phenomenon

This distinction appears in Berkhof's widely read and much appreciated book *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* (1958).<sup>4</sup> In his review in the theological journal *Kerken Theologie*, B. Breek remarks that only a theologian of Berkhof's stature was capable of writing a book such as this and states that he found that it consoles personally, stimulates scientifically, and uplifts religiously (Breek 1960: 91).

Berkhof is concerned that in reaction to the way in which the theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century tied together Word and reality, 20<sup>th</sup> Century theology has separated the two sharply, thus running the risk of losing the connection between them, so that the Word becomes an abstraction and reality is secularized. According to Berkhof, that is the fundamental problem of contemporary theology and *the* problem of contemporary preaching. With his book he attempts to express the continuing mutual involvement of God's actions and words and what we call our reality (Berkhof E.T.1979a:11).

Writing slightly more than a decade after the Second World War, Berkhof states that we live in an apocalyptic era, an age in which, more than any previous one, the great forces that move history are unveiled from their mystery. We are strangled by fear: for man, for his future, and for the direction in which we are driven against our will and desire. As we seek a way out of the events that overwhelm us, there comes a cry for illumination concerning the meaning of the existence of mankind and the goal to which we are directed. It is the cry for an answer to the old question of the meaning of history. The church of Christ not only knows of this cry, but also of a divine answer, to which she must dare to point in her position alongside the world. For her book, the Bible, is full of light precisely for these abysses of history. There the building materials for a theology of history are piled up high. Yet, for centuries the questions regarding a theology of history have not been approached at all by the churches and their theologians, or they have been dealt with in a fantastic and dilettantish manner by sects and sect-like movements. No attention, however, is as disastrous as a wrongly directed attention (13, 14, and 15).

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<sup>4</sup> E.T. *Christ the meaning of history*, 1966 and 1979a. I quote from last mentioned.

In Berkhof's view, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century church of Christ is spiritually unable to stand against the rapid changes that take place around her, because she has not learned to view history from the perspective of the reign of Christ. She thinks of the events of her own time in entirely secular terms, and, overcome with fear in a worldly manner, tries also in a worldly manner to free herself from fear. In this way, however, God functions as no more than a beneficent stop-gap (Dutch: *een stichtelijke hekkensluiter*). Though there have been encouraging signs of change much more thinking on this subject is needed. Only then will the talk about Christ's reign in history slowly begin to have meaning and more nearly approach the fullness and certainty with which it is spoken of in the New Testament (15, 16).

For centuries, Berkhof states, the view that history moves between the Fall and Completion, that Christ is the centre of this, that we are involved in the struggle between Him and evil, and that He will gain the victory in that struggle, has been typical for Europe. Indeed, it made Europe, and gave seriousness and direction to the actions of Europeans. It did not remain that way, however. In the leading circles of Europe entirely new philosophies of history cropped up since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The immanent, evolutionistic idealism of Lessing, Herder, and Hegel, the deterministic, naturalistic positivism of August Comte and Herbert Spencer, the radical nihilism of Nietzsche, and the tired scepticism of historicism of Ernst Troeltsch, heralded a certain process of emaciation. Even the attempt to return to the pre-Christian, naturalistic, cyclical concept of history (Schopenhauer and Oswald Spengler) could not bring with it a return to the harmonious notion of life. We cannot again become happy heathen. In these various views, Berkhof points out, one is aware of homesickness, sadness, resignation, and a feeling of fatigue. This was not confined to a small group of thinkers. They only voiced what was already astir in the subconscious spirit of Europe, and which became evident in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and more rapidly in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: *the loss of the sense of history*. The idea that events are goal-directed, and that for this reason it is important to take part in history and to make sacrifices for the future had made Europe great. Now, however, according to Berkhof, Europe no longer has an answer to the questioning after purpose or even belief in a future worth living and dying for. This is not so much because positivism and historicism pulled the rug from under Europe's feet — although this is indeed true — but because two world wars accomplished much more. After the Second World War, leading minds, such as Karl

Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann, and Arnold Toynbee among others, began to search for new meaning in history. These attempts, however, were unable to break the ban rapidly setting itself upon the European culture — the notion that history is meaningless and purposeless (24-33).

Over against this need and uncertainty in West European thinking about the future and the meaning of history, Berkhof states, there stands one powerful phenomenon of world dimension in which these questions are solved with great certainty and in a concrete manner — *Marxism*. Its combination of positivism, or rather materialism, with the ideas of ‘progress’, ‘goal’, and ‘meaning’ gives Marxism its great attraction. Here the process of history is propelled and directed by ‘scientifically fixed’ laws of production-ratios and technology formulated by historical materialism, and with these as basis the future can be foretold with scientific certainty. The class struggle drives history on until capitalism collapses and the power over the means of production falls into the hands of the proletariat. Then ends the struggle between man and nature, man and man, individual and corporation. Injustice and crime will halt. Then man finally comes to himself. Thus ‘out of the night and need a new morning’ of the classless society originates. Communism, Berkhof maintains, receives its astounding recruiting and driving power from its Judaeo-Christian heritage in the thought of the Protestant-educated Jew, Karl Marx, coupled with a naturalistic conformity to the law of the economic process (33, 34).

A dilemma of world proportion has arisen. On the one hand there is Western culture, which, in the course of one and a half centuries, almost completely lost the notion of a meaning of history. On the other hand there is communism, which is motivated by a solid and concrete conviction about the meaning of history. Meanwhile the forces, which were born out of the faith of Western culture in the future and in the goal-directedness of history, have won the world and have also liberated, or are liberating, the people of Asia and Africa from the cycle of their existence. These people now reach for the same forces to build their own future. But they are not able to develop these forces, since they are not fed by a strong faith in the future of man and in the meaning of history. Will communism offer them this meaning? Then they must pay the price of bloody revolutions, fanaticism, dictatorship, and contempt for the individual. Will Europe and America offer them this meaning? But these, Berkhof



points out, often know no other meaning than that of materialistic and technological progress carried on by a vague humanitarianism or sceptical rationalism. Thus, many nations must make the unfortunate choice between a wrong meaning and no meaning at all. Berkhof wholeheartedly rejects this threatening alternative. It is his conviction that history has meaning and that this can be found where Europe received it at one time: in the revelation of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ (34, 35).

According to Berkhof, we must thank Israel for the realization that history is goal-directed, and that as such it has meaning. There originated an entirely new type of historical realization, directed not only to the past, but also, guided by the past, to the future (21). There history was radically and permanently delivered from the law of nature, from the eternal cycle of prehistoric naturalism — rising, shining, and setting. There history was discovered — not in the sense that Israel found history in a unique act of thought, nor in the discovery of something that, although hidden, already existed, but in the fact that the Israelites had come into contact with that distinct God who, on behalf of His people, intervened in events and in this way changed events into guided history. The Old Testament is full of these acts. Yet it is clear that the origin of this sense of history is connected with one particular event which is indelibly imprinted into the spirit of Israel — the deliverance from Egypt in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (37). While the Exodus inaugurated a real history, God's deliverance was not a goal in itself, but was meant to be a leading into the Promised Land. History, however, did not stop in Canaan. It is described as a movement toward a climax. Soon it appears that the entry into Canaan was not an actual fulfillment of history, partly because God's final goal is much broader, and partly because progress was hindered by Israel's unfaithfulness. Even the climax under David and Solomon is not an end either. The line of history declines to the exile. The Major Prophets and the later historical books see God continuing with His guidance and struggle. In the midst of all that is contrary to their expectation they wait for a new anointed one from the house of David, and for the Messianic Age in which God's leading of his people will reach its goal. The unfaithfulness of man and the faithfulness of God together keep history moving (38, 39).

A growth in the sense of history thus took place. In the older witnesses, the sense of history is primarily a backward glance to God's history-making act of the

Exodus. The emphasis, however, later shifted increasingly to the present (the Royal Psalms), to the near future (the earlier prophets), and even to an indefinite future (after the exile). But throughout the Old Testament (the prophets, the apocalypses, to a certain degree even the non-canonical apocalyptic literature of the inter-testamental period) the fundamental concept was essentially the same (52, 53). History is primarily the terrain of God's calling and leading. Here God executes his battle against the adversaries. Man is delivered by and for God and is thus set upon the road toward the great object — the Kingdom of God (22). The outcome of the battle is certain. It is anchored in creation. Every indication of God's superior power is also an indication of the coming Kingdom. Each indication may be the institution of that Kingdom. If this is not the case, the expectation continues unperturbed to look for new indications. Due to the apostasy from within and the threats from without the struggle is not yet completed. It repeats itself again and again in similar forms. There is, however, not only repetition. The last struggle will contain a tremendous increase in battle. The adversaries will stake everything on this last stand. Yet God's victory will overcome even that. The adversaries will exhaust themselves, and the result will be the Lord's complete kingship over His people, and over all the nations (53).

This idea, Berkhof states, becomes central in the New Testament. There the cry sounds, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand!' The promise of that kingdom as the goal of history is now realized, i.e. firmly established. This realization began with Jesus. The end time has now arrived. His life and sacrificial death, His words and miracles, all united in His resurrection and glorification rang in the last phase of history. The boundaries of Israel are now torn open, and the gentiles take part in the salvation of Abraham. History has now not only a goal (the return of Christ), but also a centre (His first coming). The believer looks forward and backward, and knows he is involved in the unrestrainable movement towards the completion of God's Kingdom (22).

Living entirely by and from the Old Testament as the revelation of the Father, Jesus found His place and task as Messiah in Isaiah 53 which foretold His humiliation (a road of contempt, suffering, and a substitutionary death), and in Daniel 7 which spoke of the glorious crowning of this road (receiving from the hand of God the power over all the kingdoms of the world). Thus, Berkhof states, Jesus knew that He

was to be the Suffering Servant and the Son of Man united in one; that He alone was the faithful remnant in whom the prophets repeatedly expressed their trust as the substitute which will realize God's intentions for Israel (57, 58). In calling Himself the Son of Man, Jesus claimed cosmic history as His own. Indeed, as the Son of Man, He had a function in the great drama of history pictured by Daniel. He knew that the beasts had arrived at their greatest, blasphemous strength, but also that God's mighty intervention was at hand, and that He Himself had been appointed to take over the government of the world. This He expressed publicly at the most critical moment of His life, during the proceedings of the Jewish court (Mark 14:62 seq.), and precisely because of this confession He was condemned to death (59).

Thus, according to Berkhof, Jesus knew that He had come to bring the close of history, to lead the world to its crisis, but also to overcome that crisis. The Messianic Age the prophets looked forward to had now arrived. In Jesus, history is finally reduced to its hitherto mysterious, fundamental forces. The great division takes place around Jesus. Neutrality and indifference must clear the field. Only the 'pro' and 'con' for Jesus remain. The official religion is 'con'. More and more Jesus comes to stand alone. The adversaries summon together all their power. There can be no other way, for by His appearance and work Jesus called them to life. The great hour in which the power of darkness triumphs over the work of God now breaks over the whole world. But it is, at the same time the hour of the enthronement of the Son of Man. For that reason the atmosphere of fearful anguish which the Gospel stories depicted in the earthly life of Jesus is coupled with a deep joy and freedom. Indeed, the Gospel writers, and primarily Jesus Himself, believed that His death and resurrection ushered in the great Day of the Lord. The decrees concerning Israel and all nations centre in Him as the only and actual partner in God's covenant with man. He was the substitutionary remnant, in place of Israel and the world. His resurrection is God's triumph over the adversaries, the act by which guilty man is raised and allowed to live before Him. It is the beginning of the great Day of the Lord following the Messianic woes of Golgotha. It was the end of history, Yahweh's great victory over His enemies. What the apocalypse of Isaiah had foreseen occurred — death was destroyed. The prophecy of Daniel 7 is fulfilled in the resurrection. The words of the glorified Jesus that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him (Matthew 28:18), agree with what is said about the Son of Man, 'And to him was given dominion

and glory and kingdom' (Daniel 7:14). Thus, Berkhof states, history as God's struggle in Israel with the adversaries has come to an end — the Kingdom has come (60-65).

Although the Kingdom of God had been brought near, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus had actually arrived, a new earthly period followed which was not contradictory to but introduced by the Kingdom. Jesus is the end *and* the beginning of history, Berkhof states; end *as well as* beginning. Jesus' death and resurrection ushered in the victory over the beasts and the taking over of power by the Son of Man in accordance with Daniel 7. But this great event is not a once-for-all incident, or like a flash of lightning. It is extensive through time. The Day of the Lord has arrived. It will be revealed by visible signs and continue in an irreversible progress until the revelation of the Son of Man in glory. His sitting at the right hand of God is not just a mysterious, heavenly reality, its working-out and effect must take place in earthly events and circumstances. Jesus' claim that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him and the great commandment 'go therefore and make disciples of all the nations' (Math.28:18, 19) meant above all that this power becomes a fact on earth through the proclamation of Christ to all nations. Jesus' parables make it plain that the Kingdom must go through a development which will manifest itself partly in positive and partly in negative signs. Jerusalem is destroyed and the Gospel goes into the entire world bypassing Israel because she has rejected her Messiah. It grows into a mighty force, but it also brings confusion and division. The Church is persecuted and will have to travel a hard road of suffering. All this does not mean a postponement of the Kingdom, but only a postponement of its consummation. It is the image in which the Kingdom appears in a sinful and broken world. It is the form in which the enthronement of the Son of Man at the right hand of Power in its first phase becomes visible on earth. Thus, according to Berkhof, the Kingdom is at hand, but in its mystery; in the *Gestalt* of a historical period which stretches from the realization of the Kingdom, by means of Jesus' death and resurrection, to its still future unveiling. In the *Gestalt* of the missionary enterprise and suffering it receives duration in world history; the extent of this duration is unknown. (67-73). Whether the duration of the history inaugurated by Jesus would be short or long was never an article of faith, Berkhof states. In the primitive church believers were seeing the Kingdom of God arrive in power. Therefore there was no place for any doubt in the consummation of this event. Even if they hoped that this take place soon, the fact that the period of waiting

seemed longer did not lessen the assurance in which they walked in that Kingdom. The joy over the great Beginning removed all alarm over the delay of the End (76, 77).

The reason for the fact that through Jesus, particularly through His death and resurrection, the *eschaton* becomes more extensive, and takes on the form of history, is due, Berkhof states, to Jesus' love for sinners. His coming as the Suffering Servant did not primarily mean the introduction of the judgement, as John the Baptist suggested (Matt 3:10). It meant the postponement of judgement, the creation of new history, a dispensation of grace and patience; not as a preparation for the Kingdom, but as a temporary form of that Kingdom. In this way the love of God already comes to dwell among guilty humanity. Just a few people around Jesus understood this. Only he, who understood that his own condemnation was the only thing he could expect from an imminent judgement, could understand the glory of this new proclamation of the Kingdom (78).

However, this new history, Berkhof states, is not completely characterized by the words 'grace' and 'patience'. Along with the positive signs of mission and growth, the negative signs of division and suffering are not lacking. The positive signs stem from the fact of Jesus' triumph and exaltation, and these cause his love to become the great force in history. So, too, the division and suffering are clearly connected with the division that took place over Him, and with the suffering which became His lot. Since the servant is not greater than his Master, this means, according to Berkhof, that the event of the Kingdom brought into the world by Jesus is an analogue of what happened at that time in Palestine. Thus, according to Berkhof, the event of the Kingdom which was set into motion by Jesus' cross and resurrection, and which is being realized throughout the world by the missionary endeavour, can be described as *an analogy of the Christ-Event which is being realized throughout the world*. This, Berkhof maintains, is the core of the New Testament view of history (78, 79).

Especially important with regard to Berkhof's concept of history as an analogy of the Christ-event, is his chapter on "the missionary endeavour as a history-making force". The world, he states, has changed since the exaltation of Christ. It has become a part of the Kingdom, of history. This is a declaration of faith (81). Before the ap-

pearance of Christ the world outside of Israel had no history, i.e. it did not know freedom in the Biblical sense of the word (84). Man's awakening to freedom can only take place when the proclamation concerning Jesus Christ reaches him. The Lord who comes to us in the proclamation calls our freedom to life. The proclamation, however, neither constrains nor leaves man uninvolved. It makes a call, invites us to arise and walk a new way. Man now stands before the decision whether to remain bound to the powers of nature as a slave, or whether to join the Lord whose appearance means the desacralization of existence and whose power and love delivers us from the earthly shackles and gives us a new life as children of God, as brothers to other men, and as lords of the world / nature. In an entirely new sense, man is called to choice and decision — to freedom (85-86).

A new change at origin arises with the coming of the Kingdom. It penetrates into the darkest corners of life, and creates a new order of life, together with a new appreciation for life. This takes place first in the church of Christ. As soon as the church begins to exert her influence outside herself as a creative minority, the Kingdom also begins to uproot the life of an entire nation or a whole culture. This does not happen all at once, nor does it proceed everywhere at the same speed or to the same extent. Yet wherever the Kingdom is introduced, it uproots the world deeply and creates a new order of life (87, 88). A new idea of *being human* is ushered in — the humanity of humility. The individual is recognized in his own significance. The human *personality* is respected. Particular attention is given to the suffering and oppressed. The concept of *being* responsible (answerable to Someone) is introduced, together with the idea of *coming of age*. The relationship of the individual to the one personal God creates a personal, inward-reaching relationship from which *inwardness* develops, making literature and psychology possible. All this is against the natural 'life concepts' of man dominated by the powers of nature. A gulf arises between what man ought to be and what he is. A deep *awareness of norms* is developed, coupled with *dissatisfaction* with the existing world. The battle is pitted against exploitation, injustice, and slavery, and against everything, which is not motivated by love. Thus the idea of social justice was injected by the missionary proclamation. Even *marriage* has undergone a fundamental change. *Monogamy*, as a reflection of the love of Christ and the church, has become the only possibility. *Sexuality* is more than the ability to

take part in the divine creation of life. It now becomes mundane and primarily appreciated as the expression of personal love between man and wife (88, 89).

The new Lord, Berkhof states, brings *history* into the world. Life has received the *Gestalt* of a goal-directed aspiration. In that life the powers are desacralized — particularly that which had been considered most sacred: the state. ‘We must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29) has dethroned the state. *Tolerance*, a late product of the Christian proclamation, is rooted in the patience of God. *Nature*, too, was desacralized and made the object of man’s exploitation. In the missionary proclamation, *modern natural science and technology* were in principle given. With this a new ethos of *labour* developed. Work has taken on a new meaning. Not to work is a vice. The concept of the *world as a unity* and the *existence of the United Nations* is a result of the missionary proclamation of the Creator of the whole world, who, disregarding all boundaries, gathers the new people of God. All this, Berkhof states, has become so obvious to us that we no longer remember how we came by it, and often make the mistake of thinking that these ideas are natural, that they are a part of being human (89, 90).

The inescapable and freedom-giving result of the missionary proclamation brings with it the two-sided phenomenon of the emancipation of man and the desacralization of natural existence. The new Lord delivers man from obedience to nature and from the social institutions derived from the forces of nature. Christ brings the humanization of man and the materialization of nature. Indeed, keeping in mind the cultural and historical meaning of the concept of secularization, Berkhof states, one might say that Christ secularized life. Secularization is conversion projected in culture — the Christianization of life. He points out, however, that secularization as a result of a conversion to Christ is sooner or later, to a greater or lesser extent, accepted by everyone regardless of whether he himself experiences this conversion to Christ, or whether he considers himself a part of the Christian church. While the acceptance of this Christianization or secularization is general, and a matter of course, this is not true of faith in Christ. Wherever the missionary endeavour has gone, the curious situation arises that a whole nation gratefully eats of the fruit of Christianization, but only a minority desires the tree which produces the fruit, i.e. Christ and conversion to and faith in Him. Wherever freedom is awakened in this fallen world, there will also be a

misuse of freedom. Man listens to the voice which tells him that he might just as well, or better, use this God-given freedom against God, that he can be like God, and that he himself can determine what is good and what evil. Thus, secularization as a deliverance of life can move in two directions. The prisoner of nature can become a child of God in his maturity, or he can just as well take the role of a false god. Even this second possibility is due to the missionary proclamation. Secularization is a child of the Gospel, but a child who sooner or later rises against his mother. And yet, Berkhof notes, the mother would not be what she ought to be if she did not desire the child. The fact remains that the missionary endeavour calls into existence the greatest forces and counter-forces — Christian and anti-Christian secularization; the autonomy of man takes place simultaneously with the enthronement of Christ (91, 92).

Berkhof emphasizes that this anti-Christian twist of secularization can be illustrated by all the phenomena characteristic of the Christianization of life. Norms become an autonomous, often utilitarian, ethic spelling their own downfall; sexuality an earthly phenomenon whose stimulation is exploited, and whose meaning is betrayed by exhibitionism; marriage only an expression of sometimes passing erotic emotions; the state a toy of the factions who, in the name of democracy, lead to anarchy; tolerance a colourless and purposeless tyranny by the majority; technology, meant to make nature the servant of man, becomes itself the enslaving power of man; labour a false god, who drives us on endlessly, since he has been separated from the labouring God who gives man, His co-worker, a share in His sabbatical rest. Thus, Berkhof states, secularized life becomes the great enemy of the theocratic order of life, as much as, or even more than, the naturalistic pattern of life had been (92, 93).

Yet, Berkhof emphasizes, secularization cannot deny its theocratic origin. For in itself it has no power to exist. This it receives from the tree of which it is the fruit. For that reason, the most anti-Christian representatives of secularized life are — unconsciously and even consciously — positively or negatively — dependent on the Christian faith. Wherever the missionary endeavour has made an impression on the culture, no active thinking or deeds are conceivable which are not positively or negatively dependent on the life-giving forces brought into this world by Christ. Even atheism, Berkhof maintains is a typical ‘Christian’ phenomenon. ‘Deity is rejected on the bases of the norms he himself introduced’ (Miskotte) — the norms of love and



justice, to which the world does not apparently measure up. What is true in a negative sense is true also in a positive sense. The conviction that culture has a Christian source becomes evident to leading figures particularly during cultural crises. This evokes the suspicion that removal from the source should lead to desiccation and emaciation, to anarchy and nihilism. It is thus evident that the relationship between theocracy and secularization is very complicated. One moment they are identical, the next they are each other's sworn enemy. Yet, even in the latter case they belong together, and are inseparably connected with each other. Indeed, according to Berkhof, it is impossible to divide Christian and antichristian secularization by a date. Both are in principle continually at work, and in practice are often hardly distinguishable. The Christian church, Berkhof states, seldom does justice to this peculiar relationship. (93-95).

Peculiar, Berkhof states, is the fact that even in laudable secularization, at least during the last three centuries, it was not the believer, but the non-Christian who stood in the forefront. That the Christian church tended to view natural science and technological development with suspicion and to repeatedly act as the protector of the old naturalistic ways of life and to defend the existing order as the holy will of God, must not be blamed on banal backwardness. According to Berkhof, we must not be too harsh in our criticism. The church walks on a narrow road: on the right the slavery of the forces of nature threatens, and on the left the anarchy of autonomous life. The church has always been more afraid of the left than the right. The risks of secularization have always been greater than those of naturalism whose shackles have been broken since the missionary proclamation (95).

Because of this, Berkhof states, others who had their existence not in Christ but in human autonomy, were called to draw the missionary proclamation to its legitimate consequences. 'Were called', indeed, because here, too, the Holy Spirit was at work. He performs His work through the church, but also through what we call the world. The church has created a type of man who stands in a relationship to God as a child to the Father. The Renaissance, humanism, the Enlightenment, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century have created a type of man who emancipated himself from institutions, traditions, and natural laws and became the lord of nature, but in whom the relationship to God as a child to the Father can no longer be found. In both, Berkhof states, we find the

work of God's Spirit and the work of evil. Indeed, we must remember that the world is taught about God through the church, but also that the church is taught about God through the world (96).

The struggle between Christian and antichristian secularization has never been decided. Both remain intertwined, Berkhof states, because the church does not wish to return to naturalism, and the secularized world does not wish to move ahead to anarchy and nihilism. Whenever the threat of a restoration of life under the tyrannical powers arises, church and world stand united for the same cultural values. When the threat is past they seem to be each other's sworn enemy as two opposite poles of the theocratic pattern of life. Wherever the gospel has gone, a free, but intrinsically conflicting culture has arisen. This schism is inherent in the missionary proclamation. On the one hand, the proclamation introduces the powers of the gospel into the world of nations. On the other hand, it sets free the demonic power of self-deification. In this way, it hurls the world into a schism which, before Christ, was unknown during the tyrannical harmony of paganism (97).

Europe and America have flooded Africa and Asia with all the products of a Christian and antichristian secularization. These, however, are grafted on what are still primarily naturalistic, tribal forms. The positive background — confrontation with the new Lord — is lacking, however, with the result that the people are uprooted and secularization, divorced from its theocratic background, hangs in the air. The highly praised aid to underdeveloped areas, seemingly a material blessing, is in reality a spiritual assault. Many who do this work do not at all understand the great confusion they create in the hearts of men, because they are no longer aware of the Christian presuppositions of their own culture. All this, Berkhof points out, will end either in a destructive nihilism, or in a conscious quest for Christ who came to secularize life, and in whose service only, this secularized life is protected from nihilism. But if the latter is to be realized as the only beneficial possibility, then, along with the aid, the proclamation of Christ must be resumed with unmatched force by the young churches, missions, and the world church. Without this antidote, the present-day inoculation can only present us with serious diseases (97, 98).

Berkhof points out that what he has presented here in terms of a Christian philosophy of culture is a part of the primitive Christian proclamation, and can be re-translated into its terms. In 2 Thess.2 we come across the same double mystery. In the New Testament the word *μυστήριον* usually signifies the salvation brought by Christ (Mark 4:11; Col.2:2; 1 Tim.3:16). In Pauline writing ‘mystery’ in that sense is almost the accepted expression. In 2 Thess.2:7 (‘...for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work’) the same word signifies the power of the antichrist, who seemingly has come into operation together with the great mystery of Christ. Thus, Christ and the antichristian power form together the *Gestalt* taken by the Kingdom in this guilty and broken earthly existence. The nature of the antichristian power is human self-deification (vs.4) and blindness where the truth of God is concerned (vs.11). This power is still a *μυστήριον*, a hidden activity, behind masks, and often insolubly connected with the powers of Christ. Once again, Berkhof states, we come to the same conclusion as previously stated: The result of the missionary proclamation is the realization throughout the whole earth of the analogy to the Christ-event of the cross and resurrection (99, 100).

Berkhof expands this two-sided character of history historically and eschatologically with his concept of *the crucified Christ in history* and *the resurrected Christ in history*. It is Berkhof’s view that there will be a planetary (Dutch: *planetarische*) analogy and intensifying maximum development in history of the cross and the resurrection (134). According to him, the analogy to the cross (suffering) of Christ is realized throughout the world in this dispensation before the consummation through *persecution*; through *apostasy* (secularization in a narrower sense); through resulting *competitive doctrines of salvation* (Islam being in Berkhof’s view the greatest apostasy and competitive doctrine of salvation in one); and through *totalitarian ideology* (when-ever such a competitive doctrine of salvation takes control of the state, e.g. Nazism and Communism). All this reaches its maximum deployment in the advent of the antichrist — the demonic reflection of the Son in the pattern of a trinity made up of the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth (Rev.13); he (Berkhof is convinced that the antichrist will be an individual person) is the organic end-product of a Christianized de-Christianized world; the union of the adversaries which were called to life by the Kingdom of Christ (101-121).

While the cross continues to the present, the fruit of the resurrection is waiting for us in God's future. Yet this, according to Berkhof, is only a half-truth. The New Testament is full of a tense expectation and an unshakeable certainty that this dispensation (since and through the advent of Christ) will unveil itself as analogous with His victory. The power of His resurrection manifests itself not only in the individual, but also in the church as a whole, foremostly and centrally in the continuation of the missionary enterprise — a phenomenon without parallel in history and a miracle considering the shortages of manpower, money, and influence in comparison with the resources of the political powers. This is of constitutional significance for the Kingdom and its history-making. Faith in Christ finds root in all races and cultures, and in every defeat finds new power for its continuance. Outwardly and inwardly the church grows. All of this does not remove the fact that the opposition is strong. There is, however, a *restraining power* (the Holy Spirit and His work in the missionary endeavour) which makes certain that when total defeat threatens total victory makes its entrance, and wherever the opposition is not restrained *reverses* the opposing power in order to serve His plan. Christ's dominion, however, is broader than the church. It is revealed wherever His order of life asserts itself against naturalism's lack of freedom and anarchism's chaos in order to bring man nearer to his human destiny. A great number of men and women are in the service of Christ's dominion without knowing or wanting to be: intellectuals, artists, physicians, nurses, educators, social workers, technicians, and those taking assistance to underdeveloped nations, also no less, mothers who pass Christ's order of life on to their children. What we call progress only came into the world after and through Christianity. It is often of an antichristian nature, carried on by people who were strangers to the church of Christ and used it as a weapon against Him and His church yet is an indication that it originates in Him. More often it is not of this nature, but a simple objective service, which opens man's way to a more perfect humanity, or even leads him to the road where he can encounter Christ. In the struggle for a genuine human existence — progress — an activity is taking place throughout the world to the honour of Christ. The Christian church has not always recognized this. This led to a Christian pessimism of culture, to an ungrateful blindness for the signs of Christ's reign in the present. The tremendous fact that the forces of secularization and nihilism, of a Christ-less or even antichristian autonomy and ideology which threaten to disintegrate life are repeatedly limited, held back, turned around, or converted by the positive signs of Christ's reign in the world, should

fill us constantly with gratitude and amazement, giving us power to enter the future without fear and with the expectation of seeing new signs. Most importantly among these for Berkhof is, on the one hand, the *conversion of Israel*. In this regard he goes so far as to state: “In the victory over the great scandal in history — Israel’s disobedience — the power of the resurrection will become evident, or it will not become evident at all. The faithfulness and sovereignty of God are at stake. Here as nowhere else His faithfulness will prove to go beyond and overcome our unfaithfulness” (134, 135). For Berkhof the conversion of Israel involves not only a spiritual recovery, but also a geographical political restoration of the land of Israel (Canaan). Indeed, he states that “with the surprising...fact of the establishment of the state of Israel, the moment has come for us to watch for political and geographical elements in God’s activities, which we have not wanted to do in our Western dualism, docetism, and spiritualism” (153). Closely connected to this is the other sign of Christ’s sovereignty in history: the dawning of the *millennial* or *intermediate kingdom of peace* between our dispensation and the consummation. Not only does the restoration of Israel guide our thinking to a future kingdom of peace, but Berkhof is convinced that a recovered Israel will be at the centre of it. Christ’s honour and might demand that His resurrection in history be revealed throughout the full breadth of the cosmic front, as far as this is possible in this dispensation, centrally in the restoration of Israel and the millennial kingdom as the cosmic pneumatic analogy to the forty days between resurrection and ascension. Indeed, the transition to the union of heaven and earth is prefigured in the kingdom of peace by the merging of their boundaries (cf.122-178).

Resurrection is the essence of the consummation. Are history and consummation mutually exclusive? Is eternity timelessness, or endless time (Oscar Cullmann)? Giving his own interpretation of Barth’s concept of the consummation as *fulfilled time*, Berkhof states: “...consummation, as the glorification of existence will not mean that we are taken out of time and delivered from time, but that time as the form of our glorified existence will also be fulfilled and glorified. Consummation means to live again in the succession of past, present, and future, but in such a way that the past moves along with us as a blessing and the future radiates through the present so that we strive without restlessness and rest without idleness, so that, though always progressing, we are always at our destination. ...Jesus Christ (who is the same yesterday, today, and forever) has even now begun to give us time, ...He has delivered us from

the unending cycle of naturalistic time, and keeps us from a senseless rush through an aimless, secularized time... Since He has become the mystery of history, past present and future have approached one another in a manner which we may call a foretaste of the consummation" (188). The consummation cannot be thought of as though it were merely the end of history, because it also takes place within the bounds of time. The figurative language of the Bible, which presents the relationship between now and later as that of sowing and reaping, ripening and harvest, kernel and ear — plainly indicates a continuity between present and future. This continuity is first and most properly to be found in the faithfulness of God, who does not leave incomplete what He has begun. The witness of Scripture concerning the connection between history and consummation is so forceful and certain, and the break between the two so serves this connection, that we are forced into the grateful acknowledgement that in the glorification of his world God will add to what has already been realized of the liberation of human existence. Since the outpouring of the Spirit, and since events are changed into history, the building materials for the glorified world are being gathered. One day God will add to this work of His Spirit. But then we must say that that upon which the building continues cannot be compared with that which is being built upon it. This double confession makes us grateful, and at the same time it humbles us (cf. 180-192).

What should be our attitude to all this? We must take courage to make relative decisions; look around not only in the great world events, but also in our own country, and in our immediate surroundings, in order to discover and support the positive signs of Christ's dominion even far outside the Christian Church, and to discover and to oppose the antichristian tendencies even in the heart of the Christian Church. For the meaning of our own life is fulfilled, only when we take part in the meaning of history. The important thing is that what we build on Christ, the Foundation, will remain, and that the consummation will reveal that we have contributed to the formation of the Kingdom which in Christ began to change and divide the world of man (204, 205).

## **5.6 In retrospect**

Thus far the following has become clear in Berkhof's view regarding the relationship between Christianity and secularization.

(a) It is evident that there is much similarity between his works as set out above. Indeed, one gets the impression that his *Christ the Meaning of History* follows on his *Christ and the Powers*, in the sense that the cosmic aspect of secularization is given a broader, more extensive cultural historical and eschatological setting here.

(b) Most significant, however, is the way in which Berkhof expresses, more clearly and remarkably closer than previously, the concomitance between Christianity and secularization, even to the extent of its negative aspects. Thus we hear him state: *Christ secularized life, and: secularization is conversion projected in culture — the Christianization of life. Again: secularization (is, my insert) a result of a conversion to Christ (92). Furthermore: secularization is a child of the Gospel, but a child who sooner or later rises against his mother. And yet, the mother would not be what she ought to be if she did not desire the child. Once again: the missionary endeavour calls into existence the greatest forces and counter-forces — Christian and antichristian secularization. The autonomy of man takes place simultaneously with the enthronement of Christ (92). Also: secularization cannot deny its theocratic origin (93). Last but not least: it is impossible to divide Christian and antichristian secularization by a date...both (are, my insert) in principle continually at work, and in practice often hardly distinguishable (94, 95).*

It must be noted here that in the Epilogue to *Christ the Meaning of History* Berkhof states: “In recent years the close connection between Christianity and secularization treated here... and elsewhere, has been expressed by many authors” (212). With that *elsewhere* Berkhof probably refers to two of his articles: *De theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja (1972)*<sup>5</sup> and *Emancipatie, secularisatie, en de zending van de kerk (1978)*.<sup>6</sup> In the former Berkhof discusses the ambivalent position in which the systematic theologian finds himself when he aims to relate the Gospel to the ideas and ideals of the times, so that it may retain its critical and inspiring influence. For all the negative characteristics of our modern secularized world — autonomy, meritocracy, technological manipulation, consumerism, globalization and secularization — have a positive Biblical side. Thus, the theologian cannot simply be a prophet of doom like the Trojan prophetess, Cassandra, who continually saw misfortune approaching, nor

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<sup>5</sup> English: Theology between Cassandra and Hananiah.

<sup>6</sup> English: Emancipation, secularization, and the mission of the church.

Both these articles in the original Dutch were later also published in the compilation *Bruggen en bruggehoofden* (1981) edited by E. Flesseman-van Leer and others. Since I use this publication to quote from the above mentioned articles I refer to them as Berkhof 1981a and 1981b respectively.

in any way be like Hananiah, who in contrast to his contemporary, Jeremiah, predicted peace and prosperity for the near future where there was none. Instead the theologian must mirror himself in the prophet Jeremiah, who in the apparently peaceful and prosperous period at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC, went about as a Cassandra, feared, hated, persecuted, because he mercilessly unmasked the estrangement from God, the hypocrisy, the affluent egotism, and the social injustice in Israel, and predicted the speedy collapse of the kingdom of Judah before the armies of the king of Babel. But, when in 597 BC, Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian armies and the people had to admit that Jeremiah was right, he no longer wanted their agreement. In the darkest hours of the siege and famine his ministry took an about-turn and he began to proclaim to his despairing fellow-citizens such a future of restitution, peace, and prosperity as Hananiah had never dared. Theology cannot display everything at once in a calm balance of aspects. It has to have in mind the people whom it has to serve through its reflection. "In my opinion," Berkhof states, "the characteristics and challenges of our time are such, that theology must swiftly rid itself of the fear of the Cassandra-role. With less than a ministry of repentance it is not justified. Who knows how soon it will once again have to offer consolation in God's Name amidst the despair" (Berkhof 1981a:121).

In the second article, Berkhof enters into dialogue with thinkers such as J. Verkuyl, A.Th. van Leeuwen, and H. Kraemer who see secularization as a bastard child of the Christian faith and thus wrestle with the relation between its positive and negative aspects. While they distinguish these aspects with the words 'secularization' and 'secularism', Berkhof doubts whether this distinction is very helpful in discovering the essential features of the two aspects. He prefers to reserve the term secularization for that phenomenon which in common parlance is understood as the *Ausklammerung*, the marginalization or gradual disappearance of God from this now controllable 'world of men' (c.q. anti-Christian secularization) and that which others praise as 'good secularization', he rather calls: emancipation (c.q. Christian secularization). He admits, however, that he is at a loss concerning the question as to how one can make a clear cut distinction between the two. That which in its rise seems to be pure secularization, often in its development turns out to be salutary emancipation. And that which begins as innocent emancipation, can open the door to estrangement from God. In different periods matters can come to lie differently. And in individual lives



they can also have a different and even opposite effect. Shall we then devoutly passive simply let the developments happen to us? That would be in absolute contradiction to the *militia Christi* to which we are called. Wrong action is pardonable (who in any case has the yardstick to determine that?), but no action is unambiguously: disobedience. Berkhof then says: “I must therefore risk the leap. I must read the Bible with open eyes and ears, stand in the world, and listen to my fellow-believers. And then I hear people speak, who I think have the gift of distinguishing between the spirits. I do not indeed follow them slavishly, but I search in their direction... to unravel the threads of emancipation and secularization” — à la Verkuyl (Berkhof 1981b:186).

## **5.7 Secularization in Berkhof’s *Christelik geloof***

Now the question arises: How is Berkhof’s view regarding secularization reflected in his *opus magnum*, *Christelijk geloof*? In this regard we come across statements, which in some instances reflect aspects of Berkhof’s previous writing on the subject.

### **5.7.1 Secularization as a motive for reflection on the Christian faith**

Berkhof points out that in the history of the church one of the several motives that has led to reflection on the faith is the fact that secularization radically replaced the dominance that Christianity used to have in Europe, with the result that also in the church many have become deeply alienated from biblical and ecclesiastical language. This gap, which is not only but indeed very much a gap between the generations, must be bridged. To the study of the faith, Berkhof states, falls the task to come with the language and the concepts that are needed for an interpretation of the faith that bridges the gap. Thus it becomes primarily a handmaid of the hermeneutical process of the ‘*tra-ditio*’, the transmission of the faith to those who have not understood it in the traditional forms. Indeed, it is only fruitful if it is carried on with an awareness of the mentality and the situation of the people whom it can and must help. The church not only needs the study of the faith for the interpretation of the faith to others, but also to gain a clearer and deeper understanding of what she believes herself, and so to be strengthened in her struggle to live by that faith. For Berkhof, however, the deepest and most comprehensive motive for reflection on the faith is what he calls the ‘non-

self-evidence' of the Christian faith. For this faith by no means arises as with natural or logical necessity from the given reality. It is rather loosely attached to it. As Luther said, "it is a restless thing". This tense situation heightens the need for reflection, as a defence against the suction of doubt (Berkhof 1973a:29; E.T. 1979b: 27, 28; 1985<sup>5</sup>:27).

### 5.7.2 Secularization and the createdness of the world

According to Berkhof, the createdness of this world implies that it and everything in it is structurally good and important. Nothing is evil, nothing is appearance, and nothing is inferior (cf. Gen.1:31; 1 Tim. 4:4). On the other hand, Berkhof maintains, createdness not only means that everything is good, but also and for that reason, that nothing is absolute. Nothing is less than a creature of God, but no more either. The world has no pivot or centre in itself, or in eternal matter, or in natural events, or in a world-soul (Dutch: *zielegrond*), or in an absolute spirit. The world is non-divine (Dutch: *ongoddelijk*), and where in any case it is treated as sacred, it needs to be deified from the perspective of the confession of belief in creation.

Berkhof calls attention to the fact that much has been written about the concomitance of Christian faith and the secularization of the world (e.g. F. Gogarten, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (1953; E.T. *Despair and Hope for Our Time*, 1970), his own *Christus de zin der geschiedenis* (1958; E.T. *Christ the Meaning of History*, 1966), and A. Th. van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*, 1964). According to Berkhof, Israel's struggle with Baalism was against the ancient-religious sacralization of the forces of nature. Because of its rejection of idol worship (Dutch: *godenverering*) and emperor sacrifice (Dutch: *keizeroffer*), the fledgling Christian church found itself involved in a similar struggle, in which its enemies accused it of being 'atheistic'. After centuries of a more or less dormant state, these fundamentals of the Christian faith surfaced again, this time in opposition to the Hitler regime with its glorification of the Teutonic race, its blood and its soil. "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many 'gods' and 'lords' — yet for us there is one God... (1 Cor. 8:5 seq.). The cultural consequences of this belief are clear, too. In contrast to the worship of nature, it makes room for natural science and the mastery of nature; and in contrast to the sacralization of the state and the

societal order, it makes room for democracy, change, and if necessary revolution. By implication, it also excludes Oriental monism, which views the world as the manifestation of a divine cosmic life (Dutch: *een goddelijk al-leven*) (Berkhof 1973a:169,170; E.T. 1979b:160,161; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 162, 163).

### 5.7.3 Secularization and infant baptism

Berkhof states that the bath or washing of regeneration marks the boundary between the church and what is not-church (Dutch: *de gemeente en de niet-gemeente*). In his view the extent of salvation is wider than the circle of those who consciously and personally believe. In support of this view he mentions that the paralytic is healed because of the faith of his friends (Mark 2:5); the servant of the centurion upon the faith of his master (Matt.8:5-13); the kingdom of God is promised to small children (Mark 10:13-16); children are sanctified through the faith of their father or mother (1 Cor.7:14), and are (also for that reason) regarded as sharing in the life of the church (Eph.6:1 seqq.; Col.3:20 seq.; 1 John 2:12); Christians even let themselves be baptized for members of their family who died in unbelief without Paul preventing such baptism (1 Cor.15:29); people submit to this rite of initiation together with their whole family, which experiences the consequences of their change (Acts 10:46; 15:9; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor.1:16) (Berkhof 1973a:372, 373; E.T. 1979b:355; 1985<sup>5</sup>:350).

According to Berkhof, these considerations, while not making it obligatory, do establish the legitimacy of infant baptism (Dutch: *kinderdoop*). Though we may not say that children “ought to be baptized”, we may say that they too may be given the right of incorporation, if they grow up in a community (family, village, institution) in which they are involved in God’s salvation. In every instance it depends, however, on a pastoral decision, not on a general dogmatic principle. In principle, the incorporative rite is possible at any age, either after a profession of faith, or even earlier as a stage on the way-within-the-congregation toward a greater awareness of salvation or conscious faith. What is not possible, however, is the centuries-old practice of baptizing babies (Dutch: *zuiglingendoop*) apart from any meaningful and active faith. Due to *secularization* (my italics), Berkhof maintains, this practice is now rapidly decreasing. Believer’s baptism must be the normal practice. This does not mean, however, that it must be quantitatively dominant. The other incorporation possibilities will prevent

adult baptism from being misunderstood as a subjective confession or as a premium on faith. And this in turn will prevent the other possibilities from being used “out of custom or superstition” apart from the context of faith (Berkhof 1973a:373; E.T. 1979b:355; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 350).

#### 5.7.4 Secularization and the church’s orientation to the world

Berkhof points out that the church is the mediating movement between Christ and the people. As the institute mediates Christ to the congregation, so the congregation in turn mediates Him to the world. In this chain the world comes last, yet it is the goal that gives meaning and purpose to the preceding links. Thus Berkhof emphasizes that being church is not something static: it is a perpetual movement, a *bridge-event*. As it moves along it is itself continually changing. First it is an institution, a totality of activities and agreements. Next it is a community, a totality of personal relationships. Finally it is a totality of influences to the outside, in biblical imagery: salt and leaven. Progressing like that, the visibility diminishes: a community is less visible than an institution; and generally the influences to the outside world are even less clearly marked. To articulate this fact, Berkhof chooses a third term for the church after ‘institution’ and ‘body of Christ’: ‘God’s people’. A people, he states, is a reality, but the bond that unites those who belong to it is much less visible than that of a society or organization. Around the institution a congregation is being gathered, which subsequently is scattered as seed among the peoples of the world as the people of God. Whatever precedes, this final development is the goal. But without all the preceding the latter lacks roots and driving force (Berkhof 1973a: 429, 430; E T 1979b: 410, 411; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 402, 403).

For centuries, Berkhof maintains, a static conception of the church prevailed. The world-outside-the-church was viewed as an otherwise hostile power. A favourite picture was that of the church floating as a Noah’s ark on the deluge waters of the world. What was forgotten was that the ark was to land as soon as possible, so that the earth could be newly populated and cultivated. Since the Enlightenment, however, the ‘evil world’ becomes itself an articulate subject from which the church can evidently learn a great deal. A concerned vanguard of the church — the more than once unjustly criticized Pietists in the lead — saw the growing *secularization* (my italics) as a chal-

lunge to engage in missionary, evangelistic, and social work. In this process, the influence of theology was most of the time no more than indirect or marginal. There was theological reflection by those concerned with missions — the classic example being that of Gustav Warneck's *Evangelische Missionslehre* (1892) — but it did not penetrate to the 'official' theology. Moreover, Berkhof points out, it must be remembered that this orientation or turning to the world had mainly an aggressive-antithetical character and was less aimed at the conversion of souls, than indeed at maintaining and increasing Christian influence (Berkhof 1973a: 430; E T 1979b: 411; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 403).

According to Berkhof, the necessity of re-examining ecclesiology, and for that matter theology as a whole from the perspective of the relationship to the world, only began to take hold mainly through the unceasing appeal of the non-theologian H. Kraemer (cf. his: *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 1938). Though Kraemer's influence was worldwide, *in theologiacis* his call was heeded the most in the Netherlands, where in the first decade after the Second World War the so-called *theology of the apostolate* evolved, partly in a radicalism that went beyond Kraemer. This development was spearheaded by A.A. van Ruler (cf. his *Het apostolaat der kerken en het ontwerp-kerkorde*, 1948, and his *Theologie van het apostolaat*, 1954), radicalized by J.C. Hoekendijk (cf. his *De kerk binnenste buiten*, 1964; E.T. *The Church Inside Out*, 1966), and reflected in the *New Church Order of the Netherlands Reformed Church* (1951) (Berkhof 1973a:430, 431; E T 1979b: 411, 412; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 403).

When, after the War, the church with somewhat of a shock became aware of her great apostolary neglect, a strong reaction to it arose. Many, Berkhof states, were of the opinion, that if in the final analysis the church exists for the sake of the world, then obviously the church must be viewed solely as an instrument for preaching the gospel and for rendering service. This makes her totally and solely a handmaid, having no importance of her own, and with the obligation to minimize herself as much as possible, and to give centre stage to the world to which she has to minister. After all, God's concern is the world, and thus not the church. Stated differently, the apostolate is not one of the many functions of the church, but the church is a function of the apostolate of God in the world. In the World Council of Churches' study report: *The Church for Others* (1967), Berkhof points out, the much cited sentence appears: 'it is the world that must be allowed to provide the agenda for the churches' (p.20). The

items on this agenda include: pluralism, welfare state, use of leisure time, disadvantaged groups, lack of voice, racism, depersonalization, etc. (pp.20-22). ‘The churches today need to discover and to proclaim what is their Lord’s will in relation to what is happening in the world at large’ (p.21). These quotations, Berkhof states, indicate that the apostolary turning to the world in the fifties became a diaconal turning in the sixties. In the seventies this in turn led to a political turning: the church must witness first of all by acting as a political pressure group on behalf of the oppressed and discriminated to renew the societal structures (Berkhof 1973a:432, 433; E T 1979b: 413; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 404, 405).

Berkhof emphasizes that further reflection shows that such a purely apostolary approach to the church is untenable. In order to be the bridge between the covenant-establishing God and the world, she herself must have a firm footing on that first shore. Her first relationship is to her Lord, and this relationship is the inspirational source as well as the content and the criterion for her turning to the world. Berkhof is convinced that if the reflection on the church starts from the perspective of the world, then all this is more or less taken for granted as self-evident presuppositions and as such do not come under discussion at all. If, however, the reflection commences with God, Christ, and the covenant, then we are inexorably directed to the world. In the first approach, Berkhof states, the characteristic significance of the church as a community (and not just as a herald or deacon) does not come out. Also, it would be difficult to find a place in this view for the reality of the antithesis which the church experiences relative to the world. These considerations lead Berkhof to the conclusion that the apostolary directedness of the church is grounded in her communion both with her Lord as well as that of her members among each other (Berkhof 1973a:433; E T 1979b:413,414; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 405).

Berkhof maintains that the church is not apostolary because and to the extent that she sacrifices her being-herself (Dutch: *haar zijn-zelf*) to her being-an-instrument (Dutch: *haar instrument-zijn*); rather it is precisely her being-herself that is to work in the world in an apostolary way. That, he emphasizes, can only be done if her being-in-the-world (Dutch: *haar zijn-in-de-wereld*) is a being-different-from-the-world (Dutch: *een anders-zijn-dan-de-wereld*). Precisely for possessing this character, she is a witness to the world. She can direct herself to the world only by virtue of her be-

ing-different. Yet even her being-different is no goal in itself, but a witness and invitation to the world. Antithesis toward and solidarity with the world do not exclude or compete with each other, rather they belong together as the two sides of the same reality. The church may and must be something that is distinct from the world. Yet she will continually have to ask herself whether that is indeed her character relative to the world, whether the world can still experience her presence as the call of the gospel or whether that presence has deteriorated into a foreign language no one understands. The language, he states, which the church may speak through her existence is the language of the reality of the new community and that of the renewed humanity. In virtue of the covenant, these new realities may become visible in worship and service, in confession of sin and forgiveness, in reconciliation and brotherhood, in hope and endurance, in a new fellowship with the neighbour, but also in the attitude toward work, money, tradition, affluence, etc. This is the way in which the church has her face turned to the world, namely as the ‘first-fruits’ (Dutch: *eersteling*) of God’s purposes, as the experimental garden of a new humanity. Indeed, the ground for the church’s existence is that she lives in the sight of the world as the proof and model of God’s intentions with his creatures. In contemporary theology, which no longer takes place within a *corpus Christianum*, but in a *secularized* (my italics) culture, this is often expressed as the exemplary existence of the church. Since this may give a moralistic impression, or even suggest a haughty attitude, it is preferable to speak of *Pro-existentz* (existence for the sake of) (Berkhof 1973a:433-435; E.T. 1979b:414-416; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 405-407).

That the church is the ‘first-fruits’, Berkhof states, should not be misconstrued as if it were a silent existence flourishing in the midst of a spectator world. That would clash with the nature of this existence. Indeed, by virtue of the indwelling of the Spirit in this new community the members are liberated from themselves and directed to the Lord, to each other, to the neighbour, and to the world. It belongs precisely to the essence of this community to reach out in word and deed to the world, ministering to and drawing people. Her being-new involves her being-ready-to-serve, and her being-available and being-willing to help. It belongs to her very essence to be available for the worldwide plans of her Lord. That can express itself in all sorts of ways and can come from the church as institute, from Christian organizations or action groups, and in activities of single individuals in intercessory prayer, witness,

mercy ministry, and prophecy (Berkhof 1973a:435-437; E T 1979b:416-418; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 407-409).

All this, Berkhof points out, could give the wrong impression, as if in the relation of church and world only the church is rich and handing out while the world is only passive and poor. In reality things are not that simple. It is complicated by *resistance* and *limits*. Berkhof distinguishes three of these: (1) the enmity of the world, (2) the wisdom in the world, and (3) the disobedience of the church. It is especially in the second and third, however, that Berkhof particularly mentions *the role and influence of secularization* (my italics). With regard to (2) the wisdom in the world, Berkhof emphasizes: the Spirit instructs and liberates the world through the outreach of the church, but He also instructs and liberates the church through its contact with world. There is a two-way movement and interaction. To the church is revealed the world's salvation. But there is a great deal of other truth and wisdom which come to light elsewhere and await the time that they will be brought to bear upon the world's salvation, even as salvation awaits the moment that it will permeate and express itself in that truth and wisdom. What God has to say to us in Christ is continually receiving fresh forms as it merges with the wisdom which is discovered here and there in the world. As a rule the church is not the first to discover this wisdom at the right time, either because of her disobedience or shortsightedness, or because, even positively, God blesses his entire world with the wisdom it needs for its continuing existence. That makes the church humble. Salvation has been entrusted to her, but she does not have the monopoly of wisdom. What she does have, is the calling to bring that wisdom, wherever she meets it, in contact with Christ and thus to show it its place and purpose. This implies that in her outreach to the world the church should not only speak, but also listen; and when she speaks, she does so because she has listened first. In the dialogue with the world she is not the only one who may speak, though she may say the final word (Berkhof 1973a:438, 439; E T 1979b:419, 420; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 410, 411).

But it is in the small print attached to this paragraph that Berkhof brings home the point which he wants to make when he states: the progress of revelation in the Bible is also determined by the wisdom of Egypt, Babel, Persia, and Greece. The theological development throughout the centuries is unthinkable without Plato and Aristotle, and later without Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. The natural sciences and the hu-



manities have helped us to better understand the Bible. And strange as it may seem, it has been *the spirit of secularization* (my italics)<sup>7</sup> that has stood up against the witch-hunt-mania of a myopic Christendom; that has insisted on toleration, fought injustice, exploitation, and discrimination, and battled for freedom, equality, and brotherhood in a long struggle which eventually led to the emergence of a democratic system for which Christians and non-Christians alike are grateful. The problem is complicated by the fact that it is precisely evangelical values which in this way have triumphed over the traditional Christendom. But this, Berkhof states, does not change the fact that the world has its own input in the dialogue with the church (Berkhof 1973a:440; E T 1979b: 420; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 411).

Berkhof goes on to point out that the enmity of the world and the wisdom in the world are seldom without the marring admixture of the culpable tardiness of the church. The church itself continually evokes hostility because the world is often deeply disappointed by the church's own betrayal of the ideals which she herself has given to the world. That the church can learn so much from the world is all too often due to her refusal to see her priestly and prophetic task in relation to the needs and guilt all around her. In two ways, Berkhof maintains, the church walks away from her calling: through churchism (Dutch: *verkerkelijking*) and through worldliness (Dutch: *verwereldlijking*). She does this through churchism when she turns in upon herself as a bulwark in an evil world or, less aggressively, as an introverted, self-sufficient group, which is content with her own rites, language, and relationships. She does this through worldliness by becoming as much as possible assimilated and conformed to the world. In either case, Berkhof points out, she does essentially the same thing: she avoids the clash and the offence. The second form, he states, is the one of open betrayal — normally so evident that sooner or later the faithful will rebel against it. The first form is much more concealed. It may look very pious and respectable, because the church is concentrating on her own nature, which is the very source of the apostolate. But here the temptation is also the strongest and the corruption of the best becomes the worst. If the church forgets her calling to be God's experimental garden, she becomes a caricature of the Spirit's purposes with her. This sacralization may create the impression that it enables the church to escape *the opposite threat of seculari-*

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<sup>7</sup> In the fifth edition of his *Christelijk Geloof* 'the spirit of secularization' is changed to 'the spirit of the Enlightenment'. Essentially this does not involve a radical change of meaning, since the Enlightenment breathed the spirit of secularization.

*zation* (my italics). Precisely in this way she falls victim to it, because sacralization, put in sociological terms, is nothing else than the most obvious form of institutional self-preservation. In both cases the church itself becomes a part of the world. Then the ‘flesh’ is mightier than the Spirit. What God has in mind with the church is still far from realized. We are no further than a small beginning. But the struggle continues and the participants know that what is at issue here is the meaning of all of existence and, furthermore, that the continuance of the struggle is a sign of the victory which the Spirit will someday achieve over our recalcitrance (Berkhof 1973a:440, 441; E T 1979b:421, 422; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 412, 413).

### **5.7.5 Secularization and the renewal of the world**

To apply the concept of renewal, or sanctification, to the ‘world’ (which he defines as the totality of the contexts and structures within which human existence takes place) is not something new, according to Berkhof, only unusual (Berkhof 1973a:520; 530; E T 1979b:499, 508; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 487, 496). Since the Christian faith is person-oriented, concentrating on the conversion and renewal of people, and since faith is such a personal (though not personalistic) matter, it could be defended that faith has nothing to do with the world. Yet that, Berkhof emphasizes, is a fatal mistake. In his view, the God who created man, created him as a human-being-in-the-world, and therefore He also created the world. The important thing is man, but precisely for that reason the world is important as well. Man and world are the two sides of *one* reality. They are not reducible to each other; they can only define each other. For that reason the Christian conceptions of creation, of renewal, and of consummation are bound to remain abstract, unless the world is included in the consideration. Particularly the doctrine of renewal has suffered from this neglect. On the one hand, it is prone to treat of man detached from his world, thus rendering him unreal, a creature not of real flesh and blood; on the other hand, by its silence about the world, it suggests that this world is irrelevant for the faith, either because it is capable of saving itself, or because it is unsaveably lost. Neither can be true. If it is God’s desire to renew man, it must also be His desire to renew the world. Else He would renew only half a man (Berkhof 1973a:520, 521; E T 1979b:499, 500; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 487, 488).

In the Bible, Berkhof maintains, the renewal of the world is a distinct theme: in the Pentateuchal laws and Israel's theocracy based on it; in the prophetic appeals and judgements concerning social and international problems; in Jesus' words and deeds in which He condemns the rich and defends the cause of the poor; in Paul's thoughts on Christ's lordship over the powers; in the admonitions in the epistles on the relationship of Jews and Greeks, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, citizens and government, master and slave, husband and wife, parents and children. It is really inexplicable, Berkhof states, that this bearing which the gospel has upon the structures of society has found no echo in the study of the faith (Berkhof 1973a: 521; E.T. 1979:500; 1985<sup>5</sup>:488). For here we find a first design of a Christian social ethic, aiming at the permeation and transformation by Christian love of the current standards for conduct. Hence one might have expected that in a more favourable political climate these thoughts would have shown great germinative potential. In the history of the church that expectation came only very partially true. Christian Europe was for at least a thousand years barren soil in which the seeds of a vision of a world renewed could not germinate. To ascertain how and to what extent the theme 'world' was taken up in theology, Berkhof states, one needs to make a leap from the Reformation to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the earliest. For *only the arrival of secularization* (my italics), as the falling apart of the *corpus Christianum*, led to the vision of the world as a power needing anew the confrontation with the gospel (Berkhof 1973a:524-526; E.T. 1979:503, 505; 1985<sup>5</sup>:491, 493).

The awareness that not only man but also the world can and must be renewed becomes alive again whenever upheavals in society shock the church into the recognition of this aspect of the message entrusted to her. Such an admonition should not be necessary for the church, since it is already contained in her message itself. Historically, however, things have seldom been like that. It so happens, that God instructs the church as much by what happens in the world as vice versa. Worse, the church has often too late or insufficiently taken the lesson to heart. It took the church a century and a half to learn the lesson of the French Revolution. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution has for a long time already clamoured for more and further-reaching structural changes, changes which the churches are willing to face only reluctantly or hesitantly — with the exception of some prophetic visionaries. To this has been added the growing awareness of the gap between the developed and the underdeveloped coun-

tries. So far the rich countries hardly appreciate what it takes to narrow this gap. As a consequence, Berkhof emphasizes, the question concerning the world and its renewal can no longer be avoided in the study of the faith —not because theology would have an obligation to deal with pressing problems, but very much because these problems remind her of a dimension of the faith which has too long been neglected (Berkhof 1973a:521, 522; E T 1979b:500; 1985<sup>5</sup>:488).

In all fairness, Berkhof points out, Christian social ethics has, at least in recent decades, displayed a great interest in societal structures and their change. That constitutes an appeal to the church and the believer as concerns their *act*-ual responsibility. The outlook of dogmatics is different; it inquires as to the ground and possibility of such acting insofar as these are grounded in God's acts, His promises and faithfulness. Without such an inquiry Christian ethics remains hanging in mid-air. This raises the question: is there a promise that the Spirit who renews people will similarly renew the world? In principle, Berkhof points out, that question has already been answered in the affirmative: the Spirit does not do half a job. On further reflection, however, great difficulties arise. People can believe, repent, mend their ways, and try to lead a new life. Structures cannot do that. That consideration has led, and still leads, many Christians to think that the change and the renewal of the world can come about only as the work of renewed people. That is why this change is not dealt with in dogmatics but only under ethics. That, according to Berkhof, is an unwarranted separation. If renewed man is driven to work for the renewal of structures, this is not a personal hobby, but a mandate of the Spirit. The Spirit, however, is not only working through believers in His structure-renewing work. For it is evident that that is to a large extent the work of people other than believers. The renewal of the world is thus not a direct fruit of the renewal of people, but it follows its own ways. Whether those ways are ways of the Spirit can neither be affirmed nor denied beforehand (Berkhof 1973a:522; E T 1979b:500, 501; 1985<sup>5</sup>:488,489).

Berkhof claims that the renewing work of the Spirit in the world exhibits an analogy to his work in man. Analogy, however, denotes similarity and difference. Since he described man's renewal with concepts like sanctification, freedom, love, dying and rising again, struggle and progress, he assumes that if the Spirit works in the *world*, there are bound to be analogies of these concepts. For the world is the insti-

tutional manifestation and extension of what man himself is. Structures, too, can be sanctified by God, i.e. be made serviceable. They can promote or obstruct freedom and love. Within the structures, too, the battle rages between egotism and love. In fact precisely here the concepts of proceeding (Dutch: *voortgang*) and even of progress (Dutch: *voortuitgang*) are central (Berkhof 1973a:522; E. T. 1979b:501; 1985<sup>5</sup>:489).

Sanctification, as the manner in which God's holy love motivates man's thinking and acting, is not applicable to the societal and other structures of the world, for structures cannot be motivated. They channel and combine human activities. For that reason they can hamper or help the sanctifying of these activities: hamper by pushing aside or snagging the sanctifying forces; help by providing effective channels for sanctified activities, and also by compelling people, who in themselves are slow or disinclined to beneficence, to do good deeds, for from a Christian point of view, the effect is just as important as the motive. God not only desires to live in the heart, but also in the world. He desires societal forms that provide the best possible channels for the forces of His holy love, and which counteract as much as possible the forces of lethargy, egotism, and indifference to Him and the neighbour (Berkhof 1973a:528, 529; E. T. 1979b:507; 1985<sup>5</sup>:494, 495).

For Berkhof *sanctified structures* include forms of government, legislation, deliberation, written and unwritten rules for dealing with one another; relationships of the sexes and the generations, employers and employees, the well-to-do and the poor, associations and countries, etc., which as much as possible allow the transmission of or at least provide the room for the purposes of God's holy love. The emphasis on *holy love*, Berkhof points out, is a reminder that this sanctification is no more in harmony with our natural aspirations than personal sanctification. Hereby, a normless permissive-pluralistic society (if such were possible) as well as a theocratic dictatorship is excluded (Berkhof 1973a:529; E. T. 1979b:507; 1985<sup>5</sup>:495).

Berkhof distinguishes a threefold relationship of the Spirit to the structures in His renewing work of these societal forms:

(a) The Spirit (God-himself-in-action in the world) also works in the creation and preservation of the world. Man is not forsaken of God. Life would then be absolute hell. Everywhere in the world, in living memory, the structures in which they live,

have forced people to work together in spite of their egotism and lethargy, and so in their actions to love their neighbour as themselves. Man's egotism has regularly stymied these structures, but the reverse, Berkhof states, is equally true. People create somewhat sanctified structures, and those structures force people to conduct themselves in a somewhat sanctified manner.

(b) Linking up with and deepening, correcting, and extending that work, the Spirit works through sanctified people as instruments of love. Their interest is not in what is socially useful and possible, but foremostly what is normative and see their task as that of enabling the structures to accomplish more deeds of love and, wherever possible (but how impossible that often is!), of transforming them so that they allow more scope and greater effectiveness to these deeds.

(c). The socio-critical notions thus introduced by the Spirit can, in conjunction with (a), convince many who, without this special operation of the Spirit, consider themselves responsible for the preservation and betterment of the world. Just as believers, such people can become bearers of this objective sanctifying work of the Spirit. Conversely, Berkhof points out, believers can be delinquent in the area of structural sanctification, because their mentality and situation keep their eyes closed to specific, often pressing problem areas (Berkhof 1973a:529, 530; E. T. 1979b:507, 508; 1985<sup>5</sup>:495, 496).

The manner in which the structures of preservation are transformed in the covenantal fellowship and in sanctification can be learned, Berkhof points out, especially from the Old Testament, more particularly from the legislation, the cult, the feasts, and the kingship. In the New Testament, Paul's doctrine of the powers (*exousiai, stoicheia*) is conspicuous (cf. The "Powers" and secularization above—JPG). There is a great difference of opinion as to how the Spirit's relationship to the structures must be thought of. In contrast to Van Ruler's protological approach to this problem (in the work of 'Christianization' the Spirit primarily reaches backward, restoring the order of creation by means of a theocracy) and Moltmann's eschatological approach (the Spirit prepares the way toward the future and creates an 'exodus-church' which tries to transcend the established order in the direction of that future), Berkhof emphasizes that his approach is Christological-Pneumatological. It starts neither at the beginning nor at the end, but in the 'middle', after the analogy of personal sanctification (Berkhof 1973a:531; E T 1979b:509; 1985<sup>5</sup>:497).

Berkhof therefore reiterates his conclusion that the renewal of the world is not a direct fruit of the renewal of people, but follows its own ways. He adds however: yet these, too, are ways of the Spirit. In support of this he states: Christ as the head of the church has also been made the head of all mankind. Conformity to His image is not only intended for individuals, but for mankind in its totality and thus also for the mode of its communal life. Therefore the Spirit also directs himself to that second part. These, however, are statements of faith and as such are unverifiable by general experience. Yet they are in a way more verifiable experientially than other statements of faith. For the gospel has entered the world and in certain parts it has for centuries had the opportunity to influence cultures and structures. If there is indeed something like a sanctification of societal structures, it should be possible to illustrate that from the difference between those areas and the rest of the world. Lack of a clear difference, Berkhof admits, would make his argument highly doubtful. A clear difference on the other hand would not render his faith statement 'proven', if that difference could also be explained in other ways. Yet, in that case there is no contradiction between the faith statement and historical reality (Berkhof 1973a:530, 531; E. T. 1979b: 508-510; 1985<sup>5</sup>:496, 497).<sup>8</sup>

In Berkhof's opinion, there can be no doubt that since Christianity (after Constantine) became the co-bearer of the responsibility for the structures of society, Europe<sup>9</sup> in its thirteen hundred years of cultural history increasingly deviated from the 'general human pattern' (à la Jan Romein). It was a process which only started gradually, for not all deviations came at once, rather through a uniformly accelerated movement. Berkhof mentions three striking elements basic to this deviation-process: the care for the disadvantaged (the sick and the poor); the desacralization of the power of the state and the established order; and the de-deification of nature. A new view of man emerged. Service, humility, and self-denial became dominant values. Labour and responsibility were emphasized. The principial equality of all men, care for the individual, and the notion of social justice took hold. Room was made for nature research and an increasingly more drastic nature control. All this took place in the context of awareness that mankind goes through a history in which it is on its way to a better future which is at once promise and mandate. The notions of love, matter-of-factness (Dutch: *verzakelijking*), and a goal-oriented history made this culture dynamic, eman-

<sup>8</sup> In the fifth edition of *Christelijk Geloof* (1985<sup>5</sup>) Berkhof elided this line of reasoning.

<sup>9</sup> Structurally and culturally North America also belongs to Europe, according to Berkhof.

cupative, and expansive, aiming at the development of all of life and the humanization of man's existence. It has had a strong missionary impact on other parts of the world. The nations outside the European-American cultural sphere began to adopt the same rules, so that they may enjoy the same fruits of freedom, equality, and prosperity. Thus surprising indigenous contextualizations of the socio-political dimensions of the gospel began to emerge in Africa and Latin America. While non-Christian thinkers prefer to find the real explanation for this enigmatic deviation from the universal human pattern in Greco-Roman culture (its science, laws, and Stoic humanitarian ideals) or, after the Renaissance, in the rise of physics and technology, and *no less in secularization* (my italics), Berkhof is convinced that the Christian ferment has had a decisive role in the origin and evolution of the rules and goals of European-American society. Indeed, its characteristics of individualization, humanization, socialization, matter-of-factness, and orientation to the future are to be understood primarily as the penetration of the gospel. After Old Testament Israel, we have here, he states, the first great example of structural sanctification — an example which in Africa and Latin America has to such an extent given centre stage to the questions of structure that in comparison the western churches have lost their guiding function. In the meantime, Berkhof points out, this process has in an accelerated form become more and more secularized and disconnected from its Christian roots. Berkhof is fully aware, of course, that his forms of structural sanctification are not to be found in the Bible. For him, however, they are situational applications of the contents of the Bible. Not only in the Old Testament, but also and precisely in the New Testament the tenor of the history of salvation c.q. the universal power of the exalted Christ is depicted in such supernatural terms that the expectations evoked there and the later applications do not stand in strange juxtaposition. In fact, the passage on the salt of the earth (Matt.5:13) and the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Matt.13:31-33) suggest an extent and penetration of the Gospel far beyond the limits of the circle of believers (Berkhof 1973a:531-533; E.T. 1979b:510-511; 1985<sup>5</sup>:497-498).

The history of the sanctification of community structures, as this first happened in Europe and later extended to America and the greater part of the world, and still occurs, is a history of struggle and progress. What took place in and *via* Europe was a progressive correction and transformation of relationships, giving to ever more groups and classes the opportunity to realize steadily more of the potential of their



personal and social existence. A society was built which, though far from perfect, offers comparatively the best chances for freedom from fear, hunger, poverty, and underdevelopment. The most remarkable fruits in this everywhere accelerated process are only from recent times, not older than the French Revolution. That could give the impression, Berkhof states, *that what he calls the sanctification of the structures is much rather a product of secularization than of the Christian faith* (my italics). But, he emphasizes, the fertilization of the soil and the growth of the tree have been decisive factors; and these required a process of centuries. Indeed, the postulates of our present culture are of Christian origin. But can this progress be regarded as an analogy of personal sanctification? Berkhof is convinced that this is the case, because we see here a widespread application of the ideas of service, love of the neighbour, the spirit of sacrifice, and responsibility. These are accompanied by an element no less recognized and acknowledged by the Christian faith: the permanent dissatisfaction with what has been achieved, the restless striving toward improvement, the 'bad conscience' which may well be the most striking Christian legacy which distinguishes Western culture from others (Berkhof 1973a:533-535; E.T.1979b:512-513; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 498-500).

There is thus progress, Berkhof states, and that will continue in Europe and outside it, even if Christianity would be no more than a moderate impetus in this process. The latter is a likely possibility, for the Christian faith convinces a minority, while structural sanctification convinces people worldwide. Many regard it as a result or even the highest achievement of the evolutionary process which is at work within the human race. But having said this, Berkhof also points emphatically to the limits of progress. These, he states, are not accidental historical limits, but such as are inherent in the concept of progress. Firstly, while the concept of progress is applicable to the physical sciences, technology, jurisprudence, and social relationships, it is not applicable to art, the human ethos, love, empathy, and religion because in these areas, according to Berkhof, we have not 'come further' than, for example, the Greeks or even the primitive peoples. Secondly, the concept is also not applicable to the great powers that demarcate the provisionality of existence: illness, sorrow, and death. Structural progress can make it more bearable, or push it back, or put it off, but cannot abolish it. Due to the two limits mentioned above one cannot speak of progress in the sense of happiness, even though all the striving for progress is aimed at greater human happi-

ness. Thirdly, sin limits progress. If within the renewed structures man remains unrenewed, these structures can fortunately restrain the effects of his sin. On the other hand, the structural renewal can also be hampered by his sin. All too often the wrongs of the past persist, only with new methods or other people. Much belief in progress leads to great disillusionment, because one has the feeling that only the signs have been altered while everything else remains the same. Here something of the battle between Spirit and 'flesh' becomes apparent in the area of structures. It is a battle in which Christians will have to be involved realistically and persistently, knowing that while they are unable to expel sin, they may nevertheless participate in the plan of God. For all stifled progress brings fresh tensions and leads to explosions which are to be regarded as divine judgements evoked by us and which can only be reversed or mitigated by acts of self-sacrificial service. In this sense personal sanctification also entails a challenge to structural sanctification (Berkhof 1973a:535, 536; E.T. 1979b:-513, 514; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 500, 501).

According to Berkhof, the emancipation process that induces progress not only rests on and makes headway through struggle, but also elicits its own unique kind of struggle. Structural sanctification without personal sanctification has a double effect on man: uplifting and uprooting (Dutch: *ontwikkeland en ontwortelend*). The man who is being emancipated is the man who was created in the image of God. Yet, at the same time he is the man who refuses to obey the calling inherent in that creation, because he wants to be autonomous. Thus, despite and due to the structural renewals, a world is being built which has no structural room for the priority of God, conversion, and salvation. While in certain times and situations this may not seem to matter either ecclesiastically or culturally, sooner or later this second basic decision upon which our culture is built (that of autonomy) makes itself clearly and disturbingly felt (beside the Christian decision of renewal): in individual and collective consumerist egotism; in the brutal manner in which man acts not as the manager but as the master of creation; in the loss of and the failure to give meaning to existence, which in turn leads to boredom and so to the search for powers that claim man for their ideology and purpose. The Christian churches could already discern the alienation attending all this from the growing de-churchification (Dutch: *ontkerkelijking*), and even from their own impotence to get the vertical dimension of existence across to modern man (Berkhof 1973a:536; E. T. 1979b:514; 1985<sup>5</sup>:501).

In Berkhof's view, *sanctification and secularization progress together* (my italics). With his sanctification of society the Spirit evokes an ambiguous and internally contradictory world, a society which cuts down the gospel tree from which it is picking the fruits. That was bound to happen, for the Spirit who kindles the struggle in the believer (as 'at once saint and sinner'), does the same in culture. The Christian community cannot possibly reject that culture; it is flesh of her flesh. But she cannot feel at home in it either. Despite her real or apparent freedom in it, she anticipates with trepidation the final outcome of this steadily accelerated emancipation movement (Dutch: *eenparig versnelde emancipatie-beweging*). The initial resistance of many Christians to progress in humanity and emancipation (which on further reflection they should have welcomed, and which they or their children indeed eventually did) was premature and misdirected. The eventual outcome, however, is that the way which as such is right brings un-renewed man further estrangement from God and from himself; at the same time it brings the Christian community suffering and the struggle against apostasy, indifference, and isolation. The progress initiated by the Spirit leads to a sifting of the spirits, and is apparently not only liberating but just as much disclosing and enslaving in its effects (Berkhof 1973a:536, 537; E. T. 1979b:514, 515; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 501, 502).<sup>10</sup>

According to Berkhof, intensification is essential for a culture imbued by the Spirit with a sense of history, future, and purposefulness. Through science and technology this drive for progress has become deeply ingrained in the infrastructure of our world. We find ourselves caught up with our whole human existence in an increasingly stronger and swifter current, and the ambiguous character of our culture confronts us with the big question: what will this escalation lead to? If to 'a brave new

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<sup>10</sup> In the fine print Berkhof emphasizes that a theological concept of progress will have to go with a theological concept of secularization. Such a concept, he states, was developed by F. Gogarten in his *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit. Die Säkularisierung als theologische Problem* (1953; E.T. *Despair and Hope for Our Time*, 1970), where he views secularization especially as the fruit of man's coming of age and the depersonalization (Dutch: *verzakelijking*) of life as a result of Christ's coming. Later in his posthumous *Die Frage nach Gott* (1968) Gogarten emphasized much more the negative tendency in secularization — without God autonomous man falls back into a new slavery. While A.Th. van Leeuwen updated Gogarten's earlier line of thinking with many historical illustrations in his *Christianity in World History* (1964), the greatest influence came from D. Bonhoeffer's *Widerstand und Ergebung* (posthumously 1951; E.T. *Letters and Papers from Prison*), in which at first sight an autonomous and mature life (*etsi Deus non daretur*) seems to be greeted as a liberation, but is nevertheless seen as a life in which God can only be present as One who is powerless and rejected (letter of July 16, 1944). According to Berkhof, the deepest thinking regarding the Christian ferment *and* on the godlessness of European culture, however, comes from Nietzsche whose analysis and statement of the issue at hand may be regarded as a pendant to the biblical, and which has still not been assimilated by theology (Berkhof 1973a:539; E.T. 1979b:517; 1985<sup>5</sup>:503, 504).

world', a third world war unleashed by the robbed and deprived countries, a nuclear war between ideological blocks, a world dictatorship based on an anti-Christian ideology, that would be the stranding (Dutch: *verzanding*) or the direct downfall of the experiment called Europe. But, Berkhof states, it is also imaginable that the human race, shocked by these perspectives, will wrestle itself free from these alienating forces and look for renewal by going back to the evangelical root of its culture. This calls to mind the double image of the future of the earth in the biblical expectation of the future: a universal and voluntary acceptance of the evangelical structural rules as the only hope of saving a viable human existence ('a thousand-year kingdom'), or an anti-Christian world dictatorship — both eliciting and delimiting each other — to eventually make room for the total rule of God. Berkhof emphasizes that this double image of the future cannot be dismissed as apocalyptic and mythological. It is integral to the Christian faith, which knows both of the human decision that was made in the execution of Jesus and of the divine decision that was made in His resurrection. In our history, Berkhof maintains, this double decision spreads, expands, and intensifies. Thus, our history leads to and ends in a deadlock of two powers, which evoke, delimit, and cannot conquer each other (Berkhof 1973a:537; E.T.1979b: 515, 516; 1985<sup>5</sup>:502).

In conclusion, Berkhof points out that the Spirit of Christ endeavours to put His stamp on our reality in two ways: in personal sanctification He seeks to conform us to the image of Christ through death and resurrection; in structural sanctification He offers a paradigm and prophecy of the world as God intends it in Christ. In both cases, however, it turns out that a limit is set to this work of renewal. As regards personal sanctification, in this life we get no further than a small beginning of obedience; and structural sanctification elicits in unredeemed man precisely the opposite of the Spirit's intention, with the result that Christ not only celebrates an incidental and provisional resurrection in the sanctification of the world, but, worse still, is continually crucified afresh in our world *in the secularization evoked by that sanctification* (my italics). However, as believers in God, in Christ, in the Spirit, Berkhof states, we believe that the renewal is capable of overcoming this double boundary. The boundary of death, our personal death, is made by the Spirit into a ferment in the renewal process. As regards the world, however, the boundary of the renewal does not consist in a dying off and a dying out of the human race, but in an intensification that leads to the deadlock of an intensified and insuperable ambivalence of Spirit-power and counter-

power, which is evoked by the decisive mystery of history: Jesus crucified *and* risen. In this way and to that boundary Jesus fate is being reflected worldwide in the fate of the world (Berkhof 1973a:540; E.T. 1979b:518; 1985<sup>5</sup>:504, 505).

Can this dialectic ever be overcome? Berkhof is convinced that if we believe that Jesus' resurrection abolished His crucifixion and death, then we believe that, analogically, that is also going to happen worldwide in history. The world, he states, is heading for *the crisis of a stalemate between its two trends: sanctification and secularization* (my italics). Only God is able to deliver the world from this crisis by causing that of which He is capable to triumph in this dilemma. By raising Christ, He caused the resurrection power that was in Christ to triumph. God raised precisely Him to justify Him on account of the work the Son had accomplished in the name of the Father. The leap was at once a consequence and a crowning reward. By way of analogy, Berkhof states, the future of the world may be conceived as a leap-event from God's side to free the forces which His Spirit is activating in the world. The leap does not break the continuity, it saves it. Neither the world nor the work of the Spirit can give that continuity. A break, a discontinuity is necessary, but it serves and stands in the framework of the continuity. Here, Berkhof points out, just as in man's personal future expectation, we come up against the concept of judgement, in which continuity and discontinuity coincide. In the judgement (Greek: *κρισις*, literally division) the great sifting and purification takes place. It expresses the connection with history as well as the divine turn toward the future. In the judgement the deformed and derailed world is judged, straightened out, in such a way that all foreign elements are cast off and God's holy love begins to permeate all relationships. God not only becomes all in all (persons), but also all in everything (structures). All that is loveless and self-sufficient will be put down and what is helpless and despised will be exalted. Through and out of this judgement the world arises renewed as an 'earth in which righteousness dwells.' We live *after* the provisional leap in Christ's resurrection, but *before* the definitive leap of our world that is guaranteed in it (Berkhof 1973a:540, 541; E. T. 1979b:518, 519; 1985<sup>5</sup>:505, 506).

Can we co-operate in the coming of the Kingdom? Berkhof's answer is that while that which the Spirit works in us cannot redeem the world from its ambivalence, through that work we can and do heighten the ambivalence and hasten the great po-

larization in the ripening of wheat and weeds. In that sense, he states, we are directly co-workers in the coming of the Kingdom. But that is also what those people are, who, unwittingly and unwillingly, use the building blocks of sanctification for the construction of an autonomous culture in which there is no room for Christ. Thus the concept of co-operation is also ambivalent. Decisive much rather is the concept of choice. The important thing is that we help the ripening of that which in the great harvest can be harvested as wheat (Berkhof 1973a:541; E.T. 1979b:519; 1985<sup>5</sup>:506).

### 5.7.6 Secularization and the final judgement

In the last chapter of his *opus magnum* entitled “All Things New”, Berkhof states that the gap, which separates our world from the world to come, can only be bridged by a leap from God’s side. This sets a limit to our contemplation of the future. For Christian thought the future is a limiting concept. Failure to respect this limit leads to fantastic or simply shortsighted pronouncements of idle speculation concerning the future. Berkhof thus rejects a number of approaches to the future: *fundamentalism* (which combines and harmonizes biblical texts and presents the result as direct information); *evolutionism* (which expects a golden age as the outcome of immanent developments); *futurism* (which does the same, but in a much shorter time, viewing the future in terms of an extrapolation from technological developments); and *existentialism* (which considers it enough to know the meaning of Christ and the Spirit for us here and now). Berkhof himself follows the line of a Christological-Pneumatological extrapolation combined with a leap and which, he states, is pointedly and succinctly formulated in the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. and A. 58: “What comfort do you derive from the article of ‘life everlasting’? That, since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, after this life I shall possess perfect bliss” (Berkhof 1973a:543, 546; E.T. 1979b:521, 524; 1985<sup>5</sup>:509, 512).

Due to its absolutely unusual character, one may call the future *a central limiting concept*. We still live on this side of the gap that separates us from the great future, yet we live here from realities pointing to the future on the other side of the gap. Relative to that future, Berkhof states, these realities are *pro-visional*. At least, they open up a dim vista of that future. Furthermore, Berkhof emphasizes that the future involves the two complementary realities of: Christ (Jesus), who, in the way of obedi-

ence unto death, by virtue of the leap of resurrection-through-raising (Dutch: *de sprong van opstanding-door-opwekking*) reached the goal God has in mind for humanity — a mode of existence which is unimaginable to us; and the Spirit who, as a new leap-event, becomes available from Christ and is the great pioneer of that future, because everywhere in the world He orients people to Christ's new sonship. Both Christ and the Spirit find their ultimate justification in the future, and both are anticipations of that future. Along the narrow track which together they constitute and which is still everywhere in the world marked by provisionality and guilt, they both give a taste of the powers of the life to come: reconciliation, love, fellowship (Dutch: *gemeenschap*), justice, peace, happiness, wholeness. We, who follow that track, look ahead as those *not-knowing* and *yet-knowing* (cf. 1 John 3:2) (Berkhof 1973a:543, 544; E. T. 1979b:521; 1985<sup>5</sup>:509,510).

Since it is Berkhof's view that eschatology can only be in the form of an extrapolation from experiences of God which we acquire in our world and history, statements about the future can only be made in the language of the image (symbolic language). The imagery is derived from this world which we know, but, he states, it reaches beyond it, thus joining the *knowing* and the *not-yet-knowing*, continuity and discontinuity. While we speak of the future as a wedding, a meal, a feast, a city with streets of gold, we of course know very well that the future will be something quite different and much more. But, on account of Christ and the Spirit, we dare to say that the future must lie in that direction and will evoke similar feelings of happiness and ecstasy. The imagery thus magnifies infinitely what is uplifting and gladdening in this world and absolutely expels other elements, such as sorrow, confusion, and sin, which are just as much part of our world. In this context, Berkhof mentions that the image of the 're-turn' of Christ (*parousia* simply means coming) denotes that someday Christ will be publicly, definitively, triumphantly, revealed in our experiential world as its secret and foundation. That revelation will not happen as the unfolding of immanent forces, but as a new encounter-event (Dutch: *ontmoetingsgebeuren*), in which mankind will on its way meet the Son and, in Him, the Father as its liberators. In a combination of continuity and leap, Christ and the Spirit strive toward that future, with the church as the community which knows of that future, not yet possessing it, but destined for it (Berkhof 1973a:544, 547; E.T. 1979b:522, 525; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 510, 513).

In view of the work of Christ and the Spirit in preparing individuals as well as mankind as a whole for the leap to come, what can we expect at and beyond that boundary? Due to the duality of the two totally different boundaries — for individuals the boundary of death, for mankind the boundary of a world ending in a deadlock — many, thinking entirely in terms of mankind, time, and history, prefer to conceive of the future mainly or exclusively as a new and perfect society toward which human history is headed. In such a conception, Berkhof points out, no place is left for the perfection of billions of human lives that came to an end before the advent of this new age of salvation. Considering the purport of the whole of redemptive revelation and in particular Jesus' resurrection as promise and guarantee to us, this is an unacceptable reduction of the expectation. The same applies, he states, if redemption of the individual is abstracted from the salvation of society. No one is liberated, if all are not liberated.<sup>11</sup> For the Christian faith, the individual person, mankind, and the whole of society constitute an indivisible unity. Thus the expectation of their renewal is also indivisible (Berkhof 1973a:547, 548; E. T. 1979b:525; 1985<sup>5</sup>:513).

The problem of the duality, however, remains, for long before mankind crosses the boundary to its future, the great majority of people will have crossed the death line. This poses the question whether their personal consummation will then have to wait till the time of the consummation of the world. The response was the development of the doctrine, or rather the variant doctrines, of the so-called intermediate state, nurtured by the centuries-long concentration on the salvation of the individual soul and the age-old belief in the distinction between a mortal body and an immortal soul. The idea was that the soul of the believer at death ascends into the presence of God (heaven), eternally 'to rejoice there before the throne'. The consummation of mankind, which would give a new bodily existence as well, could, according to Berkhof, hardly add anything essential to the salvation already received. This way of thinking, he points out, is entirely in terms of an individual soul and of space (earth-heaven). Not the process of history is redeemed, but man is redeemed out of it, and the question how God will achieve His purpose for the world is thereby reduced to insignificance. For Berkhof this concept is also untenable (Berkhof 1973a:548; E. T. 1979b:525, 526; 1985<sup>5</sup>:513, 514).

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<sup>11</sup> The last two sentences are from the revised 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Christelijk geloof*.



Others, to contrast salvation after death as the lesser with the consummation of mankind as the greater, think of the intermediate state as a time of waiting, or of purification, or even as a sleep in which the consciousness of time is suspended. Berkhof's criticism of these conceptions is that while they can all appeal to biblical ideas, they are mutually exclusive. Also, they start from the common conviction that life on the other side of the death line proceeds similarly within time as it does here. Existence on the other side is thus entirely conceived of as a continued existence in time. We should realize, Berkhof states, that we are ignorant of what 'time' means beyond the leap. It makes no sense, according to him, to say that beyond the two boundaries we come into (the one) 'eternity', for eternity as the element of God is not intended for us. Time is an integral aspect of the good creation, and thus also of our human existence. For Berkhof we are thus in no position to make meaningful statements about an in-between-time or an intermediate state, except this decisive statement: that beyond the death line we shall never and nowhere fall out of the hand of our faithful Covenant-partner. He remains the same on both sides of the boundary. In the fine print, Berkhof adds that to believe that those who have fallen asleep are, in whatever manner, in the hand of the Father of Jesus Christ may seem a minimum, but it is a maximum. The diverse New Testament statements and images are no more than an approximation of that. As such they offer no material for a theological doctrine, but belong to the language which faith may properly use as it seeks to picture that which lies beyond (Berkhof 1973a:548, 549; E. T. 1979b:526, 527; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 514, 515).

Berkhof points out, however, that the concept or image of the resurrection of the dead, used from the outset by the Christian faith to capture the conjoined character of the future of the individual and of mankind, combines several ideas integral to the Christian expectation of the future. It not only indicates the direct connection between Jesus' resurrection and our coming liberation and renewal, but also the relation with what the Spirit does to us in this life, His act of bringing about a new creation by causing man to be born again. Likewise, however, it expresses the discontinuity with everything previously achieved: it is a break and a new miracle when we arise to a new life out of the ambiguity and death of this earthly existence. No reserves of our own, not an 'immortal soul', but only God guarantees this change. Yet even so, this image expresses the continuity with our earthly existence. It is and remains we ourselves who arise. Not another human being is brought into existence, but this human being is

changed. At the same time ‘resurrection’ expresses the totality of the renewal — that, in contrast with the idea of the immortality of the soul whereby only a part of man continues to live, man perishes as a totality and is saved as a totality. Saved man is no ghost. He also possesses a renewed physical existence by which he can open himself to and communicate with others. This makes possible the existence of associations and structures and consequently the end as well as the resurrection of the *world*. According to Berkhof, the word ‘resurrection’ is thus the epitome of our confession that our human existence will neither be cast off nor eternalized. It will be renewed after the analogy of Jesus, who out of our old existence arose to a new life. We do not reach our destination by escaping vertically, or by continuing to run horizontally. All of man’s and mankind’s existence is saved, preserved, and made fruitful in the way of a radical renewal <sup>12</sup> (Berkhof 1973a:549, 550; E. T. 1979b:527; 1985<sup>5</sup>:515).

Thus far the focus was on the future of believers, as the completion, by way of a leap, of that which Christ and the Spirit have worked in them in this life. What are we to think of the innumerable others who have lived their lives outside this covenant relationship. Of course we cannot tell who belongs to which group. On the one hand, there are many nominal believers, while, on the other hand, God is able to establish fellowship with people outside the covenantal path of Israel and Christ along which we have come to know Him. The fact remains, however, that on earth God has never reached and will never reach innumerable people with His covenant will — a small minority because they refused that encounter; the great majority because that encounter never came to them. What future expectation is there then for non-believers? A pressing question, since the Christian faith holds two seemingly or actually mutually exclusive convictions: on the one hand, that covenantal history, however narrow its path through time and space, is meant to be a blessing and redemption for all men; on the other hand, that this blessing and redemption remain unfruitful if men do not accept them in faith and obedience. When finally the big leap into the realm of freedom

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<sup>12</sup> The expression in the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in the resurrection of the *flesh* (*σαρκος αναστασιν, carnis resurrectionem*), could, according to Berkhof, create the misunderstanding that our *σαρξ* would be eternalized in its material, fragile, corruptible nature. That aspect, he states, is done away with in the resurrection. This discontinuity, so strongly underlined by Paul (1 Cor.15:44, 50), does not sufficiently come out in the expression “resurrection of the flesh” (Dutch: *des vlezes*; standard English: “of the body”). The emphasis on the discontinuity is all the more necessary, Berkhof states, because we can say even less about the material dimension of the resurrection than about the psychical and the social. We know nothing about the “what”. We only confess the “that”. But that is something tremendous; for owing to that we can also with loving hope defend and promote the materiality of existence (Berkhof 1973a:550, 551; E.T. 1979b:528; 1985<sup>5</sup>:516).

and love takes place, it will become manifest that numberless human lives on earth were not headed for that. For the third time, Berkhof points out, we come upon the concept of judgement, a concept which at once expresses the continuity and discontinuity between this world and that to come, and which emphasizes that the distance between these two worlds is determined by our responsibility and our guilt. As he previously indicated, regarding the believer judgement involves the sifting of his works, and regarding mankind it involves a revolutionary setting-straight of the structures and relationships. Now, Berkhof states, it concerns the coming exposure of all of human life that was lived outside the covenant relationship (Berkhof 1973a:551; E. T. 1979b:528, 529; 1985<sup>5</sup>:516, 517).

As a rule the churches simply divided people into believers and unbelievers, without considering that this “un-” comprises a great variety of attitudes. The ease with which many orthodox Christians used to and still designate at least ninety-five percent of the human race (taking into account the many centuries before the beginning of missionary activity) as lost, betrays much thoughtlessness and harshness. Fortunately, Berkhof points out, *secularization and the intense contact with non-Christian worlds* (my italics) compel to a deeper and more careful consideration of this matter. But so far little of that is noticeable in the study of the faith (Berkhof 1973a:553; E.T. 1979b:531; 1985<sup>5</sup>: 518).

Thus, contrary to the tradition of the church and the study of the faith, as he puts it, Berkhof feels compelled to make clear distinctions with regard to the final judgement. First of all he points out that the structural redemption of mankind needs as its reverse the redemption of innumerable people. Structures after all do not exist without people. When God abolishes the oppressive structures, it means salvation for the oppressed. Millions of people — the disintitiled (Dutch: *ontrechten*), the victims of discrimination, the persecuted, the downtrodden, and the tortured (Dutch: *gemartelden*) — were in this life never able to answer to God’s purpose, not because of their own sin, but due to the sins of others. If God has in mind to banish sin and to resist sinners, the judgement upon the oppressors must imply the deliverance of their victims. Else it would be meaningless. Most of the time, Berkhof states, we have misread this expectation of which the Bible is full. Yet how could we stand it in a world which

offers such unequal opportunities and is drenched in injustice, if we could not also expect this from God? (Berkhof 1973a:551, 552; E.T. 1979b:529; 1985<sup>5</sup>:517).

Furthermore, there are those who, without knowing this God or at least without feeling themselves motivated by Him, showed justice to the oppressed and so acted in accordance with God's purposes. The same judgement, which spells deliverance for the oppressed, implies justification for the merciful. They will receive mercy, as surely as God is faithful to Himself (Berkhof 1973a:551, 552; E.T. 1979b:529; 1985<sup>5</sup>:517).

Again, there are those who are unaware of these things, a group which always constitutes the great majority of humanity. They go along, do what is expected of them, avoid adventure and sacrifice, and for themselves and their family and friends try to get out of life what they can. Must not the judgement become for them a terrible revelation of the alienation in which they lived? But to what extent are they at fault and to what extent was it their fate? We do not know how God judges. We do know that we may not acquiesce in all the alienation around us. Also, of God we know that He does not divide people into categories as we are accustomed to, but that He fathoms (Dutch: *doorgrondt*) and transilluminates (Dutch: *doorlicht*) each person with His holy love (Berkhof 1973a:552; E.T. 1979b:529, 530; 1985<sup>5</sup>:517).

Finally, Berkhof points out that in the Bible the terror of the judgement almost exclusively concerns God's enemies: those who resist His ways of election and love; who begrudge Israel her (of course undeserved) place in the light; disobedient Israel that rejects and kills the Son; Christianity which under the cover of God's name persists in her worldly practices and so crucifies her Lord all over again; all who knowingly and willingly oppose the proclamation and realization of His holy love in the world. Yet, who are the ones who do that 'knowingly and willingly'? We cannot point them out. The judgement will reveal it. For them the judgement will mean total condemnation and total shame: the disclosure not only of an alienated, but of a forfeited existence. For all these people who differ so much and are of so many kinds, the judgement will mean that they will be judged in accordance with the light they had received (Berkhof 1973a:551, 552; E. T.1979b:529, 530; 1985<sup>5</sup>:517, 518).

Will this judgement, and particularly the condemnation in this judgement, be made to last forever? In other words, is ‘hell’ (as the New Testament calls the situation of condemnation), the ‘outer darkness’ (in which man ends up because in this life he chose against the light and for the darkness), the ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (the fruitless dwelling upon wasted opportunities) forever? According to Berkhof, the New Testament writings suggest more than one answer. That has resulted in a diversity of views in the Christian churches: from the dominant official ecclesiastical doctrine that hell is eternal to the view that the condemnation in the judgement is to be understood as a total annihilation, or that there may be a chance for conversion in the hereafter, or that one day all who have been created in the image of God will be recreated in the image of Christ, i.e. universal atonement (*ἀποκαταστασις*). There has always been a reluctance to engage in a deeper probing of the frightening conviction that hell is eternal. For the implication is that one will have to assume that the absolute God-forsakenness forever retains a place in a renewed creation. Due to the nature and methodology of the study of the faith, Berkhof states, the first answer we are compelled to give is: we do not know. Our duty is to call people to conversion in this life, and what God does with them in eternity is not our business. That is something we leave confidently up to God who is at once the greatest justice and the highest love. This answer, in itself correct, implies more, however, than that we do not know, and is indicative of a more positive answer. Indeed, the decision is determined by the manner in which we see justice and mercy, holiness and love, wrath and forgiveness blend in God. We know that the covenant means that God’s faithfulness ever and again does battle with man’s unfaithfulness. What will ultimately be forced to yield: divine faithfulness or human unfaithfulness? Paul raised the question with respect to Israel, and ends with the confession: “God has consigned all men to disobedience, that He may have mercy upon all” (Rom. 11:32). These considerations, according to Berkhof, compel us not to detract from the gravity of the human ‘no’ against God and its consequences, but to think just a little more of the divine ‘yes’ to recalcitrant humans. God is serious about the responsibility of our decision, but He is even more serious about the responsibility of His love. The darkness of rejection and God-forsakenness cannot and may not be argued away, but no more can and may it be eternalized. For God’s sake we hope that hell will be a way of purification (Berkhof 1973a:553, 554; E.T. 1979b:531, 532; 1985<sup>5</sup>:518, 519).

## 5.8 Concluding remarks

Berkhof gives a remarkable portrayal of the diffuse role and extensive influence of secularization in Christian thought and culture. His positive appraisal of secularization, without overemphasizing the positive aspects or underestimating the negative aspects, but combining the two sides in a dialectical Biblical concept, is impressive. His optimism as regards the meaning of history, culture, and the future, born of his firm belief in the faithfulness of God, is inspiring.

Yet, the question inevitably arises whether the concomitance between secularization and Christianity, at times so close as to give the impression that they are indeed a “unioval twin”, is not too close. Does this not give secularization a far too great a determining role in his re-statement of the Christian faith? Has Berkhof succeeded in allaying the suspicion that he rather furthers secularization instead of combating it?