Summary

Absence of God. An Investigation into Answers with W. Pannenberg, K.H. Miskotte and A. Houtepen

In this study I concentrate on the perceived absence of God, as it factually plays a role in the consciousness and acting of modern West-European people. In order to do so I have chosen three theologians as contributors to the debate: W. Pannenberg, K.H. Miskotte and A. Houtepen. In the research I only indirectly include the question of the origins of the experience of God’s absence in modern European culture. I will do so only when it appears that the answer to this question is linked directly to the way in which any of these theologians evaluates the question of the absence of God today. However, I do not try to give a definite answer to the question of who is right on this point of view in as much as such a treatment would demand a completely new and different cultural historical and cultural philosophical study.

The question is: How are these theologians dealing with the imputed absence of God? How do they process this in a theological way? What are the causes they see, and what new theological impulses do they give in order to bring God again to the fore in a relevant manner; this, within a climate in which He has become a vague and absent factor to many people. Here we encounter the problem of different terminologies that are used. One theologian speaks of the absence of God; another speaks of the death of God, whereas yet a third one speaks of the hiddenss of God. One theologian speaks of atheism or nihilism; another of the agnosm of our contemporaries. With each author the terminology used will be clarified and it will be shown that it is the same phenomenon they reflect upon.

Three Theologians

For my research I chose three theologians who have dealt comprehensively with the question of the absence of God during the twentieth century. It is with help of their concepts that I arrive to my own position. The first theologian I study is W. Pannenberg (1928- ). Pannenberg was born in Eastern Prussia (now Poland) and was raised without a Christian background. As a student he accepted the Christian faith only after the Second World War. Thus, even though he became a Lutheran theologian, he had not been ‘contaminated’ by this tradition. This makes for a likely explanation of why he does not use one particular Christian tradition in his work, but draws from greatly divergent opinions, from Augustine to Luther; from Maximus Confessor to Barth. He was quite strongly influenced by the latter initially, but even then he already also went his own way. He is driven to show to those
who lived after the Enlightenment that Christian faith in fact is a very plausible option if one wants to do justice to the questions they ask themselves concerning the destiny of the world’s and their own. Pannenberg especially wants to take the Enlightenment serious, and at the same time he wants to show that Christian theology is not outdated, but that it also offers answers indeed that meet modern human beings. The problem of the absence of God that is being raised by the Enlightenment, he wants to unmask as a serious misunderstanding. Those who think they can abolish God is neither doing justice to being human, nor doing justice to the factual course of history.

The second theologian whose thoughts I will trace regarding this aspect of God is K.H. Miskotte (1894-1976). He is a completely different person from Pannenberg. For whereas Pannenberg is very analytical, systematical and rational in his theology, and one never finds Pannenberg’s own existential questions explicitly although they are present of course, Miskotte is an intuitive spirit; how he deals with his themes is hardly systematical, his language is rich and expressive and is existentially loaded as if by an artist or a mystic. Dogmatically he leans towards Karl Barth, whom he admired during his entire life. Yet, precisely the question of the absence of God was much more important to him than it was to Barth. In view of the theme of the present study, this penchant makes him such a fascinating contributor to the debate. Theologically speaking, with him we come into contact with Barth’s position, but Miskotte’s own struggle with the burning question of God’s hiddenness renders insights that have a surplus value.

The third theologian is A.W.J. Houtepen (1940-2010), who is from the Roman Catholic tradition. In this tradition, much more than in Protestantism, people have always assumed a primeval alliance between God and humans, between God and the world. Here, Houtepen, as a contemporary representative of this Roman tradition, is the complete opposite of Miskotte. It is a daunting challenge to sustain a contrast especially between these two thinkers. The relationship between Pannenberg and Houtepen is more clear than the one between Houtepen and Miskotte. Even so, Houtepen also goes his own way in comparison with Pannenberg. On the one hand this is linked to the differences between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant traditions; on the other hand it is connected to the differences between modernism and post-modernism. Like Pannenberg, Houtepen seeks for a restoration of the alliance between the Christian tradition and culture. Thereby he seeks for ways in which God again becomes a relevant factor to our contemporaries. However, he is not someone aiming for a large and all-embracing concept, a totalizing thinker on a scale such as Pannenberg. We will observe him in conversation with Pannenberg and we will see what theologians of the Reformed tradition can learn from his approach.
Method

The research proceeds as follows. In an introductory chapter I will sketch how the undergirding theme of the absence of God again and again plays a part in discussions in the church. However, this specific theme is rarely made explicit. This is detrimental to coming to grips with the issues at hand.

This opening chapter is followed by an extensive chapter about Pannenberg. It closes with a number of questions and highlights which we will revisit in the next chapters. In the discussions on Miskotte in chapter 3, and on Houtepen in chapter 4, we will keep these questions in mind as we evaluate and analyze the concepts of these two authors. I chose this order, because Pannenberg is related to Miskotte’s issues and questions as well as to those of Houtepen. With Miskotte he shares the emphasis on the special history of God with His people of Israel and the special revelation in Christ, whereas with Houtepen he shares the longing for a restoration of a relation between belief in God and the prevailing thought in present-day culture. Therefore, Pannenberg’s theology forms a suitable point of reference to weigh both other theologians in their weaknesses and their strong points. Even so, it does not imply that we judge Miskotte and Houtepen by Pannenberg’s approach, for too many questions are raised with Pannenberg’s own positions. It merely denotes that, when listening to Miskotte and Houtepen, we will have developed a keener hearing from what we discovered in Pannenberg’s reflections.

In chapter 5 we will compare these three theologians with regard to how they go about answering the question of the absence of God. We do not intend to point to the differences and to reason from there about who is correct. That would be too easy, given the fact that those differences already have been strongly presented. It is a method in which we will listen to all three theologians again but now while they speak jointly about a number of sub-themes that will arise from the most important theme of the absence of God. We will question in what way these three theologians are able to reinforce each other when we ourselves seek for an answer within the contemporary missionary context of the church’s believing and speaking. Although we will also show at what point they exclude each other, we shall especially try to discover how they can develop a converging force.

In the final chapter we come to our own position. By doing so we hope to contribute to the necessary discussion within the church about the question how to bring God back into our speaking in a climate in which God is not present in the awareness of life of a great many people.

W. Pannenberg. Because of our Fault the Present God is Absent

The research on Pannenberg’s contribution to the discussion about the absence of God sets out with a lecture, held in 1978, by the title of Die Erfahrung der Abwesenheit Gottes in der modernen Theologie. Pannenberg sees modern anthropocentrism as the most important cause of the absence of
God in present culture. How can this be overcome? In Pannenberg’s concept it is important that this anthropocentrism is not only approached in a negative way - as being the great mistake of modernity - but that it is shown that humans do not take themselves seriously until they take God seriously as well. Anthropocentrism originated in the Enlightenment as a reaction to the wars of religion. The Christian religion was seen as obstruction to human happiness and as cause of discord and hatred. However, it was a big mistake that thereby the Christian God also was diminished, for human beings have a natural inclination towards God. Pannenberg illustrates this observation by means of the concept derived from Max Scheler, namely Weltoffenheit. Modern anthropology - as originating from the Enlightenment - in fact makes the best case for the Biblical God because Weltoffenheit corresponds best with a God who is defined by clear ‘otherness’ and thus invites people to be engaged in this world with a future that opens up to ever new horizons. Here God is the aim in which human striving can find rest and in which human destination enters into fulfillment.

To think that ‘with death it is all over,’ is contrary to the Weltoffenheit of human existence. Weltoffenheit means being focused on the future, on a totally new life. However, even though people can be focused on this, who is guaranteeing them that this totally new life is really coming? This is what the Biblical God does because He raised Jesus from death. The first Christians saw the resurrection of Christ as fulfillment of expectations from the Old Testament and as a first breakthrough of the ultimate Kingdom of God. If this resurrection did not occur, the most important reason to believe in the completion of human expectations is lost. Thus, two items are important to Pannenberg in order to overcome anthropocentrism. 1) Showing from a modern anthropological point of view that human beings have a natural inclination towards God 2) Demonstrating that having a natural inclination towards God, and thus towards the completion of human longing, is not a pious wish, but is based upon factual observations. Therefore, Pannenberg makes elaborated attempts to show that believing the Scriptures has constantly been based on actual facts, especially so in the case of believing the resurrection of Christ. Jesus has risen. This is a fact historical research is allowed to - and can - deal with. Yet this does not mean that the resurrection of Christ can be proven as a fact nobody can ignore. However, there is not a single scientific reason to deny this event.

The conclusion of my research on Pannenberg’s contribution is that his high stakes effort - to overcome the Enlightenment in its own field - is not entirely successful. Still, Pannenberg does more than making an interesting attempt to show that God and human beings are no competitors and that believing the resurrection of Christ is not implausible beforehand. Having taken notice of his works, a question which remains is: did not Western culture write off God too quickly, and without strong evidence? Should it not be possible to rethink whether this was right? Moreover, Pannenberg here adds
to the argument that in his opinion it is provable, by documentary evidence, that by dismissing God Western culture has more likely declined than flourished.

Pannenberg contends that God will remain absent as long as the witnesses do not speak about God. However, such witnesses have every incentive to speak up and break the silence. After all, there are very good reasons to see the God who is being proclaimed by the Christian tradition as the one that every human heart is longing for by nature, and is a God who left recognizable traces in history. Those traces can be discovered by anyone open to them. If the witnesses remain silent they are to blame, because God’s absence in Biblical terms does not intend to say that God has retired but that God is in hiding. As a consequence, culture declines and is caught in a permanent crisis. The experiences of an absence of God are not consequences of the fact that God does not do anything any longer but indicate that God has withdrawn and thereby judges a culture which excludes God as such. The ‘Absence of God’ in Biblical language is an active absence consisting of judgement. Thus it is very important that God’s witnesses do not remain silent but that they present God by word and deed in a godless culture but also by exploring a philosophical theology. Pannenberg himself is a witness who does not remain silent as he demonstrates in contemporary categories of thinking that God is truly making a difference and that this God is reliable.

K.H. Miskotte. Absence of God as Counterpart of Presence

With Miskotte, the absence of God is, apart from a reality in such a culture, also an existential experience in the relation with God. God, presenting the divine self in absolute power, can also hide and in this way be absent in people’s experiences of faith. My contention, founded on his earliest works, is that Miskotte felt the absence of God in culture to such a profound extent - especially also in its painful aspects - because he had a mystical mind. Miskotte himself puts it into a broader perspective and contends that believers can only show solidarity with a culture that is marked by the absence of God when they realize how unnatural God’s presence is and yet how precious it is at the same time. Apart from theological works, I use many sermons and meditative texts of Miskotte in my research. For it is in sermons and meditative texts that the existential dimension of the subject matter is constantly dealt with. In such sermons Miskotte also expressed to what extent he has realized that only a return to the Biblical ‘abc’ can overcome the crisis. By using the Biblical ‘abc’ phrase he especially means the Old Testament testimony concerning the NAME. It is in the Name that God has made known God’s being. By revealing this Name God makes Godself known in God’s freedom: the God who is different from all other gods. According to Miskotte, in the Christian tradition the God of the Bible has been equalized to merely one of the gods who people need at one time and declare unnecessary at the other, gods whom they love and hate. In this way, Miskotte gets to his
thesis that nihilism and religion are two sides of the same coin. Nihilism - God is dead and life is absurd - originated from the soil of a Christian Europe that had exchanged the God of the Bible for a god of religion, a home-made god. Nihilism, however, is difficult to maintain in its absolute form. If God is dead, and life is absurd, how then is it possible to live? That is why such nihilism often reveals itself in ‘pseudo’ nihilism in which people remain religiously involved one way or another. They are flirting with God even when God as revealed in Scripture does not exist for them. According to Miskotte, not a single attempt should be made to somehow cling to religious remains that are amply present within this ‘pseudo’ nihilism. For such a procedure would, at the most, bring back again only the god of religion. The God of the Bible will never allow God as God is to be found in this way. We only discover God if we open ourselves to hear the Voice from the other side as it comes to us in the Holy Scriptures. It is a misunderstanding to think that in this view it is all about believing on authority; that, in fact, would concern a form of believing on authority that people were used to prior to the Enlightenment. It is in God’s own freedom that God respects human freedom. In such freedom God calls for people to give a free answer. It is not about believing on a forced authority; it is about people having the miracle of revelation being truly fulfilled to them. In this event something becomes visible that is not uncommon to ‘everyday’ life: people receive the best things if they are open to be surprised, such things ‘befall’ them, literally. Regardless of all his rejections of natural theology, Miskotte does speak of an analogy between the revelation and the basic life experiences. The God of the Bible is the God of surprises.

A. Houtepen and his Approach towards Agnosm

The last sentences of the previous text take us to a key word in the works of A. Houtepen, the word ‘gratuity.’ He means by this to say that the goodness, the love of God befalls us for free - just like that. With Houtepen it is also about removing all sorts of god images that Christianity cherished but in which people got stuck. As a consequence, Christian faith is no longer attractive to most people and God is nearly absent in the culture of today. Houtepen speaks of agnosm being the most characteristic way of life these times. Agnosm is the diffuse sense that most likely there is no god but one can never be sure. He uses this word to distinguish it from the word agnosticism which is used much more often, which he regards as the deliberately rejecting of every presumption there would be something like ‘God’. Houtepen wants to speak of God in a new way, the way in which God revealed Himself in Jesus from Nazareth. In that sense, he is a theologian of revelation, just like Miskotte. Yet upon further study, the differences are large. Houtepen connects the salvation that became apparent in Jesus of Nazareth with the early church, but that was also spoken of as the Logos in a Christian way before Jesus, and since also outside the church. In this way a connection is
developed of the salvation revealed in Jesus with all that is truth, good and beautiful in this world. In various religions some of these elements enlighten its followers and they are searched for by non-religious people of good will also. The question that remains in the end is here whether Houtepen’s plea is convincing enough to demonstrate the unique meaning of the God of the Bible in an agnostic culture. To be sure, it is very much his intention to do so. He is worried just as much as Pannenber about the fact that this God has been excluded from culture. According to Houtepen such an exclusion can never allow life to improve as it is meant to be. He too, sees various signs of cultural decline where people do not count with God. He contends that we should not be content with but a few people coming to personal faith experiences in life. What matters is that people can speak again of God in the heart of culture and in the very center of all thought.

Houtepen mentions four basic emotions in people’s lives that include a reference to the God of the Bible: longing, trust, resistance and forgiveness. Houtepen takes the deepest interpretation of these basic emotions from the testimony of the Bible. At the same time this interpretation contains recognizable traits for all people, and to all human beings: they can serve as windows opening up a view in God’s direction.

Another important issue in Houtepen’s plea is his re-reading of Descartes. Against the common opinion that God’s disappearance from the Western culture started with Descartes, Houtepen contends that Descartes, in his methodical doubting toward obtaining certainty, is talking of all matters except of God. There is no need to come to certainty about God since God is the infinite reality preceding all our thinking and covering all our thinking. We know God in a different way than we know all objects. According to Descartes there is more to it than the knowledge which is obtained through counting, measuring and weighing. There is also a different knowledge which is obtained through amazement. Ricoeur has named this difference the difference between the instrumental reason and the hermeneutic reason. In various ways Houtepen tries to show that speaking of God is very well possible in modern culture; however, this culture then has to let go of the narrow-minded opinion that only what is known through instrumental reason is of importance.

**Hearing; Asking; Contradicting. Three Voices which Reinforce Each Other**

It is by this title that I bring W. Pannenber, K.H. Miskotte and A. Houtepen into contact with each other around the following six themes:

1. Absence of God as a problem of thinking, as judgment and as existential experience
2. Apologetics
3. Revelation and experience
4. The question of theodicy
5. Who is the human being?
6. Overcoming death
In these sub themes which are all linked with the question of the absence of God, I will show in what way the three theologians mutually complete and contradict each other. I especially seek for a converging movement by which these three theologians, who differ in many respects, can reinforce each other in the challenge of missionary preaching of the church to introduce God again in a culture in which God is absent. I consider this joint approach more fruitful than having their analyses play off against each other, which would not be difficult to do on strictly systematical-theological grounds. In this way, my study is meant to be a specimen of practicing theology where questions of a systematical nature are not trivialized but are taken into consideration when dealing with an overarching question, namely: what is the missionary advantage of the different concepts.

The Discussion with Agnostic Contemporaries
In my final considerations I will show what I have learnt by following the method advocated above. In my own discussion with an agnostic contemporary I alternate what I learnt from one of the theologians. I especially learned from Houtepen that the world of thought of the Enlightenment should be criticized if and where it restricts itself to instrumental reason alone. I learned from Pannenberg that one can also within the Enlightenment frame of mind search for arguments by which the plausibility of the Christian faith can be brought up. Miskotte taught me that warning signals should be sounded when we, following Houtepen’s or Pannenberg’s line of thinking, eventually come to a God who is more vaguely and commonly known than the one and only God who made known God’s Name in Israel.

To summarize: I plea for a two-step-approach when speaking to agnostic contemporaries. The first step consists of opening up the closed worldview in which our culture is trapped, the worldview of immanent thinking. This is not only necessary while speaking to the agnostic contemporary but also while speaking to the agnostic within ourselves. For it is a misunderstanding to suppose that agnosm would not be present under the coat of a churchgoer who is living in a culture in which the suggestion of the solely immanent world view is strongly present from Monday to Saturday. If the basic feeling - that the characteristic human trait of believing inclusively belongs to being human - does not return, then Christian faith will not be able to prosper again. On the other hand, if this basic feeling indeed does return - and there are signs pointing to such a return - a spiritual war will start again about the question: who is the true God? The gospel of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God of Israel, is not ‘according to human kind’. Being not ‘according to mortal man,’ however, is something different from abracadabra. It is exactly because of this difference that I plead for a two-step-approach.

Where the second step is concerned, the question of ‘Who is the true God’, we rely on the revealing testimonies in the Holy Scriptures which are being explained in words and confirmed by deeds within the gathered church
of Christ, the people of God, a believing and interpretative community led by the Holy Spirit. In that sense, the adagium of the church fathers remains true: extra ecclesiam nulla salus - outside the church there is no salvation at all.