

VU Research Portal

The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof

Gavera, J.

2010

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

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

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

7. AN ATTEMPT AT EVALUATION

In his last major work, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, Berkhof wrote that he had learned from Karl Barth to speak about those who preceded him with as much gentleness and understanding as he hoped those who follow would speak about him. Criticism is not thereby excluded, but it is in order only after one has understood the real concerns of a theologian in their positive intent (1989: xix). It is in this spirit that I attempt to give an evaluation of Berkhof's mediation theology. My aim is not to "baptize him against his will" (Berkhof E.T.1979b:6).

The journey along the road of Berkhof's theology has at times been a lonely passage, a struggle to fully comprehend the tenor of his thought and the intent of his design. It has been a daunting and even humbling experience. For who is able to judge whether a theologian — and one of Berkhof's standing and stature! — has achieved his goal? As he pointed out: "We probably cannot say more than this: from where we stand now, this or that attempt seems to us successful or unsuccessful" (Berkhof 1989: xiii). Yet, the journey has also certainly been a vastly enlightening and enriching experience.

In this evaluation I have also taken the liberty to draw upon the insights and criticism of others, especially where it was clear that their remarks are well-founded. I do so unabashedly because, as I recall, Berkhof himself encouraged theologians to eavesdrop as attentively as possible on the alternative insights of others and to integrate the truth in what they discovered there in their own view (Berkhof 1975a:126). Indeed, quite appropriate in this regard is the wise adage attributed to Professor Isaäk van Dijk (Groningen ± 1900): "He who says something that has never been said before, runs the risk of saying something that will also never again be said after him" (Berkhof 1982:26).¹

¹ Dutch: "Wie iets zegt dat nog nooit vóór hem is gezegd, loopt gevaar iets te zeggen, dat ook nooit meer na hem zal worden gezegd."

7.1 A modern European for modern Europeans

In the introduction of his reply to the criticism of G. de Ru and A. Geense (especially regarding his Christology), Berkhof made a significant remark which, when read in the context of the criticism he received, sounds very much like a plea for understanding. There he first of all reproaches his critics that while the New Testament contains a pluriformity of theological models (Pauline, synoptic, Johannine, the speeches of Acts 2-4), they tend to label as heterodox anyone who bases his theological c.q. Christological design on a different New Testament track. This despite the fact that precisely this pluriformity affords him the opportunity to be (and this is his insightful remark) a modern European for modern Europeans, so that he might at least win some over (Berkhof 1975c:316). G.C. Berkouwer has pointed out that some might be shocked to hear such a claim from someone other than the apostle Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19seq.). However, he states, Berkhof's 'modern European' is indeed a reality, and his claim is legitimate, no matter how many questions it might raise, since his concern is precisely to counteract modern Europeans' estrangement from the Gospel and to dispel their ingrained misunderstanding of it (Berkouwer 1976f:233). Indeed, Berkhof has made this abundantly clear on more than one occasion. His integrity in this regard is unquestionable.

7.2 Mediation as a feedback situation

For Berkhof systematic-theological conceptions are the ways in which the Christian community gives an account of the Gospel as its source and norm. Especially in the Western world, this community lives in the midst of a culture which is estranged from this Gospel. This is the culture for which the Christian church would like to reinterpret the Gospel so as to make it a vital option again. Therefore the task of 'giving an account of' the Gospel (1 Peter 3:15) is performed in constant counteraction, a process in which theology is the intermediary which from within its experience of the world interrogates the Gospel and then translates the results of this interrogation back to the world. Thus (mediation — my insert) theology constantly finds itself in a steady feedback situation. In this context the mediation theologian does not stand outside his world, but directly in the midst of it. He participates, consciously or not, in its presuppositions and experiences. As a result he finds himself in an encoun-

ter situation which is more complex as well as more existential than most encounters. In Berkhof's opinion, the intellectual presuppositions of the epoch after the Enlightenment have essentially remained the same since then. Man has become his own law, so he objectivizes and manipulates nature and marginalizes God. He views himself as the only responsible subject, and responsible only to himself. Within these confines, Berkhof states, one can fit almost all the utterances of the leading intellectual circles in this epoch. However, within the same confines this epoch is full of contrasts. They have less to do with the presuppositions than with the experiences. Great technical achievements, wars, revolutions, environmental exhaustion, etc., can change people's views and conduct and force them to modify (not, however, to abandon) the presuppositions (Berkhof 1989:300, 301). As a theologian who wants to be a modern European for modern Europeans, Berkhof senses and knows all this and in his feedback situation and mediation activity questions and reinterprets the Gospel in order to bridge the gaps between it and the changing points of view in modern culture.

7.3 Did Berkhof succeed in bridging the gaps?

The fields with their contrasts reviewed above (chapters 3-6) — religion (faith) and atheism, revelation and experience, Christianity and secularization, the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ — in which Berkhof attempts to bridge the gaps through reinterpretation, while they do not form an exhaustive list, are in my opinion among the most important because it is precisely in these fields that modern, atheist-secularized man's resistance to the Gospel is the fiercest and the challenge to theology the most demanding. However, the crucial question is: did Berkhof succeed in bridging the gaps and did he thus provide a convincing mediation with definite recruiting power?

Even Berkhof's harshest critics admit that his *Christelijk geloof* is an impressive and impassioned mediation design. Like so many of Berkhof's publications, it found and still finds a widespread and appreciative reading audience. Indeed, he has provided insightful and incisive perspectives which one can only greet with approval and identification. Yet, I cannot refrain from calling attention to my statement at the beginning of this dissertation that the theology of Hendrikus Berkhof is challenging if not controversial (cf. p.1). Now at the end it may well be more correct to say that his

theology is challenging because the controversial answers that he gives only raise more questions to which the answers have yet to be discovered if at all.

7.4 Bridging the gap between religion, Christian faith, and atheism

In order to bridge this gap Berkhof first of all tries to narrow it as much as possible by bringing religion, faith, and atheism in the closest relationship to each other. Thus he states that religion and atheism are dialectically related as opposite answers to the problematic inherent in religion, i.e. looking for the absolute in the relative, something which by definition cannot be found. Atheism shares in the religious questions but not the religious answers. It asks for the absolute, but observes that it is nowhere. Atheism has a “religious root”. It exhibits a deep piety which does not want to offend the deity by believing in its existence after the manner of religion. This explains why so often it issued in new forms of religion (Berkhof E.T.1979b: 9). Anthropologically, religion and atheism both have their right. They belong together as *feindliche Brüder* (hostile brothers), as the two poles of one movement. Indeed, modern atheism, like so many other modern phenomena, can be regarded as the *stepchild of Christianity* (my italics) (Berkhof 1981h: 65, 66). Therefore faith cannot regard atheism and agnosticism as abnormal attitudes. In a salutary way they accompany the faith because they remind it of its non-self-evident ground (Berkhof E.T.1979b:51, 52).

Yet, as much as Berkhof tries to narrow the gap, he cannot and does not close it. By his own definition, religion is the relationship to the absolute (6). But, he concedes, positing the absolute and a relationship to it amounts to an irreducible mental leap, which is not required by the secular phenomenal world from which it is made (10). Also, the Christian faith, situated within the wider field of religion, involves one of the greatest, if not the greatest leapvariation (Dutch: *sprongvariatie*) (13, 18). Thus the non-self-evident ground of faith necessitates a leap, and even though this ‘leap of faith’ is for Berkhof not a *salto mortale* over a chasm, but a *salto vitale* over a narrow ditch, and least of all a leap in the dark, it remains a leap which the atheist and agnostic secularized modern European is clearly unwilling or unable to take, as is evident from Beerling’s reaction to Berkhof’s mediation attempt — *Niet te geloven!* (vide my survey of Berkhof’s conversation with Beerling in ch.3).

In this regard, G.G. de Kruijf put a very intriguing question: whether Berkhof's image of a leap is nothing but an optical illusion. Was Berkhof not already on the other side of the ditch before the conversation with Beerling began? Is it not the case that right from the start the atheist / agnostic and the believer walk on opposite sides of the ditch, even if fortunately within earshot? According to De Kruijf, Berkhof already dared the leap and that colours the conversation from the first word. Berkhof, he states, suggests a tucking in (Dutch: *opschorting*) of the leap, but in actual fact hides it, at least initially. For De Kruijf, Berkhof's entire leap-construction goes against the grain. Indeed, he asks a very pointed question: is faith in God a cultural leap? (1984:188).

C. Graafland is also critical of Berkhof's leap-construction which recurs time and again in *Christelijk geloof* — in the Christ-event where Christ's resurrection is also portrayed as a leapvariation; in the renewal of man through the Holy Spirit; and in the consummation (*vide* my supplement on the term 'leap', ch.3). For Graafland the word 'leap' or 'leapvariation', which he deems to be borrowed from the theory of evolution, serves Berkhof's dialectical way of thinking and his so-called concept of extrapolation. Thus, something new occurs, but the conditions or presuppositions for this new event are already present in that which preceded it. In Graafland's opinion, with the use of the leap-concept the connections are too easily made and the relationships are too positive. The chasm, he states, is deeper, in fact it is unbridgeable (1974b:93).

A.J. Rasker states that the term 'leapvariation' gives the impression that Berkhof thinks in terms of evolutionistic anthropology. To his mind, however, this could definitely not have been Berkhof's intention. One would have preferred, he points out, that Berkhof distinguish more precisely in his use of the terms 'leap' and 'leapvariation', because the question poses itself whether he can employ the same terminology for both 'faith' and 'religion'. A more precise distinction is all the more necessary in view of Berkhof's basic conviction that the Christian faith "is from the outset opposed to the presupposition that it is only a particular form of the general phenomenon of religion (cf. Berkhof E.T. 1979b:1) (A.J. Rasker 1974:85).

Whether Berkhof borrowed his leap-terminology from the theory of evolution or from his great teacher Karl Barth (“the leap in the uncertain, in the dark, in empty air”)² or in imitation of Schleiermacher (cf. Berkhof E.T.1979b:25), the fact remains, as D.J. de Groot pointed out, that one does not do justice to the substance of faith by describing it as a ‘gamble’ or as ‘a leap in the void’. While it is to be appreciated that expressions such as these aim to emphasize the ‘emptiness’ of faith, to strip it of any notion of certainty vested in man or in the world, they nevertheless sell short the central truth that the Christian faith, which embraces the unchallengeable witness of God, is completely certain. Faith, which entrusts itself to Christ, is precisely for that reason aware that it ventures nothing and takes no risk. It knows that there is no chance of disappointment or disillusionment, because “he who believes in Him shall not be put to shame...” (Rom.9:33). Faith does not sink in a bottomless void, but stands on the firm bed-rock of the Word of God which remains unto eternity (D.J. de Groot 1949:431, 432).

In my opinion, a better metaphor than Berkhof’s ‘leap’ (which always indicates an unbridged or unbridgeable gap) is that of Emil Brunner where he describes faith as “the self-abandonment of the soul to God, the letting-down of the drawbridge, upon which the divine Conqueror from the beyond enters this world and takes over dominion...”³ Here the mention of a definite bridge and where it leads may indeed have greater appeal for the atheist / agnostic secularized modern European.

7.4.1 Berkhof’s obsolete ‘absolute’

Speaking about what would be more appealing to modern Europeans, calls to mind Rasker’s remarks regarding Berkhof’s definition of religion as ‘the relation to the absolute’. In Rasker’s opinion this is an unfortunate definition and he asks: what religious person recognizes his faith, his prayer, his sacrifice, his search for or his finding of an answer to his questions of life in this abstract formula? Such a platonic-neoplatonic expression as ‘the absolute’ for ‘God’, he states, is not very adequate. No believer, primitive or present-day, uses it. According to Rasker, Berkhof might have

² German: “... *der Sprung ins Ungewisse, ins Dunkle, in der leere Luft*” (Römerbrief, p.73, quoted by G.C. Berkouwer 1975:180).

³ German: “...*die Selbstpreisgabe der Seele an Gott, das Fallenlassen der Zugbrücke, auf den der göttliche Eroberer aus dem Jenseits ins Diesseits einzieht und die Herrschaft an sich reißt.*” (*Erlebnis, Erkenntnis, und Glaube*, 1923:101, quoted by G.C. Berkouwer 1975:179).

done better by following in the footsteps of Rudolph Otto's '*das Heilige*' or '*das Ganz Andere*', with which he continued the tradition of Schleiermacher in twentieth century fashion and for which he was praised by Berkhof (cf. Berkhof E.T.1979b:12). Even for the atheist the concept 'the absolute', as a distinguishing characteristic, is no less puzzling. According to Rasker, one could argue on sound philosophical grounds that 'the absolute' is by definition nowhere to be found. Indeed, a philosopher could use the concept of 'the absolute' as the guiding principle of his thought without thereby intending to be religious or a believer (Rasker 1974:83, 84).

Although one tends to agree with Rasker's criticism, it must be stated in all fairness that Berkhof was equally aware of the inadequacy of his definition of religion. He even stated that he was open for a better one (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:6). Of course this begs the question what such a better one must be in order to appeal to modern Europeans —Tillich's "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern ... which is unconditionally serious ... whose predominant religious name ... is God " (12), or as in much common parlance "the acceptance of a Higher Hand, a Supreme Intelligence, which shapes our destiny"? Perhaps, in view of the fact, as Berkhof pointed out, that many have given up hope of finding a comprehensive definition (6), it would be less problematic and quite intelligible even for modern Europeans to state plainly and simply: 'religion is the relationship to God' (whether spelled with a 'g' or a 'G'). For, *mirabile dictu*, the word 'God' has not disappeared from the language.

7.4.2 Are the neo-atheists still atheists?

Noteworthy is Rasker's remarks with regard to a shift within Marxist atheistic thought. Marxist atheism, he states, was originally the negative reverse side of a positively intended humanism, the liberation from a society bereft of human dignity, the return from alienation to the restoration of true humaneness. With time, however, it became apparent that it could not with certainty achieve all this. Various new forms of alienation appeared: foremostly, bondage under dictatorial systems and enforced ideological doctrines; but also the emergence of an as yet moderate, in comparison with the West, consumerist society in which the spell of and desire for material things threatened to short serve true humaneness. Thus there arose a new search for answers to questions of a different order than those on which classical Marxism and post-

revolutionary Leninism focused attention. Also, to a certain extent, the answers of religion aroused the interest of 'revisionist' Marxists. From the middle of the 20th century the original Marxist aversion to religion was replaced, at least among a small group, by an initially cautious new engagement and dialogue with Christians. Thus Marxists and Christians, atheists and believers found each other through a new and remarkable reading of the Gospel: how liberation from alienation and becoming a new man is possible. Linked to this was the concept of transcendence which received a new meaning in the encounter between Marxists and Christians. Instead of indicating an extra- or superterrestrial being, it was now discovered that indeed also in Biblical sense transcendence had much more to do with a movement-in-time in which men are called to exceed themselves toward a new future of greater humaneness. For writers such as Vitezslav Gardavsky, Ernst Bloch, Roger Garaudy, Milan Machovec, Konrad Farner, and many more, transcendence is not synonymous with 'the absolute' as it apparently is for Berkhof, but a dynamic movement, man's exceeding himself, through which his history becomes salvation history, directed toward a future liberation and fulfillment of true humaneness (Rasker 1974: 85, 86).

People who think like this are not combatants of religion after the manner of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, for they have discovered a dimension in religion which Feuerbach, Marx, and Lenin could not discern, a dimension in which religion does not collaborate to maintain existing structures, but can be a promise and power of renewal. Are they then still atheists, Rasker asks. If, as Berkhof maintains, atheism shares in the religious questions, but not the religious answers, then their atheism is set in a new context. They do not accept what they call the 'mythological' elements in the religious answers, but indeed the anthropological. But the deeper they reflect upon the meaning of the anthropological answers, and the more they make fundamental adjustments, through their encounter with the Biblical liberation thought, to the anthropology and future expectation of what has become a dogmatic Marxism, they also share, albeit partly, in the Biblical answers (87).

What this comes down to, according to Rasker, is that if Christians would leave out much of the Hellenistic ontology from their thought about God and Christ in favour of a dynamic concept of God and a transcendence which is not synonymous with 'the absolute' but aims to express how God makes history with us and for us as

we journey toward our future which is His future, then not only will there be a common field of reality upon which believers and atheists can meet each other, but also the possibility that like Abraham they might journey together toward a future that they do not yet know. At present mankind finds itself in a post-theistic and precisely for that reason in a post-atheistic period. For Christians *and* atheists that can be the impetus to review many traditional and trusted concepts. We will have to learn anew to think not ontologically but eschatologically (88).

In view of all this, Rasker is of the opinion that if Berkhof were to have written a 'Postlegomena' he would probably no longer be able to maintain that atheism shares in the religious questions but not in the religious answers (88).

It is inconceivable that Berkhof was unaware of these aspects mentioned by Rasker. Precisely the opposite is apparently true if one takes into consideration his criticism of Herbert Braun and Paul M. van Buren. The former, Berkhof states, rightly emphasizes the event of fellow-humanitarianism (Dutch: *medemenselijkheid*), the latter even more rightly the 'contagious' power of the free and liberating Jesus. But, Berkhof points out, if their aim is to assimilate God to, or let Him coincide with these horizontal realities, then they do away with the vertical dimension, the 'disclosure' character, and thus the very essence of the matter. Apparently, they have become so used to view God as a theistic, metaphysical being, that they can no longer discern between this isolated verticality and this likewise isolated horizontality the *tertium* of the disclosing Revelation in our history. It is this narrow, but real and liberating *tertium* which must be preached to our atheistic contemporaries. We must proclaim the Gospel to them in new tongues. They must understand what concrete way out of their situation is indicated, and what repentance involves for them. Repentance cannot be spared them, and with that also the offense. We cannot replace the Holy Spirit. Faith which in this experienceable, predictable, and controllable world unlocks secrets which transcend our horizontality by far, will ever again involve repentance and a leap. All our thinking is crucified by the Word in order to be resurrected to a new life. So too, the atheist must sacrifice his horizontal thinking in order to live a new multi-dimensional life (Berkhof 1981h: 69, 71).

That Berkhof cannot go along with the horizontality of the neo-atheists but insists that faith always includes repentance, is understandable and to be appreciated. He is after all a believing theologian whose concern is to win modern atheistic / agnostic secularized Europeans over to the Christian faith. Yet, his persistence that faith involves a leap, makes the bridge he attempted to span between the two not only too shaky, but illusory, and even non-existent. A leap is by definition no bridge. It only emphasizes that there still is a chasm. A bridge renders a leap quite unnecessary. Berkhof's leap-construction leaves his mediation theology vulnerable. For all his efforts, all Berkhof has gained, according to G.G. de Kruijf (in connection with Berkhof's conversation with Beerling) is dialogue — a dialogue through an entire forest (1984:188).

7.5 Bridging the gap between revelation and experience

Here, too, Berkhof endeavours to narrow the gap as much as possible, so that, as he put it, the leap can be made by which our thinking can proceed concerning a matter (revelation — my insert) which is inherently indemonstrable (Berkhof ET 1979b:50, 51). He does so in accordance with what he previously stated in his article *Openbaring als gebeuren*: that the connection between Word (i.e. revelation) and reality (i.e. experience) can only be found if it is expressed in plain experiential terms (Dutch: *nuchtere ervaringswoorden*) (Berkhof 1970:97). Hence, in *Christelijk geloof* he speaks of the *earthly character* of revelation — an event of encounter (Dutch: *ontmoetingsgebeuren*) (Berkhof E.T.1979b:56) that happens not in heaven but on earth in forms, guises, shapes and phenomena that are given with this earthly life (51); of the paradox of the *hiddenness* of revelation — for it is an event which presupposes, reveals, and, as a result of man's creaturely finitude and guilty estrangement from God, assumes hiddenness, so that God can only be present contrary to (*para*) the appearance (*doxa*) of the opposite (53-57); of the *historical shape* of revelation — for it comes to us on the plane of history, in consecutive and connected historical events, and consists of a cumulative process of events and their interpretation (61, 62); of the *symbolic language* of revelation — for it occurs in an interaction of experiences and insights which are continually retold in such a language that it can be understood as revelation and as a liberating power, and this language is earthly language tied to this earthly experiential world, and while it may not be absolutely adequate it is certainly

analogically adequate to describe the revelation event (65, 67); of the *provisional* character of revelation — the hidden and indirect revelational encounter is temporary and anticipates the ultimate full and real revelation: “seeing God” “face to face” (101).

In his valedictory address, the gap is narrowed even further. He mentions that he had no principal objection to the new emphasis on experience in dogmatics and that he gradually became opposed to a neat separation between experience and revelation. Evidence of this, he points out, is his use of the term *source-experience* (Dutch: *bronervaring*), which he also describes as *revelation-unlocking experience* (Dutch: *openbaring-ontsluitende ervaring*), and as a *source-experience which constitutes divine revelation* (Dutch: *een bronervaring die als godsopenbaring mag gelden*). Such a source-experience or revelation-unlocking experience was, according to Berkhof, the miraculous escape of Israelite tribes through the Sea of Reeds from their pursuing Egyptian exploiters. The so-called song of Miriam (Ex.15: 21) was the first interpretation of that experience as revelation, and to this very day Judaism and Christendom recognize it as divine revelation. There, as in all the great source-experiences, Berkhof states, it was not a case of interpretation after the fact, but rather of an event that interpreted itself (Berkhof 1981c:5-7).

From all this, Berkhof concludes that while all religious experiences cannot be called revelation on their own authority, for much that is presented as such are no more than the self-affirmations of group experiences (black, liberation, and feminist theologies) or only lead to the discovery, extension, and realization of the self (oriental religions), he did discover that revelation, though transcending and at times even contradicting our experience, is a specific type of experience, indeed a *very* specific type. The central symbol for this experience among the writers of the Bible is ‘the Word’, expressive of the fact that revelation involves a personal encounter that is inapprehensible, un-manipulatable, and frequently in a state of tension with our everyday experiences. But even then it is a human experience (6-8).

7.5.1 Do they — *openbaring en ervaring* — now rhyme?

This subtitle reminds us of what Berkhof said early on in his valedictory address that in the Dutch language the words *openbaring* and *ervaring* rhyme. Yet, for many —unbelievers as well as believers — these concepts do not rhyme in the least, but seem much more to exclude each other. And he asks: is that correct? (Berkhof 1981c:4). Now we must ask whether Berkhof, by expressing revelation in experiential terms, has indeed succeeded to rhyme *openbaring* and *ervaring*, so that they do not exclude each other. Or to put it differently, has he bridged the gap and thus achieved a mediating synthesis?

At first glance it would appear that that is indeed the case. That there are elements of truth in his doctrine of revelation cannot be denied. With C. Graafland we can state that it is of significant value that Berkhof has stressed the historical and experiential character of revelation (1994:67). Yet, many voices of criticism, including that of Graafland, have been raised precisely in this regard.

7.5.2 Deficient experience?

A. van de Beek has indicated that although Berkhof included a separate paragraph about experience in the fifth revised edition of *Christelijk geloof* in consideration of the growing interest in the so-called experience theology of the 1980's, he could not quite embrace the type of experience theology which came to the fore after his retirement. The problem, according to Van de Beek, is that for Berkhof experience is primarily historical experience. In the source-experiences in history (e.g. the exodus through the Red Sea), where experience and interpretation were simultaneous, Israel encountered the liberating presence of the God of the covenant. In contrast, the experiences which were in the centre of attention during the eighties were inner experiences, largely personal perceptions in the sphere of spirituality, inner persuasions voiced by shattered lives, instances which psychiatrists could explain away, symbols providing food for thought, but even more: seeking acknowledgment even though tangible proof and continuity was lacking. Things like these are inapprehensible like those who are born of the Spirit (1994: 25).

The result of this deficiency, according to Van de Beek, is that apparently theology is not as scientific as Berkhof supposed and was ever at pains to demonstrate (both his inaugural and his valedictory address significantly carry the title: *God voorwerp van wetenschap?*). In fairness, however, Van de Beek adds that in his opinion even science is not as scientific as Berkhof supposes, for even there convictions and perceptions are not minor factors. Nevertheless, he states, the encounter with God remains more than any other phenomenon the appearance of life amidst death: who can see God and live? (25).

Of course, the question is whether the allegation of a deficient experience would be of concern for Berkhof. For as Van de Beek himself has pointed out, albeit in another context, Berkhof speaks with many nuances, and thus almost any critical statement about his theology can be refuted by an explicit quotation (Van de Beek 2002:178). Thus Berkhof could appeal to the fact that in the 5th revised edition of *Christelijk geloof* he did indeed differentiate between three ways in which experience can legitimately be discussed in the study of the faith: (1) as preceding and leading to revelation (the sense in which he deals with experience in his Prolegomena); (2) as another name for the faith-experience itself (which he only uses incidentally since there are more specific words for these, such as repentance, faith, and hope); and (3) as experiences with ourselves and with the world which are evoked by the faith-encounter (to which he refers in his discussion of the renewal of man, especially §45 and §50) (Berkhof 1985⁵:52). Also, he could question, as he did in his valedictory address, whether experiences in the sphere of spirituality are indeed revelation-unlocking-experiences (Berkhof 1981c:6). But be that as it may, the point made by Van de Beek does raise the question whether Berkhof has indeed interpreted this aspect of the Gospel in such a way as to make it a vital option once more for those who, in Berkhof's own words, yearn for such peak-experiences which they find lacking in our clean-cut technical and functionalistic civilization (Berkhof 1981c:6).

7.5.3 Experience over-emphasized?

C. Graafland mentions that Berkhof has not unjustly been called a *Cocceius redivivus*. He sees Berkhof as a modern representative and his dogmatics as a mature fruit of the Leiden Cocceian tradition (*circa* end 17th, beginning 18th century), which

emphasized the history of God's continuous revelational acts and in which the covenant, with its mutual involvement of God and man, received a central place. As this tradition developed further, consistently following the track of history, the transcendental character of revelation disappeared increasingly due to the historical and ever more immanent manner of Cocceian revelational thought (Graafland 1994:54, 55). Against this background, Graafland describes Berkhof's position as one in which, with a variety of nuances, revelation is seen as experience (56). Although Berkhof aims to do justice to the ongoing streams of God-experiences (or source-experiences) through the ages, in this endeavour, however, the emphasis remains on the human experience in which the divine revelation is realized, to which it becomes connected, and which it simultaneously transcends. This, according to Graafland, has to do with Berkhof's view that revelation is essentially an event of encounter between God and man, in which the initiative is entirely from God, but which cannot be effected unless man responds to it. Not only is revelation directed to man in his tangible world of experience, but he brings his experiences with him which in their turn colour and co-determine the encounter with God. This includes every possible human experience so that the encounter with God hardly differs from our ordinary encounters with each other. So humanly does it happen in God's revelation (57). In Graafland's view, Berkhof's emphasis on experience is so strong that in fact he develops his doctrine of revelation from concrete, ordinary human experience (58). This has grave consequences. Not only is revelation set on a loose footing, so that he is forced to introduce a separate work of God, the *illuminatio* of the Spirit, in order to ensure that true revelation is effected, but also the revelational character of Scripture (the Bible), its authority, and divine inspiration is threatened (59-64). For Graafland this raises the question: how does one then convince the outsider (modern European — my insert) of the credibility of what Berkhof professes, namely that "we live from the revelation of God to Israel and in Christ (which) is for us *the* revelation, *the* self-disclosure of God" (Berkhof 1979b:75)? (Graafland 1994:59).

7.5.4 Is revelation still possible?

E. Flesseman-van Leer has indicated that, although she agrees with Berkhof's theology to a large extent, she must nevertheless question whether certain ideas in his *Christelijk geloof* are compatible with his covenantal thinking. One of these concerns

his doctrine of revelation. According to Berkhof, revelation is pre-eminently an event of encounter in which the approach must be made from two sides. God is indeed the one who, by entering our reality, makes the encounter possible, but man, as His partner, must from his side respond to the revelation. “In fact, revelation is not even revelation, if it is not perceived and acknowledged as such from the other side” (Berkhof E.T. 1979b:57). With these words, Flesseman-van Leer points out, Berkhof makes the perception and the acknowledgement, i.e. the coming through (Dutch: *het aankomen*) of the revelation, an integral moment of revelation. It is precisely in this regard, she states, that she does not know what to make of Berkhof’s following statement, namely: “that, due both to his earthly distance and his guilty estrangement from God, man is either unwilling or unable, or in any case fails to recognize the revelation” (57). This, according to Flesseman-van Leer is no passing remark. For Berkhof it is of essential significance. He argues that because man does not recognize God’s revelation, therefore besides the revelation, illumination is necessary, besides the Word also the Spirit; only through the Spirit is the human cognitive faculty heightened and liberated to such an extent that it is able to make a creative leap beyond its limitations and grasp the revelation (Berkhof E.T.1979b:57). But, asks Flesseman-van Leer, what sort of revelation is that which man can only understand through the enlightenment of his mind? After all, did we not just hear that a revelation which does not come through is no revelation at all? Berkhof himself is aware that here he is hard pressed. That is why, according to Flesseman-van Leer, he uses the Latin word *revelatio*. It does not solve anything, however. In her view, by using a ‘double revelational activity’, besides *revelatio* also *illuminatio*, Berkhof falls back on a concept of revelation which is in conflict with his encounter-thinking. Indeed, the duality of Word and Spirit gives the impression that there is first a God-on-his-own (Dutch: *een God-op-zichzelf*), who reveals himself as it were in a void, and that the Spirit then brings about the connection between this revelation of the God-on-his-own and man. For Flesseman-van Leer this duality, borrowed from tradition, is a rudiment of an objectivistic concept of God in Berkhof’s thinking which brings with it an objectivistic understanding of revelation (Flesseman-van Leer 1974:33-35).

Berkhof’s reasoning becomes even more assailable. For apparently even his introduction of the separate illuminating work of the Spirit does not ensure that revelation is indeed effected. After all, man can resist the Spirit (Acts 7:51), as Berkhof

has frequently expressly stated. For Flesseman-van Leer the question is thus justified whether this possibility would not again require a new divine intervention, in order to prevent man from shutting himself off for the illumination of the Spirit. According to Flesseman-van Leer, the problematic that arises here cannot be resolved, unless one is prepared to think strictly in terms of predestination — something which Berkhof is definitely not willing to do (Flesseman-van Leer 1974:36, 37).

7.5.5 The crux of the matter

According to Berkhof, revelation can never be described only as a divine (objectivistic) or a human (subjectivistic) happening (Berkhof E.T.1979b:57). His attempt to mediate between these two ‘extremes’ with the portrayal of an inter-subjective encounter involving God and man, in which, to God’s initiative, man must complementarily respond with a creative leap of cognition in order to effect revelation, is not only unconvincing, but also unsustainable, and even contradictory. For what must one make of statements such as these following each other within the space of a few lines: “In fact, revelation is not even revelation *if it is not perceived and acknowledged as such from the other side*” (i.e. by man), and: “No revelation will be effected *unless God works in us with double revelational activity*” (i.e. *revelatio et illuminatio*)? Berkhof is prepared to reject the “sole activity” of God as “an extreme Protestant concept” in order to avoid the danger of eliminating man and his responsibility (217, cf. Graafland 1974a:46). But it is precisely this man who fails to make the creative leap of cognition. And what indeed does such a creative leap of cognition involve? Unfortunately, Berkhof has not provided us with any lucid elaboration on the matter. This leaves it hanging in the air and makes it susceptible to a number of interpretations. For the word “creative” can mean “inventive”, “imaginative”, “resourceful”, and even “fanciful”. Berkhof’s creative leap of our cognition sounds reminiscent of what he wrote in his article *Openbaring als gebeuren*: that in order to trace the origin of the faith of Israel we must make use not only of archaeological and literary material, but we must also “*set our faculties of intuition and fantasy to work*” (my italics) (1970: 108). Did he have something like this in mind with his creative leap of cognition? But then every claim to revelation can be construed as a figment of the imagination and immediately rejected as incredible. It is inconceivable, however, that that is what Berkhof really meant, but it does show the predicament in which Berkhof’s presuppo-

sitions land him. It is therefore not surprising that he is compelled to fall back on God's activity and to concede: "experience of itself can never bridge the gap to revelation...we can only speak of the wonder that comes from the other side (God — my insert) and urges us to make the leap of surrender ahead of all our experiences" (Berkhof 1985⁵:56).

Simpler, and therefore probably more convincing and appealing (also to modern secularized man) is what J.A. Heyns writes: "Through his revelation God enabled man to know Him. God did not want to remain unknown. He wanted to, and did make himself known to man...In this event of encounter it is not a matter of two parties each making a contribution in order to make a true encounter possible. In the encounter with God man has no contribution to make except to receive in and through faith that which God wishes to bestow on him and that which God wishes to make of him, namely a child of God. In this way a fallen world is restored in its original relationship to God." (1978:6).

7.6 Bridging the gap between Christianity and secularization

At the end of my chapter on Christianity and secularization I mentioned that: 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?

7.6.1 Extension

While I abide by these preliminary remarks, they must necessarily be augmented and enhanced. First of all, it is important to take in review some of Berkhof's pronounced statements in connection with the relation between Christianity and secularization:

(a) "...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. For Christianization is itself a form, indeed the only legitimate form, of secularization" (Berkhof 1977:59, 60).

(b) "Christ secularized life" (Berkhof ET 1979a:91).

(c) "Secularization is conversion projected in culture — the Christianization of life" (91)

(d) "Secularization (is — my insert) the result of a conversion to Christ..." (91)

(e) "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" (92).

(f) "The missionary endeavour calls into existence the greatest forces and counter-forces (Christian and anti-Christian secularization — my insert). The autonomy of man takes place simultaneously with the enthronement of Christ" (92).

(g) "Yet, secularism (the Dutch reads: *secularisatie* not *secularisme* — my note) cannot deny its theocratic origin" (93).

(h) "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).

(i) "Emancipation and secularization cannot be divided however much theology tries to do so" (Berkhof 1981a:110).

On the surface these statements give the impression that Christianity and secularization are so close, that there is no or hardly any gap that has to be bridged between them anymore. But to think that would be misleading. It must be kept in mind that Berkhof uses the word 'secularization' with varied nuances. 'Secularization' is a word which is historically burdened and frequently used rather indiscriminately. On the one hand, secularization signifies the de-deification, the de-demonizing, the de-sacralizing, and the objectifying of nature, so that the world is un-

derstood as God's creation in which humans have the task of responsibly opening it up in accordance with the cultural ordinance of God. On the other hand, in common parlance secularization is understood as the gradual disappearance of God from this now controllable 'world of men'. As someone has said: who needs Hannah's prayer when fertility pills may be prescribed? (D. Lyon 1988:635). To distinguish between these two processes, the word 'secularization' is used for the former, and the word 'secularism' for the latter. Berkhof, however, prefers to speak of 'emancipation' or 'Christianization' instead of 'secularization', and he uses the term 'secularization', in the sense of the 'marginalization', the *Ausklammerung* (=exclusion) of God from cultural life, instead of 'secularism'. But then he also uses the term 'secularization' to cover both when he speaks of *Christian* and *anti-Christian* secularization, and even of 'good' secularization and 'bad' secularization. Overlooking these variant meanings, statements like "Christ secularized life" or "Christianization is the only legitimate form of secularization" will indeed not only fall strange upon the ear of the common man, but even appear contradictory, if not ridiculous. It is also not without reason that Berkhof prefers the term 'emancipation'. For it is the common denominator between laudable and deplorable secularization. In the former, emancipation is still relative, i.e. granted, directed, and limited from Above, thus always in polar relationship to security and responsibility. In the latter, emancipation rests on a pre-logical notion of absolute, sovereign freedom, detached from relationships (cf. Berkhof 1981a:180, 181). Due to this common denominator emancipation and secularization c.q. Christianity and secularization may appear as like as two peas and enables Berkhof to state that the borderline between them is so fluid that no one can say where the one ends and the other begins. Yet, as he admits, it soon becomes apparent that in origin and purpose they are opposites. At most life is a pendulum motion between the two. Living in a "Christianized de-Christianized world" (*Dutch: gekerstend-ontkerstende wereld*) (Berkhof ET 1979a:115) as we do, Christianity and secularization are at most correlative. The secularist can deny only what the Christian affirms and the debate between them seems likely to continue (Kenneth Hamilton 1981:610).

7.6.2 A too 'determining' role of secularization

Perusal of Berkhof's *Christelijk geloof* revealed the following significant facts regarding the role of secularization in Berkhof's theological thinking.

- (a) It is presented as the motive for reflection on Christian faith (Berkhof ET 1979b:27).
- (b) It contributed to the realization of the createdness, the non-divinity of the world, thus making room for natural science, nature control, democracy, change and even revolution (161).
- (c) It is hailed (strangely enough!) for its salutary role in the rapidly decreasing practice of infant (baby) baptism. Believer's baptism must be the normal practice (355).
- (d) It reawakened the church to its task of missions, evangelism, and social work (411).
- (e) It progressively accompanies the structural sanctification in the renewal of the world (514), but ultimately leads to an insuperable ambivalence and stalemate (518).
- (f) It has induced a deeper and more careful reconsideration of eternal damnation (531).

That there are elements of truth in what Berkhof maintained in this regard is not denied. The overall impression that it leaves, however, is that the spirit of the Enlightenment, more than the enlightenment of the Spirit, is the determining factor in these aspects of the faith.

7.6.3 Berkhof furthers secularization

Berkhof has clearly stated that he has broken with Classical theology's static view of preservation by a first cause (i.e. God) using secondary causes (i.e. humans). He has opted for a dynamic and dialectic view. God creates for himself a partner and allows himself to be limited and resisted by the freedom of that human partner. This does not mean that God loses grip on the world. Rather, He will not rest until ultimately He has—no, not conquered and subjugated but — led his human opponent to the true freedom of the sons of God (Berkhof ET 1979b:218, 219).

According to A. van de Beek, Berkhof's confusion of the *prima causa* and the *causae secundae* has led to a strange mixture of human freedom and divine correction, of self-limitation of and intervention by God. Berkhof's frequent use of the word "partners" suggests mutual dependence and co-operation, so that consequently the

human partner becomes a decisive factor in God's work in history. When human beings are acting on the same level as God serious consequences follow:

- (a) the human partners do not act according to their destiny. If God does not overrule them, the end of history will be a failure. No believer can accept that.
- (b) God overrules the human partner in order to avoid the failure of his purposes. Berkhof tends to that position, since he argues that in Christ God made a complete new start. Thus, starting with human freedom, he ends with rejection of it.
- (c) Both partners agree completely. It ends with full unanimous co-operation. One must be rather optimistic about human decisions to hold this view. Berkhof is inclined to do so. In the end God will convince humanity to do justice and keep peace. The Spirit who dwelt in Jesus will inspire humankind and bring them to the renewal of the world, of which Europe is a symbol.
- (d) The former three positions are based on the belief that there is a God who provides the universe and humanity with a destiny. If we, however, opt for a position of human beings making their own decisions, why should we bring God into it? If we divide up the field of free decisions, why should we restrict ourselves to a part of it? Why should we not go for full, unlimited freedom? Modern post-mechanical science has no need for the God-hypothesis. So why should we not leave God out? (Van de Beek 2002:178-180).

Van de Beek's conclusion is that the ultimate "consequence is secularization, since God is no longer considered as the ground of being. Human freedom and immanent causality push theology to keep God in the margins or in special moments of history that do not fit in normal history. They push God out of the market place. This is most strikingly visible in the wake of Barthianism, as Berkhof already warned in 1951. Nevertheless he continued this way" (184).

7.7. Bridging the Christological gap

"Jesus the Son" — that is the heading of Berkhof's chapter on Christology in his *opus magnum: Christelijk geloof*. Strikingly, it does not read: Jesus the Son of God. Indeed, that is telling. In a veiled sort of way, it is already an indication of the direction in which Berkhof's Christology went.

In the final analysis, Berkhof, too, could not avoid the penetrating question once asked in the vicinity of Caerea Philippi: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29). Berkhof gave the following answer:

“You are the true Man, as God intended you to be from the beginning: the true obedient Son, the man of love, the one who was willing, taking the full consequences, not to maintain his life, but to lose it for others, and who by that exceptional life of love and obedience started in our world the counter-movement of resurrection. And as the true Man you are the Man of the Future. You are not only a strange exception, which would mean merely an accusation directed at us. God has given you as the Pioneer and Forerunner, as the Guarantee that by your sacrifice, your resurrection and your spirit, the future is opened to our rebellious and enslaved race. You are God’s eschatological Man!” (Berkhof 1973c:303, 304).

“But however ‘high’ the language he uses may be, he always stops short at calling Jesus God’s Son in an ontological sense. There is in Jesus a divine secret, but it is not the secret of his own divinity! (Runia1984:76). Indeed, Berkhof admitted that his “true covenant partner” is purely man (Berkhof 1975c:325). Precisely this led to probably one of the sharpest criticisms of his doctrine regarding Jesus the Son. For Adriaan Geense maintains that Berkhof’s *Christelijk geloof* contains no Christology! Geense’s reason for this incisive statement is, among others, especially that in his view Berkhof, in order to solve the problem of a veiled divine monophysitism in the doctrine of the anhypostasia, replaced it with a not even veiled human monophysitism (Geense 1975:310). Since Jesus is human by virtue of a new creative act of God, he is different from all other humans. From eternity Jesus was ideally preexistent in the mind of God. The discontinuity brought about by the appearance of Jesus in the world, while not insignificant, is however relative. For ultimately God had this exalted humanity in mind for all humans from the beginning. Therefore Christ is the revelation of the true man, and thus in the final analysis Christology is the true anthropology. Then Geense’s allegation is true (Van de Beek 1994:18).

A nagging question remains. Does Berkhof’s ‘Christology’ not end in a kind of double docetism? On the one hand, for Berkhof Jesus is not the Son of God in an ontological sense. On the other hand, as the eschatological Man, Jesus is so infinitely far ahead of us that He seems unreal. Apparently, it was under this impression that H.

Russel Botman came to the conclusion in his unpublished M. Th. thesis (1984) that Berkhof's Jesus is: *Nóg God, Nóg Mens!* (Neither God, nor Man!). As C. Graafland put it, Berkhof abandoned both the *vere Deus* and the *vere homo* in his Christology. He replaced it with a confession in which the saviour is portrayed as a super-man (Dutch: *een super-mens*), a divine man (Dutch: *een goddelijke mens*) in whom, in the final analysis, neither God himself nor man himself can be found (1976:45). Apparently, Berkhof's Christology illustrates that if one does not begin with God, you will also not end with God!

Finally, it is abundantly evident that in Berkhof's Christology a marked emaciation process has taken place. Jesus is indeed the unique man, the perfected covenant man, the new man, the eschatological man. Yet, He is still man. He is not God. Precisely because He is only man, the cruxes of classical Christology are either relativized, or explained away, and consequently actually dropped. This concerns the virgin birth, the Trinity, Jesus' eternal preexistence, sinlessness, God-forsakenness, and ascension. Surprisingly, only the resurrection remains relatively unscathed. Significant in regard to this emaciation is the remark of E.P. Meijering: "I am not so sure that I can replace that which I discard from tradition with something better. Therefore, due to the lack of better, I retain more than Berkhof does" (1997:8). C. Graafland is more incisive when he states that Berkhof's Christology may perhaps appear clear and intelligible, but in fact it is particularly unclear and difficult to understand...Berkhof aims to provide a Christology which is intelligible for modern man. But that he could not achieve, with the result that to a large extent his dogmatic ideal fails (1976:43).

7.8 Conclusion

H.M. Kuitert says that according to Berkhof all good theology is for that reason *Vermittlung*, but that not all *Vermittlung* is necessarily good theology (1994:77). Kuitert himself, however, expresses his misgivings about the entire concept of *Vermittlung* (79). Indeed, he doubts whether this concept still fits in the framework of the search-designs (Dutch: *zoekontwerpen*) of current faith traditions (78, 79). Apparently, he is of the opinion that it is an outdated concept (75).

Kuitert's misgivings aside, is Berkhof's *Vermittlung* good theology? G.G. de Kruijf mentioned that in the closing pages of Berkhof's *Two Hundred Years of Theo-*

logy he detected a certain unrest in Berkhof regarding the way he went (1984:195). Evaluating theology from the time of the Enlightenment in which his own design is included between the lines, Berkhof states: “Did it mean anything? ...The question must not be avoided. The men with whom we occupied ourselves here sought to achieve something. They were pained by the ever growing gap between their church and their culture — the liberal theologians definitely no less than the orthodox. And they wanted to make the gospel understandable in their world — the orthodox just as well as the liberal. Was that goal achieved? Unfortunately, the answer has to be negative” (1989:308). Berkhof’s experience was: “...we can put the problem differently and hopefully better than our predecessors, but that does not mean we can resolve it” (Berkhof ET 1979b: 219). That is clearly the case with regard to the four aspects of his mediation theology which we examined. Two closely connected factors underlie his inability to bridge the gap between the various contra elements which he faced. The first is his choice to begin, not where Barth began, but in one way or another with *man*. Once that choice was made, the next, strange as it may seem, presented itself almost obviously, namely: to make the concept of the covenant the basic principle of the structure of his mediation theology. And that despite the fact that at the beginning of his theological career he maintained that the use of the word “covenant” as *terminus technicus* in dogmatics is from an exegetical and dogmatic point of view precarious. These choices not only made his theology vulnerable, controversial, and unconvincing, they also proved that in the final analysis it is not always possible to be a man of the “and...and”. At some stage the “either...or” cannot be avoided.

In the background of Berkhof’s mediation theology is a shrouded figure: the hands, covered with dialectic hair, are those of Barth, but the voice is that of Schleiermacher!