INTRODUCTION

1. Can the West be converted? A personal challenge

I am a church-planter and pastor in Amsterdam. I understand it as my vocation to bring out in the open and make plain the good news about Jesus Christ in this city. This calling motivates my life. At the same time it is a challenge. How does one speak about the gospel with contemporary people? The Reformed tradition, which has shaped me, has certain particular ways of speaking about the person and work of Christ. However, it has been my experience that the traditional expressions seem no longer adequate in conversation with people in a secular society. That, for example, Jesus’ blood cleanses of all sin is difficult to communicate in this setting. ‘Sin’ is often viewed in secular culture as an invention of a moralistic church to make people feel guilty, and ‘blood as a cleansing agent’ is language which is incomprehensible and even repulsive to modern ears. How then can the gospel of Jesus Christ connect to the lives of people living in the West at the beginning of the 21st century? This question has initiated an existential quest to find ways to re-tell the story about Jesus in such a way that people will sense the message is addressed to their longings, questions, and ways of thinking, while challenging them to re-orient their lives around Jesus Christ. I understand this existential call as a Christian, and this professional vocation as a church-planter, as part of the challenge and struggle of churches to evangelize in a post-Christendom city. If churches are not able to reconnect to the founding story that has inspired their mission, they resemble a business that has lost touch with its founding story, so that only efficiency and profit remain as the driving forces. A church that has lost the ability to tell its founding story in contemporary idiom is possibly still functioning efficiently and financially with profit, but it has lost touch with the source that provides fire and direction for its own life. This is not just a theoretical possibility. In my experience many Christians and churches find it difficult to understand the reality of the good news for today. Re-telling the story about Jesus is urgent.

While growing up in the Netherlands, I was a member of an orthodox Reformed denomination. During the ministry of a particular pastor, my eyes were opened to the beauty of the gospel and the reality of Jesus. Later, however, I struggled with a sense of disconnect between the gospel as I

---

1 The church is called ‘Via Nova’ and is affiliated with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken.
2 The name is: Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken.
understood it at that moment and the surrounding world in which I lived. During the 1990s I worked for some years with an evangelical mission agency in Russia.\(^3\) Regularly we would pray for many different countries around the world and we rejoiced in the flourishing of the church in China, Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world. But in the Western world, especially in Western-Europe, the church was in decline. It was in this context that I was triggered by bishop Lesslie Newbigin, when he posed the question: ‘Can the West be converted?’

Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the Church than the one I have posed. Can there be an effective missionary encounter with this culture—this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as "the coming world civilization."? Can the West be converted?\(^4\)

From the very first moment I heard this question, it resonated deeply with me and it was like a seed that fell into my heart. With hindsight the planting of this seed-question proved to be a defining moment in my search for a contextual and contemporary gospel.

For me this question is driven neither by a romantic nostalgia for the Christendom era, nor by a longing to heroically re-capture lost lands and intellectually dominate the secularists. Rather, it is a question that is rooted in a missionary longing to have, as Newbigin formulates it, “an effective missionary encounter with Western culture.” ‘Effective’ in this context means that the missionary encounter affirms all that is true and good about Western culture in light of the gospel, but also dares to challenge the illusions that blind people to the light of the gospel.

In Russia, I became more and more aware of the role of culture in thinking, feeling, and acting. The Oxford Dictionary defines culture as: “The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society,”\(^5\) and I started to become aware that the country in which one lives really has an impact on thinking, feeling, and acting. I started to question the effectiveness of my own Western and evangelical presentation of the gospel in a quite

---

3 Operation Mobilisation.
different cultural and religious climate. An awareness about the role of the context was born.  

This awareness caused other discoveries. I always had been under the impression that the soteriological theory of ‘penal substitution’ had acquired a universal and timeless status, but then I discovered that soteriology always had been formed in dialogue with the questions of the context. The theory of penal substitution was developed in the time of the Reformation (as an extension of Anselm’s satisfaction theory) in dialogue with questions about guilt and guilt feelings. Luther’s question: ‘How do I find a gracious God?’ resonated deeply in that context, in a way that is not true for today. I have spoken with many non-Christians and seekers, but this is not their deepest question. A presentation of the gospel-story centered in penal substitution is therefore not responding to the deepest questions in the Western context. It reflects a version of the gospel that has been contextualized in a different cultural situation. That is why Newbigin emphasized the importance of studying the context in order to have an effective missionary encounter with this culture. He noted that studies have “sought to explore the problems of contextualization in all the cultures of humankind from China to Peru,” but they have “largely ignored the culture that is the most widespread, powerful, and persuasive among all contemporary cultures—namely, what I have called modern Western culture...” and he added: “...this neglect is even more serious because it is this culture that, more than almost any other, is proving resistant to the gospel.”

My awareness of the role of the context in our thinking increased during my work in Amsterdam (since 2002). Amsterdam is a beautiful city with a reputation for freedom and tolerance. This has been a trait of the city for a long time, but Amsterdam has also changed a lot. The ethnic diversity has so much increased that the ethnic Dutch no longer form a majority in this city. Moreover, Amsterdam is now a post-modern, post-Christendom, and post-

---

6 The awareness of the influence of culture intensified when I moved from Russia to the United States. I was invited by Reformed Theological seminary in Orlando, Florida, to study for three years fulltime at their campus, an incredibly gracious gift that has touched my life in many ways. During that time my eyes were opened to the contextual nature of the biblical writings, especially through reading an article of one of my New Testament professors: Reggie M. Kidd, “Titus as Apologia: Grace for Liars, Beasts, and Bellies,” Horizons in Biblical Theology, 21.2 (1999), 185-209. A few years later I read the book from Dutch missiologist C.J. Haak, Metamorfose: Intercultureel begeleiden van kerken in een niet-christelijke omgeving (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2002). Haak emphasizes that Scripture allows the church freedom for the process of contextualization as long as she stays clear from the idolatry in the context. The impact of these thoughts are noticeable in the present study.

Christian city. How can I re-tell the story about Jesus in such a way that people in this city will rejoice in what God has done? How does one go about contextualizing the gospel? It became an urgent question.

2. Can the West be converted? A theological challenge

My understanding of the process of contextualization has changed over the years. During my work in Russia I thought about contextualization as just telling the gospel message in a new way. This is sometimes called the kernel/husk theory of contextualization. The kernel is a supracultural or supracontextual gospel-core that can be expressed within different cultures or contexts by changing the husk. It is about re-packaging the known content of the message. Recently I told someone about my research and he asked why I did not consult a marketing bureau to help me express the old truths in new ways. Unwittingly he revealed that he had a kernel/husk approach to contextualization. Over the years, however, I have come to understand the limitations of this model. Our context does not only affect the presentation of gospel truth but also our understanding of this gospel truth. It is not possible to express a ‘gospel core’ that is somehow supracultural or supracontextual. Even with a short confession like ‘Jesus is Lord,’ a Western understanding is different from an Eastern understanding, precisely because our context influences the understanding of ‘Jesus,’ what it means to be a ‘Lord,’ and maybe even of the word ‘is.’ When missionaries attempt to express the gospel within another culture or context, it is not only the context that is changed, but also the understanding of the gospel. Martien Brinkman, in his book The non-Western Jesus, uses the concept of ‘double transformation.’ Brinkman shows that in the process of contextualization (he uses the word inculturation), a process of double transformation takes place: if a concept is brought from an old to a new context, there is a change in two directions. The old concept changes its meaning when placed in a new context (and thus also loses some of its previous meaning), but also the new context is changed by being enriched with meanings that were present in the old context.

---

10 Even within the Western context the meaning of the word ‘is’ is not always alike. In a sentence like ‘Jesus is God’ or ‘Jesus is Lord’ the word ‘is’ has often more ontological overtones than in the sentence ‘God is a rock.’
11 Martien Brinkman, The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor or Healer? (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2009), 1. See also: Anton Wessels,
This understanding of contextualization brought a shift of focus in my quest to re-tell the gospel story. The main focus was not any longer on just trying to express the gospel with new idiom in a fresh way within the Western context, but on re-discovering the content of a contextual gospel. I realized that the question of contextualization was not just a question of a strategy of evangelism, but a truly theological question on the understanding and embodying of the gospel in a specific context. If the context shapes our understanding of the gospel, what understanding of the gospel is shaped and called forth by the post-modern, post-Christendom, and post-Christian context of Amsterdam, or (more broadly) of the Western world?

3. Theology Contextualized

It was the Third World theologians who put the contextual questions first onto the theological agenda. First world theologians have, for a long time, struggled to recognize the contextual nature of their Western theology, and therefore also of the Western understanding of the gospel. For example, though Western theologians spoke about ‘Latin-American theology’ or ‘liberation theology,’ they did not speak about ‘Western theology’ but simply about ‘theology.’ Somehow, Western theologians, being influenced by ideals of timelessness and universality, have often not been aware of the contextual nature of their work.

The word ‘contextualization’ is derived from the word ‘context,’ which has its roots in ‘contextus’ (Latin), meaning ‘weaving together.’ “In literary pursuits, context is that which comes before and after a word, phrase, or statement, helping to fix its meaning or the circumstances in which an event occurs. Contextualization can be defined as making concepts and methods relevant to a historical situation.” Therefore, in the mission of the church contextualization means making the gospel relevant to a historical situation, enabling the message of God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ to become alive as it addresses the vital issues of a sociocultural and socioeconomic context.


12 I use here the terms ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ because theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin-America have accepted this terminology and united themselves in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).


The introduction of the word ‘contextualization’ in 1972 marked a new phase in the missionary reflection on the relation between ‘gospel and culture.’ In that year the Taiwanese Shoki Coe proposed the word ‘contextualization.’ In 1965, Coe had become director of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches. The Theological Education Fund had since 1958 been entrusted with the task to provide the best ministerial training for the ‘younger churches’ in the Third World and so give a much higher priority to theological education in the whole work of missions. The goal was set to assist roughly twenty centers of theological education in the Third World to come up to the standards of the best theological faculties of Europe or North America in 1978. But already before the task was completed new questions were being asked and new problems were being uncovered:

It was not just that the theological schools of the Third World needed to be brought up to the “best” Western standards. It was the question whether these standards really are the best, whether the models of ministerial formation accepted in Europe and North America are really the right ones for the Third World—or even for the areas where they have been developed.

These new questions surfaced in the ‘Third Mandate Programme (1970-1977)’ of the Theological Education Fund. It resulted in a strong emphasis on renewal and reform in theological education, and in a new focus on the concepts of ‘contextuality’ and ‘contextualization.’ These seminal concepts, and the proposed approach to theology which they represented, resonated deeply and came quickly to the forefront of missiological concern. According to the influential South African missiologist David Bosch, contextual theology

---

18 Staff of TEF, Ministry in Context. The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77), 19.
truly represents a paradigm shift in theological thinking.\textsuperscript{20} Of course, from the very beginning of the mission of the church, the understanding and embodying of the gospel was influenced by the culture in which the gospel was proclaimed.\textsuperscript{21} Every theology has a \textit{Sitz im Leben}. That is true enough, and in itself a powerful reminder that no theology is above the flux of time and the particularities of space. According to Douglas John Hall, a theology that pretends not to be contextual, is in fact theology "which hides its de facto contextuality under the guise of universality."\textsuperscript{22} So there is a sense in which contextualization always has happened, because theologians and churches always had a \textit{Sitz im Leben}, they were rooted in a particular situation. But contextualization (from another perspective) is very new. Not until our own time, according to Stephen Bevans, have theologians been so aware of the importance of context in constructing human thought and in their reading of Scripture and tradition. It was the ‘turn to subjectivity,’ that got stronger during and after the era of the Protestant and Catholic Reformation, and the nineteenth century’s discovery of historical consciousness which stimulated this awareness.\textsuperscript{23} According to Bosch, it is “only fairly recently that this essentially contextual nature of the faith has been recognized."\textsuperscript{24} American Robert Schreiter puts it in these words:

There has been an important shift in perspective in theology in recent years. While the basic purpose of theological reflection has remained the same—namely, the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in light of their own circumstances—much more attention is now being paid to how those circumstances shape the response to the gospel. This focus is being expressed with terms like “localization,” “contextualization,” “indigenization,” and “inculturation” of theology. Despite slightly different nuances in meaning, all of these terms point to the need for and responsibility of Christians to make their response to the gospel as concrete and lively as possible.\textsuperscript{25}

One could therefore say that the context is the arena in which a Christian community is called to \textit{go out} in discernment and response. Certainly, one is always influenced by the context even if one does not heed the missionary

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Hall2} Douglas John Hall, \textit{Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 77.
\bibitem{Bevans} Bevans, \textit{Models of Contextual Theology}, 5.
\bibitem{Bosch2} David Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 421.
\end{thebibliography}
calling, but contextualization is best done in service of confessing, proclaiming, and embodying the gospel. In this process the context calls for a deliberate believing stance of Christians. Dutch missiologist Bert Hoedemaker points to this with his definition of ‘context’: “A context is a junction of religious, cultural, and social histories which becomes the soil for a deliberate believing stance of Christians, from which inherited and more or less taken for granted ways of thinking are fundamentally criticized.”

Stephen Bevans lists four realities that have impact on the soil of the context. First, the personal and communal experience of people: the experience of success, failure, births, deaths, relationships, etc. Experiences can also impact us indirectly: the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi or the terrorist attacks on New York City and Paris. Second, the culture in which people live: the system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge, including the religious aspect of culture. Third, the social location of people: whether one is male or female, rich or poor, from North America or Latin America, at the center or at the margins of power. Fourth, the reality of social change: there are social changes because of the revolutions brought by electronic media and the expansion of global connectedness, and there are social changes because many societies that have been ruled by oppressive forces now recognize the rights and dignity of oppressed peoples who are struggling for liberation.

This soil stimulates Christians towards a deliberate believing stance (in confession and praxis), and this believing stance becomes then the lens through which one critically engages taken for granted ways of thinking and acting.

The realities of the context do not only influence how we view reality but also how we view the gospel. This becomes clear from the history of missions. Missiologist Andrew Walls speaks about the ‘indigenizing principle.’ It is of the essence of the gospel that God both takes people as they are, including the way they have organized their culture, and that He transforms people into what He wants them to be. The gospel is therefore both a prisoner and a liberator of culture. Walls contends that there is a great diversity of

---

26 “Een context is een knooppunt van religieuze, culturele en sociale geschiedenissen dat de voedingsbodem wordt voor een bewuste gelovige positiekeuze van christenen waarin overgeleverde en min of meer vanzelfsprekend geworden manieren van denken fundamenteel worden bekritiseerd.” Hoedemaker, Theologiseren, 311.
27 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 4-7.
presentations of the Christian faith; he even speaks of a wild profusion, and in speaking about six different phases of Christian history he states: “In each phase the expression of the Christian faith has developed features which could only have originated in that culture whose impress it has taken within that phase.” The context influences how we understand the gospel.

In this study the choice has been made to use the words ‘context’ and ‘contextualization’ rather than ‘culture’ and ‘inculturation.’ According to Volker Küster, the concept of contextualization “is a parallel development in WCC circles to the Catholic debate on inculturation.” Today, however, both ‘contextualization’ and ‘inculturation’ are used, not necessarily reflecting the church tradition of the theologian. Stephen Bevans prefers the word ‘contextualization,’ though he is a Roman Catholic theologian, and Martien Brinkman prefers to speak about ‘inculturation,’ though he is a Protestant theologian. The choice in this study for the term ‘contextualization’ reflects the desire to take to heart the missiological lessons learned in the Third World context. Because ‘contextual theology’ and words like ‘contextualization’ arose in the Third World cultures, it could remind Western theologians of these important lessons. Lesslie Newbigin said about ‘contextualization’: “The word is unattractive, but the thing sought for is essential. Ministry must be trained in a way which relates the Gospel to the real issues of obedience which the church faces in this particular time and place.” In part III of this study, a more in-depth exploration of contextualization will follow.

‘Can the West be converted?’ Can there be an effective missionary encounter within the Western context? The aim of ‘The Gospel and Our Culture program,’ initiated by Newbigin during the 1980s, was: “to stimulate and assist the Church's witness in and to Western culture, with a view to transforming the basic premises of that culture in the light of the reality of Jesus Christ.” The present study, similarly, wants to stimulate and assist the Church’s witness in and to Western culture. Though there are some challenges to the thought of Newbigin, his legacy is evident in the title of this study: ‘The gospel in the Western context.’ This is close to ‘The Gospel and Western

32 Brinkman, The Non-Western Jesus, 1.
33 Newbigin, “Theological Education in a world perspective,” 20.
34 Part III, section 2.
36 See part III, 1.2.
culture’ about which Newbigin often spoke. The differences with Newbigin’s phrase are, first, in the choice for the word ‘context’ rather than ‘culture’ and, second, in the choice to speak about the gospel in the Western context rather than about the gospel and the Western context. This second choice reflects the conviction that contextualization is not simply the interaction between the gospel on the one hand, and culture or context on the other, as if they present two monolithic meaning systems. The Western church which contextualizes the gospel is very much part of the Western context and unable to step outside that context in the process of contextualization. Moreover, the gospel has already been influencing the Western context for a very long time. Previously contextualized gospels are already present in the Western context. Speaking about the gospel in the Western context draws attention to the fact that the challenge for the Western church is to re-contextualize the gospel while, at the same time, being part of this context.

4. The Western context

This study is about the Western context. What is meant by the ‘West?’ Philosopher Charles Taylor, in A Secular Age, puts in these words: “I shall be concerned (...) with the West, or the North Atlantic world; or in other terms, I shall be dealing with the civilization whose principal roots lie in what used to be called “Latin Christendom.” Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton, who will be introduced in section 5 of this introduction, both often refer to the ‘West.’ For Berkhof Western culture is closely connected to Europe, and in his view this includes “culturally and structurally North America.” According to Berkhof, it is this culture that received the inheritance of Athens and Jerusalem. It is in this part of the world that the gospel has had the

37 It is not claimed here that Newbigin or ‘The Gospel and Our Culture Network’ would embrace this understanding, only that the phrase ‘Gospel and Culture’ tends to stimulate this understanding. According to George Hunsberger it is the presence of the little word ‘our’ in ‘The Gospel and Our Culture’ that alters the mental furniture by expanding what we all too easily take to be a two-poled conversation (between the gospel and the culture) and forcing us to reckon with a third pole (the church). George R. Hunsberger, The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 104.


opportunity, for thirteen hundred years, to influence the culture and its structures.\textsuperscript{42} And it is especially Western culture since the Enlightenment that really changed the way people related to the gospel.\textsuperscript{43} Gunton uses different words in order to refer to the Western context or Western culture. But he also traces its roots to the Western Fathers who, in their understanding of God, were influenced both by the biblical revelation and by the heritage of Greek philosophy.\textsuperscript{44} Although he deals with philosophers and theologians from the beginning of Christianity and even before—the Greek philosophers—his focus is often, just like Berkhof, on the last few hundred years. Sometimes he refers to the beginning of this period as “the Enlightenment,”\textsuperscript{45} sometimes he speaks about “the culture of modernity.”\textsuperscript{46}

The Western world can be described as a post-Christendom context. The long period in which there were close ties between the leaders of the church and those in secular power has ended.\textsuperscript{47} Following the separation of church and state in many countries a process of marginalization and a collapse of ecclesiastical power has taken place.\textsuperscript{48} Only after the World War II did this become fully visible. In the Christendom period there was a division between a Christian and pagan territory. For many centuries the Western world was the primary context where Christian presence was concentrated. From this Western part of the world missionaries travelled to many other parts of the world. However, we now realize that the challenge does not consist any longer in just bringing the gospel to some distant places, but the Western context itself has become a mission field.\textsuperscript{49}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 509-510.
\item \textsuperscript{43} H. Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” in: Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), \textit{Bruggen en Bruggehoofden}, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Colin E. Gunton, \textit{Act and Being} (London: SCM Press, 2002), 1-35.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Colin Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation: An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company & Marshall Pickering, 1985). About the Enlightenment Gunton remarks: “Like many periods of thought it cannot be precisely dated. Certainly, its chief thinkers belonged to the eighteenth century. Kant brought its ideas to a magnificent conclusion (…) But its beginnings lie much earlier in the thought of men like Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650). I am not at this stage concerned to be precise about the trends of thought it encouraged. Rather, I want to begin by outlining the \textit{cast of mind} which seems to be characteristic of an era of human self-confidence.” (3).
\item \textsuperscript{46} Colin E. Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity}, The 1992 Bampton Lectures (Cambridge: University Press, 1993).
\item \textsuperscript{47} Paas, “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe,” 12.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Paas, “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe,” 14.
\end{itemize}
The Western world is also often described as having entered the postmodern era. Christian responses seem either to celebrate it as something that liberates us to express faith with more diversity and creativity, or to attack it because it undermines Christian proclamation of the truth.\(^50\) According to Steve Hollinghurst, some of the key elements of the shift from modernity to postmodernity are: from text to hyper-text, from the story to my story, from experts to individuals, from rationality to virtual reality, from a capitalism based on production to one based on consumption (the logic of consumerism), and from facts to experiences.\(^51\) Though there is a lot of discussion about the precise definition of the term ‘post-modernity,’ and even about the question if this is a useful word, it is clear that a lot has changed in how people perceive reality and process knowledge-claims.\(^52\) Re-telling the story about Jesus Christ in the Western context must take this shift seriously, however it is defined.

The Western world can also be described as post-Christian. When missiologists use the term ‘post-Christian,’ they do not refer to the secularization of institutions but to changes in the beliefs, motivations and practices of people. “Post-Christian societies are societies where so many individuals have declined from Christian beliefs and practices that Christians have become or are becoming a minority.”\(^53\) Charles Taylor describes the move from a society where belief in the Christian God is unchallenged and unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among

---


52 Colin Gunton speaks sometimes about “postmodernity” because this is a widely used word, but Gunton believes it is better called “late-modernity” because it is only a new phase in modernity, not a new beginning. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 69. The fact that the term ‘post-modernity’ cannot be exactly defined, might point to the nature of the phenomena: “the postmodern intellectual situation is profoundly complex and ambiguous—perhaps this is its very essence.” Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 395. Tarnas lists some working principles that are widely accepted: “There is an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation. It is recognized that human knowledge is subjectively determined by a multitude of factors; that objective essences, or things-in-themselves, are neither accessible nor postable; and that the value of all truths and assumptions must be continually subjected to direct testing. The critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain.” (395-396). The discussion about contextualization can be called ‘postmodern’ in the sense that contextual theologians recognize that human knowledge is subjectively influenced (rather than ‘determined’) by a multitude of factors.

others. The process of secularization has made Christian belief an embattled option in a post-Christian society.\textsuperscript{54} It is like having to be fluent in different languages at once. This perspective makes clear that the challenge of the Western context is not just in proclaiming the gospel but also in supporting the faith of Christian believers.\textsuperscript{55} They struggle with the diminishing importance and relevance of Christian beliefs and practices on the motivational level and they need the re-telling of the gospel, in order to have a vibrant faith as a minority in a multi-religious and multi-cultural global village.

In Amsterdam it is clear that the church has entered a \textit{post-Christendom} situation. The church is very marginalized. The population which regularly visits a church on Sunday is probably limited to a few percent. The \textit{post-modern} situation is also very recognizable. Even in the nearly fourteen years that I have worked here, the questions of seekers have shifted from ‘modern questions’ (to which I responded with rational apologetics ), to questions about the experience and praxis of the Christian faith. Hardly anyone of the younger seekers will enter a debate about e.g. the trustworthiness of the Bible because they have been influenced by the climate of relativism. But they are very interested in spiritual experience. It is also increasingly clear that we live in a \textit{post-Christian} society. Many Christians struggle to keep their faith. They still know the ‘right answers,’ but this does not satisfy them any longer because they do not taste the reality of the good news.

But is speaking about the ‘Western context’ not too broad and general? Within the North Atlantic world there are great differences. There is definitely a difference between Europe and North America. There is in Europe in general a deeper skepticism against Christianity. There are also important differences within Europe: Catholic Poland differs greatly from secular Sweden, Roman Catholic Italy is quite different from the Netherlands. The Netherlands has received a much greater Protestant influence than Italy and has been more pluralistic. The differences between urban elites and rural farmers are significant in all Western countries. In light of all these differences, it can be asked whether the ‘Western context’ is a useful concept. Always when one speaks of the ‘Western context’ as a unity, a lot of diversity remains out of sight and also the subjective perspective of the observer is less easily noticeable. However, there is also an important advantage of this approach.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{54} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 3.
\textsuperscript{55} Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann expresses the importance of evangelism for Christians by not only speaking about “Outsiders becoming Insiders,” but also about “Forgetters made Rememberers” and about “Beloved Children become Belief-ful Adults.” Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 5-6.
\end{footnotesize}
One does not need to be overly concerned with all the differences between countries and the historical reasons for it, but one can concentrate on some of the major shaping forces in the modern world, emphasizing the major cultural movements and patterns of thinking and behavior, which have, in one way or another, impacted all the countries in the Western world. By zooming out one misses many interesting details, but by zooming in one cannot see the forest for the trees. In the present study the word ‘Western context’ will be used, following the habit of systematic theologians and philosophers, in the hope that by stepping back from the details a useful overall perspective will be gained.

5. Systematic Theology

This study makes the deliberate choice to turn to systematic theology in order to reflect on the understanding of the gospel in the Western post-Christendom, post-modern and post-Christian context. Theology is, according to a classical definition: “faith seeking understanding” (fides quaerens intellectum). Both Augustine and Anselm have argued that knowledge of God presupposes faith, but faith also restlessly seeks deeper understanding of the God who remains a mystery beyond human comprehension. Every believer will try to understand the nature and content of faith, but in systematic theology one tries in a rational and orderly fashion to make sense how God, people, and the world cohere. Even within systematic theology this can be done in different ways, because the way one does it is influenced by one’s primary social location: the church, the academy, or society. My own primary location is in the church, and I am aware that this has shaped the questions that are raised in this research and the priorities that are set.

One example of how my own social location has set the priorities in this study is that it is not limited to a descriptive analysis of the process of contextualization. A descriptive analysis describes the process of contextualization after it has happened. This is often the approach of those who have their main social location in the academy. Stephen Bevans, for example, in his book Models of Contextual Theologies provides different models which can be used to reflect on the process of contextualization. This type of descriptive analysis is very helpful, but what is needed as well is an approach to contextualization which supports the church in her missionary

59 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology.
calling. A local church (a Christian community) is called to go out in discernment and response. But how does she have to read the surrounding context: with a sociological, philosophical, or theological lens? And how does she have to respond to this reading: by adapting or resisting?

The fact that I have my primary social location in the church does not mean, however, that the social locations of the academy and society do not play a role in this study. David Ford has argued that every theology has a responsibility towards all three of these locations. The responsibility towards society within this research is especially reflected in part III, where there is a dialogue with many other voices within the Western context. The responsibility towards the academy is reflected in the fact that the study of Berkhof, Gunton, and the contours of the Western gospel is done in accordance with academic standards. Academic work requires sometimes a cool and detached approach, but this does not have to determine the spirit of systematic theology. Such theology can be done in the spirit of the prayer of Anselm: “I pray, O God, to know thee, to love thee, that I may rejoice in thee.”

Systematic theology as a discipline consists in three sub-fields: dogmatics (the reflection on the content or teaching of Christian faith), ethics (the reflection on appropriate conduct and action, or broader, reflection on how to live the good life), and theological hermeneutics (the reflection on the transfer of meaning). The present research will especially be concerned with dogmatics and theological hermeneutics. It reflects on the content of Christian faith in light of the question how we can understand and communicate the gospel in such a way that it keeps its original inspired meaning in the changed Western context.

This study interacts with the Bible, tradition, and the contemporary context. Theologians have always interacted with these, but the weight they have given to each differs. Van den Brink and Van der Kooi give a typology of the stance of orthodox, liberal, and radical theologians. Orthodox

---

63 In part III ethics will come into view, especially in section 3.2.
64 Both Berkhof and Gunton are Reformed theologians, so this stream of tradition has most influence.
65 The theological “field is not best described by the labels conservative, liberal, and radical.” David Ford, *A Very Short Introduction*, 28. Van den Brink and Van der Kooi agree with Ford that these labels have their limitation and give therefore also other descriptions of the field. Van den Brink & Van der Kooi, *Christelijke Dogmatiek*, 42-44.
theologians often emphasize the importance of the past and the dogmatic choices that have been made in church history. Liberal theologians emphasize the importance of the present, because they believe that a Christianity which sticks to antiquated presentations and does not interact with contemporary forms of thoughts, is destined to perish. Radical theologians emphasize the importance of the future, because they think that following either the past or the present will result in an uncritical and status-quo type of theology that makes Christians fall asleep. They see it as crucial that theologians think from the future of the promised Kingdom of God and act accordingly. In light of this typology this study has a somewhat unusual combination: I come from an orthodox background and value both the Bible as the Word of God and my own Reformed tradition. I am gripped by the question of meaning in the contemporary context. And I have become convinced, through the insights of Third World theologians, that the perspective from the future is very important. I leave it to the reader how to best typify the resulting theology.

6. Contextualized Christology

When one wants to study the content of the gospel from a systematic theological angle, a logical choice is to turn to Christology, a sub-field within systematic theology. Christology includes both the study of the person of Jesus Christ (sometimes called ‘Christology proper’) and the study of the work of Christ (soteriology). Because the gospel has to do both with Jesus Christ as person and with His work, it seems unwise to separate these areas in a study on contextualizing the gospel in the Western context. Unless otherwise noted the term ‘Christology’ in this study will therefore be used to include both these dimensions. Another reason to choose to study Christology is that it is one of the best fields in theology to study questions about contextualization. Christology has always been of central concern at times when questions about the interaction with a dominant culture were in view. Colin Greene states:

The most profound, disturbing, prophetic and enduringly significant theological exploration is usually born out of a confrontation with specific cultural and historical contexts. From the apostle Paul to Tertullian, Ambrose and Augustine struggling with the idolatrous pretensions of the Holy Roman Empire, to the Reformers resistance to the heteronomy of the Roman Catholic Church, to Karl Barth and the Barmen declaration and the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theology and successive theologians made

---

66 Van den Brink & Van der Kooi, Christelijke Dogmatiek, 41.
67 In part III (section 4.1) it will be argued that the division between the person and work of Christ is not only unhelpful but also incomplete.
a stand against cultural hegemony in the name of the crucified and risen Christ. Nothing pushes Christology back into the centre of theological concern more than the threat of cultural domination and nothing removes Christology to the margins more than the scourge of cultural accommodation.68

Robert Schreiter, who has made major contributions to understanding contextualization, writes: “If any single area of theology is especially poised to raise questions about the nature and practice of inculturation, it is surely christology.”69

By focusing on contextualized Christology, this study assumes the contextual nature of Christology, something Western theology has sometimes found difficult to admit. Martien Brinkman in his study about “the hidden Christ in Western art” remarks that Christians in Africa and Asia often asked him about the extent to which the Western Jesus is also colored by the Western cultural context. He continues:

I argued that Western theology still does not speak readily about that, given its constant claim to universality. Nevertheless, the awareness is growing that a Western face does not have to be a limitation. If it is an indication of the creative rooting of theology in its own culture, it is an enrichment.70

The present study wants, in a different way, to make a contribution to this creative rooting of theology in its own culture. This does not mean that each expression of the gospel would be equally valid and authentic and that Western churches could be at liberty to enjoy their own version of the gospel in isolation from all others. As missiologist Andrew Walls has pointed out:

Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ’s completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world’s cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.71

70 Martien E. Brinkman, Jesus Incognito: The Hidden Christ in Western Art Since 1960 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2012), 210-211.
Contextualized Christology raises immediately questions about the unity and legitimate diversity of different contextual gospels. This will therefore be an important theme in this research. There is a tendency to polarization around these question. Either the unity of the gospel is emphasized in such a way that there remains little room for contextual approaches, or the diversity of the gospel is emphasized in such a way that the result is a complete relativism about questions of truth. This study will attempt to clarify the relation between the unity and diversity of the gospel and delineate the room for legitimate contextual gospels.

7. Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton

Using Christology in my search for a contextualized Western gospel, I have searched for two recent Western theologians to be my dialogue partners. I have looked for theologians with the following characteristics: they are systematic theologians, they have consciously related to the Western context, they live or have lived within the Western context, and they are still alive or died not too long ago. Because the present author has Reformed roots, it seemed also most helpful to choose theologians who share those theological roots so that the study could make a contribution to Reformed theology in the Western context. The choice has been made for Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton. They have a lot to offer.

Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-1995) was a Dutch pastor and theologian. He was influential and well-known, also outside the Netherlands through his writings and his work with the World Council of Churches. Berkhof had very sensitive antennae for developments in the Western context and he produced a systematic theology that was intentionally contextualized. His Christology has inspired many people, but it has also been criticized because it stands in tension with some aspects of the traditional creeds.

Colin Gunton (1941-2003) was a systematic theologian and one of the most influential British Reformed theologians during the last decades of the 20th century. Gunton had a deep understanding of the philosophy of the Western world and he practiced theology in conscious dialogue with the philosophers of modernity. His Christology remains within the boundaries of the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

Both Berkhof and Gunton were Reformed theologians with an ecumenical orientation. Both incorporated in their theology insights from other Christian traditions. It is my conviction that the challenge of the Western
context is so immense that an ecumenical cooperation is very needed. Further introductions to these theologians will be presented in the parts below.72

Why is it worthwhile to study Berkhof and Gunton from a contextual perspective? Berkhof was intrigued by the relation between the gospel and the Western culture and pioneered a form of contextual theology. There are some parallels between Berkhof’s contextual theology and the theology of the Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, an influential contextual theologian in the Third World. Gutiérrez presented his first design of liberation theology in 1968.73 That was also the year in which Berkhof started to write Christian Faith (his systematic theology) in which he, like Gutiérrez, gives a more central place to the questions of the context. Though Gutiérrez makes the question of poverty central, and Berkhof the question of meaning, there are parallels in their approach. The relationship between revelation and experience is a central theme in both their approaches. Both were also critiqued for their theological content. Berkhof’s Christology had, under influence from the Western context, moved more and more away from a traditional orthodox position. This makes him particularly interesting when studying the relationship between Christology and the Western context.

Colin Gunton also listened intensively to the (philosophical) voices within the Western context. But Gunton, unlike Berkhof, did not move away from the classical tradition in Christology but towards it. After a short-lived fascination with process-theology, Gunton turned to Barth as his inspiration and he developed a Christology that remained firmly within the Chalcedonian parameters. He did not close his ears to the modern objections against orthodox Christology, but reformed it in dialogue with voices from the Western context. However, is Gunton sufficiently aware of the importance of contextualization and of the missiological lessons learned in the Third World context? John Parratt charges Gunton for not taking the voices from the Third World seriously enough. He writes: “Voices from elsewhere in the world, when granted a hearing at all, could be dismissed as exotics irrelevant to the ‘real’ task of theology.” And in a footnote he complains that Gunton, in his theological reader, categorizes “all things non-Western, along with feminist theology(!) as ‘local theologies.’”74 This makes it particularly interesting to study how Gunton contextualizes Christology.

72 For an introduction to Hendrikus Berkhof, see part I, section 1, and for Colin Gunton, part II, section 1.
8. Research question

The desire that has driven this research is to find an answer to the question: What are the contours of a contextualized gospel for the Western world at the beginning of the 21st century? The quest for a contextualized gospel or, in systematic theological terms ‘a contextualized Christology,’ indicates that there is a double focus in this research: both the Western context and Christology. These are not studied independently but in their interrelation. Moreover, about both these foci I want to ask a methodological and a content question.

The methodological question about the Western context is: How can the church read the Western context? It is a question that focuses on the methodology with which the missionary church analyzes the context. The content question is: What is the content of this reading? Or: What features of the Western context stand out when we analyze it with the proposed methodology?

The methodological question about Christology is: With what method can we approach contextualized Christology? The content question is: What are the contours of a contextualized Christology for the Western context?

The main research question guiding this study is:

What are the contours of a Western gospel at the beginning of the 21st century based, on the one hand, on a critical study of the theologies of Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton—with respect to the method and content of their analysis of the Western context and the method and content of their respective Christologies—and, on the other hand, on a praxis informed analysis of the late modern Western context?

The research questions guiding part I of this study is: How does Berkhof read the Western context and what is the content of this reading? With what method does he approach contextualized Christology and what are the contours of his contextualized Christology?

The research question guiding part II of this study is: How does Gunton read the Western context and what is the content of this reading? With what method does he approach contextualized Christology and what are the contours of his contextualized Christology?

Part III is structured in a similar way as part I and II. Therefore, this last part of the study can build upon the insights of Berkhof and Gunton and continue the
dialogue with them in order to answer the main research question. At that point also other relevant voices can be brought into the dialogue.\textsuperscript{75}

9. Methodology

The methodology for studying Berkhof and Gunton follows the traditional approach of analyzing their written texts in context. Their reading of the Western context is studied only in so far as it depicts itself in their writings. The focus is, therefore, not on how their own biography and context influenced their approach, but on how they are consciously related to the Western context.

The approach to these theologians will be more synchronic than diachronic, though the diachronic approach is not totally left behind. The reason for this more synchronic approach is the fact that the focus is less on how they developed as theologians, and more on their synthesis, as mature theologians, of Christology and their reading of the Western context. This is also why the focus is not on tracing every article or contribution that they wrote, but on some of their main works.

Because the focus is on how these theologians contextualized their Christology, the focus will be less on their biblical exegesis or dogma-historical analysis, though at certain points considerations from these fields will be brought into the study.

The third part moves on from an analytical towards a constructive approach bringing together the result of my critical analysis of aspects of the Christologies and reading of the Western context of the systematic theologians Berkhof and Gunton with a praxis informed analysis of the late modern Western context, using recent missiological, exegetical and systematic theological research in order to construct the contours of a Western gospel for the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

10. Relevance

This study will bring questions that have arisen on the mission-field back to Western systematic theology. “The terms ‘contextualization’ and ‘inculturation’ have come into western theology—a discipline which theology has generally ignored.”\textsuperscript{76} As Darrell Guder has written: “Neither the structures nor the theology of our established Western

\textsuperscript{75} Some of them will be mentioned in section 10 of this introduction. The justification for these added voices in the dialogue will be given in part III.

traditional churches is missional. They are shaped by the legacy of Christendom.” 77 In bringing the question of ‘contextualization’ to systematic theology, an academic contribution is made to the study of Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton. Neither Berkhof nor Gunton have been studied with a focus on their contextualized Christology. Other systematic theologians, interacting with the work of Berkhof and Gunton, often give little attention to the contextual dimension of their theology. They mostly compare Berkhof and Gunton with other theologians or theological streams within the Christian tradition, which is of course not unimportant, but the Western context as discussion partner is mostly absent from these interactions. For example, in *Weerwoord: Reactie’s op H. Berkhof’s Christelijk Geloof*, a number of theologians respond to Berkhof’s *Christian Faith*, but not one of the contributions makes Berkhof’s reading of the Western context explicit. 78 The same is true for Gunton. In *The theology of Colin Gunton*, a number of theologians from across the world engage with his theology, but it is remarkable how little explicit attention is paid to the role of his reading of the Western context. 79

Part III of this study is relevant and innovative. Often the understanding of the gospel is either that it clearly can be spelled out in a few statements or the emphasis is that the understanding of the gospel within different cultures is so diverse that we cannot say anything about it. Part III presents a different understanding of the gospel and shows how this understanding can be used to read the Western context and discern the contours of contextualized Christology.

There is also a societal relevance to this study, because it contributes to the re-contextualization of the gospel in the Western context. The relevance of a contextualized gospel is pointed out by Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan: “For each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often, the answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny.” 80 By bringing missiological and contextual questions to theology, this study wants to make a contribution to discerning how the church can best respond to the deepest questions of people in the Western context. A contextualized gospel answers the most

78 E. Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), *Weerwoord: Reacties op Dr. H. Berkhof’s Christelijk Geloof* (Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach bv, 1974).
79 Lincoln Harvey (ed.), *The Theology of Colin Gunton* (London: T&T Clark, 2010). The contribution of Brad Green is an exception, but it does not bring Gunton’s reading of the Western context in explicit dialogue with his understanding of Christology. Recent studies that focus on Gunton’s reading of the Western context will be mentioned in part II.
fundamental questions of human existence in a particular context and it challenges our deepest presuppositions and disturbs our most cherished illusions.

This re-contextualization of the gospel is not only relevant for the church in the West, but also for those parts of the world that are influenced by the West. Richard John Neuhaus expressed this for the North-American context already a while ago by saying that the emergence of contextual theology does not mean that Christians in the West have

(...)

to parrot liberation theologies that are born, through much suffering, from situations dramatically different from our own. Our task, inspired by thinkers such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, is to apply ourselves to the North American experience, trying to reshape it in a way that might result in a more fulfilling society here and a society that is less oppressive, if not liberating, for our brothers and sisters to the south.\footnote{Richard J. Neuhaus, “Liberation Theology and the Captivities of Jesus,” in: Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky (eds.), \textit{Mission Trends}, 3 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 61.}

The struggle in the Western world to re-contextualize the gospel in late modern (or: postmodern) culture, therefore also has relevance for the non-Western world. According to missiologist Hoedemaker, it is not sufficient to grant the cultures in the South their own cultural position. It is necessary to face the fact that, in our global world, there is an asymmetric relation between the Western and non-Western world characterized by huge structural problems. In fact, the relationship between the modern-Western culture and the other cultures of the world is an overarching problem.\footnote{L. A. Hoedemaker, “Contextualiteit: verschillende benaderingen en gezichtspunten,” in: L.A. Hoedemaker (ed.), \textit{Theologiseren}, 279.}

Therefore Western theology should orient itself at those points where the appeal of the worldwide theological discussion becomes audible.\footnote{L. A. Hoedemaker, "Contextualiteit en theologie," in: L.A. Hoedemaker (ed.), \textit{Theologiseren}, 312.}

Contextualization is one of those points. The driving force for contextualization is the question of Jesus: ‘Who do you say I am?’\footnote{Mark 8:29.} The church in the Western world has to answer that question not from the perspective of a few centuries ago (suggesting that their answer would in its totality give a universal and timeless answer), but from the Western part of the world in the 21st century. But when the answer is a faithful response to the real Jesus, there might be the hope that in some way this answer (embodied in community) will contribute to a society that is less oppressive, if not liberating, for our brothers and sisters in the south.
11. Outline

Part I is a study of the theology of Hendrikus Berkhof. The structure follows the research question for this part. After an introduction of Hendrikus Berkhof (section one), it starts with the methodology with which he reads the Western context (section two) and the content of his reading (section three). Then the method with which he approaches contextualized Christology will be studied (section four), followed by the contours of his contextualized Christology (section five). Part I closes with an evaluation of Berkhof’s contribution (section six).

Part II is a study of the theology of Colin Gunton. The structure of this part is identical to part I.

In Part III I give an answer to the main research question. Part III follows the same structure as part I and II. But part III starts off with discussing the nature of the gospel and the relation between the gospel and the context. The study of Berkhof and Gunton makes clear that the gospel should play a central role in theology. However, there is much confusion about the nature of the gospel. If the gospel cannot be stated independent of the context, is it then impossible to state what the gospel is? Is there a givenness to the gospel or is it only discovered by interacting with the context? These questions are pursued in section one. Section two discusses the methodology with which the church could read the Western context. The dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton will be enriched by some insights of Third World theologians and insights from the discussion about missional hermeneutics within the ‘Gospel and our Culture Network.’ In interaction with these different voices a gospel-centered model for reading the context will be developed. This model will be used in section three to read the Western context. The model suggests that in analyzing the context certain images in the background of our thinking are very influential. Because Charles Taylor (A Secular Age) has analyzed the Western context with an awareness of these images, his voice will be brought into the dialogue. The gospel-centered model for reading the context looks to the context through a lens of worship, salvation, and life-style. Therefore these aspects of the Western context will be looked at. But, because of the limitations of this study, the choice has been made to look especially to the context through the lens of worship and to try to discern some of the major idols in the Western context. Section four turns then, in light of this reading of the Western context, to the question with what method the church could approach contextualized Christology. Here the dialectical movement between text and context will be explained. The last section of part III (section five) discusses the contours of a contextualized Christology for the Western context in the beginning of the 21st century. It are the contours of a contextualized
Christology and not of the contextualized Christology. It will be developed in dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton and others studies in Christology.

Finally, a more stylistic note: The choice has been made to use the spelling of ‘American English,’ except in quotations of texts that were written in ‘British English.’
PART I:
HENDRIKUS BERKHOF

Section one of this part introduces the theological development of Hendrikus Berkhof. Section two provides a descriptive analysis of Berkhof’s methodology with which he reads the Western context. Section three deals with the content of his reading of the Western context. After dealing with the Western context, Christology becomes the focus of attention. In section four the methodology of Berkhof’s Christology is considered and in section five the content of his Christology. Section six closes with an evaluation of Berkhof’s contextualized Christology.

1. Introduction to Hendrikus Berkhof

In order to gain some perspective on the contextualized Christology of Berkhof, a short overview of his theological development is required.¹ In Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-1995). Een theologische biografie, E.P. Meijering takes as periods: till 1945; 1945-1960; 1960-1981; 1981-1995.² These periods are based on important events in Berkhof’s life, e.g. his appointment as professor in Leiden in 1960, and his retirement in 1981. The present study does not take Berkhof’s personal context as a starting point, but rather the broader Dutch theological context. Berkhof’s theological development is closely connected to the developments in his Dutch post-War context. In the introduction to Bruggen en Bruggehoofden, a book with collected articles from Berkhof offered to him when he retired in 1981 as professor in Leiden, the editors affirmed this connection and wrote about Berkhof: “In his person and in his thinking Berkhof has reflected and processed the conflicts and

² Meijering, Hendrikus Berkhof, 5.
movements of the last forty years.” In one of the articles of this book, written in 1975, Berkhof ponders the changes in the theological landscape and delineates two specific periods: 1950-1965, and 1965-1975. This makes clear that Berkhof perceived significant change in the Dutch context around 1950 and 1965. As will be made clear below, around 1985 there is again significant change in the Dutch context. Based on these dates, Berkhof’s theological development can be arranged in three periods:

First period: till 1950 the impact of the Second World War
Second period: 1950-1965 the rebuilding of Dutch society
Third period: 1965-1985 the challenge of an a-theistic and secular climate

The First period: till 1950. The impact of the Second World War
During this first period, Berkhof studied at the University of Leiden (1932-1938), was appointed as a minister in Lemele (1938) and married Cornelia van den Berg (1940). Already in this early period Berkhof’s life and thinking are intertwined with the movements and conflicts in this period. The Second World War would have a major impact on the theological thinking of many theologians, but Berkhof had already become aware of some of the theological challenges in 1937. During his study in Leiden, he received a scholarship to study for a few months in Berlin. He worked there on his dissertation about the theology of Eusebius of Caesarea. According to Berkhof these months in Berlin were the most decisive period for his own theological development. He met the leaders of the Bekennende Kirche in Berlin (the Confessing Church) and became involved in illegal activities. It was here that he discovered the contemporary relevance of church history, because he saw the spirit of Athanasius in Niemöller, one of the leaders in the Bekennende Kirche, while he saw the spirit of Eusebius, the opponent of Athanasius, in those who wanted to submit the church to National Socialism. Berkhof admitted that his choice for Athanasius was influenced by his context. Through these experiences he “started to realize the meaning of Christ as Lord

---

3 “In zijn persoon en in zijn denken heeft Berkhof de conflicten en bewegingen van de afgelopen veertig jaar gespiegeld en verwerkt.” Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), Bruggen en Bruggehoofden, 8.
5 See below for the reason why 1975 is not taken as a moment of significant change in the context.
and the political relevance of the Gospel.” An interest in (what later would be called) contextualization was born.

During this first period two questions emerged that would, according to Berkhof, accompany him for the rest of his life. First, what he calls the Church question: What is the confession of the church and her calling in this world? And second, what he calls the Truth question: what is the ultimate truth and the meaning of life? In section 3.5 it will be considered whether these two questions are indeed at the heart of Berkhof’s theology.

Second period: 1950-1965. The rebuilding of Dutch society

Berkhof viewed 1950 as somehow the closing of a period and a new start. It was the end of the explosion of thoughts and publications after the Second World War. During this time the focus was on the rebuilding of Dutch society. Berkhof used the new start to broaden and extend the road that Karl Barth had shown. Berkhof had become fascinated with Barth during his time in Berlin. And yet, more and more Berkhof became convinced that Barth’s pneumatology was insufficiently developed. His approach failed to sufficiently relate Christ with reality. That became clear for Berkhof when he listened to the objectivistic preaching in many Dutch Barthian pulpits. Therefore Berkhof pleaded for a second, pneumatological, center besides the Christological. It is important to notice that for Berkhof this pneumatological emphasis served to counter the lack of orientation to the world that he observed in theology. Pneumatology connects Christ with our world: “Sooner or later we had to make clear how God builds a bridge from Christ, the one New Human, to us humans amidst our world of experience.” And God builds this bridge through the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit renews our world, and that includes the social and cultural structures. The Spirit is involved with and in our world of experience.

Many of Berkhof’s publications from the 1950s and 1960s can be understood as the working out of this second pneumatological center: A study on angelology and demonology (Christus en de machten; 1953), the meaning...
of history (*Christus de zin der geschiedenis*; 1958),\(^{15}\) anthropology (*De mens onderweg*; 1960),\(^{16}\) ecclesiology (*De katholiciteit der Kerk*; 1962),\(^{17}\) pneumatology (*De leer van de Heilige Geest*; 1964),\(^{18}\) and eschatology (*Gegronde Verwachting*; 1967).\(^{19}\)

**Third period: 1965-1985. The challenge of an a-theistic and secular climate**

Around 1965 there is something of a sea-change in general culture and in theological thinking. This period starts with a thunderstorm in the theological world, through the publication of books from authors like John A.T. Robinson (*Honest to God*), Paul M. van Buren (*The secular meaning of the Gospel*), Jürgen Moltmann (*Theologie der Hoffnung*), Dorothee Sölle (*Stellvertretung. Ein Kapitel Theologie nach dem 'Tode Gottes'*), Harvey Cox (*God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility*, and *The Secular City*), and Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton (*Radical Theology and the Death of God*). In 1966 there were the first student revolts and a ‘theology of revolution’ was born. According to Berkhof, two trends were visible in these publications. First, the modern secular climate floods the polders of church and theology. How can one speak responsibly and convincingly about God in this climate? The aforementioned authors chose no longer to think ‘from above’ but started ‘from below,’ from this empirical, historical, and positivistic climate. The second trend was the rebellion against the status quo, an impulse for societal criticism and revolution.\(^{20}\) It was not only in theological literature that the change was observable. During a lecture in 1965 Berkhof asked what the students thought about Schleiermacher’s ‘schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl’? A student replied with the question: How does he know that we are dependent on something absolute? It was especially the influence of empiricism that made people start to think ‘from below.’\(^{21}\) During this third period, Berkhof published, besides many articles, *Openbaring als gebeuren* (a study on the nature of revelation; 1970)\(^{22}\) and *Christian Faith* (his systematic theology;...

---

20 Berkhof, “Een kwarteeuw theologie,” 161-162
Though Berkhof, in his systematic theology, chooses a different direction than the aforementioned writers, he wanted specifically to include the new questions of this a-theistic and secular period and confront them with the testimony of Scripture while remaining within the theological tradition. Christian Faith includes therefore a section on ‘The Renewal of the World.’

The article in which Berkhof described 1950-1965 and 1965-1975 as distinct periods was written in 1975. The year 1975 did not mark a major transition in Dutch society. A new transition in Dutch society takes place around 1985. Historian James Kennedy indicates that around 1985 a new period starts, which he classifies as the ‘return to the spiritual.’ Also Anton van Harskamp, professor of social sciences, points to the mid-1980s as the start of a new phase, a transition that he designates as: “from ‘ethicalism’ to spirituality.” This is why, in this study, 1965-1985 has been chosen as the third period in Berkhof’s career.

In the years 1975-1985, Berkhof is still responding to an a-theistic and secular climate, but these last 10 years of his publishing career can be characterized as a time of reflection. After writing his Christian Faith in 1973, Berkhof enters a period of uncertainty in which he feared that he had written his last book. After a while new energy surfaced. In 1985 the fifth edition of Christelijk Geloof (Christian Faith) is published. Not surprisingly, Berkhof has

---

23 There are 9 Dutch editions of Berkhof’s book Christian Faith. The first edition was published in 1973. The most significant changes came in the 5th edition (1985). There are two English translations. The first one was made on the basis of the Dutch 4th edition. H. Berkhof, Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979). The second English translation was made on the basis of the Dutch 5th edition. H. Berkhof, Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith (revised), trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986). In the present study quotations are from the revised edition. This choice has been made because the focus in this study is on the mature thought of Berkhof and less on the diachronic development. However, where needed the other English or Dutch editions will be consulted.

24 Berkhof wrote often ‘a-theistic’ instead of ‘atheistic’ in order to emphasize that the denial of God was more precisely a denial and rejection of the theistic meta-physical portrayal of God. H. Berkhof, “Theologiseren in een A-Theïstisch Tijdperk,” in: Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), Bruggen en Bruggehoofden, 68. At other points Berkhof uses the word ‘a-theism’ as a synonym for ‘autonomous.’ H. Berkhof, “De Theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja,” in: Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), Bruggen en Bruggehoofden, 116.


added a whole new section on ‘Revelation and Experience,’ demonstrating his sensitivity to the cultural change that was at hand.29 During these last ten years Berkhof’s love for history also surfaced again and he started to lecture on the relationship between theology and the Enlightenment, including the solutions that were offered during the nineteenth and twentieth century for the problems occurring in the confrontation between them.30 This resulted in: 200 Jahre Theologie (1985).31 The section titles in the last chapter of 200 Jahre Theologie capture his reflective mood: “What really happened?” “Was it legitimate?” “Did it mean anything?” “Now what?” With this last major publication Berkhof takes time for backward glances and his publishing career ends. Ten years later Berkhof dies (1995).

2. The method with which Berkhof reads the Western context

How did Berkhof discern and respond to the Western context? After an introduction (section 2.1), which shows the importance of reading the context for Berkhof, three sections show how Berkhof discerned the context. He discerned the context by looking to the questions, answers, and sense of life (‘Lebensgefühl’) in the context (section 2.2). He also discerned by looking to the ‘spirit of the age’ within the church (section 2.3), and he discerned the context by looking to it in the light of his understanding of the gospel (section 2.4). Berkhof responded to the Western context through a dialectical process with enormous tensions and leading towards a crisis (section 2.5). He also responded to the context through the development of a contextualized theology (section 2.6). In the text below Berkhof’s views are presented. If a view is presented that is not Berkhof’s it will be clearly indicated.

2.1 INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF READING THE CONTEXT

Theology should not only focus on the Bible, tradition, and the needs of the church, but it should turn outwards and include an orientation to the world. Now in a sense this orientation of the church to the world has always been there, but the relation between church and world was mostly viewed as a one-way street. The church was seen as rich and handing out, while the world was

29 He describes the mood as egocentric. Berkhof, Christian Faith, xix.
perceived as only passive and poor. The church spoke, and the world had to listen. Although this construing of the relation between church and world as ‘monologue’ is no longer credible, there is a legitimate ‘speaking’ of the church. After all, the church is entrusted with the message of salvation, so the orientation to the world will always include the bringing of this message and the willingness to endure the opposition of the world against Christ. However, in the twentieth century, the church discovered two reasons why the orientation to the world should not be construed as a one-way street.

First, the church, while reflecting on her role in the World Wars and her colonial past, was confronted by the fact that she was not only rich and obedient, but also often poor and disobedient. The church herself evokes hostility from the world because the world is often deeply disappointed by the church’s own betrayal of the ideals which she herself has given to the world (see further section 2.3).  

Second, the church discovered that there is wisdom in the world. “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 the world. There is a two-way movement and interaction.” The church should, therefore, not only speak but also listen. The church has been entrusted with salvation, but she does not have a monopoly on wisdom. She is called to listen to this wisdom and connect it with Christ.

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 humanities have helped us to better understand the Bible. And strange as it may sound, it has been the spirit of secularism that has stood up against the witchcraft-hunting attitude of a myopic Christendom, that has insisted on toleration, fought injustice, exploitation, and discrimination, and battled for freedom, equality, and brotherhood, a long struggle which eventually has led to the emergence of free democratic states for which Christians and non-Christians are equally grateful.

In this citation another aspect of the ‘World’ emerges. ‘World’ is not only the totality of humankind, but also “the totality of the contexts and structures

within which human existence takes place.” There is not only wisdom in non-Christian people, but also in the societies they build, in their politics and culture (art, literature, philosophy, but also the more general aspects of culture).

The conscious ‘orientation to the world’ of Berkhof’s theology is a parallel development to the emergence of ‘contextual theology.’ When the first edition of Christian Faith was published, in 1973, theology was not yet described with the adjective ‘contextual.’ In the first edition the word ‘contextual’ does not occur. It was only in 1972 that the word ‘contextual theology’ was first coined by Shoki Coe. But in the preface to the fifth edition of Christian Faith (1985) Berkhof reflects on the emergence of contextual theology in relation to his Christian Faith and notes the parallel. He states “we should learn from the Third World to theologize contextually (...) That is how I intended my book when I first wrote it, and that is how I still intend it.” Berkhof’s Christian Faith should be viewed as a contextual theology, an approach to theology that consciously responds to its context.

The seeds for this ‘orientation to the world’ were already sown during the first period of Berkhof’s theological development. During the period in Berlin he had to ask himself how it was possible that so many German Christians outside the Confessing Church had not perceived the danger of National Socialism. Berkhof perceived as one of the major problems that their theology had failed to relate meaningfully to the context. The political relevance of the gospel had been overlooked. Berkhof’s passion to relate the gospel to the experienced reality is also visible in the second period of Berkhof’s theological development. His first major publication in this period, Christus en de machten (1953), was an attempt to show how the church could live out her calling amidst concrete social, cultural and political realities. Paul’s teaching on the powers could open the way for a more contextual ecclesiology. During the third period, Berkhof wrote Christian Faith. Here again, the passion to relate gospel and context is visible. Actually it was developments in the context that stimulated Berkhof in this writing. He had a sudden inspiration to write this Systematic Theology at an evening in May 1969 during the time of the student revolts. This period was characterized by social unrest and a rebellion against the status quo. Berkhof developed during

37 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 503.
38 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 503.
39 See part III, section 2.1.
40 Berkhof, Christian Faith, xx.
41 Berkhof, Christus en de machten; Berkhof, Christ and the Powers.
42 Berkhof, Christian Faith, xix.
this period a deep conviction (or intuition) that engagement and identity belong together. One can only venture in ‘societal-critical engagement’ when there is a source and counter-weight in a strongly inspiring and normative conviction. Stated differently, faith in the gospel finds expression within, and in relation to, the concrete societal circumstances. That is why the ‘orientation to the world’ in general and to one’s context specifically is so important. But by what method does Berkhof read his context?

2.2 DISCERN THE QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND ‘LEBENSGEFÜHL’ IN THE CONTEXT

Of first importance is discerning the questions within the context:

Western theology must articulate the Word in such a way that it comes through especially as the answer to our anxious questions concerning meaning. (...) it seeks to articulate the Good News which is an answer to our questions (...). Of course in principle our colleagues in the Third World are right; we, too, theologize contextually, but then in an altogether different context from, for example, that in Latin America (poverty and exploitation), in Africa (tribal cultures and religions), or in Asia (the individual in relation to the All). Our context is determined by the questions concerning meaning: What do we live for? What is the purpose of this world? Is there progress in society and culture? Is there a future for my life beyond death? (...).

Theology provides an answer to the anxious (existential) questions of the context and in this way fulfills the mandate of 1 Peter 3:15 to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope we have. In the Dutch foreword to the first edition of Christian Faith Berkhof expresses it even stronger: “Classical dogmatics gave in-depth answers to questions which nobody asks anymore. A modern study of the faith would at long last have to search for answers to questions which now everyone is asking.” But Berkhof

43 Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 19.
45 Berkhof, Christian Faith, xi. Berkhof’s approach at this point seems similar to the approach of Paul Tillich. Paragraph 2.6 will discuss the differences.
46 “De klassieke dogmatiek gaf diepgaande antwoorden op vragen die niemand meer stelt. Een moderne geloofsleer zou eindelijk een christelijk antwoord moeten zoeken op vragen die nu iedereen stelt.” Hendrikus Berkhof, Christelijk Geloof: Een Inleiding tot de Geloofsleer (Nijkerk, G.F. Callenbach bv, 1973), xvii. Berkhof wrote a new foreword for the English translation, which does not contain these lines. Later in his life, Berkhof seems to have reconsidered this strong opposition between classical dogmatics and a modern study of the faith. For example in Introduction to the Study of Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985) where he states that both approaches have their place, but the more focused a theology is on its context, the quicker it will be dated (62-65).
did not focus exclusively on the questions of the context. He had two reservations.

First, when one makes an analysis of the human situation not only questions arise but also answers. Giving answers is as essential to human beings as asking questions. “Were and are the great thinkers, poets, scholars only important for the questions that may be derived from their answers? They themselves would rather think the opposite to be true.”

Second, by focusing on questions, even when supplemented by a focus on the ‘answers,’ there is a tendency to give preference to the intellectual presuppositions of the context, and therefore use philosophy as the most suitable discipline to discern these questions and answers. But the intellectual presuppositions of the epoch after the Enlightenment have essentially remained the same, while it are especially the changing experiences that lead to different views. These changes in experience, in ‘Lebensgefühl’ (sense of life), are influenced not only by philosophy but also by developments in science, economy, social structures, and common experiences (e.g. the Second World War). Berkhof uses also other words to describe this sense of life: ‘Zeitgeist’ (spirit of the time), a cultural climate, and experiences and insights common to all people within a certain context. An example of such a shifting ‘Lebensgefühl’ can be seen in the time of Schleiermacher. The group to which he belonged turned against the previous sense of life (rationalism and the moral commitment to duty) towards a more romantic sense of life (in which one revels in nature, feeling, the interior world of the soul, individuality, love). Certainly, changes of insight were part of this shift, but one misses the total picture when one focuses exclusively on insights. Another example of a change in ‘Lebensgefühl’ is the one from idealism to empiricism or vice versa, a back-and-forth movement that is characteristic of the history of Europe. Such a movement took place in the nineteenth century, but many theologians for a long time missed this change.


47 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 295.
48 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 300.
49 The translator of Two Hundred Years puts the word ‘Lebensgefühl’ often in brackets behind the English translation ‘sense of life,’ probably because ‘Lebensgefühl’ is difficult to translate and can mean both ‘sense of life’ but also ‘lifestyle.’
50 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 62
51 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 68.
52 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 2.
53 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 32-33.
54 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 58
towards the new empirical, naturalistic, and atheistic culture. Why? The “worlds of Feuerbach and Comte, of Marx and Engels, the achievements of science, technology, and industry, the struggle of the working class (...) the German translation of Darwin’s main work (1863)—all these events and influences occurred out of the hearing range of theological studies and lecture halls.”\(^{55}\) In order to contextualize theology one has to pay attention to the changes in ‘Lebensgefühl.’

Berkhof nowhere delineates how a theologian can discern the existential questions and this ‘Lebensgefühl.’ He was too aware that sometimes theologians interpreted the faith in relation to a ‘Lebensgefühl’ that in fact had already passed. Not every theologian has the same antennas and sometimes very few see that an epoch has come to an end.\(^{56}\) Berkhof points, for example, to Albrecht Ritschl who, as one of the first in that period, discerned that ‘idealism’ had come to an end, and then was able to fling a plausible bridge in German theology to the ‘Lebensgefühl’ of realism. Berkhof states: “What many scholars had felt unconsciously came suddenly to the surface: (...) theology had attempted to relate the gospel to a world that was no longer there.”\(^{57}\) So there is no fire-proof method for discerning the important questions or the sense of life (‘Lebensgefühl’). But there are three things that the systematic theologian can do.

First, a systematic theologian can be careful to pay attention to experiences that are shared by most people within the context. There are of course many different experiences, and it is because of the freedom of the Spirit that “all experiences, ranging from the very intimate to the very universal and from the extremely negative to the extremely positive, can become entrance gates to salvation.”\(^{58}\) All those experiences are therefore important for preaching and other types of ministry. But the systematic theologian may not canonize one or a few experiences, although what he may do is point to certain general experiences within his context. He should be aware, however, that he take certain experiences as his theme and not certain philosophical or sociological theories about experiences. Because if the faith is formulated with the help of these theories, the intelligibility will remain

\(^{55}\) Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 68. Elsewhere he states: “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, *Two Hundred Years*, 301.

\(^{56}\) Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 67-68.

\(^{57}\) Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 69.

\(^{58}\) Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 58.
limited to a small group, and be quickly outdated when the theories are replaced by others.\textsuperscript{59}

Second, the systematic theologian need not struggle alone in finding those experiences that are of a contemporary validity. He can listen carefully to how other theologians\textsuperscript{60} perceive some of the fundamental questions and to which experiences they point as having contemporary relevance.

Third, the systematic theologian can discern the ‘spirit of the age’ within the church. This will be the topic of section 2.3.

\textbf{2.3 DISCERN ‘THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE’ WITHIN THE CHURCH}

The ‘spirit of the age’ can be discerned in two places: outside the church and inside the church. The questions and ‘Lebensgefühl’ outside the church are reflected inside the church. That is why \textit{Christian Faith} is not only written against the background of changes in Western society but also against the background of polarization within the church. There was division and tension between two groups, which Berkhof called ‘verticalists’ and ‘horizontalists,’ and Berkhof felt he had to resist the disintegration of these two groups.\textsuperscript{61} In the article “Heropening van het gesprek met de ‘horizontalisten’,”\textsuperscript{62} he tries to reconcile ‘horizontalists’ and ‘verticalists’ by pointing out that they need one another. The horizontalists were enthusiastically engaged in working for the development of man and society to greater humanity (outwardly oriented),\textsuperscript{63} but they were losing their rootedness in God and the gospel. The verticalists were, according to Berkhof, expressing their faith in an inwardly oriented spirituality but were withdrawing from the world. Berkhof agreed with the ‘verticalists’ that one should resist a form of Christianity without the gospel, but he agreed with the ‘horizontalists’ that one should resist a form of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[59] Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 58-59. It is not totally clear in \textit{Christian Faith} to what Berkhof is referring, but most likely it is to the experience of oppression and liberation and the theory of Marxism.
\item[60] Berkhof points only to the importance of listening to other theologians, but in his practice he included philosophers, e.g. Camus and Marx.
\item[62] Hendrikus Berkhof, “Heropening van het gesprek met de ‘horizontalisten’,” in: Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), \textit{Bruggen en Bruggehoofden}, 85-94. The title of the article could be translated as: Re-opening the conversation with the ‘horizontalists.’
\item[63] The General Assembly of Uppsala (WCC) had called Christians to participate in this movement. Berkhof, “Heropening van het gesprek,” 85.
\end{footnotes}
Christianity without societal engagement. Horizontal political action and vertical faith do belong together and should not be separated.\textsuperscript{64}

Berkhof engaged both the ‘horizontalists’ and the ‘verticalists.’ From his middle-orthodox position\textsuperscript{65} he pointed to two opposite dangers: modernism and conservative orthodoxy.

The first danger is ‘modernism.’ Then the church compromises the gospel under influence of the reigning ideology, as had happened with the German Christians. One should not elevate the modern spirit to the level of ultimate truth and norm. To the contrary, the church should be discerning as the Confessing church had been and take a non-compromising stand on the gospel.

The second danger is ‘conservative orthodoxy.’ The threat here is that this theology is not responding to the deepest concerns of people, and it does not discern the ‘command of the hour’ (\textit{Gebot der Stunde}).\textsuperscript{66} The reason that some types of conservative orthodoxy are vulnerable to this threat has to do with its view on truth. “Against their better knowledge many theologians still seem to proceed from a static, unhistorical, freely available ‘truth’...”\textsuperscript{67} However, there is no truth that always remains the same and only has to be passed on. The Holy Spirit places us within the critical and liberating back-and-forth movement between human situation and gospel.\textsuperscript{68}

Berkhof saw the polarization between ‘horizontalists’ and ‘verticalists’ and between ‘modernists’ and ‘conservatives’ as reflective of the ‘spirit of the age’ within the church. It was a reflection of the divided worldview in the Western context (see further section 3.1). The ‘spirit of the age’ can be discerned by looking to the extremes. The extremes are always symptomatic for the direction to which the spirit of a time moves.\textsuperscript{69} By mapping the boundaries of

\textsuperscript{64} This theme runs deep in Berkhof's life. In Berlin he had seen both the importance of an existential faith commitment to Jesus as Lord, and the political consequences of this faith. Later, during his work as rector of the Reformed Seminary in Driebergen, he also wanted to bring and keep together the different groups within the churches. His booklet \textit{Crisis der Middenorthodox} (Nijkerk, G.F. Callenbach bv, 1952) emphasized the concerns of the verticalists, while his book \textit{Christ and the Powers} (1953) emphasized the concerns of the horizontalists, the calling of the church in the world.

\textsuperscript{65} See also paragraph 2.5 and 2.6.

\textsuperscript{66} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 301.

\textsuperscript{67} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 301.

\textsuperscript{68} “Ik geloof niet aan een gelijkblijvende waarheid die wij maar hebben door te geven. Ik geloof, dat de Heilige Geest ons in dit kritische en bevrijdende heen en weer tussen situatie en Evangelie plaatst.” Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de kerk,” 21.

\textsuperscript{69} Berkhof, “Theologiseren in een A-Theïstisch Tijdperk,” 62. For a good example, see \textit{Christian Faith}, 56-58.
the river one can discern its flow. Finding one’s way between modernism and conservative orthodoxy is just one example of this process. To be sure, this does not mean that the truth is always a middle-position. Rather, one has to hold to the truths that one finds at either side of the spectrum, e.g. both holding to the truth of the gospel (as conservative orthodox would do) and listen to the deepest concerns of the people in the context (as modernists would do). Berkhof’s ability to listen to radically different approaches and try to perceive the truth of their claims, is exemplified in *Two Hundred Years of Theology*. In a very irenic and ecumenical spirit he listened to both Kant and Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and Hegel, Barth and Tillich, conservatives and liberals. This attitude enabled him to learn from a diverse range of opinions. He used that knowledge to build bridges between different streams of thought in the church, between generations, and between the church and the world.

2.4 DISCERN IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

If one only discerns the ‘spirit of the age’ without and within the church, one does not have true discernment yet. This only comes by discerning these in light of the gospel. But what is the gospel?

The essence of the gospel is *kerygma*, message and appeal in one. It is the message about and appeal on behalf of Christ who is Himself present in the life of the church. Proclaiming the gospel means proclaiming Christ, a proclamation about his coming, humiliation and exaltation. Because the message about Christ summarizes and renews the story of God and the world as made known in Israel, it cannot be told without this Old Testament background, but the heart of the gospel is the cross as a revelation that liberatingly contradicts man. Yet, this does not mean that we totally know the gospel. There is a sense in which we do know the gospel and a sense in which we do not know it. This was already so for the evangelists in the New Testament:

With their historical narrative the evangelists indeed sought to advance the proclamation of Christ. But for them proclamation (*kerygma*) meant two

---

70 This is the phrase of the Flesseman-van Leer, van Gennep, and Verdonk, the editors of *Bruggen en Bruggehoofden*, 8.
things in one: passing on to others the story of a decisive and liberating event, and that in such a manner that the addressees would discover that it was decisive and liberating for themselves.\textsuperscript{77}

We do know the gospel because there is the story about a decisive and liberating event which we, just as the evangelists, are called to pass on. The story about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are at the center of the message.

We do \textit{not} know the gospel because, just as the evangelists were, we are called not only to pass on the story of a decisive and liberating event, but do it in such a manner that the addressees would discover that it was decisive and liberating for themselves.\textsuperscript{78} The gospel is therefore not available without knowing the context and situation of the addressees. We have to rediscover and restate the gospel again and again.\textsuperscript{79} In light of this necessity it is dangerous to look for a ‘canon within the canon’ (a normative interpretation of the heart of the gospel), because the gospel is then in danger of being changed into a concept, a dogma, or an ideology. Of course, one can speak about the center (Christ) and periphery, but within every new context one has to rediscover how Christ reveals Himself, how He encounters the people in this situation.\textsuperscript{80} It has therefore been a blessing that the church, consciously or unconsciously, chose a canon with such great variations, because the variety of interpretations, some of which we today find hard or impossible to recognize as legitimate, may later prove to contain the liberating answer to questions and temptations which we cannot now imagine.\textsuperscript{81}

Discerning the context in light of the gospel means that there is always critique \textit{and} solidarity, confrontation \textit{and} consolation.\textsuperscript{82} The gospel is as a ferment that both critiques \textit{and} inspires,\textsuperscript{83} because it comes with the authority

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{77} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 273.
    \item \textsuperscript{78} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 273.
    \item \textsuperscript{79} The whole book \textit{Christian Faith} (and not only its Christology or doctrine of justification) is meant to be a restatement of the gospel: “Relative to our secularized age, 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 for so many. Relative to the church, this book aims to articulate the gospel in such away [sic.] that the reader will see how it goes its own way between rigid traditionalism on the one side and rudderless modernism on the other.” Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, xi.
    \item \textsuperscript{80} “Revelation is an event of encounter... in this case the initiative is entirely from one side. (...) Beside the revelation we need the illumination of our mind to be able to perceive the supernatural in the natural and the divine majesty in the humiliation.” Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 63-64.
    \item \textsuperscript{81} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 92-93.
    \item \textsuperscript{82} Berkhof, “De Theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja,” 120.
    \item \textsuperscript{83} Berkhof, “De Theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja,” 107.
\end{itemize}
of a revelation which liberatingly contradicts the addressees within the situation.\textsuperscript{84} The Bible provides two depth-soundings of immense prophetic strength and clarity showing that human cultures need this liberating confrontation. In Genesis 2:8-3:7 we discover that the decision of human cultures to be autonomous and a-theistic belongs to human beings as such. Similarly in Mark 12:1-12, Jesus tells the parable of the unrighteous tenants in which we see a picture of how Israel and its leaders, representing the whole of humanity, behave as if owning the vineyard while God is far away. The tenants feel threatened by anyone who comes on behalf of the Lord. They would rather kill the son, and in him the Lord himself (God), than acknowledge the Lord’s claim on their lives. In this way the gospel lays bare a single life decision at the heart of even religious cultures, namely to be autonomous and bracket (‘ausklammern’) the claims of God on our lives.\textsuperscript{85} The only difference at this point between modern Western culture and others is that we are no longer ashamed of our deepest drive. We do not feel a need to mask or embellish.\textsuperscript{86}

But how is it possible that God does not destroy such cultures? In Genesis 2-3, God threatens that humans will die in their disobedience, but it does not happen. The parable of the tenants also ends with a threat, but equally with the citation of the Psalm: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.’ (Mark 12:10-11). It is indeed marvelous. God remains faithful to his rebellious and lost creatures. He preserves His creation in spite of us, and answers our self-destructing tendencies with saving deeds through which humanity can remain on the road to the future.\textsuperscript{87} So at the root of human cultures we find both the decision to be autonomous and a-theistic, and we find the faithfulness of God, preserving these cultures and guiding them to the future.

So discerning the context in light of the gospel does not mean providing a definitive analysis. We can never give such an analysis because of our own subjectivity in understanding the gospel and in understanding culture. But the goal is to keep up and continue the critiquing and inspiring function of the gospel. Though Berkhof does not use this image, one could say that the gospel for Berkhof is more a compass showing the right direction in different contexts, than a picture or map of the landscape. If one reads the compass accurately it is possible to catch a glimpse of what God is doing in history and culture, and by following and announcing this direction we continue the critiquing and inspiring function of the gospel.

\textsuperscript{84} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 104.
\textsuperscript{86} Berkhof, “De Theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja,” 116.
\textsuperscript{87} Berkhof, “De Theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja,” 117.
2.5 RESPOND DIALECTICALLY, EMBRACING TENSION AND CRISIS

In what way should one respond to the context? It would be good to state first how one should not respond: not as Cassandra or Hananja.

Cassandra was a female seer from Troy who functioned as a prophet of doom. Theology also could take up the role of Cassandra, but there are many dangers in this approach. So often theologians have preached that catastrophes are coming, that the end of the world is at hand, that sin has filled up the cup till overflowing... but the world heard, continued as before, and (according to Berkhof) nothing happened. There is a deep theological reason why theology should not be done in a Cassandrian mode: God Himself watches over this world, God remains with people, He is faithful. A second reason why we should be careful to take up the Cassandrian attitude is that we might do so too quickly. Of course the gospel is an offense (skandalon), but we should carefully distinguish the reasons why the gospel is an offense. It can be an offense because we do understand the gospel, or because we do not understand. Too often, Cassandrian theology thinks that people reject the gospel, but the problem is that the gospel has not been presented in a lucid and relevant way. Theology should not move with the ‘spirit of that time,’ she should be prepared to move against it and beyond and above it, but the danger for Cassandrian theology is to move beside ‘the spirit of the time,’ and then to fail to relevantly connect with the context. This is especially a danger for those conservative theologians who focus mainly on explaining and maintaining certain ecclesiastical positions. They stick to rigid traditional categories, but will not be able to truly speak to this world. A Cassandrian attitude brings forth a form of churchism. Then the church 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 connections.

In the last centuries, theology often took a Cassandrian stance, but now theology is, generally speaking, afraid of all over-statements. She is

89 Berkhof, “Theologiseren in een A-Theïstisch Tijdperk,” 70.
91 Berkhof calls these conservative theologians ‘status-quo’ theologians, and distinguishes these conservatives from neo-Confessional theologians, like Kuyper and Bavinck, who consciously took their place in a great tradition which they sought to redefine or develop. Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 113. Bavinck, for example, forged his theology as a third response to the intellectual challenge arising from the Enlightenment, next to modernism and the theology of mediation. Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 131-132.
hesitant to point out the weaknesses and dangers in the ‘spirit of the age.’ Theology now wants to show ‘solidarity’ with the culture. She is willing to correct the culture but does so very pragmatically or by only focusing on symptoms. She looks like Hananja, the contemporary of Jeremiah, who prophesied peace and prosperity for the immediate future. But this approach is a form of worldliness, in fact an open betrayal. The Hananja attitude of many contemporary theologians does not do justice to the critical and inspiring function of the gospel, while this gospel should remain the norm for all our theology.

Is there another way to respond to the context? Berkhof saw three basic options in relating the gospel to modernity: confessionalism, mediation theology, and liberalism (or: modernism). Confessionalism tends to say ‘no’ and liberalism tends to say ‘yes’ to the context. Mediation theology relates gospel and context in a dialectic fashion, ever swinging back and forth between yes and no. Mediation theology shows a way between ‘rigid traditionalism and rudderless modernism,’ as Berkhof calls it. It includes both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ because this is God's movement towards this world, a movement that theology has to mirror. God pursues this wayward world with his judgment and grace, and judgment stands in the service of grace. Though man wants to live without God, God does not want to live without man.

In all solidarity with the world it [theology] must conduct a dialogue with it; but because of its solidarity with God it must do this in the form of a dispute. It cannot cover up the gap; it has to uncover it in order to bridge it. (...) [This] is true of theology in the manner of an intellectual struggle. For that reason its work entails enormous tension.

In this process it is less important if a theologian starts from the context and moves to the gospel, as liberals often did, or from the gospel to the context, as the orthodox often did. The Spirit meets the theologian where he is initially at home, however ‘carnal’ that home may be.

The Spirit will lead the theologian into tension and crisis. If the theologian does not resist this tension he will find himself in a situation of encounter,

---

96 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 304.
97 Berkhof, Christian Faith, xi.
98 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 302.
99 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 302-303.
which is more complex as well as more existential than most encounters which occur in the arts and humanities. The journey of theology always proceeds through development, differentiation, and confrontation among schools and trends, but there always emerge moments of crisis in which the gap between gospel and context is acutely felt and seemingly unbridgeable. There are analogies of this process in the life of every dynamic theologian. The Spirit will lead the theologian to a crisis in his thinking. 100 The truth of the gospel is a road everyone must travel by himself. “This road is itself the truth. One does not ‘stand’ in the truth but ‘walks’ in it on the way toward the goal that is not attainable at this side of eternity.” 101

Where it [the gospel] is turned into a mirror image of our modernity, there protest in the name of the true gospel has to arise. And where people have gone to sleep with their heads on the pillow of the “true gospel,” a new generation which has turned away from it because it seemed to have no bearing on its own experience has to be found where it is at home. Thus the journey proceeds over and over from a stage of being “before” the crisis to a stage of being “after” the crisis. 102

The crisis is not optional, because it is inherent in following Jesus Christ: “I now venture to say: the measure of legitimacy belonging to a given theological method or system corresponds to the measure in which it is involved in the double movement toward the crisis and away from the crisis.” 103 It is an analogy with death and resurrection.

But is responding dialectically, embracing the tension and facing the crisis, a fruitful road? One could be tempted to give up the quest for relating the gospel and the context because even great theologians did not seem to have much impact among non-Christians (though within the churches these theologies were very important). Might this form of Western mediation-theology be on its last legs? There are reasons why this conclusion should not be drawn. One reason is that the fundamental problems of post-Enlightenment theology are, on closer scrutiny, essentially identical with the problems in the Old and New Testaments and in earlier epochs of church history. Another reason is that non-Western theologies display the same structure and tension (experience-revelation) as the Western ones. 104 So the tension and crisis cannot be escaped.

100 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 306.
101 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 306.
102 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 307.
103 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 307.
104 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 311-312.
How can one come through such a crisis? More is needed than only intellectual struggle. Personal interaction with the Lord and fellowship within the church are needed, especially at times when the secularizing pressure from the culture is heavy. The personal reading of Scripture and prayer are indispensable, because “prayer is the accentuated manifestation of what can be called the vertical dimension of our humanity.”

2.6 RESPOND WITH CONTEXTUALIZED THEOLOGY

By entering as a theologian into the dialogue and dispute between gospel and context, a contextual theology will emerge and develop. This dynamic is already visible in the New Testament where the gospel has been handed down in a variety of forms (Pauline, Jamesian, Johannine, Lukan, etc.), and the differences between them are related to the diverse situations, thought-worlds, and problems of the people addressed in each case. This dynamic is not only part of the Christian faith, it is rooted in God Himself. Accommodation belongs to God’s being as covenant partner. God steps within our horizon, connects with our experiences, speaks our language in order to lead us from there to new experiences. In the same way, theologians have to be willing to change the conceptual apparatus and language of theology in order to make the gospel audible.

There are clearly risks involved in contextualizing theology:

In the present period the urge to produce timely and relevant theology has reached a zenith. Many scholars are so eager to do their theologizing vis-à-vis the themes of our time (such as “revolution,” “liberation,” “emancipation”)

107 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 65.
109 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 69.
that they make the gospel into a confirmation if not an echo of answers already available in the culture apart from the gospel. The task of playing a contrapuntal melody on behalf of the gospel, a task with which dogmatics stands or falls, has then been given up. Datedness has then swallowed up permanence. It is true that real dogmatics must be willing to—in fact, must—enter upon a discussion of all these questions. But it must not, in meeting the challenges, be totally absorbed by them, because the answers come from the Word that transcends, delimits, and transforms our questions.\textsuperscript{110}

Another way to state this danger is by saying that one has to be careful not to make the gospel into an ideology. This is also the challenge for Third World theologians. Many of these theologies were developed within too narrow an economic or political point of view, and the danger is then that they get locked into their context instead of crossing their contextual boundaries. Sooner or later they must let their experiences be criticized, corrected, deepened by the crucified and risen Lord, and placed in his context.\textsuperscript{111} This is also the road to a greater universality and catholicity.

The theologies in the West have gone through numerous experiences and crises. However, often they have tended not to see their own contextuality or to reflect critically on it. Whereas the danger for contextual theology is to ideologize the gospel, the danger for Western theology is to scholasticize it.\textsuperscript{112} After a period of crisis, new theological accents appear and this new theology is then handed down, rather than stimulating the next generation of theologians to start afresh the journey from situation to gospel and back. Even Barth found this difficult. He traveled the road from the ‘spirit of the age’ to the crisis, but when the crisis was past and he started afresh, “he no longer wanted to remember the road that brought him to that point. (...) This explains the passion with which the younger theologians after him now everywhere return to the first stage of his journey. There they themselves are also able to make a new beginning!”\textsuperscript{113}

If Western theologians could become more aware of the role different contexts have played in the development of Western theology, they have a rich tradition from which to learn about contextualization. The last book of Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years of Theology}, looks especially at the relation of the gospel to (Western) modern thought. This book not only gives studies on different influential theologians and recurring questions and tensions in the last few hundred years but it also shows Berkhof’s position in relation to these theologians and the questions and tensions with which they wrestled.

\textsuperscript{110} Berkhof, \textit{Introduction to the Study of Dogmatics}, 63-64.
\textsuperscript{111} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 311.
\textsuperscript{112} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 311.
\textsuperscript{113} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 307-308.
Berkhof’s methodological position will be presented under the next two headings:

**Berkhof as a mediation theologian enriched by Kierkegaard**

The theology of mediation has its roots in Schleiermacher, though the word ‘mediation’ comes from Hegel. C. Ullmann defined the term as follows:

> Mediation is the scientifically executed reduction of relative contrasts to their original unity; as a result an inner reconciliation and higher standpoint is achieved in which the contrasts are resolved. The resulting scientific state which proceeds from this mediation is the true and sound middle. (...) This lies in the nature of the case: synthesis ever follows thesis and antithesis; atomistic dispersion ever evokes the need for a gathering in the center.  

Berkhof remarks: “Though at times the reader may be touching the hands of Hegel—covered with dialectical hair—the voice is nonetheless that of Schleiermacher.” Berkhof could be classified as a mediation- or ethical theologian. Berkhof was a mediation theologian in the line of Chantepie de la Saussaye and Gunning, but working in a different context, namely an empiricist, secular, and a-theistic culture. The influence of Chantepie de la Saussaye came early in Berkhof’s life. Before he wrote his dissertation on the theology of Eusebius, he wanted to write his dissertation on the theology of Chantepie de la Saussaye. But if the label ‘mediation theology’ is applied to Berkhof, care has to be taken over what this means. Berkhof’s theology is not so easily captured.

---

115 Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years,* 63.
116 See Gavera, *The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof,* who classifies Berkhof as a mediation theologian. In the Netherlands ‘Mediation theology’ was often called ‘Ethical theology.’ Eginhard Meijering says about ethical theology “The so-called ethical theology has affinity with the Réveil, especially in regards to the connection between feeling and orthodox dogma (...) These ethical theologians were influenced by the already mentioned Schleiermacher and the French-Swiss theologian A. Vinet (1797-1847), thinkers who understood the Christian faith as the answer to the basic questions of people, especially those of the human emotions. The most important representatives (...) are father and son Chantepie de la Saussaye, I. van Dijk en J.H. Gunning,” Eginhard Meijering, *Het Nederlands Christendom in de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam, Balans, 2007), 31 (translation from Dutch by present author).
117 Mediation theology knows many varieties. There is the German mediation theology of Richard Rothe and August Dorner who worked in a climate of idealism; there is the mediation theology of Albrecht Ritschl who worked in a climate of empiricism; there is the English mediation theology of Frederick Denison Maurice and the Dutch mediation theology of Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye and Johannes Hermanus Gunning. Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years,* 66-67, 69, 87-88, 105-108.
The way Berkhof typifies the difference between Saussaye and Gunning is informative for his own position:

Whereas Saussaye emphasized especially the harmony between the anguished search of man and the experience of salvation in the church—without denying the break between them—in Gunning the accents have clearly shifted. Much more than Saussaye, he pointed out the discontinuity between flesh and spirit, between church and world. More than the need for redemption he emphasized sin, and over against “experience” he posited faith. His thinking is more personalistic, shaped by the cross instead of the Incarnation, by the eschatological future instead of the presence of the Spirit. Characteristic is the statement that the mediation pursued by ethical theology “is that which follows from afar the mediation between God and world which brought the Savior to the cross”.119

Berkhof is a mediation theologian who, just like Gunning, not only emphasized the harmony between gospel and context, but also the conflict. This explains his critical remarks about Rahner’s work as giving a too-harmonious construal of the relationship between gospel and world, too quickly stepping over breaks, paradoxes, and discontinuities.120 Berkhof’s attempt at mediation also included the difference between Gunning and Herman Bavinck. About the difference between Bavinck and Gunning, Berkhof writes:

Perhaps Gunning, in his polemics against Bavinck, had revealed a deeper understanding of the problem. For him the difference between Reformed theology and “ethical theology” did not lie in theocentricity versus anthropocentricity but in intellectualism versus personalism: Is faith submission to the authority of scriptural truths or is it the personal encounter with God through the person of Christ by which we are transformed into personalities?121

But rather than choosing Gunning over Bavinck (or vice versa) Berkhof does not think this opposition between more objective intellectualism and more subjective personalism is helpful.122

Berkhof was even able to learn from the great antipode of Hegel’s mediation theology: Kierkegaard. Berkhof sees Kierkegaard as presenting still another alternative in the relation between gospel and context.123 Where mediation theology tries to make apologetic use of the context to lead it in

119 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 112.
120 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 255.
121 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 113-114.
123 Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 72.
priestly fashion to its secret Christian goal, Kierkegaard sought to unmask it prophetically.\textsuperscript{124} Kierkegaard rejected every attempt at mediation but this did not make him a confessional theologian. According to Kierkegaard, in confessionalism the individual was pushed aside just as much by universal and objective truths as in the system of Hegel.\textsuperscript{125} Kierkegaard brought the gospel in conflict with the ‘spirit of the time,’ doing this, however, in the concepts of that time.\textsuperscript{126} Berkhof learned a lot from Kierkegaard and even said, contra Barth, that one should not only enter Kierkegaard’s school only once, but again and again.\textsuperscript{127} There is a quite positive appraisal of Kierkegaard at the end of Berkhof’s career. At the conclusion of his book \textit{Two Hundred Years of Theology}, Berkhof points to Kierkegaard as an important example: “It seems to me that Kierkegaard, in his theological dispute with his own culture, a dispute he conducted in the thought forms of that culture, came closest to what we are groping for here.”\textsuperscript{128} From this it cannot be concluded that Berkhof is a new Kierkegaard—their styles and method of theology are too different—but at least it can be said that Berkhof tried to combine the priestly fashion of Schleiermacher and the prophetic fashion of Kierkegaard, stressing both dialogue and dispute. That is why Berkhof in the headline of this section is called: ‘a mediation theologian enriched by Kierkegaard.’

\textbf{Berkhof as mediating between Barth and Schleiermacher}

In his autobiography, Berkhof writes that Karl Barth was very influential for him.\textsuperscript{129} Barth was (around 1922) unambiguous in his rejection of Schleiermacher. He believed that in Schleiermacher he could identify the source of the aberration of the theology of the nineteenth century: He who starts with man never arrives at God; man remains subject and God becomes his predicate.\textsuperscript{130} Barth strongly objects to the anthropocentricity to which he thinks Schleiermacher capitulates. Though Berkhof takes a different position than Barth, he agrees with his rejection of anthropocentricity as starting point for theology. This becomes clear in his discussion of the theology of H.M. Kuitert, who (after 1977) did not start, like Barth, ‘from above,’ but attempted to ground theological statements of faith ‘from below,’ from an

\textsuperscript{124} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 78.
\textsuperscript{125} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 75.
\textsuperscript{126} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 76. Kierkegaard used concepts of the Hegelian left (71-72).
\textsuperscript{127} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 80.
\textsuperscript{128} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 308. Berkhof interprets Kierkegaard as attempting to understand the Christian faith anew, not in terms of some anthropocentric system but in terms of the work of the Spirit in the individual. Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 78-79.
\textsuperscript{129} Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 17.
\textsuperscript{130} Berkhof, \textit{Two Hundred Years}, 202.
anthropological viewpoint.\textsuperscript{131} Though Berkhof appreciates that Kuitert attempts an alternative approach, he views it ultimately as a failure.\textsuperscript{132} “Hence what emerges is that we are led, also from below, into a closed circle in a way similar to that of which Barth was accused with his starting point “from above.” (...) Barth’s insight that one who does not start with God will never get to him seems to be confirmed by Kuitert (...).”\textsuperscript{133} Berkhof does not close his eyes to the weakness of Barth’s position, namely that since he starts with God, he does not seem to reach real people,\textsuperscript{134} but he is also clear that starting from man is no alternative.

One way to deal with these two options is to bring anthropocentricity and theocentricity into dialogue, as modelled by Tillich. Tillich always thought in the context of the polarity between question and answer. According to Berkhof, Tillich looked for a correlation between existential questions and theological answers, in which by ‘correlation’ is meant the interdependence of two independent factors.\textsuperscript{135} For Tillich the important questions in the context are not the everyday questions that people ask. It are the deeper existential questions which fuel the human quest to find an answer about matters of ultimate concern. These questions arise from the self-alienation that man experiences.\textsuperscript{136} To fathom the right analysis of human existence is, for Tillich, the task of philosophy, but it uncovers a question that cannot be answered by philosophy. God in Christ is the answer which man therefore cannot give himself.\textsuperscript{137} Tillich presents his method as an ellipse with two points (the existential question and the theological answer, a dialogue between anthropocentricity and theocentricity). Berkhof objects to this methodology.

Tillich suggests that this method brings into interdependence two independent factors. But on closer inspection the question and answer in Tillich are, according to Berkhof, not as independent as he presents them.

In the first place, the existential question in Tillich is not really independent but shaped by the answer that Christ provides. Only the person

\textsuperscript{131} Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 212.
\textsuperscript{132} Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 228.
\textsuperscript{133} Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 227-228.
\textsuperscript{134} Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 226.
\textsuperscript{135} Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 289.
\textsuperscript{136} “Paul Tillich reads cultural history as a series of anxiety attacks: ancient civilization suffered the anxiety of death; the Middle Ages and Reformation, the anxiety of guilt; modernity, the anxiety of meaninglessness. Perhaps, had he lived longer, he might have characterized postmodernity as the anxiety of truthlessness.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 2.
\textsuperscript{137} Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 290 292.
who already knows the answer knows wherein the true question consists. The question from within man’s anxiety, estrangement, and guilt, according to Tillich, is for healing, salvation, and reconciliation and therein for the meaning of life and the courage to be.\(^{138}\) Tillich presents the question as a universal human question but in light of the fact that in Asian religions anxiety about death plays no role, that modern man does not recognize his guilt, only his neurotic guilt feelings, and that many people deny that there is such a thing as a universal human nature, it becomes clear that Tillich shapes the question in a certain direction.\(^ {139}\) An existentially formulated question is shaped in the direction of Christ.

In the second place, the answer of Tillich is also not really independent. Because modern existentialism plays such a role in shaping the question, it also shapes the Christian answer. In Tillich’s theology “the answer of the gospel remains caught in the grip of a nonevangelical formulation of the question and is therefore distorted.”\(^ {140}\)

In the third place, Tillich’s methodology lacks cultural breadth. Tillich connects the gospel with the existential depths of the individual. Berkhof realizes that the oft-recurring tensions in theology between evangelical depth and cultural breadth make it difficult for one theologian to do justice to both. Such a tension is visible between Dorner (evangelical depth) and Rothe (cultural breadth), and similarly between Hermann and Troeltsch.\(^ {141}\) Tillich has attempted to connect the gospel with the existential depths of humans, and Berkhof wants this too, but it is vital to him that the gospel should also be connected with broader culture, with the ‘Lebensgefühl,’ with the social-economic-political climate of the ‘World.’ Section 3.1 will show that this double focus is at the heart of his theological program, and that taking only one focus was for him a giving in to the ‘spirit of the age.’

Berkhof did not mediate between anthropocentricity and theocentricity as Tillich did. The two foci of the ellipse where for Berkhof not an (independent) existential question and a corresponding theological answer, but Christology and pneumatology.\(^ {142}\) So he chooses theocentricity over anthropocentricity, but insists that besides Christology pneumatology should receive due emphasis, because via pneumatology the link with anthropology can be made. This brings Berkhof closer to Schleiermacher. Though Barth’s early interpretation of Schleiermacher was very negative, later in his life (1968)

---

138 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 296.
139 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 296.
140 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 298.
142 Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 17.
Barth is not so sure if he has understood Schleiermacher correctly. He keeps open the possibility that Schleiermacher, though hardly conscious about it, was dominated by a theology of the Holy Spirit. Berkhof takes this line and interprets Schleiermacher from a more pneumatological perspective. According to Berkhof, Schleiermacher was able to come closer to human reality than Barth because he attempted to understand the Christian faith in terms of the work of the Spirit in the individual. He sought to make intelligible for his cultured contemporaries the renewal of humanity through the work of God. Berkhof did not want to restrict the work of the Spirit to the individual (as Schleiermacher and also Kierkegaard seemed to do) but he chose a double focus: the individual and society. He believed that pneumatology was the only bridge between gospel and this double context.

By interpreting Schleiermacher in this way, Berkhof rejected the habit of viewing Barth and Schleiermacher as the great antipodes. Of course there were differences: Barth had more kerygmatic concerns and Schleiermacher was moved by pastoral and missionary interests. But there were also convergences. They both tried to give voice the gospel within their context. So Berkhof takes a mediating position between Barth and Schleiermacher. But how did Berkhof mediate? It was clear to him that both Barth and Schleiermacher were in motion from the same base (modernity) to the same goal (redemption in Christ). Schleiermacher was ever conscious of his base and kept looking back to see if he was still in touch with it. But he was so strongly bound up with his base that it was questionable whether he really reached his goal. Barth, however, turned resolutely away from his base in order really to reach his goal. For Berkhof, both starting with the base and journeying to the goal were important, so in that sense the two theologians were complementary, even though he wondered if a theologian could hold on to both base and goal with equal power. Where Berkhof could not concur with Barth is in that Barth, after having travelled the road from ‘the spirit of the time’ to the crisis induced by the gospel, was not willing to allow other theologians to travel this same path. Therefore Berkhof ends his autobiography with the word: “Therefore, I cannot start where Barth starts; either way I have to start also with man. But I cannot arrive at a different place from where Barth stands.” But starting with the human being is, for

143 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 204.
144 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 78.
145 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 49.
146 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 48-49.
147 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 307.
Berkhof, not a concession to anthropocentricity, but to him it means starting with the renewal work of the Spirit in people and society.

3. The content of Berkhof’s reading of the Western context

How does one discover the content of Berkhof’s reading of the Western context? Berkhof does not, of course, have a separate book about how he reads the Western context. His hermeneutical apparatus is interwoven with his whole œuvre. A good start would be to pay attention to those passages in his works where he consciously mentions developments in the Western world. However, this would not be sufficient for the analysis of a theologian like Berkhof. As stated in section 1, those close to him wrote in 1981: “In his person and in his thinking Berkhof has reflected and processed the conflicts and movements of the last forty years.” Berkhof’s reading of the Western context cannot be perceived solely by paying attention to those places where he consciously interacts with certain aspects of it, but has to be discerned from his whole theology. His whole theology is a contextualized theology (see section 2.6), and therefore contains pointers to his reading of the Western context.

But how does one extract someone’s reading of the Western context from his whole (contextualized) theology? The proposal in this study is to look to the most weighty themes in the contextual theology of Berkhof and discover there the way in which the reading of the Western context has influenced the formulation of these themes. This approach is in conformity with Berkhof’s own methodology, because he did not view the Western context as only an arena in which to express the gospel, but also as an arena through which God’s Spirit spoke to the church. Berkhof consciously tried to incorporate the truth moments of modern themes and movements. If one could find the most weighty themes in Berkhof’s theology and at those points discern the readings of the Western context that influenced the understanding of these themes, one would have found the readings of the Western context that are most influential in his theology. This approach can be clarified with an example from stars and planets.

The sun does not orbit the earth; rather, the earth orbits the sun. In the same way, there are other planets in the universe, called exoplanets to distinguish them from planets in our own solar system, that orbit other stars. The scientific reason for the fact that a planet orbits a star has to do with the

149 “In zijn persoon en in zijn denken heeft Berkhof de conflicten en bewegingen van de afgelopen veertig jaar gespiegeld en verwerkt.” Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), Bruggen en Bruggehoofden, 8.

150 See paragraph 2.1 and 2.5.
weight of the star in comparison with the weight of the planet. The superior weight of the star pulls all the planets within the system in an orbit around itself. Though the effect of the star on the planet is much bigger than the effect of the planet on the star, such an effect can be observed. This is why the existence of planets in the universe could be discovered. The planets reveal their presence by the small effects they have on the star. As the planet follows its orbit, the star follows a complementary motion dependent on the planet/star mass ratio.

The theology of a systematic theologian could be viewed as a constellation with stars and planets.\textsuperscript{151} Of course this is not all that theology is, but for the purpose of analyzing someone’s theology, this analogy is useful.\textsuperscript{152} In someone’s theology there are some themes that take a prime place in the thinking of the theologian. These are like the stars in one’s system. Other themes are like the planets. They have some effect on the star-themes, but the reverse effect is much bigger: the star-themes pull the planet-themes into their respective orbits.

The first step in section 3.1 is therefore to discover the star-themes in Berkhof’s theology against the background of the Western context. That section will show that there are three star-themes in Berkhof’s theology. One could speak about a triple-star system. The second step in section 3.2 to 3.4 is to look to each star-theme and analyze which part of the Western context has influenced the color of this star in Berkhof’s theology.\textsuperscript{153} In this way the most influential readings of the Western context which impacted Berkhof’s theology will surface. In section 3.5 some other themes will be considered: should these also be considered star-themes? The fruit of this way of analyzing Berkhof’s theology will become visible in section 4 and 5 of this part, dealing with the method of Berkhof’s Christology and its content.

\textsuperscript{151} This is true about a synchronic analysis of theology not necessarily of a diachronic approach. The analysis of this study will try to show the logical connections in Berkhof’s mature theology, without suggesting that this represents the chronological order of his thoughts. For a diachronic analysis, see: Meijering, Hendrikus Berkhof.

\textsuperscript{152} The analogy occurred to me when I was visiting the historical museum in Bern, Switzerland, not far from the university to which Berkhof dedicated his book Christian Faith. The museum featured an exposition about Einstein. In order to explain to the public Einstein’s concept of curved space, different billiard balls had been put on a stretched sheet of material. Through their weight the billiard balls literally curved the sheet. Visitors could put a marble on the sheet and watch how this marble started to roll towards the nearest billiard ball, entering an orbit around it once it got close enough. This little experiment showed how curved space was Einstein’s way of viewing gravity. At that point in my study I had already noticed that some themes in Berkhof were more weighty than others, and the analogy suggested that these weighty themes would probably pull other smaller themes in their orbit.

\textsuperscript{153} In reality the location of a star within the universe has (to my knowledge) no influence on the color of that star. There is a limitation to every analogy.
3.1 THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF BERKHOF’S THEOLOGY AND THE DIVIDED WORLDVIEW OF MODERNITY

The thesis in this study is that there are three star-themes at the foundation of Berkhof’s theology, which are interrelated as three points of a triad. The first point of the triad has to do with ‘God’, the second with the ‘World’, and the third with ‘the human being’ or ‘Man.’ These are the three star-themes which shape his theology.\footnote{Berkhof speaks often about ‘Man.’ In the Dutch original there is not the Dutch word ‘Man’ (a male person), but the word ‘Mens,’ meaning a generic human. Translating ‘Mens’ with the English ‘Man’ is not wrong because the English word can have a generic meaning. But in order to prevent misunderstanding this study will use ‘Human being’ even though the English translation uses ‘Man.’ Only in direct quotations will the English translation be followed.}

One sees this triad in his treatment of the doctrine of creation: he first deals with ‘God as Creator,’ then with ‘The World as Createdness’ and then with ‘Man.’\footnote{In the text below the single quotation marks around the words: God, Human being, or World, will be used to alert the reader that the word is not used in general, but as a reference to one of the triple star themes, one of the points of the triad: ‘God,’ ‘Human being,’ ‘World.’}

At first sight there is, of course, nothing deeply innovative about this triad. The ontological distinction between God (the upper point of the triad) and creation (the two lower points of the triad) is very basic to Christian theology.

\footnote{Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 155-224. Paragraph 24 is about ‘God as Creator,’ paragraph 25 is about ‘The World as Createdness.’ Berkhof then deals with the human being in two different paragraphs ‘Man (I): Love and Freedom’ (paragraph 26) and ‘Man (II): guilt and Fate’ (paragraph 27). Berkhof concludes this chapter by returning to the theme of the ‘World,’ dealing with the doctrine of providence: ‘The Preservation of the World’ (paragraph 28).}
Moreover, the ‘Human being’ as made in God’s image has been given a special place distinguished from the rest of creation. Though the triad does not seem innovative, a closer look will reveal more innovative aspects. In his discussion of sin, Berkhof writes:

For we stand in the triangular relation of God-I-the world. Refusing the anchoring in God, one may try to find it in the world, or unanchored choose for one’s own autonomous I. In the first instance man seeks his fulfillment in the world around him to which he gives himself. In the second instance he is his own point of reference and his goal is self-affirmation and self-realization.\(^{157}\)

Also in his summary of the proclamation of the gospel, Berkhof shows the use of the triad:

It tells people about ‘God’, about ‘freedom’ and ‘history’. The proclamation about Jesus Christ tells people about the real God, and it becomes clear that nothing else (neither nature nor state) is God. The proclamation tells people about freedom, signifying a possibility and call of man to direct himself to God and to choose him. The proclamation tells people also about history, because the world has changed since the exaltation of Christ.\(^{158}\)

The first thing to note about these quotes is that the left point of the triad has been stated as ‘I’ or ‘freedom.’ Section 3.3 will make clear that under the impact of existentialism Berkhof’s notion of the ‘Human being’ shifts from ‘generic humanity’ to a ‘free individual,’ an ‘I.’

The second thing to note is that the meaning of the ‘World’ also shifts. It is here not just the ‘world as createdness’ that is in view, neither the totality of all those who do not know or reject the gospel, but here it designates the contexts and structures within which human existence takes place. One could also use the word ‘society’ as long as it includes also politics and culture in its broad sense.\(^{159}\) By using the word ‘history’ in his summary of the proclamation of the gospel, Berkhof shows that he has a dynamic view on the ‘World.’ It is a view influenced by evolutionary views (see section 3.2). The ‘World’ is not just a static entity, but an arena in which God is at work with renewal.

The third thing to note is that Berkhof defines sin as the refusal to find our anchoring in God, while the gospel calls man back to direct himself to God and choose Him. Though there are many ways for man to refuse anchoring in

\(^{157}\) Berkhof, Christian Faith, 195.
\(^{158}\) Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History, 81.
\(^{159}\) Berkhof, Christian Faith, 503.
God, these possibilities move between the extremes of anchoring in the world or in self,\textsuperscript{160} options that were both visible in the secularist climate.

The fundamental triad in Berkhof’s theology, should be understood against the background of the divided worldview of modernity. There are two distinct streams of Western culture. One stresses the outer world, where rationality and empirical science rule. The other stresses the inner world of emotions, creativity, and religion.\textsuperscript{161} This division between the Scientific stream and the Romantic stream has caused a crisis for Christian faith. It has established a sort of double-truth universe with divisions between subject-object, inner-outer, man-world, humanities-science.\textsuperscript{162} Berkhof wrestled with this divided worldview and the crisis it had caused for Christian faith. With the triad Berkhof tries to keep not only the outer world (‘World’) and the inner world (‘Human being’)\textsuperscript{163} together, but he also tries to keep them rooted in God, and in this way confront the decision for autonomy which was, according to him, at the foundation of modernity.

That Berkhof was wrestling with this divided worldview can be seen in the following way. When Berkhof became professor in Leiden (1960), his inaugural lecture was about the faith-reason division and the religion-science division. His topic was the question if God could be the object of (theological) science. Was the scientific approach, with its rationality and detached observation not necessarily incompatible with the (inner) experience of faith, even when this experience would be described in the terminology of an inter-


\textsuperscript{161} A clear and concise description of these two streams in the Western context, can be found in Richard Tarnas, \textit{The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View} (New York, Ballantine Books, 1991), 366-367, 375. “From the complex matrix of the Renaissance had issued forth two distinct streams of culture, two temperaments or general approaches to human existence characteristic of the western mind. One emerged in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment and stressed rationality, empirical science, and a sceptical secularism. The other was its polar complement, sharing common roots in the Renaissance and classical Greco-Roman culture (and in the Reformation as well), but tending to express just those aspects of human experience suppressed by the Enlightenment’s overriding spirit of rationalism (...) his imaginative and spiritual aspirations, his emotional depth, his artistic creativity and powers of individual self-expression and self-creation. (...) Thus while Romanticism in this most general sense continued to inspire the West’s “inner” culture—its art and literature, its religious and metaphysical vision, its moral ideals—science dictated the “outer” cosmology: the character of nature, man’s place in the universe, and the limits of his real knowledge.”

\textsuperscript{162} “The faith-reason division of the medieval era and the religion-science division of the early modern era had become one of subject-object, inner-outer, man-world, humanities-science. A new form of the double-truth universe was now established.” Richard Tarnas, \textit{The Passion of the Western Mind}, 376.

\textsuperscript{163} In paragraph 3.3 it will become clear that Berkhof meant with the ‘Human being’ especially the inward aspects of the individual.
subjective meeting between God and man? Berkhof resisted this conclusion. He believed that the meeting with God could lead to (intellectual) contemplation and this (intellectual) contemplation to a renewed meeting.\textsuperscript{164} That Berkhof’s struggle with this divided worldview was more than a temporary occupation, becomes clear in the fact that twenty-one years later, when Berkhof retired as professor from Leiden (1981), he revisited this topic for his departure speech. He admits then that, though some accents have to be put differently, he is still struggling with the same question.\textsuperscript{165}

Berkhof’s resistance to the divided worldview can also be noticed at a different point. In section 2.3 it was shown that Berkhof looked for the ‘spirit of the age’ not only in the context but also within the church. There he perceived the same influence of the divided worldview. He saw the polarization between the ‘verticalists’ who looked only for an individual relation with God, and the ‘horizontalists’ who only looked for societal engagement. The ‘verticalists’ tended to look inside, while the ‘horizontalists’ tended to look outside. The foundational triad of Berkhof’s theology tries to respond to the divided worldview both inside and outside the church.

\textit{The deep structure of Berkhof’s theology: responding to other proposals}

Before presenting the three points of the triad, it is helpful to compare the proposal of the triad with other proposals. Many theologians do not perceive the triad in Berkhof’s thinking and come therefore to one-sided conclusions about his theology. H.W. de Knijff wants to defend the thesis that Berkhof’s \textit{Christian Faith} can be understood as a theological anthropology.\textsuperscript{166} De Knijff does not deny the importance of history (and specifically salvation-history) or the relation with God, but he finds in the theological understanding of man (‘Human being’) the center of Berkhof’s theology. Both A. van de Beek and A. W. J. Houtepen see the center of Berkhof’s theology in the right point of the triad: in ‘history’ which is the time aspect of the ‘World’ (see section 3.2). Van de Beek points to ‘history’ as being the supporting structure of Berkhof’s theology.\textsuperscript{167} Houtepen emphasizes that Berkhof never wanted to choose between finding God in nature, in history, or in human self-consciousness, but


\textsuperscript{165} Berkhof, “God voorwerp van Wetenschap? II,” 208.

\textsuperscript{166} “Ik zou hier willen verdedigen, dat dit dogmatisch handboek te beschouwen is als een theologische leer van de mens, doch strikt in deze samenhang.” H. W. de Knijff, “Dogmatiek als leer van de mens,” in: \textit{Waar is God in deze tijd? De betekenis van de geschiedenis in de theologie van Dr. H. Berkhof}, 181.

\textsuperscript{167} “Men kan nauwelijks zeggen dat het een specifiek thema is [verwijzend naar Berkhof’s visie op de geschiedenis; GJR], want het onderwerp is de dragende structuur van het theologische denken van Berkhof.” A. van de Beek, “Antiochië en Alexandrië in Leiden,” in: \textit{Waar is God in deze tijd?}, 11.
that he still finally took ‘history’ as his central observation point.\textsuperscript{168} C. Graafland moves to the top of the triad and takes Berkhof’s understanding of revelation as being in a pivotal position within \textit{Christian Faith}.\textsuperscript{169}

Other theologians have correctly noted that Berkhof’s theology cannot be summarized as centered in one theme, and they have pointed to covenant and history (covenant-history) as the fundamental lines in Berkhof’s theology, for example A. Geense and E. Flesseman-Van Leer.\textsuperscript{170} However, though ‘covenant’ deals with the relation between God and his people, using ‘covenant’ as the summary word of Berkhof’s theology tends to overlook the central importance of anthropology in his theology, which is seen so clearly by De Knijff. Moreover, what is most overlooked in all these proposals, even when covenant-history is taken as the summary, is the structural aspect of ‘World.’\textsuperscript{171} Yet, as explicitly stated in the preface to \textit{Christian Faith}, the renewal of the world had Berkhof’s specific interest. It was “…a theme which to the best of my knowledge is not discussed in any of the other dogmatics textbooks, and which in the present egocentric age is all too quickly forgotten.”\textsuperscript{172} In Berkhof’s theology the renewal of the world (and of people) is the goal of all God’s dealings in Israel, Jesus, and the Church.

J.P. Gavera goes in a different direction. After reviewing some of the themes that theologians have proposed as fundamental for Berkhof’s theology, he proposes that the key to his design is to be found in what came to be known as \textit{Vermittlungstheologie} (Mediation Theology).\textsuperscript{173} So he proposes that the key to his theology is not found in certain themes (content), but in a certain methodology. According to Gavera, Berkhof tried to build a bridge between the gospel and the secularized cultural environment, between Christian faith and modern thought, and he did so by looking for a synthesis between different positions.\textsuperscript{174} In a general sense Gavera is right to point to the methodological importance of mediation theology in understanding Berkhof (see section 2.6). However, there are two problems with his proposal. First, his concept of mediation theology is too general to pinpoint Berkhof’s

\textsuperscript{168} A. W. J. Houtepen, “En niet laat varen het werk dat Gods hand begon,” in: \textit{Waar is God in deze tijd?}, 33.
\textsuperscript{171} See further section 3.2 below on the space aspect of the ‘World.’
\textsuperscript{172} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, xix.
\textsuperscript{173} Gavera, \textit{The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof}, 32, 39-40.
\textsuperscript{174} Gavera, \textit{The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof}, 40.
methodology. As was shown in section 2.6 Berkhof rejects too harmonious attempts at synthesis and is enriched by Kierkegaard. Berkhof’s theology is not mainstream mediation theology. Second, by focusing on Berkhof’s methodology, he overlooks that there are three star-themes for Berkhof (content) which, together with his specific methodology, form the heart of Berkhof’s theology. Yes, Berkhof’s mode of thinking was always focused on synthesis, and he always tried to build the bridge between the gospel and the secularized cultural environment, but he contextualized specifically the three star-themes of his theology.

E.P. Meijering in *Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-1995). Een theologische biografie* does not look for a center in Berkhof’s thinking. He gives a diachronic approach of Berkhof’s œuvre. One of the views for which Meijering is arguing is that, despite appearances, Berkhof’s views did not change all that much over the years. Meijering views the strong differences between his early acceptance of traditional Christology and the Trinity and his later rejection of these as the result of the fact that Berkhof was more a preacher than a historian of dogma. He wanted to communicate to people who could not any longer accept the Christian tradition. According to Meijering, Berkhof only shifted accents in the content of his theology.\textsuperscript{175} He points especially to the fact that from his early years Berkhof paid attention to history and had a preference for historical-dynamic thinking.\textsuperscript{176} Meijering thus sees the continuity of this historical thinking as more significant than the changed judgements on Christology and the Trinity.\textsuperscript{177} With this appraisal, Meijering reveals that he perceives the center of Berkhof’s theology in dynamic-history (the time aspect of the ‘World’) and Meijering evaluates the changes in Berkhof’s position not as substantial change but as a reflection of a longing to communicate clearly to the contemporary context. There are however two problems with this approach. First, the essence of mediation theology is that the content of one’s convictions changes as a result of interaction with the context. That this is what Berkhof does will become clear in sections 3.2-3.4. This mediation methodology cannot be reduced to the longing of a preacher. Also, conservative theologians would change their communication if necessary, but not the content of their convictions. Second, by seeing the continuity in Berkhof’s view of history (time aspect of ‘World’) as more

---

\textsuperscript{175} Meijering, p. 207-208, 156.

\textsuperscript{176} Meijering, *Hendrikus Berkhof*, 20-21, 53.

\textsuperscript{177} Meijering admits the fundamental change between the younger and older Berkhof when it comes to the judgement of Paul of Samosata and Arius. The older Berkhof came close to both. “Deze christologie komt dicht in de buurt van die van de adoptianist Paulus van Samosata, over wie hij in zijn eerste studiën zo negatief was, en ook in de buurt van die van Arius (…) Ook over Arius had hij in zijn dogmenhistorische studiën een zeer negatief oordeel geveld.” Meijering, *Hendrikus Berkhof*, 159.
significant than the discontinuity in the theme of ‘God,’ Meijering denies the fact that the ‘World’ is a star-theme not only for Berkhof, but for ‘God’ as well. The significant change in his Christology and doctrine of the Trinity happened as a result of interaction with the context.

3.2 ‘WORLD’ IN A CLIMATE OF REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION

The right point of the triad is the ‘World.’ What were Berkhof’s readings of the Western context which influenced his understanding of the ‘World’, and how did these influence the color of the star-theme ‘World’ in his theology? In order to trace this, it is helpful to distinguish between the world in space and time. The first aspect (space) has to do with the fact that the ‘World’ has structures. There is a social and political sphere which should not be overlooked. The second aspect (time) has to do with the fact that the ‘World’ is not static, but in a process of dynamic and progressive change. As a reminder of what has been said before: the views presented here are Berkhof’s, though the analysis of his views is the author’s.

Readings of the Western context that influenced the space aspect of ‘World’

In the history of the church, the theme of the ‘World’ has received very little attention. After Constantine the church acquired a dominant position and it easily succumbed to the temptation of gratefully accepting the existing order and exploiting it for its own benefit. It is only since the Enlightenment that there has slowly been a turning to the world. The growing secularization urged Christians to engage in missionary, evangelistic, and social work. However, it took a long time before the recognition of the importance of the ‘World’ was taken up into dogmatics. Berkhof tried to correct this by giving serious attention to the world, both in his ecclesiology, and in his chapter on ‘the renewal of the world.’

Humans and the world both need to be renewed, because they are the two sides of one reality. We cannot speak about the human being without his world. The battle for fuller humanity must always at the same time be a battle for more adequate structures. As a soul without a body is a ghost, so the personal life of human beings is being carried, shaped, and protected by

179 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 416.
181 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 503-524.
the social, economic, political, juridical, cultural etc. structures in which it is embedded.\textsuperscript{183} Often the church forgets this until upheavals in society shock her into the awareness that the gospel has a bearing on the structures of society.\textsuperscript{184} But even then the church has often too late or insufficiently responded to these upheavals:

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 clamored for more and further-reaching structural changes... [The Industrial Revolution] made the workers’ class aware of the structures, in this sense that they began to see them as hostile, “alienating” powers. Particularly Karl Marx (1818-1883) opened their eyes to that. His conception was so closely connected with materialism and atheism that for a whole century theology discovered no elements in it which would prompt a fresh theological contemplation of the theme “world.” Only in recent times do we discover with and through Marx how much of an alienating effect the structures of our world can have with respect to the quality of human life as desired by God. As a result of that discovery, the theme “world” now presses itself upon our attention as never before.\textsuperscript{185}

It is no accident that the impulse for Berkhof’s \textit{Christian Faith} came during the time of the student revolts. There was a rebellion against the status quo in the air, an impulse for societal criticism and revolution.\textsuperscript{186}

What was, according to Berkhof, the truth moment in the awareness of the importance of the structures of the world? The proposal in this study is that Berkhof took as a true insight from the Western context the conviction: \textit{Humans have the responsibility to change the alienating structures of this world.} Both parts in this conviction are important: ‘responsibility to change’ and ‘alienating structures.’

First we will look to ‘alienating structures.’ Alienating structures are those that block the expression of true and full humanity. If people are to become fully human, the structures in which they live should not block but encourage the humanization of society. In his study \textit{Christ and the Powers}, Berkhof had argued that the powers about which Paul speaks are the structures.\textsuperscript{187} The powers are not necessarily evil in themselves—they are a framework for human service—but they become evil when separated from

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Berkhof, “Heropening van het gesprek met de horizontalisten,” 87-88.
\item Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 503-504.
\item Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 504, 509.
\item Berkhof, “Een kwarteeuw theologie;” 161-162.
\item Berkhof, \textit{Christ and the Powers}, 21.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Christ who is the ground and goal of these powers. The godless dominion of these powers shall one day come to an end, but this will not mean that they are annihilated, but that they will be reconciled to Christ by taking their proper place. The structures of the new world will then serve God’s Kingdom.

Second, we focus on the ‘responsibility to change.’ Well known is the saying of Marx that the philosophers have only interpreted the world, but that the point is to change it. Berkhof agreed that the church, instead of accepting alienating situations, should act and work for change, if necessary via revolution. Berkhof is here in line with the General Assembly of Uppsala (WCC) who stated: “The churches are ready to enthusiastically participate in the big movement of the development of man and society to greater humanity.” Berkhof agreed that one could share the quest for liberty, equality, and fraternity, as long as one does not shy away from the call to repentance. Repentance is needed in order to turn from the deep quest in human culture for autonomy to being anchored in God. But being anchored in God should not make us passive: “The humanum as potentiality demands actualisation.”

So Berkhof wanted to incorporate the truth that humans have the responsibility to change the alienating structures of this world into his theology. But of course this truth as expressed in the revolutionary movements did not necessarily need theology. However, Berkhof was convinced that only by seeing that the Spirit of Christ was renewing the structures of this world, could one participate in a way that did not lead to legalism or resignation. So as a result of the interaction between truth from the context and truth from the Bible and tradition, the star-theme ‘World’ (space aspect) received a specific color. It can be stated as follows: In this world the Spirit of Christ is active, calling the church to participate in changing her alienating structures. According to Berkhof, the Spirit of Christ reigns in this world. It might be helpful to see what Berkhof is doing here in light of his foundational triad. The ‘World’ (right point of the triad) has more and more been perceived as secular. God’s involvement in the world is hardly conceivable. The line connecting ‘God’ and the ‘World’ has been erased. By

188 Berkhof, Christ and the Powers, 28-29.
189 Berkhof, Christ and the Powers, 40-41.
192 Berkhof, “De Theologie tussen Cassandra en Hananja,” 120
emphasizing that the Spirit of Christ was active in this world and its history, Berkhof reconnected ‘God’ and the ‘World.’ Berkhof met many ‘average Christians’ who saw the presence of Christ in their personal life (in the ‘Human being’), during prosperity as well as adversity, but they limited the power of Christ to this sphere and did not see “a connection between Christ and world-events, or between Christ and daily work. This leads to an ungrateful blindness for the signs of Christ’s reign in the present.”¹⁹⁵ Berkhof passionately emphasized this connection: “The world has changed since the exaltation of Christ. It has become part of the Kingdom, of history.”¹⁹⁶

But is secularization not a proof that Christ is not reigning in this world? No. Secularization, according to Berkhof, is the opposite of sacralisation and both a fruit of the gospel and rebellion of humans against God. It is a fruit of the gospel when man takes his freedom in order to de-deify created things (be it forces of nature, the course of history, or blood, race and ethnicity).¹⁹⁷ But the secularization in modern Western culture is also an outflow of a fundamental decision against God. Secularization is then, according to Berkhof, the tendency through which the cultural life is lived by putting in brackets (‘Ausklammerung’) that relation that was dominant before the Enlightenment (‘Aufklärung’) or seemed to be: the relation between the (people and structures of the) world and the gospel or the God of the gospel. This relation is pushed back to the private sphere.¹⁹⁸ This bracketing of the relation to God, this ‘death of God’, should not tempt the theologian to condemn modern Western culture in a way that he would not do with other cultures (see section 2.4).

The Spirit of Christ is reigning in this world, changing its alienating structures.¹⁹⁹ But the Spirit is also inviting us to participate. It was only after the Second World War that the Western church became with a shock aware of her great apostolary neglect towards the Western world.²⁰⁰ She became aware that she was called to play a role in the movement of the Spirit to the world.

¹⁹⁶ Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History, 81. So the proclamation did also bring a new understanding of history as goal-oriented, making Western culture dynamic, emancipative, and expansive. See also: Berkhof, Christian Faith, 514.
¹⁹⁹ Kuitert criticizes Berkhof’s conviction that the Spirit works not only through structures in the sanctification of people, but that the Spirit sanctifies the structures as well. Kuitert, “Vernieuwing van de wereld,” 198. Kuitert believes the structures are human products. Berkhof, however, has not changed his views in the revised edition as a result of Kuitert’s critique. Probably Berkhof would say that Kuitert overlooks the invisible dimension of the structures, as shown in Christ and the Powers. Structures are more than human products.
²⁰⁰ Berkhof, Christian Faith, 348-349; 417.
Because Christ is Lord, the gospel has social and political relevance. Because God wants the whole of humanity for himself, Berkhof pleaded that the church should not turn in on itself, but participate with the Spirit of Christ in changing the alienating structures of the world.

Readings of the Western context that influenced the time aspect of ‘World’

The time-aspect of the star-theme ‘World’ is often expressed by Berkhof using the word ‘history.’ As is well known, history has been a real theme in modern Western culture only since the Enlightenment. The so-called ‘Quest for the historical Jesus’ is a modern quest. Berkhof shared this modern excitement for history. Historical questions had fascinated Berkhof from his first study on Eusebius to his last major publication Two Hundred Years of Theology. But it was not only Berkhof’s general perception that ‘history’ was an important theme in the Western world which influenced his understanding of the time aspect of the ‘world,’ there were other developments in the mid-twentieth Century that caused Berkhof to pay attention to the concept of history. In the Faith and Order Study God in Nature and History Berkhof, as one of the principal authors, writes:

(...) the Church in Western Europe (...) saw it as her duty to preserve and develop the Graeco-Roman scientific heritage, embodied in works such as those of Ptolemy of Alexandria. This was a heritage of static conceptions about nature and history. The Christian message was thus framed in a static world-concept (...) This world-view underwent a gradual disintegration in the period succeeding the Renaissance. The process speeded up about 1850. Now, since 1950, the quick destruction of its last remnants has become manifest, as it has given way to a radically new and dynamic concept of nature and history.

---

202 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 349.
203 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 272.
204 Meijering points out that Berkhof had an interest in Marcellus van Ancyra, because he exhibited an historical and dynamic way of thinking. Meijering, Hendrikus Berkhof, 21. In his autobiography Berkhof writes that after finishing Christian Faith his love for history surfaced again. Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 20. The result was his book Two Hundred Years of Theology, where the historical interest is combined with Berkhof’s interest in the question of the relation between faith and Western culture.
So it was the new evolutionary worldview which was especially a challenge for a theological understanding of the ‘World.’ Berkhof took the new worldview seriously, because evolution was for Berkhof more than an hypothesis.\footnote{206} He remarked that after the Second World War this evolutionary theory was promoted with new strength of vision and arguments and it was widely accepted.\footnote{207} Because of this, and because of the results of newer biblical exegesis in the doctrine of creation,\footnote{208} Berkhof chose to articulate the belief in creation in terms of the evolutionary view of the universe.\footnote{209} Not taking this worldview seriously would become an obstacle in the task of passing on the gospel. \footnote{210} Creation (and God’s providence in history) had to be presented from a dynamic point of view.

What was, according to Berkhof, the truth moment in the Enlightenment concept of history—especially in the mid-twentieth century after the impact of evolution theory had swept away the old static worldview? The proposal in this study is that Berkhof took as a true insight from the Western context the conviction: \textit{There is progress in history. Both parts in this conviction are important: ‘history’ and ‘progress.’}

First, we look to ‘history.’ Berkhof was inspired by Teilhard du Chardin, but he did not take ‘evolution’ as a central concept in his understanding of the world and creation. He consciously chose ‘history’ as a central concept. This concept is, according to Berkhof, richer than evolution.\footnote{211} Evolution can be seen as a great historical process:

\begin{quote}
The doctrine of evolution makes a great historical process of what we call nature, a process leading to the phenomenon man, and so continuing in man, leading in a new way toward a new and open future. In the Bible creation and history are similarly connected.\footnote{212}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[206] “There are enough facts to make it unwarranted any longer to speak of a hypothesis (a term with which Christians used to dismiss evolution), but not enough to regard it as proven fact (as is currently suggested in popular science).” Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 179-180.
\item[210] “Theology derives its insights from the gospel and not from current scientific and ideological views. Yet we believe that the truth does not contradict itself. What is experienced as truth in other areas of reality may shed new light on what the gospel tells us and thus can contribute to the ongoing articulation of the gospel. In any case, we are familiar with the negative reverse and know how difficult the coupling of revelation with an antiquated world view has made it for many to hear the gospel. In this task of passing on the gospel, theology must not be an obstacle but serve as an interpretive aid.” Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 180.
\item[211] Berkhof, \textit{Gegronde Verwachting}, 100.
\end{footnotes}
Second, we focus on ‘progress.’ History is not only a process, it is also progress. Enlightenment thinkers (e.g. Hegel) had often spoken about progress (in history), and through science and technology this drive for progress has become deeply ingrained in the infrastructure of the world.213 “The concept of progress, often uncritically accepted in 19th-century modernism, was for a long time just as uncritically rejected by orthodoxy.”214 Progress means that a culture more and more allows and supports humanization. It means that a culture allows and supports a truly human life of faith, hope, and love,215 a life of freedom and obedience, as we see in Jesus Christ, the true human. One could call this vision of Berkhof a Christian humanism. A world and culture supportive of this type of humanization is God’s goal in creating the world. According to Berkhof, this was more and more the case in Europe and North America. These cultures were not on the same level as other cultures. “Since the time that Christendom (after Constantine) also began to make its impact on the structures of society, “Europe” has deviated more and more from “the general human pattern.”216 Under influence of the gospel, there has been progress in sanctification.”

So Berkhof wanted to incorporate the truth that there is progress in history into his theology. But of course this truth, as expressed in the evolutionary worldview, did not necessarily need theology. However, Berkhof was convinced that the Spirit of Christ was not only working amidst structural change, but also in the whole historical process. So as a result of the interaction between this truth from the context and the truth from the Bible and tradition, the star-theme ‘World’ (time aspect) acquired a specific color. It can be stated as follows: The Spirit of Christ leads world history towards the Kingdom of God. History is leading upwards to the goal of the Kingdom of God, to the full realization of human existence.

Berkhof leaves behind the older vision that creation was a perfect and static situation and takes as his starting point the view that creation is the preamble of- and pointer to salvation.217 Through redemption the creation is led back to its original goal, and this includes a process that is progress:218

According to Berkhof, the creation is the preamble of and pointer to salvation.217 Through redemption the creation is led back to its original goal, and this includes a process that is progress:218

213 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 518.
214 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 519.
216 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 513-514.
218 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 516.
of resistance and struggle, of suffering and dying. If this is the will of him whom we have come to know as holy love, we may believe that some day it will become crystal clear that all the pains of childbirth and growing up of this world in process of becoming cannot be compared with the glorious outcome.\textsuperscript{219}

Western theology, says Berkhof, has not often followed this ‘elevation line’, because they have mainly worked from a static and perfect beginning situation. But Irenaeus, the school of Antioch, Greek Orthodoxy and Anglican theology have taken this ‘elevation line’ and they are at this point Berkhof’s inspiration.\textsuperscript{220} A. van de Beek points out that in Berkhof’s theology there is: “a linear history-concept in which the arrow of time always points ahead (…) the implication of this model is that the future has primacy. Later is better.”\textsuperscript{221}

The conviction that the Spirit of Christ leads world-history towards the Kingdom of God includes a notion of progress, but it should be distinguished from a purely immanent Enlightenment conception. For Berkhof, this progress is limited and incomplete, just as individual sanctification is limited and incomplete, and there is not only an ascending line in history but also a descending line, an intensification of evil. In fact both the death of the cross and the new life of the resurrection of Jesus are, through the Spirit of Christ, extended into this world. The Spirit makes this death and life effective as historical powers:

The history after the resurrection is the period when the analogy of Christ’s cross and resurrection is being realized over the whole earth. If God’s way with Israel and in Christ is intended to bring about the redemption of all mankind, it is really unnecessary to ask what is the sense of the continuation of history, because the sense of Christ’s work requires this continuation and becomes effective in it.\textsuperscript{222}

Both the human decision that led to the cross of Christ and the divine decision that led to the resurrection of Christ, continue in history. “In our history this double decision spreads, expands, and intensifies. Our history leads to and ends in a deadlock of two powers which evoke, delimit, and cannot conquer

\textsuperscript{219} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 176.
\textsuperscript{220} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 173. According to Adriaan Geense it was in 1959 that Berkhof for the first time suggested that a connection between the thought of evolution and the elevation theology of the Orthodox and Anglican theology did not have to be in opposition to the fundamental intentions of Barth’s theology. A. Geense, “Geschiedenis en verbond,” 21. According to Meijering, Berkhof had from very early on a fascination with the dogma of redemption of the Greek church fathers. Meijering, \textit{Hendrikus Berkhof}, 29.
\textsuperscript{221} Van de Beek, “Antiochië en Alexandrië in Leiden,” 16.
\textsuperscript{222} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 320.
each other.” So there is in history ‘progress,’ but also an increase of the power of evil. History moves to a climax, a confrontation between Christ and the antichrist. And then, all things will be made new.

But already now the fruit of Christ’s resurrection and the fruit of the rebellious antichrist can be noticed in history. What are the fruits of Christ’s resurrection, the many signs of Christ’s reign in Western culture? In *Christian Faith* these signs are divided by Berkhof into three categories:

The first is the care of the sick and the poor. This went hand in hand with a greater emphasis on labor, responsibility, equality, the individual, and social justice. All this is progress in humanization. This included a deeper awareness of norms, a dissatisfaction with the existing world, an emphasis on tolerance, and changes in the view on marriage and sexuality.

The second is the desacralization of the established order. The divine nature of the power of the state is rejected. This opened the way for democracy and an independent justice system. “The French revolution, with its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, had far more to do with Jesus Christ than had those who resisted it in the name of Christ.”

The third is the de-deification of nature, making room for the study of nature and an increasing domination of nature. All these three elements developed under influence of the ferment of the gospel.

Notice again that Berkhof tends to think along the triad: the first can loosely be related to the ‘Human being’ (or rather in this case ‘humanity’), the second to the ‘World’ (the structural aspect), and the third is the influence of the Christian conception of ‘God’ (the separation between God and nature).

The ‘fruits’ of human rebellion under the inspiration of the antichrist are also visible in this world. Berkhof mentions three situations of suffering:

224 Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 113-121.
226 “In the struggle for a genuine human existence, for deliverance of the suffering, for the elevation of the underdeveloped, for redemption of the captives, for the settlement of race and class differences, for opposition to chaos, crime, suffering, sickness, and ignorance—in short, in the struggle for what we call progress—an activity is taking place throughout the world to the honour of Christ. It is sometimes performed by people who know and desire it; it is more often performed by those who have no concern for it, but whose labour proves that Christ truly received—in full objectivity—all power on earth.” Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 173.
persecution, apostasy, and competitive doctrines of salvation.\textsuperscript{229} Again we notice the triad. Persecution has to do with the left pole, the persecution of the ‘Human being.’ Persecution takes away the freedom of people to live their faith. Apostasy, for Berkhof, has to do with the ‘World,’ because it only can take place where the gospel has found roots in one form or another. Apostasy presupposes that the gospel is broadly and deeply rooted in a culture. Apostasy is an historical force and an historical process.\textsuperscript{230} European secularization, though it has positive aspects, is clearly also a sign of apostasy.\textsuperscript{231} But this apostasy cannot remain a stable situation. It creates a vacuum for new competitive doctrines of salvation. This is a replacement of ‘God’ and his revelation. Totalitarian ideologies like National Socialism and Communism are such doctrines.\textsuperscript{232} But also Islam must not be forgotten. Islam is, according to Berkhof, the great apostasy and competitive doctrine of salvation in one.\textsuperscript{233} We cannot know what the future will hold in store, but it is certain that both the power of Christ and the power of the antichrist would grow. We should even expect an intensification, an “everywhere uniformly accelerated movement.”\textsuperscript{234}

In summary: The star-theme ‘World’ is colored by two perceived truths in the Western context. Berkhof’s reading of the French and Industrial revolutions, and Marxism, led him to the conviction: \textit{Humans have the responsibility to change the alienating structures of this world.} Berkhof’s reading of the new evolutionary worldview and the progress in science led him to the conviction: \textit{There is progress in history.} The resulting color of this star-theme can now be stated as follows (combining the space and time aspect): \textit{The Spirit of Christ leads world history towards the Kingdom of God and calls the church to participate by changing the alienating structures of the world.} As we will see, the gravity field of this star has effects on many other areas of Berkhof’s theology. It impacted his doctrine of the ‘Human being’ and of ‘God’ and gives a dynamic teleology to all of his theology. If this dynamic teleology is insufficiently captured by the figure of the triple-star system, one could imagine that these triple stars with their planets are themselves also moving through space, from creation to consummation.

\textsuperscript{229} Berkhof, \textit{Christ the Meaning of History}, 104.  
\textsuperscript{230} Berkhof, \textit{Christ the Meaning of History}, 104-105.  
\textsuperscript{231} Berkhof, \textit{Christ the Meaning of History}, 105, 94.  
\textsuperscript{232} Berkhof, \textit{Christ the Meaning of History}, 107.  
\textsuperscript{233} Berkhof, \textit{Christ the Meaning of History}, 108.  
\textsuperscript{234} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 518.
3.3 THE ‘HUMAN BEING’ IN A CLIMATE OF EXISTENTIALISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The mid-twentieth century was characterized by a climate of existentialism. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus had said that the meaning of life is the most urgent question. Existentialists believed that the world and the universe was meaningless. To be authentic in such a world meant to freely admit this meaninglessness and make choices in freedom. The struggle to do this gave alone meaning.

The background to this existentialism lies in the fact that in Modernity there was not only a ‘turn to the world’ but also a ‘turn to the human.’ The Western context became more anthropocentric. According to Charles Taylor, there was a rise of humanism which for the first time in history provided an alternative to the Christian outlook.²³⁵ The power of this alternative was not just a matter of a changing philosophy about the cosmos, it was the (resulting) shift of the character of the modern human that made the traditional Christian view less plausible.

The direction and quality of that character reflected a gradual but finally radical shift of psychological allegiance from God to man, from dependence to independence, from otherworldliness to this world, (...) from a fallen humanity to an advancing one (...) Science gave man a new faith—not only in scientific knowledge, but in himself. It was particularly this emerging psychological climate that made the progressive sequence of philosophical and scientific advances—whether by Locke, Hume, and Kant, or by Darwin, Marx, and Freud—so potently effective in undercutting religion’s role in the modern world view. The traditional Christian attitudes were no longer psychologically appropriate to the modern character.²³⁶

One paradoxical result of this ‘turn to the human’ was that there was a widespread sense of meaninglessness. Because of the anthropocentric turn, people had lost their sense of dependence on ‘God,’ but they also could not any longer find meaning in the ‘World’ (the right point of the triad). They suffered cosmological estrangement. After the scientific revolution (Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton), the human being had been displaced from the center to the periphery in a vast, impersonal, and evolving universe. Evolutionary theory by itself could not answer “the question as to the sense and purpose of that turbulent process which billions of years ago likely began

²³⁶ Richard Tarnas, The Passion of the Western Mind, 319-320.
with a massive, chaotic gas cloud.” But what then is the purpose and meaning of this dynamic nature and history and of the human? This became an urgent question. Existentialism suggested that there was no real answer, and that to be authentic in such a world meant to freely admit this meaninglessness and make individual choices in freedom.

What was, according to Berkhof, the truth moment in this anthropocentric turn and the climate of existentialism? The proposal in this study is that Berkhof took as a true insight: *Freedom and individuality are central to the human being and he is driven to find meaning.* All three parts are important.

First, we look to ‘freedom.’ Freedom was one of the keywords in the Western context. Closely associated was the word ‘autonomy.’ Berkhof saw ‘autonomy’ as the foundational characteristic of our modern culture since the ‘Aufklärung.’ With ‘autonomy’ Berkhof means that the human being is himself the measure of all things. Modern western culture, at least since the Renaissance, has revealed a deep drive towards the ideals of autonomy and independence, and these ideals have been realized in the lives of many. Many people have reached a much greater degree of autonomy than their forebears. But Berkhof took as a true insight: *freedom is central to the human being,* not *autonomy is central to the human being.* Freedom incorporates the positive drive in autonomy, but does not necessarily include the conviction that the human is the measure of all things.

Next, we focus on ‘individuality.’ Western culture has fostered more individuality than other cultures. The human is not only free in relation to nature, but also in relation to other human beings. He is not bound to the group. The centrality and value of this individuality is accepted by Berkhof as a true insight.

Last, ‘a human being is driven to find meaning.’ For a long time the anxious question about the meaning of life did not surface, because Christianity had provided a meaningful outlook on life. In the modern period, after the anthropocentric turn and the secularization of the ‘world,’ the question about the meaning of life surfaced with new strength. Berkhof himself struggled as well with these questions about meaning. Questions about meaning were raised in his own mind as early as his reading of Nietzsche’s *Thus spoke Zarathustra* during his Gymnasium time, and in the introduction to his *Christian Faith* Berkhof writes: “Western theology must articulate the Word in such a way that it comes through especially as the

---

answer to our anxious questions concerning meaning.” To see the contrast of Berkhof’s approach with theology in earlier ages, think of Luther. He feared condemnation and his quest was to find a gracious God. This is quite different from someone who fears, above all, meaninglessness.

So Berkhof wanted to incorporate the truth that freedom and individuality are central to the human and he is driven to find meaning into his theology. But of course this truth, as expressed in the humanistic and existentialist climate of those days, did not necessarily need theology. But it could be placed in a different framework. In Berkhof’s theology the human is a responding creature. He is a being who is made to encounter God, to respond to His Word. If the human remained isolated (left point of the triad), he would search in vain for meaning and his freedom would be endangered by new forms of slavery. Only by being anchored in ‘God’ (top of the triad) and being engaged in the ‘World’ (right point of the triad) would the human find true freedom, individuality, and meaning. So as a result of the interaction between the truth from the context and the truth from the Bible and tradition, the star-theme ‘Human being’ acquired a specific color. It can be stated as follows: The human finds true freedom, individuality, and meaning only by responding to God and living as God’s partner in shaping the world. How did Berkhof incorporate freedom, individuality, and meaning in his theology?

In order to incorporate a significant place for freedom in his theology, Berkhof had to reflect theologically on the rise of autonomy. What is the relation between the gospel and this fruit of modern Western culture? Has it grown in spite of the gospel’s presence in modern Western culture, or because of its presence? Berkhof’s answer is: both. Autonomy is a fruit of the gospel, because the gospel has inspired the human to claim freedom and turn against superstition, against oppressive social or political powers, and against powers of nature. Yet, in modern Western culture autonomy is also exercised in relation to God. In this sense the development of autonomy is a sign of the world coming of age. But when the human makes himself the measure of all things and claims his freedom in order to turn against God, this is not a

---

242 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989), 18. It seems that Berkhof in his last book somewhat relativizes the urgency of the questions about meaning when he writes: “in the first world it is the mild climate of a prosperous pluralistic culture in which people can afford the luxury of reflecting on the so-called ultimate questions of the meaning of life.” Berkhof, Two Hundred Years, 311.
243 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 186.
244 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 144.
liberating fruit of the gospel but an endangerment. Freedom can only function well when the human being remains responsive to God: “By describing man as “responsible” we delimit him from the outset in his maturity and autonomy. The first word does not come from him. He is made man by an initiative from the outside and from above.” Sin is the misuse of freedom. This is the foundational anthropological structure. It is, according to Berkhof, difficult to say precisely where the borderline is between the human and animal, but from a theological point of view it must be said that the human had only become fully human when he became aware of God’s presence and learned to pray.

So Berkhof emphasizes that freedom only can function in the relation between the ‘Human being’ and ‘God,’ but when it comes to the relation with the ‘World,’ Berkhof views freedom as freedom to rule and master:

Freedom means that he lifts himself above the common lot he shares with the cosmos (partially, but increasingly more) and takes it into his own hands. With the same freedom with which he is called to respond to God’s love, he must have dominion over the world, managing and ruling, cultivating and transforming it with his technology and culture.

The human is not seen as being in relationship with the world, but as its master. Because the human is made to respond to God’s love and to reflect it, ‘freedom’ is essential for the human in a manner and in a measure in which such cannot be said of the rest of creation with which we are familiar. But this freedom to rule this world as covenant partner of God, does not mean that the human is separated from the historical process in the ‘World.’ Berkhof integrates in his anthropology (left point of the triad) the dynamic structure of history (right point of the triad):

Freedom means that man, in contrast to the animal, is an unfinished being. Man is created as potentiality; his identity does not lie in him but before him. Therefore man lives in the sphere of history. By means of the freedom with which God endows him and the love to which he calls him, God begins a

---

246 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 187. De Knijff notes that by describing the human as a responsible creature, there is right from the start an asymmetry in the relation with God. The human does not rest in himself and then enters in relationships, but he is a being that only in the relationship can become who he is. The being of the human is ex-centric, and sin is ego-centric. De Knijff, “Dogmatiek als leer van de mens,” 187-188.
248 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 186.
249 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 191.
250 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 189.
journey with him and involves him in a hazardous adventure. In the doctrine of God we observed already that thereby God also involves himself in an adventure. For by creating somewhere in the cosmos a free being, God limits his freedom to make room for a son, a partner, a counter-player.  

With these last comments Berkhof indicates that his emphasis on freedom at the left point of the triad also has ramifications for his understanding of the top point of the triad (‘God’). When the human is in a responsive relationship with God, one can also speak of freedom within this relationship. There is more freedom here than often has been allowed by the stress on the human’s dependency. There is room for the human’s independent initiative, because God as the Defenseless Superior Power limits himself to make room for this human initiative (see further section 3.4).

It seems, though, that Berkhof’s emphasis on freedom changed somewhat over the years, being balanced by an emphasis on love. In Christ the meaning of history (1958) he writes: “The whole missionary endeavor of God’s Spirit is focused on leading men to freedom. The whole development of nature and history is meant to bring forth free men.” Later in Christian Faith (1973) Berkhof emphasizes that ‘freedom’ and ‘love’ belong together, and that there is an order. He says: “Freedom, as the infrastructure of love, is always means and never purpose. For the modern Western spirit freedom often seems to be its own purpose. The Christian faith cannot agree with that. It must view the misuse of freedom as being just as bad as the lack of freedom.”

In order to incorporate a significant place for individuality in his theology, Berkhof had to reflect theologically on the place of the individual person. Of course, Berkhof knew that the individual person could not exist without relationships with other people. That is why he speaks again and again about freedom and love. He emphasizes that we are called to love others and that we have to learn to be with our fellowman. When speaking about the

251 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 189.
252 See also Berkhof’s statement on the purpose of creation in Christian Faith. He says: “In order to determine the purpose of creation we thus choose man as the final goal. One may call this “anthropocentric.” But in the preceding chapter we saw that in revelation we meet a God who happens to be surprisingly anthropocentric.” Berkhof, Christian Faith, 170. According to Berkhof, the doctrine that creation is for the glory of God is a strong defence against the urge of the religious human to manipulate God and treat Him as our servant, as the help and guarantee of our drive for happiness. But the danger is that we forget that the glory (doxa) of God lies in the happiness on earth of men on whom his favor rests. Berkhof, Christian Faith, 171.
253 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 190.
powers, Berkhof emphasizes that mankind is not composed of loose individuals, and in the section on the “Renewal of Man” he states that “for God there are no pure individuals.”

Yet all these remarks do not negate the fact that the left point of the triad is an individual human. There is an underlying individualism in Berkhof’s anthropology. This becomes clear in the following quote: “With the individual, too, God now establishes a bond, and this bond is really his ultimate goal. The human receives a covenant partner, a savior, a saving Opposite. In the final analysis he is now no longer all by himself, lonesome. There is Someone who cares for him and guides him.” The lonely individual, searching for meaning, finds here fulfillment in his relation with God. In his book on the Holy Spirit, Berkhof puts the role of the individual in relation to the community in even stronger terms:

This does not mean that the work of the Spirit in the individual is subordinated to that in the church. One can as well or even better argue that the proper work of the Spirit is his dwelling in the lives of individuals. This last and highest work presupposes the work in the church, however.

Although the community comes first, the end-goal is defined by Berkhof as the individual.

---

255 Berkhof, Christ and the Powers, 66.
256 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 423.
257 Individualism is a Protestant tendency. The individualizing impulse of the Renaissance was taken up by Luther and Calvin in theology and religion. Luther had in a real way anchored the human in God (coram Deo) as a lost and justified sinner. The church was not the mediator of God’s grace, but the human stood alone before God on basis of God’s Word in Scripture. Faith in God’s grace, as revealed in Scripture, was the basis for the justification of the human as an individual sinner before God. This foundation for the Protestant churches provided a new joy and certainty of God’s love for countless believers, but ecclesiology remains problematic because it is viewed as an external means of grace, not inherent in the relation between God and the believer.
258 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 450.
260 De Knijff only notes the interdependence between individual and community in Berkhof, but not the underlying individualism. De Knijff, “Dogmatiek als leer van de mens,” 191. Berkhof himself saw the danger of individualism: “The individual (lit., that which cannot be divided any further; Gk. atomos) is a person considered in abstraction from the world around him. (...) A human being is not an individual, however, but a person, a being existing in relation to an entire world and especially to other persons, in an unremitting process of receiving and giving.” Berkhof, Introduction to the Study of Dogmatics, 23. However, if in the foundation of one’s thinking there is a ‘Human being,’ which under influence of existentialism is conceived in an individualistic fashion, the tendency towards individualism is undeniable.
In the introduction to this study, Brinkman’s concept of ‘double transformation’ has been introduced: if a concept is brought from an old to a new context, there is a change in two directions. The old concept changes its meaning when placed in a new context (and thus also loses some of its previous meaning), but also the new context is changed by being enriched with meanings that were present in the old context. The measure in which the new context of the mid-twenty century was changed under the influence of Berkhof’s conception of the ‘Human being’ will not be pursued in this study, but the conception of the ‘Human being’ as a free individual is a clear example of reverse transformation. The emphasis on freedom and individuality in the Western context have transformed Berkhof’s understanding at this point. There are even moments in Berkhof’s thinking that a further transformation of his concept of the ‘Human being’ takes place. In his inaugural lecture (1961), while responding to the thought of Bultmann, Berkhof writes:

If the only important point would be the encounter between God and man, and if all that can be objectified would fall as such outside this encounter, then faith will be emptied of all those elements that can be experienced in the reality of nature and history. The encounter is then emptied of all involvement with the world of space and time. Then the encounter becomes timeless, ghostly, bloodless and skimpy, a world of pure inwardness, an upper floor above the ground-floor of our real existence (...).

The encounter between God and man is for Berkhof the line ‘God’-‘Human being’ in the triad. As usual Berkhof objects to separating the third point of the triad from this encounter (the reality of nature and history). But then he clarifies what he means by saying that then the encounter becomes “timeless, ghostly, bloodless and skimpy, a world of pure inwardness.” At this point the left point of the triad is not only a free individual, but specifically the subjective inwardness of this free individual, while the right point of the triad becomes the objective world, including the body of the free individual. Here is an echo of Descartes’ distinction between the res cogitans (thinking substance, subjective experience) and the res extensa (extended substance, the objective world). One senses considerable passion in Berkhof’s refusal to accept the cleavage between the left and right points of the triad:

---

261 Section 2 of the introduction.
Inspired by Heidegger they [Bultmann and his followers] see a fundamental cleavage between the world of nature and history with their ‘objectivizable’ entities and the world of man, which means freedom and decision. (...) In this way they radically de-historicize the New Testament and limit the significance of Jesus Christ to that of the inspirer of existential life as it is confronted with God in the present. This is the most recent attempt in the long series which began with Gnosticism, to remodel the gospel in accordance with the dominant philosophical ideas of the time.264

But while fighting this divided worldview, his own concepts are transformed in the process, the ‘Human being’ becoming not only more individual but also more inward and subjective.

In order to incorporate a significant place for the search for meaning in his theology, Berkhof had to reflect theologically on the question of meaning. Berkhof took a purpose-oriented view to the meaning of life: “We understand ‘meaning’ in the sense of ‘goal’ and of the movement towards it.”265 There are of course other views. One could also find meaning in life by being devoted to God and awed by His beauty, without having a specific end in mind, just as a relationship of love to a partner might be experienced as meaningful without concern for ultimate purpose.266 But Berkhof connected the question of meaning intimately with the question of purpose, without even distinguishing between these. Where could meaning and purpose be discerned? The ‘verticalists’ and Christian existentialists (Bultmann) tried to find it on the direct line between ‘Human being’ and ‘God.’ For Berkhof meaning and purpose should be found in God, but not separated from the objective world, so he emphasized: ‘Human being’-‘World’-‘God:’

When we can no longer find meaning in history it means that we do not understand ourselves. (...) What is certain is that one day the relation between this entire cultural development and eternity will be disclosed and shown to be meaningful.267

But what one day will be disclosed, we now know already by faith: “The purpose of the world is the Kingdom of God, as the full realization of human

264 Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History, 208. The quote comes from the epilogue which was added to the book in 1965, so nearly 5 years after his inaugural lecture.
265 Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History, 17.
266 Compare: Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, 3-24.
267 Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History, 13; Berkhof, Christian Faith, 543.
existence through fellowship with God (...)."

The full realization of human existence is God’s purpose for the human, a humanity characterized by the combination of love and freedom. When the human has reached his full elevation and maturity (as we see in Jesus) he has fully become God’s partner and instrument. Christ, who has gone before us, now brings the humanization of the human and the materialization of nature. The fruit of the gospel of Christ took root in Europe. It aims at the development of all of life and the humanization of the human’s existence. But if people only want the fruit without the root, it cannot be sustained.

What does this mean for the question about the goal of creation? It seems Berkhof takes an anthropocentric view: “In order to determine the purpose of creation we thus choose man as the final goal.” But he was aware of the danger of this anthropocentric view, namely that God is seen as our servant, a help and guarantee of our drive for happiness. Berkhof’s view on the purpose of creation cannot be labeled anthropocentric or theocentric. It is dialectic. The purpose of creation should not only be seen as ‘for the greater glory of God,’ but as fellowship with God. The strong theocentrism of the Reformed Protestantism, especially Calvin, takes on “an inhuman hardness because it seems to forget that God’s glory, his doxa, lies in the happiness on earth of men on whom his favour rests.” So there is a dialectic in the purpose of creation: “For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God (Irenaeus).” Because Berkhof rejected the object-subject division, opting for an inter-subjective approach, he did not want to follow the Reformed approach and make the glory of God the purpose of

---

268 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 170. Also De Knijff sees this as the foundational perspective in Berkhof: God’s purpose is the human and his salvation, which He realizes in the process of history. De Knijff, "Dogmatiek als leer van de mens," 185-186.

269 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 303. The elevated vision for the human was inspired by Jesus’ humanity: “Jesus was first of all himself the embodiment of this order, the man who completely answers to God’s purpose and translates it in his words and deeds. (...) Both forgiveness and healing aim to elevate man, on the basis of God’s gracious coming, to the true humanity of being a free and happy child of God.” Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 301.


271 In the revised edition of *Christian Faith* Berkhof has become more careful about the ‘progress’ in Europe and North-America. While still speaking about the uniqueness of this culture, he adds: “Meanwhile, in the accelerated post-Enlightenment forms, this process has become increasingly secularized and detached from its Christian roots.” Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 514.


274 Compare the discussion about theocentrism and anthropocentrism in Berkhof’s mediation between Barth and Schleiermacher in paragraph 2.6.


creation, nor did he want to follow humanism and posit the flourishing of the human (without God) as the purpose of creation. It was the flourishing of the human (and his world) in fellowship with God that was the ultimate purpose, the Kingdom to which world-history moved.

By emphasizing the line: ‘Human being’-‘World’-‘God,’ Berkhof did not forget that loving God was more than socio-political engagement. There is also a direct line between the ‘Human being’ and ‘God,’ as long as it remains connected with the other line: We have a need for transcendentality and responsibility, for mysticism and ethics.\(^{277}\) The transcendentality and mysticism can be expressed in this way: “We should find our security in Him, knowing His care and guidance, being obedient to Him.”\(^{278}\) Only so does the modern human find meaning in his covenant relation with God.

In summary: The star-theme ‘Human being’ is influenced by a perceived truth from the Western context. Berkhof’s reading of the anthropocentric turn and existentialism, led him to the conviction: *Freedom and individuality are central to the human being and he is driven to find meaning.* The resulting color of the star-theme ‘Human being’ can be stated as follows: *The human finds true freedom, individuality, and meaning only by responding to God and living as God’s partner in shaping the world.* The gravity field of this star has effect on many other areas of Berkhof’s theology.

### 3.4 ‘GOD’ IN A CLIMATE OF EMPIRICISM AND FUNCTIONALISM

The third point of the triad is ‘God.’ In searching for the contextual influences at this point, and the resulting color of the star-theme, one first has to note that the climate of existentialism and anthropocentrism that influenced the ‘Human Being’ also influenced Berkhof’s doctrine of God. Moreover, the climate of evolution and revolution that influenced the ‘World’ also influenced his doctrine of God. Berkhof’s view on the ‘Human being’ made it necessary for him to rethink God’s omnipotence, and his view on the ‘World’ made it necessary for him to rethink God’s immutability.\(^{279}\) This does not mean that


\(^{278}\) Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 445-454. Elsewhere Berkhof writes: “Instead of speaking about “revealed truths,” one begins to speak about the Truth as a person or as a singular event, with an appeal not first of all to the understanding intellect, but to the loving heart, to the self-surrender of the person, to the human existence risking itself and winning.” Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 79.

\(^{279}\) The suggestion here is of course not that Berkhof first worked out his doctrine on the ‘Human being’ and the ‘World’ and only then reworked his doctrine of ‘God.’ That is not how the mind of a creative theologian works. Developments are parallel and influence one another. The point here is, rather, that it is not a directly perceived truth in the context that
‘God’ is a planet for Berkhof (see below) but it is important to first look to the impact of the other two stars on ‘God.’

First, the way God’s omnipotence was traditionally conceived made it difficult to see if there was any room for independent initiative on the part of humans. So the relation ‘Human being-God’ became difficult to conceive. The development of the concept of omnipotence had been influenced by Greek philosophy. Christian theologians had, under its influence, given a one-sided emphasis on God’s transcendence and failed to sufficiently stress the side of his condescendence. God’s superior power was emphasized, but not his defenselessness and powerlessness which we see in Christ. But if God is only all-powerful, while nothing can resist Him, then there is no room for the freedom and individuality of the ‘Human being’ as a covenant-partner for God. Then there is also no room for the ‘Human being’ to resist Gods loving purposes, while in the secular climate it is more than evident that people can resist Gods purposes. At this point Berkhof agreed with Bonhoeffer’s words: “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross...the development towards the world’s coming of age (...), the God of the Bible (...) wins power and space in the world by his weakness.” By connecting God’s power with His love, he was able to hold to the traditional notion that God would finally overcome all resistance.

Second, the way God’s unchangeableness (immutability) was traditionally conceived, made it difficult to conceive the ‘God-world’ relation. In modern Western culture, the world was more and more seen as a dynamic process of evolution. A static unchangeable God seemed a distant stranger, not very involved in this world and with us. Berkhof put again two attributes of God in conjunction and he presented God as ‘The Changeable Faithfulness.’ In this way he could make room for the dynamic process of evolution, while holding fast to God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His promises.

So, the contextual influences of existentialism, anthropocentrism, the Marxist revolution, and Darwinian evolution colored the star-themes ‘Human being’ and the ‘World.’ And the gravity fields of these stars were felt in the motion of the third star: ‘God.’ The way in which Berkhof reconceived the

made Berkhof re-consider his doctrine of God (the omnipotence and immutability of God were of no great interest for secular existentialists and scientific evolutionists), but the indirect influence of the context via ‘Human being’ and ‘World.’

280 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 144.
282 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 144-145.
283 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 152.
285 Although Berkhof did not embrace process theology, he clearly has incorporated their emphasis on the dynamic nature of God and their emphasis on seeing God’s power as in some way limited. Compare Meijering, Hendrikus Berkhof, 21.
attributes of God followed the lead of the one he saw as his teacher: Barth. Like him, Berkhof wanted to formulate his doctrine of God from the perspective of God’s condescension in his revelation.\textsuperscript{286} He wanted to learn about God’s essence from his revelation in Israel and Christ.\textsuperscript{287} For a long time dogmatics had treated God’s condescension as limited to the area of revelation, while God’s transcendence belonged to His essence. “This one-sidedness was due to the fact that one tried to derive God’s essence from abstract thought instead of reading it exclusively from his revelation to Israel and in Christ. Thus there was imprinted upon the minds of many the image of a distant and cold deity.”\textsuperscript{288} Many traditional attributes (omnipresence, omniscience, simplicity, eternity) are not primary or fundamental attributes of God, but are rather presuppositions or consequences of revelational experiences.\textsuperscript{289} The primary or fundamental attributes are read from God’s condescension and just here God’s transcendence is revealed. Therefore the three headings (holy love, defenceless superior power, changeable faithfulness) always combine a noun with an adjective, the one denoting the aspect of transcendence and the other the aspect of condescendence.\textsuperscript{290}

Besides the contextual factors that influenced Berkhof’s understanding of ‘God’ via the ‘Human Being’ and ‘World,’ there were other contextual factors that had a more direct impact on his understanding of ‘God’: empiricism and functionalism.

In the first place, we look to empiricism. As stated in the introduction (section1), Period III of Berkhof’s theological life (1965-1985) started with a thunderstorm.\textsuperscript{291} The modern secular climate flooded the polders of church and theology. Under the influence of empiricism people started to think ‘from below.’\textsuperscript{292} Atheism became a viable option. Berkhof struggled with the question: How can one speak responsibly and convincingly about God in this empirical, historical, and positivistic climate? Closely connected to this empiricism was the general decline of metaphysics in modern Western culture. The objective world as discovered by empirical science gives no

\textsuperscript{286} According to Berkhof only Augustine, Calvin, and later Barth followed this route. Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 117-119.
\textsuperscript{287} Compare paragraph 2.6 where it was stated that accommodation belongs to Gods being as covenant partner. God steps within our horizon, connects with our experiences, speaks our language in order to lead us from there to new and even opposite experiences.
\textsuperscript{288} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 117.
\textsuperscript{289} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 122.
\textsuperscript{291} See paragraph 1.
\textsuperscript{292} Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 18.
ground whatsoever to confidently assert the existence of non-empirical transcendental realities. Discussions in theology were deeply affected by this cultural climate especially because theology, for so long, had been deeply intertwined with metaphysics. New questions were raised about how to conceive of God and his relation to this world in a climate in which onto-theology (Heidegger’s phrase for metaphysics) had become deeply suspect.

The back-and-forth movement between idealism and empiricism is a polarity that is characteristic of the spiritual history of Europe. Idealism tends to foster a panentheistic concept of God, while empiricism leads to atheism. But these two hostile brothers (panentheism and atheism) are very close to each other, because they share the same origin. “When reason is conceived as self-positing and creative, either it is God himself or it replaces God.” The autonomy of reason has to be resisted irrespective of whether the climate is more idealistic or more empiricistic. One also has to hold to the truth of both of these climates. The truth of an empiricistic climate is that one cannot fly off into speculation but has to establish faith on an historical basis. Because the kerygma is also a testimony to that which has happened it requires legitimation from history or else Jesus becomes a myth. But the truth of the idealistic climate is that faith is focused on the post-Easter Christ. This Christ is not unhistorical but suprahistorical. In a climate of empiricism, one has to establish faith on an historical basis, without giving in to the temptation to deny the post-Easter Christ.

In the second place, we focus on functionalism. Functionalism is described well by philosopher C.A. van Peursen in his book *Cultuur in Stroomversnelling* (Culture in acceleration). Berkhof was familiar with van Peursen’s approach to culture. Van Peursen and Berkhof had been colleagues at the university of Leiden for many years. More importantly, Berkhof expresses his indebtedness to the book of John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, and Robinson makes use of the three cultural phases of Van Peursen. A short summary of these three phases will be important both for understanding Berkhof’s doctrine of God and His Christology. Van Peursen sketches the development of (especially) Western culture in three phases that can be distinguished by

---

293 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 28-29.
294 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 59-60.
295 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 70.
296 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 177.
297 Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years*, 138.
paying attention to the human’s way of thinking about the world and the surrounding powers. ‘Thinking’ is in fact too narrow a term because it includes theory and practice.

First there was the mythic way of thinking. The myth was a story that revealed strange powers and gave direction to a group of people. It showed them how to behave and how to participate in the powers of nature that surround him. In this mythic way of thinking the subject is not a closed circle, so that the influence of the surrounding world can penetrate to the core of the human being. There is not a strict separation between the human and the world. Van Peursen summarizes the mythic experience with the word ‘that.’ The fact ‘that’ something exists, both in the surrounding world and in the human’s own existence, keeps thinking and doing in thrall. The human is searching for the origins of existence and has a fear for the hidden ground of his existence. It is a fear for the ‘that.’ Normally this would lead to honoring and worshiping the powers. But when humility becomes pride, the practice of magic will result. Then the goal is to control the powers for one’s own benefit.

Second there was the ontological way of thinking. Early signs can be seen from 600 B.C. in the Greek transition from mythology to philosophy. In this way of thinking the human starts to take more distance from what surrounds him. Craft and technique play a role, but it is especially the theoretical reflection on the visible (physica) and the invisible (metaphysica) that surface. A theory about being (ontology) is developed, not just out of speculative interests, but with a very practical goal: deliverance from the hidden powers of life and death, act and fate, guilt and suffering. Van Peursen summarizes the ontological experience with the word ‘what.’ It is not so much the fear and acknowledgment ‘that’ something exists (mythic experience) but the question ‘what’ it is becomes central. In the ontological phase the human wants to acknowledge the powers appropriately by understanding ‘what’ they are. But like the mythical way of thinking could become magical through a lack of humility, the ontological way of thinking could end in ‘substantialism.’ Van Peursen uses this word to indicate an attitude that wants to see things in themselves without seeing them in direct dependence on something else. The result of this attitude is that the relation between things is severed. Substantialism isolates and separates. It is a way of grabbing power. But in this process the object (fellow humans, God) is lost out of sight. One does not reach above and beyond oneself in ever new and risky engagement of persons.

The third way of thinking is the functional. Early signs are already visible around 1600, but only in the twentieth century does this thinking

---

300 C.A. van Peursen, Cultuur in Stroomversnelling, 39.
become dominant. The functional thinking/attitude looks for cohesion and sees the meaning of a word or act or thing in the role that it has—its function—within such a cohesion. In the functional way of thinking the referral of subject to object and vice versa is in the foreground. The question is not any longer ‘what’ things are, but ‘how’ they are, what their function is. Personal concern and engagement become the criterion. Something that cannot be shown to concern you, something that cannot move you into action and enthusiasm becomes meaningless. Even those things which we can understand quite well, but do not touch us, are rejected. It is not difficult to understand that people with this attitude have a strong aversion to the ontological way of thinking. To them it comes across as authoritarian because values, God, rules etc. are pushed upon people just because they exist in themselves. Speculations and closed thought systems are despised and especially the old metaphysical constructions come under fire. Speaking about things that cannot be shown by science or by our senses is meaningless. In the functional way of thinking, one starts with the specific and concrete, with a ‘close-up,’ in order to gain via this direct contact something of the bigger picture. There are dangers with the functional way of thinking. It could derail into operationalism. The ‘how’ becomes then an instrument to be controlled for one’s own benefit. The subject is not open any longer to others, but it refers only to his own activity and achievements. Humans are nothing more than the role they play. God is nothing more than human feelings and desires (projection). This is the modern danger: reducing everything to numbers, bureaucracy, technocracy, positivism, and manipulation.

What was, according to Berkhof, the truth moment in the climate of empiricism and functionalism? The proposal in this study is that Berkhof took as true insights the following. First about where God should be looked for: God should not be looked for in a separate area ‘above,’ but on the level of history and experience ‘below.’ Second about how God (or other people) should be known: Only through personal and inter-subjective encounter can one meaningfully come to know the Other.

Berkhof’s reflections on where God should be looked for, came to clarity in his struggle with the empiricistic and a-theistic climate. Was this atheistic climate not a direct attack on the gospel and the God of Old and New Testament? Berkhof responded again in his dialectic way. Again he was unwilling to dismiss the new insights too quickly. Of course atheism as a repression of the turn towards the transcendent was counter to Christian faith, but there is also a very positive aspect to atheism. Atheism is also a

rebellion against a certain concept of God. Atheism is a-theism, a rejection of theism. Theism supposes a God ‘up there,’ who is outside the reality which we can experience, a metaphysical Being. As long as we do not see that the Christian faith is not closer to religion than to atheism, we misunderstand our context. Especially in the Old Testament we meet a non-religious God, a God who is hidden but appears in the concrete reality of history. This God cannot be met ‘up there.’ He must be met here ‘below,’ through his deeds and words, in the field of concrete history.

Berkhof’s reflections on how God should be known were part of his general struggle with the subject-object gap after the Enlightenment. Berkhof’s specific concern with the subject-object dichotomy was different from the discussion in science or philosophy. In the latter the focus would be on the relation between the knowing subject and the known object. In terms of the triad, it would be the problem of how to relate the ‘Human being’ and the ‘World.’ For Berkhof, as a theologian, this was important but it could not be considered in separation of the third point of the triad: ‘God.’ Sartre had said: “Either man is subject or God, but not both at the same time.” This train of thought was really paralyzing. Berkhof complained: “Western thinking was so much in the groove of the subject-object scheme that it could not bring God and man together as two (cooperating and opposing) subjects. In this conceptual scheme, that kind of concursus always amounted to competition.” This competition thinking had deeper roots than the Enlightenment. It was already visible in Thomas of Aquinas and Augustine. Berkhof’s struggle to overcome the subject-object dichotomy was not on the periphery of his theology. In his theological autobiography he makes the revealing remark that while he was writing Christian Faith, he discovered certain continuous lines in his own thinking. He described those lines with three words: covenant, encounter, and inter-subjectivity. And we know from Berkhof’s inaugural lecture that he used these three words to overcome the subject-object dichotomy. So only when he nearly had finished writing Christian Faith did Berkhof recognize that ‘encounter, inter-subjectivity, and covenant’ helped him to overcome the subject-object dichotomy. The emphasis on ‘encounter’ and ‘intersubjectivity’ was influenced by the personalism of Martin Buber, in which the I-it attitude was rejected because

---

304 Berkhof, “Theologiseren in een A-Theïstisch Tijdperk,” 68.
305 Berkhof, Christian Faith (first edition), 132. In the revised edition (Dutch: 5th edition) this quote has been removed.
306 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 221.
307 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 123.
308 Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 19.
the ‘other’ is then reduced to an object dominated by the subject. It is the I-Thou attitude which gives an inter-subjective encounter in which the other can be truly known. Only through personal and inter-subjective encounter can one meaningfully come to know people and God.

The Bible calls the relationship of God and man a “covenant.” That term does not suggest a subject-object scheme; it intimates much rather the concept of “inter-subjectivity.” Yet even that term is not adequate because we do not deal with two subjects that are on the same level, but with a Subject who in sovereign love makes room for other subjects and allows his actions to be determined and limited by them, yet without thereby losing anything of the sovereignty of his own subjectivity.  

For Berkhof the notion of ‘covenant’ captures both the ‘intersubjective encounter’ between God and man, as well as the inequality between the Divine and human partner.  

So Berkhof wanted to incorporate the truth that God should not be looked for in a separate area ‘above,’ but on the level of history and experience ‘below,’ and the truth that only through personal and inter-subjective encounter can one meaningfully come to know the Other into his theology. Berkhof was aware that in order to incorporate these truths of the context, he had to revise the doctrine of revelation. It might seem that the doctrine of revelation should not be viewed as part of the star-theme ‘God.’ However, for Berkhof the doctrine of revelation and the doctrine of God belong together. In the doctrine of revelation (he calls it the internal prolegomena) the epistemology which is implicitly given in the relationship between God and the human being is abstracted from it and considered first. The only reason Berkhof is willing, in Christian Faith, to consider the doctrine of revelation separate from the doctrine of God is not because they can in principle be separated, but only because “the estrangement between the Christian faith and the secularized cultural mentality in the Western world and in our time is so great and so strongly felt that we should take the risks, if at the outset we can do something to shed some light on this situation of estrangement.” As a result of the interaction between the truths from the context and the truths from

---

309 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 222.
310 Berkhof defines covenant in this way: “The covenant is a gracious disposition from God, yet involving two parties who relate to each other as subjects and whose attitude and behavior are always mutually co-determinative. Grace and judgment, faithfulness and unfaithfulness are always mutual reactions to the other in the covenant relationship.” Berkhof, Christian Faith, 252.
311 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 44.
the Bible and tradition the star-theme ‘God’ got a specific color. It can be stated as follows: *God reveals himself to us on the plane of history and experience through inter-subjective encounters.*

Revelation, according to Berkhof, comes to us on the plane of history. It is in this reality which we can experience that God discloses himself through human encounters. It is here, in the form of human encounters, that the face of this unknown God becomes visible. This does not mean that the revelation of God is just another name for horizontal encounters with other people and situations as the ‘horizontalists’ claim. But it is neither an encounter with God that happens outside these encounters. Berkhof warns against the gnostic danger that our ‘I’ would try to meet God, either by ‘going up’ or ‘going down.’ The metaphysical quest did the former, the existentialist inward quest did the latter. In our a-theistic time, it is necessary to stress the revelation of God on the field of history, a tertium that breaks the mould of both isolated ‘horizontalists’ and ‘verticalists.’ In these ‘disclosure moments’ on the field of history a new height and depth is revealed. These insights are unpacked in Berkhoef’s book *Openbaring als gebeuren* (Revelation as Event). It was this insight about revelation, as a result of the interaction with atheism and empiricism, that convinced Berkhof that he had to start theology ‘from below.’ After the Enlightenment man started to think ‘from below.’ He started to take his own subjectivity as starting-point, rather than the revelation of God. Barth had opted for revelation, rejecting all points of contact in human subjectivity and experience. The liberal theologians had opted for human subjectivity. Berkhof saw revelation as a road that one travels. On the road, the starting-point is not the end-point. One could start with human subjectivity (*contra* Barth) as long as one lets revelation challenge, correct, and deepen one’s views.

It might seem that Berkhof opts here for a dialectical relation between human subjectivity (or experience) and revelation. But, as was shown in section 2.6, Berkhof does not follow Tillich’s methodology. Rather, he broadens his conception of revelation. Because revelation is an encounter, it cannot be described only as a divine (objectivistic) or a human (subjectivistic)

313 It seems that Berkhof views both the metaphysical quest and the existentialist quest as a sort of Gnosticism in disguise.
315 Berkhof, “Openbaring als Gebeuren.”
happening. It is both at the same time. Both the objective and the subjective pole are the work of God. The initiative of revelation comes from one side (Gods), but unless man acknowledges it, it is not even revelation. Therefore God needs not only to make himself present in our reality, but he must also open our eyes to make us see his presence (illumination). For this double activity the concepts ‘Word’ and ‘Spirit’ are used in dogmatics. “This duality and “biunity” of Word and Spirit is thus the description of the encounter event that takes place in the act of revelation.”

Because Berkhof viewed revelation as an encounter with both an objective and a subjective pole, he could not follow Barth who seemed to deny the subjective role of human experience in revelation and who did not have a developed doctrine of the Spirit in his theology. Berkhof neither wanted to separate revelation and experience (as Barth, Moltmann, and Küng do), nor make certain experiences nearly coincide with revelation (as Rosemary R. Ruether seems to do as a feminist theologian). Berkhof wanted to relate them by pointing out that revelation is directed to people in the world of their concrete experience, but that experience itself can never bridge the gap between the person and revelation. An encounter is unpredictable and widens one’s horizons. It comes in one’s world of experience, but liberates to go beyond it. So the revelation of Christ connects with experience but also goes beyond it. In this way Berkhof could also have a more positive evaluation of the relation between Christianity and other religions than Barth, who had made strong claims about other religions as being expressions of unbelief and idolatry.

For Berkhof the divine revelation in Christ is normative, but not exclusive.

Berkhof has closely tied revelation to experiences on the plane of history. Is there no room left for metaphysics? There are two answers possible, one more theoretical, the other more practical. In theory, Berkhof does not reject metaphysics or reflection on ontological questions. He only insists that this reflection must be rooted in God’s revelation of Himself on the plane of history. On the level of theory Meijering is right when he states that

317 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 63.
318 E. Flesseman-van Leer thinks that Berkhof’s thoughts betray at this point a falling back in the object-subject division. E. Flesseman-van Leer, “Over de tweezijdigheid van het verbond,” 34-35.
321 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 58-59. Berkhof’s paragraph on ‘Revelation and Experience’ was only added in the Revised Edition.
322 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 51.
323 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 50.
Berkhof does not polarize between functional and ontological thinking. However, on a practical level this is not the case. To the best of the present author’s knowledge, all the references to ontology in Berkhof’s later publications (from period III onward) are negative, and at those points where traditional theology engaged in ontological reflection (Christology, Trinity), Berkhof refuses to join in. So in practice there was a polarization between functional and ontological modes of thinking. Berkhof rejected the ontological mode of thinking and embraced the functional mode.

3.5 OTHER THEMES?

Are the three star-themes ‘God’, ‘Human being’, ‘World’, truly the most weighty in Berkhof’s thinking, or could others also claim a similar place? In section 1, mention was made of Berkhof’s own assessment (in his theological autobiography) that the Truth-question and the Church-question would accompany him throughout his life. The Truth-question is indeed an important theme for Berkhof, and he deals with this under the rubric of God and his revelation (see section 3.4). But what about the Church-question? Should the theme of the ‘Church’ be considered as a fourth star-theme? No, the church-question might have been an important question for Berkhof, but it has not the same weight in his theology as the star-themes. To be sure, the theme of the church is important for Berkhof. He devotes 15% of the pages in Christian Faith to this theme, and it might be that the re-discovery of the church’s ‘orientation to the world’ (after the Second World War) stimulated Berkhof’s awareness of the ‘World’ as an important theme in theology in general. But there is further little evidence that the weight of the doctrine of the church influenced the three themes of the triad, though there is clear evidence that the themes of the triad influenced the theme of the church. It is remarkable that in his study Christ the Meaning of History (1958), Berkhof clearly submits the significance of the church to the foundational triad:

Christ (...) is not concerned about the Church as such, but that in and through the Church he might be glorified in the hearts of men and within the sphere of history.

325 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 348-349.
326 Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History, 177.
The church is important, but she is subordinate to the work of the Spirit in the hearts of men and within the sphere of history. As was stated in section 3.3, Berkhof does not want to submit the work of the Spirit in the individual to His work in the church, “One can as well or even better argue that the proper work of the Spirit is his dwelling in the lives of individuals.”327 Also in *Christian Faith* the foundational triad shapes the presentation of the church. It is presented as having three aspects: an institutional aspect, a communal aspect, and an apostolate aspect (orientation to the world, meaning here both the hearts of men and the sphere of history):328

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. Everything that has come before serves this goal, even when it is not deliberately stated.329

The place of Christ in relation to the triad will be taken up in section 4 and 5, but it is clear that the church stands between Christ on the one hand and both ‘World’ and the non-Christian ‘Human being’ at the other hand. The church is not a star-theme, but it is a planet that is orbiting the three stars, being pulled into their gravitational field (see picture).330

---

330 In reality planets of course do not orbit three stars at the same time, even not when those three stars form a triple-star system. Here the analogy breaks down.
Another theme that should be considered is Israel, because it played a significant role in Berkhof’s thinking. James Barr praises Berkhof for subordinating the theme of the Old Testament to the theme of Israel, because it makes clear that the study of the Old Testament is not just about studying a text, but about uncovering the life and history of the people out of which these texts emerged.331 But also at this point the triple-star system shapes his understanding of Israel (and the Old Testament):

Israel’s way can be summarized as covenant history, for it concerns a covenant which makes history in being realized (...) Covenant and history—these are the two integral constituents of the way of Israel. Covenant means: encounter with Yahweh, experiencing his deliverance, promise, threat, and commandment. The people as a whole and the individual must respond to these.332

All three points of the triad are mentioned: Yahweh (‘God’), the people and the individual (‘Human being’), the covenant and the encounter (the line between ‘God’ and the ‘Human being’), and history (the time aspect of the ‘World’). Elsewhere Berkhof also mentions the space aspect of the world, in that Israel “arises out of the world situation and is meant to become a blessing for the whole world.”333 The meaning of Israel is clearly submitted to the

332 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 233-234. James Barr criticizes Berkhof for trying to combine ‘covenant,’ which Eichrodt took as the central concept of the OT, with ‘history,’ which von Rad took as the central concept. According to Barr the oppositions between both approaches cannot be so easily combined. Barr, “Some Old Testament aspects,” 16.
333 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 249.
universal plan of God with the world and the human being.\textsuperscript{334} Israel, as a theme, is a planet that orbits the three stars, being pulled in their gravitational field.

For the Old Testament as text this picture is not sufficient. The Old Testament is as such not a theme in Berkhof’s systematic theology, so it is neither a planet nor a star. Rather, it is, together with the New Testament, the source for his interaction with contextual influences around the star-themes. The Bible remained for Berkhof as a Reformed theologian always the primary source.\textsuperscript{335}

4. The method with which Berkhof approaches Christology

In this section the method with which Berkhof approaches Christology will be studied. In section 4.1 the four angles from which Berkhof approaches his subject will be presented, and section 4.2 will describe how Berkhof’s method is shaped by the triple-star system.

4.1 CHRISTOLOGY: ‘FROM BEHIND,’ ‘FROM BELOW,’ ‘FROM ABOVE,’ AND ‘FROM BEFORE’

Berkhof’s approach to Christology is clearly set out in the opening of his Christological chapter “Jesus the Son” of his \textit{Christian Faith}. He uses four approaches to Christology, which he sees as complementary.\textsuperscript{336}

The first is the approach ‘from behind’ in which Jesus is seen in the line of redemptive history, “how he arises out of the Old Testament problematic, and gives and is the answer to it.”\textsuperscript{337} This approach ‘from behind’ has to come first:

We must break radically, also methodologically, with a mode of thinking that approaches Christ apart from Israel, for the result is almost always that he is put in frameworks (ethical, idealistic, existentialistic, futuristic, revolutionary, etc.) that are familiar to us but which do not fit him.\textsuperscript{338}

\textsuperscript{334} For a fuller study, see: A.H. Drost, \textit{Is God veranderd?} (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007). Drost shows that Berkhof’s focus was not Israel as such, but the way in which God had a relation with Israel. This relation was functional because Israel was called to participate with God in reaching the whole of humankind (277, 350).

\textsuperscript{335} Berkhof, \textit{Introduction to the Study of Dogmatics}, 16-18.


\textsuperscript{337} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 271.

\textsuperscript{338} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 258.
The passion to connect Christ with the Old Testament surfaced already in Berkhof’s theology from the time he was in Berlin. It was born from a concern that the Church will not compromise and make an ideological image of Jesus. He saw this danger especially in the school of Bultmann:

The neglect of the OT as the background and presupposition of Jesus we regard as the Achilles’ heel of the school of Bultmann. This background has been exchanged for an existentialistic presupposition, with the result that Jesus’ own concept of existence is as much as possible reduced to actuality and decision.339

The second approach is ‘from above’ in which Jesus is seen as a new beginning and a turn made by God. This approach starts from the Word, the creative and saving speech of God which in him became “flesh,” that is, an historical human life.

The third is the approach ‘from below’ in which the methodology of all historical investigation is applied to Jesus, a careful investigation of the sources resulting in a view of Jesus within the framework of his own time.

The fourth approach is ‘from before’ in which Jesus is viewed from the perspective of what he works through the centuries in human hearts and in the peoples of the world.

Berkhof has dealt with the approach ‘from behind’ in the chapter on Israel (section 31), and starts the approach ‘from before’ when he transitions into pneumatology (section 37). The start of pneumatology (section 37) in the Christological chapter is done intentionally:

Even as the previous chapter, on Israel, led to Christology (section 31) and so formed the transition to this chapter, so this Christological chapter leads to pneumatology and thus forms the transition to what will be taken up in the remainder of this book, except for the final chapter [all things new]. With this division, which is at the same time an intentional overlapping, we give expression to the fact that, despite all the turns, we nevertheless deal with one uninterrupted activity of God in history.340

340 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 324. Paragraph 37 (the transition into pneumatology: “The Spirit and the Participation”) is not the last paragraph in Berkhof’s Christological chapter. Paragraph 38 describes his theology of the Trinity. Berkhof placed the discussion of the Trinity consciously after his doctrine of God and Christ. Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 19. Only at this point could Berkhof show that the Tri-unity was not a description of the one covenant partner (God) but of the covenant itself in which God and human beings (through the Son) come together in the Spirit. Berkhof, Christian Faith, 335.
The substance of Berkhof’s Christological part is found in section 32-36:

32. In Search of the Historical Jesus
33. The Person
34. Life and Humanity
35. Death and Reconciliation
36. Resurrection and Glorification

According to Berkhof he deals in these sections with the approaches ‘from below’ and ‘from above.’ There might be some confusion here, because Berkhof does not always use these terms in the way they are normally used. Often a Christology ‘from below’ means starting with Jesus’ humanity and seeing there a (partial or full) revelation of God, while a Christology ‘from above’ means starting with his divinity and seeing Jesus as the God who comes to us, as the Word who became flesh. As became clear in section 3.4, Berkhof’s usage of these terms is strongly influenced by the contrast between two modes of thinking: a speculative metaphysical mode of thinking and an historical or empirical mode of thinking. Only when this is kept in mind can the confusion be cleared.

Berkhof uses ‘from below’ as referring to an historical and empirical mode of thinking. Therefore it is section 32, “In Search of the Historical Jesus,” which represents for Berkhof the approach ‘from below’ and not section 34, “Life and Humanity,” which would represent the approach ‘from below’ in the common usage. Historical investigation is of necessity not tied to one faith-perspective. Therefore, historical investigation has often been viewed and feared as an undermining of faith, but it can only promote the truth. “The faith is more than this truth, yet it does presuppose and imply it.” The starting-point in empirical history is for Berkhof not optional. “(...) We opt for a sequence in which the approach from below comes first. In our world (after the Enlightenment) this could hardly be otherwise. We approach Jesus as an

---

341 When Berkhof refers to this traditional way of using these terms, he will put them in double quotation marks: “from below” and “from above.” Berkhof, Christian Faith, 291.
342 G.H. Borger-Koetsier suffers from this confusion. She states that Berkhof does not make a clear distinction between ‘from below’ and ‘from above:’ “Doordat Berkhof geen scherp onderscheid maakt tussen het spreken ‘van beneden’ en ‘van boven’, blijft in zijn hoofdstuk ‘Jezus de Zoon’ vaak onduidelijk wat hij nu verstaat als werk van God en wat als werk van de mens Jezus.” G.H. Borger-Koetsier, Verzoening tussen God en Mens in Christus: Theologiehistorisch onderzoek naar de opvattingen in het twintigste-eeuwse Nederland (Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2006), 217. Also M. de Jonge is on the wrong track when he states that for Berkhof the ‘from behind’ is the same as ‘from below.’ M. de Jonge, “Johanneïsche notities bij Berkhof’s Christologie,” in: E. Flesseman-van Leer (et al.), Weerwoord, 118.
343 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 283.
historical figure first of all with our own historical awareness.” In this quote it might seem that only contextual reasons speak in favor of starting ‘from below,’ but Berkhof’s doctrine of revelation (see section 3.4) makes clear that for him revelation is of necessity tied to the plane of history and experience. It starts here. A good historical investigation of Jesus does not unravel his secret, but its mysteriousness becomes even more visible, irresistibly calling for a personal choice with respect to Jesus. Faith in Jesus is a leap from this historical research, a decision, but it is not in conflict with this historical research either. It is leap to a perspective ‘from above.’

‘From above’ is for Berkhof a faith perspective on Jesus. When this faith perspective is reached while by-passing history, Berkhof rejects it as an unhistorical vertical mode of thinking. But when it is reached via the ‘from below’ it is legitimate. ‘From above’ is then a faith-perspective which perceives the divine secret behind the historical Jesus, not based on a return to metaphysical speculation but based on God’s revelation in history. This slightly different use of the term ‘from above’ explains why, according to Berkhof sections 33-36 are all a perspective ‘from above.’ Not just section 33 where the identity of the person of Christ and his relation to God are discussed, but also section 34 about Jesus’ ‘Life and Humanity’ and the sections about the meaning of Jesus’ death and his resurrection (section 35 and 36).

Berkhof’s approach ‘from before’ includes the things mentioned at the end of section 3.2. There is was stated that fruits of Jesus’ influence (the ferment of the gospel) were the care of the sick and the poor, the desacralization of the established order (opening the way for democracy, freedom, and an independent justice system), and the de-deification of nature (making room for science).

4.2 CHRISTOLOGY: A METHOD SHAPED BY THE TRIPLE-STAR SYSTEM

In the next section (section 5), it will be shown that the content of Berkhof’s Christology is shaped by the triple-star system. Here the more methodological aspects will be pursued. How did Berkhof make room in his Christology for the humanity of Christ (‘Human being’)? How did he make room for the historical and structural aspect of the ‘World’? How did he incorporate a non-metaphysical concept of ‘God’?

---

344 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 272.
345 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 284.
347 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 225.
How did Berkhof make room in his Christology for the humanity of Christ? A closer look at the interconnections of section 33-36 will reveal the place Berkhof assigns to Jesus’ humanity. Section 33 stands in a special relation to 34-36. Section 33 zooms in on the person of the Son of God, while 34-36 zoom in on how this “sonship evolves and realizes itself on the way (...).” Person and way are interrelated: “We know him only in and from his way. But that way derives its unique significance for us from the person whose way it is.” Berkhof chooses ‘Son of God’ as the most adequate title for the secret of Jesus’ person, and the way of this Son of God is dealt with in three parts: his earthly life (34), his suffering and death (35), and his resurrection (36). This is all pretty straightforward, but something interesting arises when Berkhof discusses the question: What is the ground of faith in the person of Christ? For many centuries it was assumed that the ground lay in the authority of the Bible and the church. “But Christ does not derive his authority from the Bible; the Bible derives it [sic] authority from a history of encounter of which Christ is the center.” After the Enlightenment many have sought the ground in the life of the earthly Jesus (Bonhoeffer, Ebeling), while others have seen this ground exclusively in the resurrection (Pannenberg). For Berkhof both approaches are not sufficient: “In the study of the faith we will have to say that there are three central elements which presuppose each other and which in their combination are decisive for who Jesus is and for the faith that looks to him (...).” One would expect at this point that Berkhof would mention the third element of the way of Jesus (his suffering and death, section 35) as complementing his life (34) and his resurrection (36). Berkhof comes very close to saying this, but he says it differently, and the difference is instructive for the structure of his Christology. What are the decisive three elements for Berkhof? His “ministry with authority, his resurrection, and how his way constitutes the continuation and fulfillment of God’s way with Israel.” Here the influence of the foundational triad is becoming visible. Jesus’ ministry with authority shows the human side: Jesus as the new ‘Human being,’ the new covenant partner before God. Jesus’ resurrection shows the divine side: ‘God’ reveals that He is behind the way of Jesus in life and death, and there is a divine validation of this new covenant partner and a crowning, an elevation to a higher state. The third element is not formulated as ‘Jesus’ suffering and death,’ but as ‘how Jesus’ way constitutes the continuation and fulfillment of

348 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 286.
349 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 293. Italics from present author.
350 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 286.
God’s way with Israel.’ The third point of the triad, specifically history as the time aspect of the ‘World’, comes to the fore here. Israel’s way was summarized by Berkhof as covenant history, for it concerns a covenant which makes history in being realized.\textsuperscript{355} The renewed covenant between the divine partner (God) and the human partner (Jesus) is here viewed as part of the history of this covenant. Jesus’ way constitutes the continuation and fulfillment of God’s way with Israel, and becomes the door through which the Spirit comes, doing His work of renewal.

Though this might not immediately be obvious, through this approach Berkhof emphasizes the importance of the new humanity of Jesus. Traditionally, the driving forces in Christology have been ‘the person of Christ’ (how he was both God and man) and the work of Christ (the interpretation of his atoning work on the cross). “In the history of theology the life of Jesus has always stood in the dark shadow, on the one hand of the two-nature doctrine, on the other of the doctrine of reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{356} Berkhof, however, wants to emphasize that Jesus’ humanity was a new beginning and a turn made by God. This humanity was a kind of injection ‘from above.’ The connection between this gift of new humanity and the history of Israel can be made clear by noticing the interconnections between the sections:

| The new man appears with authoritative ministry. He is the new human covenant partner of God. § 34 |
| The new man is resurrected by the divine covenant partner (God). He is validated and elevated - § 36 point 1 and 2 |
| The death of Jesus’ new humanity is God’s answer to the covenant problematic in the OT - § 35 |
| Jesus’ glorified humanity represents us - § 36 point 3 and 4 – and becomes through His Spirit a renewal force in history - § 37 |

The real driving force in Berkhof’s Christology is to make room for the humanity of Christ and to show how this humanity relates to God’s history with Israel and (through the church) with this world.

How did Berkhof make room for the historical and structural aspect of the ‘World’? He presents Christ as a decisive turn in the history of Israel and the world. Berkhof consciously opted for an historical approach to Christology. After commenting that the doctrine of the threefold office of Christ did and does offer “a good opening toward a development of Christology which is more functional, historical, and related to the OT and the covenant problematic,” Berkhof says: “We do not use the scheme of the threefold office because (...) its gain (...) can better be realized by a consistently historical arrangement.” Berkhof viewed history as a great process with radical breaks and turning points. The place of Jesus should be understood in light of this great process, and it is not difficult to hear resonances of the theory of evolution in the background. According to Berkhof there are five turning points in history, five breaks, turns, or leaps. The first sharp break in the evolutionary process is man’s (sinful) appearance:

Precisely man’s emergence as the crown of creation meant an enormous break. It drastically changed God’s position as creator (...) There is yet another, directly related reason for speaking of a sharp break: not only has man come in between, but with man also sin. The steward tries to seize the power. The partner becomes a rebel.

The second break occurs with the calling of Abraham. He was involved “in one of the greatest, if not the greatest, religious leap that has occurred in religious history.” Then comes Jesus. He is “the fulfillment of Israel’s way precisely because he is more than a small segment of that way, namely a new beginning and a turn made by God.” He is the new humanity, the new man, who realizes his identity in a history of struggle and obedience. The next turning point is the coming of the Spirit:

We (...) stand before a turning point here. (...) It is a turning point which ensues from what happened before and which prepares for the consummation: from the outset it is impossible that the firstfruits who is going to be the center of a renewed humanity can remain a single individual. It has to become evident that in his person and work he represented us, and

357 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 299.
358 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 300.
359 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 216.
362 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 328.
363 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 290.
that from now on, in virtue of his work, a process toward the renewal of the human race is under way.  

Berkhof sees the renewal through the Spirit in three spheres: in the church (the new community), in individuals (the renewal of man) and in the world (renewal of the world). The last turning point is the consummation. “Christ and the Spirit are instrumental in preparing individuals as well as mankind as a whole for the leap to come.”  

These turning periods are significant for understanding Berkhof’s Christology, because they indicate certain phases in the uninterrupted activity of God in history. The first and last turning point are especially significant because here we discover the origin and the goal of this great historical process, and it is at this level that we see most clearly that Berkhof’s emphasis on Jesus’ humanity is part of a bigger picture, an historical process which starts with the appearance of the human being and ends with the crowning of the human being. The first turning point starts not with creation, but with the appearance of man. An entirely new era starts now (at the beginning of the sixth day of creation): the product of evolution is now becoming its leader. And the final phase ends with the bringing forth of true humanity in union with God. So Christ (as the center of the phases Israel-Christ-Spirit) restores and renews humanity and only in Jesus do we see what true humanity means: It is humanity in fellowship with God. It is not humanity isolated from the world, but including the renewed structures of society which are such an important part of the ‘World.’  

How did Berkhof incorporate a non-metaphysical concept of ‘God’? Berkhof views the metaphysical speculations as a real problem in Christology. The problem with this is twofold. First, in these speculations one moves from eternity to time and this results in an “unhistorically vertical trinitarian mode of thinking.” Second, humanity and divinity become opposed to one another: “In the history of the church, when the biblical encounter thinking was changed into substantialistic thinking, Jesus’ two natures came to stand in contrast to each other.” Many of these problematic tendencies have,
according to Berkhof, their root in the way Logos-Christology was developed.\textsuperscript{371}

But is there an alternative? “We must ask the question whether a radical return to a pneumatic Christology would not do more justice to the biblical message, and be more relevant to the modern mind, than our traditional categories.”\textsuperscript{372} There is in the Bible a double relationship between Christ and the Spirit. On the one hand the Spirit precedes Christ, controls him and is greater than Jesus. On the other hand the Spirit is the work of the risen Jesus, being ruled by him. The second aspect has always received due attention but not the first.\textsuperscript{373}

The reason was that Christ and the Spirit were not viewed primarily in redemptive-historical perspective, but especially as historical embodiments of their place as second and third person in God’s eternal triune being. It is not feasible to have such positions in eternity play musical chairs in time.\textsuperscript{374}

Berkhof chooses to pay more attention to the first. Jesus is first the bearer of the Spirit before he becomes the sender of the Spirit. The Spirit rests on Jesus in a unique sense. One could even speak about Jesus as the incarnation of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{375} And when this unique creature through the Spirit is taken up in glory, he becomes so one with the Spirit that he can send the Spirit.\textsuperscript{376} In this way Berkhof attempts to bypass the ontological problems in the classical formulations by using a pneuma-Christology.

5. The content of Berkhof’s Christology

In this section the content of Berkhof’s Christology will be studied. The gravitational pull of the triple-star system is clearly shaping Berkhof’s

man Jesus seems to stand opposite God. Statements of this kind, which are contradictory in terms of substantialistic thinking, are regularly found in the same writer.”

\textsuperscript{373} Berkhof, Christian Faith, 329.
\textsuperscript{374} Berkhof, Christian Faith, 329.
\textsuperscript{375} Berkhof, Christian Faith, 330.
\textsuperscript{376} The work of the Spirit is sometimes distinguished from the work of the exalted Christ, but it is also frequently identified. Berkhof believes that this second relation (the identification) was neglected because it did not fit the classical Trinitarian pattern in which the second and the third person remain clearly distinguished. Berkhof, Christian Faith, 330. He opts for the second approach without indicating how the distinction between the Spirit and the exalted Christ can be honored in his approach. He was himself aware of the tension. In Christian Faith he comments on his book The doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the following way: “Berkhof (...) who identifies Christ and the Spirit (but does not maintain this in the following chapters).” Berkhof, Christian Faith, 331.
Christology and therefore it can be presented under three headings: ‘Jesus Christ: The new human covenant partner’ (5.1), ‘Jesus Christ: Bringer of salvation in history’ (5.2), and ‘Jesus Christ: The Son of God’ (5.3). In section 5.4 the relation between Berkhof’s Christology and the triple-star system will be studied.

5.1 JESUS CHRIST: THE NEW HUMAN COVENANT PARTNER

At 6 and 13 August 1973, just when he had finished writing *Christian Faith*, Berkhof gave some lectures on Christology that give more insight in his thinking and the choices he made in his systematic theology. According to Berkhof, most of the controversies of Christology from the council of Chalcedon up till the modern times were discussions within the framework set by Chalcedon. But in the modern times this framework itself became the problem. Hermann Samuel Reimarus was the first who put the questions differently from anyone before him, and he did this in such a way that theology up till today is struggling with the same questions. Reimarus perceived two systems in the New Testament, the ‘Jesus-system’ of the synoptic gospels where the historical Jesus is presented as prophet and example, and the ‘Christ-system’ of Paul and John, where the risen and ascended Son of God is central. How do these two systems—Berkhof preferred to speak about two perspectives—relate to one another? In the nineteenth century, three trends or directions were visible.

The first is what can be called the orthodox direction. This direction does not acknowledge a break between these two perspectives, and it is committed to Chalcedon, though it is prepared to emphasize the ‘vere homo’ much further than its forebears.

The second was the liberal direction which, following Reimarus, took its base in the perspective of the synoptic Gospels and explained the second perspective as a process of divinization of Jesus.

---

377 In *Christian Faith* Berkhof placed a discussion about the *person* of Jesus Christ (paragraph 33: The Person) before dealing with the *way* of Jesus Christ (paragraph 34-36: Life and Humanity, Death and Reconciliation, Resurrection and Glorification), but he stressed that person and way were interrelated. The reason for the choice not to follow Berkhof’s presentation in *Christian Faith* but deal with Jesus as person only at the end (paragraph 5.3) will become clear in paragraph 5.1.

378 These lectures were published as: “Hedendaagse vragen in de Christologie,” in: *Rondom het Woord: theologische etherleergang van de NCRV* (Hilversum, NCRV, 15e jaargang nummer 4, November 1973), 1-17.

The third direction wanted to take serious the fact that the second perspective (system) is older than the first, the letters of Paul preceding the synoptic Gospels in the New Testament. David Friedrich Strauss viewed the New Testament as the myth of humanity: miraculously conceived, human and divine, ever dying but also rising.

Berkhof remarks that, when viewed in light of the phrase ‘the Word became flesh,’ the second direction tended to stress ‘flesh’ without the ‘Word,’ while the third direction stressed the ‘Word’ without the ‘flesh.’

In the twentieth century these three directions return but than in refined form.

The first direction is represented by Barth, Brunner, Vogel, and Korff. Chalcedon remains the framework but it is modernized, made dynamic, and has even more emphasis on the ‘vere homo.’

The neo-Bultmannians, continuing the second direction of the nineteenth century, took again their starting-point in the historical Jesus. One tried to uncover his unique existence: his ‘faith’ (Ebeling), his ‘conduct’ (Fuchs), his ‘freedom’ (van Buren), his ‘responsibility for the world’ (Gogarten). From here one tried to seek a connection with the second perspective (system) by viewing the message about Christ as the expression of the abiding timeliness of the historical Jesus. The resurrection is the hinge event between the two perspectives.

The third direction is, in a sense, continued by Bultmann. Bultmann was not so skeptical about the historical Jesus as Strauss, but for him the historical Jesus was not part of the kerygma. Ernst Käsemann accused Bultmann therefore of docetism.

According to Berkhof there is a consensus growing between these three directions. Especially Wolfhart Pannenberg was able to connect these three directions in one synthesis.\(^\text{380}\) Pannenberg starts with the historical Jesus, as the second direction did. He emphasized Jesus’ claim to God’s authority. Jesus spoke and acted in the name of God. This was a claim with which Jesus anticipates the justification of God’s eschatological act: the resurrection. So the ‘Jesus-perspective’ anticipates the ‘Christ-perspective,’ and the ‘Christ-perspective’ (after the resurrection) throws new light on Jesus’ earthly life, namely as a revelation of God. In this way Pannenberg connects the second and third directions. Berkhof followed Pannenberg in this connection between the second and third directions, though he disagreed

with how Pannenberg incorporated the first (orthodox) direction (see further section 5.3).

In light of these lectures one can more easily follow the choices that Berkhof makes in his Christology.

He takes his starting-point in the ‘Jesus-perspective,’ in the historical Jesus of the synoptic gospels, but he relates it to the ‘Christ-perspective.’ Like the Neo-Bultmannians he views the message about Christ as the expression of the abiding timeliness of the historical Jesus.

Berkhof emphasizes especially the radical love for the Father (with radical obedience as the other side of the same coin) and Jesus’ freedom. In this he incorporates contributions of Gogarten and Van Buren. Gogarten’s emphasis on Jesus’ ‘responsibility to the world’ is important to Berkhof, and therefore he emphasizes that Jesus embodies God’s purpose and translates it in saving action to the guilty and the wretched. To the guilty Jesus comes with the message of radical forgiveness, and to the wretched he comes with the deed of compassion. Here Jesus’ love for the Father finds expression in love for the world. Also Van Buren’s emphasis on ‘freedom’ is important to Berkhof, though he is careful not to present it as autonomous freedom and thereby project the modern pathos of freedom on Jesus. True freedom only exists within a radical love for God and obedience to Him. The sinless humanity of Jesus is revealed in a positive and dynamic way, as total surrender to God and total solidarity with sinful people.

Just like Pannenberg, Berkhof stresses the resurrection as the hinge-event between the love and freedom of the historical Jesus and the proclamation of the abiding significance of this human life. Jesus’ resurrection is a divine validation of his life and death (retroactively).

In this way Berkhof connects the ‘Jesus-perspective’ and the ‘Christ-perspective.’ But in order that Jesus can save other humans, the ascension has to be stressed. Resurrection is also ascension, an elevation to a higher state, a glorification. Jesus’ humanity is taken up in the sphere of God. “Not that thereby he changes from human into divine, but as man he receives the most intimate union with God, as the capstone of his whole preceding way.”

---

381 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 301.
382 For Berkhof the term ‘sinlessness’ was too negative, too static, too limited. Moreover, Jesus’ sinlessness did not come about without struggle and anguish. He learned obedience through what he suffered. He withstood the test and so his new humanity was revealed. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 303-304.
384 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 316. The connection that is made here between the earthly humanity of Jesus before and after his resurrection is the reason why in this paragraph (5.1)
From this place he can be our representative. “Everything he is, he is in our stead and for our good.” Jesus, as the new human, intercedes before God and is the guarantee that the covenant will not be broken and that God rules the world “in the spirit of Jesus, that he directs everything to the revelation and victory of this covenant.”

Through Jesus’ ascension and his representative ministry of intercession, he can bless us and send the Spirit. The Spirit will renew human beings to live as faithful covenant partners with the same love and freedom as Jesus has. In this way the resurrected humanity of Jesus can be proclaimed as relevant to all. The old human being was called to freedom and love but did not fulfill this calling, while the new human being (Jesus) embodied it fully. Jesus is the perfected covenant man, who may represent us and who can renew us through His Spirit.

5.2 JESUS CHRIST: BRINGER OF SALVATION IN HISTORY

When it comes to the interpretation of Jesus’ death on the cross, we have to remember the structure of Berkhof’s Christology (section 4.2). The question about the significance of the death of Jesus is, for Berkhof, not the general question: Why did Jesus have to die? The question is more functional: Why was the death of this new man (new humanity) necessary in order to solve the covenant-problematic as revealed in Israel? The death and reconciliation of Jesus are constantly interpreted in light of salvation-history (the time aspect of the ‘World’ is here felt).

Berkhof rejects what he views as the orthodox caricature, as if Jesus came to earth only to die, and he stresses the fact that we should see the death of Jesus as an outflow and consequence of his new humanity. “He came to live, but to live in such a way that in this world he could not but perish. (…) Only in that sacrifice was the new humanity which he came to bring completed and fully disclosed.” One could say that before Berkhof addresses the question how Jesus’ death brings about atonement and salvation he first wants to address its purpose: what Jesus’ death does for us and humanity. The purpose of Jesus’ death was to renew the covenant so that

‘Life and Humanity’ and ‘Resurrection and Glorification’ are not separated as in Christian Faith. By placing them in one paragraph, the one history of his humanity is stressed. See also the picture in paragraph 4.2 where the link between Jesus’ earthly and resurrected humanity is made clear.

385 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 318.
386 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 321.
387 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 324-325.
389 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 304-305.
people could live out a new covenant relation with God and so participate in the renewal of the world. One could call this a new-covenant model of the atonement. After the resurrection of Jesus his followers became convinced that the covenant was not abolished but confirmed. They thought about the last meal which Jesus had with them and where the words ‘(new) covenant,’ ‘my blood,’ and ‘for many’ were spoken. They knew that the covenant with Moses was established with blood (Exodus 24:8) and that the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31) also needed the surrender of life, specifically of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53:12). In this way he could be the representative who could reconcile and bring the parties together by representing the people with God and God with the people.390 Berkhof emphasizes the fact that the conviction that Jesus died for our sins, as our substitute, to remove the barrier between God and us, has always belonged to the essence of faith. But how and why this had to be precisely so, is much less certain. There has never been a universally accepted ecclesiastical pronouncement about the connection between cross and reconciliation.391 The New Testament offers a variety of pictures which elucidate this connection, which are derived from the juridical, cultic, financial, and military areas of life. There are also others in the history of the church.392 Berkhof does not think that any of these pictures or images has priority in explicating the work of Christ.393 But the interpretation in terms of punishment (juridical interpretation) as is found in Western orthodoxy since Anselm is foreign to the New Testament and can better be avoided. It “seems preferable in our time not to interpret Jesus’ death primarily and exclusively with Paul’s one-sided juridical and cultic concepts (as has been and is being done in Western

391 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 309.
392 Berkhof gives six important conceptions with which, according to him, the possibilities within the Western world are exhausted: Anselm’s objective doctrine of the atonement, Abelardus’ subjective doctrine, Calvin offered a deeply thought-out third view, Socinianism did not see Jesus’ death as reconciliation, but as the confirmation of his teaching and his passage to the resurrection, Ritschl offered a new form of the subjective doctrine of reconciliation, and finally Barth who offered a conception in which God is entirely active in the work of reconciliation, characterized by some as “Theopaschitic,” a line continued in Moltmann. Berkhof, Christian Faith, 311.
393 This approach would later be called the ‘kaleidoscopic view.’ See James K. Beilby, Paul R. Eddy (eds.), The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views, (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2006), 21. Borger-Koetsier takes the view that Berkhof did not value (anymore) the theories offered in church-history because they were too much in thrall of especially the Western object-subject distinction. Borger-Koetsier, Verzoening tussen God en Mens in Christus, 225-226. That is an overstatement. Yes, Berkhof saw the object-subject division reflected in these theories, but this did not bring him to reject those theories, rather to find a synthesis which incorporated the strengths of the different positions.
theology), but also with the Johannine concepts of love, obedience, and 
glorification (...).” Berkhof puts it in these words:

(...) the true humanity of the Son stands out more clearly according as he puts 
himself at the disposal of this glory [the condescending love of God] and with 
his self-denial goes to the very limit. So Father and Son hold mutually on to 
each other, determined to make the glory, the love, the covenant faithfulness 
victorious against all human resistance.  

Through the sustained union and communion of love between Son and Father, 
the covenant is saved. Because Jesus so strongly desires that God’s 
redemptive will will be carried out, he in obedience continues to put himself at 
God’s disposal even when this involves suffering. In this way, God’s 
condescension, his undying love for people, shines through clearly in Jesus’ 
new humanity. Jesus loves even his enemies up till the end.

In section 5.1 it has been shown that Berkhof sees the resurrected and 
ascended humanity of Christ as representative. To that it has to be added that 
Berkhof connects Jesus’ representative role also with his death. But it is not 
his death as such that is representative, but his death as the climax of his new 
humanity. His new humanity, which he came to bring, was completed and fully 
disclosed in his death. In his total life surrender he identifies himself to the 
limit with his and God’s enemies.

This is how the dialectic history of God’s faithfulness and human 
unfaithfulness finds its resolution in Jesus. He answers the faithfulness of God 
with his own faithfulness, and thus opens the way to the expected new age in 
which the nations of the world are being included in Israel’s salvation. The 
suffering of Jesus is no sign of failure, but it was the vicarious and reconciling 
suffering of the servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53.

5.3 JESUS CHRIST: THE SON OF GOD

In his lectures on Christology, Berkhof described how Pannenberg not only 
connected the ‘Jesus-perspective’ with the ‘Christ-perspective’ but also 
combined it with the first (the orthodox) direction. Pannenberg viewed Jesus’ 
history as a revelation of the Trinitarian secret. From the perspective of the 
resurrection, Jesus’ surrender to the Father and his humility and obedience 
reveal the relation between the eternal Son and his Father. In even further

---

394 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 311.
396 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 305.
397 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 260.
retrospect, one comes to the confession of the incarnation and to Jesus as the mediator of creation. Similar approaches can be found in Barth, the Roman Catholic theologian Dietrich Wiederkehr, and Moltmann. Characteristic of these approaches is that they all remain within the framework of Nicaea-Constantinople and Chalcedon. But Berkhof does not think that this is the right solution. He is convinced that one has to pay a high price for conceiving the way and the person of the historical Jesus through the lens of the Trinity.

The first objection is that the Trinity shifts towards a tri-theism. The works of the different persons of the Trinity are on the outside not any longer indivisible. The Father and the Son have now different, even opposite roles. The unity of God, as person, disappears.

The second objection is that the anhypostatic development of Chalcedon which these theologians perform shifts the historical Jesus in the direction of a God masquerading as a human being. And if one tries to prevent this by acknowledging both the human being and the divine being, all the objections which have been voiced since the Enlightenment against such a double being (hybrid like a centaur, half God and half human) resurface.

Thirdly, this speculative teaching cannot be the content of the proclamation. At least, in the New Testament it is not.

According to Berkhof, it is not by accident that all the thinkers of this Chalcedonian approach come from the German-speaking world. There, idealism and speculation are stronger than in the Netherlands or in the English speaking world, where empiricism is more prevalent. Berkhof sees an alternative approach to Christology emerging in the line of Piet Schoonenberg, Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, and John A.T. Robinson.

Schoonenberg rejects the enhypostasis/anhypostasis teaching because then Jesus would not be a real human being. He proposes that the Word of God, being impersonal, finds its personality in connection with the human person of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the person who lets himself be totally led by the Word and full of its presence.

Flesseman-van Leer develops her thoughts in the same direction as Schoonenberg, but she uses Old Testament rather than patristic terminology. She does not use the word ‘incarnation’ but believes the teaching about the incarnation was meant to emphasize God’s initiative in the history of Jesus. She expresses the fact that God made in Jesus a new beginning by stating that God ‘created’ Jesus with this purpose.

---

399 Berkhof refers here to the Augustinian rule: opera ad extra indivisa sunt.
400 Berkhof, “Hedendaagse vragen in de Christologie,” 8-12.
Robinson rejects the ontological dualism of Chalcedon. He wants to present Jesus in an evolutionary framework. Jesus is like us the product of ‘emergent humanity’ but this is how God wants to express himself in our midst. Jesus is the concentration (as in a magnifying glass) of the true light which enlightens every human being. Here is the human who does what we are all called to do: represent God.

But does this alternative (second) approach of Schoonenberg, Flesseman-van Leer, and Robinson give the solution? Does Jesus in this approach not become the ideal human, just as he became the disguised God in the other approach? Is there any room left for the doctrine of pre-existence, and how can one retain the doctrine of the Trinity? Berkhof warns that it is very easy to polarize these two approaches, but he takes his starting point in the second approach.  

Supporting this he points to the titles which the New Testament ascribes to Jesus. They are all attributed to him as a human being, showing him to be unique but not exclusively so. So Berkhof thinks that the New Testament invites us (and obligates us) to find the uniqueness of Jesus in his humanity and not in a sort of double nature. The texts about Jesus’ pre-existence only want to state that the life of Jesus is an expression of what was in the heart of God from eternity. John 1 only states that the Word which was active in creation went again forth. Jesus’ humanity rests on this new creative act and is an embodiment of it. This Word of God is an expression of what elsewhere is called Spirit. Berkhof views the first approach (in line with Chalcedon) as a failure of contextualization. The early Christians translated the Old Testament terminology into the ontological language of Hellenism. But for modern humans who think functionally this ontological language is not any longer a language for personal faith. In fact the Old Testament language in which relations are central and not substances is much more accessible for modern humans. The teaching on the anhypostasis of Jesus’ humanity should therefore be given up, because it does not do justice to the Jewishness and humanity of Jesus. Also the teaching of the Trinity should be re-translated in biblical covenantal terminology.

In light of these lectures one can more easily follow the choices that Berkhof makes in his description of Jesus as Son of God.

402 Berkhof refers for this exegetical insight to Karl Rahner-Wilhelm Thüsing, Christologie—systematisch und exegetisch (Freiburg, Quaestiones disputatae no 55, 1972), no page number mentioned.
First, it is clear that Berkhof takes his starting-point in Jesus as human being (as Schoonenberg, Flesseman-van Leer, and Robinson do). He wants to proceed in his thinking not from eternity to time, but from time to eternity (see section 4.2). He chooses the title ‘Son of God’ as the most adequate for indicating the secret of Jesus’ person.\textsuperscript{403} In the Christian tradition this title has been used to refer to the divinity of Christ, just as the term ‘Son of man’ was used to refer to the humanity of Christ. But Berkhof uses this term not to refer to Jesus’ divinity, but to his humanity. For him sonship refers to a covenant relationship of mutual love and (with man) of obedience.\textsuperscript{404} ‘Son of God’ is thus not an exclusive term for Jesus, it can also be used for Christians (and for Israel and kings).

Second, though Berkhof does not confess the divinity of Christ, he believes that Jesus as Son is the result of a new creative act of God and thus comes ‘from above.’\textsuperscript{405} Like Flesseman-van Leer he rather does not speak about an ‘incarnation,’ or pre-existence, and he prefers to use Old Testament covenantal language to speak about Jesus (though in the small-typed sections he interacts with the ontological language of the church councils). “In Jewish and Hellenistic image thinking the category of pre-existence is often applied (e.g. to the Torah, wisdom, the son of man) to indicate the divine initiative \textit{behind} and the meta-historical validity of these phenomena. The NT pre-existence statements also aim to extol the divine initiative and the divine condescension in the creation of Christ.”\textsuperscript{406}

Third, in order to express the unique relationship between the human Jesus and God, Berkhof tries, as Schoonenberg did, to express the fact that God was \textit{in} this human. However, he did not try to express this by looking for a relation between the Word and the human, but by emphasizing the role of the Spirit in his life. He thus developed a pneuma-Christology (see section 4.2).

Fourth, Berkhof insisted that his account was not just a functional Christology. He saw this tendency towards mere functionalism in Robinson.\textsuperscript{407} But there is a tertium between a ‘substance-Christology’ and a purely ‘functional-Christology,’ namely: “a new covenant, [sic] relationship effected by God, which has its own ontological character.”\textsuperscript{408}

\textsuperscript{403} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 286.
\textsuperscript{404} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 286.
\textsuperscript{405} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 296.
\textsuperscript{406} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 293. It is not clear, however, why the creation of the second Adam is more an initiative ‘from above’ than the creation of the first Adam.
\textsuperscript{407} Berkhof joined Robinson in taking over the evolutionist framework, where Jesus is seen as a decisive step in the evolution of mankind.
One could say that Berkhof tried to present Jesus as the incarnation of the Spirit, although the word ‘incarnation’ is here not totally appropriate because it does not involve the sharing of nature. In the traditional teaching of the incarnation, God assumes the flesh and is thereby connected with humanity and the world. Berkhof does not use this Alexandrian *logos-sarx* model, neither the Antiochene *logos-anthropos* model, but he develops a *pneuma-anthropos* model. “There are thus not two subjects in Jesus, but his human “I” is, out of free will, fully and exhaustively permeated by the “I” of God; and in virtue of this permeation he becomes the perfect instrument of the Father [through His Spirit].”

So instead of God sharing human nature (either ‘*sarx*’ or ‘*anthropos*’), there is the permeation by God’s Spirit of a newly created human. So the relation between this new man and God (the Father through the Spirit) is central.

Is this an Adoptionist Christology, as in the approach of Paul of Samosata? Berkhof saw elements of truth in Adoptionism. Jesus as human received a new position after the ascension: “(...) as man he receives the most intimate union with God, as the capstone of his whole preceding way.”

But according to Berkhof, the problem of Adoptionism is that it neglects the strictly unique way in which the Spirit is united with Christ. Berkhof tries to safeguard this uniqueness by stressing that the Spirit of God did not adopt a general person, but that he created a new human. Not just from baptism, but from conception Jesus was the Son of God.

Is Berkhof’s Christology Arian? Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh have, with their study *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* changed the understanding of Arianism. Older treatments take Arius’ cosmological views (Jesus as embodiment of the created Logos) as central in Arius’ thinking. In this view Arius (and other Arians like Asterius the Sophist and Eusebius of Nicomedia)

---

410 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 316. Berkhof sees good elements in Adoptionism and in Monophysitism. “The first looks at Jesus’ way from its beginning, the second from its end. Both want to construct a picture that is valid for all the stages, at the expense of the recognition of the unique and surprisingly wonderful way which the Son must go through the depths to glory.” Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 293. If ‘Monophysitism’ is the right label (for the union of the human Jesus with God after his ascension) can be doubted precisely because Berkhof stresses that Jesus receives this union as human being.
wanted to protect above all the unity of God, and therefore he made the Logos part of creation. However, Gregg and Groh argue that Arius’ main drive was a certain view of salvation.\textsuperscript{415} Arianism lent support to a view of salvation in which holiness could be achieved by choice. And the Arian view on the person of Christ was driven by the principle that the Creator related to his creation solely by his will. So Jesus was not an extension of the divine nature but a creation of the divine will, and the creaturehood of the Son was the pin which swung their Christological door.\textsuperscript{416} This new view gives a rather different perspective on what drove Arius in the discussion of the cosmological questions about the relation between the created Logos and the human Jesus. “It is not the Arian plan to demote Christ in order to clear space and secure preeminence for the high God; rather, he is the one upon whom sonship is conferred, (...) foreordained and faithful, the servant who brings himself to perfection by discipline and exemplifies the relationship to be had with the Father by “all the rest”.”\textsuperscript{417}

Is Berkhof’s Christology Arian? On the older view Berkhof cannot be viewed as an Arian because he did not share Arius’ cosmological views about the creaturely status of the Logos (the pre-existent Christ). But on the newer view there are definitely Arian tendencies in Berkhof’s approach. Most clearly this is the case in Christology proper. The Arian approach emphasized that Jesus was solely created by an act of will of the Creator and not by sharing His nature. Berkhof incorporates the Arian principle: “Arius’s strong point was indeed that he positioned Christ radically on the side of the creature, as created by an act of the divine will.”\textsuperscript{418} There is not a unity of nature between (the Spirit of) God and Jesus, but a unity of will: “Jesus is not will-less with respect to God. He has a passionate will, whose driving force is to have his own will yield to that of God and to will nothing else than what God wills.”\textsuperscript{419} So in Christology proper Berkhof follows Arius.

When it came to salvation (soteriology) there was a clear distinction between Athanasius and Arius. For Arius the help and empowerment of the Spirit was very much needed for living a holy life, but it was the choice and discipline of the believer that opened the gate to this empowerment. Like Arius, Athanasius also encouraged striving towards holiness through disciplines, but the power came from Jesus’ grace and not one’s own will.\textsuperscript{420}

\textsuperscript{415} Gregg and Groh, \textit{Early Arianism}, 77-78.
\textsuperscript{416} Gregg and Groh, \textit{Early Arianism}, 5, 1.
\textsuperscript{417} Gregg and Groh, \textit{Early Arianism}, 78-79.
\textsuperscript{418} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 296.
\textsuperscript{419} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 301.
\textsuperscript{420} This is clear in Athanasius portrait of Antony, Gregg and Groh, \textit{Early Arianism}, 150. See also chapter 2, 43-76.
Holiness was not achieved but received, because God came in Jesus not just to stand beside us but to carry us, re-connecting His life with our lives. Berkhof tries to follow the line of Athanasius but without the latter’s teaching on the incarnation. In Berkhof’s soteriology Jesus is not just a model for striving after holiness, but also a substitute. He, as the new human, stands in our place. He bears our guilt and fate. The difference between Athanasius’ model and Berkhof’s model is in how the gap between God and sinful humanity is covered. For Athanasius God personally covers the distance, coming to us in Christ. For Berkhof God covers half the distance through His Spirit and then creates a new human who covers the other half, so that they meet in the middle. Jesus becomes then a gate or window between heaven and earth through which believers can come to God and through which the Spirit of God can come to people. Berkhof’s soteriology is at this point not full-blown Arianism, but in the elevating of a human creature half-way between God and humanity, the Arian tendency is visible. For Berkhof and for the Arian theory, salvation is accomplished through the obedient life of Jesus and the moral transformation that flows from it rather than through the act of incarnation and the renovation of our being.

5.4 CHRISTOLOGY AND THE CONTEXTUAL TRIAD

What is the place of Christology in relation to the triple-star system? Is Christology a planet orbiting the three star-themes, or is it a star in its own right? In order to ascertain this, it is necessary to compare the influence (the gravity field) of the three themes on Christology with the reverse influence (gravity field) of Christology on the three star-themes.

The influences of the three star-themes shape Berkhof’s Christology in a significant way. Summarizing what has been shown so far, one can say that Jesus Christ, in relation to the left point of the triad, is presented as the new human covenant partner (‘Human being’), and that the freedom and individuality which is so important in the existentialist climate also colors the presentation of Jesus. In relation to the right point of the triad, Jesus is presented as a decisive turning point in the way of Israel and the history of the world (time aspect of the ‘World’) and as the one through whose Spirit the structures of this world can be renewed (space aspect of the ‘World’). In relation to the upper point of the triad, Jesus is presented as someone who is validated and elevated by the divine covenant partner (‘God’), and whose origin ‘from above’ is not framed in ontological-, but in Old Testament terminology.

421 Gregg and Groh, Early Arianism, 143-149.
The reverse influence of Christology on the three star-themes is also visible. Berkhof’s view of the time aspect of the ‘World’ has been influenced by the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was well aware that there was in the Western context not only progress, but also an intensification of evil, resulting in a “deadlock of an intensified and insuperable ambivalence of Spirit-power and counter-power. (...) [This situation] is induced by the decisive mystery of history: Jesus crucified and risen.”  

423 The view of the ‘Human being’ has been influenced by the emphasis on love that is seen in Jesus, and not only by the existentialist emphasis on freedom. 424 “Man is made for love. He cannot do without that nurturing love from the outside, nor without responding to that love.” 425 From here the influence of Jesus’ love also affects the vision of humanity after the consummation: “Then man will reach his destiny in the absolute unity of freedom and love which God has in mind for man (...).” 426 The view of ‘God’ has also been influenced by Christology. Berkhof’s view of God as the ‘defenseless superior power’ has been influenced by the defenselessness that is visible in Jesus, who renounced all earthly power and was hung on a cross. 427 The same is true for God as the ‘changeable faithfulness’ 428 because God experiences change when Jesus appears, dies, and is raised.

There is an influence of the three themes on Berkhof’s Christology and vice versa. But which influence is stronger? An assessment of this question looks different dependent on one’s view of what Christology should be. The difference between an Arian and Nicaean perspective influences one’s judgment.

From an Arian perspective Jesus should not be identified with God but he has to be placed at the side of creation. This brings Christology closer to the star-themes ‘Human being’ and ‘World’ than to ‘God.’ In Berkhof the driving force of his Christology is to make room for the humanity of Christ, so this relates Christology to the star-theme ‘Human being.’ The humanity of Christ is for Berkhof even more important than humanity in general, because Jesus’ new humanity is the ideal for the other humans, therefore one could even say that

424 De Knijff states that one cannot discuss the anthropology of Berkhof without pointing to the special character of his Christology, because in this Christology the humanity of Christ is emphasized. De Knijff, “Dogmatiek als leer van de mens,” 190.
425 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 188.
426 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 539. Berkhof admits that this picture of the consummation is based on the principle of extrapolation (perfected humanity, communion, love, etc.), see also 540.
427 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 142.
(from an Arian perspective) Christology takes the place of the ‘Human being.’ The humanity of Christ is the real star-theme, while reflections on general anthropology are derivative. Jesus Christ is the new human being, and is as such the model for other human beings. The gravity field of this Christological ‘Human-being’ is felt in the star-theme ‘World’ (especially the dynamic of death and resurrection) and in ‘God.’

From a Nicaean perspective it looks rather different. Christology could neither be identified solely with the ‘Human being’ nor with ‘God.’ The fact that Berkhof’s Christology becomes closely identified with the ‘Human being’ shows that it is not a star-theme of its own in Berkhof’s theology. Rather the conclusion has to be that the gravity field of the triple-star system pulled Berkhof’s Christology into its orbit. Therefore Christology is a planet in Berkhof’s systematic theology. From a Nicaean perspective the two following arguments will support this claim:

First, the synchronic development of Berkhof’s thoughts should be noticed. The major developments of his thoughts about the three themes were already in place before Christology received his full attention. Berkhof’s attention for history came early, culminating in a book about history in 1958. In his lectures on Christology (1973) Berkhof states that during the 1950s the theological attention was focused on anthropology, and in the 1960s the attention shifted to the doctrine of God. Berkhof wrote his anthropology at the end of the 1950s (1960), and he wrote his study on revelation at the end of that 1960s (1970). Only then did the theological attention shift to Christology, because after the God-is-dead theology the question surfaced about how and where God can be spoken of in this reality. This means that for Berkhof the focus on Christology coincided with his writing of Christian Faith. This gives new light on the remark in his autobiography that he discovered in January 1973, when the writing of Christian Faith was finished, constant lines in his thinking (covenant, encounter, inter-subjectivity) and that as a consequence of that discovery he had to rewrite the early part of the book and had to change the doctrine of the Trinity and place it after his Christology. Moreover, about his Christology he says that, after years of searching, he found for himself a clear way, though

---

429 Berkhof, Christ the Meaning of History. This is not a study on Christology, but on the meaning of history.

430 Berkhof, De mens onderweg.


it is often contested. So, Berkhof’s thought on Christology (and the Trinity) came only to fruition while writing Christian Faith.

Second, we have the advantage that we know Berkhof’s thinking about Christology and the Trinity in earlier years. Both in his thesis on Eusebius and his book on Church history, Berkhof favors Athanasius over Arius and he rejects Adoptionism. Up till 1960 his position on these matters did not change much. It is only after 1960 that his position starts to shift. In his book on the Holy Spirit (1964) he clearly starts to search for an alternative for Logos-Christology, finding it in a new emphasis on pneuma-Christology, while expressing doubts about the Trinity. But only in Christian Faith do his Christology and doctrine of the Trinity find their final form and here he is no longer in agreement with the Council of Nicea that stated that Jesus Christ is of one substance with the Father (homoousion). What has happened? One could state it as follows: in the triad the starting point for thinking is the separation between ‘God’ and ‘Human being,’ between divinity and humanity. The triad therefore favors the Antiochene school above the Alexandrian school, because the Antiochenes started with the distinction between the natures of Christ (divinity and humanity) and not with the unity of his person. Berkhof’s Christology in his earlier years contained a counter-emphasis on the unity of the person of Christ, but the triple-star system wants to pull this Christology either into the gravity field of the ‘Human being’ (leading to Arianism and Adoptionism), or into the gravity field of ‘God’ (leading to Monophysitism), or into the gravity field of the ‘World’ (leading to a view of Jesus as part of the evolutionary process). Precisely to ward of the first two dangers, the Council of Nicaea added the homoousios. For Berkhof there were two options. Either his Nicaean Christology would have enough weight to change the triple-star system, or the triple-star system would break up the Nicaean Christology of the early Berkhof and make Christology a planet around one of its stars. From a Nicaean perspective it is this second option that happened. Berkhof’s Christology has been changed through the gravity

433 “Al schrijvend zag ik bepaalde constante lijnen in mijn denken naar voren komen, vooral die van verbond, ontmoeting, intersubjectiviteit. Ik dacht er toen over om het boek Verbond en Vernieuwing te noemen. Toen het onder de titel Christelijk Geloof (1973) op 1 januari 1973 afkwam, zag ik dat de grondlijnen die ik langzaamaan ontdekt had, in het eerste gedeelte nog niet duidelijk waren uitgevoerd. Ik ging dat stuk dus herschrijven, en moest zelfs de hele paragraaf over de drieëenheid veranderen, en uit de godsleer naar achter de christologie verplaatsen. In de christologie zelf had ik, na jarenlang zoeken, een voor mij duidelijke, zij het veel weersproken weg gevonden.” Berkhof, “Om de Waarheid en om de Kerk,” 19.
434 Meijering clearly spells out Berkhof’s position as reflected in his study on Eusebius and his Church-history. Meijering, Hendrikus Berkhof, 17-21, 29-32.
436 See paragraph 4.2. Also Meijering, Hendrikus Berkhof, 116-120.
field of the triple-star system and ends up as a planet orbiting the ‘Human being.’

6. Evaluation of Berkhof

This section will evaluate the methodology of Berkhof’s reading of the Western context (6.1), the content of this reading (6.2), the methodology of his Christology (6.3) and the content of his Christology (6.4).

6.1 THE METHODOLOGY OF READING THE WESTERN CONTEXT

There are many strengths in the methodology with which Berkhof reads the Western context.

Berkhof clearly perceived the importance of both reading the context and remaining faithful to the gospel. Both are crucial in the process of contextualization. Berkhof understood the importance of paying attention to the wisdom of the world, otherwise the communication of the gospel is hindered by lack of attention to the newer scientific insights. He also understood that faithfulness to the gospel may require a clear social- or political stance. Only in light of the gospel does it become clear what in the context should be resisted or could be accepted.

Berkhof also is helpful in pointing out that one should not only pay attention to the questions and answers in the context, but also to the ‘Lebensgefühl’ (sense of life). For example, a climate of empiricism or idealism does affect one’s sense of life. Berkhof does not deny the importance of intellectual questions and convictions but he also pays attention to other aspects. Through his discernment of the divided worldview he is able to keep together both the existential- and the social-economic-political aspects of the context. Berkhof pointed out that the divided worldview was at the root of the crisis of Christian faith in the Western context. Because of this awareness he was able to consistently reject one-sided contextualizations which would focus either on the outer world or on the inner world. Though the developments in Western culture have continued after Berkhof’s contribution, the split worldview is still very much present. In the new spirituality, for example, the emphasis is on the inner world, while in movements like the ‘emerging church’ the focus is on the outer world.

That the ‘spirit of the age’ cannot only be discerned outside the church but also within the church is obvious after it has been stated, but it is not so often emphasized in discussions about contextual theology. Of course there can be a danger with this approach that one uses this methodology in order to become a Cassandra prophet, but it can also be an encouragement to listen
carefully to the local congregation and to the wider body of Christ. Not just in order to point out deficits (though that may also be necessary), but in order learn about important changes within the context. What also can be learned from Berkhof is that there is no fire-proof method for discerning the context. It is a process in which the Spirit will lead the theologian and in which he can learn from other theologians.

Berkhof’s image of theology as a road that one travels is also helpful. Getting to points of tension and crisis is not a sign of failure, but these are inevitable because the Spirit wants to lead the theologian to a crisis in his thinking, because only after the cross can resurrection follow.

Through the influence of Kierkegaard Berkhof was aware that too harmonious a mediation theology was misleading. He was aware that disputation and confrontation were necessary components in interacting with the context. Berkhof was also right in pointing to the importance of a doctrine of the Holy Spirit. If Berkhof’s interpretation of Schleiermacher correctly views him as a theologian who was dominated by a theology of the Holy Spirit (though hardly conscious about it), then Schleiermacher indeed provides a perspective that is lacking in Barth. Without this pneumatology one either has to deny the context a place in theology (following Barth) or give the context an independent place besides the gospel (following Tillich).

There are also weak points in the methodology with which Berkhof reads the Western context. Three of them will be pointed out:

First, in his contextualization of Christology Berkhof was not so much aware of the idols of the Western context, though discerning these are important for contextualization (see further part III, section 3). Berkhof mentions only National Socialism, Communism, and Islam as competitive doctrines of salvation (see section 3.2), implying that when one stays away from those, one is in safe or neutral territory. The lack of attention to idolatry in the context is related to the fact that the worship of God and Christ did not play a central role in Berkhof’s theology. The person of Christ is submitted to the work of Christ. There is a tendency in his theology to present Christ as instrumental in reaching real progress (structural renewal) and the true existential life under God.

Second, the cross does not have a central significance in Berkhof’s theology. It might seem that the cross plays an important role in Berkhof’s theology, because he states that the heart of the gospel is the cross as a revelation that liberatingly contradicts man. But Berkhof’s Arian Christology militates against giving the cross a central significance. For the Arians:

---

The cross is a signal point. It marks the end of Jesus’ long development in virtue, understood to mean obedience to the Father, since the Arians did not conceive of a perpetual ascent in virtue. But the cross stands as a supreme instance of his existence-long obedience to the Father.\footnote{Gregg and Groh, \textit{Early Arianism}, 23-24.}

This reflects how Berkhof thinks about the cross. The cross becomes totally placed at the human side. The cross is the result of human resistance, and the resurrection is the divine answer.\footnote{For example: “This double image (...) 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.” Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 519.} There is no sense left that the cross is also God’s will.\footnote{For example: “He came to live, but to live in such a way that in this world he could not but perish.” Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 304.} There is no sense that the cross reveals God and his characteristic way of dealing with the world. The cross becomes an intellectual principle of both liberation and contradiction in the theology of Berkhof, while the existential dimension of the cross seems limited to those moments in the career of the theologian that he comes in a total crisis. Berkhof seems too little aware that theology should always be done from a position of powerlessness, intellectual, existential, or social.\footnote{See further part III, section 2.}

Third, mediation theology wants to mediate between two existing positions. The helpful aspect of this methodology is that it encourages the theologian to listen carefully to different sides of a debate. More problematic is that its position seems superior to the alternatives because it appears to prevent one-sidedness, but it should be noted that the classification of the different sides is not a generally accepted one, but presented by the mediation theologian precisely in order to find a synthesis at that particular point. However, if the classification is perceived differently, the proposed solution will go in a different direction. An interesting example of this can be given from the exchange between Berkhof and Jürgen Moltmann. Berkhof responded to Moltmann’s \textit{Theology of Hope} by stating that while for Bultmann hope is nearly swallowed by faith, for Moltmann faith is nearly swallowed by hope.\footnote{Hendrikus Berkhof, “De methode der eschatology,” in: \textit{Discussie over theologie van de hoop van Jürgen Moltmann} (Utrecht, Amboboeken, 1968), 134. Originally published in German: \textit{Diskussion über die ‘Theologie der Hoffnung,’} (München, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1967).} Berkhof makes here a clear classification and chooses himself a mediation position in which the future is extrapolated from what already has been given in Christ and the Spirit. In this way Berkhof tries to honor both what is already given and what still has to be revealed. In response, Moltmann denies that his position is a reaction to Bultmann; rather...
it was forged in discussions with Jews and Marxists. Moltmann emphasizes the
distinction between ‘futurum’ and ‘adventus.’ If the future is only ‘futurum’
(the future as an extension of the present) one could extrapolate from the
present, but because it is also ‘adventus’ (or Parousia: the coming or arrival of
the future to the present) extrapolation is not possible. Only anticipation is the
right response. In Moltmann’s view Berkhof is very one-sided because he only
sees the future as ‘futurum’ and not also as ‘adventus.’ Moltmann tries to do
justice to both aspects.\textsuperscript{443} The convincing power of a mediating position stands
or falls with the classification of the positions to be mediated. In postmodern
idiom one could say that in the choice for a certain classification the ‘will to
power’ is evident. There is in mediation theology not necessarily more ‘will-to-
power’ than in other types of theology, but precisely because mediation
theology presents itself as fighting against one-sidedness and the absolutizing
of certain positions, one easily overlooks the fact that in this claim there is a
pretension of reaching a many-sided position that is stronger because it seems
to incorporate so many different voices.

6.2 THE CONTENT OF READING THE WESTERN CONTEXT

There are many strengths in the content of Berkhof’s reading of the Western
context.

In Berkhof’s reading of the Western context, he takes movements of
revolution and protest seriously. He perceives that the Christian faith never
can be identified with the status-quo, and that Christianity has always
provided an impulse for societal criticism. Instead of accepting alienating
situations, the church should act and work for change. The discovery of how
much of an alienating effect the structures of the world can have with respect
to the quality of human life as desired by God was stimulated by the work of
Marx. Berkhof had processed these new discoveries by reflecting on the
relation between the powers in Scripture and the structures of the world. In
this way he gave a theological legitimization for the call to participate with the
Spirit of Christ in changing the alienating structures of the world. His reading
of the Western context is therefore not focusing only on the ideas of the
context but also on the social, economic, and political realities. Berkhof is not
only reading in terms of ‘what is,’ but also in terms of ‘what should be.’
Berkhof also saw the difficulty of communicating the Christian faith if it was
too closely connected with a static conception of nature and history. He used

\textsuperscript{443} Jürgen Moltmann, “Antwoord op de kritiek op Theologie van de hoop,” in: Discussie over
theologie van de hoop van Jürgen Moltmann, 170-180. See also Moltmann’s critique on
a more dynamic concept of nature and history and was so able to speak the language of the vast majority of Westerners for whom evolution is more than a probable hypothesis. He used a dynamic concept of history in which there was room for progress towards the Kingdom of God and for an intensification of evil. Though today most theologians would be hesitant to speak so confidently about progress and to see Europe’s cultural history as increasingly deviating from the universal human pattern, the opposite danger is giving in to hopelessness and despair. The despairing stance envisions the world as one in which we are captured and spellbound. Something has overtaken us, and we experience ourselves as entirely in the hands of forces that have their way with us. However, as David J. Kettle has shown, this experience involves our hidden collusion. It is an evasion of the demands of hope in face of its immediate non-fulfillment. The threat of being overwhelmed by despair can be confronted with a gospel that speaks of being overwhelmed by a God who blesses. “The cross defeats our hope; the resurrection terrifies our despair.”

Berkhof was well aware that there was a climate of anthropocentrism in the West which should be taken seriously. From a Christian perspective one should, of course, reject the view that ‘man is the measure of all things’ but there is a freedom and independence of human beings that should be respected. Even though an absolute ontological dependence upon God as Creator does not have to be denied, the actual relation with God is not only one of absolute dependence if that would entail only pure passivity on the part of humans. God not only initiates, but also responds to the initiative of human beings, as many psalms testify. Human beings have a measure of freedom, because they are like God ‘persons.’ As Barth said: a person is one who loves in freedom. So Berkhof’s emphasis on freedom is not just an adaptation to the Western context, but deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.

---

446 Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, 89, a quotation from Austin Farrer.
448 Interestingly, Paul Fiddes shows that it was especially the move of the Greek fathers who were daring to equate *hypostasis* with ‘person’ (*prosopon*) which led to an ontologizing of the person, and so to a discovery of freedom as essential of ‘persons’ over against the denial of this freedom in the Greek philosophical view of the universe as being bounded by necessity. Berkhof embraces the fruit of this development (freedom) but he rejects the root (the development of the Trinity). Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 15.
Berkhof had the courage to take seriously the fact that many people were not able to relate to ontological language. This is still the case, also for Christians. There are today few Christians that understand the debates surrounding the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, there are even far fewer who would be as passionate about these matters as the early Christians were. Berkhof took this crisis seriously, and he pointed both to the shift from ontological to functional language and the general difficulty with metaphysical concepts in a climate of empiricism as major sources of this problem. Berkhof had not lost touch with Christians in the congregation. Though the climate of empiricism is today less pervasive than when Berkhof wrote *Christian Faith*, the anti-metaphysical sentiment and the functional way of thinking are still strong. Berkhof has rightly intuited that this climate necessitates another way of speaking about God and His revelation, more through inter-subjective encounter than through the polarization of subjective and objective modes of knowledge.

There are also weak points in the content with which Berkhof reads the Western context. Three will be pointed out:

First, it can be argued that if one reads the Western context with an awareness of idolatry, there will be a greater awareness of the problematic role of individualism and of progress (see part III, section 3). The underlying individualism of Berkhof’s anthropology has already been pointed out in section 3.3. Also Berkhof’s formulation of the goal of creation, equating God’s glory with the flourishing of humankind, lacks awareness of the importance of worship. Charles Taylor formulates it in this way:

> It’s clear that in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition (...) loving, worshipping God is the ultimate end. Of course, in this tradition God is seen as willing human flourishing, but devotion to God is not seen as contingent on this. The injunction “Thy will be done” isn’t equivalent to “Let humans flourish”, even though we know that God wills human flourishing.\(^{450}\)

This does not mean that ‘human flourishing’ should be totally left out of the formulation of the goal of creation, but it must be emphasized that one worships God by trusting that human flourishing will be the result, not by always seeing this fully in this life.

\(^{449}\) In 429 A.D. riots broke out in Constantinople and Ephesus because of the sermon of Nestorius which denied that Mary was the mother of God. See: A. van de Beek, *Jesus Kyrios: Christology as Heart of Theology* (Studies in Reformed Theology, Supplements, Vol. I) (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 17.

\(^{450}\) Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.
Second, there is a problematic aspect in the notion of progress in Berkhof’s theology. In Western societies there is a kind of eschatology: the immanent goal of progress towards prosperity and security. Berkhof qualifies this secular eschatology in different ways (see section 3.2). He balances the positive progress by stating that there is also a progress of evil, and he relativizes the positive progress by stating that this progress is incomplete and limited. Moreover, he does not envision this progress as a purely immanent phenomenon, but as the work of the Spirit of Christ, who prepares humanity for the final leap into the renewal of all things. And yet, the notion of progress envisions the process as one through which this world is pushed towards the future. In Moltmann’s terminology: the future is here seen as ‘futurum’ and not as ‘adventus,’ in which the arrow of time is shifted a hundred and eighty degrees because the future comes towards us and breaks into the present.

It is the lack of the ‘adventus’ in Berkhof’s notion of progress which is problematic because it tends to line up too closely with the secular eschatology which envisions the future as being dependent on human possibilities and planning. Berkhof, of course, would say that progress is dependent on what the Spirit works through humanity, but this still hinders the open expectation and anticipation of what is genuinely new. One characteristic, however, which is always present when God fulfills his promises is this surprising newness. Before the fulfillment of this promise it is unknown how it will be fulfilled. ‘Futurum’ does not encourage an attitude of openness before this frightening and exciting unknown, and it will have difficulties to welcome what is different.

Third, if one reads the Western context from the perspective of a *theologia crucis*, the issue of power should receive more attention than it does in Berkhof’s theology. Then there will be not only an awareness that normal human power works against Gods power, but it will also pay more attention to how Western power is used in such a way that it marginalizes others in this world. Berkhof reads the Western context as if it is isolated from other parts of the world.

Fourth, at the time when Berkhof observed the Western context, the turn towards the new spirituality had not taken place yet. This of course is not really a weakness in Berkhof’s reading of the Western context as such, but it is

---

451 In paragraph 3.2 Van de Beek was quoted that there is a linear history-concept in which the arrow of time always points ahead.
453 In part III, section 2. There it will become clear that Shoki Coe, who coined the word ‘contextualization,’ was in 1973 already aware of the interaction between the local and the global.
something to be remedied from a contemporary perspective because now this aspect should receive sufficient attention.

6.3 THE METHODOLOGY OF CHRISTOLOGY

There are many strengths in Berkhof’s methodology of Christology. Berkhof approaches Christology from four directions: ‘from behind,’ ‘from below,’ ‘from above,’ and ‘from before.’ From a methodological point of view the strength is that these four different perspectives are not polarized but function complementarily. Berkhof has convincingly shown how important the ‘from behind’ is for Christology. It prevents ideological portraits of Jesus, and helps to understand him against the background of God’s history with Israel. Berkhof also makes room for a perspective ‘from below,’ which for him means an historical and empirical mode of research. That this line of inquiry remains fruitful is visible in the Third Quest. Though Berkhof interpreted the ‘from above’ differently, he wanted to emphasize that Jesus should be seen as a new initiative of God. With the ‘from before’ Berkhof helpfully pays attention to an aspect that is not so often discussed in Christology, namely that Jesus should also be understood from the perspective of what the Spirit of Jesus works through the centuries.

Another strength of Berkhof’s methodology is that he tries to find an alternative to the language of Nicaea and Chalcedon in order to express the intuitions of the early church in a context that is not able any longer to connect deeply with the metaphysical language of those church councils. Berkhof’s attention to the role of the Spirit in the life of Jesus isbiblically justified, though this attention is often lacking in Logos Christology. Picturing Jesus as inspired by the Spirit is more relevant to the modern mind than presenting him with traditional ontological terminology. Berkhof paints Jesus as a real human inspired by the Spirit. The potential benefit of this is that in the New Testament believers are enjoined to take Christ as a model for the Christian life. “However, it is difficult to imitate someone whose metaphysical constitution is such that it places him at a distance from other human beings.”

By emphasizing the active role that the Holy Spirit plays in the life and ministry of Jesus, there is a theological underpinning for the call to model the life of Christ, because the Holy Spirit is also given to believers to sustain and empower them in this life.

Finally, because Berkhof’s Christology is shaped by the triple-star system, and these three stars are colored by interaction with the modern context, Berkhof shapes his Christology in a way that is very appealing to

---

modern people. The humanity of Christ is emphasized and placed within God's history not only with Israel and the Church but also with the whole world. Jesus' place is seen as a crucial turning point in the process that started with the emergence of sinful man in the evolutionary process and which will culminate in the renewal of all things. In this way Berkhof's Christology takes into account both the modern climate and modern scientific insights about the development of humanity.

There are also weak points in the content in Berkhof's methodology of Christology. Three of those will be pointed out:

Berkhof's pneumatic Christology starts as an attempt to contextualize the intuitions of the early Christian councils, but in this process these intuitions are lost and he shifts from a Nicaean Christology to an Arian Christology. The present author has not been convinced by Berkhof that this Arian Christology is the best expression of the Biblical witnesses (see 6.4). From a Nicaean perspective there is still room for a pneumatic Christology, but it would need to be combined with a Logos Christology (even when this Logos Christology needs to be formulated differently in our day). John Owen, for example, combined an incarnational Christology with an inspirational Christology. Without the strand of incarnational Logos Christology, pneumatic-Christology will become degree-Christology, in which Jesus' uniqueness lies in the degree by which he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

There are also weaknesses with Berkhof's methodological approach 'from behind,' 'from below,' 'from above,' and 'from before.' The attempt to re-shape the terminology of 'from below' for an historical and empirical mode of thinking and 'from above' as a faith perspective is confusing (see section 4.1), although the advantage of this confusion is that it can alert one that in many discussions it is not clear if one means by 'from below' a faith-perspective on the humanity of Jesus or an empirical approach based on historical criticism. The 'from before' needs the most revision. For Berkhof the 'from before' deals with Jesus from a perspective of what he works through the centuries in human hearts and in the peoples of the world. So, Berkhof looks for the fruit of the Spirit in wider society. But what is


456 This perspective is obviously influenced by the perceived relationship between the Spirit and culture (or context). If one identifies the work of the Spirit with the European society, one comes to a different perspective than if one sees only discontinuity. A clear description of these approaches is given in G. van den Brink & C. van der Kooi, *Christelijke Dogmatiek*
underemphasized in this approach is that the ‘from before’ should be more closely linked to what the Spirit does in the church. In the New Testament gospels there is a strong link between the way Christ is presented (Christology) and the perception of what it means to be a disciple and follow Christ within that context. Christology in the NT might be called “discipleship-in-context Christology.” There is, of course, influence from Christology on discipleship, but there is also the reverse influence from the challenges of discipleship (within a certain context) back to Christology. The local church has therefore an important role to play in developing contextualized Christology. Discipleship-in-context happens within the local church, and in that process the Spirit of Christ helps the church to discern Jesus’ salvation and his person amidst the idolatries of the context. So, it is not wrong to look to what Jesus works through the centuries in human hearts and in the peoples of the world, but one should look even more to what the Spirit of Christ is working within the church in a particular context, as they are following Christ.

If one does not follow Berkhof in his Arian perspective on Christology, a deeper question about his methodology surfaces. From a Nicaean perspective, Berkhof’s Christology has been malformed because it became a planet which orbits the triple-star system, circling especially around the ‘Human being.’ Methodologically Christology will always orbit other stars, unless Christology, or rather the gospel about Christ, is made the most weighty star (see further part III, section 1). If it is essential to the New Testament portrayals of Jesus that they place him on both the human and the divine levels of reality (as Nicaean Christology maintains), this mystery should be the basis and start of our response and reflections. Christian theology should start with Christology, or rather, with the gospel.

(Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 467-474. They describe their own (third) approach as ‘testing and discerning.’
457 See further part III, section 4.
459 Van de Beek writes: “It is remarkable therefore, how theologians often write about God before they address christology. (…) If we know God most clearly in Christ (not even arguing for exclusivity), we should begin with that clarity and from there proceed to what is less clear. A Christian theology that does not begin with Christology is a detour. The earliest creedal statements of the church begin, therefore, with Christ. They find their center in the phrase ‘Jesus is Lord.’” Van de Beek, Jesus Kyrios, 13. Because Christology is rooted in the preaching of the gospel within one’s context, it would be even better to state that theology should start with the gospel.
6.4 THE CONTENT OF CHRISTOLOGY

There are strengths in the content of Berkhof’s Christology.

Berkhof’s Christology is driven by a desire to make room for the humanity of Christ. Berkhof was passionate to communicate about Jesus Christ in a way such that contemporary persons not only could understand who Jesus Christ was, but that they could admire Him. They would then admire his freedom and his love for God and other people and ask: Who is this? Then they would learn that this human person was not just an exemplar who managed something that others could not, but that he fulfilled a key role in God’s history and that through His Spirit he was able to renew ‘normal’ people who struggled to live out this love and freedom. At the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Berkhof confessed Jesus in this way:

You are the true Man, as God has intended you from the beginning; the true, obedient Son, the man of love who, accepting all consequences, was willing not to keep but to lose his life for others, and who, by this exceptional life of love and obedience, has started the counter-movement of resurrection in this world. And as the true Man, you are also the Man of the Future. You are not just a strange exception, for then you would only be an accusation against us. God has given you as the Pioneer and Forerunner, as the Guarantee that through your sacrifice, your resurrection, and your spirit, the future is opened for us, obstinate and enslaved people.460

It is a powerful and moving confession.

The strength of Berkhof’s soteriology is that he distinguishes between the question of the purpose of the atonement and the question how Jesus’ death brings about atonement and salvation (see 5.2). According to Berkhof the purpose of Jesus’ death was to renew the covenant so that people could live out a new covenant relation with God and so participate in the renewal of the world. The strength of this proposal is that this model of the atonement does justice to Scripture.461 Moreover, it links directly with Jesus’ own explanation of his death in Mark, Matthew, and Luke,462 and it combines judicial and relational aspects of the atonement, as Kevin Vanhoozer has stated.463 But despite its biblical roots, the theme of the covenant has not

463 “While the sundry conceptualities championed by the various atonement theories do not, strictly speaking, cohere, they are nevertheless compatible thanks to the integrative framework of the covenant—a complex, multilevel reality that combines the judicial and
often been viewed as model for the atonement. After giving an extensive overview of different proposed models, Michael J. Gorman states: “My main point now, however, is that despite its apparent significance to Jesus and the evangelists, the (new) covenant is not very significant to the Christian theological tradition on the atonement.” Berkhof was an exception to this trend.

In discussing the *how* of the atonement Berkhof rightly points to the mystery that clouds the relation between the death of Christ and salvation. There remains an impenetrable haze. Berkhof states that “one who thinks that he is able often makes the connection superficial, rational, and all too human.” Berkhof clearly saw that there are a variety of pictures and metaphors in the NT, derived from the juridical, cultic, financial, and military areas of life, and that they were developed in different contexts, and that no one had priority. He believed that in the contemporary Western context one could best use the Johannine concepts of love, obedience, and glorification, rather than the juridical and cultic concepts of Paul. Although not everyone will follow Berkhof in this ‘kaleidoscopic view,’ the fact that Berkhof so clearly saw the contextual nature of the atonement debate is a strength.

There are also weaknesses in the content of Berkhof’s Christology. First, in the just mentioned ‘kaleidoscopic view.’ Berkhof tends to see the different metaphors of the atonement as building blocks lying on a table, from which he can choose the one that is most applicable within the context, leaving the others to the side. Might not a better picture be that one tries to build a pyramid with the building blocks and that the peak of the pyramid should contain the block which communicates best in a certain context? In this approach there is a contextual dimension, but other metaphors in Scripture (and wisdom which grew during in church history) are not discarded but used to contribute to the understanding of atonement. Might it not be the case that, for example, juridical metaphors should not be in the peak of the pyramid, but that they are still telling something about the work of Christ that

relational aspects of Jesus’ death “for us” in a garment as seamless as the one for which the soldiers cast lots.” Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 391.

464 Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah*, 15.

465 Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 309. Charles Taylor is right when he points to the danger that the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement gives proponents the sense that this language has, above all others, a lock on the mysteries involved. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 78.

466 The name ‘kaleidoscopic view’ is the name given by Joel Green to his proposal that the wide variety of New Testament atonement images should lead us to conclude that, while each of the paradigms play an important role in explicating the work of Christ, none of them has a claim to priority. See Beilby & Eddy (ed.), *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 21. See also Joel B. Green, Mark. D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2000), 35-86.
cannot be captured solely by relational terminology? Berkhof tends to reduce the variety of the biblical metaphors to a single conceptual scheme.467

Second, the present author is convinced that the New Testament portrays Jesus on both the human and the divine level of reality. Jesus’ reality is fully human and yet in some way he is also God in action who comes to save His people.468 In both the ancient and modern world, this conviction ran up against deep-seated assumptions which appeared to make it necessary either to place a being on the divine level, or on the human level, or to place it somewhere midway between the divine and the human. The early church councils rejected the dualistic assumptions that forced the denial of either Jesus’ humanity or his divinity, and protected the mystery of Jesus by ruling out these options. Berkhof, however, embraces the dualistic assumptions and places Jesus at the human level. This does not do justice to the way the New Testament portrays him.469

It is important to point out that the objection at this point is not the fact that Berkhof tries to contextualize the gospel and re-word it without ontological language. Many Christians in the non-Western world attempt similar things. The objection is also not his attempt to express the gospel without using the term ‘incarnation.’ Since Irenaeus’ battle with the Gnostics in the 2nd century the incarnation of the Word of God came to function in the Christological thought of the early church as a ‘master-story.’470 It is an important master-story, especially in contrast with gnostic thought, but there are other ways the Bible speaks about the mystery of Christ. The problem is not that Berkhof does not repeat the wording of Nicaea-Constantinople or Chalcedon, nor that he wants to try to go beyond Chalcedon with new proposals that contextualize Christology in the Western context. In this Berkhof is even an example. The problem is that his proposal predicates on the dualistic assumption that the divine and human could not be both present in Jesus. This assumption is countered by the witness of the New Testament. One senses Berkhof’s dualism when he says: "No, he is not a dual being (...)"
There are thus not two subjects in Jesus.”\textsuperscript{471} Interestingly, Berkhof is aware of the problematic nature of dualism: “In the history of the church, when the biblical encounter thinking was changed into substantialistic thinking, Jesus’ two natures came to stand in contrast to each other.”\textsuperscript{472} But rather than challenging the underlying ontological dualism, he tries to solve it on an epistemological level by emphasizing a type of thinking that overcomes the object-subject divide (encounter thinking). Berkhof thinks that if one starts with time and only then moves to eternity, the dualism between time and eternity can be overcome.\textsuperscript{473}

The result of Berkhof’s different view of the person of Jesus Christ can be criticized on two accounts.

First, based on the rule “lex orandi, lex credendi,” often translated as “the law of praying (or worship), is the law of believing,” one has to point out that Berkhof’s view is not consistent with the liturgical practice of the church. His view on the relation between Jesus (as human) and God leaves sufficient ground to honor and admire Jesus as divine agent but not to include him in worship. A human Jesus could never be worshipped even if he would be a divinely appointed agent of God Himself. For a Jew there was a strict prohibition to worship anyone besides God. Now Berkhof seems to be consistent here, because in his section on worship in \textit{Christian Faith}, he speaks only generally about the worship of God, but makes no reference to the worship of Jesus.\textsuperscript{474} The key question is of course: was this what the early Christians did? Did they continue to worship only the one God of Israel and give honor to the human Jesus as God’s supreme agent? Clearly, no. Berkhof does not consider well enough the worship practices of the early Christians. Larry Hurtado argues that scholars have often focused on Christology (the beliefs about Jesus in early Christianity), but they have given surprisingly little attention to the devotional practices of the early Christians.\textsuperscript{475} It is not so much by looking to the titles and functions assigned to Christ that we discover the mutation of early Christians (as Berkhof wants us to do), but by looking to


\textsuperscript{473} In responding to the theology of Berkhof, C. Graafland also perceives a dualism between time and eternity. He points out that this dualism influenced the opposition between the voetianen en coccejanen in the 17th and 18th century. C. Graafland, “Openbaring en Schrift bij H. Berkhof,” 54.

\textsuperscript{474} Berkhof, \textit{Christian Faith}, 377-382. Berkhof views the human Jesus (after his resurrection and ascension) as sharing in the life and rule of God (288). But even though he is then in an unprecedented union with God, he remains a human being.

\textsuperscript{475} Larry Hurtado, \textit{How on Earth did Jesus become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus} (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 27.
their religious practices. Jews had no trouble, whatsoever, in honoring all kinds of beings beside God. They honored angels, patriarchs, and personified divine attributes (wisdom, logos). The early Christians certainly understood Jesus also along the lines of the Jewish divine agency tradition, but they went beyond this. “The early Christian devotion constituted a significant mutation or innovation in Jewish monotheistic tradition.” Christ came to be included as an object of the devotional attention characteristically reserved for God in other examples of Jewish tradition. They included Jesus in their worship out of an apparent conviction that it was the will of the one God for them to do so and they saw their action as an affirmation of the sovereignty and glory of God. It is an unprecedented reshaping of monotheistic piety to include a second object of devotion alongside God. At this point Berkhof’s Christology is more Jewish than Christian.

A second criticism of Berkhof’s presentation of the identity (person) of Jesus Christ might be surprising: Berkhof’s Jesus is not human enough. In order to see this, we need to remember the point of the incarnation. It is that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Now flesh, whatever the precise meaning, refers to the stuff that ordinary humans are made of. The Word connects himself in a mysterious way with this stuff, because “the unassumed is the unhealed” (Gregory of Nazianzus). Yet, in Berkhof’s Christology the humanity of Christ is in a significant sense different from our humanity. The fact that in both cases the word ‘humanity’ is used might conceal this fact. His humanity is different because it rests on a “unique and new creative act of God.” Jesus came to bring the new humanity. Whereas the miracle in more orthodox Christology is that God unites himself with fallen humanity, here the miracle is that God creates a new humanity. But this causes a theological problem. You cannot any longer sustain that Jesus really has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sinning (Heb. 4:15). Berkhof tries to say that Jesus did face the same temptation because Jesus did not know that he could not sin: “a whole world tried to pull him away from his calling.” True enough, the outside world tried to pull him away, but what about the inside world (the flesh)? Did He share our flesh? I don’t think that Berkhof could affirm this,

---

477 Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 41-92 (chapter 2-4).
478 Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 93.
479 Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 99.
480 Hurtado, One God, One Lord, 100. Hurtado bases this conclusion on a consideration of (1) hymnic practices, (2) prayer and related practices, (3) use of the name of Christ, (4) the Lord’s Supper, (5) confession of faith in Jesus, and (6) prophetic pronouncements of the risen Christ (100-114).
481 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 287.
482 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 302.
because for him Jesus’ humanity was a new creation. Based on his view that Jesus’ humanity is a new creation, he cannot fully affirm Hebrews 2:14: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity....” Berkhof might say that, though Jesus is a new creation, there is continuity between his humanity and ours. His newness is more like a jump in evolutionary development. But still the ‘gap’ between people and Jesus is the ‘gap’ between sinful humanity and sinless humanity. Whatever the continuity might be, he is not any longer of the same family. There are three consequences of this move. First, it devalues the original creation and seems to suggest that the old humanity was never able to be the covenant partner of God. Sin becomes a deficiency within humanity that only can be eradicated by the creation of a new human. Second, representation becomes problematic because Jesus cannot be a true representative of the (old) human family. Third, salvation is not guaranteed, because God’s presence saves only indirectly through a new human who has not sinned but is able to sin.

484 Ellen Flesseman-van Leer is (from a Jewish-Christian perspective) also uneasy with the view that Jesus is a new creation. She thinks it devalues created humanity. Flesseman-van Leer, "Over de tweezaïdheid van het verbond," 38-39.
485 Berkhof points out that representation points to the final, solid core of our salvation. But he does not consider the question why this new human may represent the old humans. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 307. Borger-Koetsier also points to this deficiency. Borger-Koetsier, *Verzoezing tussen God en Mens in Christus*, 224.
486 At this point I am in agreement with Van de Beek, who points out the difference between Athanasius and Arius: "One could say that Arius was almost completely an Athanasian except for one small point: his Logos was all encompassing and bore everything, but stopped short of being God. Athanasius fought his entire life about that small opening of space, and was banned and exiled because of it. It is the space between the finger of God and the finger of Adam on the fresco of Michelangelo’s *The Creation*, albeit now related to the incarnation. Such a space shows that God is not quite fully connected to this world. And if Godself does not save us, we are lost forever." Van de Beek, *Jesus Kyrios*, 109.
PART II:
COLIN GUNTON

In this dissertation the focus is on the contours of the gospel in the Western context. Both Hendrik Berkhof and Colin Gunton interacted much with the Western context. The specific focus for the analysis of their theology is how they analyze the Western context and contextualize Christology in light of it. Last part provided a study of Hendrikus Berkhof. This part will focus on Colin Gunton.1

Section one of this part will introduce the theological development of Gunton. Section two will provide a descriptive analysis of Gunton’s methodology, through which he reads the Western context. Section three will deal with the content of his reading of the Western context. After dealing with the Western context, Christology will become the focus of attention. In section four the methodology of Gunton’s Christology will be considered and in section five the content of his Christology. Section six closes with an evaluation of Gunton’s approach to contextualized Christology.

1. Introduction to Colin Gunton

In order to gain some perspective on the contextualized Christology of Colin Gunton, a short overview of his theological development against the background of theological changes in the British context is required. There are two reasons why such an overview is more difficult to give than for Berkhof. First, there is a scarcity of published biographical information about Gunton.2 Second, Gunton does not give the reader many opportunities to see the changing context through his eyes. There are a few instances in introductions and epilogues, which will be noted below, but they are rare. Therefore, an overview of the theological context in Britain in the late twentieth century has to be provided from elsewhere. Use here is made of a chapter by Rowan Williams, “Theology in the twentieth century,” in A Century of Theological and

---

1 As stated in the introduction to this study, the main text will use the United States spelling of English, except in direct quotations of Gunton or other British authors.

Religious Studies in Britain: 1902-2002. Based on this chapter and the clues provided by Gunton himself, Gunton’s theological development can be approached based on three periods:

First period: 1962-1977 Christological controversies in a secularizing world
Third period: 1995-2003 Renaissance of Trinitarian theology

Colin Ewart Gunton was born January 19, 1941. He was educated at Nottingham high school. In 1960 he won a classics scholarship to Hertford College, Oxford. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in *literae humaniores* in 1964. In that same year he married Jennifer Mary Osgathorpe, a schoolteacher who lived in Nottingham, where they were members of the same church. They had two daughters and two sons. In 1966 Colin received a Bachelor’s degree in Theology from Mansfield College, Oxford, followed by a Master's degree in 1967. He remained there for his doctoral research (D. Phil 1973) on the relationship between the process philosopher Charles Hartshorne and the Reformed theologian Karl Barth. His dissertation was supervised first by Robert Jenson, then by John Marsh, and finally by John Macquarrie. He was appointed to a lectureship in the philosophy of religion at King’s College London in 1969. Not much later (1972), Gunton was ordained in the newly formed United Reformed church, and from 1975 until his death he served as associate minister of Brentwood United Reformed Church. Gunton became lecturer in systematic theology in 1980, senior lecturer in 1983, and professor of Christian doctrine in 1984.

During the late forties and fifties, theology in Britain was responding to the continuing challenge of positivist philosophy, but in the sixties issues of New Testament interpretation seemed to generate the liveliest debates.

---

During the period in which Gunton received his education theology in Britain was focused on Christological issues. The 1962 Cambridge symposium, *Soundings: Essays concerning Christian Understanding*, represented a fairly widespread unease with what were considered doctrinal orthodoxies. It preceded and in some ways foreshadowed *Honest to God* by John A.T. Robinson. The climax of this development came in 1977 with the symposium *The Myth of God Incarnate*, arguing for a comprehensive rethinking of classical Christological language. John Hick was the editor of the book that was published after this symposium, and he was a driving force in considering theology amidst religious diversity. Another important book in 1977 was from G.W.H. Lampe *God as Spirit*, a written apologia for dismantling most of the structure and vocabulary of classical Trinitarian theology. The attempt of Hick and Lampe seemed successful. But the truth was more complex, as Rowan Williams notes:

So an observer at the time might have concluded that a broadly liberal and revisionist approach had triumphed at the highest professional levels of British (or at least English) theology. The truth was more complex. The year 1977 was another high water mark, after which the assumptions and conclusions of the authors of the *Myth* symposium began to shift or fade in the overall intellectual map. That broadly Christocentric (but not Chalcedonian), morally serious, doctrinally agnostic theism which represented a quite long tradition in English theological liberalism was sharply challenged on two fronts.

The first challenge came from those theologians who had an interest in German theology. The almost total lack of reference in the *Myth* to European Continental work suggested some insularities to be overcome. During the seventies there was a substantial increase in the translation of major theological works from Germany. The writings of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg became widely available and a number of younger theologians began to take a strong interest in Barth, one of whom was Colin Gunton. Gunton’s first published article in 1972 was about Karl Barth and the development of Christian doctrine, and up till the end of his life Gunton

---

8 Williams, “Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 244.
11 Williams, “Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 246.
12 Williams, “Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 246.
13 The second challenge will be discussed in the description of period two (1977-1995).
interacted with the thought of Barth.\textsuperscript{14} His first published book \textit{Becoming and Being} was about the doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth. Though Gunton would only in his second book, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, directly focus on the Christological questions; in his first book he was already clearly interacting with the methodological assumptions of the broadly liberal and revisionist theology in Britain, especially by engaging process philosopher Hartshorne.


After 1977 the liberal, revisionist theology in Britain continued to exercise influence, but it was also increasingly challenged from a second frontier. Actually it were different movements which challenged mainstream theology, but they all were influenced by the sociology of knowledge. The whole theological enterprise as classically conceived was challenged in the light of various analyses of its ideological interest. Three can be mentioned. Liberation theology, becoming well-known in the seventies, saw both liberal and conservative theology failing to realize the need for an emancipating practice to accompany, even to ground, theological statement. The gradual entry of feminist concerns also challenged both liberal and conservative strategies. And in the early eighties the presence of postmodern theories began to make itself felt, especially through the work of Don Cupitt.\textsuperscript{15} Colin Gunton also observed these challenges. In 1983 Gunton’s second book was published: \textit{Yesterday and Today}.\textsuperscript{16} When in 1997 the second edition of this book was published, Gunton reflects on the changes in the British context since 1982. He notes that after he wrote the book there was very little substantial addition to the discussion to which the book was devised as a contribution. Other themes had meanwhile taken the place of Christology proper as the center of the debate. He mentions four themes: the place of Christianity among the religions, feminism, truth and power, and the doctrine of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{17} The place of Christianity among the religions remained the interest of the liberal, revisionist stream of theology, even when, after 1977, the Christological issues did not remain at the center of the debate. Gunton does not mention liberation theology, but he does point to feminism and postmodern influences (Gunton preferred to speak about ‘truth and power’). These challenges became visible in the early eighties. Though the general revival of interest in the Trinity started somewhat later in Britain (from

\textsuperscript{14} P.H. Brazier has published a book based on the tape recordings of a lecture program in which Gunton taught about Karl Barth. He still gave this course during his final years (1999-2001). Colin Gunton, P.H. Brazier (ed.), \textit{The Barth Lectures} (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, “Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 246-247.


\textsuperscript{17} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 212-226.
an early major influence was the Study Commission of the British Council of Churches: “Trinitarian Doctrine Today,” which met between November 1983 and May 1988.\textsuperscript{18} Gunton also preceded the general revival of Trinitarian theology with his 1991 publication: \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology}. At that point the general interest only just started. It was only in November 1996 that Gunton could write in the preface to the second edition (published in 1997): “Suddenly we are all Trinitarians, or so it would seem.”\textsuperscript{19} So the start of the third period (Trinitarian reorientation in the doctrine of God) has to be dated between Advent 1990 (when Gunton wrote the preface to the first edition) and the end of 1996. Different dates are possible because there is not a clear event or publication that marks the transition into this new period. In this study the choice has been made for 1995, the year in which \textit{Trinitarian Theology Today} was published, edited by Christoph Schwöbel. Schwöbel (then in London, now in Tübingen), wrote the introductory chapter to that book and he gave it the title: “The Renaissance of Trinitarian Theology: Reasons, Problems, and Tasks.”\textsuperscript{20} According to Gijsbert van den Brink Christoph Schwöbel was probably the first one to apply (in this chapter) the label ‘Renaissance’ to the new interest in Trinitarian theology.\textsuperscript{21} This indicates that only in 1995 (or shortly before) the interest in the Trinity became widespread in Britain.

During the second period seven major works of Gunton are published. In 1983 \textit{Yesterday and Today} appears, a \textit{tour-de-force} in the modern study of Christology, as the back cover to the second edition (1997) states.\textsuperscript{22} King’s College’s chair of Systematic Theology had been renowned for its highly liberal stance, and yet here one finds Gunton, as senior lecturer, presenting and defending a Christology in the line of Athanasius, Cyril and Irenaeus. In 1985 \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation} was published, though the book was already completed in 1982.\textsuperscript{23} Gunton starts the preface with the sentence: “The great

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
philosophers of the Western tradition provide in many ways more illuminating conversation partners for the systematic theologian than do those more narrowly concerned with what has come to be called the philosophy of religion.24 A revealing remark from someone who taught philosophy of religion for eleven years. In dialogue with the philosophers of the Western tradition, Gunton formulates a critique on modernity, claiming that the Enlightenment has caused alienation. Gunton focuses in this book on problematic aspects of perception, freedom and interpretation in the Western context, and he suggests that Christian theology in some measure is able to illuminate and heal modern existence. If one understands God as triune, one is better able to understand the nature of the world.25 In Gunton’s next major study, *The Actuality of Atonement* (1988),26 he applies his critique of modernity, specifically his critique of modern rationalism, to the way the modern doctrine of the atonement has developed. Exploring the nature and working of theological language, specifically the use of metaphor, he presents an understanding of the atonement that has more continuity with the Christian tradition than modern accounts of the atonement. Although one would have expected a Trinitarian account of the atonement, after the suggestions in *Enlightenment & Alienation*, there is not much of this. Chapter six, “The atonement and the Triune God,” speaks more about a relational understanding of the atonement than about a Trinitarian understanding. Gunton turns to the importance of a Trinitarian understanding in his next study, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (1991).27 The center of that book (a collection of articles published from 1985-1991)28 is to be found in a quest for ontology, an understanding of the kind of being that God is. Gunton is aware of the danger of this approach, seemingly setting on one side the soteriological dimension. In the preface he writes about this: “I hope that the careful readers will realize that the concerns of *The Actuality of Atonement*, far from being abandoned, have in fact been advanced by these explorations, one of whose concerns is to hold creation and redemption together.”29 From *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* onwards the doctrine of the Trinity became more and more central to Gunton’s theological work. The Dutch theologian Gijsbert van

28 Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, xii-xiii.
29 Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, xi. In the second edition Gunton added two chapters to this book, one of them was the chapter on atonement: “Atonement and the project of creation: An interpretation of Colossians 1.15-23.” Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, xxix.
de Brink, who dedicated an article about the Trinitarian renaissance to the memory of Colin Gunton, surveyed different reasons for this renaissance. All the four reasons which Van de Brink points out (encounter with Eastern Orthodoxy; awareness of problematic development of Trinity in the West, especially by Barth; the bankruptcy of philosophical theïsm; an increased sensitivity to the connection between the picture of God and our view of man and society), are already present in this seminal work of Gunton. In 1990 Gunton returns to Christology with the Didsbury lectures, published in 1992 as *Christ and Creation*. Gunton had discovered that his earlier study on Christology *Yesterday & Today* lacked both pneumatology and a doctrine of creation. He saw both of these as complementary, as two sides of the same coin. In this study Gunton develops a Trinitarian account of the relation between creator and creation, enriching Christology. After this turn to Christology he directs his attention again to the crisis of modernity with his study *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (1993), a book based on the 1992 Bampton lectures. “After Gunton’s death, many appreciations of his work, oral and published, pointed to this book as perhaps his greatest achievement.” While his earlier study *Enlightenment & Alienation* only suggested the importance of a Trinitarian understanding of God for engaging modern culture, Gunton now argues more fully that the lack of this understanding has created many problems in the Western context. He develops a Trinitarian doctrine of creation with the same desire as in *Enlightenment & Alienation*, namely to contribute to the healing of modern fragmentation. In *Enlightenment & Alienation* Gunton had pointed to different areas of crisis in modernity, the reading and understanding of the Bible being one of them. In *The One, the Three and the Many* Gunton does not develop this theme. But he takes this up in his next study (1995), *A brief Theology of Revelation*, based on the 1993 Warfield Lectures. As in *The Actuality of Atonement* Gunton critiques those modern tendencies that have made an understanding of revelation and authority nearly impossible. He uses

35 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 125.
not only Christological insights to develop a doctrine of revelation, but also his
dep deepened understanding (compared with Enlightenment & Alienation) of the
importance of the doctrine of creation, pneumatology and the Trinitarian
understanding of God. Gunton steers between an objectivist and subjectivist
approach to epistemology, while at the same time not conceding to the lack of
ontological clarification in more narrative types of theology. Gunton traces
some of the problems that modern thinkers have with the concept of
revelation back to, in his view, the unstable synthesis between revelation and
reason already before Ockham. His proposal, following Coleridge, that All Truth
is a species of Revelation, is worked out in this book as an alternative to the old
dichotomy between reason and revelation, of course with the help of a
Trinitarian framework. One more publication should be mentioned here,
though it was published in 1996, during the third period. Theology through the
Theologians is a collection of selected articles from Gunton, written in the

The advantage of placing these studies of Gunton against the background of
the general theological development in Britain, is that one can perceive better
the kind of discussions that he was involved in. He fully participated in
challenging the liberal, revisionist theology from the first frontier, continuing
the line of Barth in awareness of and discussion with Pannenberg and
Moltmann, leading to the Trinitarian renaissance. But three of the four
discussions that were generated at the second front-line (the place of
Christianity among the religions, liberation theology, feminism, truth and
power) were bypassed by Gunton. Interaction with the liberation theology of
Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, and Leonardo Boff is absent from his writings.
The same is true about interaction with feminism and the theology of inter-
religious dialogue. Gunton is aware of the contribution that Trinitarian
theology can have on these themes, but they are not chosen for sustained
interaction. Only issues surrounding the postmodern agenda (truth and power)

37 Colin E. Gunton, Theology through the Theologians: Essays 1972-1995 (Edinburgh: T&T
Clark, 1996). Only chapter seven had not been published before, see Gunton’s remark in the
preface, x.
38 In the preface to The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (see below in
period three), Gunton shortly addresses the idea that being a white, Western, man would
disqualify him from his work as theologian: “That, in my view, is just silly, for all human
beings have advantages and disadvantages inherent in their particular situation, and their
faithfulness is judged not by where they begin, but by where they go on its basis.” (x).
Gunton also makes some remarks about feminism in the 1997 epilogue to the second
edition of Yesterday and Today (213-215). He states that feminist objections can be the
occasion for a deeper rethinking of the meaning of Christology (214).
39 Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, xvi-xvii. See also the epilogue to the second
are regularly addressed by Gunton, especially in *The One, the Three and the Many* and in *A Brief Theology of Revelation*.


During the third period there are different important movements in Britain.\(^4^0\) Besides Colin Gunton, David Ford, and Daniel Hardy, who continue the dialogue with Barth, a new school appears: Radical Orthodoxy (John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock). There are also those who during this period attempt to preserve or revive something of the liberal tradition.\(^4^1\) But the ‘Renaissance of Trinitarian theology’ is an important and widespread feature.

During this third period Gunton publishes seven major works. The first, *Theology through the Theologians: Essays 1972-1995*, has already been mentioned in period two. In 1998 *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* was published,\(^4^2\) a study about the doctrine of creation. Gunton had already addressed the relation between Christology and the doctrine of creation in *Christ and Creation*, and in *The One, the Three and the Many* he had discussed the bearing of the doctrine of creation on the ontology of social relations. But in this book he develops a doctrine of creation interacting with the history of this doctrine, arguing that “early in the process serious mistakes were made which led to highly problematic outcomes, among them the effective de-Christianising of the doctrine and the effective divorce of theology from science.”\(^4^3\) In 2000 *Intellect and Action: Elucidations on Christian Theology and the Life of Faith* appeared. It contains ten papers and/or articles, most of which had been written in 1999.\(^4^4\) Different topics are discussed in these chapters: from the nature of theology, to social ethics (holiness and virtue), to election and freedom. Two of the articles were published in the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, a journal of which Gunton was founding editor together with John Webster. In 2001 a collection of sermons was published: *Theology through Preaching: The Gospel*

---

\(^4^0\) The distinct emphases of several major English theological centers can be found in: Russell Re Manning, “The Shape of British Theology in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries,” available at: http://www.academia.edu/497802/The_Shape_of_British_Theology_in_the_late_twentieth_and_early_twenty_first_Centuries (last accessed: 4/6/2015).

\(^4^1\) Williams, “Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 248-249. As examples of the latter Williams mentions Gareth Jones, Ian Markham, and possibly Keith Ward.


\(^4^3\) Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, ix.

\(^4^4\) Colin E. Gunton, *Intellect and Action: Elucidations on Christian Theology and the Life of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). The papers/articles on which chapters one, five, and ten were based, were not written in 1999.
Gunton had not only treated many topics of systematic theology academically, but he had also preached regularly at his church in Brentwood. He hoped that the publication of a collection of his sermons would bring out further dimensions of the gospel’s unfathomable riches. Gunton continued his systematic exposition of the gospel in 2002 with the study *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine.* He followed the creedal outline, first treating the foundations (‘Maker of Heaven and Earth’), then Christology (‘His Only Son, Our Lord’) and finally pneumatology (The Perfecting Cause: ‘And in the Holy Spirit’). Gunton did not think the Christian faith could be systematized without distortion, but it could be arranged in a way in order that something may be understood of how beginning, middle and end belong together. Gunton remarks that every theologian is affected by broader human culture, and so a theologian cannot fail to be affected by science, by ecological concerns, by movements such as feminism and the range of phenomena called postmodernism, and so on. But faith for Gunton did not only have a subjective dimension but also an objective dimension: the content of faith. In this book he gives an exposition of his understanding of this content. In 2002 another study appears: *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes.* Gunton turns towards the question of God’s attributes and discusses the difference the Trinity might make. Gunton is convinced that “our inherited doctrine appears to owe too little to biblical and Trinitarian considerations, too much to a priori philosophical decision about what God may be conceived not to be.” This book was meant to do some ground-breaking, and he hoped to give a more detailed account of God’s attributes in his planned multi-volume *Dogmatics* which, however, did not appear due to his death in 2003. The last book that Gunton prepared was the third set of collected articles and papers *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology.* In the preface Gunton says that “it might well be entitled ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ for it contains an account of the work of the triune God in which a more secure place is sought

---

for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit than has often been the case in theology, especially the theology of the West.”

After Gunton’s death three other publications appeared. A second collection of sermons: *Theologian as Preacher: Further Sermons from Colin Gunton*, in 2007. In the same year *The Barth lectures* saw the light, based on tape recordings of a lecture program about Karl Barth given for many years by Gunton at King’s College, and one year later *Revelation and Reason* also based on tape recordings from Gunton’s lectures at King’s college, London. Also in this third period, it becomes clear that Gunton did not feel obliged to interact with the many different streams of theology that were present in Britain and abroad. Gunton had a persistent focus on developing a fully Trinitarian theology. In order to reach this goal he selected discussion partners who were attempting a similar task.

About Colin Gunton as a person, David Ford writes:

Gunton was a man of profound faith who embodied a real zest for life and a constant sense of cheerfulness. An inspirational and impassioned teacher and preacher, his joy and interest in theology were infectious and deeply appreciated by students, colleagues, and parishioners alike. He was also a devoted family man and a loyal friend, who relaxed in the pursuit of gardening, walking, and choral singing. His legacy lay not only in his accomplished academic work, but in the many who were touched by his enthusiasm and his witness.

John Webster points out: “He edified students and colleagues in the academy and the church by restless intellectual energy, by cheerful partisanship, by his catholic range of interests, above all, by his conviction that the gospel is a

---

57 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, entry: Gunton, Colin Ewart. Available at: www.oxforddnb.com (last accessed: 25th of May 2015). Members of Brentwood United Reformed Church also point to his enthusiasm: “He was an enthusiast for so many of the things that enrich life—music, theatre, his garden, cricket, church social gatherings, children in church, good books, fine hymns (especially Isaac Watts), family holidays—and his enthusiasm was infectious.” Gunton, *The Theologian as Preacher*, x.
grand matter for the mind.”\textsuperscript{58} There was a strong stream of non-conformism in Gunton, a feisty Christian independence.\textsuperscript{59}

Gunton died suddenly, aged 62, on May 6 2003. He was survived by his wife Jennifer and by their two daughters and two sons. Stephen Holmes, writing the foreword to \textit{Father, Son \& Holy Spirit} points to the thoughts of the last section, and the very words of the last clause: “Our eschatological membership of the body and bride of Christ belongs in that period of fulfillment and promise, in sure hope of the resurrection of the dead.”\textsuperscript{60} Holmes suggests that they were very appropriate for Colin “who was deeply entrenched in the gospel, and profoundly faithful to Christ.”\textsuperscript{61} In \textit{The Christian Faith} Gunton had also written about the promise of the resurrection: “The resurrection .... is as such a promise: that the final judgment on a life and a world may be the divine Yes, according to which human successes and failures alike are permitted variously to play their part in the summing up of all things, things in heaven and things on earth, by God in Christ (Eph.1.10).”\textsuperscript{62}

2. \textbf{The method with which Gunton reads the Western context}

This part will present the method and content of Gunton’s reading of the Western context, and the method and content of his Christology. Gunton’s Christology is developed parallel to his analysis of the Western context. This can be seen in the parallel development of his second and third book. In the preface (1982) to \textit{Yesterday \& Today}, Gunton writes that this study in Christology has been “many years in the making.”\textsuperscript{63} In the preface (1984) to his first study of the Western context, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, he states that the process for writing it had started already in 1969 with the preparation

\textsuperscript{60} Gunton, \textit{Father, Son \& Holy Spirit}, 234.
\textsuperscript{61} Gunton, \textit{Father, Son \& Holy Spirit}, xi.
\textsuperscript{62} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 166. A few pages before (160), Gunton observes that there is not only the relative failure of those who die full of years and sometimes of honor, but also the lives of those who die apparently before their time, especially children and young people. Gunton’s own grandson died apparently before his time, see: “Benjamin William Gunton: 1 October 1996- 2 April 1998,” in: Gunton, \textit{Theology through Preaching}, 209-211.
\textsuperscript{63} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, vi.
and teaching of a course in the history of modern philosophy.\textsuperscript{64} Gunton’s Christology is developed parallel to his analysis of the Western context.\textsuperscript{65}

The study of Gunton’s Christology and reading of the Western context will be mostly synchronic not diachronic, because the interest here is less on the development within Gunton’s œuvre, than on his settled convictions. Gunton’s reading of the Western context and his understanding of Christology became settled in period I and II. In period III there is not much development at these points.\textsuperscript{66} That is why the focus will be mostly on the main works published during the first two periods.\textsuperscript{67}

This section starts with the question: With what methodology does Gunton read the Western context? First an analogy of Gunton’s approach to theology will be given (2.1). Then it will be explained that Gunton discerns the Western context by expressing and justifying the gospel (2.2), he discerns the context with a theological reading (2.3), a dialectical reading (2.4), and with an awareness of the impact of idolatry on human perception (2.5).

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION: AN ANALOGY OF GUNTON’S APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

Before the method of Gunton’s reading of the Western context will be explicated, his overall approach to his theology can be understood through the analogy of ‘a conversation at the wall of the city.’ The analogy of a conversation at, or behind, the wall of the city is borrowed from Walter Brueggemann.\textsuperscript{68} Brueggemann reflects on the story in 2 Kings 18-19 where there is a dramatic encounter between the Assyrians and Judah in 701 B.C.E. The Assyrian negotiator stands at the city wall and shouts the terms of surrender. In part he makes an offer, but mostly he taunts, arguing that Judah has no real alternative to surrender. A conversation takes place at the city wall.

\textsuperscript{64} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, viii.
\textsuperscript{65} Note also the fact that Gunton’s renewed focus on Christology, in \textit{Christ and Creation} (1992), was directly followed by a renewed study on the Western context, in \textit{The One, the Three and the Many} (1993).
\textsuperscript{66} The chapters on Christology in \textit{Father, Son & Holy Spirit} (chapters 8-10) focus on the relationship between creation and redemption, and the relationship between the Spirit and the Son, both providing further explorations of themes already present in \textit{Christ and Creation}.
\textsuperscript{67} An exception being \textit{The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Dogma}.
\textsuperscript{68} Walter Brueggemann, “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic: 2 Kings 18-19,” in: Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 41-69. Gunton was not the type of rationalist who believed that only precise concepts are useful in the pursuit of knowledge, as his emphasis on ‘metaphors’ in \textit{The Actuality of Atonement} makes clear, so it will not dishonor him if an analogy is used to capture a central element of his theology.
wall between this representative of the Empire and the agents of king Hezekiah. But there is also a conversation behind the wall. There a different language is spoken.⁶⁹ There the power of Yahweh is taken seriously, and prayers to Him are made.⁷⁰ According to Brueggemann, the two types of conversation are important for Christians as well.

Christians should be nurtured to be bilingual, to know how to speak the language on the wall in the presence of the imperial negotiators, but also how to speak the language behind the wall in the community of faith, where a different set of assumptions, a different perception of the world, a different epistemology are at work.⁷¹

Both conversations are necessary. According to Brueggemann, the liberal temptation is to think that the conversation at the wall is the only conversation and that all needs for conversation can be met there. However, by ignoring the conversation behind the wall, the dominant voice at the wall becomes absolute, ideological and idolatrous. The reverse can also be the case. The conservative temptation is to imagine that the conversation behind the wall is the only conversation and to conclude that anyone who wants conversation must join this one.⁷² The conservatives overlook the fact that their tradition needs critique as well. Without it, it becomes also absolute, ideological and idolatrous. Brueggemann writes: “The critique [of the conversation behind the wall] comes from the awareness of the others, who must be taken seriously on their own terms. But the terms of the critique are found within the tradition itself.”⁷³

The analogy of Brueggemann is helpful in order to characterize Gunton’s theology. Gunton’s theology is first and foremost a ‘conversation at the city wall.’ It is a conversation with Western culture in one of its major languages (philosophy).⁷⁴ In having this conversation at the wall, Gunton is very aware of the temptation to let the imperial voice become absolute. He is constantly vigilant in order not to surrender to the assumptions of modern Western culture and so drown out the voice of the gospel.

---

⁶⁹ Brueggemann means ‘language’ here not literal, because the Imperial negotiators, in fact, spoke Hebrew (2 Kings 18:26). The contrast is between the language of faith or the language of the Empire.


⁷¹ Brueggemann, “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic,” 44.


⁷³ Brueggemann, “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic,” 60.

⁷⁴ Philosophy is not the language of the common people, neither Christian nor secular. Gunton conceives the conversation with culture as a conversation between the elites, the people of the highest social class meeting one another for the exchange of thought.
The question to contemporary Christianity, particularly in the West, is whether it has the vigor and confidence so to indwell the reality of him who was and is the temporal actuality of the eternal divine love that it may reforge its language for the conversation with an ailing, if not decadent, culture. This book is offered as a contribution to the process.\(^{75}\)

But for Gunton the conversation at the city wall is more than offering resistance. As stated in section one, it was Gunton’s desire that he could contribute to the healing of modern culture through this conversation. Moreover, the conversation at the city wall is not only for the benefit of modern culture but also for that of the Christian tradition, which needs critique in order not to become absolute and idolatrous. Gunton shares the conviction of Brueggemann that Christianity can be renewed by listening to the voices of those outside the tradition.

Gunter is “a theologian who writes from and for a culture.”\(^{76}\) But what is Gunton’s relation with the conversation ‘behind the wall’? Gunton is very aware that the intellectual conversation ‘at the city wall’ is rooted in the conversation ‘behind the city wall’ in the community of confession and worship. Historical development in Christology “took place against a background of belief, grounded in worship, in the risen and continuing reality of Jesus Christ (…) Language about Christ becomes possible for those who are related to him by virtue of their being placed in a community of confession and worship.”\(^{77}\) Gunton’s involvement in the leadership of his local church and his book with published sermons testify to this central conviction. The role of the exegesis of Scripture is not directly obvious from reading his books. Certainly there are, at decisive points, interactions with New Testament scholars, but N.T. Wright points out the relative lack of sustained exegetical interaction in his works.\(^{78}\) However, there was another reality which was less visible, and ‘behind the wall,’ so to speak. Stephen Holmes points to this in his preface to the second collection of sermons of Gunton:

\(^{75}\) Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 202-203.

\(^{76}\) Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 2.

\(^{77}\) Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 72, 147.

\(^{78}\) “The revival of Trinitarian theology that has occurred since the 1970s (one thinks of theologians as diverse as Jürgen Moltmann, Colin Gunton, and Rowan Williams) has happened without much detailed explicit engagement with or exegesis of the Bible (…)” N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 11-12. David Höhne also states: “Throughout our investigation of Gunton’s thought the paucity of exegetical material was a common feature (…) Gunton’s engagement with the particularities of even the Gospel narratives was found to be cursory.” David A Höhne, *Spirit and Sonship: Colin Gunton’s Theology of Particularity and the Holy Spirit* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), 169.
Those of us who worked with him know how often a conversation in a seminar or over coffee would begin with Colin reflecting on the text of Scripture set by the lectionary, or on a conversation in last night’s Bible study (...) Colin said to me in connection with that service, ‘you should always have three readings from Scripture—Old Testament, New Testament and Gospel—and a psalm at the beginning. After all, it is only when the Bible is being read that you can be sure God is speaking to the people!’

So for Gunton both the conversation ‘behind the city wall’ and ‘at the city wall’ are important. But his primary focus was not to sustain the conversation of faith by commenting on Scripture through sustained meditation (as monastic theologians would do), but by adding the dimension of reason to the word of God (as was the passion of scholastic theologians). Gunton tried to show the reasonableness of that which is believed with faith. Theology is “a quest for rational expression and justification of something already believed on other grounds.”

2.2 DISCERN THE CONTEXT BY EXPRESSING AND JUSTIFYING THE GOSPEL

Unlike Berkhof, Gunton does not start with discerning the questions or the Lebensgefühl of the context. Gunton certainly listens intensively to the (intellectual) voices of the Western context, but he is less inclined to see it as the responsibility of the church (and the theologian) to respond to all those voices. Rather, the church is responsible to pass on the gospel, and the theologian is called to rationally express and justify the belief in this gospel. While performing this task, all kinds of objections will be voiced, and with those voices a conversation will follow. But the agenda for theology is not set by the questions or the sense of life of people within the context, but by expressing and justifying that what the church has received in faith, the gospel.

79 Stephen R. Holmes, “Introduction: The Theologian as Preacher, the Preacher as Theologian,” in: Colin E. Gunton, The Theologian as Preacher: Further Sermons from Colin Gunton (London: T&T Clark, 2007), xii. It seems that the interaction with Scripture becomes more prominent in Gunton’s later works. His last published book Father, Son & Holy Spirit is much more focused on interaction with Scripture than his earlier books.

80 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 45. Also: “an intellectual quest of those who seek understanding of the faith in the present Christ which has been received in worship, biblical exploration, experience or some other means.” (83) Of course, this conversation ‘on the wall’ would ultimately also serve the conversation ‘behind the wall.’ As Holmes pointed out: “Theology, he [Gunton] believed passionately, was the church’s science—pointless and meaningless if not directed to the maintenance, edification and extension of the body of Christ.” Holmes, “Introduction: The Theologian as Preacher, the Preacher as Theologian,” in: Gunton, The Theologian as Preacher, xi.
This approach to theology uses reason, but does not start with reason. According to Gunton, there are in the modern period two new ways of doing theology. The first takes its starting point in ‘pure reason,’ an attempt to derive by the use of reason a concept of God. Charles Hartshorne, who developed a neo-classical doctrine of God, followed this route. “Much modern liberal theology is in this tradition, and it is as a consciously liberal theologian that Schubert Ogden adopts Charles Hartshorne as the philosopher for modern theology.”

The second new way is taken by Karl Barth who concluded that the point of departure for theology could not be in reason. Barth develops a concept of God on basis of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The difference between these two ways could also be made clear by using a distinction of Jürgen Moltmann between proofs from the ‘name’ and the ‘concept’ of God. “It is the difference between the concept of a God who reveals his ‘name’ on particular, concrete, occasions, and the God who is believed to be inferable from man’s universal (metaphysical and linguistic) experience.”

Barth moves from the particular to the general in his theologizing, while Hartshorne moves from a completely abstract, a-historical metaphysic to the saving significance of a historical figure.

It is in the process of developing a concept of God, a process of using intelligent reason based on revelation, that Barth’s reasons for rejecting both the classical- and the neo-classical concept of God emerge.

In terms of the discussion with neoclassical theology, Barth’s principle can also be understood as an attack on a priori theological method. It is impossible to decide in advance of revelation what God can and cannot be, for example, that it is appropriate to speak of ‘being’ but not of ‘becoming’ in God, on the ground, say, that ‘becoming’ entails change and therefore imperfection. This is equally an attack on classical and neoclassical metaphysics (...). Both want to find God behind his revelation, to say that he cannot really be what he chooses to be. They cannot therefore take God’s becoming temporal with full seriousness.

According to Gunton, theology should follow Barth in taking revelation, the gospel about Jesus Christ, as the point of departure for its method. In light of

---

81 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 6.
82 “Rational inquiry [of the Bible] will lead us inexorably from what happens in Jesus Christ to the description of God in his triune reality.” Gunton, Becoming and Being, 128.
83 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 105-106.
84 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 215-218.
85 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 132.
86 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 6-7. Therefore what Robert Jenson suggests is imprecise, namely that Gunton made the triunity of God the founding beginning of his reflections. Jenson, ”A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” 10. In Christ and Creation Gunton gives
later discussions (part III, section 1) it is important to point out that when Gunton speaks here about the gospel, he in fact points to a different axiom at the root of one’s thinking. The axiom in modern culture is that divinity and humanity are contradictory predicates, but the New Testament consistently places Jesus on both the human and the divine level of reality. So it is the incarnation which is the starting point for Gunton’s theology, “the belief that certain events, described, remembered, and promised in the biblical books [about Jesus], are correctly attributable to the agency of God and are such as to illumine consistently both human life and the world in which they happen.”

Jesus is inseparably bound up with God’s saving activity, suggesting that the agent of salvation is here in person.

2.3 DISCERN WITH A THEOLOGICAL READING

This starting point of theology does not directly illuminate human life and the world. It is theology developed on basis of this starting point that has this capacity. Gunton wants to develop “a theological account of modernity.” For Gunton this means that he reads modernity especially in light of the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation. These can illuminate human life and the world. This is very clear in his book The One, the Three and The Many. The first four chapters are his reading of the Western context. Gunton says: “I have in

a careful account of the relation between Christology and the Trinity with these words: “Pannenberg has famously said, in the argument to which I have already often referred, that the trouble with traditional Christologies is that they make the mistake of presupposing the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, he holds, any doctrine of the Trinity must be the outcome of Christological thought. In a sense, the latter is true. A doctrine of the Trinity of the kind outlined above can only be the result of thought about the economy of salvation through Christ and the Spirit. That is the necessary order of knowing: from God’s relatedness to the world, made known in Christ, to a doctrine of his eternal being in relation. But the order of being must take a different orientation. If there is to be talk of the incarnation, it must presuppose the existence of a triune God, for it holds that the one through whom the world was made has become part of that world in order to redeem it from its bondage to decay. In that respect, the two doctrines, of God and of Christ, offer each other mutual support, or, rather, are dependent upon one another.” (75-76). During period I and II Gunton mainly followed the first route, starting with Christology. Only from period III onwards (maybe starting a little earlier with the publication of The Promise of Trinitarian Theology), Gunton seems to have made the triunity his founding beginnings. See also the account of this shift in Holmes, “Towards the Analogia Personae et Relationis,” 32-48, which will be discussed in section: 6.3.

87 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 68, 71.
88 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 65, 119.
89 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 219. Italic in original.
90 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 74. Though Gunton is imprecise by using the word ‘gospel’ for the incarnation (see part III, section 1), his use of words will be followed in this chapter.
91 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 4.
each of the first four chapters taken a sounding in different aspects of the ideology and practice of modernity."\textsuperscript{92} But where did these soundings come from? "The soundings were suggested by the concepts which will provide the framework for the second and constructive phase of the project, so that the critical part of the book has been shaped in advance by the later constructive development."\textsuperscript{93} In this second part of the book, Gunton rethinks the theology of creation in light of his Trinitarian understanding of God.\textsuperscript{94} According to Gunton the root of the crisis of the modern Western context (its fragmentation and decline into subjectivism and relativism) can be illuminated when understood from a theological perspective: the story of a wrongly conceived deity (the classical concept of God) and God’s displacement in modern times, \textit{and} a deficit theology of creation, specifically a theology of creation that was too much influenced by Plato and too little by a Trinitarian understanding of creation.\textsuperscript{95}

The role of the context for Gunton is not one in which he searches for truth in general. He only looks to the truthfulness of the criticisms that are voiced in response to the church’s theological presentation of the Christian claims. However, those truths are not directly incorporated, but are used as encouragement to re-develop a theology on basis of the gospel (using Bible and tradition in this process), which can better justify the claims of the gospel in light of the modern critique. The intellectual, moral and aesthetic concerns of our world should be understood carefully and be brought in dialogue, not directly with the revelation of the gospel, but with the articulated theological implications of revelation. "There can thus take shape a claim for the truth and distinctiveness of Christianity which is also truly open to conversation with other cultures and religions."\textsuperscript{96}

According to Gunton, our understanding of the doctrine of God (who God is) and the doctrine of creation (what created reality is) should be open for revision. Though the gospel, Jesus Christ Himself, should not be questioned because Jesus is God’s revelation which is the basis of theology, theological reasoning which is part of culture can be wrong-headed too, as is shown in the classical concept of God and the Western understanding of creation.

\textsuperscript{92} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 4.
\textsuperscript{93} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 4.
\textsuperscript{94} The second part of this book develops a theology of meaning and truth, a theology of relatedness (based on insights from Christology), a theology of the particular (based on insights from pneumatology), and a theology of the one and the many (based on insights from the triune communion).
\textsuperscript{95} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 2.
\textsuperscript{96} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 212 (footnote one).
Based on the gospel of Jesus Christ, something can be said about who God is. The phrase ‘who God is’ does not mean that the being of God is more important than the action of God, because (following Barth) Gunton stresses that “God is what He does, and does what he is.”97 We know God from and in his acts. We know who God is from what he does.98 It is important to make this link from the revelation of God’s action to who He is: “… we need to know that we can rely on what God reveals: that what he seems to be, that he truly is. Otherwise, how could we rely on his always being loving, holy, merciful, powerful and the rest?”99 This does not mean that it is possible to give a logical definition of God’s being. We only can indicate some of the characteristics of God, knowing that the mystery of the person always eludes final definition.100 But suggesting that God’s essence is unknowable, only the ‘persons,’ introduces a disastrous breach. Can we then truly rely on what God reveals to us in his action? Negative theology states that God’s essence is unknowable, but on basis of what do they assume to know who and what God cannot be and do?101 The result of stressing unknowability will be that we start to project a deity based on our desire. This is dangerous projection, even if it involves worthy things like envisioning a moderately feminist deity in favor of ecological responsibility. “Salvation depends on the unflinching affirmation that the God who meets us in the Son and the Spirit is the only God there is.”102 “If Jesus Christ is God, then God is really given in him, and does not have to be sought behind or apart from him.”103 Because the events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection reveal God, it is impossible to distinguish between what God does and what he is.

In this way we also can speak about God as being Triune, because from His acts in Jesus Christ he reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, a revelation which we can trust to give us knowledge of the being of God. Again, this does not mean that we can give a full rational account of God, or that we have an inside view of the being of God.104 The Bible (the witness to the revelation of the Word) does not communicate a full doctrine of the Trinity, but the roots of this doctrine are certainly in the Bible.105 A Trinitarian

97 Gunton, Act and Being, 77.
98 Gunton, Act and Being, 97.
99 Gunton, Act and Being, 94.
100 Gunton, Act and Being, 95.
101 Gunton, Act and Being, 93.
102 Gunton, Act and Being, 93.
103 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 129.
104 Gunton, Act and Being, 111.
105 Gunton refers here to Barth’s conviction that there is a threefold meaning to the statement that God reveals himself as Lord in the event of Jesus Christ. “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself.” Gunton, Becoming and Being, 135, 128.
understanding of God develops further the Scriptural roots: “(... ) it is not claimed that the Trinity can be ‘read off’ the Scriptures. Rather, a possibility is being suggested (... ).”

This Triune God is the Creator. In a sense, therefore, the doctrine of creation can be dealt with as part of the doctrine of God. In his book The Christian Faith Gunton places the doctrine of creation, providence, and ‘man and woman’ in part one of the book that deals with the foundations under the heading “Maker of Heaven and Earth.” Also Gunton’s book that deals particularly with the doctrine of creation appeared under the title The Triune Creator. But irrespective of where it is dealt with, according to Gunton the doctrine of creation should also be open for revision. Gunton draws especially on Irenaeus in order to develop a doctrine of creation that is able to respond to the modern paradoxes. There are different emphases in Gunton’s treatment of the doctrine of creation. For example, that God creates via his two hands, the Son and the Spirit. This allows Gunton to give place to both the relative independence of creation and God’s involvement within it. Moreover, creation is not the outcome of arbitrary will but of love. Creation has also an eschatological directedness. Gunton presents creation as a project. An in-depth study of Gunton’s doctrine is not necessary at this point and can be found elsewhere.

2.4 DISCERN WITH A DIALECTICAL READING

Gunton understands the modern period as a reaction against the preceding period of Christendom. He sees the history of thought as a process of affirmation and negation. “The history of thought shows how one emphasis in philosophy tends by a kind of reflex attempt at correction to give rise to trends that stress what is lacking in previous enterprises.” It is a complex process in

---

106 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 140.
107 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 138.
109 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 121.
111 For a more thorough treatment of the doctrine of creation, see: Hans Schaeffer, Createdness and Ethics: The Doctrine of Creation and Theological Ethics in the Theology of Colin E. Gunton and Oswald Bayer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2006); William B. Whitney, Problem and Promise in Colin E. Gunton’s Doctrine of Creation (Leiden: Brill, 2013). For the major ideas of Irenaeus upon which Gunton drew, see page 17-23 in Problem and Promise.
112 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 113.
which only some parts of a thesis are negated while others continue as often unrecognized assumptions.\textsuperscript{113}

As a historical phenomenon, modernity can be understood as the era which arises out of Christendom by making against its predecessor a charge of hypocrisy: that its freedom is a cloak for tyranny, its creed a pretext for the suppression of the authentic human quest for truth (…) if my analysis is right, modernity is parasitic upon the preceding Christendom in the sense that it takes its major orientation from its rejection of some of the latter’s primary doctrines, and in particular its ontology of the transcendent basis of things.\textsuperscript{114}

Gunton uses here a dialectical reading of history. This way of looking to the emergence of modernity, allows Gunton to respond subtly to the crisis of Christianity and Christian theology in the West. That crisis was fueled by decline of belief in God and secularization. However, because of his dialectical reading, Gunton neither defends the theology of Christendom over against the thinkers of modernity, nor takes the side of Enlightenment thinkers over against the theologians of the past. He discerns a much more complex dialectical pattern. Already the first section of his first book makes this very clear.

The decline of belief in God in the Western world has been documented and analyzed in many ways. The cultural aspect of the decline, so vigorously welcomed and preached by Nietzsche as the death of God, has received the bulk of the attention, and is often the presupposition of modern Christian apologetic. Given that man is irreversibly secularized, runs the argument, how best may elements of the Christian gospel still be made real to him, so that he may at least find them interesting enough to take up some kind of attitude to them? This study is written in the belief that the situation is by no means as simple as it is sometimes made to appear, and that much light can be thrown by looking at it from a different angle. It is a theological as well as a cultural development…\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{113} The echo from Hegel should not lead to the conclusion that Gunton is a follower of Hegel. Already in his first study, he choose the line of Barth instead of the line of Hegel. Gunton, \textit{Becoming and Being}, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{114} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 123. This is sometimes called the ‘gravedigger hypothesis,’ in which it is maintained that in contributing so substantially to the rise of modern culture, Christianity has essentially created its own secular gravediggers. Craig M. Gay, \textit{The Way of the Modern World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 16-17, 256-261.
\textsuperscript{115} Gunton, \textit{Becoming and Being}, 1.
According to Gunton, secularization is in fact a displacement and rejection of the God of Christendom. But what if this rejection was (partly) justified? What if the concept of the God of Christendom was indeed defective? In that case secularization is not irreversible, Gunton surmises. God does not have to be rejected, because we can understand God differently. This is Gunton’s theological program: not to re-assert the theological answers of Christendom, but to revise them by going back to the gospel of Jesus Christ, taking into account the justified criticisms of the Enlightenment thinkers.

2.5 DISCERN WITH AN AWARENESS OF THE IMPACT OF IDOLATRY ON HUMAN PERCEPTION

Especially in *The One, the Three and the Many*, Gunton often uses the word ‘paradox’ or ‘contradiction.’ For example, “(...) paradox is very much the mark of the world we are in, for the modernity with which we are concerned is the product and the realm of paradox.”116 Already in his earlier study, *Enlightenment & Alienation*, Gunton pointed to this paradox.117 What does Gunton mean with paradox?

On the one hand there are many themes in modernity that have a positive connection with the Christian past. Gunton points out that the Enlightenment’s emphasis on human justice and freedom has its roots in the Bible. Also the development of modern science is related to the Christian doctrine of creation, as historians of science have pointed out. Modern democratic institutions owe also something to Christian influence.118

On the other hand, the way in which certain themes have been pursued has led to new forms of slavery. So, though the reaction of Enlightenment thinkers was partly justified (the classical concept of God and its ontology were defective) the results were not as promising as hoped. The Enlightenment has brought alienation: “To put it simply, I want to argue that excess of light can blind.”119

In light of Gunton’s frequent use of words like ‘paradox’, ‘alienation’, and ‘new forms of slavery' one also could say that Gunton reads the Western context with an awareness of idolatry, though he rarely uses the word, presumably because Gunton finds the word more appropriate in the conversation ‘behind

---

116 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 56. Or: “If, in the following chapters, the words paradox and contradiction are used from time to time, the reason is to be found in the odd character of the modern age.” (3-4)
the wall’ than ‘on the wall.’ But the dynamic of idolatry is pointed out by him in these words:

To give transcendental status to that which is simply part of the created order is to misplace the object of worship, and so misconstrue the kind of being that it is (...) it is possible to understand the ills of modernity as arising from a displacement of God and the replacing of the creator by the creature, with the only superficially paradoxical result that a movement aiming to give central importance to life in time and space has as a matter of fact cramped and distorted that which it claims to preserve.120

Gunton is convinced that the morally disintegrative paradoxes of the modern context have as their source the displacement of God,121 and he therefore adds the title “The Displacement of God” to the chapters which analyze modern culture.122

Idolatry in Scripture is taking something in the created order and treating it as God (worshiping it), and this always leads to new forms of slavery.123 Gunton shows that modernity takes certain things in the created order absolute. He points to ‘freedom,’ ‘individuality,’ ‘rationality,’ and ‘time.’ All these are good things, but because they are taken absolute, they lead to new forms of slavery.

Though Gunton describes intellectually the results of wrong conceptions of God, his language can be remarkable religious. Gunton says for example: “God is (...) displaced into impersonal forces....”124 Or: “(...) the chief point to be made here is that the displacement of God does not give and has not given freedom and dignity to the many, but has subjected us to new and often unrecognized forms of slavery.”125 “Where there is a multiplicity of gods there results not a genuine human plurality, but fragmentation.”126 Notice also this sentence: “When God is no longer the one who holds things together, demons rush in to fill his place. An impersonal one replaces the despised one of traditional theism, and the slavery is greater than before. (...)The transcendent and apparently oppressive single deity is swept away only to be

---

120 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 156, 210. On page 70 Gunton uses the word idolatry in relation to the Western context: "Marx had the eye of an Old Testament prophet for idolatry, however disastrous may have been his prescription for its cure. He saw that one of the roots of modern alienation is the failure of relation to the material world that is symbolized by money-fetishism."
121 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 123.
122 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, xi.
123 E.g. Romans 1:23,25.
124 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 74.
125 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 29.
126 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 123.
replaced by the demonic alternatives we have met.”\textsuperscript{127} Gunton hints here at Jesus’ teaching in Luke 11:24-26, and indicates that though the Enlightenment thinkers had a point when they rejected traditional theism, their alternative is many times worse.

But what does it mean when Gunton says: “When God is no longer the one who holds things together, demons rush in to fill his place?” Certainly, Gunton does not mean that God would no longer uphold creation and provide for its well-being (providence). Nor does he mean that God is no longer relating to His creation through his two hands: the Son and the Spirit. Gunton points rather to the realm of human perception. If God is displaced from the human perception, other forces will rush in to fill this place. In \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation} Gunton makes use of insights of Coleridge to point to the importance of the imagination in human perception. In an age which tended to distinguish sharply between sense and reason, the imagination, which in many ways seems to mediate between the two, becomes an embarrassment: it becomes a passive fancy. But there is a use of imagination which enables us to come into contact with what is really there. Imagination, properly used, helps us to mediate between passive sense and active intellect, and is at once active and passive. It is the living power and prime agent of all human perception.\textsuperscript{128} Because human perception is used both for our knowledge of God and our knowledge of the world, a mutual illumination can take place between these two forms of knowledge, which have a correspondence of structure.\textsuperscript{129} But if God is displaced from the human perception and therefore does not inform our imagination, other images will take the place of God (idolatry), affecting our knowledge of the world and ourselves and releasing forces that bring alienation.

Gunton takes these insights into the role of imagination further in \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}. There he states: “the scientist as much as the artist is required to use the imagination as much as sense and reason in advancing the discipline. We are not disembodied intellects, but require the harmony of sense and reason which only imagination can supply.”\textsuperscript{130} Gunton therefore proposes that ‘metaphor’ is not of secondary value (here he goes beyond

\textsuperscript{127} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 36, 38. Also: “The room swept bare and garnished has been invaded by the deities of immanence, so that for every advance achieved in the modern world there appears to be a destructive and demonic counterpart.” (41)

\textsuperscript{128} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 30-33. Gunton stresses with Coleridge that the overreliance on ‘sight’ as a model of what is meant by perception has imposed an alienated understanding. ‘Imagination’ should therefore not be construed as of necessity ‘visual imagination.’ Gunton explores with the help of insights of Michael Polanyi what imagination would look like if it would rely on ‘touch’ as a model for perception (34-44).

\textsuperscript{129} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 53.

\textsuperscript{130} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 31-32.
Coleridge, but is central to getting to know reality. “The world can be known only indirectly, and therefore metaphor, being indirect, is the most appropriate form that a duly humble and listening language should take. In all this, there is a combination of openness and mystery, speech and silence, which makes the clarity and distinctness aimed at by the rationalist tradition positively hostile to the truth.”

Gunton continues his quest for a different human perception in *The One, the Three and the Many*. His quest takes there the form of looking for open transcendentals. An open transcendental is “a notion, in some way basic to the human thinking process, which empowers a continuing and in principle unfinished exploration of the universal marks of being.” Gunton believes that the way people think and perceive, should be influenced by our belief in the Triune God. When we think and perceive with the help of (often unconscious) transcendentals, the belief in a Triune God could shape these transcendentals, and so explore the world with a different conceptuality. There can be even an exploration of ‘being’ in general, not because ‘being’ would have priority over God, but because God as creator has left His mark on His creation.

The underlying convictions with which Gunton works are that God, as Creator, has made this world in such a way that it bears the mark of its maker. Only if the realm of human perception and imagination is shaped by knowledge of the true Triune God, will the world be perceived correctly and then thinking can contribute to the flourishing of life. However, if this realm of human perception is shaped by a wrong concept of God (as in classical theism) or by the displacement of God (as in the period after the Enlightenment) the world cannot truly be seen as it is, and alienation will be the result. In *Enlightenment & Alienation* Gunton summarizes his methodology in this way:

The argument, then, is an attempt to reverse the traditional relation of so-called ‘natural’ and ‘revealed’ theology. It attempts to see nature—an aspect of our relation with the created world—in the light of an understanding of God in such a way that there is mutual illumination, from God to the world and, in direct correspondence, from the world to God. It is, accordingly, possible to make a claim for the rationality of Christian belief, in that with its help we are enabled to see something of the rationality at once of our world and of the God in whom Christians believe. This mutual illumination is made

---

133 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 142.
134 Gunton will point to three open transcendentals: ‘perichoresis,’ ‘substantiality,’ and ‘relationality.’ See further section 2.7.
135 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 136-137.
136 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 136.
possible by a correspondence of structure between our knowledge of the world and of God.\textsuperscript{137}

Gunton discerns the Western context with an awareness of the impact that right worship and idolatry have on human perception.

It seems that Gunton came to an awareness of the role of idolatry by discovering the anti-theological drive at work in the Enlightenment thinkers. Kant especially, despite his own continuing belief in God, reveals this anti-theological direction in his thought. Kant transfers the capacity of the creation of universal law from God to the human.

In order to assure the autonomy of the human moral agent, Kant has denied the function traditionally ascribed to God. Lawmaking is now the work of the rational will, not of a being outside ourself [sic.]. We instruct ourselves rather than receive instructions. (…) In a sense, Kant has made reason into God. (…) [Kant writes:] ‘God is not a being outside me, but merely a thought in me. God is the morally practical reason legislating for itself. Therefore there is only one God in me, about me, above me.’\textsuperscript{138}

Gunton does not only point to the fact that certain functions of God, like lawmaking, are transferred to human beings. The real irony of the development is that many other characteristics of God were also being transferred to man. While the Enlightenment thinkers rejected the classical concept of God (with God being omniscient and omnipotent), these God-like characteristics are now transferred to human beings. That is why Gunton says: God is not so much replaced but displaced.\textsuperscript{139} Kant transfers omniscience from God to man, resulting in the modern desire for objective and certain

\textsuperscript{137} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 52-53. Gunton adds: “The whole of this first part of the book is an argument from faith to understanding, from a belief in a God who has made himself known as triune—as the one who identifies himself to us in Jesus—to the outline of a possible way of interpreting our relation to the reality we perceive day by day. (…) The argument of this (…) section accepts that among all the possibilities for our understanding of perception, the overtly theological is but one. But in its favour is a claim that it ‘saves the phenomena’ better than alternative accounts. Whether it is the true account cannot be solved on grounds internal to the discussion of perception. This, too, requires some form of antecedent faith (…)” (52). The importance of the doctrine of creation is not explicitly mentioned at this stage (1982), because Gunton's awareness of the importance of this doctrine only surfaced around 1990. See the preface to \textit{Christ and Creation} where Gunton observes that his lack of pneumatology and lack of the doctrine of creation in his previous Christological study \textit{Yesterday and Today} are two sides of the same coin. Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 11.

\textsuperscript{138} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 61-62.

\textsuperscript{139} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 123.
knowledge, a God’s-eye view of reality. Kant also transfers omnipotence from God to man, resulting in the modern desire to be the master and judge who compels the world to answer its questions.\textsuperscript{140} The result is that the rational will becomes god.\textsuperscript{141} Though Gunton writes in his usual irenic style, he does not hesitate to use strong words:

This in its turn points us to the theological, or rather anti-theological, direction of Enlightenment thinking. It is not only individualistic, but aims to see the individual after the image of God: or rather of the powerful, lonely, solitary God of so much Western theological thinking. (...) [We meet here] the transformation of the individual into God; or rather into a demon. This demonic individualism is a far cry from what (...) is the essence of human society, whether that be in science or politics.\textsuperscript{142}

Gunton’s pursuit of a Trinitarian theology (both in the doctrine of God and in the doctrine of creation) is rooted in these earlier insights: only thinking rooted in the worship of the true Triune God is able to contribute to the healing of modern culture.

3. The content of Gunton’s reading of the Western context

The content of Gunton’s reading of the Western context will now be presented. After presenting the deep structure of Gunton’s theology (3.1), four problematic and paradoxical features of the modern Western context will be presented: 'rationality' (3.2), 'time' (3.3), 'freedom' (3.4) and 'human community' (3.5). The understanding and practice of these features show the marks of alienation and distortion, leading to slavery. Moreover, it is the pervasive non-relational ontology affecting all those paradoxical features and leading to a deep fragmentation of the Western context (3.6).

3.1 THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF GUNTON’S THEOLOGY AND THE IMMANENCE OF MODERNITY

The thesis in this study is that there are three weighty themes at the foundation of Gunton’s theology: God-Human perception-World.

\textsuperscript{140} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 151-152.
\textsuperscript{141} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 61-62.
\textsuperscript{142} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 84.
In Gunton’s mature theology this becomes: Doctrine of the Trinity-theory of Human perception-Trinitarian doctrine of creation. However, the advantage of putting it more generally (e.g. doctrine of God instead of doctrine of Trinity), is that it also throws light on how Gunton analyzes both the Medieval and modern understanding of God and the world, in which the Trinity did not play a big role.

The importance of the doctrine of human perception (or: human interpretation, epistemology) is often overlooked in analyses of Gunton’s theology. According to Gunton the framework provided by the doctrine of human perception is often unconscious. Yet it powerfully affects both the understanding of the world and of God. Philosophers in the Western tradition often started with the fact of error and illusion. This was tied up with a view the way things are (ontology): that this material world was

---

143 “What happens when we perceive, or think that we perceive, the sights and sounds, the textures, tastes and smells, of the world in which we live? On the answer to that question depend the answers to all kinds of other questions, as philosophers have seen in making the theory of perception a central part of their interests.” Gunton, *Enlightenment & Alienation*, 11. For Gunton ‘human perception’ is not only about sense experience, while rationality would be about ‘thinking.’ Human perception, for Gunton, is not a dualistic separation of the active mind and the passive sense, but a combination of both (see further below).

impermanent and changing and therefore the senses could not be trusted. Only the intelligible world was permanent and therefore thought could be trusted.\footnote{145}

The role of human perception in Gunton can be elucidated by comparing it with Kant. For Kant human perception is active and the human structures of the mind determine what one sees in the world or in God. For Gunton this is only partially the case. Yes, concepts are in part the product of the mind as it attempts to come to terms with the world. But according to Gunton the mind shapes concepts in such a way that these concepts correspond to the way the world is apart from our conceiving.\footnote{146} Gunton takes a position between naïve realism and the idealism of Kant, between empiricism and rationalism, claiming that the human perception is both active and passive, but has real epistemic access to the world.

This theory of human perception influences Gunton’s theology. He makes a claim for the rationality of Christian belief:

\[...\] there should be no absolute distinction between revelation and reason (...) what can be learned from revelation (...) can be shown to correspond to the structures of universal human rationality. By this is meant that, because the Trinitarian concepts reflect the being of God, we should be prepared to find them echoed in some way in human thought and in structures of the created world. Barth is right in arguing that by reason of human finitude and sin there is need for revelation if God is to be known as he truly is. He is also right, I believe, in arguing that such knowledge cannot be merely a human achievement, but rather must, as a human achievement, also be the gift of the Holy Spirit. But I believe that we can go further and hold that links can and may be drawn between the articulated theological implications of revelation and all other intellectual, moral and aesthetic concerns. Revelation speaks to and constitutes human reason, but in such a way as to liberate the energies that are inherent in created rationality.\footnote{147}
Gunton draws here a link between the structures of the created world, human rationality (human perception) and the revelation of the being of God.\textsuperscript{148} The understanding of God and the world are done by the same mind, and therefore what we discover about the world should influence our understanding of God, and what we discover about God (through revelation) should shape our understanding of the created world.

Emphasizing the mediating function of the human perception does not have to conflict with stressing the mediating function of the Son and the Spirit in Gunton’s theology. Precisely by understanding that God is involved within the human and non-human world through the Son and the Spirit, the human perception can be formed in such a way that humans are able to perceive both God and the world more truly as they are.\textsuperscript{149} But if one conceives of God (and His mediation) in a wrong way, the human perception will then result in a diminished vision of the world.

The inner coherence of Gunton’s thought can be noticed when one follows these three central themes from the Medieval period, to the modern period, to Gunton’s proposed revision:

\textsuperscript{148} This was already a theme in \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation} in a passage which has already been quoted partially: ”The argument, then, is an attempt to reverse the traditional relation of so-called ‘natural’ and ‘revealed’ theology. It attempts to see nature—an aspect of our relation with the created world—in the light of an understanding of God in such a way that there is mutual illumination, from God to the world and, in direct correspondence, from the world to God. It is, accordingly, possible to make a claim for the rationality of Christian belief, in that with its help we are enabled to see something of the rationality at once of our world and of the God in whom Christians believe. This mutual illumination is made possible by a correspondence of structure between our knowledge of the world and of God.” (52-53; emphasis GJR). Notice that when Gunton makes a claim for the rationality of Christian belief, it is not about a pure conceptual rationality, but one that includes the imagination in its perception of reality. In Gunton’s pursuit of open transcendentals, he is on a rational quest, pursuing innate ideas that indicate how the human mind interacts with reality. Gunton believed God made the world in such a way that the exercise of reason can expect its own due reward in the achievement of a measure of understanding. Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 143, 146.

\textsuperscript{149} The second half of \textit{The One, the Three and the Many} shows how human perception and human thinking is transformed by taking the mediation of Son and Spirit seriously enough to let them shape Trinitarian transcendentals.
The first period that will be considered is the Medieval concept of God and creation. Already in his first major publication, Gunton argued that the modern Western context should be understood as a rejection of the classical concept of God (classical theism). This problematic conception of God was formulated in the Middle Ages, classically in the “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas.\(^\text{150}\) Both scientific developments and philosophical developments (e.g. Hume and Kant) undermined the credibility of this classical concept of God.\(^\text{151}\) What, according to Gunton, was wrong with the classical concept of God?

---

\(^\text{150}\) Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 1. Gunton wrote this in 1978. Robert Jenson correctly points out that gradually “Augustine would replace Aquinas as the one chiefly blamed for those aspects of the theological tradition that Gunton, at the time of the dissertation, labeled classical theism, and against which he never ceased to argue.” Jenson, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” 10. See for example Gunton’s chapter “Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West,” in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 30-55.

\(^\text{151}\) Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 4-6.
1. *It was dualistic and non-relational.* God was defined as a supernatural being. The understanding was that supernatural reality began where natural reality leaves off. This definition, however, brings God in opposition to nature, and therefore relations with nature are necessarily problematic.\(^{152}\) One also can say that the classical concept of God is based on a dualistic ontology. Dualism “does not refer to a metaphysic in which two different kinds of reality are supposed, but one which conceives two realities as either opposites or contradictions of each other.”\(^{153}\) The full strength of this dualistic ontology was not fully visible because it functioned against the background of a neo-Platonic ontology. In this ontology: “Entities are higher or lower in a scale of beings, the lower depending to a greater or lesser degree on the higher.”\(^{154}\) But this neo-Platonic ontology was undermined by developments in philosophy and science. “Nature, on this view, is interesting and comprehensible for what can be seen within and beyond it. A hierarchy gains its significance from its head. But modern science finds nature to be interesting *in itself.*”\(^{155}\) After the collapse of the neo-Platonic worldview the dualism between God and His creation was strengthened.

2. *It was timeless and a-historical.* God was seen as the timelessly eternal or the timeless absolute on which all reality depends. “Once again, acute logical difficulties are raised for those, like Christians, who would speak of the historical relations of this God to the world.”\(^{156}\)

3. *It prioritized power.*

One of the features of the Western theological past of which we are learning to repent is the priority of the idea of power in our characterization of the nature of God. Whatever the cause, and the use of Christianity as a kind of cultural cement since the time of Constantine may have something to do with it, the tendency to see God as primarily power and only secondarily as love or self-giving is very deep-seated in our tradition (...)\(^{157}\)

Gunton follows Jüngel at this point. According to Gunton, our understanding of God has not been sufficiently determined by his suffering on the cross.

\(^{152}\) Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 2.
\(^{153}\) Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 86.
\(^{154}\) Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 3.
\(^{155}\) Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 5.
\(^{156}\) Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 3.
4. *It was monistic.* Though Christians believe with the Jews that God is one, Trinitarian theology suggests that this oneness should not be understood as a monism, but as a differentiated unity. Yet, “The God of most Western philosophy is single, simple and unchanging. And that is the problem.” Gunton notes a strong preference in Western culture to view God through the lens of Greek philosopher Parmenides (for whom the real was single and unchanging) rather than through the lens of Heraclitus (for whom the real was plural and in motion).

These four characteristics of the classical concept of God play an important role in Gunton’s thinking. They are also visible in Gunton’s analysis of the modern period. However, before turning to the modern period it should be noticed that, because these characteristics shaped human perception in the Medieval period, they also shaped the Medieval doctrine of creation:

A. Creation was conceived, since Augustine, as a double creation, first of the Platonic or ‘intellectual’ world, second of the material world. The result of this *dualism* was a hierarchical favoring of the immaterial against the material creation. The image of God was understood *non-relational*, in terms of the possession of fixed characteristics such as reason or will.

B. The Medieval doctrine of creation was also influenced by the belief that species were created as *timeless and unchanging* forms, a belief that made theories of evolution more difficult to engage positively.

C. The Medieval doctrine of creation also *prioritized power*. Gunton does not directly use these words, but he points to this issue through discussing ‘arbitrary will.’ According to Gunton the problem with the Medieval doctrine of creation (with roots in Augustine) was that the world appeared simply the arbitrary product of the divine will. “The scene is thus set for a contest of wills: between the God who appears to impart particularity only to that which is a function of his will, and therefore to deprive of true particularity; and the human will which appears to achieve independence only in the kind of arbitrary self-assertion which appears to be the mark of divinity.”

---

158 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 24.
159 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 2.
160 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 3.
161 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 2.
162 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 54.
163 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 58.
this approach is the central affirmation that creation is the outcome of the love of God, freely willed indeed, but willed for the sake of the creation itself.\textsuperscript{164} While using different words Gunton points here to the problematic priority of power instead of love in understanding the relation of Creator and creation, resulting in a clash of wills between God and humans.

D. The Medieval monistic doctrine of God resulted as well in a monistically perceived creation. There was a tendency in Christendom towards unitary conceptions of social being and order.\textsuperscript{165} The strong stress on the unity of God had a corresponding one on the unity of society. A unitary deity, whether theist or deist, is at the root of totalitarian or repressive forms of social order.\textsuperscript{166}

Moving from the Medieval to the modern period, many things change, but these four characteristics reappear. In paragraph 3.2 till 3.5 an extensive analysis of these four characteristics in the modern world will follow. More generally, Gunton characterizes the modern world with the term ‘immanentism’:

If there is an intellectual direction in the culture that has developed over the last few centuries it is that which is rather barbarously labeled ‘immanentism’. That is to say, the phenomenon which at once characterizes a culture and sets for Christian theology its central problem is the widely accepted belief that the world can be understood from within itself, and not from any being or principle supposed to operate from without. Examples are to be found everywhere, from the characteristic modern ‘experience’ of being alone in the universe to the brash technocratic optimism that sees in modern knowledge the key to the solution of all problems.\textsuperscript{167}

The God of Christendom is rejected in modernity. One could then conclude that ‘God’ does not any longer shape human perception, but Gunton is too aware that the function of ‘God’ in the human perception can be displaced but not removed. In Kant the human individual receives God-like properties, and not surprisingly, this human is made in the image of the God of Christendom. Kant’s individual is dualistic (a dualism between ratio and sense perception) and is conceived as a solitary individual, after the image of the non-relational monistic God of Christendom. This ideal individual has an omniscience with a timeless and changeless perspective. This individual is also omnipotent,

\textsuperscript{164} Gunton, \textit{The Triune Creator}, 118.
\textsuperscript{165} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 213.
\textsuperscript{166} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 25.
\textsuperscript{167} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 2-3.
imposing his will and judgment on his environment. Lastly, because the individual is the focus of unity, there is a monistic drive which does not leave much room for diversity.\(^{168}\) Gunton summarizes the replacement of God with these words: “The Enlightenment’s programme [sic.] is to replace God with the individual as the source of all authority.”\(^{169}\)

With this analysis of the doctrine of God and creation in the Medieval and modern period, the contours of the theology of Gunton can already be gleaned. He will not support the Enlightenment's transfer of predicates from God to man but their revision. Gunton believes this can be done, following Barth, by thinking of God as triune. He will propose a non-dualistic and relational concept of God (contra the first mistake of the classical concept of God), give special attention to the relation of the eternal God to time and history (contra the second mistake). He will put the love and self-giving of God in Jesus at the center of his theology, rather than power because the "power is the power of the cross, the knowledge the giving up of knowledge for our sake, the glory that of the washing of the feet of the disciples"\(^{170}\) (contra the third mistake), and he will propose a Trinitarian concept of God which can do justice to both the concerns of unity and diversity, the one and the many (contra the fourth mistake). "The error of Christendom was that this radical rethinking of the Godness of God in his self-giving was never seriously attempted."\(^{171}\) By further developing the Trinitarian theology of Barth, Gunton tries to provide a conception of God which incorporates the justified criticisms of Enlightenment thinkers against the classical conception of God, while at the same time countering the modern tendency of a whole-sale rejection of God, leading to secularization.\(^{172}\) This Trinitarian concept of God shapes the human perception and therefore gives rise to a Trinitarian doctrine of creation.

**The deep structure of Gunton’s theology: responding to other proposals.**

The proposal in this study about the three weighty themes that form the deep structure in Gunton’s theology throws light on the strength and weaknesses of other proposals.

\(^{168}\) Gunton, *Enlightenment & Alienation*, 57-64, 151-152.

\(^{169}\) Gunton, *Enlightenment & Alienation*, 64.


\(^{172}\) Gunton does not claim that the Medieval conception of God was the cause of secularization, rather he claims that it has contributed to this process. In the same way Gunton does not think that a Trinitarian conception of God will reverse secularization, but: "The claim is more tentative, that the argument will have shown something of the causes of contemporary alienation and of the possibilities in Christian theology for illuminating and healing our modern existence." Gunton, *Enlightenment & Alienation*, 53.
Sometimes, the focus is on Gunton’s doctrine of God (Trinity). Robert Jenson, for example, proposes to understand Gunton’s theology as a decision tree that displays partings of some theological ways. The four forks in the road, according to Jenson, are all related to the doctrine of God.\textsuperscript{173} To be fair, Jenson does not present this as a complete map of Gunton’s thinking,\textsuperscript{174} but the tendency in this article is to regard the doctrine of God as the one center in Gunton’s understanding. Jenson is only partly right, however. Not only is the centrality of the doctrine of creation and human perception not noted in his analysis, Gunton’s interaction with the modern Western context seems strangely absent. The article seems to imply that Gunton’s theology was only done in interaction with other theologians, but not with other voices from the Western context, ‘outside the wall.’\textsuperscript{175}

William B. Whitney rightly calls attention to the fact that Gunton is well known for his work on the doctrine of the Trinity, but that his theology of creation should be viewed as an integral aspect of his theology as well.\textsuperscript{176} It is indeed the Trinity in relation to the created order that is of prime importance to Gunton. Whitney also calls attention to the doctrine of mediation, the ‘two hands’ of God, the Son and the Spirit, which link God and creation: “Thus, if one was to choose three words that sum up the major aspects of Gunton’s theology they would be: Trinity, Mediation and Creation—while also adding the caveat that for Gunton, it was impossible to speak of one of these without incorporating the other two aspects.”\textsuperscript{177} “A summary label that also could be used to describe Gunton’s theological program is “A Trinitarian Mediation of Creation.””\textsuperscript{178} This proposal points in the right direction. However, though ‘mediation’ has logically an important role to play between God and the world, it is questionable if it has the same weight as the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation. John Webster rightly pointed to the fact that “Gunton never gave the concept of mediation the kind of comprehensive exposition

\textsuperscript{173} Jenson first mentions Gunton’s parting with the classical concept of God; then he zooms in on the nature of the Trinity (Augustine’s, that of the Cappadocians, and the approach of Ireneaus); thirdly, is the relation about the incarnate Jesus with the Logos; lastly, the relation between Logos-Christology and pneuma-Christology.

\textsuperscript{174} Jenson, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” 16.

\textsuperscript{175} A similar concern could be noted about John Webster’s analysis on the relation between Gunton and Barth. John Webster, “Gunton and Barth,” in: Lincoln Harvey (ed.), \textit{The Theology of Colin Gunton} (London: T&T Clark, 20010), 17-31. The focus of Webster’s article is not to give a proposal about Gunton’s theology as a whole, and yet after reading this article one is left with the impression that Gunton only interacts with other theologians of the Christian tradition. Gunton, however, is consciously interacting with the voices in the Western context.

\textsuperscript{176} Whitney, \textit{Problem and Promise in Colin E. Gunton’s Doctrine of Creation}, 1.

\textsuperscript{177} Whitney, \textit{Problem and Promise in Colin E. Gunton’s Doctrine of Creation}, 79.

\textsuperscript{178} Whitney, \textit{Problem and Promise in Colin E. Gunton’s Doctrine of Creation}, 99.
and analysis for which we might have hoped; he relied, instead, on appealing to the notion in the course of examining other doctrinal matters, as a kind of summary term for a gospel-governed understanding of the triune God’s active relation to created reality.”\textsuperscript{179} The doctrine of mediation through the Son and the Spirit can, therefore, better be treated as part of the doctrine of God. As noted above, ‘human perception’ is the operative link in Gunton’s theology, between his doctrine of God (including mediation) and doctrine of creation.

Christoph Schwöbel, in an insightful article, focuses on the Trinitarian shape of Gunton’s theology and how it shaped all the different loci of systematic theology, including the doctrine of creation.\textsuperscript{180} What, however, is less clearly spelled out is the inner dynamic of Gunton’s thought in which he related his thoughts on God and the world in a continual dialogue between the Christendom understanding of these doctrines, the modern reactions, and his own Trinitarian proposals.

Lincoln Harvey proposes the ‘Double Homoousion’ as forming the content of Gunton’s theology.\textsuperscript{181} Because Jesus is simultaneously of one being with the Father and of one being with humanity “we can surely look ‘sideways’ to discern the nature of the world just as much as we can look ‘upwards’ to discern the nature of God.”\textsuperscript{182} Harvey correctly identifies that Gunton is fully committed to thinking through the question of how God and the world are related. He also notes the crucial role of human thinking and perception. But in the final analysis he, just as Whitney does, places the doctrine of mediation between the doctrine of God and the world.\textsuperscript{183} The deep structure of Gunton’s theology, however, should not only be read from his constructive proposals, but also from how he analyzes the Medieval and modern periods. And in those analyses, it is the mediating function of the human perception which plays a structuring role in his theology.

Hans Schaeffer suggests that Colin Gunton’s theology can be summarized as a quest for a Trinitarian ontology.\textsuperscript{184} Certainly this is an important facet of Gunton’s theology. The quest for ontology is a part of Gunton’s quest for right human perception. And because Schaeffer gives sustained attention to the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation of

\textsuperscript{179} John Webster, “Gunton and Barth,” 21.
\textsuperscript{182} Harvey, “The Double Homoousion,” 87, 94.
\textsuperscript{183} “It is clear that Gunton is fully committed to thinking through the question of how God and the world are related. Broadly speaking, his neo-Irenaeian theology of mediation is his proposed settlement.” Harvey, “The Double Homoousion,” 92.
\textsuperscript{184} Schaeffer, Createdness and Ethics, 27.
Gunton, his proposal is close to the one of the present study. But summarizing Gunton’s whole theology as a quest for ontology pays insufficient attention to the role of epistemology. Human perception, for Gunton, is more than ontology.

Bradley Green, in his study *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine* claims that “the over-arching matrix of the One and the Many (...) is the conceptual backdrop for Gunton’s understanding of the history of Western thought.”\(^{185}\) This is not a proposal for the whole of Gunton’s theology, but for his reading of the modern context. However, as will become clear in section 3.2 till 3.5, there are four important features of the Western context which form the heart of Gunton’s reading of the Western context (just as there were four features in the classical concept of God that were defective). Certainly, the theme of the one and the many is one of them (see section 3.5), but Gunton calls the theme of the one and the many “one of the subthemes of the lectures,”\(^{186}\) not the main theme. The present author would dispute the claim that this theme is the right entrance for understanding his reading of the Western context. It actually suggests that Gunton’s main tool of analysis is philosophical (via the Greek philosophers Parmenides, who stressed the oneness of all things, and Heraclitus, who stressed the plurality and flux of all things) rather than theological. Section 2.3 has shown that Gunton pursues a thorough theological reading of his context. Moreover, the different themes are not picked out of philosophical interest, but because Gunton discerns idolatry around these themes in the Western context.

### 3.2 PARADOXICAL FEATURES OF MODERNITY (I): RATIONALITY

Because of the displacement of God, the immanent Western context has many paradoxical features. In section 3.2 - 3.5 the four main paradoxes will be discussed. They are the result of the four problematic features in the classical concept of God and Medieval doctrine of creation that reappear in the modern period.

The first problematic feature of the classical concept of God and the Medieval doctrine of creation was its dualism. This problematic feature reappears in the modern context as the dualism between passive sense and active reason, a dualistic rationality.

In section 2.5 a beginning with this theme was made. Here some more details will be added. From the Greeks we have inherited a suspicion about

---


\(^{186}\) Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 16.
our perception, through the senses, of material reality. This leads to a
distinction in the theory of knowledge between perception and reason as
competing ways to knowledge, the former being mere opinion or belief the
latter giving certainty.\textsuperscript{187} In perception the mind is passive, in reason active.
The Enlightenment strengthened the case against the reliability of what we
learn through the senses. Descartes turned inwards, the world of rational
ideas and mathematical certainty.\textsuperscript{188} The empiricists (e.g. Locke) tried to
rehabilitate the senses, but what “(...) is of interest here is how similar Locke is
to Descartes in certain essential respects, viz., his belief in the essentially
passive nature of perception and in the resulting dualism of passive sense and
active reason.”\textsuperscript{189} The result of this contrast between the certainty of ‘my
mind’ and the uncertainty of what I receive from the outside, is an alienation
from the world outside. The mechanical world presented to the senses is
foreign to human values and therefore I have to assert the will, to impose a
pattern of some kind.\textsuperscript{190} Connected with this theory of perception is a strong
preference for conceptual language. Pictorial language and use of the
imagination becomes suspect because certainty can only be found in clear
ideas, expressed with mathematical precision.\textsuperscript{191}

There is a certain logic to the strengthening of dualism between mind
and body during the Enlightenment. In Greek thinking the body and the senses
are on the bottom floor, the mind and the will on the second floor. When God
is displaced, who traditionally occupied the third floor, the rational will tries to
fill the vacancy by occupying the third floor, strengthening the already existing
dualism between mind and body. This dualism has caused alienation.

The first mark of alienation is the tearing apart of belief and knowledge.
Where Augustine had taught that “unless you believe you will not
understand”, the Enlightenment reversed this: “if you believe you will not
understand...” Gunton thinks the Enlightenment was right to attack credulity
and superstition, but in the process it produced a view of the human mind
that falsified its relation to the world. One came to believe that absolute,
objective, impartial, and certain knowledge would be possible: a God’s-eye-
view of reality. This view may blind us to our own prejudice and cut us off
from tradition, without whose help we cannot understand (Gadamer). Another result of this view of knowledge was that all areas of human culture

\textsuperscript{187} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 12.
\textsuperscript{188} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{189} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 17.
\textsuperscript{190} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 63.
\textsuperscript{191} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment & Alienation}, 32. Gunton points to Coleridge’s distinction
between fancy and imagination as being very important.
which fell short of this supposed certainty and demonstrability began to be suspected as inferior. The outcome is destructive and alienating, particularly in the sphere of ethics.\textsuperscript{192}

The second mark of alienation is the exaggeration of the mind in the organization of its knowledge. “The mind must ensure that it is the master, constraining the world to its procrustean bed.”\textsuperscript{193} The authoritarianism of the past might have overemphasized the role of listening rather than speaking, but Kant reverses it. He says that reason must not approach nature “in the character of a pupil who listens to everything that the teacher chooses to say, but of an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer questions which he has himself formulated.”\textsuperscript{194} This assertive activity of the mind generates a technocratic attitude to the world about us, encouraging attitudes of dominance and disparaging receptivity.\textsuperscript{195}

Rationality is one of the paradoxical features of the modern Western context. Rationality is part of creation and a good gift from God, but its use (after the displacement of God) has caused alienation. Gunton laments that though the motto of the Enlightenment is “Have the courage to use your own intelligence,” most give uncritical allegiance to Kant and his dualisms.\textsuperscript{196} These dualisms cause alienation because “by means of them a breach is torn between knower and known, person and environment.”\textsuperscript{197} In his book \textit{The One, the Three and the Many} Gunton uses the word 'disengagement' to describe this: “Descartes’ ethic, just as much as his epistemology, calls for disengagement from world and body and the assumption of an instrumental stance towards them. (...) Disengagement means standing apart from each other and the world and treating the other as external, as mere object.”\textsuperscript{198}

Gunton’s dialectical reading makes it impossible for him to put the blame only on the Enlightenment thinkers. He asks himself if the roots of this dualism were already present in earlier periods of (Christian) thought. He finds in the Platonizing minds of Origin and Augustine the seeds for this dualism between passive sense and active reason, because, as noted in section 3.1, they tend to suggest a double creation, first of the Platonic or ‘intellectual’ world, second of the material world made in imitation of the (created) eternal forms.\textsuperscript{199}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{192} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, 3-5.  \\
\textsuperscript{193} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, 6.  \\
\textsuperscript{194} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, 5-7.  \\
\textsuperscript{195} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, 25.  \\
\textsuperscript{196} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, 153.  \\
\textsuperscript{197} Gunton, \textit{Enlightenment \& Alienation}, 24.  \\
\textsuperscript{198} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 13-14.  \\
\textsuperscript{199} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 2.
\end{flushright}
Gunton looks for a different type of rationality. Both modernists and late-modernists (postmodernists) share the quest for a divine reason which is absolutely certain. Modernists look for infallible foundations and stress the claims of universal truths against all relativism and pluralism. Late-modernists are convinced these infallible foundations cannot be found and they argue the claims of the particular. Gunton rejects, however, the quest for a divine certainty underlying both these approaches. If “we are finite and fallible human beings, should we not rather seek for a concept of truth that is appropriate to our limits, both in capacity and in time and space? [Should we not seek] a conception of created rationality rather than the divine reason aspired to in the tradition?” Gunton is convinced that a conception of created rationality is able to overcome the dualism so prevalent in both phases of modernity. He develops a non-dualistic epistemology with the help of, especially, Michael Polanyi. For Polanyi the mind is not related to the world by clear and disembodied ideas. As a blind man who uses a stick to perceive his environment, the mind indwells (metaphorically) the stick of the senses. The senses are not simply passive, but they are the means by which the person relates himself actively to his world. “Polanyi presents us with the picture of a person as a compound of sense and reason, action and passion, acting upon the world not simply to dominate and control, but so as to receive.” This approach to perception shows that our rational enterprises are not infallible but entail risk and personal commitment. This is true in scientific research but also in knowing God. This approach to knowing does not oppose reason and faith, but it points to the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality.

3.3 PARADOXICAL FEATURES OF MODERNITY (II): TIME

The second problematic feature of the classical concept of God and doctrine of creation was that it was timeless and a-historical. This problematic feature also reappears in the modern context. In The One, the Three and the Many Gunton focuses on the problematic understanding of time in the modern world under the heading: “A plea for the present. The problem of relatedness in modern life and thought.” In the question of relationality, how the

---

200 Gunton, The One, The Three and the Many, 135.
201 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 37-43; Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 143-150.
202 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 41.
203 Esther Meeks summarizes Polanyi’s epistemology succinctly: “Knowing is the responsible human struggle to rely on clues to focus on a coherent pattern and submit to its reality.” Esther Meeks, Longing to Know (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 13.
204 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 41.
205 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 74.
The universe is bonded together, space and time play a central role. Gunton focuses on time because it is the main factor by which the many may be conceived to be bonded historically.

Modernity aims to give central importance to life in time and space. It reacted strongly against the supposed other-worldliness of pre-modern and especially mediaeval culture, and has in a unique and far-reaching way affirmed the priority for both being and life of time over eternity, space over infinity. We live in a this-worldly culture. To be modern is to be conscious of the passing of time, in a way that much pre-modern civilization was not. Many people feel rushed for time, and being under pressure by time is in general a clear mark of the developed West.

Modernity has a problem with relating time and eternity. This is an inheritance of the Greeks, who put time and eternity in dualistic opposition. Eternity is then, by definition, timeless and time is fleeting. Plato saw time as the ‘moving image of eternity,’ but there was in this view an element of discomfort with the temporal and this-worldly. For Kant time was a category of the ordering mind, and time was therefore limited to the world of appearances. Also Hegel and the idealists stressed time. They are, according to Gunton, right in stressing the importance of time: “Time is not something that thought must escape, for it is at the heart of the way things are.” But because of the immanentism of these thinkers the relationship with eternity is again problematic.

One consequence of this dualism between time and eternity is that time becomes fallen and meaningless. Referring to both Kant’s and Augustine’s doubts about the reality of time, he writes: “Both see time as essentially fallen, the place where there can be no intrinsic meaning and rationality (…).” With this view on time there is no possibility of perceiving a rational order of meaning within time. There is a lack of eschatology, no eschatological orientation to the perfection of all things, as in Irenaeus. The result is then that either time is negated or it is made absolute. This absolutizing of time can be seen in the modern obsession with the future.

---

206 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 78.
207 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 76.
208 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 210.
209 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 74-75.
210 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 77.
211 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 104.
212 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 106.
214 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 120.
215 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 123.
216 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 80-81.
217 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 120.
“The anxiety to bring the future about is the cause of the frantic rush that is one mark of the modern failure to live serenely in time.”

This is a displaced eschatology.

It might seem that the whole discussion about the relation between time and eternity is only of interest for philosophical minded readers. But views on time come closer home in one's view on tradition and its role in the interpretation of the Bible. The critical movement in biblical studies, which has done so much to undermine the transmission of tradition, is really modern in its view of time. This movement has tended to open up a gulf between ourselves and previous ages. There is a contempt for the past. The past is seen as primitive and not enlightened. This is clearly seen in D.F. Strauss. Strauss had a strong version of the Enlightenment’s doctrine of rationality. “Only the conceptual and the purely conceptual, without contamination by the particular, concrete or imaginative, satisfied the demands of modernity.” Strauss applied the term ‘myth’ to the New Testament. Myth is “the representation of an event or of an idea in a form which is historical, but, at the same time characterized by the rich pictorial and imaginative mode of thought and expression of the primitive ages....” Strauss showed contempt for the past and is convinced that this past ‘cast of mind’ has to be overcome. Therefore these mythological expressions of the New Testament have to be translated in a modern philosophical religion. Only the ‘modern’ view that the world is an entirely closed system (immanentism) had enough philosophical depth. After Strauss, the focus shifted more to the historical events underlying the biblical texts, but the attitude in approaching the texts remained. It is an attitude of being a ‘judge’ over the text, an attitude of skepticism towards past interpretations, rigorously cross-examining the textual witnesses from a supposed enlightened point of view. The whole attitude of the ‘pupil’ who first listens to the text is lost, and it is a parallel to the theory of perception which sees passively receiving what is given to the senses as unreliable and therefore actively imposes with the mind its own categories on reality. This attitude results in a severe alienation from past interpretation.

Gunton looks for a different conception of time. What is needed, according to Gunton, is a conception of the interpenetration of times, the interpenetration

---

218 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 90.
220 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 117.
221 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 117, 119.
222 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 116.
223 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 124.
of past, present, and future. He uses the concept ‘perichoresis’ to point to this interpenetration, not only of times, but also of persons and things. Perichoresis is a concept “heavy with spatial and temporal conceptuality, involving movement, recurrence and interpenetration.” Through the perichoresis of time, the present becomes a place where the past is directed to the future. There can thus be an interaction between the temporal and the eternal. The eternal is here conceived as a time-embracing and not a time-denying reality. The reason for this is Christological. Christ, the Logos, holds time and space together, and we can see in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus both time and eternity working together. This different conception of will also lead to a rehabilitation of ‘tradition’ (see further section 5.2).

3.4 PARADOXICAL FEATURES OF MODERNITY (III): FREEDOM

The third problematic feature of the classical concept of God and doctrine of creation was that it prioritized power rather than love. This problematic feature reappears in the modern context as the desire for freedom and the demand for autonomy.

If there is a priority in the idea of power in our characterization of the nature of God, there is a real danger, unless it is very carefully defined, that it appears as authoritarian power. Then either one responds with fearful obedience or the outcome is human rejection and self-assertion in the name of freedom and autonomy. The latter response is seen in the thought of Kant. Kant views the world of appearances as a world of ‘unfreedom,’ a world where man is ‘under the laws of nature’ (heteronomy). “Heteronomy is, of course, the opposite of autonomy, and means being determined by ‘alien causes.’” Kant solves this problem by dividing the world into two: the world of the senses may be heteronomous, but not the inner world of human willing. The will is autonomous, it is a law unto itself. Kant is not advocating a lawless or random world, but a moral world. Reason generates moral principles. Every human is the maker of universal law. In the thought of Sartre a new element is added. In Sartre we see that every human not only creates laws, but creates value. This is an important claim in understanding Western culture, for it denies that any moral value or law can be given from

---

224 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 171.
225 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 163-166.
226 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 163.
228 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 130.
outside the agent. Values are not discovered or perceived, they are created and imposed. Gunton is again careful to emphasize the positive achievements of the quest for freedom: “liberal political institutions and individual freedom of religion, association and opinion.”

Gunton has a strong preference for modern libertarian conceptions of individual freedom over against those that mark the authoritarian dimensions of modernity. But the core problem in modernity is that there can be no finally satisfactory individualist account of freedom. A “modern individualistic concept of freedom tends to separate the person from other people (...) it is essentially and irremediably non-relational.” Enlightenment thinking is not only individualistic but aims to see “the individual after the image of God: or rather of the powerful, lonely, solitary God of so much Western theological thinking.”

In The One, the Three and the Many Gunton has become aware of the fact that ‘freedom’ is a word that belongs to the personal realm, but that creation contains both the human and the non-human creation. Therefore, Gunton continues to speak about ‘freedom,’ but he also emphasizes that the problem of freedom is part of the problem of the particular in modern life and thought. “Our human freedom is in large measure what we make of our particularity: it is what you and I do, or would do, as distinctly ourselves, and not as someone else.” But by using the term ‘particularity,’ Gunton can broaden his interest also to e.g. the realm of arts, because also in our dealings with the non-human creation there are problems with how particularity is treated.

Gunton looks for a different concept of freedom, a concept that is able to incorporate relationality, but in such a way that it does not subvert the other but establishes the other in its true reality. He finds it in a theology of the Spirit.

Spirit is to do with the crossing of boundaries. Spirit relates to one another beings and realms that are opposed or separate. That which is or has spirit is able to be open to that which is other than itself, to move into relation with

---

232 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 57.
233 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 62.
234 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 64.
235 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 84.
236 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 41.
237 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 62.
238 See his section: “Particularity in practice 2: the aesthetic.” Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 66-70.
239 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 182.
the other. (...) Spirit is that which, far from abolishing, rather maintains and even strengthens particularity. It is not a spirit of merging or assimilation—of homogenization—but of relation in otherness.²⁴⁰

Gunton emphasizes the fact that the true substantiality of persons is precisely their particular being in relation to God and others. This substantiality is not fully given from the beginning, but has to achieve its end through the Spirit who is the perfecting cause of the creation.

If freedom is not controlled by individualistic and non-relational views but subordinate to a concept of spirit, it takes its proper place. It is the function of the Spirit to realize the true being of each created thing by bringing it, through Christ, into saving relation with God the Father.²⁴¹ But the Spirit does this in such a way that there remains ‘space’ between God and humans, between humans and humans, and between humans and nature. Just as God’s will is not arbitrary but realized through a community of love, so the freedom of humans is also not arbitrary when it is rooted in love.

A different concept of freedom is also important for a grounding of ethics. Gunton, like Barth, grounds ethics not in the power of God, nor in His eternal goodness, nor in human need (if we obey it will go well with us), but in God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ. He has given himself to us, so we have ethics as glad response.²⁴²

### 3.5 PARADOXICAL FEATURES OF MODERNITY (IV): HUMAN COMMUNITY

The fourth problematic feature of the classical concept of God and doctrine of creation was that it was monistic. “The God of most Western philosophy is single, simple and unchanging. And that is the problem.”²⁴³ This problematic feature reappears in the modern context in the view on humans and their relation to human community or human society.

In what sense is human society a unity or totality and in what sense a set of more or less loosely connected individuals? Is a collectivist or individualist vision of society the right one?²⁴⁴ The Enlightenment chose for the many over the one, for the freedom of people over against the God of Christendom. But the paradox is that this has resulted in “new and often unrecognized forms of slavery.”²⁴⁵ The French and Russian revolutions provide plentiful evidence that there is a new monistic and absolutist drive in

---

²⁴⁰ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 181-182.
²⁴¹ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 189.
²⁴³ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 24.
²⁴⁴ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 18-19.
²⁴⁵ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 29.
modernity that again suppresses the many. But the same tendency can be seen in the liberal and individualist versions of modern culture. In consumer culture there is a tendency to suppress the other by treating the other as merely a means to an end.  

In the imposition of a unitary and homogenous public culture, disseminated now throughout the world by the spread of Western technology and communications, is to be found one of the central features of modernity’s distinctive way of achieving the priority of the one over the many.

Gunton looks for a different concept of human community. Again and again it has become clear that there is no stable concept of human community because modernity is in thrall to a doctrine that the one, but not the many, is of transcendental status. There is drive to unity, but if the reverse would be the case (if the many would be of transcendental status and not the one), human community would not be possible. Gunton emphasizes that we have to conceive of community as being-in-communion. We have our true being in communion, and especially in the communion-in-otherness that is male and female, according to the creation accounts. “It is only when Adam can rejoice in the fellowship of one who is a true other-in-relation that he is able to transcend the merely individual state that is a denial of human fullness. (...) Social being, of the kind embodied in a true ecclesia, is the deepest expression of human reality.” The biblical word ‘covenant’ expresses this calling of the human race into free and joyful partnership with God, and so with each other.

3.6 THE FRAGMENTATION OF MODERN CULTURE AND THE LACK OF RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

Gunton was deeply concerned about the crisis in modernity:

> Despite the astonishing success of modern science in understanding the world (...) there is at another level a serious crisis in human life. The personal and physical universes we inhabit have been so divorced that the morality we should adopt to our world is a matter of scandal and confusion. Understanding is so divorced from questions of our being and that of the

---

246 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 31-32.
247 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 33-34.
248 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 6.
249 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 216, 222; Gunton, “Election and Ecclesiology in the Post-Constatinian Church,” in: Colin Gunton, Intellect and Action, 139-155.
250 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 22.
world that we are seeing a mindless rape of nature in the interests of short-term human gain. This divorce of the natural and moral universes is perhaps the worst legacy of the Enlightenment, and the most urgent challenge facing modern humankind.251

The distinction between the personal and physical universe has already been pointed out while speaking about the paradoxical features of modernity. This distinction has, in the past, led to an overstressing of the discontinuity between the human and non-human creation. In that sense the theory of evolution was a blessing in disguise because humans were thrown back to their organic place in nature.252 But neither stressing the continuity nor the discontinuity does much to answer deep remaining questions: How are we related to the rest of the world? What is the relation between cosmology and social theory? Gunton attempted therefore to discover open transcendental which could guide our thinking, and which would be applicable to both spheres. That is for example, why Gunton takes relationality as the third transcendental and not sociality, because the latter is only applicable to the personal realm while relationality is also a mark of the physical universe.

This divorce between the personal and physical universe can be noted in the modern treatment of rationality, time, freedom, and community, but is also shows itself in a deeply problematic fragmentation in modern culture: our failure to integrate or combine science, morals and art, our failure to hold in some positive relation, yet without reducing one to another, the three central dimensions of truth, goodness and beauty.253

As has been shown above, the displacement of God is, according to Gunton, at the root of this fragmentation and crisis. But, according to Gunton, related to this displacement is a problematic view of ontology that is at the root of the crisis in modernity. Many voices in late-modernity call for an abandonment of ontology, but Gunton called not for an abandonment but for an adjustment. According to Gunton, ontology is unavoidable:

(...) all languages and systems of concepts, even those that attempt to avoid explicit ontology, carry ontological implications or presuppose some view of reality. In that sense ontology is unavoidable, especially for those who would dabble, as writers about Christology must, in matters such as history, time, humanity and God.254

252 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 3.
253 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 115, 117.
The denial of metaphysics and ontology amounts to a metaphysic. “Underlying much modern dogma there is the implicit belief that the prime reality is the human will which is ontologically either so distinct from the rest of the world or so continuous with it that the only conceivable orientations are the alternatives of dominance or resignation.”\(^\text{255}\) In Medieval times divine substance (divine ontology) was perceived as changeless, unitarily conceived will or authority. This notion of substance was transferred to the human being, and late-modernity reacted against this notion by rejecting this ontology and polarizing relationality with ontology. But the problem should not be sought in ontology as such, but in a specific understanding of ontology. Ontology was always understood in analogy with ‘substance.’ Ontology is then a way of speaking about the real underlying and unchanging substance. In this approach, unity is a transcendental mark of being, plurality is not; changelessness is a mark of being but becoming is not. And because plurality is downgraded in the tradition of Plato-Augustine-Thomas, beauty is too, or certainly materially embodied beauty.\(^\text{256}\) “But if beauty is in some way both ontologically and epistemologically inferior to the other realms of being, to truth and goodness, is not the ground laid at the very heart of the theological tradition for (...) the cultural fragmentation of Western life?”\(^\text{257}\) Gunton points here to one of the roots of the fragmentation of modernity. Of course, it is not possible to simply add beauty, plurality, and becoming to our understanding of ontology, if there is nothing that accounts for the relationship between the different realms. There is a tendency in Western thought to either choose unity or diversity, either unchanging substance or change and becoming, either to dismiss beauty or to elevate it. Why is there this tendency to an either/or approach? According to Gunton because of a pervasive non-relational ontology. The influence of Greek dualism on Western ontology puts different realms in opposition to one another without a possibility to conceive the relations between them.

Gunton looks for a different ontology. It must be a relational ontology, based from the outset in God’s economic involvement in the world.\(^\text{258}\) It must allow for both unity and diversity, for being and becoming. It must be an ontology, based on revelation, that helps to heal the fragmentation of modern culture by allowing the different realms of truth, goodness, and beauty their own space while at the same time being interrelated. This ontology should not be understood in analogy with ‘substance.’ For Gunton ‘ontology’ means the understanding of “the nature of reality, and specifically of the nature of God

\(^{255}\) Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 219.  
\(^{256}\) Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 140.  
\(^{257}\) Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 140.  
\(^{258}\) Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 140.
and his relation to the world, that results from the concept of God.”

It is God’s revelation in Jesus Christ that gives us hints and pointers to understand the nature of reality. One of the major mistakes of e.g. the Thomist program was precisely that it tried to develop a system of transcendentality and ontology independent of the historical becoming of God in Jesus Christ.

Gunton develops a new ontology by orienting himself to the being of God. One of the mistakes was to locate the being of God in an underlying reality, a substance that underlies the particular persons. However, following Basil, the concept of hypostasis should be more at the center of our thinking. Then the substantiality of God resides not in his abstract being, “but in the concrete particulars that we call the divine persons and in the relations by which they mutually constitute one another.”

On basis of this orientation to the being of God, Gunton looks for “a Trinitarian analogy of being (and becoming): a conception of the structures of the created world in the light of the dynamic of the being of the triune creator and redeemer.” Often the ‘analogy of being’ is being criticized as an idolatrous enterprise which brackets God and that which is not God under the same concept. This move would obliterate the ontological distinction between Creator and creation, a distinction that Gunton very much wants to uphold. Gunton himself strongly objects against the method with which the ‘analogy of being’ is often approached. It is precisely the method of using a-priori philosophical convictions to conceive ontology, to which Gunton objects. Following Barth, Gunton wants to base his ontology on his understanding of the Trinity. But Gunton takes a step beyond Barth, who with his analogy of faith tried to predicate qualities of God analogously for humans. Gunton, however, wants to find a way of speaking of all being, personal and non-personal.

That is why Gunton looks for transcendental marks of being. With this move he tries to reverse William of Ockham who denied the reality of universals (transcendental marks of being). Gunton introduces the transcendentals with the words: “Such notions provide thought with a way of conceiving both the unity and the diversity of being, for they enable us to seek both what kind of being is to be found everywhere and—if there are sufficient and various transcendentalsthe complexity and richness of things.”

---

259 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 172.
260 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 139.
261 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 191.
262 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 141.
263 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 138.
264 Whitney, Problem and Promise, 75-78.
265 Gunton, Becoming and Being, 174.
266 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 141.
267 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 136.
then chooses ‘perichoresis’, ‘substantiality’, and ‘relationality.’ These transcendentals can guide our thinking about human life and this world. With their help one can conceive a relational ontology. People and things are conceived as particulars with their own substantiality but at the same time perichoretically related to God and the rest of creation. Gunton hopes that his theology can contribute to the healing of modern fragmentation.

4. The method with which Gunton approaches Christology

Section four and five will analyze the method and content of Gunton’s Christology. The goal is not to arrive at an exhaustive presentation of all the aspects of his Christology and soteriology, but to present it in such a way that the relation with his reading of the Western context will be elucidated. Therefore the presentation in these parts is parallel to the presentations in earlier parts concerning the reading of the Western context. First, the starting-point will be considered, the relation between the gospel and methodology in Christology (4.1). Then the question will be answered how Gunton’s theological reading (4.2) and his dialectical reading (4.3) affects his methodology in Christology. The next four paragraphs describe how Gunton’s awareness of idolatry and the resulting four paradoxical features of Modernity impact his methodology of Christology (4.4—4.7). The last paragraph (4.8) outlines the relation between Gunton’s method in Christology and the fragmentation of modernity with its separation of the personal and physical universe.

4.1 THE GOSPEL AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY

As has been demonstrated in section 2.2, Gunton takes as the starting point of both his theology and his reading of the Western context the conviction that: “It is of the essence of the New Testament portrayals of Jesus that they place him on both the human and the divine levels of reality.” The New Testament, which is a witness to the revelation of Jesus Christ, confronts us with this manifestly twofold reality in the person of Jesus Christ. A dualistic reading of the New Testament, which opposes the ‘Jesus of history’ and the ‘Christ of faith’ succumbs to the modern axiom that divinity and humanity are

---

268 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 229-230.
269 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 125.
270 In this text ‘Christology’ is used to refer both to Christology proper and soteriology, unless the term ‘Christology proper’ is used or the combination ‘Christology and soteriology.’
271 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 65.
contradictory predicates (see further section 4.4). The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are both inseparably bound up with God’s saving activity, suggesting that the agent of salvation is here in person.\textsuperscript{272} This belief (Gunton often refers to it as the gospel), functions for him as a starting axiom in his Christological method.

### 4.2 A THEOLOGICAL READING AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY

From the basis of the gospel, Gunton moves to a theological understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and he does so in light of the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic concerns of the world. Because section 2.3 has given a description of this theological approach, it does not have to be repeated here. The only point that needs to be clarified is the relationship between Jesus as presented in the New Testament and systematic Christology. What is that relationship?

Often, the developments in Christology after the New Testament documents had been written are viewed as discontinuous with what preceded. Gunton admits that later dogmatic developments have tended to a greater level of abstraction and systematization, but there is a real continuity between the biblical portrayal of Jesus Christ and e.g. the formulation of Chalcedon. The truth of historic Christianity depends upon the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God, and in the language of later tradition this is expressed as: Jesus is one person in two natures (hypostatic union). The chief historical basis for this claim is that Jesus was confessed in terms that identified him with the God whose servant he was, and that his disciples worshipped him and were prepared to die for him. The chief theological basis for this claim is that Christianity is a religion of salvation which is mediated through Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{273}

The impression of discontinuity has much to do with the dualistic lens with which the New Testament is being read. Gunton comments favorably on the approach of Werner Elert who, instead of using the dualistic framework of ‘Jesus of history’ and ‘Christ of faith,’ says that the four Gospel writers present the Christusbild, the portrayal of Christ as they believed him to be visible to his contemporaries. The epistles are more concerned with Christusdogma, with reflecting upon, expounding and clarifying the belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord.\textsuperscript{274} This approach of Elert is a helpful start, but it falls short because it strips the gospel of John of its prologue and treats it as similar to the other gospels. The gospel of John is rather a unique link “interweaving history and theology in a way that it becomes, for our purposes, the representative of the

\textsuperscript{272} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 74.
\textsuperscript{273} Gunton, \textit{Christian Faith}, 79.
\textsuperscript{274} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 65.
whole New Testament.”\textsuperscript{275} The clause ‘for our purposes’ is interesting at this point, because it refers to a real contextual awareness. Gunton wants to represent the twofold reality in the person of Jesus Christ in a context that thinks very dualistically and which constantly opposes the ‘from below’ and the ‘from above.’ Gunton believes that the whole of the New Testament gives the ‘from below’ and the ‘from above’ together, but the accents differ. Therefore Gunton searches where in the New Testament the connection between these two is most clearly present. His answer: in the gospel of John.

For in all that it does it intermingles history and supra-history, time and eternity, the human and the divine Jesus. It does systematically what the other New Testament Christology does less reflectively, showing its understanding of how in Jesus of Nazareth the ‘above’ and the ‘below’ are given together.\textsuperscript{276}

The gospel of John provides a link between the \textit{Christusbild} and the \textit{Christusdogma}. It points to the fact that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the love of the eternal God takes temporal form. But as soon as this claim is made, Christology ‘proper’ begins.\textsuperscript{277} Systematic Christology reflects upon this claim, expounding and clarifying it. New Testament Christology is very important in the construction of a systematic Christology, but these cannot be equated.\textsuperscript{278} Systematic Christology is an attempt to express the meaning of Jesus Christ, which the NT writers did not impose but discern, from within ever changing contexts.\textsuperscript{279} That is what the early church attempted to do in their context. The early fathers were part of Hellenistic culture and “expressed their understanding of the person of Christ from within it.”\textsuperscript{280} A systematic Christology in the Western context should express an understanding of the person of Christ from within this context.

\textbf{4.3 A DIALECTICAL READING AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY}

In section 2.4 it was stated that Gunton understands the modern period as a reaction against the preceding period of Christendom. He sees the history of thought as a process of affirmation and negation. Gunton reads the Western context in a dialectical manner. When it comes to Christology, Gunton also takes this dialectical approach. For Gunton, Christology involves theological reasoning, and this reasoning is part of culture. Therefore in Christology the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{275} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{276} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{277} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 126.
\item \textsuperscript{278} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 56.
\item \textsuperscript{279} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 62.
\item \textsuperscript{280} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 49. Italics in original.
\end{itemize}
same dialectic can be discerned as in theology generally. Modern Christology can thus only be understood as a response to the Christology of the Christendom era. Through a process of both affirmation and negation the Christology of the modern period arises out of its predecessor, in which Aquinas and Anselm played an important part. Gunton discusses modern Christology through interaction with Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kähler, Kierkegaard, Strauss, Reimarus, Ritschl, Barth, Pannenberg, Rahner, and others. Because of Gunton’s conviction that the response of modernity to its predecessor is mistaken (though also partly justified), a revision of modern Christology is necessary. In order to be able to do that one needs a point of reference outside these two periods. That is why Gunton, in Yesterday & Today, is regularly interacting with the theologies of Athanasius, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Origin, Tertullian, and others. These early church fathers are not unquestioned authorities for Gunton. But they are an important reference point outside Christendom and the modern period. It is, for him, crucial to see how these fathers contextualized the gospel in this Hellenistic context. He tries to understand their theologies within their context and is particularly interested in how they dealt with the philosophical presuppositions inherited from the surrounding context. According to Gunton, those whose names “appear in the histories of dogma as ‘heretics’ may be the ones who were judged to allow this to happen [philosophical presuppositions to determine Christology] to such an extent that their teaching damaged essential Christian tenets.”281 But Gunton adds that many who ended on the ‘right’ side were also often strongly influenced by their philosophical presuppositions.282 So Gunton uses his philosophical skills in trying to discern where philosophical presuppositions start to limit or override the revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture. And these insights are used in his dialectical reading of Christology.

4.4 IDOLATRY AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY (I): DUALISM

Gunton reads the Western context with an awareness of idolatry (see section 2.5). He has discerned that where the God of classical theism is being displaced (section 3.1), some wrongheaded characteristics of this classical concept of God re-appear as paradoxical features of modernity (section 3.2 - 3.5). It is a sign of Gunton’s consistency that these aspects of Gunton’s deep structure can also be traced in the method of his Christology. Because Gunton reads the Western context with an awareness of idolatry, he firmly opposes those aspects of methodology which are in his view the result of the

281 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 34.
282 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 34.
displacement of God. In section 4.4-4.7 four different aspects of modern Christological method will be discussed which are in Gunton’s view wrongheaded. In section 4.8 the link between Christological method and the fragmentation in modernity and the lack of relational ontology (3.6) will be discussed.

The first methodological objection of Gunton has to do with a prevalent dualistic rationality which opposes Christology ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ What is meant by these terms? Gunton points out that except in very general terms there is little agreement about what is meant, but in light of the developments in modernity it can be made clear.283 Kant was a decisive figure in the development of Western thought because he rejected the possibility of rational knowledge of the transcendent.284 Since Kant the intellectual direction in Western culture can be labeled as ‘immanentism’, which is the widely accepted belief that the world can be understood from within itself (see section 3.1). The terms ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ should be understood against this intellectual background. The general concern of Christology ‘from below’ is to begin theological inquiry more on a this-worldly plane. It finds it more reasonable to start with asking what is true about human beings (anthropology) than with questions about God or the Logos. Christology ‘from below’ aims to ground what it has to say in time rather than in eternity, though there is every intention and expectation to leave the ground, to speak theologically as well as anthropologically, and not to remain stranded on the earth.285 In modern discussion about methodology this approach is contrasted with Christology ‘from above.’

This immanentism of the Western context is the central problem for Christology, and stands in marked contrast to the period of the early church fathers. In that period, influenced by Platonism,286 the existence of a transcendent world was assumed. The ancients tended to think ‘from above.’ We tend to think ‘from below.’ “While the Greeks were more confident in dealing with eternity than with time, we are happier with time than with eternity.”287 Even if we believe in the existence of God, it is impossible, in our immanent culture, to assume God’s existence or a transcendent world in the same way as in earlier periods.

However, there is also much continuity between our post-Enlightenment world and the age of the Church Fathers. They are not as

radical different as often supposed. At the surface these ages look radically
different (immanence versus transcendence), but at a deeper level there is
much in common. Dualism affects both ages deeply. The difference, in the
eyear age, between the orthodox position and the heretics was not that one
was influenced by dualism and the other not. Rather, the difference was that
Athanasius and others were willing to do violence to the inherited
philosophical dualism out of concern for the Son. The same intellectual
issues are at stake today: is the gospel allowed to do violence to our
immanence, and approach ‘from below,’ or not. “If, then, it can be shown that
the same kind of intellectual issues are at stake in modern as in ancient
Christology, those who reject the latter in the name of modern experience or
understanding will be challenged at the heart of their assumptions.”

But why does Gunton reject the dualistic opposition between ‘from above’
and ‘from below’?

First because it is incompatible with the content matter of Christology,
incompatible with the way Jesus is presented in the NT Scriptures. Gunton,
following Hans Frei, is convinced that the quest of the historical Jesus is
mistaken because it radically misconstrues the nature of the New Testament
documents. The documents are history-like, and locatable in a particular time
and culture. “But that is not the same as saying that they are appropriately
used as quarries for historical facts.” The quest of the historical Jesus
attempts to go behind the texts to find objective and scientific facts, but this is
trying to wring from the texts the kind of information that they are not
intended to give.

A second reason why Gunton rejects the dualism between ‘from
above’ and ‘from below’ is that it is based upon an outdated empiricist theory
of fact and meaning. It holds that ‘facts’ are individual ‘things’ in space and
time, verifiable by a straightforward use of the senses. This view holds that
they “are neutral, in the sense that they can be stated quite independently of
interpretation.” Interpretation is then a process of subjectively imposing an
understanding upon the facts rather than discerning a meaning within the
facts. This theory of meaning has been very influential in Christological
method: a distinction is made between the Jesus of history (fact) and the
Christ of faith (interpretation). In its most radical form (e.g. Strauss) it sees
the Christ of faith simply as a “culture-relative construction of or projection

upon the facts by the minds of the early Church."\textsuperscript{293} We can then construct an interpretation of the facts that is more in line with our culture.

A third reason why Gunton rejects the dualism between ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ is that every writer who claims to take either one of the approaches ends up smuggling in the other. For example Karl Rahner develops a Christology ‘from below’ by starting with transcendental anthropology, a view of human nature as absolutely open upwards.\textsuperscript{294} But this is mixed in with elements ‘from above,’ namely an Hegelian view of history and certain orthodox formulations. Another example of the need for both approaches can be found by looking to Origin who had a Christology ‘from above,’ who tends to take his point of departure not in the biblical story, but in \textit{a priori} philosophical or theological considerations. But also with Origin there is an element of movement from below in the account of the believer’s order of knowing.\textsuperscript{295}

A fourth reason has to do with Gunton’s theological convictions. In the disputes of the first five centuries about Christology two principles were at stake, and these are still at stake in modern debates. They both concern the reality of salvation. The first is “that because only God can save, Jesus’ reality as God in action must in some way be preserved in whatever was taught about him.”\textsuperscript{296} The second is “that unless Jesus is also fully human salvation is again not guaranteed (…) the point in Christology is that if human being is to be restored to its right condition, the change must happen from within, taking account of human freedom rather than forcing people into an alien pattern.”\textsuperscript{297} So, a dualistic Christology does not do justice to these important theological insights.

A fifth reason is historical. James Dunn in his book \textit{Unity and Diversity},\textsuperscript{298} a book to which Gunton refers in his study on Christology,\textsuperscript{299} points out that Jewish Christianity and Hellenistic Christianity represent ‘from below’ and ‘from above.’ Heresy, according to Dunn, came about when e.g. Jewish Christianity was not any longer corrected by Hellenistic Christianity. The result was the heresy of adoptionism. Or, vice versa, when Hellenistic Christianity was not any longer corrected by Jewish Christianity, it ended in the heresy of Docetism.\textsuperscript{300} Gunton agrees with this judgment and deepens

\textsuperscript{293} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 62.
\textsuperscript{294} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 12.
\textsuperscript{295} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 38.
\textsuperscript{296} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 86.
\textsuperscript{297} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 87.
\textsuperscript{299} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 65.
\textsuperscript{300} Dunn, \textit{Unity and Diversity}, 399.
Dunn’s presentation by pointing to the dualistic assumptions: “In this sense, both adoptionism and Docetism, the earliest and most logically primitive Christian heresies, arise from the same root. Because their assumptions are dualistic they are compelled to deny either that Jesus was fully God or that he was fully man.”

Gunton, in his methodology, wants to follow the NT texts. They give a naïve admixture of ‘below’ and ‘above.’ The NT writers wrote ‘from below’ if by that is understood “the fact that they are writing about Jesus of Nazareth, the human being that they or some of their informants had known ‘after the flesh.’” But they wrote ‘from above’ in the sense that “they all operate from a belief which they developed after the resurrection in the transcendent significance of that human being.”

The documents seek to tell the truth about Jesus of Nazareth, but that truth is not told apart from its theological framework. They do offer us a way to the historical Jesus. But for them the historical Jesus has already become, without any loss of historical reality, also of suprahistorical significance.

The content of NT Christology has to inform the method and therefore ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ cannot be separated. According to Gunton, this does not mean that one has to start with a fully-fledged doctrine of the incarnation or of the Trinity. “It is possible, for example, to begin with a relatively informed confession of faith (‘Jesus is Lord’) and move from there to a full doctrine of the incarnation and the Trinity.” So the starting-point for Christological method is the non-dualistic NT presentation of Jesus and not the conclusions of Chalcedon.

4.5 IDOLATRY AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY (II): A FALSE TIME-FRAME

In section 3.1 it was shown that a problematic feature of the classical concept of God was that it was timeless and a-historical. There was a dualism between time and eternity. This problematic feature reappears in the modern context (section 3.3). Modernity aims to give central importance to life in time and space, while rejecting eternity. How does this affect Christological method?

301 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 86.
305 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 44.
Modern Christology is pursued in an immanent context which strongly accentuates the otherness of time and eternity. Eternity, and God, are being viewed as ‘timeless.’ This is a problematic feature because in its train comes the idea that God’s decisive actions lie in the past. Jesus, who then represents the timeless in time, is only to be found where the past event once happened or where it can be conceived to repeat itself. Modern Christological method is therefore wrongly oriented. Gunton agrees with Dietrich Ritschl:

The real problem of Western Christology … does not lie at the point of concentration and focus in the present scholarly discussion. Exegetes and dogmaticians are presently in large measure preoccupied with modifications of Martin Kähler’s problem of the historical Jesus and the post-Easter Christ, although in reality the problem lies in the relation between the ‘historical-risen’ Christ and the Christus praesens.

Gunton puts the presence central. The New Testament uses often the present tense in accounts of the reality of Christ. They speak of him as a present reality: ‘Jesus is Lord.’ By this they express the permanence of Jesus’s reality and significance. If the eternity of God is not an expression of his timelessness but of his overarching of past, present and future, then Jesus of Nazareth is not simply a past historical figure, but one who belongs to all times. The starting point for Christology is therefore not the quest for the historical Jesus, but it starts in the community of confession and worship where Jesus’ presence is discerned and experienced. The West’s obsession with the past makes it difficult for theologians to interpret the New Testament.

---

306 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 81. Gunton quotes at this point Dietrich Ritschl (not Albrecht Ritschl), and it seems that Ritschl also points to Augustine as responsible for this dualism between time and eternity (28).
307 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 82.
308 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 82. The quotation comes from Dietrich Ritschl, *Memory and Hope: An Inquiry Concerning the Presence of Christ* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967). The importance of Ritschl’s insight for Gunton’s Christology is made clear in his book title *Yesterday and Today*. Gunton gives elsewhere two examples: “Does it really concern us that Christ won on the cross a cosmic battle against the demonic, when we have the demons in our times to overcome and do not necessarily see the connection between that battle and ours? (...) does it, similarly, help us to be told that Christ bore the sins of the world on the cross, if we still have our own sins to bear? The crucial link that must be made is between the past historic event and life in the present, and mere statements of a past victory or sacrifice do not enable us to make it.” Gunton, “Atonement: The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices. From Metaphor to Transcendental?” in: Gunton, *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, 184-185.
310 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 147.
In the previous section (4.4) Dunn’s book *Unity and Diversity* has been mentioned. He shows that already in the early church there was diversity. Besides Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity, he also mentions Apocalyptic Christianity and Early Catholicism. The decisive element in the opposition between these early varieties is their orientation to time. Apocalyptic Christianity overemphasizes eternity and is focused on the future. Early Catholicism overemphasizes the past (traditions). Both have a role to play, but because of the prevalent dualism between time and eternity they do not relate well and both miss the centrality of the present.

The theological root of the lack of attention to the present is a displaced eschatology. “What mainstream mediaeval eschatology lacked was rather a sense of the interweaving of the times: of a way in which the divinely ordered destiny of life could, by the work of the Spirit, be anticipated in the present.”312 Gunton expresses it succinctly in a footnote:

In fact, the heart of the Western weakness can be seen as a whole to derive from a stressing of the protological over against the eschatological, the Christological against the pneumatological, as is evidenced by the fact that much Western eschatology, in contrast to Irenaeus, sees the end essentially as a return to the beginning. Irenaeus’ conception of economy has a dynamic teleological drive which conceives the end as something more than a return to the beginning. Much recent theology, recognizing the imbalance, has tended to overbalance in an opposite direction, stressing the eschatological at the expense of the protological, as for example in Pannenberg’s claim that creation is something that happens from the future, a manifest leaning, if not more, to a disappearance of creation into eschatology.313

So, Gunton positions himself between ‘mainstream medieval eschatology’ and modern theologians who stress the future aspect. Methodologically, Christology should be done with great awareness of eschatology, with an awareness of the work of the Spirit to bring everything to perfection. This has consequences for one’s relation with the tradition. Neither a view that absolutizes past formulations, nor a view that has contempt for past tradition and imagines we can re-write the gospel, is right. Tradition is handed down from generation to generation, but we have the responsibility to decide what we accept or reject from our teachers.

312 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 92.
313 Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 160 (footnote 5).
4.6 IDOLATRY AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY (III): OVERSTRESSING HUMAN POWER

In section 3.1 it was shown that a problematic feature of the classical concept of God was that it prioritized power rather than love. This problematic feature reappears in the modern context (see section 3.4). There is a search for freedom and autonomy and an overstressing of human power. How does this affect Christological method? Modern Christology is often pursued with methods that over stressing the power of the human intellect, resulting in forms of rationalism (which paradoxically limit human freedom). Gunton does not object to rationality as such. Following Anselm and Barth he sees theology as a rational pursuit. Gunton quotes Barth and says:

Christian faith is not irrational, not anti-rational, not supra-rational, but rational in the proper sense. (...) Christian faith is concerned with the illumination of the reason. What man can know by his own power, this has nothing to do with the God of Christian faith.  

Gunton objects to rationalism. What does this mean? In section 2.2 mention has been made of the contrast that Gunton draws between theologies that take their starting point in 'pure reason' and those that take their starting point in 'revelation.' But in Christological method more has to be said because rationalism can even occur in those theologians that seem to take their starting point in revelation. According to Gunton, modern rationalism can be recognized as the desire to reduce reason to a narrowly conceived process of reasoning. The manifold features of our experience (e.g. the conceptual, the ethical, the aesthetic) are then not given a due place in our thinking about who and what we are, and about the world in which we are set. No, human response to the world is forced in a Procrustean bed, defining in advance what may or may not be said. This rationalism derives from a tendency to desire an omnipotent human intellect.

In the modern period three forms of this rationalism can be discerned. Kant and those theologians that follow Kant have a tendency towards a rationalism of morality. Schleiermacher and those who follow Schleiermacher a rationalism of experience, and the Hegelians a conceptual rationalism. Gunton mentions these three forms in his book The Actuality of Atonement and points out that traditional conceptions of the atonement have been deeply affected.

by these rationalist criticisms. Unless this rationalistic methodology is revised an insurmountable barrier remains between our understanding of the atonement and that of earlier ages.

Immanuel Kant is a crucial figure in the development of the modern doctrine of autonomy (see section 3.4). Kant's crucial difference with the Christian tradition is that he ascribes redemption to the moral agent himself, through one's own exertions, while Christian teaching has been founded on a doctrine of helplessness of the human agent, apart from God's new initiative. In Kant there is therefore a drift to a moral rationalism: God is not encountered as a personal creator and redeemer, but his divine activity is found in human moral reason and action. Therefore there is no need for atonement.\textsuperscript{317}

Schleiermacher shows a different form of rationalism: a rationalism of experience. Schleiermacher was deeply influenced by Kant but went beyond Kant in developing the third, aesthetic, dimension of human experience. He elevated feeling above both pure and practical reason, which it unified in a higher synthesis. We can feel together what we cannot satisfactorily think together. The result was that Schleiermacher produced a highly subjectivist interpretation of traditional doctrines, so that their meaning is realized more in the experience of the Christian than with reference to the historical incarnation and cross. Paradoxically, this lead to a highly rationalistic account of the content of theological writing in Schleiermacher. The very lack of a rational object leads to the need of a very logical, conceptual and systematic theology. In the area of the doctrine of the atonement, Schleiermacher developed a mainly exemplarist interpretation of Jesus’ sufferings: that is to say, they are of importance more as an example to follow than as altering objectively our standing before God. He took strong exception to the legal and penal language of Western atonement theology. This is not to deny his great achievement, particularly in the perceptive account he developed of the corporate nature of both sin and salvation.\textsuperscript{318}

Hegel presents the third form of modern rationalism, a conceptual rationalism. Conceptual rationalists often argue that meaning and truth are successfully conveyed only by means of concepts of an intellectual kind, which have been purified as completely as possible from all imaginative or pictorial content. The conviction is that utterly clear and distinct ideas are more suited to tell the way things are than that language which draws upon sense, imagination and the historically particular. So unless metaphor is shown to be an indispensable means for the advance of knowledge and understanding, the ‘official’ doctrine gives the doctrine of the atonement a hard time. The main

\textsuperscript{317} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 3-8.

\textsuperscript{318} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 9-16.
images are then argued or refined away, leaving conceptions of the atonement that place the emphasis not on the significance of what happened with Jesus, but on the response of the believer. Hegel wanted to restore a genuine Christianity, oriented to human well-being and the good ordering of society. But in the process of his attempted restoration, much of the content of the Christian tradition’s teaching about salvation came to be lost. Gone was the orientation of the doctrine to matters of cosmic and human evil, as well as to the historical cross of Jesus as the place where they are met and overcome.\(^\text{319}\)

Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel are the presiding geniuses of the modern period because they have all marked our intellectual times indelibly and cannot be evaded simply by ignoring or going behind them. Gunton takes up this challenge in his book: *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition*. Over against Hegel he wants to rehabilitate the role of metaphor in rationality. He takes as the main challenge from Schleiermacher the question: Does the language of law, punishment and penalty provide a suitable vocabulary in which to speak of the relationship between God and his people? How realistically and literally do we interpret this metaphor used to describe the atonement? And Kant faces us with the question if we can be saved by another agency without the loss of our moral freedom and autonomy, and how we are related to the past events which we consider so crucial.\(^\text{320}\)

### 4.7 IDOLATRY AND METHODOLOGY IN CHRISTOLOGY (IV): PLURALITY WITHOUT UNITY

In section 3.1 it was shown that a problematic feature of the classical concept of God was that it was monistic. This problematic feature reappears in the modern context (see section 3.5). There is a real tension in the modern world between the one and the many, between unity and diversity. How does this affect Christological method? Modern Christology has reacted against the unifying tendency of classic Christology. It has been shown that there is a rich diversity in the New Testament portraying Jesus Christ. Some even have stated that each New Testament book has its own Christology. The overall tendency of this approach, however, is to suggest that these Christologies are incompatible or contradictory, leading to a relativizing of not only orthodox formulations of Christology, but of a unified Christology all together.

Gunton does not claim that the diversity of the New Testament can be brought back to one Christology. There is not a single New Testament Christology. But, according to Gunton, we need to look to a deeper level. “If we take the one human and divine reality of Jesus Christ to be the logically primitive reality, then the diversities of expression can be understood as different attempts to express in words the richness of this reality which must necessarily transcend all its verbal expressions.” Gunton refers at this point also to Michael Polanyi: “The true artists of speech remain always conscious of the metaphorical character of language. They go on correcting and supplementing one metaphor by another, allowing their words to contradict each other and attending only to the unity and certainty of their thought.” In this way the differences and development within the New Testament can be relativized. It all took place against the background of belief, grounded in worship, in the risen and continuing reality of Jesus Christ.

4.8 THE FRAGMENTATION OF MODERN CULTURE AND CHRISTOLOGY’S LACK OF COSMIC CONTEXT

In section 3.6 it has been argued that for Gunton the fragmentation of modern life has its root in the divorce between the personal and physical universe and the accompanying lack of relational ontology. This also has impacted Christology and Christological method. According to Gunton:

Western theology has by and large lost this dimension [the cosmic context of the metaphors of atonement] and shown a repeated tendency to over-moralize its understanding of the atonement. Its vision has become increasingly anthropocentric and individualistic, at the expense of aspects of the tradition which see salvation as being in and with the whole created order.

Gunton will therefore consistently try to incorporate in his Christological thinking the wider cosmic context. Much of the material content of this will be dealt with in section five, but the methodological aspect is worth underlining.

First, Christology should not only be done with a greater awareness of the role of the Spirit, whose role it is to bring everything to perfection, but also with a greater awareness of creation, which is more than only the creation of humans. In his book *The Christian Faith*, Gunton therefore takes the

---

traditional order of the apostolic Creed. Part 1 he calls “Foundations: ‘Maker of Heaven and Earth.’” Part 2 is “‘His Only Son, Our Lord,’” and part 3 “The Perfecting Cause: ‘And in the Holy Spirit.’” This Trinitarian approach should safeguard the cosmic context when it comes to Christology.

Second, it is important to notice contextual decisions in Gunton’s theology. His Christology is done in the Western context which has lost the dimension of the non-human creation. Especially in the doctrine of salvation this has become apparent. How does Gunton respond? He deals with different metaphors of atonement, but contrary to many modern treatments of the doctrine, he emphasizes the importance of understanding the atonement as sacrifice. There seems to be both a theological and a contextual reason for this emphasis. Theologically “it could be said that the priests and their sacrifices take us to the heart not only of Israel’s relation to God, but of ours also.” Those who sacrifice give something of themselves and so the relation between God and his people is reordered. But there is also a contextual reason that make this metaphor of prime importance: “The value of the concept of sacrifice is that, in contrast with other images used of God’s providentially gifted institutions and saving acts, it cannot be restricted to the merely social and human sphere.” So, in light of the fragmentation of modern life, rooted in the divorce between the personal and physical universes, the metaphor of sacrifice and the office of priest become especially important in order to contribute to the healing of culture.

Third, Christology should be pursued with an awareness of its impact on the human perception of ontology.

5. The content of Gunton’s Christology

Gunton’s Christology is developed parallel to his analysis of the Western context. The choice has, therefore, been made to present his Christology in line with the four, by now familiar, points related to the displacement of God. In a sense, the presentation in four points is somewhat schematic and will not prevent certain forms of overlap. But this way of presenting has the advantage of making the relation with his analysis of the Western context very clear. Each of these points show crucial aspects of Gunton’s Christology.

325 Gunton uses the single quotes in the table of contents.
326 Gunton, The Christian Faith, 70. Also in relation to Jesus as sacrifice: “Here we reach the heart of the mystery of the atonement, for the life that is given is the life of God himself, the incarnate Son dying for the life of the world.” Gunton, Actuality of Atonement, 138.
328 See the introduction to section 2.
5.1 JESUS CHRIST: LORD OF CREATION AND CREATURE, GOD AND MAN

Gunton wants to present a non-dualistic Christology. In this quest the Council of Chalcedon (451) is not the starting-point, but it is still a useful measuring rod because it attempted to exclude all three heresies which are the result of embracing dualistic assumptions: downplaying the divinity of Jesus (as in Arianism), downplaying his humanity (as in Apollinarianism), and disintegrating the unity of his person by conceiving him as a sort of hybrid of two persons (one divine, the other human, as in Nestorianism). Gunton thinks that all Christologies, whether ancient or modern, tend in one of the three directions: endangering the deity, the humanity, or the unity of the person of Christ. We need all three doctrines if we are to be true to both scripture and the claims made in it for Jesus.

Modern Christology has been developed in a climate of immanence, stressing the humanity of Christ and starting ‘from below.’ It was a reaction against the Christian tradition, who for the most part was able to present the divine Christ, awesome judge of the living and the dead, more vividly and effectively than the human. Gunton thinks that the advocates of a Christology ‘from below’ are justified in their suspicions that there is a docetic tendency in orthodox Christology, so that Chalcedon’s ‘of one substance with ourselves’ is not taken seriously enough. So, a renewed attention for the humanity of Christ should be welcomed. But the major problem with much modern Christology is that it in turn loses the divinity of Christ. That has, of course, to do with the dualistic assumptions, but it has also to do with the fact that, as moderns, we keep struggling with the language of Chalcedon. Gunton offers different ways of addressing the difficulties.

The first way in which Gunton addresses the problems in understanding the language of Chalcedon is by using different words. In Christ and creation Gunton says “given the modern suspicion of appealing directly to dogmatic formulations (...) let us begin with the gospel portrayals of Jesus. In these, one does not have to read far to find that Jesus is portrayed as one who bears the authority of the Lord of creation.” In this way, Gunton slightly shifts the focus from an often philosophical discussion about ‘divinity’ and ‘humanity’ to the fact that Jesus is both ‘Lord of creation’ and ‘creature.’ In earlier periods certain miracles of Jesus were posited as being signs of his divinity. Though this has not been a fruitful approach, the approach of Jesus as Lord of creation receives lots of support in the texts. One does not have to read far to find that Jesus is portrayed as one who bears the authority of the

---

331 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 70.
332 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 16-17.
Lord of creation. “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him? (Mark 4:41)” And by seeing Jesus as a ‘creature’ and not just as a ‘human,’ Jesus’ relation with the non-human creation remains within sight.

The second way has to do with the language of ‘nature.’ Jesus Christ is said to be one person with both a divine and human nature. ‘Person’ therefore denotes the unity of Jesus Christ, while ‘nature’ points to the divine and human reality. However, the language about ‘nature’ can be dangerously misleading. Natures are not separate entities. This “takes us to the problem that is intrinsic to the tradition, Catholic and Protestant alike, to treat natures as things which have attributes. But natures are not hypostases, and so do not have attributes. ‘Natures’ are not things but refer to ways in which Jesus is and acts. That is also the reason for the confusion about the Lutheran teaching about the ‘communication of attributes.’ We have not a communication of ‘attributes,’ but of actions. “Jesus’ acts, as scripture presents them, are at once God’s actions and those of a human being.”

Even if we conceive ‘natures’ more as acts than ‘attributes,’ it remains difficult to visualize it. Gunton points out (and this is the third way in which he addresses the difficulties moderns have in following Chalcedon) that many difficulties with transcendence derive from the way in which visual patterns of perception dominate our understanding of space. Visible things are mutually exclusive. But the visual metaphor is not the only one in human experience. Hearing is another, which could help us overcome the mutual exclusiveness.

When, for example, the notes of a major triad are played simultaneously, we hear in one and the same place three tones which retain their identity and create a new reality, the chord. That is in itself an interesting parallel to the statement that in Jesus Christ there are two co-present realities—what Chalcedon called the human and divine natures—which in their association, the ‘hypostatic union’, form a new reality which yet does not do away with the specific characteristics of the old: ‘without confusion, without change’. But it is only a parallel, for music remains a this-worldly reality for all its anticipations of heaven, while the claim in classical Christology is that in Christ we have the spatial co-presence of the finite and infinite.

---

333 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 17.
335 Gunton, Act and Being, 151.
337 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 114.
338 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 115-116.
Gunton also refers to new ways of viewing reality through scientific development, e.g. that atoms are viewed now as fields of force rather than discrete substance and that they can interpenetrate.\textsuperscript{339} Modern physics helps us to realize that everything is related to everything else, so that “all human actions, as well as all that happens in the non-personal world, affect in different ways everything else that there is.”\textsuperscript{340} From this perspective we need to take serious the genetic inheritance of Jesus (his Jewish particularity) without suggesting that evolutionary biology or any other science is able to give a full account of his significance.\textsuperscript{341} The merit of field theory is that it can suggest that the world is open to God’s continuing interaction with it.

In these ways, Gunton wants to help modern readers perceive the possibility of a dual reality in Jesus. Referring to field theory, he suggests:

\begin{quote}
The world is what it is through the operation of the spatially omnipresent divine field of force. In Jesus Christ we see the outcome of the self-differentiation of the divine omni-spatiality. Without loss to his general presence, he takes form within his world and alongside other men as part of that world.\textsuperscript{342}
\end{quote}

One can speak of a self-emptying (kenosis), as long as this is not viewed as leaving behind divine attributes. He humbled Himself, but He did not do it by ceasing to be who He is (Barth). “In the incarnation the being of the Son expresses itself, is laid out in all its fullness, because in his self-emptying the Son is most fully divine.”\textsuperscript{343} Kenosis is an expression rather than a detraction of His deity.\textsuperscript{344} Gunton puts it like this:

\begin{quote}
(…) God differentiates himself, becoming present within one piece of finite reality (he in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’, Col. 2.9), but without either losing his general relationship to the whole or depriving that one part of its genuine humanity. In this one piece of space there are co-present two levels of reality, that which permeates everything by virtue of his creating power, and that which by virtue of that same power, he takes freely and graciously to himself, becoming what in himself he is not.\textsuperscript{345}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{339} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 117-118; Gunton, \textit{The Triune Creator}, 175.
\textsuperscript{340} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 40.
\textsuperscript{341} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 41.
\textsuperscript{342} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 118-119.
\textsuperscript{343} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 83-84.
\textsuperscript{344} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 220.
\textsuperscript{345} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 119.
\end{footnotes}
We can say that the Son’s human career is a concentration of something that is there all the time.\(^{346}\)

5.2 JESUS CHRIST: THE REVELATION OF GOD’S ETERNAL LOVE IN TIME

The classical concept of God was timeless and a-historical, and the doctrine of creation was influenced by this as well (see section 3.1). Modernity reacted by aiming to give central importance to life in time and space. To be modern is to be conscious of history and live one’s life in a this-worldly culture. Modernity reacted strongly against the supposed other-worldliness of pre-modern and especially Medieval culture, but struggles to give a place to eternity, thereby misconstruing Christology. In light of this, Gunton takes ‘time and history’ as integral to Christology, in three ways. First, he views Jesus Christ as the presence of God’s eternal love in time. Second, he links Christ to the project of creation as a cosmic mediator, making room for a different eschatology. Third, Gunton rehabilitates tradition.

\(a\). Jesus Christ as the presence of God’s eternal love in time

In order to overcome the dualism between time and eternity, Gunton turns to Christology. The eternal can be discerned within the temporal. Jesus is God’s love taking place in our time and history. In this temporal life, one can discern a transcendent rationality,\(^{347}\) one can perceive a rational order of meaning within time.\(^{348}\) One could also say that the love of God, as revealed in Jesus, has a shape and a form, a ‘logic.’

Precisely because this love of God is revealed in the life of Jesus, one should not focus exclusively on the cross, or on another moment, e.g. that God unites with human flesh. Gunton argues that it is a weakness of Western theology that it has tended to treat the significance of the cross in relative abstraction from the incarnation, resurrection and creation.\(^{349}\) The link with creation will be considered below, here attention will be given to the link with the incarnation and resurrection. In order to counter the Western weakness, Gunton uses a summary term for all things that happened with and to Jesus: his ‘career.’ With this, admittedly inadequate word, Gunton points to Jesus’ birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension.\(^{350}\) It is in this whole ‘career’ of Jesus, played out in time, that the logic of divine love can be discerned. Gunton affirms with the main lines of the Western tradition that

\(^{347}\) Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 124.
\(^{348}\) Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 123.
\(^{349}\) Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, 178.
\(^{350}\) Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 145.
we can understand the cross as the heart of the matter, the place where the battle against evil comes to a climax,\textsuperscript{351} but by using the word ‘career’ he wishes to prevent whole parts of Jesus’ humanity becoming lost out of sight. This is also one of his concerns with the concepts of ‘anhypostasia’ and ‘enhypostasia.’ The words have been used in order to express how the person of Christ can be understood to be related, on the one hand to history and creation, and on the other, to God. But Gunton is not convinced that these concepts are sufficient to safeguard the humanity of Christ. He notes that even in Barth, the stress is so much on what God does in Christ, that the question must be raised how far this is also the act and passion of a man.\textsuperscript{352} Gunton, therefore, wants to pay more attention to all the episodes in Jesus’ life, the episodes in his ‘career.’ Incarnation should therefore not be equated with only the virgin birth, but with this whole ‘career,’ in which God the Son unites Himself with this particular human flesh. “Jesus works out his human calling through time and by means of the Spirit’s leading.”\textsuperscript{353} It is actually this re-uniting of God with human flesh (and therefore with creation) through the ‘career’ of Jesus that is at the heart of redemption. “The incarnation achieves its redemptive end by a form of divine immanence in the world.”\textsuperscript{354} In Christ God draws near as a revealing and saving presence.

But what is the relationship between Jesus’ life and death, and his resurrection and ascension? In a sense, the cross ends the life of Jesus in the most public sense. But in another sense this life is not yet ended. The cross is indeed a kind of completion because here a full and perfect sacrifice is made. But this random sample of creation has to come into relation with the rest of creation. Through the resurrection Jesus’ sacrificial humanity is brought into contact with the rest of creation, and through his ascension Jesus and creation are brought into a new relation with God. Heaven is opened to earth, and earth to heaven.\textsuperscript{355} Through resurrection and ascension, Christ is established as the eternal mediator between heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{356} Gunton expresses it in this way:

The achievement of the incarnate Son [was]: as man, he begins a restoration of creation’s teleology by offering to the Father a true human obedience. In terms of the imagery of sacrifice, he effects the process of renewal by offering to the Father through the Spirit a cleansed and representative sample of the fallen flesh he bore through being born into a network of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{351} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{352} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 47-48.
\item \textsuperscript{353} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 103.
\item \textsuperscript{354} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 90.
\item \textsuperscript{355} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 59-60.
\item \textsuperscript{356} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 67.
\end{itemize}
corruption. His resurrection attests and guarantees the eschatological perfection of that sacrifice.  

In section 4.5 it was pointed out that the New Testament accounts often use the present tense in speaking about Christ, e.g. ‘Jesus is Lord.’ This way of speaking derives from the resurrection (and ascension) of Jesus. Jesus is present as Lord, and it is a continuing presence.  

By looking to the ‘career’ of Jesus, we see the logic of divine love, a logic of initiative, overcoming, judgment, and restoration. God lays out his own logic of love within the frame of ours. The logic of this divine love is not an unprecedented irruption or intervention, but is continuous with the activity of God in the Old Testament. Redemption did not start with the incarnation, but with the call of Abraham. He, and his descendants, would be the source of salvation for all the peoples of the earth. They were called to be mediators between heaven and earth. Many blessings have come through the people of the promise, but the evil which had infected not only the nations but also them, prevented them to offer themselves without blemish to God and be the mediators for this world. And therefore, the Word became flesh. This is the logic of divine love. The eternal Son of God voluntary reduces himself to our level (Cyril of Alexandria). In the ‘career’ of Jesus, we can clearly discern the logic of initiative, overcoming, judgment, and restoration, but because Jesus is the present Lord, we may worship God in Him as the One who is also now in this way present in our temporal lives. In this way, Gunton offers an alternative to the West’s obsession with the past.

b. Jesus Christ and the project of creation

Overcoming the dualism between time and eternity starts with discerning in Jesus Christ the presence of God’s eternal love in time. But more is needed. Creation itself should be re-conceived in such a way that time is an indispensable part of it. However, the problem is that there has been a tendency to view creation as timeless and perfect, that is, without an eschatological directedness. According to Gunton, we should recover the notion of creation as project. “That is to say, we need to understand it as something God creates not as a timelessly perfect whole, but as an order of

---

357 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 81.
358 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 130.
359 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 129.
363 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 84.
364 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 129.
things that is planned to go somewhere; to be completed or perfected, and so projected into time.” To view creation as a project also has impact on eschatology. The Medieval period had a deficient eschatology. The four classical loci (death, judgement, heaven, hell) suppose a merely otherworldly account of eschatology. Eschatology seems to point only to the end of time. What is lacking is a sense in which the times are open to one another. Eschatology has a future orientation, but it has to be distinguished from the future. The ‘end’ can also break into the present, by anticipation, as is shown in the resurrection of Jesus.

The effect on Christology is that the significance of Christ is put in the broader context of God’s plan for the whole created order, connecting Christ as Redeemer with Christ as cosmic mediator, as is done by the writer of Colossians in 1:15-23. Often in this connection, Gunton praises Irenaeus of Lyons, because he integrates creation and redemption. Irenaeus struggled with a Gnosticism that devalued creation and was incapable of handling the material world and especially the body. Despite the fact that modernity thinks it is world-affirming, it is Gnostic to a deep degree. Therefore, the linking of creation and redemption is today just as urgent as in Irenaeus’ time. In order to do that eschatology and pneumatology are indispensable. What is needed is an eschatology in which there is an interweaving of the times (perichoresis): where the destiny of this creation can, by the work of the Spirit, be anticipated in the present. Not only mainstream mediaeval eschatology lacked this, but so did modernity. In modernity the agency of the Spirit is displaced to humans, resulting in an obsession with the future, an anxiety to bring the future about and a failure to live serenely in time. There is a great illusion that we have to create the future. It is, however, not our task to create the future. It is the work of the Holy Spirit who can be understood, as in St. Basil’s expression, as the perfecting cause of the creation. Through the Spirit we may have the more modest desire to shape the future, because we trust that the conditions of the world to come may be anticipated in this one.

The notion of ‘creation as project’ should not be confused with notions of progress or process, which suppose that in some way history itself

---

365 Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, 181.
368 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 225. The One, the Three, and the Many, p. 2. For a discussion of Gunton’s view on the relation between the eternal Son and the Son who is the man Jesus, see Robert W. Jenson, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” 14-15.
369 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 226; Gunton, The Triune Creator, 47-50, 52-56.
370 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 92.
371 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 90-91.
372 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 46.
is a process of evolution or development which is moving immanently towards its promised end.\footnote{Gunton, \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology}, 182.} Already in his first study \textit{Becoming and Being}, Gunton had departed from process theology and Hegel’s concept of God which is essentially immanent, being understood in terms of the cosmic process.\footnote{Gunton, \textit{Becoming and Being}, 6.} If Christology is placed under notions of process or progress (e.g. Robinson, Teilhard de Chardin), Christ becomes the ‘cosmic Christ’ shorn of his historical particularity and especially of the centrality of his substitutionary death.\footnote{Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 126.} Jesus becomes one of the crucial movers in a general process. The form of eschatology which Gunton proposes is one which accepts the necessity of a transformation of history if it is to move towards its goal. It must go through the narrow gate of the historic cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and there is no eschatology without first passing through death, cosmic and personal alike.\footnote{Gunton, \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology}, 182.}

Approaching Christology within the context of creation as a project has consequences for views on sin, salvation, and the motivation for the incarnation. According to Gunton, the heart of the problem is the disruption or distortion of the relation of personal beings with the personal creator God, a disruption that in mysterious fashion incorporates the whole created world in its structures.\footnote{Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 59.} But in light of the fact that creation is a project, sin and evil should be viewed as derailing creation as a project, pulling it away from its direction to perfection and turning it towards death. It is in this light that God’s action in Christ should be seen. He reverses the movement into dissolution and nothingness, restores creation’s original movement to perfection, re-directing it to its proper end, the glory and praise of the Triune God. Though Christ’s coming is decisive and the guarantee that creation will be restored, the story is not finished. Salvation is an eschatological concept, perhaps in that respect best rendered ‘redemption.’\footnote{Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 63, 67; see also 59-62.} ‘Feeling saved’ and ‘having an experience of forgiveness and release’ may be part of this, but Gunton insists that in eschatological perspective salvation means arriving safely at one’s destination. The Son of God, the cosmic mediator, has in a new way entered His realm to bring it back to the Father, but the end will be greater than the beginning. The coming of the savior was not a mere repair job, but achieved something greater even than that what was achieved in creation. The loving union between God and humankind will be greater than even Adam experienced. Adam was created good, but he still had to grow in
love. Christ, as the second Adam, not only restored the direction to perfection, but also crowned what was there begun.\textsuperscript{380} The motivation for the incarnation is therefore not only the fall. Gunton adopts what is sometimes called a Scotist Christology, which states that Christ would have come even if there had been no fall, although the form of his coming would have been different.\textsuperscript{381}

If the redemption of Christ is connected with the view of creation as project, the link between what Christ has done and the destiny of this creation is important. The link is through pneumatology. Christ has won the decisive battle against the forces of evil, and through Christ’s resurrection and ascension, His Spirit is able to give a foretaste of the age to come. Christ elects the church as “the particular means by which particular anticipations of the promised reconciliation of all things in Christ are achieved.”\textsuperscript{382} Redemption awaits therefore, though guaranteed by the victory of Christ, the eschatological completion of the project of creation.\textsuperscript{383}

Gunton claims that, in what happened with Jesus of Nazareth, we are presented with the reality of God in a way that we are presented with it nowhere else. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is rooted in the New Testament linking of Christology and soteriology. “Jesus is unique because he is the way by which God restores his human creation—and, along with it, his whole creation—to a wholeness of relationship with him.”\textsuperscript{384} In and through Jesus, God meets humanity where it is, in its alienation and fallenness, and so liberates it for an imitation of that love. Here we see that the logic of love and the logic of morality are not finally in conflict, God as love and God as judge are not distinct, for the one who judges does so only by means of the love that is his Son.\textsuperscript{385}

Gunton is aware of the fact that the way in which, in the past, the uniqueness of Jesus has been asserted has assisted the development of political authoritarianism and an association of Christianity with colonialist attitudes in our relations to other cultures and religions. But the response to this abuse should not be to surrender the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, but to emphasize that Jesus is the mediator of creation, and therefore the mediator of all truth as well.\textsuperscript{386} It is precisely the starting-point (faith), which brings Gunton to be open to truth from other corners. Gunton does not start with an


\textsuperscript{381} Gunton, The Christian Faith, 67; Gunton, The Triune Creator, 52-56.

\textsuperscript{382} Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, 190.

\textsuperscript{383} Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, 185.

\textsuperscript{384} Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 164.

\textsuperscript{385} Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 164.

\textsuperscript{386} Gunton affirms that God can be met in the created order, in history, and in other political and religious movements than the Christian church. Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 163.
a priori decision that all religions, deep down, are all oriented on the one God, rather it is a matter of a posteriori investigation and discussion, an inquiry that will be shaped by the Christology which one affirms.\textsuperscript{387}

Wherever there is between human beings the kind of love instantiated in Jesus and wherever there is good use of the created world for science and art; wherever, that is to say, the world in all its aspects is enabled to praise its creator, there is the work of the perfecting Spirit.\textsuperscript{388}

c. Jesus Christ and tradition

In order to overcome the dualism between time and eternity, Gunton also wants to rehabilitate ‘tradition.’ He questions the complete denial of tradition\textsuperscript{389} and does not want to posit a radical discontinuity with tradition,\textsuperscript{390} a contempt for the past as seen in Strauss. Tradition involves a personal relatedness to others in both past and future time. “To deny the salutary character of tradition is to say that we can only be ourselves by freeing ourselves from others—by suppressing the other—rather than being set free by them.”\textsuperscript{391} Of course tradition is fallible and “in order to make grateful use of the work of my teachers I must also come to decisions about what I shall take from them, and what reject. But if I come to believe that I have nothing to receive, I am denying something central to their humanity and mine.”\textsuperscript{392}

There is in contemporary theology a good measure of breakdown of confidence in the traditional Christology of the first five centuries. Gunton, however, believes that a Christology which is true to the claims of the gospel requires a greater degree of continuity with the past. What is needed is a deepening of the possibilities inherent in Christology for our understanding of God, rather than a rejection of the past.\textsuperscript{393} How can that be done? On the one hand, it must be strongly asserted “that it is not, and never has been possible, simply to repeat the words of the Bible, the Father, the Reformers or any other group of authorities.”\textsuperscript{394} We have to use our own language. But on the other hand, we cannot find our own language without assistance from theirs. “The fact is that belief, the tradition, is mediated—handed on from one person or generation to another—in words, and those words cannot finally be

\textsuperscript{387} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 212.

\textsuperscript{388} Gunton, \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology}, 191.

\textsuperscript{389} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 6.

\textsuperscript{390} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 87.

\textsuperscript{391} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 95.

\textsuperscript{392} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 95. Gunton continues this theme in chapter 5 of \textit{A Brief Theology of Revelation} (83-104).

\textsuperscript{393} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 8.

\textsuperscript{394} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 4.
separated from the experiences or realities about which they are speaking.”

This approach was already demonstrated in section 5.1 where Gunton accepts the language of Chalcedon, but then also shapes it in order to communicate with modern readers. The attitude which Gunton takes towards tradition is not first that of a ‘judge,’ but that of a ‘pupil’ who first listens to text and tradition. Human perception is not only active, but also passive. We shape, but we also receive.

5.3 JESUS CHRIST: GOD’S SAVING LOVE AND SELF-GIVING IN ACTION

The third problematic feature of the classical concept of God and doctrine of creation (see section 3.1) was that it prioritized power rather than love. This problematic feature reappears in the modern context. At one hand there is an overstressing of human power, leading to various rationalisms. At the other hand there is a desire for freedom and the demand for autonomy (see section 3.4). Gunton responds to these problematic features by developing pneumatology. It is the Spirit that enables humans a free response to God’s love and grants them a measure of power. “Because the Spirit is the one who perfects all the creation, his work is centered on enabling the ordinary, and especially ordinary life in the human body, to be what it is made to be.”

Gunton’s development of pneumatology as such is, however, not the focus of this present study. But his pneumatological response to the overstressing of human power and claim for autonomous freedom in modernity, has also impact on his Christology. The following features of his Christology (which includes Christology proper and soteriology) are all the result of Gunton’s re-thinking of Christology while putting God’s love in the center and not God’s power.

a. Re-imagining God’s power and human freedom through the self-giving of Christ

The idea of God as primarily power was the cause of the justified rebellion of modern atheism. At least in principle it is possible to be human without God. The ‘solution’ is not so to emphasize the ‘suffering God’ or the fact that he needs us, that his power is denied. A God worthy of his salt must be independent and powerful in order to set us free as forgiven and restored human beings. The point is rather that there are different ways of exercising power. Does God force us into obedience or does he enable a free

---

395 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 4.
396 Gunton, The Christian Faith, 156.
397 For a study on Gunton’s pneumatology, see: M.D. Stringer, The Lord and Giver of Life.
398 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 96.
response? This free response is seen in Jesus. If we locate our understanding of autonomy and freedom on the self-giving of Jesus, it will be bound to change. And our view of God’s power changes. Here is a God who shares our alienation to the uppermost. He upholds the moral order not heteronomously (from the outside), but from within, by himself taking responsibility for our condition. “The God who demands is the God who gives himself beyond the measure of any human self-giving. For Paul, Christ is God’s grace in action in and for this world. God is indeed powerful: but the power is the power of the cross.”

This leads to an understanding of God as omnipotent only in a very unusual sense, and that is why the debate about autonomy and heteronomy is transposed into a different key... it becomes a different melody. A response to grace must be won and not compelled. Our freedom means that we can freely respond to this gracious love by loving God and submitting to his will to participate in His self-giving love for others. This is the ‘law’ of our being.

Gunton does not only put ‘God’s gracious love’ in the center but also, following Barth, God's freedom. “Barth begins with a polar account of God’s being: God loves, but he loves freely, so that each of the perfections is to be understood as characterized as a perfection either of love or of freedom (…).” The same is true for human beings. “It follows also from the personal character of human being that of central significance in our theology of the image of God are two slippery and often misused concepts, love and freedom.”

Gunton does not deny the Augustinian tradition at this point, that insofar we sin, we are deprived of the capacity to act freely, neither does Gunton deny that there are many determinants in our lives in which we have no choice: of genes, parents, sex, nationhood etc. But Gunton emphasizes that freedom is essential to our being made in the image of God. So ‘love and freedom’ are central for both God and humankind. Therefore, also in Christology they are central. Or rather, because love and freedom are central in the humanity of Christ, they are also important to understanding our humanity.

Gunton is convinced that if we are to understand the humanity of Christ, one has to pay attention to the part the Holy Spirit plays in his life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. The chief way in which to conceive the unique yet real humanity of Christ was traditionally through the

---

399 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 101.
400 Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 103.
402 Gunton, Act and Being, 98-99.
403 Gunton, The Christian Faith, 44.
404 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 55
405 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 39.
406 Gunton, Christ and Creation, 46.
**anhypostasia** and **enhypostasia**. But proponents of this approach can still use interpretations that effectively deny the humanity of Jesus. For example for Barth the humanity of Christ is the humanity of God, and everything that happens is for Barth the act of God.  

This raises the question: “in what sense is everything that happens also the action and passion of a man?” However, “The weaknesses of the **enhypostasia** teaching are alleviated, if not removed, if we give a more prominent place than has been the case to the place of the Holy Spirit in Christology.”

Through giving a more prominent place to the Holy Spirit in Christology, freedom can be approached differently. In remaining true to the demands of his calling, Jesus establishes his freedom, and he accepts this freedom as a gift from the Father’s sending of the Spirit. “Freedom is not an absolute, but something exercised in relation to other persons, and that means in the first instance that it is the gift of the Spirit who is God over against us, God in personal otherness enabling us to be free.”

After Jesus’ ascension, he poured out this Spirit that enabled him to live in freedom. The gift of the Spirit brings freedom: freedom from the idolatry of self and the world.

In this context the name of Edward Irving appears often in Gunton’s writing, because Irving was able to give major place to the action of God the Holy Spirit in both the act of incarnation and its outworking as a truly human story. “The action of the Holy Spirit, that is to say, is the personal means by which God the Father enables his incarnate Son to be, as truly human, the one who achieves the ‘active obedience’ which is the vehicle of God’s saving action.”

So it was through his obedience to the guidance of the Spirit that Jesus was able to live as a true and free human being, through the Spirit overcoming the sinful tendencies of the flesh which he shared with other humans.

### b. Jesus as substitute

Gunton affirms the quest for freedom in the modern Western context. But he does not want to remove the offence of the theology of atonement against autonomy, namely Jesus being a ‘substitute.’ A concept of substitution is necessary, albeit one controlled not by the necessity of punishment so much

---

409 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 50.
410 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 55.
as by the gracious initiative of God in re-creation.\textsuperscript{413} Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and that involves more than removing feelings of guilt. “The unredeemed past is more than sins and feelings of guilt; it is the objective disruption of the life and fabric of the universe. (...) At issue is the actuality of atonement: whether the real evil of the real world is faced and healed ontologically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{414} So Jesus is a substitute, but substitution is grace, because by this substitution he frees us to be ourselves, he enables us to go to the Father after him. Substitution and representation are correlative, not opposed concepts.\textsuperscript{415}

c.  \textit{Jesus and the impassibility of God}

If the Son of God, in his life, suffering and death, substitutes his life for this world, does this mean that God is not impassible? According to Gunton, unless God is impassible in one sense, his very being is at risk on the cross. Then, God’s action on the cross is no longer a saving action, but something that happens to God, beyond his power. However, God cannot be pushed around, his fundament is secure. God does not suffer history, he moves it.\textsuperscript{416} It is, therefore, also not right to say that on the cross God dies. This diverts the attention away of the death of Jesus as a truly human action. It is the office of the Son to suffer. That is why the Fathers of the church decided on the qualification ‘one of the three has suffered in the flesh’ in their opposition to patripassionism.\textsuperscript{417} But because of the unity between Father and Son in the Spirit there is another sense in which not only the Son, but also the Father suffers. So the question about the suffering of God is a question of the distinctive being and action of the Son in relation to, but in distinction from the Father.\textsuperscript{418} How should this be viewed? Gunton rejects the tendency of Moltmann to posit an enmity between God and God.\textsuperscript{419} The cry of dereliction is not a rift between God and God, but the final episode in the incarnate Son’s total identification of himself, through the Spirit, with the lost human condition.\textsuperscript{420} Gunton brings to the fore the notion of perichoresis between Father and Son. The Father (sacrificially) gives up his Son to death. It is genuine compassion in action because the Father wants the Son to bear the consequences of human enmity with God. The Father, thus, must be seen as both to command (in that sense, the Father, as one who sends the Son, is

\textsuperscript{413} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 164-165.
\textsuperscript{414} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 164-165.
\textsuperscript{415} Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, 167.
\textsuperscript{416} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 87, 88.
\textsuperscript{417} Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation}, 87.
\textsuperscript{418} Gunton, \textit{Act and Being}, 128.
\textsuperscript{419} Gunton, \textit{Christ And Creation}, 86.
\textsuperscript{420} Gunton, \textit{Act and Being}, 131.
responsible for his death), and to suffer his Son’s total identification with man under judgment.  

**d. Understanding the atonement through metaphors**

The understanding of the atonement has suffered under the over-stressing of human power in modernity. The temptation to arrive at omniscient knowledge led to a strong tradition in the West, going back to Plato and Aristotle, that the best words are concepts which have been completely purified from all imaginative or pictorial content. But Gunton contests the claim that metaphor is at best of secondary value (see section 2.5). Metaphor is rather a way of attaining ‘epistemic access’ to the world. Not only scientists, but also artists need imagination to perceive the world. In *The Actuality of Atonement* Gunton turns to the great metaphors of atonement: victory, justice, and sacrifice. Metaphors are indirect descriptions of something that really is there. Therefore metaphors must not be treated as self-contained worlds. Rather, there must be an openness of concepts to each other, so that nuances and shades of meaning can be developed. A tight verbal systematization of theology, as Hegel tried, should not be attempted.

**e. Jesus’ death and penal substitution**

The main challenge from Schleiermacher is the question: Does the language of law, punishment and penalty provide a suitable vocabulary in which to speak of the relationship between God and his people? How realistically and literally do we interpret this metaphor used to describe the atonement? (compare section 4.6). Gunton, as usual, tries to go to the root of the issue. He agrees with Schleiermacher that the dominance of notions of legal satisfaction have

---

421 Gunton, *Act and Being*, 129.
423 In *The Christian Faith*, Gunton will also point to a fourth metaphor: ‘redemption,’ a monetary image. But it does not get the same weight as the other three metaphors. In *The Christian Faith* it becomes clear why Gunton puts most weight on the first three metaphors. Gunton sees a connection between these metaphors and the Old Testament. Israel had specific political, moral, and religious dimensions to her life. These dimensions were related to the offices of king, prophet, and priest. That is why the three metaphors of victory, justice, and sacrifice describe essential dimensions of both the Old Testament and the work of Christ. Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 69. The metaphor of victory shows that in the way God acts towards us in Jesus Christ, He overcomes (as God and man) the power of evil and liberates people. The metaphor of justice shows that in the way God acts towards us in Jesus Christ, He justifies Himself, judges us and lays bare our sinfulness, and justifies us. The metaphor of sacrifice shows that in the way God acts towards us in Jesus Christ, He sacrifices (gives) Himself completely, both as God and as man. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 53-141 (chapter 3-5).
been gravely distorting, but he thinks that Schleiermacher’s approach does not take the radical nature of evil serious enough. So Gunton wants to revise the doctrine of penal substitution in light of justifiable criticisms.

First, Gunton rejects the pervasive dualism in the Western context. The popular notion that Jesus is conceived to be punished by God in the place of the sinner, is deeply dualistic.426 Gunton wants to hold to a notion that in Jesus Christ both God and man act together in harmony.

Second, Gunton rejects views that concentrate on the moral and legal aspects without connecting it to the cosmic aspects. This parallels his criticism on views which do not integrate Christ the Redeemer with Christ the cosmic mediator (see section 5.2). According to Gunton what often happens in Western atonement theories is that they have a deficient view of sin: “... theologies centered on a legal or commercial metaphor can degenerate into a kind of mathematical rationality, a balancing of evil: Jesus bears so much evil as a counterweight, so to speak, to ours.”427 But sin should not be viewed as just a mistake, but as “a state of the creature, the second state of a creature, in which it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. That being so, the relationship of the creature to God cannot be restored by a legal and quasi-financial balancing act supposed to have taken place in our past.”428 Gunton’s point here is that the removal of legal guilt does not put creation back on track. This does not mean that there are no penal aspects to the atonement. “To understand the cross as a judgment is to hold that just as a court decides and so declares a verdict of guilt, so the cross lays bare certain aspects of our condition—for example, the pride of our standing in judgment on others.”429 There are penal aspects to the atonement, but if they are construed as only a wiping away of legal guilt, the place of the cross within the cosmic redemption of creation is obscured. “There can be no merely moralistic or personalistic discussion of salvation which does not root human life in the context of the created order as a whole.”430

Third, Gunton rejects views that seem to put God’s power rather than His love in the center. Take the way in which ‘justice’ is often understood. Justice in the theory of penal substitution is retributive justice. Gunton points out that also the Greeks had such views of retributive justice. Gunton shows that “the justice of Zeus was one of “violent grace” by virtue of which he punishes, late or soon, a man who has done injustice to another.”431

---

426 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 90.
427 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 128.
428 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 129.
429 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 111.
430 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 95.
does not deny that the Bible, at times, has notions of retributive justice, but through what God does in Christ, the meaning of justice is shaped in the direction of transformative justice. Anselm did not have a retributive view of justice, either. God, for Anselm, is responsible for the good order of the universe, but He “operates not by punishing but by mercifully accepting the gift of infinite value given on behalf of the offender by the God-man.”

Gunton takes over McIntyre’s insistence that Anselm’s word *satisfactio* is a different and alternative concept from *poena*. Satisfaction is the way by which God is enabled not to exact a tribute of compensating penalty from the sinner.” In this Anselmian approach, the love of God can remain in the center. Another metaphor that Gunton re-considers is the metaphor of ‘sacrifice.’ Often the metaphorical character of ‘sacrifice’ is overlooked. “This is [however] clearly a metaphorical use of language: there is no altar, but a cross; he is killed by soldiers not (...) by priests.” The life and work of Jesus Christ should be seen as a gift to God, the Father, through which he purifies and restores our relation with God. In all of these proposals the centrality of the love of the Triune God, reconciling the world to itself, remains central.

Fourth, Gunton rejects views that do not give sufficient space to the Holy Spirit. But that is precisely the danger in views that see the death of Christ as merely the bearing of so much inflicted wrath, vengeance and punishment. In these views we lose the need to find in the Spirit the agent of the accomplishment of Christ’s work. In Gunton’s view of atonement, the Son of God through the Spirit gained victory, brought justice, and offered Himself to the Father. Through his resurrection and ascension he has become our substitute and representative and mediates this Spirit so we can partake in His victory, justice, and sacrifice.

5.4 JESUS CHRIST: SECOND PERSON OF THE TRINITARIAN COMMUNION
	BECOME FLESH

The fourth problematic feature of the classical concept of God (see section 3.1) was that it was monistic. There is a strong preference in Western culture to view God through the lens of Greek philosopher Parmenides (for whom the real was single and unchanging) rather than through the lens of Heraclitus (for

---

whom the real was plural and in motion). The Enlightenment thinkers displaced this monistic God and choose for the many over the one, for the freedom of people over against the God of Christendom. However, the paradox is that a monistic drive reappears in the modern context in relation to human community or human society, not only in collectivist visions of human society but also in the liberal and individualist visions of society (see section 3.5). In consumer culture there is a tendency to suppress the other, because only the ‘one’ is of transcendental status and not the ‘many.’ What is lacking in both the classical concept of God and the contemporary visions of human community, is a vision of community as being-in-communion, and especially a communion-in-otherness.

Gunton, therefore, responds by proposing a Trinitarian concept of God which can do justice to both the concerns of unity and diversity. He wants to conceive God as the Trinitarian being-in-communion, the communion-in-otherness of Father, Son, and Spirit. On basis of this concept of God he wants to develop different conceptions of both the church and human society.

The purpose of the next two sections is not to give an in-depth analysis of Gunton’s Trinitarian theology (‘Christology and Trinity’) or his ecclesiology (‘Christology and community’), but to make clear the relation between his analysis of the Western context and his Christology.

a. **Christology and Trinity**

In light of Gunton’s development of a Trinitarian understanding of God, Jesus as Son of God is the second person of the Trinity. Against a background of the monistic drive in the Western context, Gunton wants to emphasize both the ‘one’ and ‘many’ and the many in his Triune understanding of God, and therefore he is keen to give attention both to oneness of the three persons and the distinctions between the persons. He emphasizes the oneness by underlining the ‘*homoousios*’ of the Nicene Creed. An

... important function of the *homoousion* is that it enables a theology of the Trinity to express the oneness of the being and act of God. One danger of the concept of communion—and especially of a ‘social’ analogy of the Trinity—is of a form of tritheism which appears to relate the three persons in such a way as to suggest that they have distinct wills.\(^{437}\)

Gunton emphasizes as well the doctrine of the ‘perichoresis,’ the inter-animation in relation, of Father, Son and Spirit that is such that all that is done is indeed the act of all three. But if only the ‘*homoousion*’ and ‘perichoresis’ are emphasized, the distinction between the three persons is not given

\(^{437}\) Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 198.
sufficient attention. The Bible clearly distinguishes the persons by stating, for example, that “there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came, and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live.”438 Or in Ephesians 2:18: “For through [Christ] we both have access to the father in the one Spirit.”439 Gunton thinks Basil of Caesarea puts it well: “the original cause of all things that are made, the Father; … the creative cause, the Son; … the perfecting cause, the Spirit.”440 Gunton thinks that it is precisely the Western danger to flatten out the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity.441 What is often lacking in Western Trinities is an emphasis on the way in which the persons constitute one another. The ‘Filioque’ clause has strengthened this tendency because it tends to subordinate the Spirit to the Son. Gunton therefore agrees with Thomas Smail that:

(...) we would need to say about the Spirit that ‘he proceeds from the Father through the Son’; but we would also need to say about the Son that he is ‘eternally begotten of the Father through the Spirit’. In that way what we say about the relationships of Father, Son and Spirit in God would more faithfully reflect what the New Testament obliges us to say about the relationships revealed in the life and in the resurrection of Jesus.442 [Elsewhere Gunton says it like this:] The point is this. If the Father is the one from whom the Son is begotten—in the Spirit—and from whom the Spirit proceeds—indeed, through the Son—our enquiries come to an end. There is a final, if mysterious, explanation for the way things are.443

Gunton draws here upon a rather different concept of person than the Western individualistic conception. It is a relational view of the person.444 By understanding persons not as a relation, but as one who has his or her being in relation to others, Gunton is able to present a Trinitarian concept of God in which both ‘one’ and ‘many’ are represented.445 Renewed attention to ‘relation’ and ‘otherness’ (alterity) is a feature of much late modern philosophy.446 Gunton connects this in a specific way with the persons of the

440 Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 81.
441 See Gunton’s discussion with Thomas Torrance about Eastern and Western Trinities in Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 32-57.
443 Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 55.
444 See also: Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, 83-99.
445 Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 53.
446 See for example the overview of this development in LeRon Shults, Reforming the Doctrine of God (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 5-9, 26-30.
Trinity, by stating that it is the Son who ‘relates’ all things. He is the unifier of creation, the one in whom all things hold together. It is the Spirit who establishes ‘otherness,’ who maintains the particularity, distinctiveness, uniqueness, through the Son, of each within the unity. Because all created reality is made through these two hands of God, both the ‘one’ (unity) and the ‘many’ (otherness/particularity) has transcendental status.

In speaking of the second person of the Trinity, Gunton wants to say two things that appear contradictory. The first is that this second person of the Trinity is the Son quite apart from and in advance of being Jesus of Nazareth—for Jesus of Nazareth has a begetting in time. The second, however, is that he is not Son apart from being Jesus. “The only-begotten Son is also the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. The one who is the object of the worship of heaven in Revelation is the lamb bearing the marks of slaughter upon him. It is not a Logos with no relation to Jesus whom we confess but ‘One Lord Jesus Christ...’” The distinguishing mark of the Son’s action in this world is that he is sent by, given by and obeys the Father, and viewing Jesus as the eternal begotten Son enables us to perceive this action in the world as expressing his eternal sonship in temporal or economic subordination. The paradox between the two things that need to be said cannot be solved, because they are two sides of the same coin.

b. Christology and community
The monistic drive in the classical concept of God, paradoxically reappearing in the modern context, is also visible in the conception of ecclesiology in the West. The conception of God as a triune communion made no substantive

---

447 Gunton, The One, The Three and the Many, 206. This point is already clear from the chiastic structure of the Book. The Pneumatological chapter 7 “The Lord who is the Spirit. Towards a theology of the particular” responds to chapter 2: “The disappearing other. The problem of the particular in modern life and thought.” The Christological chapter 6 “Through whom and in whom....’ Towards a theology of relatedness,” responds to chapter 3 “A plea for the present. The problem of relatedness in modern life and thought.”

448 Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 70.

449 Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 70. Compare as well on page 191: “To use the daring metaphor of St John the Divine, the (sacrificial!) lamb slain from the foundation of the world is the revelation of the inner being of God. That is to say, Jesus as the eternal Son made flesh is the self-giving of the Father in expression and realization of his eternal will for covenant.”

450 Gunton, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 71-72.

451 See also the more extensive discussion in M.J. Kater, Kom en Zie (deel I): De plaats en betekenis van de pre-existentie van de Zoon belicht vanuit de theologie van Kuschel, Pannenberg en Gunton (Abblasserdam: Drukkerij Verloop, Theologische Universiteit–Apeldoorn, 2010), 341-348. Jenson critiques Gunton for holding to these two contradictory sayings, and suggests that it would be better to simply eschew the concept of a Logos asarkos. Jenson, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” 14-15.
contribution to the doctrine of the church.\textsuperscript{452} Gunton wants to address this, and he does so by reflecting on the human community by way of analogy. “A theology of sociality teaches that those whose being is constituted by relation to the triune God should succumb to the ideology neither of the one nor of the many. Communion is being in relation, in which there is due recognition of both particularity and relationality.”\textsuperscript{453}

For Gunton, ecclesiology is intimately connected with Christology. His book \textit{Christian Faith} places Christology in part 2 of the book (part 1 being about God the Creator), and part 3 about the Holy Spirit opens with a chapter on ‘Christian Community and Human Society.’\textsuperscript{454} Why? The “Spirit’s first function is to realize in the life of particular human beings and groups of human beings the reality of what God in Christ achieved on the cross.”\textsuperscript{455} That is also why Gunton, in his book \textit{The Actuality of Atonement}, treats the ‘community of reconciliation’ as the climax of the argument. It is here were the atonement comes to concrete expression in community. The resurrection of Jesus is of universal significance, but it has to come to concrete expression by the particularizing Spirit. “The Church is the place where the logic of the divine love that is Jesus takes form in the present, and in so far as it does, it becomes real also for the rest of humanity.”\textsuperscript{456} In this way Gunton is able, not only to envision a community that is neither individualistic or collectivistic, but also to hold to the universal significance of Jesus, while realizing that in concrete expressions of the church only, at best, a foretaste of the \textit{eschaton} can be enjoyed.

5.5 JESUS CHRIST: PERIOCHORESIS AND SACRIFICE

In section 3.6 it has been argued that for Gunton the fragmentation of modern life has its root in the divorce between the personal and physical universe and the accompanying lack or relational ontology. In section 4.8 it has been argued that for Gunton one of the methodological consequences for Christology has to do with the relation between Jesus as Savior and as Cosmic Mediator. The consequence for the content of Christology has already been dealt with in section 5.2.b). The only thing that has to be added at this point is the fact that Gunton’s understanding of the fragmentation influenced his Christology (via human perception), but his Christology also influenced his perception of ontology. How does Gunton’s Christology influence his ontology? In \textit{The One},

\textsuperscript{452} Gunton, \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology}, 56, 60.
\textsuperscript{453} Gunton, \textit{The One, the Three and the Many}, 223.
\textsuperscript{455} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 121.
\textsuperscript{456} Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 177.
the Three and the Many Gunton proposes three open transcendentals: perichoresis, substantiality (or hypostasis), and relationality (sociality in the personal realm). For Gunton there is a link between perichoresis and Christology. The “Son is the focus of God the Father’s immanent action, his involvement within the structures of the world, as paradigmatically in Jesus, but also in his various angelic and other presences to the world recorded in the Old Testament.” If the relation between Jesus as Son with the Father and the Spirit can be described by the term perichoresis, a term involving movement, recurrence and interpenetration, then it is possible to view the structures of this world as perichoretically related as well. Gunton’s view on Christ (Christology) influences how he perceives the Logos, the Greek rationality, which was seen to hold everything together.

There is another move from Christology to ontology in Gunton’s article: “Atonement: The Sacrifice and the Sacrifices. From Metaphor to Transcendental?" According to Gunton, sacrifice is a notion without which we cannot make sense of our world. It is a transcendental that is given definitive shape theologically by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God’s gracious will to self-giving is central to understand not only God but the world as well.

So in order to counter the fragmentation of modernity, Gunton develops a relational ontology. The contribution of Christology to this relational ontology is to view the deepest reality as perichoretically and sacrificially related.

---

457 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 206, 229. M.J. Kater mistakenly posits that the three open transcendentals are: relationality, particularity, and temporality. Kom en Zie, 252. The quote of Gunton on which Kater bases this observation states: “I shall hope to use the trinitarianly developed transcendentals to throw light on the contested questions which the earlier chapters showed to have been so unsatisfactorily treated in both the ancient and modern worlds: relationality, particularity, temporality (...).” Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 150. Kater confuses the trinitarianly developed transcendentals with the questions upon which they are intended to throw light.

458 Gunton, Act and Being, 77-78.

459 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 165.

460 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 178-179. Of course, the relation between all three persons of the Trinity can be described by the term perichoresis. But the link between this term and the immanent structures of the world is made by Christology, because the Son is the focus of the Father’s immanent action. The Spirit is the focus of the transcendent, eschatological action, pulling things forward to that for which God has made them. Gunton, Act and Being, 78.


462 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 185.

6. Evaluation of Gunton

The evaluation in this section will follow the general outline of this part. After looking to the methodology with which Gunton reads the Western context (6.1), the content of that reading will be evaluated (6.2). Then the methodology of his Christology follows (6.3), and lastly the content of his Christology (6.4).

6.1 THE METHODOLOGY OF READING THE WESTERN CONTEXT

There are many strengths in the methodology with which Gunton reads the Western context.

According to Gunton theology should follow Barth in taking revelation, the gospel about Jesus Christ, as the point of departure for its method. He has argued this point with much methodological rigor, and consistently pointed out the importance of the axiom at the root of one’s thinking: is it a modern dualistic axiom, presuming divinity and humanity to be contradictory predicates, or is it a non-dualistic axiom that accepts the New Testament portrayal which place Jesus consistently on both the human and divine level of reality. Gunton provides here much clarity.

Gunton discerns the context with an awareness of idolatry. This is a real contribution to the field of contextual theology. By noticing where there is wrongly directed worship in the context, one has (from a Christian perspective) a valid point of critique. Precisely because false worship always leads to a false view on the world and different forms of slavery, this type of contextual theology adds true discernment.

Gunton affirms the contextual nature of theology. Jesus as God’s revelation (the gospel) is the basis of theology, and this basis should not be questioned. But theological reasoning is part of culture and can be wrong-headed too, as shown in the classical concept of God and the Western understanding of creation. There is a real awareness with Gunton that theology is not timeless. Theology can become distorted by either paying attention only to the conversation ‘on the wall,’ or to the conversation ‘behind the wall’ (see section2.1). He is aware that the dominant voice at the wall can become absolute, ideological and idolatrous, but the reverse can also be the case. The faith-tradition needs critique as well, otherwise it also can become absolute, ideological and idolatrous. So Gunton responds constructively to modernity, neither embracing all its critiques on Christianity, nor rejecting everything in the name of tradition. He is willing to re-consider Christological formulations, creatively renewing the theological tradition.

The strength of Gunton’s contextualization is in his ability to engage the philosophical questions in the Western context. Though this approach
makes his theology only accessible for philosophically minded intellectuals, it really can help those theologians to become aware of the philosophical assumptions that color their reading of Scripture, and to receive a new lens for reading and understanding.

There are also weak points in the methodology with which Gunton reads the Western context. Three will be pointed out: Misperceiving the character and extent of knowledge, lack of attention to pain and suffering within the context, and lack of attention to the questions and sense of life in the context.

a. Misperceiving the character and extent of knowledge
In section 3.1 it has been argued that human perception is one of the three themes that form the deep structure of Gunton’s theology. Gunton makes a claim for Christian rationality and the knowability of God’s inner being. He is at this point willing to put himself over against the whole tradition of Eastern Christianity and large parts of the Western tradition:

This principle that God is trinitarianly knowable is one which is most neglected in the tradition, and, indeed, may raise the question of whether we need one traditional attribute, that of the unknowability of God, at all. It undoubtedly calls into question the way the matter has often been put in both East and West. In the East, the official doctrine, associated especially with Gregory Palamas, is that we do not know the being or essence of God, but know him through his energies. In the West, certainly until the late medievals—beginning, as we have seen, with Scotus—and the Reformers began their critique, the doctrine was the Neoplatonically formed teaching that we do not know God in himself, but from his effects. It seems to me that both of these ways of putting it are at best misleading, and that in the light of the gospel we must be free to confess that we are granted to know the very being of God.  

Certainly, Gunton is right in his claim that there is true knowledge of God possible, because God truly reveals himself in Christ. The first epistle of John did not hesitate to make the claim “God is love” based on this revelation of God in Christ. But two questions have to be asked, the first is if this knowledge is totally rational, the second about the extent of this knowledge.

Is this knowledge of God totally rational? Thomas F. Torrance, a theologian Gunton speaks highly of, speaks freely about the ‘mystery of Christ’ in order to describe the co-presence of humanity and divinity in Christ. We are granted to

464 Gunton, Act and Being, 110-111.
465 1 John 4:8,16.
know a ‘mystery.’ Gunton rather omits talk about ‘mystery’ out of fear for irrationalism. But does this not point to the fact that Gunton thinks of ‘revelation by the Spirit’ as being a totally rational revelation? Is Gunton right that we can grasp this mystery solely by our ‘conscious mind’?

Sense perception and discursive reason are two different ways of knowing and both belong to the conscious mind. Michael J.B. Allen argues that Plato recognized a third way of knowing: “If the first eye is the Herecleitian eye of sense perception, and the second the Socratic eye of discursive reason, the third is the Pythagorean eye of the intuitive intellect.” Plato used the third eye, as it were, to look at divine things. Plato acknowledged that the gods sometimes inspired a divergence of normal rationality in the form of love, Dionysian frenzy, oracular prophecy, and poetic composition. The way of the poet and the prophet, of the dream and of the vision, and—most importantly—the way of love, cannot be restricted to the conscious mind alone, there is an ‘unconscious’ aspect.

Plato’s third way of knowing has remained alive in the Christian West in the more mystical theologians. For example, in the early medieval period Hugh and Richard of St. Victor wrote that humanity was given three different sets of eyes: the eye of the flesh (thought or sight), the eye of reason (meditation or reflection), and the eye of true understanding (contemplation). In our day the mystical tradition flourishes with new strength and it is often put forward as the one thing that unites all religions. In light of the emergence of different forms of new spirituality, the weakness of Gunton’s theology becomes more clear: there is not much room for this mystical or Dionysian current in religion. Bishop John Taylor’s words are worth pondering:

The Greek philosophers supposed that pure reason was the only element in man that could aspire to know absolute reality (...). But the mystery religions kept alive an older, truer and more dangerous knowledge of the meeting of

---

469 Both depth-psychologists and psychologists of religion have pointed to the importance of this third type of knowledge in religion and the unconscious aspects of, for example, the ‘symbol.’ See, for example, Tjeu van den Berk, *Mystagogie: inwijding in het symbolisch bewustzijn* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 1999), especially 125-131.
God with man. There is more of Dionysus than Apollo in the Holy Spirit. Beneath the high altar of St Peter’s, Rome at the level of the pre-
Constantinian cemetery, there is a mosaic depicting Christ as the young Apollo in the chariot of the sun. It was a natural choice of imagery for that Graeco-Roman world, but one that was fraught with danger for the church. It was one thing to proclaim Christ as the Logos and Light which enlightens every man, and to experience the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, for these are concepts deeply rooted in the prophets’ faith in the God who has acted. It is quite a different thing to identify either Christ or the Spirit with the philosophers’ abstraction of rationality and enlightenment (...). I am not suggesting that we can safely identify the movement of the Holy Spirit with the upsurging of the unconscious. But I am saying that this is very often the medium in which he works; for this is the sphere from which our sudden recognitions and ‘annunciations’ seem to arise. (...)

The Spirit is not averse to the elemental world of our dreams, the raw emotion of our fears and angers, the illogical certainties of our intuitions, the uncharted gropings of our agnosticism, the compulsive tides of our history. These are his *milieu.*

The powerlessness of Gunton’s theology is never felt more intensely than when questions about this type of Dionysian spirituality are in need of discernment, for example in spiritual direction. Oswald Bayer states that theology should stand between ‘myth’ and ‘metaphysics.’ However, Gunton’s theology operates at the metaphysical end of the spectrum and is far removed from ‘myth.’ Though this might look like a strength in conversation with philosophers and scientists—and the claim here is not that metaphysics should be discarded—it becomes a weakness in conversation with the revival of spirituality. In Gunton’s theology there is a ‘taming of God,’ the ‘religious sense’ is muted.

This third type of knowledge has also much to do with desire and love, and the argument here is that these should be more at the foundation of knowing than Gunton permits. Esther Lightcap Meek, a Christian philosopher working on epistemology under inspiration of Michael Polanyi, points to the importance of ‘desire’ and ‘love’ in inviting the real. Knowing is an expression of love. One can get to know only that which one loves. This Christian and Augustinian understanding can be contrasted with the Greek

---

understanding where not love but knowledge has the priority. In the words of Leonardo da Vinci: “Every great love is the daughter of a great cognition.”

Graham Tomlin points out that this different understanding about the priority of either love or knowledge, is also visible in comparing Descartes and Pascal:

The major question posed by Descartes in seventeenth century intellectual life was the question of epistemology. Pascal refuses to be swayed by this: his diagnosis of the human condition insists that the essential problem is not primarily epistemological, but soteriological. It is not a failure to understand God, it is a failure to love him. This insight flows directly out of his understanding of the nature of the Augustinian God approached in love.

For Gunton the major reason for modernity’s rejection of Christianity was the wrong concept of God (the classical concept). So Gunton follows the Greek line of thinking: knowledge has priority. Because of a failure to correctly understand the true God people turned away. Pascal would reject this claim of Gunton and insist that rather than a failure to understand God it was a failure to love him that was the cause of God’s displacement.

The suggestion here is that if one enriches the ‘human perception’ of Gunton with this third type of knowledge, desire and love can be at the foundation of knowledge. This also allows for a truly embodied rationality. Gunton rightly points to the danger of a lack of ‘embodied rationality’ with “too great a concentration on abstract reason at the expense of other features of being (...).” But because of his lack of attention to the role of desire and love his analysis of the Western context remains somewhat abstract.

Paying attention to desire is crucial in the changing Western context. In our visual media saturated world, we should not overlook the fact that visual stimuli often bypass our thinking and appeal directly to the desires.

---

474 Meek, Loving to Know, 430.
476 One is inclined to ask if Gunton’s “I don’t like Augustine” (see: Gunton, The Barth lectures, 6) had greater ramifications than the areas of explicit disagreement with Augustine on e.g. time/eternity and the doctrine of creation.
477 Interestingly, in his book Enlightenment & Alienation, Gunton is aware that there has to be something that precedes the active intellect or will. It is a moral orientation that not only tries to see the other accurately but to see the other justly and lovingly. “This is something of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation (...).” Gunton, Enlightenment & Alienation, 75. The loving attention directed to people or things precedes the right understanding. It is, however, a minor theme and in later works it is not developed.
478 Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 178.
Pictures and images pull us in, draw us in, they are animated beings with desires, needs, appetites, demands, and drives of their own.\textsuperscript{479}

After having looked to the nature of our knowledge of God, the extent of our knowledge of God will be considered. Are we granted to know the very being of God, as Gunton claims in the quote at the beginning of this section? Or did the Eastern and Western theological traditions conserve intuitions of the living biblical tradition, which Gunton would have done well to take more serious? According to Michael Wyschogrod there is in Jewish thought an intuition about the danger of pursuing knowledge of God as He is in Himself:

The Bible wants man to know only about the God who turns to man and engages him. It does not seem to want man to know about the privacy of God, when he is turned inward into his own being. Knowledge about God in his true nature, as he is in himself and apart from his relation to man, is inevitably objective knowledge. Objective knowledge is made possible by a stepping back in order to discover the contours of what is known, of its place in the whole and its relation to other things. The Bible does not approve of such knowledge of God. God is encountered in command and command is an experience of the subjectivity of God, of his commanding and observing man rather than of man observing him. Objective knowledge of God would give man power over God because it is inherent in objective knowledge to relativize its object and to gain power over it. The Bible is therefore not a theological work if by theology we mean a reflective analysis of the nature and purpose of God. In the New Testament the Gospels are also not theological works to any significant extent because they are primarily the telling of a story rather than the drawing of more or less systematic conclusions.\textsuperscript{480}

Wyschogrod might not be totally right in his contrasting “God as he turns to man and engages him” and “God as He is in Himself,” a contrast between the Acts of God and the Being of God as Gunton would put it. Put to an extreme this contrast could lead to suggesting that God in Himself is someone totally different from how he engages us. Moreover, if obedience to this God is loving obedience, then the loving contemplation of who this God is—the one who has turned to us and engages us—does not necessarily lead to the dangers that Wyschogrod points out so well. But Wyschogrod is right in clearly


pointing to the objectification of God as a major danger, treating God as object rather than subject.

Hans Küng can hardly be typified as a mystical or irrational theologian, and yet he points to the same danger. In his interaction with Taoism, he writes: “Taoist and Christian thought agree that the inner Being of the Tao or of God remains hidden for people. Who thinks that he can penetrate into the secret of God, in order to see God as it were in a sense from the inside, falls prey to a big self-deception. Who thinks he has grasped God, has already violated Him.”

Gunton’s position becomes clear in his interaction with Kierkegaard. Jaroslav Pelikan attributes to Soren Kierkegaard the distinction of “having penetrated more deeply than any other Christian thinker, at least since Luther, into the subtle fallacy of identifying the Holy and the True.” But Gunton is less sure. He sees greatness in Kierkegaard, precisely because he reacted so strongly to “the tendency to identify God and human reason, a tendency which came to full flower in the Hegel against whom so many of Kierkegaard’s polemics were directed.” But Gunton also points out where he sees problems with Kierkegaard: “(...) as an assertion of the rights of faith it can become an enemy of knowledge. (...) If there is to be responsible talk of God in Christ, must not some further account be given than of God as the unknown who is met in paradoxical relation to the temporal?”

The drive for clear knowledge makes Gunton hesitant to admit paradox or mystery. The question that has to be raised at this point is about the relation between knowledge and the cross. The question for Gunton, at this point, can be formulated in this way: Does the fact that God reveals Himself in cross and resurrection, as the gospel-narrative so clearly delineates, have consequences for how we do theology? Theology makes claims to truth, and truth is intimately related to power, but does the theology of Gunton use power in a manner that is consistent with God’s revelation on the cross? Gunton pursues a created rationality—neither omniscient nor powerless—but he does not pursue a crucified rationality, a rationality developed in light of the fact that the cross can only be understood from a position of powerlessness.

---


483 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 141.

484 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 141-142.

485 For rationality and the theologia crucis, see: Tomlin, The Power of the Cross.
claim that we can know the inner being of God (on basis of his revelation) not in danger of denying this powerlessness, because it suggests that it is within the power of our created rationality to know God? There is an absence of emphasis on the weakness and foolishness of God’s revelation, and this makes his theology sometimes look like a ‘theology of glory.’ Stated differently: Gunton links his doctrine of God and doctrine of the world in human perception, but the doctrine of sin and atonement did not have much impact on how he viewed the working of this human perception. So his claim for Christian rationality lacks Christological shape.

b. Lack of attention to pain and suffering within the context

A second weakness is that Gunton does not give attention to the places of pain within the Western context. Gunton’s conversation ‘on the wall’ is with Western philosophy. So it is a conversation with the intellectual powerful within the Western context. Gunton does not listen to the truth which could be heard by paying attention to the excluded, the poor, and those suffering the greatest pain within the Western context or outside that context as a result of the relations between the Western- and other parts of the world. In section one it was noted that Gunton hardly interacted with the liberation theology in England of his days. That might be symptomatic. Joerg Rieger states that in much contextual theology, practiced on the level of well-to-do middle-class churches across the conservative-liberal spectrum, “our own concerns, initiatives, and questions set the stage for theology.” In Gunton’s theology, it are the philosophical questions of the Western context that set the stage. The point here is not that it is wrong to engage those questions. Rather, the point is that the truth of the situation in the Western context cannot be solely discerned from the center of (intellectual) power nor from the history of philosophy as such. As long as the marginalized and excluded remain a blind spot in theology (the underside of history), one cannot find the truth about oneself. Listening to the marginalized and excluded should therefore not be viewed as ‘special interest theology’ or ‘advocacy reading,’ but as a theology done for the benefit of both poor and rich, excluded and included.

In order to understand why Gunton remains on distance from the more concrete history of suffering, one could look to his treatment of the

486 Compare 1 Corinthians 2: 1-16.
487 Hans Schaeffer rightly points out that the influence of hamartiology on anthropology is not clear. Schaeffer, Createdness and Ethics, 99.
489 Rieger, “Developing a Common Interest Theolog from the Underside,” 129-130, 125.
attributes of God. Gunton follows Barth using the dialectic between love and freedom as the matrix to position the attributes.\textsuperscript{490} For our purposes only the first six pairs have to be pointed out. The first six are three perfections of the divine loving (grace, mercy and patience) which are dialectically paired with three perfections of divine freedom (holiness, righteousness and wisdom). So these are: gracious-holy, merciful-righteous, patient-wise. What would have happened if Gunton’s passion to contextualize around the worship of God within the Western context would have started more clearly with these attributes? Would it not have stimulated thought about graciousness and holiness in the Western context (e.g. in dealing with money and sex), mercy and righteousness (including attention for the excluded and marginalized), and patience and wisdom (e.g. in dealing with terrorism and warfare)? However, Gunton’s real contextualization happens around the points of: dualism, time/eternity, power/love (freedom), individualism/community (monism). All the main points of contextualization are therefore of a more philosophical nature.

c. \textit{Lack of attention to the questions and sense of life in the context}
There is a sense in which Gunton does listen to the voices from the context. However, if the analysis in this study is correct, Gunton listens only to the critique of how the gospel has been explained. He takes the critical voices serious in order to re-shape the presentation of the gospel and the theological implications of the gospel. This is certainly an important part of contextualization. The questions of the context do not determine the message of the gospel. However, this type of contextualization is also limited. The questions that people ask deserve a sensitive answer, even if they are not related to the heart of the gospel. According to Walter Brueggemann, God Himself is a dialogical character, and the religious temptation is to dissolve the dialogue into an authoritarian monologue.\textsuperscript{491} Gunton stays too far removed from a real dialogue with the context.

6.2 THE CONTENT OF READING THE WESTERN CONTEXT
There are many strengths in the content of Gunton’s reading of the Western context.

Gunton’s perspective on how modernity arose out of the Medieval past is really perceptive. Suddenly, the whole development of the modern world makes a lot more sense. Even the phase of late-modernity (post-
modernity) is illuminated by the historical sketch which Gunton paints. Of course, critical questions can be asked about the accuracy of the details of Gunton’s sketch, for example in his reading of Augustine. The details of the critiques are not important for the present study, but with Holmes it can be said: “To say that these big stories needed nuancing is to miss their point: Colin was not trying to give a full and adequate narrative in the history of ideas, but trying to illustrate the nature of systematic theology.” Ideas have consequences. The strength of Gunton is that he picked up on ideas and propositions in e.g. Augustine that had in the long run disastrous consequences.

The four paradoxical features of Modernity which Gunton perceives, are a strength in the analysis of the Western context. They are not just philosophical issues, but recognizable in the lives of many. Especially the quest for freedom, problems surrounding the relation of the individual with the community, and the unease with time (being hurried because of the illusion that we have to create the future) play a major role.

There are also weaknesses in the content of Gunton’s reading of the Western context. Many of them have already been pointed out in the last section. Gunton does not read the Western context through a lens of justice (thereby overlooking the places of pain and suffering), he does not give much attention to the role of money, consumerism, sex, and the impact of the media, though all of these are, arguably, powerful shapers of the lives of people in the Western context.

An important weakness, which has not yet been pointed out, is Gunton’s lack of attention to the rise of the new spiritualities, though that was a feature of the British context during Gunton’s working years. There was a considerable rise in spiritual and supernatural experience among non-churchgoers, from 48 per cent in 1987 to 76 per cent in 2000. However, when it comes to questions about spiritual experience and ortho-praxis, Gunton does not have much to offer.

---

492 See, Bradley Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine.*
494 See also Robert Jenson, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” 11-12. For a balanced and more extensive discussion of Gunton’s critique on Augustine’s view of the material world, see: Whitney, *Problem and Promise,* 29-37.
495 The dualistic rationality also plays a role, but unlike the other three features, this is often not experienced as being problematic.

231
6.3 THE METHODOLOGY OF CHRISTOLOGY

There are many strengths in the methodology of Gunton’s Christology. Gunton’s awareness that the starting-point for Christology is the gospel has already been pointed out in section 6.1. Also his theological and dialectical reading in Christology continue the methodology of reading the Western context.

Important insights in the methodology of Christology can be found in section 4.4-4.8. There is a real consistency and rigor in Gunton’s methodology. The dualism between Christology ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ is well known, but Gunton gives important insights in challenging the underlying dualism (4.4). Even more unique is the way in which he brings an awareness of the role of time to a consideration of the methodology of Christology. He shifts the whole discussion from the problem of the historical Jesus and the post-Easter Christ, to the relation between the ‘historical-risen’ Christ and the Christus praesens (4.5). Gunton’s awareness of the different types of rationalism in the Western context, made him aware of the role of language in Christology. His re-introduction of the importance of ‘metaphor’ opened up new approaches in discussions about the atonement (4.6). He is also very aware of questions about unity and diversity, both in Christology proper and in soteriology (4.7). Gunton does not claim that the diversity of the New Testament can be brought back to one Christology. There is not a single New Testament Christology. But, according to Gunton, we need to look to a deeper level. “If we take the one human and divine reality of Jesus Christ to be the logically primitive reality, then the diversities of expression can be understood as different attempts to express in words the richness of this reality which must necessarily transcend all its verbal expressions.”

Finally, after Christ and Creation, Gunton consistently develops Christology with an awareness of the cosmic context and the need to overcome the dichotomy between the personal and physical universe (4.8). All these strengths are only pointed out in order not to repeat what has been said in section four.

Three weaknesses in the methodology with which Gunton approaches Christology will be pointed out. Especially when one does Christology not only in an academic setting but also in a missionary setting these become apparent. The first weakness is, as has been pointed out in section 2.2, is that for Gunton the gospel is in fact equivalent to the incarnation. This does not mean that Gunton overlooks soteriology, but (in the planet analogy) the incarnation is the star and soteriology becomes a planet. One can notice this by looking to what happens to soteriology in Gunton’s contextualization. Though Gunton

---

497 Gunton, Yesterday and Today, 72.
gives sustained attention to soteriology, it is not his soteriology that is contextualized. Gunton does not read the Western context in light of the victory, judgment, and sacrifice of Christ. He reads it in light of the incarnation of Christ (and the result of this foundational axiom upon the areas of rationality, time, power, and unity versus diversity). This is an imbalance in understanding the gospel. Methodologically Gunton’s soteriology is under-weighted.498

The second weakness can be introduced by pointing to a development in Gunton’s theology. Stephen Holmes has analyzed a gradual shift in Gunton’s thinking about the task of theology. He shows that Gunton in his early work saw the gospel story as definitive of God’s triune life, and in his later work he saw it as merely revelatory. In the first case understanding the Trinity is, as it were, a lens to understand the gospel, the revelation of Jesus Christ. In the latter case it becomes more and more “the task of theology to find ways of speaking about God’s eternal life that accept that it is repeated or mirrored or lived out in the economy.”499 The real focus of theology shifts to understanding the immanent Trinity. Jenson also seems to share this second approach to theology with his comment: “Historically and properly, the immanent Trinity is the foundation in God of his communion with us as the economic Trinity, and so can be properly construed only by keeping that economy always in mind.”500 Should one only keep the economy in mind or should one always keep the economy as the real focus for theology? From a missionary perspective the first approach—seeing the gospel story as definitive of God’s triune life and keeping the economy as the real focus for theology—is to be commended. The missionary movements always had their impulse in the proclamation and manifestation of the gospel. Trinitarian developments are crucial lenses in understanding the gospel, but if a certain understanding of the Trinity starts to function as the real gospel, one is not passing on the apostolic gospel. In that case the gospel becomes a planet that surrounds the star of the Trinity, rather than the Trinity being the planet that surrounds the star of the gospel. If the renaissance of Trinitarian theology would result in a shift of focus, from gospel to immanent Trinity, it has lost its biblical and missionary center.

A third weakness in the methodology of Gunton’s Christology is the fact that discipleship-in-context does not play a constitutive role. As has been pointed out in the evaluation of Berkhof,501 Christology in the New Testament

498 Of course, there are also many treatments of the gospel that have the incarnation under-weighted. For a fuller treatment of the gospel, see part III, section 1.
501 Part I, section 6.3.
might be called “discipleship-in-context Christology.” The Christology of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, has influence on their portrayals of discipleship, but one could also argue that their perception of the challenges of discipleship within that context influences their Christology. This interplay is also important for today. The methodology of Christology should, therefore, pay attention to the challenges of discipleship within the local church in a particular context.\textsuperscript{502} Gunton overlooks that.\textsuperscript{503}

\section*{6.4 THE CONTENT OF CHRISTOLOGY}

There are many strengths in the content of Gunton’s Christology. Two of them, especially pertaining to contextualizing Christology in the Western context will be pointed out.

The first strength is that Gunton is aware of the philosophical shifts that are taking place in the Western context and that he is trying to formulate Christology from within this different situation. According to LeRon Shults, most Greek philosophers valued substance over relationality both ontologically and epistemologically. ‘Relation’ appears in Aristotle’s list of categories but is subordinated to the category of substance. ‘Relation’ does not appear in Plato’s list, although he does include ‘difference,’ which is the basis for relation. In general, there was a preference for ‘sameness’ (and thus ‘substance’) over ‘difference’ (and thus ‘relation’).\textsuperscript{504} Within the possibilities set by this philosophical climate, the early church struggled with the question how both the unity and difference of the two natures (substances) can be upheld. The Definition of Chalcedon clearly shows the influence of the philosophical climate. The phrase ‘the same’ (ton auton) appears eight times within the Definition of Chalcedon. However, it often goes unnoticed, according to LeRon Shults, because the repetition of the term is so cumbersome that most English translations do not translate them all.\textsuperscript{505} In this philosophical climate the schools of the Alexandrians and Antiochenes represent the two logical options that are forced by this way of structuring the debate, the Alexandrians emphasizing the unity between the two natures.

\textsuperscript{502} See further part III, section 4.
\textsuperscript{503} At least in his chosen methodology. Through his involvement in the local church, Gunton might have been unconsciously picking up some of the challenges in discipleship. One gets, for example, the impression that his description of the modern struggle with time (see section 3.3) shows awareness of the challenging nature of this topic for faithful living.
\textsuperscript{505} LeRon Shults, \textit{Christology and Science}, 25-26.
(tending towards a more Aristotelian understanding of the human person, with a strong emphasis on the unity of the soul and the body), the Antiochenes stressing the distinction between the divine and human nature (tending towards a more Platonic anthropology in which the body and soul were more strongly distinguished). Gunton is very aware of the philosophical shifts in the Western context, and develops his Christology by emphasizing divine and human actions (rather than divine and human attributes) and the relation between Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

One of the weaknesses of the Chalcedonian tradition has been that it always has struggled to concede Jesus’ human dependence on God, his need to pray for himself and his reliance on divine grace. One of the streams of theology which took this side of the gospel serious was Socinian theology, and this has been one of the reasons why the impact of this stream on modern Christology has been so big. According to Alan Spence, one of the key arguments of the nontrinitarian Racovian Catechism was that Christ’s empowerment by the Holy Spirit and his continued dependency on God, as it is reflected in his practice of private prayer, is not compatible with the idea that he was substantially one with God. Gunton, however, looks for ways to give room to Jesus’ human reliance on the Spirit within a Chalcedonian Christology. Following Edward Irving, Gunton teaches first that Jesus was enabled to resist temptation not by some immanent conditioning, but by virtue of his obedience to the guidance of the Spirit. This allows him to take the different moments in Christ’s life and show that Jesus as real man passed through the various stages from childhood to manhood. However, this type of teaching often easily becomes Arian or Adoptionist. Therefore Gunton teaches a radical doctrine of the self-emptying of the eternal Son, who humbled himself and emptied himself, this being an expression of the inner dynamic of the Trinity. The result is an account in which the relation between Jesus and his Father can be taken with full seriousness, and also the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit play a much more constitutive role.

A second strength of Gunton’s Christology in light of contextualizing the gospel in the Western context, is his treatment of the doctrine of penal substitution. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, the hegemony of the juridical-penal model plays an important role in the rise of unbelief in the West. The whole juridical-penal way in which the doctrine of original sin and the

508 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 54.
atonement were cast during the high middle ages and the Reformation was particularly repulsive to the Enlightenment mind.\textsuperscript{510} Gunton listened intently to the criticisms directed at this part of the tradition and tried to reform the doctrine of the atonement in light of those criticisms, which he perceived to be partly justified. Gunton correctly points to the problematic bottom-line in the doctrine of penal substitution, which is that every sin must be punished: either we receive that punishment or Jesus in our place, but in both cases retributive justice will always be upheld. The need for retributive justice rather than reconciling love is at the heart of the matter.\textsuperscript{511} However, by letting one’s understanding of justice be formed by ‘retribution,’ love and justice are perceived to be deeply at odds with one another. The reasoning then goes that God is love, but he is also just. Wolterstorff, in his book \textit{Justice in Love}, shows how problematic this line of reasoning is. It not only betrays a wrong understanding of justice, but also a wrong understanding of love. In the West love has often been understood as undeserved ‘benevolence,’ but it is better understood as ‘care.’\textsuperscript{512} Care includes seeking justice. Treating the neighbor justly is not an alternative to loving him, but a way of loving him, as Moses’ teaching in Leviticus on the love-commandment makes clear.\textsuperscript{513} Punishment maybe part of justice, but punishment is not to be equated with retribution. Wolterstorff writes: “Jesus’ injunction to forgive the repentant wrongdoer implies opposition to retributive punishment of repentant wrongdoers; his rejection of the negative side of the reciprocity code implies opposition to retributive punishment in general.”\textsuperscript{514} Justice cannot be equated with retributive justice. Gunton defines justice in this way:

\begin{quote}
Justice has for scripture a far wider embrace than fairness and the proper punishment of offence. Comprehensively, divine justice refers to the realization of God’s rule over the creation, and that means the fulfilment of his project that all creation should be perfected and therefore praise him. Human injustice is in that light that which retards the movement to perfection of the world and its constituent people and things. If, then, Jesus is to embody and realize God’s purpose, his action must in some way achieve a reordering, a re-establishing of God’s just and merciful rule over his world.\textsuperscript{515}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{511} Gunton, \textit{The Barth Lectures}, 174.
\textsuperscript{513} Wolterstorff, \textit{Justice in Love}, 80-84.
\textsuperscript{514} Wolterstorff, \textit{Justice in Love}, 129.
\textsuperscript{515} Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 74.
But if God does not retributively punish sinners, how then does God deal with the sins of people? Does God simply forgive, out of mercy? Though many today prefer this view, it is not the view that Gunton takes. As stated in section 5.3.e. Gunton points out that poena and satisfactio are alternatives. This is forcefully brought home in the following sentence: “Satisfaction is therefore according to Anselm the way by which God is enabled not to exact a tribute of compensating penalty from the sinner.”

What then is satisfaction? It is the divine action in setting right that which has been thrown out of kilter by human sin. The good God is unwilling to allow his creatures to destroy themselves. Now, to be sure, there is a kind of rejection and wrath involved in the death of Christ:

We have seen (...) that God’s justice is not primarily his punitive act but his purpose to see the right prevail. But if we are to be true to the overall message of scripture, we must also allow that the wrath of God is integral also to his relations with the world. Wrath is the form that holy love takes when it is rejected, and it involves the rejection of the actions of those who put themselves outside the love of God. It is a function of God’s love, and so is punitive only in the respect that it accepts that breaches of the law must entail certain consequences, however much these are mitigated in their outcome. (The function of punishment in a loving family offers a proper if limited analogy). It is, however, not punitive in making punishment an end in itself rather than a means to the greater end of the redemption of the sinner. To obtain some conception of what it involves, we again refer to Jesus’ horror before his execution, which is the horror of one encountering God’s rejection of all that is unfit to come into his presence. He endures it, however, so that we should not have to suffer the deadly judgment that is the logical outcome of our ways.

So one could say that Jesus Christ bears our punishment in that, if he would not have come, we would have suffered the deadly judgment that is the logical outcome of our ways. One sees here that Gunton develops (following the lead of Anselm and of Barth) a doctrine of atonement which is not controlled so much by the necessity of punishment, but by the gracious

---

516 Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 90. Guda H. Borger-Koetsier traces in her Ph.D. thesis, Verzoening tussen God en Mens in Christus: Theologiehistorisch onderzoek naar de opvattingen in het twintigste-eeuwse Nederland (Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2006), the line from Anselm’s ‘aut poena aut satisfactio’ (either punishment or satisfaction, 34), to Thomas of Aquinas’ ‘poena satisfactoria’ (satisfying punishment, 40), to the Reformer’s ‘satisfactio poenalis’ (satisfaction through punishment, 43).
518 Gunton, The Christian Faith, 75-76.
initiative of God in re-creation. This approach is a strength in the Western context for two reasons. The first is that it has gone through the fires of modern critique, rather than retreating from them. The second is that this revised doctrine might have much more convincing and blessing power in our late-capitalist exchange economy than the classical penal substitution. As Darrin Belousek has shown, the retributive principle is also present in the exchange economy and reflects how humans try to trade fairly. There is nothing necessarily wrong with honest exchange, but it does not capture the abundance of grace that is present in God’s dealings with humanity. If the heart of the salvation is presented through a model with the retributive principle as a bottom-line, the surprising quality of the good news will be muted.

There are also weaknesses in the content of Gunton’s Christology. Two will be pointed out.

The first weakness is only possibly a weakness: Gunton’s Christology is leaning towards monothelitism. This point is argued by Alan Spence. Gunton sees the interaction in Gethsemane as an interaction between the one divine-human will of Jesus and the will of the Father. The reason why Gunton does not accept two wills in Jesus Christ is that he believes, just as the Monothelitists, that the will is related to the person not to the human or divine nature:

A human nature and a divine nature cannot will anything. Only persons have wills, especially if by ‘will’ we mean that which initiates or brings about action directed to an object or end. But if we examine what is entailed, we shall realize that it is a mistake to make will into a kind of entity or object. It means, rather, a person willing something rather than some hypostatized

---


520 Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 27. See also chapter 20, 21, 23. He points out that the retributive principle is present as well in theories of capital punishment and just war, but this is for the European context somewhat less relevant.

521 Gregory Boyd, though from a different perspective than Gunton, points to C.S. Lewis as trying to do the same. In Lewis’ masterpiece ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ Aslan offers his life for Edmund. After the resurrection of Aslan he explains what happened to the two surprised and overjoyed girls: “Though the Witch knew the Deep Magic [referring to the law], there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. (...) when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.” Boyd comments: “the deepest and oldest magic is the power of self-sacrificial love.” Beilby & Eddy (eds.), *The Nature of the Atonement: Four views*, 101.


entity within the person of such a kind that one person can have two of them.\footnote{Gunton,\textit{ Act and Being}, 29.}

If we think of the will as something characterizing the action of a person there are ramifications for our understanding of God. Because earlier in history ‘will’ was seen as an attribute of ‘nature,’ it was clear that God could have only one ‘will.’ However, if ‘will’ is a characterization of the action of a person, there must be three divine wills. This idea is, according to Gunton, problematic for all kinds of reasons, but he is still open to speak of “three wills in utterly concerted action.”\footnote{Gunton,\textit{ Act and Being}, 29, 31.}

Alan Spence disagrees with Gunton at this point. He agrees with Maximus the Confessor: “The will cannot simply be dislocated from the nature as if it were an external or unrelated faculty.”\footnote{Spence,\textit{ Christology}, 55.} He believes that an important reason why Gunton does reject duothelitism is that he allocates the divine agency in Jesus Christ to the Father, rather than to the Son:

\[
(...) \text{ the allocation of agency to the Father in this way seems to me to be somewhat problematic }(...) \text{ Significant changes to Gunton’s Christological structure occur when God the Son is recognized as the divine agent of the human career of Jesus and the one willing his actions. It means that the duality of agency or volition of which Gunton speaks is a duality within the incarnate Christ.}\ 
\footnote{Spence,\textit{ Christology}, 61-62.}
\]

This is a complex situation. If Gunton would have expressed this theology during the Third Council of Constantinople, he would definitely have been in the Monothelitist camp, though of a quite different color than the Monophysites because of his strong stress on the humanity of Christ. And yet, a contemporary defense of Duothelitism (like Spence’s) seems to require an anthropological view of faculty psychology in which the will is an attribute of ‘nature,’ which is hardly defensible today.\footnote{On the problems with substance dualism and faculty psychology, see also LeRon Shults, \textit{Reforming Theological Anthropology}, 165-174.} Therefore it was stated that this is a possible weakness of Gunton’s Christology. More study is needed before Gunton’s approach can be accepted.

The second weakness has to do with the contextual nature of Gunton’s Christology. In response to Jesus’ question “Who do you say, I am?”\footnote{Mark 8:29.} Gunton
confesses Jesus as Lord of creation and creature (5.1), as the revelation of God’s eternal love in time (5.2), as God’s saving love and self-giving in action (5.3), as the second person of the Trinitarian communion become flesh (5.4). Gunton emphasizes Jesus as priest and mediator within a relational cosmos. This is all truly very important and worthwhile. And yet, there is a sense in which all these answers are the result of responding to philosophical questions (the dualism between God and humanity, the dualism between time and eternity, the relation between God’s power and human freedom, and the relation between the individual and the community). Gunton made an important and (I believe) lasting contribution in this area, but from a contextual perspective it remains too removed from the questions, fears, and desires of non-philosophically minded people. A closer engagement with these questions, fears, and desires is necessary.
PART III:
CONTOURS OF A WESTERN GOSPEL
AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Part I and II have presented how Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton analyze the Western context, what the content is of their analysis, how they methodologically approach Christology and what the content is of their Christology. Both the strengths and weaknesses in their approach have been pointed out in section 6.1-6.4 of part I and II. One could, at this point, continue in part III by deepening the discussion with Berkhof and Gunton and try to ignite a dialogue between them with respect to their interaction with the Western context and Christology. This approach would definitely contribute to the understanding of Berkhof and Gunton from a systematic theological perspective. However, as has been made clear in the introduction, the quest in this study is for a missiological reading of Christology. The desire that has driven this research is to find an answer to the question: What are the contours of a contextualized gospel for the Western world at the beginning of the 21st century? Part III wants to do that by building upon the contributions of Berkhof and Gunton. An attempt is made to incorporate their strengths and avoid their weaknesses and provide systematic proposals for analyzing the Western context and denoting outlines for doing Christology.

Part III is structured similarly to part I and II. Following up on section one (the function of which will be clarified at the start of that section), there is a discussion about how the church could analyze the Western context (section two). Section three presents a discussion about the content of the reading of the Western context. Section four continues with reflections on the method with which the church could approach contextualized Christology, while section five provides an outline of the contours of a contextualized Christology for the Western context in the beginning of the 21st century. Certainly, the contours of a Western gospel which are described in this third part are provisional, as all theology should be. But it is offered in the hope that it will bring the dialogue about this important topic a step further in the right direction.
1. The gospel as star-theme

This section provides the foundation for the discussion on methodology in section two. In order to understand in what way this is the case, one has to be reminded of the evaluations of the methodology with which Berkhof and Gunton analyze the Western context (section 6.1 in part I and II). It became clear that one major strength of Gunton is that he analyzes the Western context through the lens of worship and idolatry. Gunton has convincingly shown that both the monistic image of God in Mediaeval times and its displacement in Modern times had paradoxical outcomes. One of the major strengths of Berkhof is that he was very aware of the existential sense of life and the importance of the social-economic-political aspects of the context. Berkhof does not look to the context through a lens of worship but through a lens of salvation. The question emerges if it is possible to build upon the strength of Gunton and Berkhof by combining the lens of worship and salvation in a new methodology for reading the context? Certainly one can use a both-and approach and somehow combine the strengths of these two theologians, but this only will be convincing when the new methodology can show why both theologians are one-sided. Moreover this new methodology should also be able to correct the weaknesses that have been pointed out in Berkhof and Gunton, particularly the lack of attention to the centrality of the cross in Berkhof and the lack of attention to pain and suffering in Gunton’s theology, as well as Gunton’s misperception about the character and extent of knowledge.

How does one go about looking for such a new methodology? The starting-point for this search has been taken in another strength of Gunton’s theology, namely the insight that the gospel (the revelation about Jesus Christ) is the center for both the content of theology and the method of theology. This starting-point was confirmed (for the present author) by the study of Berkhof’s theology. As has been shown, Berkhof does not take the gospel as the star-theme of his theology and the result is that Christology is pulled around the star of anthropology (section 5.4 in part I).

The thesis in this study is that the gospel should be the star-theme of one’s theology. The gospel is the heart of the New Testament and the lens to understand the Old Testament. The gospel is shared among all the different traditions of the Christian church and the confession of this gospel unites all the branches of the Christian church. In the mission of the church the

---

1 “Theology is the science of the Christian gospel, that intellectual discipline which tests the beliefs of the Christian community, accepted as they are on the basis of preaching, experience, tradition, authority and all the other ways in which people happen to become believers.” Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 76.

2 See further section 1.1.
proclamation of the gospel (in word and deed) has always been central. The heart of the proclamation of the church did not consist in explicit views on ‘the human being,’ ‘the world,’ or ‘God,’ (the themes that carry the most weight in Berkhof’s approach) but in news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Certainly, the proclamation about Jesus Christ influences one’s view on ‘the human being,’ ‘the world,’ and ‘God,’ but as the four canonical Gospels make clear, it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is at the heart of the gospel. The heart of the proclamation of the church is the gospel and not Christology as such, though they are related. Christology, as a theological discipline, provides the church with a lens to read the canonical Gospels (and the rest of the Bible) and proclaim a contextual gospel about Jesus Christ within ever changing contexts.

So part III of this study takes the gospel as star-theme. On basis of this starting-point two subsequent questions are pursued:

1. What is the gospel? Could it be the case that both Gunton’s and Berkhof’s understanding of the gospel need correction, and that a fuller expression of the gospel (the star-theme) should be at the basis of a quest for a new methodology with which the church could read the Western context? Section one of part III pursues the question ‘What is the gospel?’ (1.1) and (as a transition to section two) ‘What is the relation between the gospel and the context?’ (1.2)

2. Is it possible to develop a new methodology for reading the (Western) context on basis of this fuller understanding of the gospel? This question is pursued in section two of part III.

1.1 WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

What is the gospel? There is much confusion about this question among Christians in general, but also among scholars there are differences of opinion. In the study of Colin Gunton, it became clear that he uses ‘the gospel’

3 “Gather a dozen Christians into a room and ask them the question, 'What is the gospel?' The likelihood is that you will receive a dozen different answers. Some Christians will speak about forgiveness of sins, entering into a personal relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ, and the gift of eternal life. They may add to this the incorporation of the believer into the body of Christ—the new humanity begun in Christ. Other Christians will speak of liberation from oppression and injustice, of reconciliation, or of the restoration of creation. Still others will speak of the power of the Holy Spirit, healing, miracles, freedom from demonic powers, and of a joy so intense that words simply cannot express it. Still other Christians will speak of strength in the midst of weakness, courage in the face of suffering, comfort, peace, and the capacity to face death unafraid.” James V. Brownson & Inagrace T. Dietterich & Barry A. Harvey & Charles C. West, Stormfront: The Good News of God, Gospel and Our Culture (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 35.
as a synonym for ‘the incarnation.’ For Berkhof the center of the gospel is not the incarnation, but the cross and resurrection. He uses the word ‘gospel’ often to refer to the critical and inspiring aspects of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Lesslie Newbigin, however, emphasizes still another aspect of the gospel. The gospel, for him, is an account of what happened, a story about things that happened at a particular time in history and a particular part of the world centering on the Mediterranean. Gunton emphasizes the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ (the God-man), Berkhof the work of Jesus Christ (soteriology) and Newbigin the historical narrative about Jesus Christ (given in the New Testament). How should these differences be evaluated? In order to answer this question some insights of a missiologist (Andrew Walls), a church historian (Ted Campbell), and a New Testament scholar (James Dunn) will be discussed.

Missiologist Andrew F. Walls has written many influential articles about the nature of the Christian faith and the transmission of the gospel across centuries and continents. He is aware of the incredible diversity of Christian expression in different contexts. There are different priorities in the expression of the faith and what appears of utmost importance to one group may appear intolerable, even blasphemous, to another. And yet, Walls believes we can discern a firm coherence underlying all the different expressions, and indeed, underlying the whole of historic Christianity. It is not easy to state this coherence in propositional or creedal form, for extended creedal formulation is itself a necessary product of a particular Christian culture, but still a small body of convictions and responses which reappear in all these different contexts can be pointed out:

1. The worship of the God of Israel. This not only defines the nature of God; the One, the Creator and the Judge, the One who does right and before whom

---

4 See part II, section 2.2.
5 See part I, section 2.4.
humanity falls down; it marks the historical particularity of Christian faith. And it links Christians—usually Gentiles—with the history of a people quite different from their own. It gives them a point of reference outside themselves and their society.

2. The ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth. This is perhaps the test which above all marks out historic Christianity from the various movements along its fringes, as well as from other world faiths which accord recognition to the Christ. Once again, it would be pointless to try to encapsulate this ultimacy forever in any one creedal formula. Any such formula will be superseded: or, even if adopted for traditional reasons, it may make no impression on believers who do not have the conceptual vocabulary the formula will imply. Each culture has its ultimate, and Christ is the ultimate in everyone’s vocabulary.

3. That God is active where believers are.

4. That believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.

Walls points out that besides these convictions there also certain practices (he calls them ‘institutions’) which have continued from century to century: the reading of a common body of scriptures and the special use of bread and wine and water.

Walls’ observations are not about the gospel as such, but about the communities that have become visible after the gospel has been proclaimed in these different contexts. To use an analogy: if the gospel is the seed, the result of sowing this seed is that a tree will grow up (a community embodying the gospel). As Walls observes, the amazing thing is that the gospel seed can bear fruit in very different soils (contexts). The resulting trees can be wildly different, but they can be recognized as gospel trees because they have as marks three major recognizable branches (the first three points of coherence of Walls) and their root system is connected with other gospel trees (the fourth point of coherence). See the picture on the next page.

If the many diverse communities that embody the gospel (the different trees) all reveal these three basic convictions (the three branches), while being connected with one another (the interconnected root system of the trees), the question arises if this is reflective of the DNA of the gospel itself. Does the gospel contain (in seed form) something that can grow out into trees with three major branches and an interconnected root system?

---

10 Walls points out that Christianity, more than any other religion, has spread outwards, across cultural frontiers. The very survival of Christianity as a separate faith has been linked to the process of cross-cultural transmission. “The progress has not been steadily outwards, as Muslims may claim of their faith. Its progress has been serial, with a principal presence in different parts of the world at different times.” Walls, “Culture and Coherene in Christian Faith,” 22.
One could, at this point, turn directly to a study of the meaning of the gospel within the Scriptures, but in order to have a perspective that is validated by the church in many centuries and on many continents, attention will first be given to church history. Church historian Ted A. Campbell, in his study *The Gospel in Christian Traditions*, focusses on the question if there are shared understandings of the gospel across different contexts and amidst different Christian traditions.\(^\text{11}\) Campbell shows that there is a basic message or belief that is shared by all the major branches of the church. One could speak about unity amidst diversity. Based on his involvement in ecumenical dialogue between different churches, his study of the official church statements, and his study of the results of bilateral dialogues in the ecumenical movement about the meaning of the gospel,\(^\text{12}\) Campbell discerns shared meanings of the gospel among Proto-Orthodox Christian Communities, Ancient Christian Churches (Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Assyrian churches), Protestant churches, Evangelical communities (including Pentecostal churches and contemporary megachurches), and the Ecumenical movement. This is not to say that the confession of this gospel does exactly mean the same thing between these widely varied communities with sometimes quite different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. After all, meanings are inevitably transformed in the transition from one cultural system to another. But shared meanings can be discovered by carefully comparing their statements on the

---


12 Bilateral dialogues are official talks between two Christian churches or families of churches (often known as Christian World Communions).
gospel. Campbell points to three clusters of shared meaning in the understanding of the gospel. It will become clear that these three clusters of shared meaning, which are present in the gospel seed, are responsible for the three major branches visible in all Christian communities across different contexts. These shared meanings will therefore, in this research, not only be treated as being historically descriptive of the church but also as prescriptive for the proclamation of the gospel. The Christian gospel needs to contain these three shared meanings. The three clusters of shared meaning will first be presented and then the results will be compared with the work of New Testament scholar James Dunn.

Campbell takes 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4, as a very early version of the good news. This is a summary of the gospel as it had been proclaimed orally in the earliest Christian communities before the canonical gospels or even the epistles of the New Testament were written down. The fascinating point he makes is that this summary is, up till today, shared by the worldwide church. Campbell points to three clusters of interrelated meanings associated with the gospel, based on words drawn from the summary in I Corinthians 15:3b-4:

1. “Christ died... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day.” The first cluster of shared meaning is the basic narrative (or story of events) of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This new story, this basic narrative, is at the heart of the gospel and shared by all churches. It was Newbigin, more than Gunton and Berkhof, who pointed to this aspect of the gospel.

---

14 The fourth mark of coherence will be discussed later.
15 “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (…).” (verse 3-4). Campbell does not include verse 5: “and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.” This is probably the result of his study of church history (the creeds do not emphasize the appearances), but from an exegetical perspective at least verse 5 belongs to the early creed. John Dickson notes that the appearances to the twelve (verse 5) are described in the closing chapters of all four Gospels. “Paul's gospel creed looks very much like it was crafted to follow this narrative sequence exactly.” John Dickson, The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 122. David Moffitt argues that also verse 6a and 7 belong to the early creed. David M. Moffitt, “Affirming the “Creed”: The Extent of Paul’s Citation of an Early Christian Formula in 1 Cor. 15, 3b-7,” Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und Kunde der Alten Kirche 99 (2007), 49-73. Though the canonical Gospels do not speak about Jesus’ appearance to the five hundred nor about a personal appearance to James, they do note appearances to those outside the direct circle of the twelve (to Mary and to those on the road to Emmaus).
Proclaiming the gospel always means telling the story about Jesus of Nazareth. This person has ultimate significance for Christians (Walls’ second mark of coherence). The story about him is not only significant when the gospel is preached in a new context, but also during the growth of the church. Through continuously reading the Scriptures, praying in the name of Jesus, and following him in discipleship, the ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth is embodied.

Though the summary of the basic narrative is shared across contexts, the basic narrative itself should not be viewed as a supracultural or supracontextual gospel core. The existence of four canonical Gospels makes clear that this narrative is only available in contextualized form. Every subsequent re-telling of this story is influenced by its context (and the one telling the story).

It is also clear that in church-history there have been different accents in how this narrative has been told. Sometimes the attention was focused so much on the suffering and death of Jesus, that Jesus’ own teaching about the gospel of the kingdom disappeared in the background. In the period after the Enlightenment, however, scholars in the so-called ‘quest for the historical Jesus’ have paid close attention to the life of Jesus and the ‘gospel of the kingdom’ which he preached. It might be asked if the gospel-summary in 1 Corinthians 15 pays enough attention to Jesus’ life and to the ‘gospel of the kingdom.’ After all, it seems that the focus is solely on the fact that Christ died, was buried, and was raised. But the four canonical Gospels point in a different direction. These Gospels begin by describing the life, teaching and powerful works of Jesus of Nazareth. In the middle of each of these Gospels the disciples are led to the affirmation: “You are the Messiah [Christ].” This affirmation inaugurates the narrative about Jesus’ suffering, death, burial, and resurrection. The canonical Gospels can, therefore, also be summarized with the words of 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4. “Christ died... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day” does not mean that a man named Christ died. It means that

18 For the different Christologies in the four canonical Gospels, see, for example: Mark Allan Powell & David R. Bauer (eds.), Who do You say that I am? Essays on Christology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 14-87.
19 Theologians writing from the perspective of the so-called ‘emerging church’ give also renewed attention to Jesus’ own ministry and his proclamation of the good news. See, for example, Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, Refjesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church (Peabody/Erina: Hendrickson Publishers and Strand Publishing, 2009).
God’s promised Messiah—the king of God’s kingdom died and was raised.  

In order to prevent the mistaken exclusion of Jesus’ life and preaching from the gospel-narrative, one can say that there are three parts to this narrative: a) Christ’s life (preaching and ministry); b) his suffering and death (including his burial); c) his resurrection (including appearances and ascension). According to Volker Küster the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are:

the iconographic corner-points from which Christology can be retold time and again (...). Depending on which of the three corner-points the story is developed from, a different central perspective opens up on Jesus Christ. These options are typically represented by the three great confessions: incarnational theology in the Catholic confession; the theology of the cross in the Protestant confession; and resurrection theology in the Orthodox confession.

Küster rightly calls attention to the fact that the three great confessions tell the basic narrative with different emphases. Though one’s tradition always has influence on how one reads this narrative, it is in the proclamation of the gospel important to both see the strength of one’s tradition and to learn from other traditions and so open up to the full breadth of this story.

---


22 See also the publication of the World Council of Churches, Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), Revised Edition (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010). In this publication the results of a worldwide collaboration are summarized. The confession ‘We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ’ is presented in three parts: incarnate for our salvation, suffering and crucified for our sake, risen to overcome all evil powers (29-59).


24 Speaking about ‘three great confessions’ might be numerically correct if ‘Orthodox’ includes both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox (including Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syrian, Malankara Syrian (Indian) and Armenian Apostolic churches). However, the Assyrian Church of the East (also called the Nestorian Church) should be mentioned as a fourth branch of the church, whose missionary efforts came as far as China in the 7th Century. See, for example: Martin Palmer, The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).
2. “Christ died for our sins.” This is the second cluster of shared meaning which Campbell points out. The gospel involves not only the constitutive narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ but also the claim that God has somehow brought about human salvation through the works of Jesus Christ recounted in this narrative. The protestant tradition has emphasized this soteriological aspect of the gospel, and Berkhof is reflective of this tendency. How God through Christ’s work accomplishes this salvation is answered in varied ways among churches, but that there is this link between the work of Christ and human salvation is shared by all. God not only brought salvation through Christ’s work in the past, but also invites people in the present to fully share that salvation by being united with Christ and entering His body, the church. This aspect of the gospel appears in the full grown tree of the Christian community as Walls’ third mark of coherence: ‘God is [savingly] active where believers are.’

---

25 If the Greek word ‘hyper’ in “Christ died for (hyper) our sins” is taken in a substitutionary sense, then those churches that do not accept substitutionary atonement would be excluded. However, there seem to be valid arguments pro and con. For a substitutionary reading, see: Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 55-79. For an extensive argument that ‘hyper’ does not have to be restricted to a substitutionary reading, see: Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 265-291. Campbell does not argue that the church is united in a substitutionary reading, but only that God somehow brought about human salvation through the works of Jesus recounted in this narrative.

26 New Testament scholar Scot McKnight thinks that protestants in general and evangelicals in particular have so much equated the gospel with soteriology that the narrative aspect of the gospel is threatened. “I want now to make a stinging accusation. In this book I will be contending firmly that we evangelicals (as a whole) are not really “evangelical” in the sense of the apostolic gospel, but instead we are soterians. Here’s why I say we are more soterian than evangelical: we evangelicals (mistakenly) equate the word gospel with the word salvation. Hence, we are really “salvationists.” When we evangelicals see the word gospel, our instinct is to think (personal) “salvation.” We are wired this way. But these two words don’t mean the same thing, and this book will do its best to show the differences.” Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: the Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 29. McKnight is right that this aspect of the gospel should not draw attention away from the narrative aspect, but he himself comes close to stating that the gospel is only the story of Jesus, and though the gospel (the kingdom vision of Jesus) entails or implies or involves the Plan of Salvation, that salvation should be distinguished from the gospel itself (41, 44). Though McKnight is inspired by Campbell’s study (63-64), Campbell himself does not separate the link with salvation from the gospel.

27 That Walls points to the saving activity of God-in-Christ among His people is made clear in the same article: “Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute a culture. (...) [then] people separated by language, history and culture recognize each other in Christ. (...)
Though the link between the story of Jesus and the salvation that God works through him is shared across contexts, the ‘how’ of the link between the work of Christ and human salvation (soteriology) is not part of the shared understanding of the gospel. This, however, does not mean that the ‘how’ is unimportant. On the contrary. Already in the New Testament one sees different contextual soteriologies. Also throughout the history of the church, gospel-salvation (soteriology) has been formulated in such a way that it responded to the human predicament and longings in their particular contexts, so that it could be heard as ‘good news.’

The good news is preached as promise and as claim of God, who summons to allegiance and decision.

3. “In accordance with the Scriptures.” Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for human salvation are in continuity with the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament). The Jewish Scriptures are, therefore, crucial in understanding the narrative about Jesus Christ. Certainly, not all churches have given the same amount of attention to the Old Testament, but since the proposal of Marcion has been rejected, the New and Old Testament both belong to the canon of the church. The church has read the Old Testament differently from how the Jews did. While Jews read the Old Testament as if they are listening to God while standing before Mount Horeb where God makes a covenant with them, Christians read the Old Testament as if they are listening to the resurrected Jesus, who explains the Old Testament in light of his own death and resurrection, while breaking the bread as a sign of the renewed covenant. Moreover, the gospel is not

---


31 Deuteronomy 5:2-4.

only the lens for reading the Old Testament, but also for reading the New Testament. The gospel functioned as criterion for the establishment of the New Testament canon. Campbell notes the significance of this development:

The point should not be missed, however, that the gospel narrative transmitted in the early Christian kerygma and then in various forms of the creed was not only something included within the text of the New Testament. It was indeed included within the New Testament text, for example, in the crucial passage in I Corinthians 15 (...). But the gospel narrative existed before the writing of the canonical gospels and shaped the latter, and it was also transmitted apart from the text of the New Testament. In this way it became a principal criterion by which the text of the New Testament was established and by which the New Testament writings continued to be interpreted.33

The fact that the gospel is ‘in accordance with the Scriptures’ does not only imply that the narrative about Jesus should be understood in relation to the ancient story of Israel,34 it also implies that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”35 is no other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the same one who is the creator of the material world. This claim distinguished the early Christian communities of the second century from Marcionite, Valentinian, and other groups who did not accept the connection between Jesus Christ and the God of Israel praised as the creator of the material world.36 This identification between ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ and ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the creator of the world’ became (after it was challenged) the impulse behind the Trinitarian and Christological councils. Gunton emphasized this aspect of the gospel. So, though a detailed Trinitarian understanding of God does not belong to the shared meaning of the gospel, one is not telling the gospel when one does not connect the story of Jesus with the story of the Old Testament: with God as creator and redeemer of Israel. This aspect of the gospel appears in the full grown tree of the Christian community as Walls’ first mark of coherence: ‘Worship of the God of Israel.’ Most Christian churches have clarified the link between

---

33 Campbell, The Gospel, 27.
34 N.T. Wright formulates the relation between the narrative of Jesus and the Old Testament in this way: “the four canonical gospels tell the story of Jesus as the continuation and climax of the ancient story of Israel.” N.T. Wright, “Imagining the Kingdom,” 383.
35 Ephesians 1:3.
Jesus and the God of Israel in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit. Making this prescriptive, however, goes beyond 1 Corinthians 15.\(^{37}\)

The three shared clusters of meaning could be viewed as the common DNA of the gospel that is proclaimed in many different contexts. Every proclaimed gospel is a contextual gospel, but if it is the true Christian gospel it will tell the story of Jesus Christ (the gospel-narrative) in light of God’s story with Israel (the gospel-frame) promising human salvation (the gospel-salvation).

\[\text{Contextualized gospel}\]

God’s story with Israel

Promising human salvation

Story about Jesus Christ

It is the task of the church to tell the gospel within every new context, in worship and proclamation, as the culmination of the story of Israel and to unpack and embody the soteriological and doxological impact of that fact.\(^{38}\)

\(^{37}\) Though the present author shares a Trinitarian understanding of the gospel and finds it unwise to reject the Apostles Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian Creed (which all present the gospel in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit), it is also clear to him that the gospel, as stated in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, was not yet fully Trinitarian. This was a later development. Moreover, there are also Christian groups today which share the summary statement of the gospel in 1 Cor. 15, and also embody the four marks of coherence of Andrew Walls, and yet are not Trinitarian. So, non-Trinitarians could be accepted as Christians. Trinitarian faith cannot be presented as that what is believed everywhere, always, by all (the triple test of Vincent of Lérins). However, because there has been such a great consensus in the Christian church about this teaching, we can trust this tradition as a very reliable aid to interpretation and would be very unwise to discard it. A more extended description of the method of Vincent, as well as the backgrounds and driving concerns, can be found in Thomas C. Oden, The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 156-186.

\(^{38}\) Compare here what Robert Jenson wrote in 1993, many years before the study of Campbell: "It is the church's constitutive task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in
Approaching contextualization through the gospel is different than approaching it through a Christian worldview. Under inspiration of Abraham Kuyper many theologians and missiologists have presented the faith as a worldview. Berkhof’s theology, centering on certain views about God, human beings, and the world, could be viewed as an update of the Christian worldview he inherited. The theology of Gunton also comes very close to this approach. Though he discerns that the gospel is the foundation for theology, he attempts to unify different fields of human endeavor in a harmonized and balanced whole. Campbell’s insight, however, is important at this point. He points to the crucial difference between the gospel and a worldview. It is worth quoting him at length:

One of the most influential definitions of “religion” is that given by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in a 1973 article on “Religion as Cultural System,” where Geertz suggested that “religion” can denote an over-arching cultural system that frames a people’s view of the world (a Weltanschauung) and their view of life (a Lebensanschauung). I have come to question the extent to which such an understanding of “religion” can apply to Christianity, given what has been considered in this study of the gospel in Christian traditions. The gospel has always been embedded in larger cultural systems that function more as the over-arching views of life and reality that Geertz envisioned: the complex interweaving of Semitic and Hellenistic culture of Palestinian antiquity, the Byzantine culture that grew out of the Eastern Roman empire, medieval Latin culture influenced as it eventually was by Islamic and Jewish versions of Aristotelianism, and highly varied complexes of modern cultures. (...) The gospel, I would say, is the central element in a fairly small cluster of interrelated beliefs and practices that have consistently characterized Christian communities and that have persisted through a sequence of larger host cultures.39

It is of course true that when the gospel has been embedded in a larger cultural system, a kind of Christian worldview emerges, a paradigmatic way of viewing the world and life from the perspective of the gospel. In that sense there is a lot to learn from the ‘Christian worldview’ of a former generation. But when there are transitions in the larger host-culture, as is the case in the

proclamation and to God in worship, and to do so in a fashion appropriate to the content of that narrative, that is, as a promise claimed from God and proclaimed to the world. It is the church’s mission to tell all who will listen, God included, that the God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead, and to unpack the soteriological and doxological import of that fact.” Robert W. Jenson, “How the world lost its story (1993),” in: Robert W. Jenson & Stephen John Wright (ed.), Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 50.
39 Ted A. Campbell, p. 122-123.
Western world at this moment, holding to the worldview approach hinders fresh contextualizations and is in danger of confusing faithfulness to the gospel with faithfulness to the older paradigm. Without renewed contextualization the gospel will not have a reformative effect on contemporary life, precisely because it does not address the current view of reality (worldview).

After considering insights of missiologist Andrew Walls and church historian Ted Campbell, the results of New Testament scholar James Dunn will be considered. According to Dunn, in his book *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, there is a diversity of *kerygmata* (contextual gospels) in the New Testament. There are clear differences between the *kerygma* of Jesus, the *kerygma* in Acts, the *kerygma* of Paul, and the *kerygma* of John. And yet, there is also unity amidst this diversity. Dunn perceives three common elements in the diverse New Testament proclamations of the gospel. Two of those elements, though he formulates them somewhat differently, are parallel to the shared meanings of Campbell.

Dunn views as the first common element, the proclamation of the risen, exalted Jesus. Dunn uses consciously the name Jesus at this point (instead of the title Christ), to emphasize that it is the historical figure Jesus, the Jew who lived and was crucified, which is now risen and exalted. This first

---


43 Campbell has the same conviction: ‘Despite the wide diversity represented in the New Testament literature, New Testament texts presuppose at specific points that there was a common understanding in early Christian communities of the church’s basic proclamation (kerygma) of God’s saving work in Christ (the “good news” or gospel, euangelion).’ Campbell, *The Gospel in Christian Traditions*, 1. He refers specifically to 1 Corinthians 15:1, 11; Galatians 1:6-7; Jude 3.

common element of Dunn is parallel to the first point above: the basic narrative about Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

The second common element is described by Dunn as the promise held out to faith—whether it be put in terms of Spirit, or of its various aspects (forgiveness, salvation, life) or of a continuing relation thus established between exalted Christ and believer (union with Christ, mutual indwelling). This second element of Dunn is parallel to the second point above: the link between the work of Christ and the human salvation which God brings.

Dunn’s third common element is not mentioned by Campbell: the call for faith, for acceptance of the proclamation and commitment to the Jesus proclaimed. Campbell would not deny the importance of this call for faith, because it always accompanied the apostolic preaching. The question is, however, if this call for faith is viewed as part of the *kerygma* or as accompanying the *kerygma*. Dunn says: *Kerygma* can either mean what is preached, or the act of preaching. Welsh New Testament scholar and influential Protestant theologian C.H. Dodd has focused attention on *kerygma* as content. German Lutheran theologian and professor of New Testament Rudolf Bultmann focused on *kerygma as preaching*. Campbell (just like Dodd) has focused attention on the content of the message, while Dunn includes insights of Bultmann and therefore treats *kerygma* as including personal address, calling for faith and demanding a decision. Campbell’s focus on the official church-documents naturally leaves out the personal address, which will happen in preaching. Without entering the debate between Dodd and Bultmann, one can affirm with Dodd that the *kerygma* can be stated as content, as 1 Corinthians 15 makes clear, and affirm with Bultmann that in the act of preaching it always includes a personal address.

Campbell’s third cluster of shared meaning, the link between the narrative of Jesus and the Old Testament Scriptures is not specifically mentioned by Dunn. The reason why Dunn has not explicitly mentioned this, should be sought in the fact that in these early New Testament *kerygmata* the link with the Old Testament Scriptures is often more implicit than explicit. The preachers, coming from a Jewish background, assumed that the story of Jesus was understood against the background of the Old Testament (as 1 Cor. 15: 3b-4 makes clear). Only after the link with the Old Testament was explicitly challenged (from the second century onward; e.g. Marcion) did it receive more

---

45 Dunn presents his second and third common element in a different order than presented here, but the change in order simplifies the comparison with Campbell’s presentation.
46 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 11-12.
47 The personal address can be noticed both in Jesus’ preaching (Mark 1:14-15) and in the preaching of the early church (e.g. Acts 3:18-19; 7:51; 17:30). Sometimes the personal address comes as a result of questions of the audience (e.g. Acts 2: 37-40; 8:37).
48 See, for example, Acts 17:22-31.
explicit emphasis. While Dunn does not mention the link with the story of Israel explicitly, he would not dispute the fact that these diverse *kerygmata* of Jesus, Acts, Paul, and John, can only be understood against the background of the Old Testament. Dunn also emphasizes, in speaking about the primitive confessions, that a central conviction is that Jesus the Jew was exalted, thereby emphasizing the link with the Jewish story.

James Dunn has enriched the understanding of the early confessions and kerygmata and, though he gives some different emphases, confirms Campbell’s three clusters of shared meaning of the gospel. It has become apparent that the different emphases of Newbigin, Berkhof, and Gunton reflect different facets of the gospel. In isolation from each other, however, they are one-sided and potentially misleading. It has also become clear that the DNA in the gospel seed is responsible for the three major branches in the full-grown tree.

Up till now the focus has been on Walls’ first three marks of coherence. The fourth mark is: ‘Believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space.’ Why is it that Christian communities in different contexts understand themselves as transcending time and space, though this is not explicit in the three clusters of shared meaning? That has to do with the nature of the gospel. The gospel is not a systematic treatise with three points: a narrative, a link with the story and God of Israel, and a link with salvation. The gospel is proclamation about a person, an historical person, Jesus the Jew, who is now risen and exalted to the right hand of God. The gospel is good news about Jesus Christ who is, who was, and who is to come. David Tracy puts it well:

> At the centre of Christianity stands not a timeless truth, nor a principle, not even a cause, but an event and a person—Jesus of Nazareth experienced and confessed as the Christ. Through the diverse genres, titles, confessions of the New Testament there is the constancy of a confession, constituted by the

---

49 It is e.g. impossible to understand Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom without knowing the Old Testament understanding of the kingdom. But this is true for all kerygmata. All authors of the New Testament shared the Jewish story, so understanding the kerygmata which are found in their books cannot be divorced from this story. Even the (probably) non-Jewish Luke, the writer of Luke-Acts, presents his two-volume work as a continuity and climax of the story of Israel: “The pervasive use of prophetic imagery and pattern is a key to understanding how Luke managed so convincingly to make his story of Jesus and of Christian beginnings a prolongation of biblical history.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 12.

50 Dunn emphasizes that the unified core *kerygma* (with the three common elements, or in Campbell’s words: the three clusters of shared meanings) is an abstraction. No NT writer proclaimed this *kerygma*, but in each case the *kerygma* was more extensive including situation specific elements. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 31.
community’s present experience of its Crucified and Risen Lord to this person Jesus of Nazareth.\footnote{David Tracy, \textit{The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism} (London: SCM Press, 1981), 317, quoted in Colin J.D. Greene, \textit{Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking out the Horizons} (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003). 1. Similarly Colin Gunton wrote: "If we take the one human and divine reality of Jesus Christ to be the logically primitive reality, then the diversities of expression can be understood as different attempts to express in words the richness of this reality which must necessarily transcend all its verbal expressions." Gunton, \textit{Yesterday and Today}, 72.}

This is why Paul often simply speaks of the ‘gospel of Christ.’\footnote{See Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Galatians 1:7; Philippians 1:27. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul speaks about ‘the gospel of the glory of Christ’ and in Ephesians 3:8 he says that preaching the gospel is the preaching of ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ.’ In Acts 8:35 Philip tells the eunuch ‘the good news about Jesus’. The confession that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah) was a key expression of faith in the early Jewish phase of Christian mission. Even though other confessions were added this one continued to be used. For Paul the belief in Jesus as the Christ had become so firmly established in his mind and message that he simply took it for granted. For him, ‘Christ’ simply functioned as a way of speaking of Jesus, as a proper name for Jesus. Dunn, \textit{Unity and Diversity}, 42, 45.} It is good news about this person who (as king) has inaugurated God’s kingdom.

Walls points also to Jesus Christ as the reality that unifies the different communities. He suggests that it is valuable to link the great principle of translatability, which lies at the heart of Christian faith, with Paul’s vision in Ephesians 4 of the full-grown humanity unto which we are to grow together. The very diversity of Christian humanity makes it complete.\footnote{Walls, “Culture and Coherence in Christian History,” 25.} Jesus Christ himself unites believers across time and space. Believers are called to be rooted and built up in him.\footnote{Colossians 2:7. In this analogy Jesus Christ might be compared with the ‘Mother Tree.’ Suzanne Simard, forest ecologist at the University of British Columbia (and her colleagues), have made the discovery that trees interact with each other and share resources. Via a web of fungi, substances like carbon, water, and nutrients are moved between trees according to their needs. At the hub of these networks stand the ‘Mother Trees.’ These are large, older trees that rise above the forest and are connected to all the other trees in the forest by this network of fungal threads, and they may manage the resources of the whole plant community. Jane Engelsiepen, “Trees Communicate,” (2012), http://www.ecology.com/2012/10/08/trees-communicate (last accessed: 29 December 2015).}

The gospel is a verbal message, but this message points to the mystery of Christ in our midst. This is the reason why confession and proclamation are intimately related.\footnote{The Apostles Creed shows this relation by preceding the content of the kerygma by the confessional statement ‘I believe.’} According to Dunn, at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel there was a contextual confession.\footnote{Dunn, \textit{Unity and Diversity}, 34.} The contextual nature of
confessions is already visible in early Christianity: ‘Jesus is the Messiah’ was the most important confession of Palestinian Jewish Christians, ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ of Hellenistic Jewish Christians, ‘Jesus is Lord’ of Gentile Christians. Dunn points out that not only was the confession at the heart of the gospel, but also the first response to the proclamation of the gospel was the confession of believers. In response to the preaching of the gospel the heart may respond with faith and the mouth with confession. Dunn points to the importance of this contextual confession:

confessions framed in one context do not remain the same when that context changes. New situations call forth new confessions. A Christianity that ceases to develop new confessional language ceases to confess its faith to the contemporary world.

To continue the analogy: in response to sowing of the gospel seed a tree trunk grows up and this is the contextual confession of Jesus. This initial trunk (faith expressed by confession) grows out into a tree with the three major branches.

---


58 Romans 10:9.

59 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 62.
For a freshly contextualized Western gospel a crucial question is how to confess Christ within this context, how to answer from this particular historical situation the question: ‘Who do you say I am?’ This is the distinctive praise to God from within a particular context.\(^{60}\) Such a confession is at the heart of a contextualized gospel, just as in early Christianity the specific way in which Christ was confessed in a certain context (e.g. as Christ, or Son of God, or as Lord) was taken up in the gospel-preaching.\(^{61}\)

### 1.2 THE RELATION BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND THE CONTEXT

The presentation in the last sub-section has raised the question about the relation between the gospel and the context. Each gospel is a contextual gospel and cannot be stated independent of the context, and yet one can point to clusters of meaning within the gospel which are shared among all the different contexts. This sub-section wants to deepen the perception of the relation between the gospel and the context by presenting the thought of Lesslie Newbigin on this relation and two important critiques of his thought by Konrad Raiser and Bert Hoedemaker.\(^{62}\)

Newbigin, as a missiologist, was very aware that the question about the relation between gospel and context was an important one. The gospel was, for Newbigin, not a supra-cultural entity because he argued that only that which is non-historical is supra-cultural.\(^{63}\) Newbigin shared the insight of many missiologists that the gospel is always transmitted in the clothing of culture. The gospel could be compared to an onion, rather than to a kernel hiding within a husk, because there is no supra-cultural essence of the gospel which can be transmitted from one culture to another culture without translation or inculturation.\(^{64}\) Therefore the work of contextualization or inculturation was crucial for Newbigin and required listening to the voices in the context.

---

\(^{60}\) James Brownson puts it in this way: “on the one hand, I am a member of a particular community that offers its own distinctive praise to God, and on the other hand, I am a member of a diverse human community that offers a much more powerful, indeed astonishing, array of voices, singing a form of doxology that radically transcends my own distinctive voice.” Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” 487.

\(^{61}\) See Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 36-58.

\(^{62}\) Raiser and Hoedemaker will be introduced below.


\(^{64}\) Andrew Walls writes: “(...) God chose translation as his mode of action for the salvation of humanity. Christian faith rests on a divine act of translation: “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). (...) The translations of Christ that take place as believers within different cultures respond to him are retranslations. These incarnations of Christ are contingent on that first Incarnation with its firm anchorage in time and space, its “crucified
But this emphasis on listening to the context did not mean for him that “the Gospel is (...) discovered by analyzing the situation.”

However grievously the Church may have distorted and misused the concept of dogma in the course of history, and it has indeed done so grievously, the reality which this word designated is present from the beginning and is intrinsic to the gospel (...) It is a new fact, to be received in faith as a gift of grace. And what is thus given claims to be the truth, not just a possible opinion. It is the rock which must either become the foundation of all knowing and doing, or else the stone on which one stumbles and falls to disaster. Those who, through no wit or wisdom or godliness of their own, have been entrusted with this message can in no way demonstrate its truth on the basis of some other alleged certainties: they can only live by it and announce it. It is something given, dogma, calling for the assent of faith.

According to Newbigin, there is something ‘given’ in the gospel that transcends the particular context, even though the gospel is only available in contextualized form.

In the middle of the 1990s a disagreement surfaced between Konrad Raiser, theologian and general secretary of the WCC, and Lesslie Newbigin. Raiser disagreed with Newbigin about the emphasis on the ‘givenness’ of the gospel. He looked with suspicion to this presentation of the gospel, because it involved an exclusive claim for the revelation in Jesus Christ. Raiser viewed Newbigin as a representative of, what he called, the classical ecumenical paradigm of mission, and he critiqued the ‘Christocentric universalism’ in Newbigin and in the classical paradigm. By ‘Christocentric universalism’ Raiser meant an

---


emphasis on the universal importance of the Christ event without consideration of the work of the Spirit.

Raiser was burdened by the global dangers that threaten the human race. He feared that an exclusive claim for the gospel would endanger this world. Instead of Christocentric proclamation, he emphasized the work of the Spirit in this world and in other religions, promoting dialogue with other religions and humanity at large. He de-emphasized the difference between the church and the world and wanted the church to adopt an attitude of service towards the world in solidarity with all life forms. Raiser embraced a pluralistic position in regards to other religions, and he was critical of classic Christology.

The question that is raised in this discussion is the role of the Spirit in contextualization and the relation of pneumatology to Christology. For Newbigin pneumatology is dependent on Christology, and for Raiser Christology is dependent on pneumatology. Newbigin emphasizes Christology but lacks a sufficient pneumatology, while Raiser puts pneumatology central in such a way that it comes in conflict with many of the classical Christological convictions. Berkhof also struggled with this relation. He pointed out that there is in the Bible a double relationship between Christ and the Spirit. On the one hand, the Spirit precedes Christ, controls him and is greater than Jesus. On the other hand the Spirit is the work of the risen Jesus, being ruled by him. The Christian tradition in the West has, according to Berkhof, always favored the second relation. Berkhof himself chose to pay more attention to the first. Jesus is first the bearer of the Spirit before he becomes the sender of the Spirit. The Spirit rests on Jesus in a unique sense. One could even speak about Jesus as the incarnation of the Spirit. With this choice Berkhof stands closer to Raiser than to Newbigin. Gunton takes a position between Newbigin and Raiser, because he rejects the idea that either Son or Spirit would be subordinate to the other. According to Gunton, the ‘Filioque’ clause has strengthened the Western tendency to subordinate the Spirit to the Son (a tendency visible in

---

68 Konrad Raiser formulated the difference between him and Newbigin in this way: “(...) we seem to disagree about what it means to take the Trinitarian faith seriously and specifically to appreciate the constitutive role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Christ event. Newbigin does not really respond to this challenge, which is central to my argument, and in fact he can state his basic Christological and ecclesiological affirmations almost without any reference to the pneumatological dimension.” Raiser, “Is Ecumenical Apologetics Sufficient?” 50.


70 See part I, section 4.2.
Newbigin). But Gunton does neither want to make the Son dependent on the Spirit (a tendency visible in Raiser):

(...) we would need to say about the Spirit that ‘he proceeds from the Father through the Son’; but we would also need to say about the Son that he is ‘eternally begotten of the Father through the Spirit’. In that way what we say about the relationships of Father, Son and Spirit in God would more faithfully reflect what the New Testament obliges us to say about the relationships revealed in the life and in the resurrection of Jesus.71

For Gunton, following Irenaeus, the Son and the Spirit are the ‘two hands’ of God. These hands, though not subordinate to one another, are not independent. The Father, Son and Spirit constitute one another, and there is ‘perichoresis,’ the inter-animation in relation, of Father, Son and Spirit that is such that all that is done is indeed the act of all three.72

Bert Hoedemaker, emeritus professor of missions and ecumenics at the university of Groningen (the Netherlands), offers yet another angle on the relation between gospel and context. His critique of Newbigin is that, by speaking about ‘gospel and culture,’ the danger is that the gospel is still treated as an entity that is already fully known before entering the context. In terms of the discussion about the relation between Christology and pneumatology, one could say that Hoedemaker opposes Newbigin’s tendency to subordinate the Spirit to the Son. But Hoedemaker does neither want to go in the opposite direction and make the Son subordinate to the Spirit. He pleads for more eschatological reserve and formulates somewhat paradoxically: contextualization means that we only with hindsight can establish what truly was given in advance.73 Only when all the cultures have processed and contributed their reception of the gospel, will the essence of the gospel become clear.74 In terms of Christology and pneumatology, Hoedemaker stresses the fact that we should not make the one subordinate to the other. They both have their place, but till the eschaton has arrived we will wrestle with the tension between them.

Hoedemaker’s stress on the eschatological aspect of the gospel should be understood against the background of a missionary past in which this was often forgotten. As a result, the biblical and hopeful vision of unity became too much intertwined with modernity’s dream of a unified and civilized world.

72 See further chapter III, section 5.4.a.
74 Hoedemaker, “Contextualiteit”, 276.
Hoedemaker wants to differentiate mission’s transcendent vision of unity from the modern dream of one civilized world through Western expansion, and he wants to differentiate the unified testimony of the missionary movement from the modern rational unity which is based in a trust of autonomous reason, emancipation, democracy, and the free market.\textsuperscript{75}

Hoedemaker takes, like Gunton, a third position between Newbigin and Raiser. He, like Raiser, fears the kind of triumphalist proclamation which undermines the much needed solidarity in this world. But he does not do this by weakening Christology in favor of pneumatology, but by emphasizing eschatology. Hoedemaker does not deny that Christ unifies all things, but he stresses the fact that only in the eschaton will we be able to discern how this is the case.\textsuperscript{76}

The position of this study agrees partly with Hoedemaker. If the gospel is proclaimed with a triumphalist attitude which has no need of listening to the context and which seems to communicate that it already knows how Christ unifies all things, then Hoedemaker’s call for eschatological reserve and his call to re-discover the gospel in dialogue with the context is very needed. At this point there is agreement. There is disagreement with Hoedemaker because he tends to overemphasize the future in relation to the present and the past.\textsuperscript{77} In response it is important to emphasize that the gospel is good news about the person of Jesus Christ, who is, who was, and who is to come.\textsuperscript{78} These words are meant to emphasize the past, present, and future of the Christ who is confessed and proclaimed in the gospel.

An emphasis on the future of Jesus Christ (he, who is to come) allows one to incorporate Hoedemaker’s notion of ‘eschatological reserve.’ We do not yet fully know the mystery of the gospel, the mystery of Christ. This eschatological reserve at the heart of the gospel prevents us to control the gospel and act as if it is in our possession. The gospel is, as Luther said, ‘the true treasure of the church,’ but it is a treasure which only in the eschaton will reveal how wide and long and high and deep it is.\textsuperscript{79}

\footnote{See also Bert Hoedemaker, \textit{Met Anderen tot Christus: Zending in een Postmissionair Tijdperk} (Zoetermeer, Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2000).}
\footnote{See Gunton’s insights on this in part II, section 4.5.}
\footnote{Revelation 1:8.}
\footnote{Ephesians 3:18. According to Colin Greene, Karl Barth also maintained a theological open space for the mystery of God. Greene argues that to center upon God is to converge upon the untamed and the uncoercible. It is to focus upon that which calls us fundamentally into question. Greene, \textit{Christology}, 293.}
But the gospel is not totally hidden until the *eschaton* has fully dawned. Jesus Christ has already appeared in history (he, who was). “The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.”\(^80\) There is a ‘givenness’ to the gospel which no ‘eschatological reserve’ can take away.

There is also a present aspect to Christ who is confessed and proclaimed in the gospel (he, who is). Jesus Christ is not just an historical figure. Dunn puts it in these words:

> the distinctive feature which comes to expression in all the confessions we have examined, the bedrock of the Christian faith confessed in the NT writings, is *the unity between the earthly Jesus and the exalted one who is somehow involved in or part of our encounter with God in the here and now.*\(^81\)

The person to which the gospel points, is not only a past figure, nor only a future one, but also the one who is in the here and now. It is the present status of Jesus that is confessed—not what he was, but what he is.\(^82\)

How have the discussions with Newbigin, Raiser, and Hoedemaker, deepened the perception of the relation between the gospel and the context? What does it concretely mean for the process of contextualization?

First, it has become clear that one should not subordinate Christ to the Spirit or vice versa. This means that the process of contextualization is a dialectical process. At one hand, one reads the Scriptures and the proclaims the gospel as one understands it and, at the other hand, one tries to discern what the Spirit is doing within the context. Leaving either one out of the process would be a form of subordination.

Second, the emphasis on the past, present, and future of Jesus Christ, has made it clear that the gospel itself cannot be totally understood by just studying the Scriptures.\(^83\) It is the community’s contextual encounter with

\(^{80}\) 1 John 1:2.

\(^{81}\) Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 61. Italics in original.

\(^{82}\) Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 60.

\(^{83}\) The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* is a help in the process of contextualization as long as it is not interpreted as a disregard for tradition or as a denial of the need of new contextualizations. For a lucid treatment about the relation between Scripture, tradition, and context, see: Richard J. Bauckham, “Tradition in relation to Scripture and Reason,” in: Richard Bauckham & Benjamin Drewery (eds.), *Scripture, Tradition and Reason* (London / New York: T&T Clark International, 1998), 117-145. Sometimes *Sola Scriptura* is used to suggest that one only has to study the Scriptures. However, it is by studying the Scriptures while listening to what the Spirit is doing in the context, that the gospel can be rediscovered. In Acts 10-15 Luke, the writer of Acts, described an interchange between Word and Spirit in the early church. Luke did not mean this only as a description of what happened, but as
Jesus Christ in the present that shapes her understanding of the gospel as well. Moreover, fully understanding the mystery of Christ (to which the gospel points) will only be possible when God’s new world has fully dawned.

Third, because the work of Christ and the Spirit are not independent of each other, the question surfaces if there are Christological criteria which help to discern the work of the Spirit within the context. Does the discovery of the shared DNA of the contextual gospel, and the discovery of the marks of coherence within different communities, provide clues for where to look for the work of the Spirit within the context? Stated differently: With what methodology can we read the (Western) context so that the discernment of the Spirit is not independent of the Christ of the gospel. This question will be the topic of the next section.

2. The methodology of reading the Western context

A fuller understanding of the gospel has been presented in section one. Is it possible to develop a new methodology for reading the context on basis of this fuller understanding of the gospel which incorporates the strengths of Berkhof and Gunton and avoids their weaknesses? In order to respond to this question it is valuable to bring in two perspectives from outside the field of systematic theology, because questions about the method with which one reads the context have been extensively debated within missiological circles.

The first perspective is contextual theology. Consciously contextual theologies, with the exception of feminist and diaspora theologies, are primarily a Third World phenomenon. Academic theology in the Western normative for how the church should operate. See: Luke Timothy Johnson, Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). The emphasis on listening to what the Spirit is doing within the context does not have to entail a rejection of Sola Scriptura, because it is only in light of the Word that we can discern what the Spirit is doing, but it does entail a rejection of an interpretation of Sola Scriptura, which makes the ‘becoming silent while listening to what the Spirit of God is doing’ (compare Acts 15:12) a non-necessary part of discernment. This does not mean that 'present human experience' (context) becomes a third locus theologicus, besides Scripture and tradition, as Stephen Bevans proposes. See: Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 3-4. From a Reformed perspective the more nuanced approach of David Bosch is more convincing: “Our reading of the context is also a norm, but in a derived sense; it is the norma normata, the “normed norm” (...) it is the gospel which is the norma normans, the “norming norm” (...). Of course, the gospel can only be read from and make sense in our present context, and yet to posit it as criterion means that it may, and often does, critique the context and our reading of it.” Bosch, Transforming Mission, 430.

As stated in the introduction the terms ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ are used in this study because theologians in Africa, Asia, and Latin-America have embraced this terminology and united themselves in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).
world has often remained ignorant or skeptical about these developments.\textsuperscript{85} They are still mostly discussed in missiology, ecumenics, and biblical hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{86} As was stated in the introduction to this research, this perspective is included because of the desire to take to heart the missiological lessons learned in the Third World context.

The second perspective, which will be presented in section 2.2, comes from a conversation about missional hermeneutics within the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN). Though the accents are different than among Third World theologians, there is here also attention for the question how to read the context.

Combining the insights of Berkhof, Gunton, contextual theology, and the conversation about missional hermeneutics within GOCN, section 2.3 will present a new gospel-centered model for reading the context.

2.1 LEARNING ABOUT CONTEXTUALIZATION FROM THE THIRD WORLD CHURCH

The understanding of contextualization often differs between authors and in many cases this understanding is presented descriptively. As was stated in the introduction, this descriptive approach is helpful for purposes of analysis, but for a local church called to proclaim a contextual gospel a different approach is needed. Therefore the choice has been made to present the author’s understanding of Third World contextual theology in a form that is meant to support the Western church in its missionary calling.

Contextualization is a process to which every Christian congregation is called. It is an ongoing process of \textit{discernment and response} for the local church and its ministers. Though the ministers have an important responsibility, this responsibility can never be delegated to clergy only. The local church needs to participate in the discernment process and the response.\textsuperscript{87} Contextualization (as practiced in the Third World context) can be described as:

\textsuperscript{85} There are exceptions, e.g., Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz.
\textsuperscript{87} For the rediscovery of the role of the local church, see: Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 378-381.
A dynamic process of prophetically discerning what makes the context really significant
- in light of the missio Dei
- and from an anti-imperialist perspective
and responding
- by challenging situations with praxis (goodness) and theoria (truth)
- as part of God’s pilgrim people

Prophetically discerning what makes the context really significant in light of the missio Dei. Contextual theology in the Third World emerged in the same period that the ‘turn to the world’ occurred in theology and mission (from 1960s onward). There was an increasing awareness that the church should look beyond church walls in order to participate in what was happening there. Third World contextual theology emphasized the dynamic nature of the interaction between the gospel and the soil in which it was sown. Shoki Coe, who first coined the word ‘contextualization,’ wrote:

In the developing theologies of the “younger churches” in the Third World, the emphasis has shifted from indigenization to contextualization. Why? How do they differ? Indigenization derives from the idea of “taking root in the soil,” and tends to suggest a static response to the Gospel in terms of traditional culture. Therefore, it is in danger of being past-oriented. The context today, however, is not that of static culture, but the search for the new, which at the same time has involved the culture itself. In using the word “contextualization,” we try to convey all that is implied in the familiar term “indigenization,” yet seek to press beyond for a more dynamic concept which is open to change and that is also future-oriented.

So, contextual theology focuses attention on the dynamic interaction between the life of the church and her environment, and it does so in light of the future. One could therefore say that contextual theology is not only reflective of a ‘turn to the world’ but also of a ‘turn to the future.’ Contextual theologians were influenced by the 20th Century rediscovery of the eschatological dimension of the gospel. The gospel is not only a message about things that

---

89 Shoki Coe, “Contextualizing Theology,” in: Mission Trends No. 3, 32. The analogy of the seed and the tree in the previous section has guarded the dynamic nature of the interchange by emphasizing the variety of trees which can grow in the soil. Shoki Coe would probably emphasize as well that Christian communities can and should change over time because the soil is in constant change, a truth that is possibly not so clearly represented in the analogy of the tree.
happened in the past, but also a message about God’s future kingdom which is breaking into the present. Coe fervently desired the impact of the future order to be felt concretely in the present, and “this kairos of fullness and fulfillment impels the church into its context so that it is not permitted to withdraw into hiding.”

The church has to respond to God’s future breaking into the present. This calls for a new way of theologizing in which there is a dialectic between contextuality and contextualization. According to Shoki Coe, “Contextuality is that critical assessment of what makes the context really significant, in the light of the *missio Dei.*”

The concept of the *missio Dei* developed under the influence of Barth, and expressed a significant shift toward understanding mission as God’s mission. God Himself is turned towards the world. Mission is therefore first seen as a movement from God to the world, originating in His love. This changes the role of the church in mission from being the sender to being sent. The church is an instrument of the Triune God’s mission, participating in what God does. The church has, therefore, to discern the context in light of the *missio Dei.* By regularly reading the Scriptures, the church can discern and respond to God’s future breaking into the present.

The re-discovery of the eschatological dimension of the gospel can also be seen as a re-discovery of the prophetic dimension of the church. Walter Brueggemann notes how the prophets in the Old Testament were often focused on the present in light of the future:

[They] do not utter universal truths, but speak concretely to a particular time, place, and circumstance. They characteristically perceive their time and place as a circumstance of crisis, a context in which dangers are great and life-or-death decisions must be made (...) Alongside this intense preoccupation with the burden and demand of the present, the prophets characteristically anticipate Yahweh’s future; that is, they think eschatologically, and mediate to Israel an imagined possibility willed by Yahweh. This daring tilt toward the

---

91 Coe, *Contextualizing Theology,* 21.
92 For the development of the understanding of the *missio Dei,* see: Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 389-393.
93 Though the concept of *missio Dei* has a long history and has come under sustained criticism, it has established itself and is now also taken over by evangelicals. See Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62-64. For a critique on the term *missio Dei,* see Frank Petter, *Profanum et Promissio: Het Begrip Wereld in de Missiologe van Hans Hoekendijk, Hans Jochen Margull en Ernst Lange* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2002), 65, 70. For a critique from a Lutheran and evangelical perspective, see Tormod Engelsviken, “*Missio Dei:* the Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology,” *International Review of Mission,* 92, no. 367 (2003): 481-497.
future (...) is rooted in a conviction of Yahweh’s indefatigable resolve to bring creation, and all in it, to Yahweh’s sovereign intention for creation.\footnote{94} The church is in a dynamic process of prophetically discerning what makes the context really significant in light of the \textit{missio Dei}.

Sometimes the word ‘context’ is understood in a limited sense as the direct surroundings of a Christian community. However, Third World theologians were aware that this view should be corrected. Shoki Coe took local culture seriously, but he was also well aware of the rapid political, social, and economic change on global scale which affected also the Third World. He did not play local theology against universal theology, but looked for (what would later be called) ‘glocal theology,’ a theology and theological education done in view of the increasing connections between the global and the local.\footnote{95} Shoki Coe’s contribution is still very relevant. Ulrich Beck points out that “globality means that from now on nothing which happens on our planet is only a limited local event."\footnote{96} Continuing to speak about the ‘gospel and culture’ is in danger of approaching ‘culture’ too statically and too isolated from other parts in the world.\footnote{97} In our time it is important to discern the impact of a globalizing world.

\textbf{From an anti-imperialist perspective.} In order to understand the ‘critical element’ in contextualization, one has to be reminded of the colonial era as background for the emergence of Third World contextual theology. The experience of imperialistic domination gave rise to a profound suspicion that Western theology (whether conservative or liberal) was designed to serve the interests of the West.\footnote{98} There is therefore often an element of anti-Western polemic in ‘Third World theologies.’\footnote{99} But how should

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\footnote{94}{Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 624, 646.}
\footnote{97}{For an explanation of a ‘static view on culture’, see: Harvie M. Conn, \textit{Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Triadlogue} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 121-122.}
\footnote{98}{Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 424.}
\footnote{99}{Lesslie Newbigin, “Culture and Theology”, 99. The anti-Western polemic is sometimes also present in Western writers. E.g. John Parratt stresses the negative side of the Western mission by focusing on the negative effects of the colonial periods. John Parratt (ed.), \textit{An}}
this be weighed? If the resistance would be fundamentally against Western culture as such, it will be difficult for Western theologians to take over this critical element because they are called to live and work in Western culture. If the resistance would be fundamentally against colonialism as such, we could also leave the ‘critical element’ out because this period is in the past. A more fruitful approach, however, would underline the ‘imperialism’ of the West as the focus of opposition. This is also relevant for today because empires can use ‘hard power’ to control others by dominating them, as in the colonial era, but they can also use ‘soft power,’ e.g. education, free market, instrumental rationality, as in the postcolonial Western empire. Formulating the critical element in contextualization not as being anti-Western, but as anti-imperialistic, allows theologians in the Western world to join Third World theologians in their resistance to imperialistic tendencies of Western culture wherever they are discerned, and to join them in an ecumenical conspiracy against forms of theology that have become unjustly dominant. How much Western missionaries served the colonial empire is, of course, a matter of discussion. Scott Sunquist summarizes it in this way: “During this shameful period of history, missionary work often stands out as a civilizing and salting influence in the midst of the oppression and subjugation of local peoples and cultures. And yet, Christian missionaries too often shared the same superior attitudes as the colonialists—looking down on local cultural expressions, importing the forms as well as the content of the Christian religion to Africa.” Living under an empire is one thing, and some empires are worse than others, but if theology becomes (unconsciously) a servant of a worldly empire, it should be unmasked.

Discernment will only happen when the blinding effect of imperialistic tendencies is resisted. Through the influence of imperialism the attention


100 Rieger, Globalization and Theology, 30.
101 Hoedemaker, Theologiseren in Context, 279. This insight has been stressed by Third World theologians, but there are also many Western theologians who came to the same insight. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, who experienced the imperialistic tendencies of Germany, wrote: “It remains an experience of unmatched value that we have learned to see the great events of history from the underside, from the perspective of the eliminated, the suspect, the abused, the powerless, the oppressed, and the ridiculed, in short, from the perspective of the suffering.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Der Blick von unten,” in Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 2 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1959), 441, quoted in Rieger, Globalization and Theology, 24.

102 Sunquist, Understanding Christian Mission, 98. Sunquist notes many examples of missionaries who resisted the colonial Empire (54-58).
shifts to the center and people at the margin disappear from sight. According to John Parratt in his book *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* the imperialism during the colonial period had indeed this effect. He points to the ‘colonial legacy’ and the ‘anthropological poverty.’ With the ‘colonial legacy’ he means the deleterious effects of the economic and political system that was enforced, and with the ‘anthropological poverty’ he means the denigration of integrity, humanness, religion and culture. Both the ‘colonial legacy’ and the ‘anthropological poverty’ can be understood as the result of the imperialistic tendencies. From the center of power it is difficult to respect the true particularity of other people and other cultures. There arises the danger that a Western vision of unity is enforced suppressing plurality.

Out of this imperialistic suppression grew two major types of contextual theologies that were both well represented in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT): a cultural-religious type of contextual theology and a socio-economic and political type of contextual theology (liberation theologies). For the first the acceptance of people in their particular cultural and religious identity is the focus, while the second is concerned with the poor and oppressed. According to Volker Küster “The consultation process engaged in by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) is already a success story, because here the two great streams of tradition have been fused and there has been a cross-fertilization.”

As has been pointed out in the introduction of this research, Dutch missiologist Bert Hoedemaker defines ‘context’ in this way: “A context is a junction of religious, cultural, and social histories which becomes the soil for a deliberate believing stance of Christians, from which inherited and more or less taken for granted ways of thinking are fundamentally criticized.” When this definition is related to the emergence of contextual theology, it points to

---

103 Parratt (ed.), *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, 3-7. Parrat’s perspective is much more critical than that of Sunquist.

104 Parratt is more critical than Sunquist on the colonial period, but he also makes less distinction between the colonizers and the missionaries than Sunquist does.


106 For these different types of contextual theology, see: Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, 24-26; Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*, 4-7.

107 One could even say that the Third World discovered the importance of prophetically discerning the priestly dimension of the context (religious), the kingly dimension (liberation of people from marginalization or oppression in the social-economic and political spheres), and wisdom dimension (how to live wisely in this culture).


109 Hoedemaker, *Theologiseren*, 311. In light of the previous paragraph it might be wise to add the word ‘economic’ to the sentence: ‘a junction of religious, cultural, and social histories.’
the fact that the insights of Third World theologians would eventually result in critique on taken for granted ways of thinking. This happened, and their critique was not only focused on imperialistic ways of thinking, but also on the role of Western theology. They concluded that philosophy, being the traditional dialogue partner for Western theology, should be replaced by the social sciences, because philosophy did not sufficiently throw light on the religious-cultural and social-economic-political dimension of the context.

The anti-imperialist perspective of Third World theologians could sensitize Western theologians to both the cultural-religious and socio-economic marginalized in the global context. Being in the center of power has often a blinding and deafening effect. Matthew Lamb wrote:

>The cries of the victims are the voice of God. To the extent that those cries are not heard above the din of our political, cultural, economic, social, and ecclesial celebrations or bickerings, we have already begun a descent into hell.\textsuperscript{110}

Pursuing contextualized theology in the West is dangerous if ‘context’ is only viewed as that which is closest to home. Context, because of global interconnectedness, should include places where the pain is greatest. Giving attention to the marginalized in this world within contextual theology does not mean that this theology is ‘special interest theology,’ done only for those in the margins. It is also for the sake of those who are part of the powers that be. As Joerg Rieger has pointed out, contextual theology “is common interest theology, identifying common pain and seeking the liberation of both the poor and the rich, oppressed and oppressors.”\textsuperscript{111} The underside of history is not just a highly significant part of human experience that is too often neglected, but the location where God is at work, where God has preceded us.\textsuperscript{112} So theology needs to include a view from the underside of history and pay attention to issues of truth and justice both in the religio-cultural and socio-economic-political realm.

Responding by challenging situations with \textit{praxis} (goodness) and \textit{theoria} (truth). The church is called to be prophetic. Prophets challenge existing situations and call for change, believing that change is a possibility because of Yahweh’s resolve. According to the Third Mandate Programme of the

\textsuperscript{110} Quoted in Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 424.
\textsuperscript{112} Rieger, \textit{Globalization and Theology}, 25. Joerg Rieger
Theological Education Fund, authentic contextualization is always prophetic. A prophetic response of the church to the context should not only involve words, but also actions. The founding manifesto of EATWOT states:

To be faithful to the gospel and our peoples we must think about the realities of our own situation and interpret the word of God in relation to these realities. We reject as inadequate a merely academic theology which is separate from action. We are ready to make a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and enters into a critical reflection or the real praxis of reality of the third World.

Contextual theologies claim that Western theology has not helped the church to respond well, because they remained in the mode of reflection only. Even if one does not share the radical prioritizing of praxis over theoria, the importance of including praxis in one’s response to the context is crucial. The church should unmask injustice and commit to work for a more just society, which means that they will take a stand beside those in the margins and against imperialistic tendencies. This can take many different forms, depending on location of the church and the gifts of those participating in this church, but neutrality over against injustice in the context is a betrayal of those in the margins. Karl Barth wrote: “God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on

115 Though David Bosch rightly points to the fact that contextual theology constitutes an epistemological break over against traditional Western theologies, using this as his primary lens for understanding the emergence of contextual theology, he is in danger of neutralizing too much the struggle with the imperialistic tendencies of Western culture. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 423-426. For a discussion of faith and praxis, see also: Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 91-120.
116 Miroslav Volf, “Doing and Interpreting: an Examination of the Relationship Between Theory and Practice in Latin American Liberation Theology,” *Themelios* 8 (1983), 19. Faith seeking action is an orientation that has deep roots in Jewish soil. Marvin Wilson writes about this Jewish perspective: “To the Jew, the deed was always more important than the creed. (...) “Walking in the truth” (2 John 4) and “living the truth” (1 John 1:6) were a higher priority than rationally analyzing the truth.” Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 153. Jewish philosopher of religion Michael Wyschogrod has said that the biblical view of man (in the Old Testament) cannot focus on reason because reason is not the domain in which the fundamental task of man lies. “Man’s fundamental project is not understanding but obedience to the divine command. It is, of course, true that obedience is possible only for a creature who has understanding, but it is not in the domain of understanding that man’s uniqueness is to be sought.” Michael Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 5.
behalf of the lowly, against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.”¹¹⁷ Though God’s dealings with Abraham, David, Solomon, Job, and others might point to a somewhat more nuanced perspective than Barth provides, his statement does reflect God’s passionate concern for justice and His opposition to injustice. God does not oppose the powerful simply because they are in the center of power, but in so far as they use their power to trample the weak.

One could argue that a response of ‘poesis’ should be added to ‘theoria’ and ‘praxis.’¹¹⁸ For the Greeks ‘theoria,’ ‘praxis,’ and ‘poesis’ were all three important, but their preference for ‘theoria’ caused a disjunction between the three.¹¹⁹ In contextual theology ‘praxis’ is again emphasized.¹²⁰ But ‘poesis’ cannot be ignored. ‘Poesis’ involves imaginative creation or representation of evocative images. Religious symbols cannot be reduced to—either ‘theoria’ or ‘praxis.’ Symbols not only touch the mind and its conceptions, and evoke action with a purpose, but compel the heart.¹²¹ In contextualization one needs to be alert to the images and symbols present in the context and respond with a new poetic imagination.¹²² The Christian community has the task of capturing those symbols and metaphors which best give expression to the experience of a community. Often poets, artists, and artful preachers can support the community in this task.¹²³

As part of God’s pilgrim people. According to Shoki Coe, the ongoing process of contextualization is “fitting for a pilgrim people.”¹²⁴ Christians are people who

¹²⁰ Though Stephen Bevans’ book *Models of Contextual Theology* played a significant role in bringing contextualization to theology, the (unintended) effect may be that the priority of ‘theoria’ over ‘praxis’ is still kept in place. Bevans writes that the contextualization of theology is “the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context.” (italics mine). Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3. The theologian then first wants to choose the most suitable model and then apply it to the concrete situation. That would be an ironic continuation of the Greek spirit against which Third World theologians rebelled, a spirit which considers ideas and principles to be prior to and more important than their “application.” See also: Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 421.
¹²³ Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 19.
belong to their own culture and context, but through their new birth they receive a new future towards which they journey.

Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the *insiders* who have diverted from their culture by being born again.  

Involvement of Christians with people in their context is sustained by their identity. As people who are part of the culture, they have received a new identity and they follow Christ to a different future.  

The realization that contextualization is always done as *part of God’s* pilgrim people, emphasizes the interdependence of the worldwide people of God. Contextualization is not a quest for independence from traditions and Christians in other contexts. The third mandate of the Theological Education Fund stated clearly:

> ... contextualization does not imply the fragmented isolation of peoples and cultures. While within each diverse cultural situation people must struggle to regain their own identity and to become subjects of their own history, there remains an inter-dependence of contexts. Contextualization thereby means that the possibilities for renewal must first of all be sensed locally and situationally, yet always within the framework of contemporary interdependence which binds both to the problems of the past and present and to the possibilities for the future. Finally, contextualization, while it stresses our local and situational concerns, draws its basic power from the Gospel which is for all people. Thus contextualization contributes ultimately to the solidarity of all people in obedience to a common Lord.

Vital catholicity is achieved, not by presenting a universal theology, but by letting many contextual theologies enrich and correct one another.

---

128 For five helpful criteria in assessing the catholicity of contextual theology see: Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 117-121. Eddy Van der Borght has pointed out that the question of ecclesial authority (‘Who decides?’) cannot be sidestepped in this type of assessments. Eddy Van der Borght, “Who Decides? About the Catholicity of non-Western Jesus Interpretations in Protestant Ecclesiology,” in: Leo J. Koffeman (ed.), *Christian
2.2 A MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC

One place in the Western world where similar issues are debated as among contextual theologians in the Third World is within ‘the Gospel and Our Culture Network’ (GOCN).\textsuperscript{129} There are differences, though. One could say that the GOCN has devoted much attention to the question how to read the Scriptures in light of the missio Dei, while Third World theologians have (in general) given more attention to the question how to read the context in light of the missio Dei. The starting point has also been different: the GOCN did not start because of the pain of marginalization, but because of the struggle to be a missionary church in the Western context. According to George Hunsberger, it was Jim Brownson who first used the term missional hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{130} Brownson wrote:

\begin{quote}
I call the model I am developing a missional hermeneutic, because it springs from a basic observation about the New Testament: the early Christian movement that produced and canonized the New Testament was a movement with a specifically missionary character. One of the most obvious phenomena of early Christianity is the way in the movement crossed cultural boundaries and planted itself in new places.\textsuperscript{131}
\end{quote}

From this impetus, a conversation about missional hermeneutics developed. The beginnings were informal, but in 2005 the GOCN began a Forum on Missional Hermeneutics that meets annually at the same time as the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL).\textsuperscript{132} In 2009 the conversation was formalized as an ‘Affiliate Organization’ related to the SBL under the name ‘GOCN Forum on Missional Hermeneutics.’\textsuperscript{133}

For theologians or missiologists who use a missional hermeneutic, there is agreement with contextual theologians that it is not possible to read the Bible from a neutral or objective point of view. But instead of reading from the point of view of a certain group within society, one reads the bible from the mission of God and the missionary nature of the church.\textsuperscript{134} One reads “in the interests of those who have committed their own personal life story into

\textit{Traditions between Catholicity and Particularity} (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2009), 117-30.
\textsuperscript{129} This network operates both in the United Kingdom and the United States.
\textsuperscript{131} Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” 482.
\textsuperscript{133} Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 309.
\textsuperscript{134} Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 309.
the biblical story of God’s purpose for the nations.” Hunsberger discerns four different emphases within this conversation. These will be presented here and discussed in relation to the presentation of Third world contextual theology in section 2.1.

The first approach emphasizes ‘the missional direction of the story.’ It sees the center of the missional hermeneutic in a certain way of interpreting the scriptures, namely in light of the story it tells about the mission of God and the formation of a community sent to participate in it. The mission of God is the heart and core of the biblical narrative and the different parts of Scripture should be interpreted in light of this story. Chris Wright is the prime example of this model, and his book *The Mission of God* demonstrates this approach.

Chris Wright’s focus is on reading the Bible and not on reading the context. In *The Mission of God* the specific context of Africa, Asia, or Europe is not discussed. Though the book provides many insights for understanding the Old and New Testament, the only point of contact with contextual theology might be the fact that, according to Third World theologians, the discernment of the context should be done in light of the *missio Dei*. Chris Wright presents a biblical-theological narrative of this mission of God. He suggests a reading of Scripture with a canonical and narrative hermeneutic. It is a canonical hermeneutic (reading the Bible as a whole) and a narrative hermeneutic which recognizes how the Bible as a whole tells a story. As New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham puts it:

A narrative hermeneutic recognizes the way narrative creates its own world in front of the text and so interprets our world for us; how narrative opens up new possibilities of living that change us and our world; how we are given our identities by the narratives of our own lives and the wider narratives to which they relate. To focus on the narrative character of the Bible not only does justice to the character of the Bible; it also makes possible a hermeneutic that connects with the character of people’s experiences.

---

136 Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 310-318.
137 Hunsberger also mentions Grant LeMarquand and Michael Goheen
However, in light of the study of the gospel in section one, there is a point of concern with this approach to missional hermeneutics: the biblical narrative tends to take the place of the gospel. This becomes clear by noting the role of the core narrative in relation to Scripture: “from the scriptures is discerned the core narrative that becomes the key or clue for understanding the scriptures.” However, as has been argued in section 1.1 of this part, it is precisely the gospel that has, and should have, this function in a Christian approach to the Old and New Testament scriptures. The gospel is the key and clue for understanding the scriptures. Certainly, one could argue that there is no difference between these two approaches, because the gospel has at its center the story about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and this story should be understood as the climax and turn in the story of God’s dealings with Israel, which is set within an even wider story of creation to re-creation. Yet, when the gospel is central it remains clear that there is a plurality of legitimate angles on reading the story of Jesus, as the four canonical Gospels make clear. But when the core narrative of the whole Bible takes this place, there is a tendency to perceive only one core narrative and not a plurality of legitimate angles on this core narrative. Because the Bible does not have a carefully plotted single storyline, Wright is in danger of enforcing unity and prohibiting diversity. Richard Bauckham (not responding to Christopher Wright) puts it well:

... there is the profusion and sheer untidiness of the narrative materials: the proliferation of little stories within the larger ones, the narrative directions left unfinished, the narrative hints that enlist readers’ imagination, the ambiguity of stories that leave their meanings open, the narrative fragments of the stories of prophets or apostles in their books (...). All this makes any sort of finality in summarizing the biblical story inconceivable. The Bible itself offers no summary of the whole story from beginning to end. (...) Summaries of the biblical story are more or less essential, but they cannot replace what they summarize, and the latter as they say, resists closure. In other words, the biblical story refuses to be summed up in a finally adequate interpretation that would never need to be revised or replaced. 141

The tension that is felt here between, on the one hand, the need for summaries, and, on the other hand, the need to remain open for what cannot be summarized came also to the surface in the discussion about the shared clusters of meaning of the gospel (which provide a summary) and the mystery of Christ to which these summaries point but which they cannot replace. The

140 Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 312.
141 Bauckham, Bible and Mission, 92-93.
conclusion there was that this pointed to the need for a contextual gospel. But a parallel emphasis on a contextual core narrative is lacking in Christopher Wright’s *The Mission of God*. So where Wright provides one clear example of what it could mean to read Scripture in light of the *missio Dei*, there is a lack of sensitivity to the need for a contextualized reading of Scripture in Wright’s magnificent book.\(^{142}\)

The second approach in missional hermeneutics emphasizes ‘the missional purpose of the writings.’ The aim of biblical interpretation is to fulfill the equipping purpose of the scriptures. Darrel Guder has championed this emphasis. For him, the basic question that guides interpretation is not: “What can I get out of it,” but: “How did this text equip and shape God’s people for their missional witness then, and how does it shape us today?” This is why the Scriptures were written:

> The purpose of this “Word of God written” was and is the continuing formation of the missional church. Every Christian is called to be a follower of Jesus whom he is making into a “fisher of people.” The life of the New Testament churches was centered around their missional vocation and their formation to practice it. This is what discipling was all about. This formation happens as the biblical word works powerfully within the community.\(^{143}\)

Christians have an apostolic vocation: ‘You shall be my witnesses.’ The Holy Spirit implements that vocation by the gathering, upbuilding, and sending of the witnessing community.\(^{144}\)

There is much to commend this approach. Like the first approach, it clarifies what it means to read Scripture in light of the *missio Dei*. Where the focus of the first approach is on interpreting the Bible, here the focus is on using the Bible to equip the congregation to move into mission. In light of the discussion about contextual theology, one could say that there is here not just an emphasis on understanding (*theoria*) the Biblical story from the perspective

---

\(^{142}\) There is agreement with Christopher Wright that certain approaches to contextual theology can end in pluralism and relativism. Wright therefore wants to contend for a meta-narrative, an overall story. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 45. When, however, the gospel provides the point of unity and truth amidst plurality and relativity, there is still the necessity to talk about the Biblical core narrative (meta-narrative), but it can be somewhat more open-ended, and therefore less inclined to impose narrative unity and diminish the contextual dimension.


of the mission of God, but on the pastoral praxis of using Scripture to equip the church for mission. The church is a sent community, missional by its nature and in its essence, but the church needs to be equipped and shaped by the scriptures in order to fulfill this calling. Before there is the praxis of the people, there has to be the praxis of using Scripture for the formation of the missional church. The insight of Lesslie Newbigin that the congregation is the only credible hermeneutic of the gospel, is taken seriously in this approach.¹⁴⁵ New Testament scholar Michael Gorman puts it in this way: “for Paul the church is a living exegesis of the gospel of God. The church performs the gospel as a living commentary on it .... It lives the story, embodies the story, tells the story.”¹⁴⁶ The gospel must become flesh and blood in and as the church, embodying God’s salvation.¹⁴⁷ In light of the three clusters of shared meaning (section 1.1) one can see the complementarity of Wright’s and Guder’s approaches. Wright emphasizes that the gospel-story should be linked to God’s story with Israel, while Guder emphasizes that the gospel-story should be linked with the promise of salvation by a community who embodies that salvation for the world.

Yet, there is also a concern. The flow of thought is from the Bible to the context, but there does not seem to be much of a reverse movement. In light of the presentation of 2.1, one has to ask: Is it still necessary to discern what makes the context really significant, or is the knowledge of the missio Dei (through the scriptures) sufficient? Church leaders with this missional hermeneutic will be focused on gathering, upbuilding, and sending the church. They want to equip the saints to embody salvation. But is then a real dialogue with the context necessary, or is a monologue sufficient? Is there a sense that we do not know how to embody salvation if we have not listened to the context? In terms of the earlier discussion (section 1.2), one can perceive here the danger of submitting pneumatology to Christology and there might not be enough eschatological reserve about knowing and embodying the gospel. When these dangers are thwarted, this second approach will have much to offer for the church.¹⁴⁸

The third approach, while concurring with the second approach about the purpose of the scriptures, finds the uniqueness of the missional hermeneutics in its relentless commitment to formulating critical questions aimed at faithfully articulating the missio Dei and the community’s role within the

¹⁴⁶ Gorman, Becoming the Gospel, 43.
¹⁴⁷ Gorman, Becoming the Gospel, 15-16.
¹⁴⁸ A possible way to strengthen this approach is to emphasize that the church is like a travelling theater company. A biblically well-formed Christian church should be able to respond with faithful improvisation to the context and so do justice to it. See: Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine.
purposes of God. The focus of this approach is on the ‘missional locatedness of the readers.’ Michael Barram, a representative of this approach, writes:

a missional hermeneutic should be understood as an approach to Scripture that self-consciously, intentionally, and persistently bring[s] to the biblical text a range of focused, critical, and located questions regarding [the] church’s purpose in order to discern the faith community’s calling and task within the missio Dei. Such questions will be inherently contextual—rooted in the fundamental conviction that we read the biblical text as those who have been drawn into the larger purposes of God. Ultimately, to read the Bible from a missional perspective is not an eisegetical enterprise but merely an honest acknowledgment of our primary interpretive location as we seek to read the Bible more faithfully today. In that sense, the social location of the people of God is at the very heart of a missional hermeneutic.¹⁴⁹

Hunsberger notes a parallel with the experience of the base ecclesial communities in Latin America and their pastors and theologians. He refers to Pablo Richard who pointed to three hermeneutical spaces: the academic space, the space of the institution of the liturgy, and the communitary space. In this last space, the Bible is read and interpreted in community.¹⁵⁰ Michael Barram emphasizes the importance of this last space. For him, ‘located questions’ are those that arise out of the place and time in which the sent community lives and in terms of which it seeks to discern its particular charisma and vocation.

There is much to commend this approach. Here, the context of the congregation starts to play a more significant role. That becomes clear in the kind of questions that Barram wants to ask. For example:

“In what ways does this text proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives, and how might our own social locations make it difficult to hear that news as good? (...) How does this text expose and challenge our societal and economic tendencies to assign human beings and the rest of creation merely functional, as opposed to inherent, value? (...) Does the text help clarify the call of gospel discipleship in a world of conspicuous consumption, devastating famine, rampant disease, incessant war, and vast economic inequities? (...) How does this text clarify what God is doing in our world, in our nation, in our cities, and in our neighborhoods—and how may we be called to be involved in those purposes?”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Hunsberger, “Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 315.
¹⁵¹ Barram, “’Located’ Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 4.
These kind of questions help the congregation to take their social location serious and relate the text of the Bible to a specific context. In order to understand Scripture the reading community has to wrestle with her concrete context and so come to an obedient life, dedicated to God’s mission.

In light of the discussions in section 2.1 there are two concerns. The first can be introduced with a quote from Barram: “I envision a missional hermeneutic that will incorporate and then ultimately move beyond broad overviews of biblical mission toward focused and contextualized exegetical engagement with particular pericopes, including those that have not been understood heretofore in terms of mission.”  

Barram rightly stresses the danger that broad overviews of biblical mission tend to suppress the diversity within Scripture (the particular pericopes that do not easily fit within the mission focused summary). However, this stress on diversity needs a complementary stress on the unity of the gospel, which the missional hermeneutic cannot move beyond. If the quest is for proclaiming and embodying a contextualized gospel, all parts of the scriptures are allowed to contribute. But without this unifying focus on proclaiming and embodying a contextualized gospel, the stress on the different pericopes could pull the congregation in quite different directions.

The second concern with this third approach (but also with the first two) has to do with its understanding of ‘context.’ Shoki Coe perceived that ‘context’ has both a local and global pole because they are interconnected. The emphasis on the social location of the missionary congregation gives attention to the local pole, but less to the global pole. To be sure, Barram does include questions (see above) that show an awareness of the interconnectedness of the Western context with places beyond. But in light of Third World contextual theologies, one notices that the ‘anti-imperialist perspective’ is muted. This raises the question if the focus of the GOCH on ‘the gospel and our culture’ has not blinded it to the marginalized beyond the geographical boundaries of the West. Certainly, valid criticism is possible of the view that one has to start by discerning from the margins and respond by taking a stance with those in the margins. When human needs become central instead of the worship of the one and true God who liberates those who are in the margins, there is a danger that liberation becomes understood as a purely immanent term.

152 Barram, “‘Located’ Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic,” 3.
153 Compare Christopher Wright who points out (following Carl E. Braaten) that the church should begin its mission with doxology, otherwise everything peters out into social activism and aimless programs. According to Wright, we are advocates for God, before we are advocates for others. Wright, The Mission of God, 45. New Testament scholar Richard Hays formulates it in this way: “One potential danger in the use of liberation as a focal image, however, is that it can easily be understood in a purely immanent sense as a political term.

283
there is also a danger that, despite good intentions to worship the true God, blindness in relation to the suffering (global) neighbor remains. Worship and liberation are connected. The greatest commandment unites the love for God and the love for people (as Berkhof showed). Because of the fact that Western theologians are closer to the centers of global power than our brothers and sisters from the Third World, the muting of the ‘anti-imperialist perspective’ should be distrusted.

The fourth approach in missional hermeneutics is described by Hunsberger as ‘the missional engagement with cultures,’ and Jim Brownson is a representative of this approach. The focus is on the question: What happens at the interface between text and context in the missional engagement with cultures? How is the received biblical tradition brought into critical conversation with a particular human context? Already in the New Testament the authors drew on the received tradition to address the people of their own time and place. How did they draw on elements of prior tradition and bring them into critical relationship with the current moment? According to Brownson: “the summary of the gospel provides the hermeneutical perspective or matrix through which the Christian tradition and specific historical context are interpreted.” There are three structural features of the gospel as hermeneutical matrix.

1. The Christian tradition is interpreted and applied Christianly when it is articulated and lived in such a way that it makes a personal claim on the hearer. The gospel in a basic sense represents the call of God to which humans are called to respond in trust and obedience. The divine claim is personal, but not individualistic in orientation. When we are dealing with interpretations governed by the gospel, it is always, finally, a universal claim on the world as a whole. It is the public world with which God is dealing. “The gospel envisions nothing less than God’s action in the entire cosmos. In a sense, one might say that this cosmic horizon of interpretation is simply entailed in the notion of


154 It is remarkable that Colin Gunton, who in many ways put worship central, hardly notices the marginalized.

155 Brownson, Speaking the Truth in Love, 499. Italics in original.

monotheism. If there is only one God, then language about such a God must necessarily encompass a universal frame of reference.”

2. The Christian tradition is interpreted and applied Christianly when God’s claim on life is presented dialectically, both in judgment and mercy, in affirmation and critique, because the universal claim over the world is manifested in the Christ event. This event is regarded as paradigmatic for understanding the relationship between God and the world. God’s claim is not universally acknowledged, there is resistance, graphically portrayed in the crucifixion of Jesus. The death of Jesus provides some kind of definitive glimpse into the nature and character of the human predicament and deliverance from it, and the resurrection of Jesus provides some kind of definitive perspective on God’s involvement with and attestation of Jesus’ life and death.

3. Finally, the gospel is promising news. “The Christian tradition is interpreted and applied in accordance with the gospel when the present need for a restoration to a right relationship with God’s sovereign claim is juxtaposed with an affirmation of God’s action to bring this about. The gospel insists that the Christian tradition be interpreted in such a way as to affirm that God is in the process of “making good” on the divine claim to the world and that this process has come to its climax in the Christ event. Hence there is a characteristic dimensions of hope and trust (...). One tells the stories about Jesus Christianly when one tells them in such a way that they elicit the response of hope and trust in the God who is revealed in them.”

A more appropriate name than ‘the missional engagement with cultures,’ might be: ‘the role of the gospel in the dialectic between text and context.’ Brownson’s proposal matches very well with Campbell’s later published study. Campbell focuses more on the content of the gospel, and Brownson more on the gospel as hermeneutic matrix, but there is a surprising parallel. It could be stated in this way: The gospel is a story about what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (gospel narrative) and therefore (when this gospel is preached or used to interpret older traditions) it comes as judgment and mercy, as affirmation and critique. This story can only be understood in light of the story about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Creator of the world (gospel frame) and

---

157 Brownson, Speaking the Truth in Love, 50. There is a slight difference between the account of the three structural features on page 50-51 and 52-53. Here the order of page 52-53 is followed, resulting in taking the first and second item on page 50 together.

158 Brownson, Speaking the Truth in Love, 53.
therefore (when this gospel is preached or used to interpret older traditions) it comes as a personal and universal claim to worship and obey the Lord of creation. The gospel is also a story about salvation from our sins (gospel-salvation) and therefore (when this gospel is preached or used to interpret older traditions) it comes as promising news about what God is doing.

There is much to commend this approach. Most approaches to contextual theology do perceive the general dialectic between text and context. This approach goes a step beyond this by proposing the summary of the gospel as interpretative matrix. It is an approach that is rooted in the New Testament.

The only critique is about the role of the community in this proposal. There is an emphasis on the fact that the gospel makes a personal claim on people and a universal claim on this world, but in the Bible the main emphasis is on the fact that these claims first come to the church. “The Biblical story focuses on God’s design for forming a covenant people.” Brownson’s lack of emphasis on the community comes to light by comparing his proposal with the one of New Testament scholar Richard Hays. Hays searches for images that can focus and guide the reading of the New Testament with respect to ethical issues, and he points to three key images: Community, Cross, New Creation. A detailed comparison between Hays and Brownson is not necessary at this point, but the overlap is surprising. Brownson’s focus on Jesus’ paradigmatic death and resurrection matches well with Hays’ image of the cross. The believer should follow Christ to the cross in hope on the promise of resurrection. Brownson’s focus on the hopeful news about salvation, matches well with Hay’s image of new creation, after all the Bible often describes salvation as new creation. New creation gives a certain perspective on salvation: “In the present time, the new creation already appears, but only proleptically; consequently, we hang in suspense between Jesus’ resurrection and his parousia.” However, there is a difference with the third image. Brownson’s focus on ‘a personal and universal claim to worship and obey the Lord of creation’ does not match with Hays’ focus on ‘community.’ This can partly be explained by the fact that Hays’ focus is on ethics. But it also makes clear that Brownson does not give sufficient attention to the church. Not the personal or universal claim are primary, but (as Hays writes): “The church (...) is the primary addressee of God’s imperatives.”

2.3 A GOSPEL-CENTERED MODEL FOR READING THE CONTEXT

Is there a way to read the Western context that incorporates the strengths from Berkhof and Gunton and corrects their weaknesses with what has been learned from Third World contextual theology and the conversation about missional hermeneutics? The conviction in this study is that a gospel-centered model for reading the context can provide this. First this model will be presented. Second, a shift in philosophical anthropology will be discussed that is needed for ministry in the Western context. This shift influences how the model will be used, namely not so much as a tool to (only) understand the thinking in the context, but as a tool to discover, from the one hand, the desire and imagination in the context, and from the other hand the embodied practices.

a. A gospel-centered model for reading the context

A promising avenue that has opened up in the fourth approach to missional hermeneutics is a reading of the context through a gospel lens. The gospel is not only the hermeneutical key to interpret the text but also the context. Such a reading of the context would be in accordance with the proposal of section one in this part, namely that the gospel should be the star-theme in theology. The proposal below is a step beyond Brownson, incorporating different insights from Berkhof, Gunton, contextual theology, and the conversation in missional hermeneutics. The model will first be presented and then explained:

163 Reading the context through a gospel-lens does not necessarily mean neglecting the creational dimension. The gospel-frame includes God as Creator and the gospel-salvation can be approached as the renewing of creation.
The basic thought behind the model is that the DNA of the gospel seed (which is related to Walls’ three marks of coherence) can be used as lenses for reading the context. The three lenses are worship, salvation, and life-style. A faithful contextualization of the gospel will interact with the context at these points, rejoicing in what is good and listening to what the Spirit has to say to the church. However, if a reading of the context is overlooking idolatry, the contextual face of sin and evil, or the absence of a crucified lifestyle, this reading will (from a gospel-perspective) be insufficient. The following points explain the model in more depth:

1. Looking to the context through the first lens is done by asking: ‘What is the worship and meta-narrative in this context?’ It is followed by an interaction with the context in light of worshiping Israel’s God, the Creator of the world, and responding to His gracious claim. Brownson stressed that the

---

164 In a rather surprising way, the pursuit of a gospel centered reading of the context has given a model that has similarities with the deep structure of Berkhof’s theology. The difference is that for Berkhof the gospel is not in the center of his model. Berkhof focuses on three themes (God, human being, world), while the present model focuses on three lenses for looking at the context (through the lens of worship, salvation, and a crucified lifestyle).
New Testament authors connected text and context with an awareness of God’s personal and universal claim. This was not because they had followed a university course on hermeneutics, but because they were part of a community who confessed and worshiped Israel’s God and Jesus as Lord. The universal claim is entailed in the notion of monotheism, as Brownson said, and the early church internalized that claim.

By taking worship as a lens on reading the context, the strength of Gunton’s approach can be included. Gunton’s theology shows the importance of worship and of discerning idolatry within the context. Berkhof puts much less emphasis on this perspective, though it is important. The Western church should not bow down to Western idols, but worship Father, Son, and Spirit. This does not mean that this worship is disconnected from the context. In her worship the church will be influenced by the Western context, including the religious dimension. One could also speak here about the transcendental dimension because, though a secular and agnostic context might not have a specific religious dimension, the sense of transcendence continues. Adding the word ‘gracious’ to God’s claim is a reminder of Gunton’s emphasis that the true God exercises his authority in a gracious way.

Reading the context through the lens of worship can be done with theological tools, as Gunton has shown, but the theological perspective certainly could be enriched and corrected by social-scientific, philosophical, and other approaches. The three gospel-lenses give focus to the reading of the context, but the reading itself is open for the contributions of many angles.

2. Looking to the context through the second lens is done by asking: ‘What kind of salvation is needed and visible in this context?’ It is followed by an interaction with the context in light of the promising news about the new creation. Brownson emphasized that the gospel comes as promising news (engendering hope and trust) because God is acting to bring salvation. The early Christians had so much internalized the promised kingdom that the promising news about this future started to function as a hermeneutical key to connect text and context. The breadth and depth of the promising news of salvation can be emphasized by using Paul’s metaphor of ‘new creation,’ as Richard Hays has shown. How does one read the context through the lens of salvation (new creation)? In light of what has been learned from the different conversation partners in this research, there are (at least) four dimensions within the context that should not be forgotten.

---

165 Anyone who has worshiped with Christians from other cultures, discovers that the religious dimension is also influenced by one's context.
The first dimension has been suggested through the study of Third World contextual theology: the social-economic-political dimension. The question needs to be asked who are the marginalized in our context, remembering that ‘context’ has a local and global pole. Berkhof, just like the contextual theologians, had a sharp eye for the social-economic and political dimensions of salvation. It is through the Bible that one discovers God’s passion for justice and his concern for the oppressed, but other analyses (social, economic, political) are very valuable in order to sharpen one’s understanding of the concrete position of the marginalized today.

The second dimension has also been suggested through the study of Third World contextual theology: the cultural-religious dimension. The question needs to be asked whose cultural or religious identity is suppressed. Now, because Christianity has become a minority in the Western world, it will be less able to threaten the cultural or religious identity of others. But the church could still share superior attitudes towards those from other religions or cultures. It would be better if the church would be sensitive towards those whose identity is under attack within or without the Western context and reach out to them.

The third dimension is the creational dimension of salvation. Gunton emphasized that salvation is broader than human salvation and includes the cosmic dimension. It is now widely recognized that creation is in need of being rescued from exploitative human treatment. The Anglican Communion, for example, has as its fifth mark of mission: “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” Though Gunton did not speak much about the practical implications of creation-care, by stressing the theology of creation he provided room for these considerations. Scientific studies about climate-

---

166 Both Berkhof and Gunton contextualized as if the Western context is isolated from other parts of the world. Berkhof was aware that Third World theologians struggled with poverty and oppression, but he more or less thought this was their struggle while our struggle in the West is with questions of meaning (part I, section 2.2.). Gunton hardly paid attention to the Third World context. As has been stated in the introduction of this research, John Parratt charges Gunton for not taking the voices from the Third World seriously enough. He complains that Gunton, in his theological reader, categorizes “all things non-Western, along with feminist theology(!) as ‘local theologies’. Parratt bitterly comments: “Voices from elsewhere in the world, when granted a hearing at all, could be dismissed as exotics irrelevant to the ‘real’ task of theology.” Parratt (ed.), An Introduction to Third World Theologies, 2.


168 Berkhof has a less sharp eye for the creational dimension of salvation, but this is also due to the fact that in the middle of the 20th Century this was not yet a major theme.
change and ecology could make clear how salvation would concretely look like in this area.  

A fourth dimension of the new creation should not be forgotten: the personal dimension. It is especially Berkhof who passionately fought against the separation of the social-economic-political dimensions from the personal dimensions. Certainly, salvation has corporate dimensions, but there is also a very personal (existential) dimension. Studies from a psychological or neuroscientific angle could enrich and correct theology because they provide insight in how people experience peace or change.  

3. Looking to the context through the third lens is done by asking: ‘What lifestyle is visible in this context?’ It is followed by an interaction with the context in light of a cruciform spirituality (as seen in Jesus). Campbell showed that the gospel-narrative is a story about Jesus’ identity as the Christ, visible through his life, death, and resurrection. Brownson showed that this aspect of the gospel was used by the Biblical writers as an hermeneutic matrix between text and context. The claim of God and offer of salvation is presented dialectically, both in judgment and mercy, in affirmation and critique, as seen in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Again, this was not because the biblical writers followed a course in hermeneutics, but because the cross and resurrection of Jesus had so much formed the imaginary of the early congregations, that they had internalized this way of looking to the relations between God and people. They had internalized it not only in their way of looking but also in living. Following Jesus, they adopted a cruciform lifestyle and a cruciform spirituality. This third lens is, of course, not something totally different from the first two lenses. Christians worship a cruciform God and believe in a cruciform salvation. This lens, however, brings this aspect to the fore.  

---

170 The personal dimension is reflected in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” [italics GR]
172 The word life-style is chosen in order to capture something of the narrative of Jesus Christ. Colin Gunton called it the ‘career’ of Jesus Christ. When the story about Jesus Christ is told (proclaimed), the believing community will reveal in her life ‘the ultimate significance of Jesus Christ’ (Walls’ second mark of coherence), through trusting Jesus and following Him in his life-style.
The term ‘crucified spirituality’ has been taken from Michael Gorman, who is participating in the GOCN conversation. He explicates the role of a crucified spirituality in the New Testament in his trilogy. For Gorman spirituality is the experience of God’s love and grace in daily life, but it can also be described as life in the Spirit, or as life with and in Christ, in whom the love and grace of God are most fully revealed and experienced. Paul, as well, had such an experience, but most accounts of Paul the theologian pay insufficient attention to his religious experience—his spirituality—and to his fondness for narrating that experience. Cruciformity was essential to Paul’s spirituality. He did not primarily think about cruciformity, he lived it: “I die every day!” (1 Cor. 15:31). Gorman shows how Paul’s experience was one of cruciform faith, cruciform love, cruciform hope, and cruciform power. Both Berkhof and Gunton have been criticized in part I and II that they do not pay sufficient attention to the hermeneutical implications of the cross: the cross can only be understood from a position of powerlessness. The path to truth is not so much epistemological as soteriological: only within the experience of a truly humbling encounter with God can the truth about him begin to be grasped. And only from this perspective can the context be read accurately.

Discovering what life-style is visible in the context and asking how a crucified lifestyle would express itself within this context is important because the church could be involved with fighting poverty and injustice while overlooking important dimensions of a crucified lifestyle. All too often the church’s involvement within society has been done without discerning that her use of power was not in conformity with the crucified power of Christ. The theology that has most consistently emphasized the lens of the cross, has been theologia crucis. Theology of the cross is polemical theology because it is directed to theologies that use power in a manner that is not consistent with Gods revelation on the cross.

---

174 Gorman, Cruciformity, 2-3. He adds: “‘Spirituality’ is a slippery word, one that is both difficult to define with precision and subject to a wide variety of understandings. In many circles today, it is associated with vague feelings of purposefulness or serenity and disassociated from religion, especially from religious community. Even in religious environments, however, "spirituality" is often understood as vague emotion without substantive content, or as an experience that can neither be validated nor challenged.” (2).
175 Gorman, Cruciformity, 3.
176 Gorman, Cruciformity, 369-370.
177 Gorman, Cruciformity, 95-348.
If Christian theology has to take account of the precise historical nature of God’s self-revelation in Christ as crucified, then it can undertaken only by those who experience a kind of crucifixion or powerlessness within their own existence. For Paul the form of crucifixion was social (…) For Luther, the form was experiential (…). For Pascal, the form was intellectual and moral (…). [Theology of the cross] has always been firmly contextual theology, addressing issues of power within the church and society (…). 179

The third lens for reading the context looks from the perspective of a cruciform spirituality to the Western context. 180 This third lens could also be called the lens of ‘cross and resurrection’ (or even: life, death, and resurrection as parallel to the gospel-narrative), because it involves both critique and affirmation. However, the choice for putting the cross (and a crucified spirituality) central, is meant to counteract the danger of simply affirming the flourishing of life as we see it. 181

4. The three lenses give focus to the view on the context and guide the interaction between text and context. But how does the interaction take place? This question can be clarified by looking to the early church. According to historian Larry Hurtado, the early church interacted with the context (the Jewish and Roman-era religious environment) in three ways. First, from a desire to communicate meaningfully the Christian message and practices, they looked for appropriate language. 182 Second, they paid

---


180 Without this third lens, the lens of worship is in danger of becoming a vita contemplativa, and the lens of salvation a vita activa. Luther did not choose either one of these and rejected also a dialectical pairing. He breaks through this twofold scheme and roots both of them in a third place: theology is rooted in ‘faith in God’s promise.’ Only the thinking and acting that are born from this faith are truthful. This faith is totally passive (vita passiva). It is not within the powers of man (as are the ‘thinking’ and ‘acting’). We are powerless and can only receive it, and it is embodied by letting go of claims to power. Oswald Bayer, Handbuch Systematischer Theologie, Band I (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 42-49.

181 See further section 3 of this study. The emphasis on the cross might also be reflective of the Protestant and Reformed theology of the present author.

182 Hurtado gives an example: “To refer to Jesus as Christos (Messiah) reflects a claim directed to Jewish hopes of the time for God’s messianic mercy. Virtually all the Christological rhetoric of early Christians was appropriated from their environment, although in a great many cases the meanings were significantly altered.” Larry Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 75.
attention to the context because they wanted to differentiate their message from others:

It is clear that in their efforts to commend their religious views and practices, the early Christians sought to differentiate their message from others of the time. That is, they took account of their religious environment much more consciously and critically than they would have had they seen their message and devotional pattern as simply one of many acceptable versions of religiosity of their cultural setting. This means that the Roman-era religious environment was influential, but not only, perhaps not primarily, in terms of the simple or direct appropriation of ideas and practices. In their efforts to articulate and justify their distinctives in message and practice in the Roman-era religious setting, and in their reactions against features of the religious environment, their religious rhetoric and religious practices were also shaped.  

The third way in which the early church interacted with the context was by listening and responding to opposition and critique. This came initially from the Jewish side and afterwards in the pagan religious and political arenas as well.

If a local church in the 21st century wants to follow the missionary example of the early church, the interaction will be fueled by a desire to communicate, to differentiate, and to respond to opposition and critique. These elements are also visible in the theology of Gunton and Berkhof. Gunton tried to communicate the Christian faith, differentiating it from dualistic modern thought, and responding to philosophical criticisms of the Christian faith. Berkhof was passionate to communicate the Christian faith clearly, pointing to the questions in the context and the ‘sense of life’ as important factors in this process. He differentiated the Christian message from the approaches of horizontalists and verticalists, and responded to the

---

183 Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 75. [Italics GJR]. Hurtado adds: “For example, I contend that the rising frequency in the Christological use of divine sonship language that we see in the Christian writings of the late first century and thereafter may very well reflect a reaction against the contemporaneous increase in the use of the same rhetoric in the emperor cult under the Flavians and thereafter.” (75-76).

184 Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 76-77. Hurtado adds: “It is widely accepted that Paul's assertions of Jesus’ superiority over Torah were, in a significant measure, in opposition to those Christian Jews who either demanded circumcision and Torah observance of Gentile converts (e.g. the “false brethren” of Gal. 2:4-5) or in Paul's eyes behaved in such a way as to give implicit support for such demands (e.g., the behaviour of Cephas and Barnabas as described in Gal. 2:11-14). That is, Paul's conceptualizing and verbal expressions of Christ's significance were in this case shaped in a polemical encounter with his religious environment, though in this example it was the immediate Christian sector of that environment.” (77)
criticism that the metaphysical frame for understanding the divinity and humanity of Jesus was not understandable. Though there are differences between Berkhof and Gunton, they both show at this point an approach that is in line with the early church.

However, a fourth way of interaction with the context needs to be added. After 20 centuries of Christian mission it has become quite clear that one can engage in communicating, differentiating, and responding, in two different ways. It can be done as a monologue, the flow going only from Christians to non-Christians. It can also be done from a listening position convinced that, though Christians really have good news for the world, they would do well to listen to the wisdom of the world. Berkhof put it in these words: “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 the world. There is a two-way movement and interaction.”

When looking to the context we should not expect to find only idolatry. We would do well to interact with the context by listening to people and learning from their (collected) wisdom, realizing that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid.

5. Though individual theologians can contribute to the process of contextualization, the model itself is best used by a local congregation, the only credible hermeneutic of the gospel according to Newbigin. Even in a context where no Christian presence exists, a missionary might individually proclaim the gospel, but as soon as a community grows up (the gospel-tree), the community will start to contextualize the received gospel (even if they do so unconsciously) and the three branches of worship, a life-style acknowledging the ultimate significance of Jesus, and the embodiment of salvation, will grow in a form appropriate to the soil (context). ‘Community’ is one of the central images to provide unity in the New Testament, according to Richard Hays. The second and third approach within the conversation on missional hermeneutics (represented by Darrell Guder and Michael Barram) also emphasize the central role of the community. This emphasis on community makes clear that reading the context is not just a matter of having the right hermeneutical theory in our heads. Only when our being is formed (within the church) to embody the gospel can we read the context and respond to it in line with the Spirit of Christ. So this model proposes that ecclesiology has an important part to play in reading the context, because the church participates and points to the reality of the

185 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 424.
186 Colossians 2:3. See also footnote 83 in part III.
Kingdom of God. This is in line with the Faith and Order report *The Nature and Mission of the Church*:

The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-21; Rom 8:18-25). Through its worship (*leitourgia*); service, which includes the stewardship of creation (*diakonia*); and proclamation (*kerygma*) the Church participates in and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit the Church testifies to the divine mission in which the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.\(^{187}\)

If a local church\(^{188}\) faithfully embodies within the context the gospel in *kerygma*, *leitourgia*, *diakonia*, and *koinonia*, she is formed and shaped and will read the context better.\(^{189}\)

\textbf{b. A shift in philosophical anthropology—the centrality of desire and imagination}

One of the weaknesses of Gunton is that he misperceives the character and extent of knowledge (part II, section 6.1.a). Over against Gunton, who puts knowledge before love, it has been suggested that love and desire have priority above knowledge. Emmanuel Levinas put it in these words: “In Descartes the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire.”\(^{190}\) In order to overcome Gunton’s weakness, a shift in philosophical anthropology is necessary. As will become clear, this shift influences how the model that has been presented above will be used, namely not so much as a tool to understand the thinking in the context, but as a tool to discover the embodied practices within the context, embodied practices that are fueled by the imagination (a specific picture of the good life) and that shape desire towards that end.


\(^{188}\) The quote from the World Council of Churches speaks about the Church, not a local church. It is true that only the church of all times and places can fully embody the gospel. At the same time, the universal church can only fulfill this calling when the local congregations within diverse context are faithfully embodying the gospel as well.

\(^{189}\) The WCC statement does not include *koinonia* which is also an important dimension of the church. See: Stefan Paas, “Missionary Ecclesiology in an Age of Individualization,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 48 (2013), 91-106.

A dominant model, as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes, sees the human person as a *thinking thing*.\(^{191}\) The Reformed tradition has reacted strongly against this rationalistic approach to human beings, and has emphasized that humans are *believing persons*, essentially religious creatures, defined by a worldview that is pre-rational or supra-rational.\(^{192}\) Both Berkhof and Gunton find their place in this tradition. As a reaction and correction to the rationalistic spirit, this approach is, according to James Smith, to be commended. But Smith has two reservations about this approach. First, the beliefs often still look like the propositions and ideas of the rationalist model.\(^{193}\) Second, the person-as-believer model still tends to operate with a very disembodied, individualistic picture of the human person.\(^{194}\) Smith expresses here similar insights as Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*: “Modern enlightenment culture is very theory-oriented. We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings...”\(^{195}\) Taylor calls it ‘excarnation,’ the opposite movement from incarnation.\(^{196}\) Smith proposes a philosophical anthropology, inspired by Augustine, of the human person as lover: “I am what I love.”\(^{197}\) He takes an intentional account of human persons, an account that emphasizes that our being-in-the-world is always characterized by a dynamic, ‘ek-static’ orientation that ‘intends’ the world or ‘aims at’ the world as an object of consciousness.\(^{198}\) And the mode of this intending is love, desire, or

---

191 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2009), 41.
192 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 43.
193 "My concern is that worldview-talk – particularly in its recently distorted form, but also perhaps even at its best moments – still retains a picture of the human person that situates the center of gravity of human identity in the cognitive regions of the mind rather than the affective regions of the gut/heart/body. While it rejects thinking-thing-ism, it is prone to fall prey to believing-thing-ism, where “beliefs” are still treated as quasi-ideas, propositions that require assent.” Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 63.
196 In light of this, we should not be surprised to find that Western scholars studying the early Christian movement have focussed on ideas and beliefs and have tended to be blind for devotional and embodied practices. In that sense the move to liberation theology (or praxis theology as Bevans calls it) is understandable and partly to be commended. However, because worship is not kept at the centre of this approach to theology, the holism that we find in the Exodus (social-economic-political and, at the centre, spiritual redemption) is lost. For a discussion of these issues, see Wright, *The mission of God*, 265-288, 316-323.
197 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 46.
198 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 48.
longing.\(^{199}\) Every human being is a lover. The difference between persons has to do with the object of our loves and desires. So, though we can speak (from a Christian perspective) about misdirected love, the love, desire and longing in themselves cannot be switched off.

Our love and desire is directed towards a certain specific vision of the good life, an implicit picture of what we think human flourishing looks like.\(^{200}\) The desire for the kingdom (or some other, rival version of ‘the kingdom’) is called forth by imagining the kingdom in a certain way. The vision of the good life is a picture (not a theory) that captures our hearts and imaginations.\(^{201}\) Stories, legends, myths, plays, novels, and film address the imagination.\(^{202}\) In his book *Imagining the Kingdom*, Smith expresses a renewed appreciation for the aesthetic or poetic force of the narratives that shape our identity.\(^{203}\) “The imaginative logic of poiesis plucks our deepest heartstrings, and such aesthetic resonances reverberate in deep corners of our unconscious, attuning us in ways we are not even aware of. We’re less convinced by arguments than moved by stories; our being-in-the-world is more aesthetic than deductive, better captured by narrative than analysis.”\(^{204}\)

But how does the desire for and orientation to a particular vision of the good life become operative in us (motivating actions, decisions, etc.)? By acquiring certain habits or dispositions: “Our habits thus constitute the fulcrum of our desire: they are the hinge that “turns” our heart, our love, such that it is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions.”\(^{205}\) Habits are inscribed in our heart through bodily practices and rituals that train the heart, as it were, to

---

\(^{199}\) Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.

\(^{200}\) Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 52. Smith calls this a vision of the Kingdom and emphasizes that it is a social vision. The social imaginary is certainly part of the image of the good life, but one could argue that the cosmological imaginary and the moral/personal imaginary are also part of the image of the good life.

\(^{201}\) It is questionable if “picture” is the right word here. Garret Green makes a helpful distinction between the “paradigmatic imagination” and the idea that we are led by pictures. An image is not the same as a picture, the latter being a concrete representation, the former being possibly more abstract. The imagination can be formed by a narrative, as actually happens through the Christian canon. When the gospel is preached, Jesus can be clearly portrayed (Galatians 3:1). The Bible forbids making pictures of God, but the Son is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). This does not mean that we have to see in our mind’s eye a visible face of Jesus, but that Jesus fulfils a paradigmatic function for us. The gospel accounts are very well suited to render the character of Jesus in such a way that the main (paradigmatic) features become clear. Garret Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 61-80.

\(^{202}\) Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53


\(^{204}\) Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 108.

\(^{205}\) Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 56.
desire certain ends. Some of those habits might be chosen consciously by individuals, but others we acquire simply by participating in a certain culture. Not all habits and practices, however, are as significant. Some shape us more than others. There are ‘thin practices’ (Smith uses the word ‘ritual’ to point to routines that are not necessarily directed to a certain end), ‘thick practices’ (Smith uses here the word ‘practices’—which are always, in his definition, directed to a certain end), and ‘thickest practices’ (Smith uses here also the word ‘liturgies’—which are formative of identity, directed to matters of ultimate concern, and inculcating particular visions of the good life):

Our thickest practices—which are not necessarily linked to institutional religion—have a liturgical function insofar as they are a certain species of ritual practice that aim to do nothing less than shape our identity by shaping our desire for what we envision as the kingdom—the ideal of human flourishing. Liturgies are the most loaded forms of ritual practice because they are after nothing less than our hearts. They want to determine what we love ultimately. By ultimately I mean what we love “above all,” that to which we pledge allegiance, that to which we are devoted in a way that overrules other concerns and interests.

The shift in philosophical anthropology that puts desire and imagination central, influences the use of the model that has been presented in this section. First, it influences the way that the context is read through the lens of worship. It makes clear that this does not primarily mean looking for what people in the context are thinking. This is certainly a part of what is involved, but central is the question: What captures their imagination? What are the visions of the good life that propel people into action? By paying attention to embodied practices (liturgies) that shape desire, one does not only perceive that what is consciously thought but also that what is unconsciously forming.

---

206 Garret Green connects the biblical word ‘heart’ with the role of the ‘paradigmatic imagination.’ Here faith is rooted. Therefore Paul can pray: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know (...).” (Ephesians 1:17-18). It is the imagination of our hearts that determine the shaping of our desires and the direction of our lives. Therefore idolatry, being ‘bad religious imagination’ is so destructive. Green, Imagining God, 91. Smith points to desire, and the habits that form them, as connected to the ‘heart.’ Might the biblical ‘heart’ not be precisely the point where embodied desire and imagination meet?

207 One of the fascinating things that research in the “new unconscious” by cognitive psychologists like Bargh and Chartrand suggests is that, though some habits/dispositions are acquired by choosing to engage in certain practices, many are acquired without our knowing it or being aware of it. Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 85.

208 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 80.

209 Smith, Desiring the Kingdom, 87.
As has been pointed out in the evaluation of Gunton’s methodology of reading the Western context, we should not overlook the fact that, in our visual media saturated world, visual stimuli often bypass our thinking and appeal directly to the desires.

Second, when interacting with the context through the second lens (the promising news about new creation), the shift in philosophical anthropology makes clear that not only thoughts can be obstacles for the Kingdom, but also behavior. There can be habitual ways of acting (sometimes reinforced through institutes and structures in society) that cause ruptures in the context. In the Western context, there is often the presupposition that people change behavior after changing their thoughts. Certainly when thoughts block change, a new imagination can inspire new ways of acting. But the reverse is also true. New ways of acting change the thinking/imagination as well. This underlines the hermeneutical circle in interacting with the context: reading and responding reinforce one another. Insight into truth comes also out of practical engagement. Learning is also the product of action.²¹⁰

Smith’s proposal uses especially the first and second lens, while emphasizing that these lenses are not primarily lenses for cognitive understanding of the context, but for discerning which imagination fuels the desire and how those desires are formed. However, Smith does not give sufficient attention to the cruciform nature of embodied practices. This third lens adds the awareness that at the heart of the Kingdom vision there is the vision of a cruciform God. Participating in the life of the God requires the embodied practice of cruciform power. From this perspective, one is better able to discern within the context where the powerless and marginalized are located.

²¹⁰ Alan Kreider suggests that the church in the post-Christendom era could learn at this point from the Christians during the pre-Christendom era. During that time the main emphasis in the conversion process was on changed behavior, rather than correct thinking. It was in the fourth and fifth centuries, that the balance began to shift: teaching came to give preponderant attention to correct belief, whereas instruction about behavior atrophied. Alan Kreider, The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom: Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 102. Renewed attention for orthopraxis is also stimulated by dialogue with other religions. According to Hans Küng, a concentration on orthodoxy rather than orthopraxy (a Christian, or more precise, a Greek-Roman specialty), is often unhelpful in the dialogue with other religions. Hans Küng und Josef van Ess, Christentum und Weltreligionen: Islam (München/Zürich: Piper Verlag GmbH, 1994), 170; Hans Küng und Julia Ching, Christentum und Weltreligionen: Chinesische Religion (München/Zürich: Piper Verlag GmbH, 1988), 133.
3. The content of reading the Western context

Both Berkhof and Gunton give an incisive analysis of the Western context (section three in part I and II). The strengths and weaknesses have been evaluated in section 6.2 of part I and II. It has been pointed out that the strength of Berkhof’s approach was in the attention he gave to: a) Social change and movements of revolution and protest; Berkhof offers a dynamic understanding of nature and history b) The anthropocentric climate in the Western context calling for freedom; Berkhof offers an account of the relation between God and humankind in which there is room for the initiative of people over against God; c) Empiricism and functionalism; Berkhof rightly perceives that ontological language is difficult to understand in the present Western context.

However, Berkhof was not so well attuned to the idolatries of the Western context and this blinds him to a certain degree to the dangers of his concept of progress, individualism, and his lack of attention to power-difference between the West and other parts of the world. Gunton was much more attuned to the idolatries of the Western context and he points to paradoxical features in Modernity with regards to rationality, time, freedom, and human community. And yet his analysis remains somewhat aloof from the pain and suffering in the context.

How to continue from here onwards? As has been pointed out in the previous section, a simple ‘both-and’ approach will not clarify the deeper issues. But the hope is that the new methodology that has been developed in section 2.3 will enable a fresh look at the Western context. What becomes visible when the Western context is viewed through the three lenses of worship, new creation, and (crucified) life-style? It seems that in this way the strengths of Gunton and Berkhof can be combined but there is still an important obstacle that has to be removed. Section 2.3 has argued for the importance of considering the imagination, desire, and embodied practices within the context. What are the pictures (images) that keep us captive? Neither Berkhof nor Gunton pay sufficient attention to these background pictures. Therefore attention will be given to the analysis of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his tome A Secular Age.211 There are good reasons to pay attention to Taylor’s analysis. First, it is a very influential account of the Western context that is discussed not only by philosophers but also by sociologists and theologians.212 Second,

---

212 For scholarly interaction with this book, see: Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, Craig Calhoun (eds.), Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2010).
Taylor gives attention to the background pictures in the Western context which, according to the methodology in section 2.3, are very important in order to trace the worship in the Western context. Third, Taylor’s analysis resonates with the present author’s practical experience in Amsterdam. Taylor’s description of the ‘Age of Authenticity’ is recognized by both Christians and people from other backgrounds.

Section 3.1 provides a description of the ‘Age of Authenticity.’ This section does not only describe this age but also reflects on the missiological task of the church in this climate. In section 3.2 a deeper analysis of the Western context will be provided with the help of the lenses of worship, new creation, and crucified life-style. Though the present author makes use of Taylor and many other authors in this section, the description of the Western context is his own contribution. It is the result of taking the methodology of section 2.3 and apply it to reading the Western context. In section 3.3 this reading will be brought in dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton in order to see if their strengths have been incorporated and their weaknesses avoided.

3.1 THE ‘AGE OF AUTHENTICITY’

There is among missiologists, sociologists, and philosophers a discussion how the Western context should be viewed. Is the Western context secularized? Is it the case that, when societies become more modern through the process of scientific rationality, religion becomes less and less important, with the result that people turn away from God and quit going to church? Or is the Western context experiencing a spiritual revolution in which traditional forms of religion are giving way to new forms of spirituality (e.g. yoga, reiki, etc.)? Pascal Siegers, after an extensive empirical analysis in Europe, concludes that a spiritual revolution has not taken place, but the new spiritualities (alternative spiritualities, as he calls it) are a relevant religious option in Europe, though there are important regional differences. In North- and Western Europe about 10-15% of the population can be classified as practicing alternative spiritualities. In the Catholic countries of South- and Middle Europa, it is hardly present. So in parts of Europe, a third option (besides the religious and

---


215 Pascal Siegers, Alternative Spiritualitäten: Neue Formen des Glaubens in Europa, Eine empirische Analyse (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2012), 320. One reason for the
secular option) appears. However, a deeper change can be detected in the Western context, which is also visible outside the North- and Western parts of Europe. It is a shift towards an ‘Age of Authenticity,’ as Charles Taylor has called it. There is certainly a link between this shift and the emergence of the new spiritualities, but the impact of this shift is also felt among religious believers who participate in church and among secular humanists. At this point, only a few important characteristics of this age in light of the proclamation of the gospel will be highlighted.

According to Taylor, the North Atlantic civilization has been undergoing a cultural revolution. The sixties of the last Century were the hinge moment, but it was the result of a very long cultural development. The first phase was the emergence of exclusive humanism as an alternative to Christianity in the eighteenth Century. This created a new situation of pluralism, a culture pressured between a religious and a non-religious option. In the second phase there were many reactions to these two options and to the immanent frame and buffered self that were pervasively present. A sense of malaise at the immanence surfaced. A sense that this world is flat and empty, and that one’s buffered self is closed off from depth and mystery. It resulted in a multiform search for something within or beyond it that could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence. What follows is a discovery of the depth in nature and in human nature. Both are mysteriously deep (the discovery of evolution and the unconscious depth of the personality) and have both a beautiful side as well as a terrifying wild side. The search for something

lower percentage in South- and Middle Europe, is that alternative spiritualities and belief in paranormal experiences is able to find a place within traditional churches.


217 A purely immanent humanism in contrast with e.g. Christian humanism.

218 Taylor tells this story in part II of his book.

219 Taylor describes the ‘buffered self’ in these words: “It is very hard to see how an exclusive humanism could fill this role [the role of being an alternative to Christianity] as long as people had an enchanted view of the universe; that is, saw us human beings as in a field of spirits, some of whom were malign. In this respect, of course, science in helping to disenchant the universe, contributed to opening the way for exclusive humanism. A crucial condition for this was a new sense of self and its place in the cosmos: not open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers, but what I want to call “buffered”. But it took more than disenchantment to produce the buffered self; it was also necessary to have confidence in our own powers of moral ordering.” Taylor, Secular Age, 27.

220 “This complex of theories, unreflective understanding and moral imagination is the dominant one in Western Civilization in our time. It saturates our world. We can see it everywhere. It is evident, for instance, in post-Freudian psychology. Many people may reject Freud’s theories, but the surrounding context of understanding which makes sense of these theories is very deeply entrenched. The idea of a deep nature, which we have lost sight of,
within or beyond is not only a feature of that time, but it is one which
continues into ours.\textsuperscript{221} This multiform search multiplies the options in all
directions.\textsuperscript{222} One of the options, followed by many intellectuals and artists
during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, begins to shape the
outlook of society in general after the Second World War. This starts the \textit{third}
phase, a process that is accelerated after the sixties. The resulting culture of
authenticity can be described as an “understanding of life which emerges with
the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us
has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find
and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model
imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or
religious or political authority.”\textsuperscript{223} Phrases like ‘do your own thing,’ ‘find
yourself,’ ‘realize yourself,’ ‘release your true self,’ appear everywhere.\textsuperscript{224} This
ethic of authenticity opposes the attempts of society to enforce conformism by
exercising instrumental and rational control. It comes up for creativity,
individuality, imagination, spontaneity, and feelings.\textsuperscript{225}

The fact that this ‘Age of authenticity’ has become widespread does
not mean that there is only one option left. The shift to an ‘Age of authenticity’
rather affects all the different options. There are at least four options in our
societies:\textsuperscript{226}

- There is the option of Christian faith with many varieties and different
levels of church attendance.
- There is the option of exclusive humanism, with no link to religion or
spirituality. It is an atheistic or agnostic option. There are different
emphases possible. Some focus more on benevolence and justice,
others take it in a more hedonistic way.\textsuperscript{227}

\textsuperscript{221} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 307-321.
\textsuperscript{222} Taylor calls this “the Nova Effect,” and he tells it in part III of his book.
\textsuperscript{223} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 475.
\textsuperscript{224} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 475.
\textsuperscript{225} The consumer revolution is both an expression of- and a stimulus behind this approach.
\textsuperscript{226} Compare Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 636-637. Taylor does not mention 'Islam' as a separate
option, but it certainly has become a force to be reckoned with in Europe.
\textsuperscript{227} The humanist alternative to Christian faith existed long before the sixties, but the heart of
the revolution in the sixties lies in sexual mores. Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 485.
- There is the option of the new of alternative spiritualities. Here the exclusive humanist option is connected with spirituality. Alternative spiritualities are focused on human flourishing and not so much on the possibility of a transformation after death.228

- The fourth option is a stream of anti-humanism (the immanent counter-enlightenment) under inspiration of Nietzsche. This option also tries to realize one’s true self, but it disagrees with the Romantics that human nature is benevolent. It exalts heroism and celebrates the violence of a warrior.229

What is the effect of this ‘Age of authenticity’ on the shape of spirituality? Spirituality takes the form of a personal quest. It is a quest because it does not accept the idea that a church can provide a definitive answer.230 There is a strong aversion to institutional churches that make authority claims ‘from above’ by stating what you have to believe (dogma) or how you have to behave (morals or rules). This approach is seen as inauthentic. An authentic search (quest) is ‘from below,’ a search for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth.231 The distinction between spirituality and religion is often made along these lines: religion is ‘from above’ while spirituality is ‘from below.’

It is also a personal quest. The tight normative link between a certain religious identity, the belief in certain theological propositions, and a standard practice, no longer holds for great numbers of people. There is ‘believing without belonging,’ and many are engaged in assembling their own personal outlook, through a kind of bricolage.232 This does not mean that a personal quest cannot be reconciled with a choice for community, for experiencing the sacred with others (e.g. in festivals) or a choice for exercising spiritual practices. But it has to be a conscious choice. The personal quest can be directed to personal wellness and holism,233 but also towards a radical renunciation of otherwise legitimate pleasures out of a trust and love for God and for the sake of others.

228 Taylor, Secular Age, 505-535.
230 Taylor, Secular Age, 507-508.
231 Taylor, Secular Age, 506-508.
232 Taylor, Secular Age, 513-514.
233 Holism is, according to many researchers (e.g. Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers & Peter Mascini, Françoise Champion, Hubert Knoblauch) a feature of the alternative spiritualities. Pascal Siegers, Alternative Spiritualitäten, 49.
What does it mean to interact with this culture of authenticity? First, because of the desire to *communicate* clearly we look for appropriate language. The language of a personal quest can be used, and also the language of spirituality and an emphasis on listening to one’s own heart. The depth and ambivalent character (beauty and wildness) of both the human personality and the non-human realm of creation do not have to be denied. Also the fact that both God and evil remain, in a sense, mysterious, can be re-emphasized.

Interacting with the context necessitates that we *differentiate* the Christian message from that of its competitors in the ‘Age of authenticity.’ Much could be pointed out here and section 3.2 will continue this theme. What needs to be emphasized here is that one of the biggest differences between the Christian message and the other options in Western society is that the Christian message is not just focused on human flourishing (either in the benevolent or violent mode). Christians are called to seek, acknowledge, and serve a good which is beyond human flourishing. Loving and worshiping God are the ultimate end. “Of course, in this tradition God is seen as willing human flourishing, but devotion to God is not seen as contingent on this. The

---

234 The following points certainly reflect Taylor’s insights, but also the experience with trying to communicate the gospel in Amsterdam.
235 The first Christians were called people belonging to the Way (Acts 9:2). The Christian Faith can be presented as a way of life.
236 Taylor rightly questions the polarization between ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ He points out that these polarizations were also visible in the battle between the Jansenists and Jesuits, and that the basic issue is: Can one trust one's own intimations, or is something external required to latch on to, some authority beyond one's own sense of the direction in which God was to be found (e.g. Bible or authority of the church). Often the debates force people in a direction of either total self-trust or utter self-suspicion. Taylor comments wisely: "One might even argue that the valid position was to recognize a complementarity here, and to combine some features of each: within a basic stance of self-trust, to be aware of the multiple possibilities of complacency and self-deception..." Taylor, *Secular Age*, 511-512. These debates are a variation on the theme of the relation between Christology and pneumatology (see section 1.1).
237 John Forrester, inspired by William Morrow's article “Toxic Religion and the Daughters of Job,” emphasizes that the YHWH speeches in the book of Job portray God’s control not only over order but also over chaos, and not just over the chaos of the untamed, wild animals, but also over the monsters of the chaotic deep. This forced Job to make room in his theology for both order and chaos. We live in a world that is not fully understandable, and our lives and emotional experiences include chaotic elements that we will not always understand or control. John A. Forrester, *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* (Toronto: Pastor's Attic Press, 2010), 110-111.
238 Taylor shows how the anthropocentric shift and the resulting providential deism had the result that the sense of mystery faded. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 223-224.
239 According to Taylor this is also true of Buddhism, so this is only a start and more is needed to distinguish Christian faith from other options.
injunction “Thy will be done” isn’t equivalent to “Let humans flourish”, even though we know that God wills human flourishing.” The believer is called to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case, a renunciation of human fulfillment to serve God in the other. Jesus does not give people a new and superior means for achieving ‘human flourishing,’ but he redefines the character of this flourishing as self-expenditure for another’s need. The fruit of this renunciation is that it becomes on one level the source of flourishing to others, and on another level, a collaboration with God in his healing mission. God calls people to participate in his life and mission, and promises a transformation which will take us beyond the limitations in this life. For Christian believers the power to reach fullness is outside, not within. Christians sense they receive it in relation with another being capable of love and giving. They approach fullness by practices of devotion, prayer, charity, and giving. So, a major difference has to do with the transcendent perspective of the Christian message. From this perspective human flourishing certainly has a place, but the experience of the cross as well. For exclusive humanists death is simply the negation of flourishing and therefore it must be combated. Anti-humanists under inspiration of Nietzsche have countered this by emphasizing that death, at least the moment of death, or the standpoint of death, is a privileged position, one at which the meaning, the point of life comes clear, or can be more closely attained than in the fullness of life. From a Christian perspective Christ’s giving of himself into death for the sake of others reveals the mystery of God, the mystery of sin, and the mystery of life’s deepest purpose. Only after having developed the model in section 2.3 did it become clear to the author that the three lenses have resonances with the options in the Western context. The exclusive humanist position could easily agree with the lens of salvation as new creation, but without the lens of worship and cross it easily becomes a purely immanent salvation. The anti-humanist position has resonances with the perspective of the cross, only it is disconnected from God and human flourishing/salvation. Therefore is has to present facing death as heroic and not (also) as trusting obedience. A Christian position that emphasizes the worship of God but

240 Taylor, Secular Age, 16-17.
242 Taylor, Secular Age, 17.
243 Taylor, Secular Age, 224.
244 One could certainly say that God through His Spirit works from within as long as the ontological distinction between our own self and God-in-us is not obliterated. The power within is not under our control but requires our surrender and devotion.
245 Taylor, Secular Age, 8.
246 Taylor, Secular Age, 320.
without embodying salvation and following Christ in a crucified life-style is sub-Christian.\textsuperscript{247}

Interacting with the context necessitates as well that we respond to opposition and critique. There is of course lots of criticism directed towards the church, for example, that it is irrelevant and authoritarian. Wherever there is truth in those accusations, it should be humbly acknowledged. Deeper criticisms on the Christian faith come firstly from the Romantic angle.\textsuperscript{248} It accuses Christianity to set impossibly high goals for humans (asceticism, mortification, renunciation) and that it undervalues the unspectacular, flawed everyday love, between lovers, or friends, or parents and children, with its routines and labors.\textsuperscript{249} It is very important in this light, first to affirm the goodness of normal life, and second to clarify that the call for dedicating oneself to a higher love does not mean trying to change human nature by one’s own power. Spiritual disciplines are not an attempt to change oneself, but to devote oneself to a transforming relation. It only makes sense from the perspective of trusting God’s promise. Another critique on Christianity comes from the tragic axis (stream of Nietzsche). The reproach is leveled that religion cannot face the real hard facts about nature and human life: that we are imperfect beings, the product of evolution, with a lot of aggression and conflict built into our natures; that there is also much which is horrible and terrible in human life which can’t just be wished away.\textsuperscript{250} This critique should be taken serious, given the fact that Christianity has really been tempted to try to make over the whole society to higher standards by enforcing discipline. It will require leaving the illusion that the drives to sex and violence can be tamed by will-power. The criticisms of both the exclusive humanists and the anti-humanists require that the Christian message is clearly distinguished from human flourishing, moral education and attempts at civilization. Though Taylor does not speak in these terms, it requires a strong doctrine of election.\textsuperscript{251} An emphasis is needed that Christians are called out of this world for the sake of this world. They are called to forego focusing just on their own well-being (either material or spiritual) and give themselves for the sake of others. Christians are a kingdom of priests who have a higher calling than having a

\textsuperscript{247} The fourth option, the new or alternative spiritualities, will be discussed in section 5.4.

\textsuperscript{248} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 625-634.

\textsuperscript{249} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 626-628.

\textsuperscript{250} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 624, 634-636. This critique is justified against forms of Christianity that only spoke about love and benevolence, but not against those forms that have emphasized the sinful nature of people (e.g. Calvinism).

\textsuperscript{251} A proposal for a revision of the Reformed doctrine of election in light of Biblical exegesis can be found in: Suzanne McDonald, \textit{Re-imagining Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others & Others to God} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010).
fulfilled life. Only from this perspective can the question about God’s relation with violence and suffering be responded too.

Interacting with the context also necessitates an attitude of listening and learning. In fact this has already been visible in the response towards criticism of the Christian faith and also by using some of the terms of the ‘Age of authenticity’ which influences also one’s own understanding of the Christian faith. There is much to learn from this ‘Age of authenticity.’ One of the major points is that religion should not come only ‘from above,’ (in dogmas and morals), but also ‘from below.’ Listening to the Word and listening to one’s own heart (and context) should be combined.

3.2 THE LENS OF WORSHIP, SALVATION, AND (CRUCIFIED) LIFE-STYLE

The Western context has been described as an ‘Age of authenticity,’ and some general directions of interaction have been indicated. Now it is time to look with more focus to the Western context through the three lenses of the gospel-centered model. A thorough study of the Western context through each of these three lenses would require much more space than is available here. Moreover, it would also require the cooperation of scholars from other fields, as has been indicated in section 2.3. The choice is made here to start with the first lens (worship) and then to add a reading through the second and third lens in light of what has been discovered through the first. This is a limited project, but it could be seen as a first step to a more thorough reading of the Western context.

a. The lens of worship

A mark of Christian communities is that they worship Israel’s God, the Creator of the world. This living God confronts idolatry. Idolatry dethrones God and enthrones creation. What are the idols in the Western context? The shift in philosophical anthropology has pointed to the fact that one should be aware that images can keep people captive. Idolatry is bad religious imagination. What are the images in the Western context that keep people captive, preventing them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ?

---

252 For the importance in a post-Christendom situation of viewing the Christian church as a kingdom of priests, see: Stefan Paas, Vreemdelingen en Priesters: Christelijke Missie in een postchristelijke omgeving (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2015).
254 Green, Imagining God, 91. It is certainly more than that, including wrong-directed devotion, but it is not less.
255 2 Cor. 4:1-6; Taylor writes about the importance of pictures or images: “Wittgenstein calls a “picture”, a background to our thinking, within whose terms it is carried on, but which is often largely unformulated, and to which we can frequently, just for this reason,
What are the thickest (liturgical) practices which shape the desires of people in the Western context in the direction of these images? These questions are, in this study, not asked from a stance of cultural pessimism. As has become clear in section 3.1 there is much in the ‘Age of authenticity’ that can be welcomed. However, precisely when one enjoys the freedom to be a Westener for Westerners it is important to sharpen the view on what can be embraced from a Christian point of view, and what should be resisted. So what are the idols in the Western context?

Taylor’s book *A Secular Age* is an excellent resource to pursue these questions because he traces what pictures/images have influenced the Western context. He focusses on what has happened in the ‘background,’ a term used by Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Polanyi, and referring to the ‘framework of the taken-for-granted.’

One of his main points is that pictures of an immanent world without transcendence (the background to much of our thinking today) can hold us captive, so that we have trouble imagining ourselves outside this context and see options for belief. Taylor shows that the most significant pictures or images can be noticed at three points: how we imagine human agency (imaginary of self), how we imagine ourselves in relation to others and society (social imaginary), and how we imagine the purpose of our lives and of society (the telos of the social imaginary). The thesis of the present study is that these three images, biblically speaking, represent three idolatries in the Western context.

Imagine no alternative. As he once famously put it, “a picture held us captive”. We can sometimes be completely captured by the picture, not even able to imagine what an alternative would look like; or we can be in somewhat better shape: capable of seeing that there is another way of construing things, but still having great difficulty making sense of it—in a sense, the standard predicament in ethnology.” Taylor, *Secular Age*, 549.

To be clear, Taylor himself does not trace idolatries in the Western context, but he traces pictures that have made it difficult to believe in God. The following will, therefore, provide a kind of theological reading of *Secular Age*, complemented by other sources.

Taylor, *Secular Age*, 13-14. To be clear, Taylor himself does not trace idolatries in the Western context, but he traces pictures that have made it difficult to believe in God. The following will, therefore, provide a kind of theological reading of *Secular Age*, complemented by other sources.

Often it is asserted that the change in the cosmic imaginary is the reason for decline in belief. Then it is presented as if science has overcome faith. Taylor opposes this presentation, arguing that it was not science as such that overcame the believing option, but the coupling of science with an ethical stance. Unbelief was portrayed as a stance of maturity, of courage, of manliness, over against childish fears and sentimentality. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 364-365.

There is sometimes a tendency among authors who are writing about idolatry in the Western context to point to various sins in the Western context and call them idolatry. The approach here is more restrained by looking to images that keep us captive. For an overview of different writers that have addressed idolatry in the Western context, see: Wright, *The Mission of God*, 165-166.
The first image that keeps people captive is an image of human power and agency. In the long history of Western culture human power and agency have been used to reach Goodness, Truth, and Beauty. It shows itself, therefore, in different ways: as an adoration of the moral will (the power to grasp goodness), the adoration of ratio (the power to grasp truth), or the adoration of creativity and aesthetic emotions (the power to grasp Beauty). The adoration of the moral will started within Christianity. “What is peculiar to Latin Christendom is (...) [a drive to] make over the whole society to higher standards, and an extraordinary confidence in the capacity to remodel human beings.” At the root of this drive to reform, there is the temptation of power: “Perhaps the contradiction lay in the very idea of a disciplined imposition of the Kingdom of God. The temptation of power was after all, too strong, as Dostoyevsky saw in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. Here lay the corruption.” One could also say that this was a confusion between faith and moral willpower. The adoration has shifted from the power of God’s grace, imparting goodness, to the power of an immanent moral will. “There is a sense of a pure, universal will, an inner power before which we stand in awe, as with Kant (...) the very power to act by universal law is an object of wonder and infinite respect. Kant invokes in the same breath “the starry skies above, and the moral law within”.” It is not the discovery or use of human willpower itself that makes belief in God difficult. It is the adoration of a power that is purely human and immanent that makes the adoration of-, and trusting dependence on God impossible. The same dynamic is visible in the adoration of the human ratio. This power of disengaged reason (e.g. in science) allows great gains in knowledge and understanding, and helps to bring order to the world and ourselves. But one of the attractions of a rational framework for life is the image of humans as free, invulnerable, disengaged agents, who have to establish their own norms and values on their own authority. A sense of pride hinders belief in God. The third form, aesthetics, became also a substitute for God:

261 Taylor, Secular Age, 62, 61, 63, 121.
262 Taylor, Secular Age, 158.
263 There was a shift from distinguishing good from bad will, to distinguishing strong will from weak will. Taylor, Secular Age, 112-115.
264 Taylor, Secular Age, 251.
265 Taylor, Secular Age, 580, 300. Taylor points out that on the one hand powerful ideals arose, of honesty and integrity, as well as of benevolence and solidarity. But on the other hand, also pride had a place. This does not mean that in individual cases people were proud and therefore left orthodoxy, rather that pride played a role in the ‘background.’
So the aesthetic was established as an ethical category, as a source of answers to the question, how should we live? What is our greatest goal or fulfilment? This gives a crucial place to art. Beauty is what will save us, complete us. (…) So created beauty, works of art, are not only important loci of that beauty which can transform us, they are also essential ways of acceding to the beauty which we don’t create. In the romantic period, artistic creation comes to be the highest domain of human activity.\textsuperscript{266}

According to historian Jaroslav Pelikan, the confusion between the adoration of Christ and the enjoyment of aesthetic rapture can already be found in medieval mysticism:

The mystical cultivation of an intimate and immediate communion with God brought with it a charging of the emotions in which aestheticism could make a stirring appeal.(…) The strongly sexual overtones in some of the visions of ascetic women in the Middle Ages serve to highlight the confusion of the adoration of Christ with the enjoyment of aesthetic rapture, which, in turn, has affinities with the delicate and deep urgings of sex. Aestheticism, then, has often appeared when religion was put into an emotional framework, and especially when the emotions were in an advanced state of refinement.\textsuperscript{267}

In our ‘Age of authenticity’ there is often personal optimism and societal pessimism. The temptation is strong to see the power of creative self-expression as a means to gain personal fullness of life (salvation). But for society as a whole, the optimism with human progress has diminished. There is more often a sense of fatalism. Many people, faced with terrorism, AIDS, the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, and the recurring prospect of economic collapse, feel overwhelmed and paralyzed.\textsuperscript{268} What should be noticed, however, is that both optimism and pessimism testify that the image of the power of human agency still captures our imaginations. We feel depressed because we do not see how human power could save us from these evils. We cannot imagine the fact that God might be able to save us from this if we despair about human power and call out to Him. Is this fixation on the power of human agency (in its three different forms) just an innocent tendency? Not according to Nietzsche. He discerned at the root a will-to-power

\textsuperscript{266} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 359.
\textsuperscript{267} Pelikan, 120-121. He gives Schleiermacher as an example of someone who roots the religious consciousness in the emotions.
\textsuperscript{268} See also: Douglas John Hall, \textit{The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 97.
The second image that keeps people captive is an image of themselves as a free and fulfilled individual, self-sufficient and self-cultivating. In the Western context a vision of society has developed as existing ultimately for the (mutual) benefit of free individuals and the defense of their rights. This modern idea, which incorporates relations of mutual service between equal individuals, remains an idée-force in our world. It is the influence of this idea of moral order that has resulted, via the intermediate stage of providential Deism and the impersonal order, in an exclusive humanism. This social imaginary has been strengthened in our day, in the Age of authenticity. The ideals of fairness and of the mutual respect of each other’s freedom are as strong as ever. The strong, often unconscious, imaginary of ourselves as individuals has a long pre-history. It is very important in approaching this theme to make a distinction between the growing self-consciousness in Western culture at the primary agent is not the community but the individual, and the content of the social imaginary, seeing ourselves as, say, billiard balls that decide to enter into

---

269 "All his life Nietzsche was haunted by the figure of Christ, and even when he spurned Christ he did so in an existential, even religious way. With a penetration sadly lacking among many theologians of the time, Nietzsche saw the fuller implications of the figure of Jesus. Jesus was not an example of what man could be if he cultivated the moral will in his innermost being. Nor was he the highest attainable stage in the evolution of man. His difference from men was not quantitative but qualitative. The holiness of Christ did not challenge men to improve themselves, it demanded that they repent. Christ represented God’s judgment upon every human attempt at self-improvement. He was the despair of any theory that pointed men beyond themselves to a divine congruent with their innermost longings. He was indeed the devaluation of all values that the superman had preached, but He was that because the Holy stood in judgment upon any of the values men had projected and all the systems they had devised. (...) There could be no compromise with the God who was the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, no compromise and no barter. The claim that He laid upon men as their Creator and Lord had to be swept aside before the superman could emerge." Pelikan, Fools for Christ, 139-140.


271 Taylor, Secular Age, 160.

272 Taylor, Secular Age, 170.

273 Taylor, Secular Age, 225. See chapter 6 and 7 for this story.

274 Taylor, Secular Age, 484.

313
relationships rather than already being part of such a network.\textsuperscript{275} The first development (starting to view the individual as the primary agent) is traced back by Taylor to the beginning of the Axial revolution.\textsuperscript{276} But the second development (a non-relational view of the individual) arose with the image of the ‘buffered self.’\textsuperscript{277} Now, it is true that the romantic movement contained criticism on this view of the buffered self, and tried to overcome the alienation between individual and community. However, many of the characteristics of that ‘buffered self’ are still part of the ‘Age of authenticity.’ For example, the view of the ‘buffered self’ brought a changing view on intimacy. Open and vulnerable relationships were important while growing up, but for adults open and vulnerable relationships could no longer be seen as defining. One could choose to anyhow enter such a relation, but one could and should not admit being dependent on the affirmation of others. There is an ideal here of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, autonomy, and self-cultivation.\textsuperscript{278}

Self-cultivation is the imperative (...). So this isn’t a crass and vulgar selfishness, about narrow self-interest or mindless accumulation. This is a higher selfishness. It’s about making sure you get the most out of yourself, which means putting yourself in a job which is spiritually fulfilling, socially constructive, experientially diverse, emotionally enriching, self-esteem boosting, perceptually challenging, and eternally edifying.\textsuperscript{279}

It is in the period after the Second World War that the limits on the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfilment have been most clearly set aside, particularly in sexual matters. This takes place in virtually all Atlantic societies. “The heart of this revolution lies in sexual mores. (...) The relativization of chastity and monogamy, the affirmation of homosexuality as a legitimate option, all these have a tremendous impact on churches whose stance in

\textsuperscript{275} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 168-169.
\textsuperscript{276} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 146-158. Taylor goes back to the early religions and he shows how profoundly the individual was embedded in society: one could not imagine oneself outside the social matrix. But with the Axial religions there started the growth of a new self-understanding of our social existence, one which gave an unprecedented primacy to the individual. Christianity itself contributes to this disembedding because the New Testament is full of (personal) calls to leave or relativize solidarities of family, clan, society, and be part of the Kingdom. However, these Axial spiritualities were prevented from producing their full disembedding effect because the matrix in which they operated had still to be transformed. The hierarchical ordering of society was still in place. It is only now in the post-Axial condition (removed from the cosmic and social sacred) that the full impact of this long vector to individualism is fully revealed.
\textsuperscript{277} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 158.
\textsuperscript{278} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 135-142.
\textsuperscript{279} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 477.
recent centuries has laid so much stress on these issues (...).” Sexual fulfillment is now seen as one of our greatest joys. A driving conviction in the ‘Age of authenticity’ is that individual freedom for sexual self-expression in any form will lead to increased happiness and fulfillment (as long as it is between consenting adults), and a denial of this right will hinder human fulfillment and intimacy.

Though there is an ideal of self-cultivation and self-expression, this does not mean that the social environment does not play a role. There is very much an awareness that there are others simultaneously present, watching my display of self-expression. On the one hand, there is much room for freedom: let each person do their own thing, and we shouldn’t criticize each other’s ‘values.’ The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance, because others have a right to live their own life as you do. On the other hand, people have high expectations of themselves. Everything seems possible and the responsibility to become an outstanding individual lays with the individual him- or herself. But not everyone is able to bring themselves close to their idealized self-image. Added to this is the fact that others can seem more successful. This brings to the surface feelings of shame and deficiency. In order to mask these feelings a narcissistic impression management is required. One needs to present a better version of self to the outside world, while masking those parts that are deemed unacceptable. This results either in a mistaken sense of self-

---

280 Taylor, Secular Age, 485. From the utopian goals and ideals of May 1968—self-expression, sensual release, equal relations, and social bonding – the first two remain intact and central in many of the BoBos (synthesis between “bourgeois” and “bohemian”). Many people in the West have made their peace with capitalism and productivity, but they retain their over-riding sense of the importance of personal development and self-expression. They retain the whole-hearted embrace of sex and sensuality as a good in itself. Taylor, Secular Age, 477.

281 Taylor, Secular Age, 253.

282 Dale S. Kuehne, Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship beyond an Age of Individualism (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2009), 20. Though Kuehne’s book is, in general, convincing, at certain points he seems to downplay sexuality in favor of a network of philia, coming close to the Stoic (and sometimes early Christian) notion that passion is dangerous. This leaves out the incredible statement of Hosea who compares God’s love for his people with the passionate and erotic love of a man for his wife. For a different accent, see: H.W. de Knijff, Venus aan de leiband: Europa’s erotische cultuur en christelijke sexuele ethiek (Kampen: Kok, 1987), 80-82.

283 Taylor, Secular Age, 481. The space of fashion is a particularly apt example of this mutual display.

284 Taylor, Secular Age, 484.

importance, or a resentful isolation when confronted with a denial of alleged importance. In both cases there is an inability to deeply relate with people. Re-envisioning this world as a place where someone bigger than ourselves (God) embraces our shame and assigns us honor is a challenge.

The third image that keeps people captive is an image of immanent prosperity and security:

Political society enables individuals to serve each other for mutual benefit; both in providing security, and in fostering exchange and prosperity. Any differentiations within it are to be justified by this telos; no hierarchical or other form is intrinsically good (...) Conceiving of the economy as a system is an achievement of eighteenth-century theory (...) but coming to see the most important purpose and agenda of society as economic collaboration and exchange is a drift in our social imaginary which begins in that period and continues to this day. (...) The mutual benefit we are meant to confer on each other gives a crucial place to the securing of life and the means to life. Human flourishing itself becomes the end-goal. At one point Taylor calls this ‘a secular religion of life.’ Of course, the focus on human flourishing has brought incredible blessings, for example in the increase of health, average life-expectancy, and living conditions for millions. But there are also problematic sides. The drive for security has fueled both militarism and for example an ever growing insurance industry. The drive for prosperity is exported to the rest of the world via global capitalism. The Western drive for prosperity and consumption puts a heavy burden on nature and increases the gap between poor and rich. Our earth cannot sustain this single-minded drive for prosperity. Richard Bauckham points out that Islamic extremists who wished to attack America (as leader of the Western world) correctly identified it with economic globalization, as well as with military hegemony in the Middle

---

287 Taylor, Secular Age, 170, 178.
288 Taylor, Secular Age, 371. How it came to this is a long story, told by Taylor in Secular Age. Noteworthy is that in the twelfth to fifteenth century there was a striking change in the attitude towards death. There was a growing concern with death, even a fear of death, and an increasing emphasis on the judgment of God that individuals would face beyond death. There was also an increasing emphasis to flee from the pleasures of the flesh. What is noteworthy here is that contempt for the world, dramatization of death, and the insistence on personal salvation emerged together. Taylor, Secular Age, 64-70. But the story continues with a twist. The emphasis on transcendence, and the life beyond this life, resulted, after a long development, in the opposite emphasis on immanence and the life in the here-and-now. The irony is that it was precisely the attempt to bring the Kingdom with human power that brought a new social imaginary that blinded people for anything beyond immanence.
East: hence the attack on the towers of the World Trade Center as well as on the Pentagon.\textsuperscript{289}

Our immanent prosperity and security is threatened by different forms of violence that inflict suffering. In our age, violence represents for many people evil in its most naked and horrible form. The news often focuses precisely on those events where unexpected violence inflicted great suffering (terrorism, sudden death, diseases natural disasters, etc.). In a flourishing world this type of evil power should not be there, we think, but it is present everywhere.\textsuperscript{290} It fuels the fear of death.

As a result of this focus on immanent prosperity and security, our imaginary of time has also radically changed. Taylor emphasizes this change in our view of time, because, according to him, modern secularization can be seen from one angle as the rejection of higher times, and the positing of time as purely profane.\textsuperscript{291} Time has come under the spell of immanent goals. It is a precious resource, which we should not waste, because with time we can get things done. The saying ‘time is money’ indicates that it is viewed as a resource which can contribute to prosperity. Therefore we have to measure, organize and control time. It is an iron cage that occludes all higher times and makes them even hard to conceive.\textsuperscript{292}

Re-envisioning the immanent world as a place which is embraced and pervaded by the Kingdom of grace, love, and justice is a challenge. The early Christians were not afraid of death and could therefore give themselves freely for the flourishing of others.\textsuperscript{293} They had a Kingdom-imaginary that needs to be re-discovered in the Western context.

\textit{b. The lens of Salvation (New Creation)}

With this lens there is an interaction with the context in light of God’s promise of salvation, the promising news about the new creation. When we have internalized the promising future vision of the Kingdom of God and then look to the Western context, where would we imagine God to bring salvation if His future would break more fully into the present? This is the type of question that is meant to be generative, stimulating reflection on the text of the Bible in

\textsuperscript{289} Bauckham, \textit{Bible and Mission}, 3. American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has often written about the fact that the Western worldview can be described as: “technological, therapeutic, military consumerism,” stimulating a process of rapid self-destruction. Walter Brueggemann, \textit{The Word that Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 104-105.

\textsuperscript{290} McGill, \textit{Suffering}, 34-52.

\textsuperscript{291} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 195, and 54-59.

\textsuperscript{292} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 59.

\textsuperscript{293} Morna D. Hooker and Frances M. Young, \textit{Holiness and Mission} (London: SCM Press, 2010), 49-50.
connection with the context. There is not one possible answer because the social location of the congregation and the different types of giftedness of those involved in the process of contextualization legitimately influence the reading and responding. The four dimensions of reading the context through the lens of salvation (the social-economic-political dimension, the cultural-religious dimension, the creational dimension, and the personal dimension) are helpful to guard against one-sidedness. As has been stated in the introduction to section 3, these will not be fully worked out at this point. Rather, some suggestions will be made in such a way that the link with the idolatries in the Western context become clear. So, the Western context will now be looked at through the lens of salvation (new creation) but with an awareness of the three idolatries that have been discovered through the lens of worship. Are we able to see the need for salvation in the Western context in relation to these three idolatries?

The first idolatry is focused on the power we adore and trust: the power of human agency. What need of salvation in our context is related to this image? It can be argued that one group within the Western societies which come more and more under pressure are those that do not have sufficient human power to cope with the increasing complexity of our societies. This category cannot be equated with the poor. It are those who lack the intellectual capacities to deal with regulations of society and cannot deal with the (often digital) stream of information. There are also those who do not seem to be able to find the motivation to cope with daily life, who do not have the energy any longer to cope with the expectations and complexity of their surroundings. A third group are those who have suffered under the abusive use of human agency (domestic violence, victims of people-trafficking or forced prostitution). According to Mary in the New Testament, when God’s salvation (new creation) breaks in it will result in lifting up the humble and bringing down the rulers from their thrones, filling up the hungry and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1: 52-53). In the Western context, where human agency is adored, the coming of God’s salvation will result in God’s mercy for those who lack powerful human agency and the bringing down of those who use their human agency in merciless ways. Joining God in His saving mission means participating in extending mercy to those in need and opposing persons or structures that are merciless. In this way a facet of the new creation will become visible.

---

294 Hans van Ewijk, *Maatschappelijk werk in een sociaal gevoelige tijd* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij SWP, 2010), especially 19-20. Ewijk mentions different groupings within society that are under pressure. Some of these will be dealt with under the next idolatry.
The second idolatry is focused on the kind of person we adore and want to be: a free and fulfilled individual, self-sufficient and self-cultivating. What need of salvation in our context is related to this image? One could argue that as a result of this social imaginary there is a lot of shame and loneliness in Western societies. People who are not able to present a successful image are less willing to participate in society and withdraw in their homes. Not only old people in retirement homes suffer from loneliness, also many younger people, but expressing this to others increases the shameful sense of failing to reach the ideal of being a fulfilled and self-sufficient individual. For those who are in the seemingly successful parts of society it seems different. But behind the mask of success there is also often a lot of loneliness despite many sexual encounters. If God’s future would break more fully into the present, there is healing available for shame and loneliness. The Father would embrace every ashamed younger son or daughter who would come home, honor them as His children and involve them in reaching out to others. The Father would also try to call into the celebration the successful older sons and daughters who find it hard to celebrate such strange love which is not dependent on how successful you keep up appearances. In a society where this celebration of God’s future breaks in, there will be room for self-expression and sensual release, but they will be bound by the rule of radical love and faithfulness, because here it is believed that the road to true happiness and fulfillment is found in abandoning the quest for self-fulfillment by living to honor God and serve the neighbor. Communities would be safe—you may show yourself as you are—and challenging—you are called to let go of pursuing your own name and honor, while praying “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

The third idolatry is centered on immanent prosperity and security. What need of salvation in our context is related to this image? If God’s future would break more fully into the present, the poor and oppressed within the Western societies would certainly celebrate. But there will be especially rejoicing outside the boundaries of the Western countries. Certainly, the causes for poverty in Third World countries are complex, but one could envision a joyful sharing of resources between nations, as modeled between the church of Corinth and Jerusalem. When Westerners are saved from their idolatry with

---

295 Ewijk, Maatschappelijk werk in een sociaal gevoelige tijd, 20.
297 The amount of economically poor people differs significantly between countries. For example, the percentage in the Netherlands, with its social security, is much lower than in the United States.
298 “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: “The one
prosperity and security, new possibilities will arise. Also creation will rejoice when the ecological burden of consumerism and militarism is lifted.\textsuperscript{299} Joining God in His mission means participating in the care of creation, and in finding ways to gladly share resources with those within and without the Western countries.\textsuperscript{300}

c. \textit{The lens of (a crucified) life-style}
With this lens there is an interaction with the context in light of a cruciform spirituality (as seen in Jesus). ‘What type of life-style is visible and how would a crucified lifestyle look within this context?’ These types of questions are meant to be generative, stimulating reflection on the text of the Bible in connection with the context. As has been pointed out before, there is at this point no space to make a study of life-style in the Western context. Moreover, one would need an inter-disciplinary team of scholars to do that. What will be presented here are some suggestions about a crucified lifestyle that make clear the link with the idolatries in the Western context. So, the Western context will now be looked at through the lens of life-style but with an awareness of the three idolatries that have been discovered through the lens of worship. Are we able to see the need for a crucified life-style in the Western context in relation to these three idolatries? Actual ministry of the author in Amsterdam have confirmed that the suggestions that are given below are not merely theoretical. They present areas of real life-struggle for followers of Jesus Christ within this context.

What would it mean to have the adoration of human agency crucified? The call of Jesus to deny yourself and take up a cross,\textsuperscript{301} can only be done if the image that keeps us captive is replaced by another image in which God is a central agent who speaks and empowers. For example the parable of the sower emphasizes that if we listen carefully, the Word of God will bear fruit in our lives.\textsuperscript{302} Paying attention to God does not mean that human agency as such should be undervalued. The power of the will, of reason, and emotions belong to humans as created beings. But human agency should be centered in paying attention and responding to the Holy One in trust and loving obedience. The Western context makes this extremely difficult, because it fragments our

---

\textsuperscript{299} Dave Bookless, \textit{Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World} (Downers Grove : Intervarsity Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{300} At the moment of writing (summer 2015) a stream of thousands upon thousands of refugees risk their lives for a chance to enter Europe.
\textsuperscript{301} Mark 8:34.
\textsuperscript{302} Luke 8:4-15.
attention.\textsuperscript{303} Many hours of the day are spent in active performance (active human agency), often followed by a type of relaxation that involves being passive spectators while others perform (televison, internet). What is squeezed out in this type of lifestyle is practices of attention that help people to notice and manage their own thoughts, bodily feelings, and behavior. Attention deficit disorders are on the rise in Western society and there are two forms: the predominantly inattentive-disaffected form and the predominantly hyperactive-obsessive one.\textsuperscript{304} The Western context pushes people towards the passive and/or active pole, leaving hardly space in the middle for practices of attention and paying attention to the Word of the Holy One in our midst. Taking up our cross in the Western context means crucifying the adoration of human agency. It means making room for rest (Sabbath), practices of attention, prayer, contemplative reading of Scripture, spiritual direction, and spiritual friendship.\textsuperscript{305}

Even when Christians make room for God in the center of their lives, the temptation of adoring human agency is not overcome. In our ‘Age of authenticity’ the biggest temptation is not the use of the moral will to grasp God (as in moralism) or the use of reason to grasp God (as in dogmatism or intellectualism). Both temptations are still present but the temptation to focus on experience as a means to grasp God is even bigger. Walter Lowe, who tries to develop a postmodern view on Christology and soteriology, puts it in these words: The “magical-aesthetic assumption feeds the fantasy, so often operative and yet unquestioned, that if I can only get in on such a Presence—if I can experience it, if I can incorporate it—then I will in fact be saved: the delusion of salvation by aesthetic absorption. That is the self-absorbed soteriology of “this world.”\textsuperscript{306} What is needed here is a \textit{theologia crucis} in an aesthetic key. This theology will stress the fact that we will not be able to get in on the Presence of God by our own power. Our emotional attempts at connection will often be met with the experience of Absence, because underlying our religious attempts at re-connection with the transcendent is a will-to-power that refuses to bow down before the lordship of Christ (as Nietzsche saw clearly). God cannot be present to people who violently wish Him to be dead. God can only be present to us in Jesus Christ, in whom He in passionate love, becomes intimately present to his creation, and in whom He connects himself with flesh that is occupied by the sinful will-to-power,

\textsuperscript{304} Phillips, \textit{The Cultivated Life}, 113.
\textsuperscript{305} Phillips, \textit{The Cultivated Life}, 75-91.
surrendering Himself to violent death. The invasion of God’s gracious Presence is first experienced as painful because God has to loosen our fixation on the idols of human power. People need to fully face and accept the experience of Absence, because only in that profound experience of emptiness and suffering, the gospel of God’s Presence can be received in trust and faith.\(^{307}\) Jesus’ cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is in Mark the deepest revelation of the gospel. It is a gospel of God’s self-identification with the Godforsaken.\(^{308}\) Through Jesus’ work on the cross we are surrounded by a gracious presence. We can trust that. Experiencing His absence is already the first part of salvation. In due time He will surprise us with signs of His presence.

Thinking that active human agency can connect us to God is a serious temptation, but the passive variant might even be a stronger temptation. The monks called it spiritual apathy (acedia, sloth), but now it is a general cultural temper.\(^{309}\) R. R. Reno describes how the mood has shifted from outward ambition to inward self-protection and passivity (with the help of irony and cynicism), fuelled by fear and anxiety.\(^{310}\) Acedia describes a lassitude and despair that overwhelms spiritual striving, a dullness of soul and a waning confidence in the efficacy and importance of prayer and charity.\(^{311}\) According to Reno the challenge is to nurture an ambition that has the courage of drawing as near as possible to redemptive power, renouncing rights and privileges and accepting those disciplines and sacrifices that are necessary to commit to a transformative relation with God.

The kind of action, in prayer and the spiritual life, which is required should neither be done in the active voice, nor in the passive voice, but in the middle voice. As Eugene Peterson puts it:

> My grammar book said, “The middle voice is that use of the verb which describes the subjects as participating in the results of the action.” I read that now, and it reads like a description of Christian prayer—“the subject as participating in the results of the action.” I do not control the action; that is a pagan concept of prayer, putting the gods to work by my incantations or rituals. I am not controlled by the action; that is a Hindu concept of prayer in

---

\(^{307}\) For Luther ‘humility’ was not a positive virtue, a first human step in order to receive God’s grace. Rather, humility is associated with language of emptiness, nothingness, despising of self. Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross*, 161. Compare Hosea 2:14: “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.”


\(^{309}\) Taylor, *Secular Age*, 303.


which I slump passively into the impersonal and fated will of gods and goddesses. I enter into the action begun by another, my creating and saving Lord, and find myself participating in the results of the action. I neither do it, nor have it done to me; I will to participate in what is willed.\footnote{Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 103-104. Donald Fairbairn argues that even in monastic writers like John Cassian, one could make a strong case that they believed their activity was sustained by a prior act of God's grace, not only initiating conversion but also as producing the virtues in the monks. Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 133-168.}

The church in the Western context is tempted to either forget about discipleship or to take it in the active voice, as if the disciplines themselves transform people. The challenge is to model discipleship in the middle voice. One promising development is this regard is the re-discovery of spiritual direction (mystagogy).\footnote{David Regan traces the recovery of spiritual direction (mystagogy) in the Roman Catholic Church: David Regan, *Experiencing the Mystery: Pastoral Possibilities for Christian Mystagogy* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 27-38. See also: Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner (eds.), *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 11-30.}

What would it mean to have the adoration of ourselves as *free and fulfilled individuals* crucified? The call of Jesus to deny yourself and take up a cross can only be done if the image that keeps us captive is replaced by another image in which not the self is central, but in which God is central and the self is related to others in a community under God. For example, the image of God as a Father, as Jesus paints it in the parable of the lost son,\footnote{Luke 15: 11-32.} an image of God as a Father who embraces an ashamed son and honors him as his son. In light of this new image, a crucified lifestyle is possible. A few things can be mentioned. First, a very important part of crucified living in the Western context is dying to the seeking of honor from others.\footnote{Sometimes people are taught today that what others say is not so important. One only has to love, value, honor, and judge oneself. Paul's attitude was strikingly different: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God." (1 Cor. 4:3-5).} There is a sense in which the Western context stimulates us to make a name for ourselves (individually) and to be impressive, popular and spectacular.\footnote{Henri Nouwen was very aware that this was one of the temptation for church leadership as well. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989). That, however, makes believing in God...}
impossible: “How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” Closely related to this is, second, to value others within the community above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but to the interests of others. Third, in a Christian approach to life, sexual fulfillment and sensual release do not have to be suppressed but sexual pleasure is always submitted to radical self-giving love. The same is true for self-expression in other regards. Discovering and expressing one’s gifts has a place within the framework of love. Fourth, there is a dying to self by revealing (confessing) what is shameful in oneself to other people in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. Fifth, there is also a dying to self-sufficiency by letting others minister to one’s needs, instead of only offering help to other people. It requires a kind of hospitality that allows vulnerable openness in relating to others. Sixth, serving others and blessing them, includes honoring them whenever Christ-like behavior is visible. Seventh, others can be approached with boldness and lack of shame.

What would it mean to have the adoration with immanent prosperity and security crucified? The call of Jesus to deny yourself and take up a cross can only be done if the image that keeps us captive is replaced by another image of God’s Kingdom where there is no need to worry because the Father cares for us.

---

317 John 5:44; compare 12: 42-43. Jesus’ own approach to life was revealed in his prayer before his death: “Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:28).
318 Philippians 2:3-4.
319 Certainly, sexual fulfillment and sensual release have been taboos during certain periods. H.W. de Knijff shows that in the history of Western culture there is a sort of pendulum swing in the development of views on sexuality. Either ‘lower nature’ (sexus and eros) wants to throw off the guidance of ‘higher nature,’ (philia and agape) or higher nature wants to escape the tension of living with lower nature by repressing it. De Knijff uses the picture of the horse and rider. If the rider does not respect the nature of the horse and if he beats it up, the horse will turn against its rider. But a horse without the wise guidance of a rider will wreak havoc. De Knijff, Venus aan de leiband, 271-274. During the present era, the drive for sex is not only the result of the pendulum swing, but as Thomas Moore states: “In modern life sex is one of the few numinous areas we have left, numinosity being the aura of awe and mystery usually associated with religious feeling.” Thomas Moore, The Soul of Sex: Cultivating Life as an Act of Love (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 88. The church needs, in the ‘Age of authenticity,’ to appreciate and recover the importance of eros as a mode of love and as a passionate stance in life. Only if she can appreciate and affirm what is good in the ‘Age of authenticity’ will she be able to guide people away from the idolatries. There is a need here for the training of character, learning to wisely ride the horse rather than beating it up or letting it totally free reign. Compare Taylor, Secular Age, 485. For a quite broad discussion of Christian sexual ethics in light of love and justice, see: Margaret A. Farley, Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).
320 See: 1 Cor. 12-14.
321 “Honor one another above yourselves.” (Romans 12:10).
322 For the relation between boldness and shame, see Forrester, Grace for Shame, 157-164.
in such a way that compassionate service to one another can be at the center. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, shows the self-expense for the sake of others that is at the heart of eternal life and embodied by Jesus.\textsuperscript{323} It is still relatively easy to try to help someone in need while living in abundance. However, that still can be done while leaving the adoration for immanent prosperity and security intact. We then just try to bring other people on ‘our level.’ Leaving the idolatry with immanent prosperity and security will cut deeper. It starts when we are surprised by a promise of undeserved hope for us and the world.\textsuperscript{324} Then a desire grows to embody this promise in new practices. Only when the new vision is embodied in new practices will we be able to see the gracious and loving Kingdom embracing and pervading our context. There is no absolute moral law describing these practices, and there will be different paths for different people. But a few possible directions can be pointed out. First, we have to die to a consumerist lifestyle and replace it with a more simple lifestyle,\textsuperscript{325} being aware of how products connect us to people in other parts of the world and how depleting resources and producing waste burden the environment. Second, we have to grow in learning the joy of giving and sharing, both materially and spiritually, within and without the congregation.\textsuperscript{326} Third, we should not view poor people as just recipients of our help, but as those who can minister the grace of God to us.\textsuperscript{327} Fourth, we need to die to the desire of doing our living and sharing in the spotlights, instead of in inconspicuous places like stables in Bethlehem. Fifth, we have to resist the flattening of all times within a 24/7 economy, and

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{323} Luke 10:25-37. Arthur McGill notes that the parable does not draw the attention to the \textit{effects} of the Samaritan’s charity on the wounded man, but the \textit{way of acting} with unlimited and single-minded self-giving. What is good about the Good Samaritan is the unqualified liberalty with which he expends himself for the other’s needs. McGill, \textit{Suffering}, 53-54.
\textsuperscript{326} Christopher Wright makes clear that just as the blessing (or lack of blessing) in the promised land was a thermometer for God’s relation with his people, so in the New Testament the koinonia of the church (a spiritual and material sharing) functions to show God’s blessing or lack thereof. Christopher Wright, \textit{Living as the People of God: Relevance of Old Testament Ethics} (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 97-99.
\end{footnotes}
let our times be shaped by the rhythm of Christ.\textsuperscript{328} Sixth, we need to re-learn the ancient practice of the monks to regularly contemplate our deaths.\textsuperscript{329}

The three lenses give all different views on the Western context. The way this has been done in this section is very partial. Yet, there was the surprising discovery that the idolatries do indeed throw light on the need for salvation and for a crucified life-style. Though the perspective has to be broadened and deepened, it seems that the three clusters of idolatry are really important points in the contextualization of the gospel in the Western context. The tendency of the approach taken is, however, towards a critical perspective. Can we not affirm many good things in the Western context? Does the Spirit not teach the church through many movements beyond the church walls? Yes, certainly. It is precisely by discerning the idolatries in the Western context that we also can notice movements that resist these idolatries. There are movements that resist the adoration of human agency and call for a more crucified lifestyle (e.g. practices of attention, sharing with the poor and seeing them as partners, resisting the 24/7 economy etc.). There are also movements that (partly) embody the salvation for the poor and powerless. It is not uncommon that non-Christian groups respond quicker to some of the needs in society than Christian churches. Though Christians are not called to judge the motives of others, they certainly can affirm and rejoice in the responses of (sometimes) secular movements to the needs in society.

3.3 A DIALOGUE WITH BERKHOF AND GUNTON

The reading of the Western context, which has been presented in section 3.1 and 3.2, will now be brought into dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton. But a few things should be noted about this task. First, the gospel-centered model which has been used to read the Western context (section 2.3) has already tried to incorporate the strengths of both Berkhof and Gunton. Therefore, the reading of the Western context, presented in the last sections, is not really independent of the contribution of Berkhof and Gunton. It is informed by them. Certainly, Taylor has contributed a lot to the reading presented in the last section, but Taylor has been used creatively, reading him with another methodological approach than he uses himself. Second, the reading of the Western context in this study is not complete, as has been indicated at several points. Further study of the Western context, through the lens of salvation and


\textsuperscript{329} Anselm Grün, \textit{Der Himmel beginnt in Dir: Das Wissen der Wüstenväter für heute} (Freiburg: Verlag Herder GmbH, 1994), 114-122.
life-style, will be able to provide more depth perspective. So, in a sense, it is an incomplete reading that is brought into dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton. Third, the readings of the Western context that will be compared have not been developed simultaneously. When Berkhof analyzed the Western context the ‘Age of authenticity’ was not as ubiquitous as now.

A first observation in comparing the readings of the Western context is that there is much overlap. The quest for freedom, for example, plays a major role in all three approaches. Gunton clearly perceived the problems surrounding the relation of the individual with the community, the unease with time (being hurried because of the illusion that we have to create the future), and the idolatrous tendencies surrounding human power and agency. These also have reappeared in the reading in the previous section. Berkhof took movements of revolution and protest seriously, and though these have not been pointed out yet, a fuller reading of the Western context through the lens of salvation (new creation) would make these visible. Berkhof, in his reading, opposed the divided worldview and because this has already been incorporated into the methodological approach (the lens of new creation looks to both social-economic-political issues as existential issues) these aspects reappeared in the presentation of the last section.

The strength of the proposed reading of the Western context is that it is developed in light of the mission of the church. It could be argued that it is of much more help in the actual task of proclaiming the gospel because it looks for common language, distinctions, and oppositions to the Christian gospel. Moreover, by including the lens of the ‘new creation’ and the ‘cross’ it incorporates a vision how a community of disciples (the church) can embody the gospel within the Western context in action and lifestyle. By paying attention to the pictures that keep us captive (idolatry), and the desires that are directed to certain ends, it becomes clear that the power that makes it difficult to believe in God is not primarily the power of scientists or philosophers, but the power of unconscious pictures through which we perceive the world and the power of embodied practices which shape desires. This approach is needed in our visual media saturated world, where visual stimuli often bypass our thinking and appeal directly to the desires.

What is the weakness of the proposed reading of the Western context? The weakness is possibly located in the lack of attention to important concepts within the context. One of the strong points of Berkhof, for example, was that he saw the difficulty of communicating the good news if it was too closely connected with a static conception of nature and history. Therefore, he used a more dynamic concept of nature and history and was thereby able to speak the language of the vast majority of Westerners for whom evolution is more than a probable hypothesis. One of the strong points of Gunton, for
example, was that he saw the difficulty of communicating the good news if it was too closely connected to a monistic conception of God and a dualistic conception of human beings. Therefore, he developed a more Trinitarian conception of God and a more holistic conception of human beings. The proposed reading of the Western context does not deny these insights, but the question has to be asked why reading the context through the lens of the proclamation of the gospel, worship, salvation (new creation), and cross, does not bring these insights to the surface. The reason seems to be that with the lens of worship one looks for images, with the lens of the cross one looks for lifestyle, and with the lens of the new creation for embodying saving action. The intellectual realm (the use of concepts) does not receive focused attention. Where could the intellectual realm be included in the present model? Probably best in the realm of salvation: there are material dimensions of salvation but also intellectual dimensions. This dimension could be added to the aforementioned four dimensions in reading the context through a lens of salvation. The question that can be asked at that point is what concepts about God, man, or the world, are in need of reformulation and how God’s salvation would impact the intellect at these points. This whole discussion is also a reminder that the shift in philosophical anthropology should not result in downplaying the importance of the intellectual realm. Certainly, pictures keep us captive hold in place by embodied practices, but there are intellectual ramifications of these images that also deserve attention.

4. The methodology of Christology

Section 6.3 of part I and II presented an evaluation of the methodology of Christology of Berkhof and Gunton. Rather than bringing these directly into dialogue with one another a different choice has been made. During the course of this study it became clear that the deepened understanding of the gospel (section one), and the new gospel-centered methodology for reading the context (section two), suggested also a different methodology of Christology. This different approach will be presented in section 4.1. In section 4.2 this approach will be brought into dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton.

---

4.1 APPROACHING CONTEXTUALIZED CHRISTOLOGY THROUGH A CONTEXTUALIZED GOSPEL

The assumption at the commencement of this study was that Christology could be contextualized directly. The theologian would then attempt to express insights into the person or work of Christ within his or her context and so come to new formulations and accents. One would, for example, have to struggle to express the divinity and humanity of Christ in new ways and look how the meaning of the atonement resonated with issues in the context. Certainly, not everything in this approach has to be rejected and certain struggles cannot be bypassed, but as an overall approach it can be criticized on different grounds.

First, it confuses Christology with the gospel. Though these are intimately related, the gospel takes precedence in the process of contextualization. The gospel is a message about God’s saving presence in our midst, a story about Jesus Christ, the one who is, who was, and who is to come.\(^1\) The gospel, as the canonical Gospels show, is not merely an historical report, but a proclamation, “seeking to present and interpret traditions about Jesus in such a way that readers (or hearers) of the story will be moved to acknowledge him as Son of God (...).”\(^2\) This, however, is not what is regularly meant with Christology. It is certainly possible to use a definition of Christology that encompasses this whole process. Carl Braaten, for example, states: “Christology is a churchly discipline; it is the church’s response to Jesus’ question ‘Who do you say that I am?’”\(^3\) However, systematic Christology (Christology as part of a systematic theology) has often been more limited. Generally speaking, systematic theologians have clarified the identity of Jesus Christ (who He is) in Christology proper, and the meaning of his saving work in soteriology.\(^4\) In light of the presentation of the gospel in section one, one could say that the focus in systematic theology has been on the gospel-frame

---

\(^1\) See section 1.3.
\(^4\) Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, writing from an ecumenical, international, and contextual perspective, defines Christology very broadly as the task to interpret the significance and meaning of Jesus Christ for our own times in light of biblical and historical developments. But in his outworking he only notes the distinction between the 'ontological' (who Christ is in his person) and 'functional' (what Christ has done for us). He focuses in his book on the ontological aspect. There is in this approach no indication of an awareness that his broad definition of Christology would require him giving attention to more than the ontological and functional aspects. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology–A Global Introduction: An Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 9, 11-12.
and the gospel-salvation. Most systematic Christology does not focus on describing the gospel-narrative (the story of Jesus Christ) in such a way that within the context the readers or hearers of the story will be moved to acknowledge him as Son of God.\(^{335}\) The more limited aim of reflecting on the identity and work of Jesus Christ in light of Scripture, tradition and contemporary (often philosophical) challenges to the received doctrine is certainly very important for the mission of the church because it supports the church in reading the Scriptures and proclaiming the gospel in a new context. But confusing the gospel and this more limited understanding of Christology would result in a truncated contextualization of the gospel.

Second, and closely related to this, is the fact that a theological attempt to directly contextualize Christology (in its limited sense), bypasses the role of the church in general and the local congregation in particular. If the real work of contextualization requires thorough knowledge of the intricacies of the debates surrounding Christology and the different theories of the atonement, only highly educated theologians are equipped to attempt the work of contextualization. Theologians can contribute to this process, because they also receive the Spirit when they belong to the church. But the Spirit speaks to the church as a whole: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”\(^{336}\) It is the church that has been entrusted with the gospel and that has the task to tell the gospel about Jesus Christ within every new context, in worship and proclamation, as the culmination of the story of Israel, and to unpack and embody the soteriological and doxological impact of that fact.\(^{337}\) The church does not discover new contextualization only by reflection (though this is part of the task), but also through adoring the triune God and refraining from idolatry (worship), while going out to embody salvation (new creation) and following Jesus in a crucified lifestyle (cross).

A different approach to contextualizing the gospel follows from what has been presented in section one to three of part III. Section one presented an understanding of the gospel that left room both for the fact that we do not know what the gospel is before the eschaton has arrived (leaving room for the mystery of Christ), and that there is a ‘givenness’ in the gospel (gospel-story,

---

\(^{335}\) According to Kevin Vanhoozer Western theologians have typically responded to Jesus’ question (“Who do you say that I am?”) in one of two ways: (1) by saying what he is or (2) by saying what he does for us. “The 1980s ushered in a new approach that responds by (3) narrating his identity thereby focusing on the who question in a new way.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Christology in the West: Conversations in Europe and North America,” in: Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, K.K. Yeo (eds.), Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 23.

\(^{336}\) Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

\(^{337}\) See section 1.1.
gospel-frame, gospel-salvation). Section two presented a discussion about the methodology of reading the context, resulting in a model proposing a gospel-centered reading of the context. This model uses the summary of the gospel as hermeneutical lenses in reading the context. So in a sense it starts with the gospel (the DNA of the gospel), but then it turns (dialectically) to the context in order to discern what is happening there in terms of worship, salvation and life-style. Section three used this gospel-centered model for reading the Western context. It is now time for the next step. From an understanding of the Western context we return (dialectically) to the gospel, in order to flesh out a contextualized gospel-frame, gospel-narrative, and gospel-salvation. Section 5 will describe the content of this contextualized gospel-frame, gospel-narrative, and gospel-salvation for the Western context. This section only describes the methodology.

DNA of gospel ➔ gospel-centered reading of Western context ➔ Contextual gospel

In the last step, returning to the gospel, the understanding of the Western context is used to shape and sharpen the understanding of the gospel. This leads to a contextual gospel for the Western context. In fact, as many writers on contextualization point out, this is a hermeneutical circle. One starts with a certain (contextual) understanding of the gospel, then turns to understanding the context, this results in a sharpened understanding of a renewed contextual gospel, which then becomes the new starting point for the same movement.

By envisioning a gospel-narrative, gospel-frame, and gospel-salvation within the Western context, the contours of a Western gospel emerge. One could also call this the contours of a Western Christology as long as Christology is understood in the broad sense. Discussions about the identity of Jesus Christ and the meaning of the atonement (the classical approach to Christology) are important, informing especially the presentation of the gospel-frame (the identity of Jesus Christ) and the gospel-salvation (the meaning of the atonement). But the approach here is not limited to these discussions. Also the gospel-narrative is considered.

---

338 In the work of contextualization one does, of course, not start with a summary of the gospel only. One starts with an understanding of the gospel that is already influenced by one’s context and tradition.
339 In reality this movement from gospel to context happens continuously.
340 For example: Küster, The Many Faces of Jesus Christ, 27.


4.2 A DIALOGUE WITH BERKHOF AND GUNTON

How does this proposed approach to contextualized Christology compare with the approaches of Berkhof and Gunton? Berkhof approaches Christology from four directions: ‘from behind,’ ‘from below,’ ‘from above,’ and ‘from before.’

There are similarities with the proposed approach here. The direction ‘from behind’ finds a parallel in the gospel-frame, specifically the relation between Jesus Christ and the story of Israel. The ‘from before’ finds a parallel in the gospel-salvation, though Berkhof emphasizes what the Spirit of Christ works out in this world while the present proposal, though not denying this aspect, puts more emphasis on what the Spirit of Christ works out in the church, including reflections on discipleship-in-context. Berkhof’s understanding of ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ have already been criticized as confusing, but Berkhof does pay attention to the relation between the human Jesus and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is the Creator of the world, a theme that is discussed under the gospel-frame in the present proposal.

Gunton’s weaknesses in the methodology of Christology, are lacking in the present proposal. The gospel presented here is not equivalent to the incarnation, though considerations of the incarnation (the relation between God and Jesus in the gospel-frame) are part of the presentation. Soteriology does play a decisive role in contextualizing the gospel in the proposed model. The missionary drive in this model prevents that considerations of the immanent Trinity take the central place in theology. Lastly, while Gunton’s methodology does not pay sufficient attention to “discipleship-in-context-Christology” the proposed model cancels out this lack.

The weakness of the proposed methodology for reading Christology is similar to the weakness of the model for reading the Western context: difficulties with the concepts (of Christology) are not automatically brought to the surface. Both Berkhof and Gunton were strong at this point. Berkhof was aware that people in his time (but also in our time) struggle to connect with the traditional and metaphysical language of Nicaea and Chalcedon. This is an important insight. The attempt to find alternative language that can express the intuitions of the church fathers is important for the proclamation of the gospel. Gunton was very aware how different types of rationalism in the Western context had suffocated the expression of Christology in the modern context. His re-introduction of the importance of ‘metaphor’ opened up new approaches in discussions about the atonement. The proposed model does not automatically

---

341 See part I, section 4.1.
342 See part I, section 6.3.
343 See part II, section 6.3.
focus the attention on these dimensions. Certainly, as has been suggested in section 3.3, if the intellectual dimension of the Western context is given a more prominent place, this problem could be somewhat alleviated. But it might be more wise to admit that no model will be strong at all points and so admit that at this point the proposed model has limitations.

5. The content of Christology

In this section a contextualized Christology (understood in the broad sense) is presented in light of the gospel-centered reading of the Western context in section three. The contours of a Western gospel become here visible: a contextualized gospel-narrative (5.1), a contextualized gospel-salvation (5.2), and a contextualized gospel-frame (5.3). Within the scope of this study only certain directions can be described without providing in-depth treatments. The dialogue with Berkhof and Gunton will not be given in a separate sub-section, but be integrated in the different sub-sections. Section five ends with a contextualized confession of Jesus Christ in the sub-context of the new or alternative spiritualities.

5.1 A GOSPEL-NARRATIVE IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT

Contextualizing the gospel-narrative starts with a disciplined reading of the canonical Gospels within the congregation. Through this reading, according to Volker Küster, the biblical stories about Jesus Christ and the themes which determine them start to interact with the stories of men and women and the generative themes of the context which govern them. This process will always continue and provide new contextualizations of the gospel. As has been argued in section 3.1, the ‘Age of authenticity’ provides at this moment the themes of the context and it is, therefore, not surprising that the understanding of the story of Jesus is affected by this climate. Three challenges to telling the gospel narrative in the Western context will be pointed out:

344 As has already been pointed out in paragraph 3.2 the reading of the Western context in this study is limited in that no independent studies of the Western context through the lens of ‘cross’ and ‘new creation’ has been attempted.

345 Küster, The Many Faces of Jesus Christ, 32. Küster presents a model about contextualization in which there is a criterion of relevance (how far does a particular contextual theology succeed in announcing the relevance of the gospel in each situation?) and a criterion of identity (how much congruence is there between a particular contextual theology and the gospel?). When Küster speaks about the gospel, he mainly points to the gospel-narrative dimension without theological interpretation (9-14). This dimension of the gospel-narrative is strongly present in his approach. For Küster Christology is talk of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (29). However, the gospel-frame (according to Scripture) and the gospel-salvation (for our sins) do not play a normative role in his assessing contextual theology on basis of the criterion of identity and relevance.
1. The first challenge is to tell the gospel narrative in a context that is marked by an *immanent frame*. Though Christianity in the Western world is affected by this immanent frame, the other three options are even less able to provide resistance to this frame (the exclusive humanism, the new or alternative spiritualities, and the stream of anti-humanism). One reaction to this immanent frame, therefore, could be for Christians to accept this frame. The story of Jesus is then told in such a way that it does not break through the immanent frame. This does not mean that Jesus cannot be painted as a spiritual person, but his spirituality will be understood as an immanent spirituality, in the interest of purely human flourishing. The three pictures that keep people captive in the immanent frame will then not be challenged by the gospel narrative. Jesus could then be painted as a powerful (spiritual) person, who was independent from others, and who showed people how they could live their lives in order to maximize (spiritual) prosperity and security in the here-and-now. By choosing the word ‘idolatry’ in this study to refer to the pictures that keep us captive in an immanent frame, it is made clear that this is not a direction that is viewed as being faithful to the apostolic gospel. One could, of course, also go in the opposite direction and emphasize transcendence in such a way that immanence does not have a place, e.g. by telling the story of Jesus in such a way as if he was talking continuously about the life beyond death. But then, transcendence and immanence are still disconnected. The gospel-narrative has to be told in such a way that it breaks through the immanent frame and shows the connection between heaven and earth, between an earthly salvation and the salvation beyond death. The gospel-narrative can provide narrative-pictures of Jesus that function precisely to connect immanence and transcendence. If it is true that the adoration and worship of God in Jesus is an alternative to the Western idolatries, then the narrative pictures of Jesus have to counter the three points at which the immanent frame keeps us captive. So the story of Jesus has, first, to be told with attention for how he dealt with human power. It is crucial, in the Western context, to tell the story of Jesus by emphasizing Jesus’ trust: he was relying on the power of the Spirit while listening to His Father. The

---

346 See section 3.1. The alternative spiritualities are also not breaking through the immanent frame (see further 5.4). Only the Islam is strongly resisting this immanent frame.

347 See section 5.3.

348 Henri Nouwen, for example, tells the story of Jesus from this perspective. Henri Nouwen & Michael O’Laughlin (ed.), *Jesus: A Gospel* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001). From a theological perspective one could say that there are not only biblical grounds to choose for a Spirit-Christology, but that the Western context necessitates this emphasis in order to battle the idolatry with human power and agency. For a theological account of both the
story of Jesus has, second, to be told with attention to how he dealt with human freedom and fulfillment. It is crucial, in the Western context, to emphasize the nature of Jesus’ love. It was not an individualistic expression of love, but He established community and practiced hospitality. He was not self-sufficient, but accepted help from others to sustain him in his vocation. His deepest drive was to honor his Father. By giving up the attempt to make a name for himself, he became willing to give up his own freedom and his own self-fulfillment (including sexual fulfillment) for the sake of others, even being willing to endure the cross, scorning its shame.

The story of Jesus has, third, to be told with attention for the purpose with which Jesus lived. It is crucial, in the Western context, to emphasize Jesus’ hope: he lived with a single-minded purpose, seeking first the Father’s kingdom and his righteousness.

At all these three commonalities and differences between Christ’s human reliance on the Word and Spirit and ours, see: Kathryn Tanner, Christ the Key (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-57. See also: Oliver D. Crisp, Revisioning Christology: Theology in the Reformed Tradition (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 91-109.

Henri Nouwen did not only perceive the importance of countering the idolatry with human power and agency, but also the idolatry with individual freedom and fulfillment which makes people self-enclosed. He reflected upon the importance of hospitality already in 1975. Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life (New York: Double Day, 1975), 63-110. Through the influence of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, the theme of hospitality has received renewed attention. See, for example, John D. Caputo, What would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 75-78. Hans Boersma goes beyond Levinas and Derrida by reflecting on God’s hospitality. The connection with the theme of freedom and love is made clear from the start: “God’s hospitality does not nullify human freedom. The father’s embrace [referring to the parable of the prodigal son] does not force itself in tyrannical fashion on a son who has no choice but to endure the father’s imposition of his love. Hospitality rejects the violence of a totalizing imposition of oneself on the other, the violence that forces the other to be shaped into one’s own image. (…) God’s hospitable grace requires that we enter voluntarily into his loving embrace.” Hans Boersma, Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 26. Martien Brinkman shows that the self-preoccupation of human beings is often a theme in Western film and art (since 1960). It is learning to let go of this preoccupation and truly opening one’s heart to others, that is a sign of salvation, modeled by a Christ-figure. Martien Brinkman, Jesus Incognito: The Hidden Christ in Western Art Since 1960 (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2013), 90-91.

Jesus accepted financial support from some women (Luke 8:1-3), he asked for a drink from the Samaritan woman (John 4:7), and he asked three of his disciples to stay awake and pray at his darkest hour (Matthew 26:36-46).

Hebrews 12:2.

Matthew 6: 33.

The nature of the kingdom of God has been debated by scholars for centuries, because in Scripture there is a strand that seems to say that the Kingdom is already present and a strand that seems to say that it will come in the future. Is it a Kingdom within or a Kingdom
points the relation between Jesus and His Father becomes central. Jesus was focused on His Father who spoke to Him and guided Him, who honored Him and celebrated Him, and who brought in His Kingdom. And Jesus did not maintain this relation in his own strength, but in the strength of the Spirit. What becomes visible here is that a Trinitarian lens to read the gospel-narrative, actually is very necessary in the Western context in order to break through the immanent frame. Though Gunton did not pay much attention to the re-telling of the gospel-narrative, he discerned clearly that Jesus had a mediating priestly role. Berkhof gave a much clearer image of Jesus, painting him in terms of love and freedom: Jesus loved God to come? Both can be affirmed. However, the denial of the eschatological perspective, is the result of being captive to the immanent frame in the Western context. Jürgen Moltmann did not fall into this trap. Being a German prisoner of war for three years after the Second World War, he experienced “a rebirth to new life thanks to a hope for which there was no evidence at all.” Jürgen Moltmann, Experiences of God (London: SCM Press, 1980), 7. The theme of ‘hope’ and ‘eschatology’ started to play a big role in his theology, and this has influenced his understanding of the kingdom: “God’s present, liberating and healing activity points beyond itself to the kingdom of freedom and salvation. But through God’s lordship, the coming kingdom already throws its light ahead of itself into this history of struggle. We therefore have to understand the liberating activity of God as the immanence of the eschatological kingdom of God, and the coming kingdom as the transcendence of the present lordship of God.” Jürgen Moltmann, The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimension (London: SCM Press, 1990), 97-98. The new spirituality is, as could be expected, much more vulnerable to deny this transcendent hope and enclose the gospel-narrative in an immanent frame. Philip Jenkins writes about the Jesus of the hidden (gnostic) gospels (e.g. the gospel of Thomas): “This Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is present and attainable here and now, within each follower: he mocks concepts of eschatology, any hopes or fears about the end of the world. The rejection of the apocalyptic Jesus is probably the greatest single insight derived from the hidden gospels, and presented as unshakable fact, the idea pervades contemporary critical New Testament scholarship. For the radical scholars at least, the change of attitude toward the nature of Jesus’ core message represents a full-scale paradigm shift.” Philip Jenkins, Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10. It is not what is affirmed that is wrong (the presence of the kingdom in the here-and-now), but what is denied (the future aspect of the kingdom).

Jürgen Moltmann points in the right direction. In the words of Richard Bauckham: “God is not only, as the Father, creation’s transcendent Lord, but also, as the Spirit, an immanent divine presence within it. (...) Trinitarian theology requires us to think, not of a simple dichotomy between God and the world, but of a tension within God himself, who is both transcendent beyond the world, and pervasively immanent within it. (...) The one-sided stress on God’s transcendence in relation to the world led to deism, as with Newton. The one-side stress on God’s immanence in the world led to pantheism, as with Spinoza. The Trinitarian concept of creation integrates the elements of truth in monotheism and pantheism. (...) The Son is the mediator (...).” Richard Bauckham, The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann (London: T&T Clark, 1995), 186-187.

He came closest to paying attention to the narrative in: Gunton, Christ and Creation, 46-59. But he does not think that it is the job of the systematic theologian to re-tell the narrative within the context.

See part II, section 5.2 and 6.4.
and people, and he was free from people and nature. But he was less aware of the danger of the immanent frame than Gunton.\textsuperscript{357}

It seems that the clear transition in the middle of the canonical Gospels takes on special importance within the Western context, because it can help to distinguish the Christian gospel from alternative messages that promise only human flourishing. In the first half of the story, Jesus is dedicated to human flourishing through forgiveness, healing, exorcism, and teaching. Jesus cares for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, and invites them to follow Him. This first half of the gospel lacks the power to break fully through the immanent frame within the Western context.\textsuperscript{358} In the second half of the gospel-narrative, Jesus’ focus shifts to his approaching death on the cross.\textsuperscript{359} It can still be attempted to read this second half also through a frame that focuses only on the flourishing of life at this side of death. Then Jesus becomes an example of how we deal with suffering or prepare for death and so cultivate a full life even in difficult circumstances. It is only when this second part of the gospel-narrative is read as involving a free sacrifice of Jesus before God, on behalf of others and the kingdom,\textsuperscript{360} that it becomes clear that in Christianity there is a calling beyond human flourishing. The tension between the first and second half of the narrative cannot be taken away.\textsuperscript{361} God wants people to flourish, but he also calls people to follow Jesus Christ and freely sacrifice self-cultivation and self-fulfillment for the sake of others.

2. The second challenge is telling the gospel-narrative in a context where many people choose for exclusive humanism rather than Christianity

\textsuperscript{357} It has already been noted in part I, section 6.2 that for Berkhof the glory of God and the flourishing of human beings could be equated. What also should be noted is that Berkhof’s portrayal of the life and humanity of Jesus Christ strongly emphasizes Jesus’ love for the Father, but it is much weaker in its emphasis on the reliance of Jesus on the Father and the active role of the Father in Jesus’ life.

\textsuperscript{358} Certainly the first half of the gospel is able to partially break open the immanent frame. Jesus’ whole life testifies to the kind of life that is connected with the transcendent Father God. The first half of the gospel, however, is not able to break through the exclusive and immanent focus on life before death.

\textsuperscript{359} For example, Mark 8:31ff.

\textsuperscript{360} Mark 10:45.

\textsuperscript{361} It is a tension from a ‘fleshly’ perspective. All the canonical Gospels make clear that the disciples did not understand Jesus’ teaching about his approaching death and they resisted the idea. There is no tension from the perspective of the Spirit of Christ. The one who dedicates him- or herself to human flourishing without reserve will inevitably break through the immanent frame. Then, the suffering of the second half of the gospel follows logically from the first because the evil powers in this world gather together to stop the one who is truly dedicated to human flourishing under God, while trusting and following the Lord.
because it was seen as a stance of maturity, of courage, of manliness, over
against childish fears and sentimentality. Nietzsche accused Christianity
of having denied a warrior ethic and the exaltation of courage and
greatness. Might there be, despite the disagreement with the overall
thrust of the arguments, some kernel of truth in both these attacks on
Christianity? Have the images of Jesus in the church under-emphasized his
courage and the fact that, though Jesus was not a violent warrior, he was a
prophetic warrior for truth and justice against evil powers? Michael Frost
and Alan Hirsch do think that the pictures and portraits of Jesus in the West
are often feminized. In light of this, the warrior-ethic and courage of
Jesus might need more emphasis in the Western context when telling the
story of Jesus. The path to which Christ calls us is not one of childish fears
and sentimentality. Though the power to conquer is God’s power, it
requires courage and determination. The crucified lifestyle asks for a real
commitment. The fact that Jesus’ victory paradoxically did not involve
slaying enemies but suffering for them instead, does not take away the fact
that there was a victory achieved.

3. A third challenge in telling the gospel-narrative comes from the emphasis
on ‘from below.’ In the ‘Age of authenticity’ people pay more attention to
their own lived experience and are rather suspicious towards dogma’s and
moral rules that come ‘from above.’ When reading the story of Jesus in
this climate, it will invite more attention to Jesus’ own lived experience, for
example, his mystical experience about God. As a mystic and wise man
Jesus had the wisdom to help others find a fuller life. Attention to this
aspect of Jesus’ life can be a valuable emphasis in telling the gospel-
narrative in a culture of authenticity, preventing a merely dogmatic and
moralistic portrayal of Jesus. However, some authors want to go much
further rejecting both the portrayal of Jesus as traditionally given by the
church and the authenticity of the canonical Gospels. One starts then from
the assumption that just as the discovery of our real selves has been

362 Taylor, Secular Age, 365.
363 Taylor, Secular Age, 373.
364 As an example they point to the painting of William Holman Hunt, “The Light of the
World.” Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church, 92-95.
365 The early desert monks viewed themselves as athletes for Christ and soldiers for king
Jesus. They emphasized that becoming full of love and clarity was a battle. Anselm Grün,
Heaven Begins Within You: Wisdom from the desert Fathers (New York: The Crossroad
366 It should be noted that, since the 20th century, the victory theme within theories of
atonement has received again more attention. Compare: Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement,
53-82.
367 See section 3.1.
blocked by oppressive dogma’s and morals, so the discovery of the real Jesus has been blocked by the dogmatic and moralistic Christology of the church. The discovery of new Gospels (e.g. the Gospel of Thomas) has contributed to suspicions that the institutional church has suppressed Jesus-Gospels that are more authentic and liberating than the canonical Gospels. Stimulated by these new gospels, one looks for an alternative Christianity and an alternative Jesus. Jesus is, for example, painted as a subversive and individualistic mystic who taught (non-dogmatically) in parables and who, as wisdom-teacher, showed (non-moralistically) people the way to life. Though the biographical value of so-called gnostic Gospels should be assessed by historical scholarship, the study of Gunton has made clear that the polarization between ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ cannot be sustained. This cuts in two ways. If it could be shown that traditional Christianity has been dogmatic and moralistic without giving attention to the experience of the Spirit, it is indeed not in accordance with the story of Jesus. But it is also necessary to emphasize that the newer proposals about Jesus also contain an implicit ‘from above.’ Often there is a pervasive dogma about the underlying unity of all things and a strong moral teaching about the value of not judging. Gunton has pointed out that there is often the implicit claim in these proposals that we are able to understand better than the earliest writers the nature of Christianity, and that therefore a radical break with the tradition is required. But this claim cannot be sustained. This does not mean that the new proposals are without merit. Often the writers are very attuned to the difficulties that people have with traditional orthodoxy. However, the proposals are often similar to those of the new spirituality, including their strengths and weaknesses (see section 5.4).


369 According to Hurtado the value of the gnostic Gospels is that it aids understanding of the diversity of Christianity in the second and third Century, but not for understanding first Century Christianity. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ, 427-561. For a revealing study about the agenda behind the drive to re-open the existing canon, see: Jenkins, Hidden Gospels.

Telling the gospel-narrative in the Western context requires an emphasis on the (priestly) mediating function of Jesus between immanence and transcendence, it requires an emphasis on the (prophetic) courage of Jesus as a warrior, and it requires an emphasis on Jesus’ life in the Spirit (as a wise man).

5.2 A GOSPEL-SALVATION IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT

The purpose of this section is not to give an overview of the contemporary discussions in soteriology, but to discern the challenges to soteriology in the Western context.\textsuperscript{371} When the gospel states that ‘Christ died for our sins,’ how could this be expressed in the Western context? Certainly one could discuss this without taking the specific context into consideration and state that all have sinned in turning away from God.\textsuperscript{372} This type of discussions certainly has a place, but in light of the mission of the church in the West a more contextualized soteriology is necessary. Though there is a strong tradition viewing the penal substitution theory as a universally valid one, a denial of the contextual element in forming theories hinders fresh contextualizations.\textsuperscript{373} This

\textsuperscript{371} An overview of contemporary discussion can be found in: Michael J. Gorman, \textit{The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement} (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 9-17. Very valuable in showing that there is not just one, or three models of the atonement, but (at least) ten different approaches, is: Peter Schmiechen, \textit{Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).


\textsuperscript{373} See, for example, Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, Andrew Sach, \textit{Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution} (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007). The book is highly acclaimed by many well-known leaders in the evangelical world (e.g. John Piper, J.I. Packer, D.A. Carson, and many others) and is valuable in historical research and debunking caricatures of penal substitution. However, there seems to be no awareness in this book that the formulation of doctrines is influenced by its context. At one point in the book they address an objection to penal substitution, namely “Penal substitution is unable to address the real needs of human culture.” (221). Their response is revealing: “Indeed, if we really believed that cultural differences presented an insurmountable barrier to understanding, then we should have to avoid discussing monotheism when speaking to Hindus, or banish talk of the Holy Spirit when in dialogue with scientific materialists. This would obviously be ridiculous; we would end up never trying to communicate anything our hearers did not already know. The lack of common ground with other people does not require that we abandon distinctive ideas; only that we work harder to explain them.” (222-223). There is such a strong assumption here that the theory of penal substitution is universally valid (on the same level with the belief in monotheism and the existence of the Holy Spirit) that the authors seem only to be able to envision two options: either full embrace of the theory, or the rejection of the theory, which according to them is a rejection
is also visible in church history where the understanding of the human predicament always had impact on the understanding of soteriology.\(^{374}\)

What is the Western contextual understanding of the human predicament? In our times the understanding of the human predicament is greatly influenced by the perceptions of the human sciences of sociology and psychology.\(^{375}\) The alienation in human existence is often diagnosed as arising from the situation of being caught between various tensions in life. Because of the tensions between, for example, our freedom and our limitedness, our possibilities and actualities, we become anxious. “In our anxiety we fail to hold the balance between the two poles of our existence, and we tip over to one side at the expense of the other; we either ignore our limits and posture as gods, or we give away our freedom and succumb like animals to the forces that squeeze and determine us. The result is the alienation from ourselves, others and the whole of reality (...).”\(^{376}\) We can see this dynamic around all three clusters of idolatry. The idolatry of human power either stimulates us to try to control and dominate situations or people, or a sense of powerlessness makes us passive, resulting in attempts to escape reality. The idolatry of the free and fulfilled autonomous individual has brought issues of honor and shame to the surface. It has stimulated either the overt pole of narcissism, in which arrogance, feelings of omnipotence, impression management, and manipulation of the gospel itself. There is no sustained reflection on the role of the context in developing tradition from Scripture, as is done, for example, by New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham: Bauckham, “Tradition in relation to Scripture and Reason.” For a critique on penal substitution which takes ‘guilt’ and ‘wrath’ serious, see part II, section 6.4.

\(^{374}\) Paul Fiddes points to the relation in church-history between how the deepest problem of humans was viewed and the corresponding view of salvation. Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 6-13. Sin as impurity corresponded with the atonement as sacrifice; oppression by hostile powers corresponded with the atonement as victory over de devil (early church Fathers); problems of mortality corresponded with salvation as deification; in the Middle Ages the problems in society were seen in terms of a disturbance of order, and particularly of feudal obligations. Atonement was seen as paying God his due honor (satisfaction); when the human predicament was felt to be a loss of love, the cross was viewed as a mighty demonstration of the love of God, turning human hearts back to God; The period of the Reformation laid new stress upon the central place of law in human society. The only security lay in the absolute claims of law to guard rights and punish offenders. “Thus the estrangement of human beings from God was understood in terms of their being law-breakers, summoned to receive condemnation at the divine bar of justice. Atonement, correspondingly, was a matter of satisfying not so much the honour of God as the demands of his Law, with Jesus punished as a substitute for guilty humankind.” (9).

\(^{375}\) Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 10. This is also very visible in the new or alternative spiritualities where one could speak of “the psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology.” Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 224-229.

\(^{376}\) Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 11.
relationships are central, or the covert pole of narcissism, in which there is also a strong desire for other people’s attention, but it is hidden behind a resentful and pouting attitude.\textsuperscript{377} Around the idolatry of the immanent \textit{telos} of prosperity and security the dynamic is also visible. As Jesus already pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount, there is a basic fear (or worry) because we cannot secure our own prosperity and security. We either try to suppress that fear by hoarding treasures on earth and hold all those who would threaten it on a distance, or we become worrisome, depressed, and without hope for the future.

In order to respond to these tensions and anxieties in our world, soteriology in the Western context needs particular accents. Three accents, relating to the three idolatries, will be discussed, but first the relation between contextual soteriology and the underlying anxiety will be discussed.

Within the ‘immanent frame’ there is a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness, resulting in anxiety and the sense that we are alienated from ourselves, others, and nature. Charles Taylor points out that this malaise of immanence can take different forms. Sometimes it is felt in moments when one searches for the meaning of life, for that what makes life really significant. There are suggestions of an answer, but they all seem uncertain. At other crucial moments in life (birth, marriage, death), we want to feel that these moments have solemn weight, and so we request the church to provide a ritual that can somehow link us with transcendence. But a terrible sense of flatness and emptiness is also felt (by some) in the everyday. The accelerating cycle of desire and fulfillment in consumer society cannot take this feeling away, but rather intensifies it.\textsuperscript{378} The question today is not so much about life \textit{after} death, but about life \textit{before} death.\textsuperscript{379} What gives meaning to this life? Taylor describes different reactions in modern society to this sense of emptiness and meaninglessness.\textsuperscript{380} But what could be the response from a

\textsuperscript{377} Derckx, \textit{Wrok & Begeerte}, 23-24. For the relationship between the Western context and the increase of narcissistic tendencies, see page 17-25.
\textsuperscript{378} Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 309-310.
\textsuperscript{379} Douglas John Hall, \textit{The Cross in Our Context}, p. 129-130.
\textsuperscript{380} Taylor groups the responses along three axes: a principal axe, a romantic axe, and a tragic axe. The responses along the principal axe look for an immanent purpose to give life its meaning, but they emphasize that it asks for a radical commitment and puts stringent demands on people. The responses along the romantic axe look to the depth of immanent nature (without and within) to overcome alienation and give a sense of meaning to life. Beauty is seen as the fullest form of unity and the true end of life. The responses along the tragic axe emphasize that within the immanent order one cannot find purpose or meaning. One should honestly face the tragedy, the pain, and unresolved suffering in life. Recognizing these aspects of life is not only courageous, it is also acknowledging some of its depth and grandeur. Taylor, \textit{Secular Age}, 311-321.
When the anxiety was about fate and death, contextualized soteriology responded with emphasizing that God in Christ Jesus had given Himself to overcome this threat. Jesus is victorious over the powers of death. When the anxiety was about guilt and condemnation, contextualized soteriology responded with emphasizing that God in Christ had given Himself to overcome this threat. He forgives guilt and frees us from condemnation. Now that we face the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, contextualized soteriology has to respond to this, as Berkhof did. But it is necessary, more than Berkhof did, to emphasize that it is the presence of God in Christ (through His Spirit) that saves. After Israel committed idolatry with the golden calf, no pronouncement of forgiveness or the promise of a guiding angel was able to give rest to Moses and the people of Israel. Only God’s own presence was sufficient. It is the presence of YHWH himself that ultimately makes the difference. This is a major theological theme in the book of Exodus. At the end of Exodus the glory of YHWH settles on the tabernacle. John Durham comments:

This final chapter (...) recounts the fulfilment of the ideal of the Exodus theology of the Presence: Yahweh among his people, not in his mighty deeds, or in his rescue, or in his provision, or in his guidance, or in his judgment, or at a distance on a forbidden and foreboding mountain, but there in their midst; the symbol of his nearness visible to all, and all the time (...).

Salvation and worship are closely united in Exodus. In the New Testament YHWH’s Presence rests on Jesus, and that Presence comes close through

381 The theory of penal substitution is a contextual soteriology that is very well attuned to questions of guilt and condemnation.
382 The anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness is so profound “that few Christians have been courageous enough to plumb its depths. Despite its exploration in the artistic and literary works of almost a century, to say nothing of the investigations of psychology and sociology, the anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness remains for the general public, including the churched, a virtually uncharted depth – and one intuitively, legitimately, feared and repressed. Yet until the depths of the human predicament have been plumbed, in any age, there can be no response to that anxiety from the depths of the Christian gospel.” Hall, The Cross in our Context, 130-131. At this point Berkhof was more aware of the challenge than Gunton.
383 The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:14-16).
385 John 1:14.
Word and Spirit. A theology of Presence is able to speak to the anxiety of emptiness, meaninglessness, and alienation in our time.

There are three accents that this theology of Presence needs in the Western context. The first accent is related to power and powerlessness. The Presence of the crucified Lord reveals both our powerlessness to reach God and our hidden violence towards others and ultimately towards God. But rather than coming in judgment, this Presence comes with forgiveness and as a guiding and empowering Presence. The Presence of God saves us from powerlessness, not by making us inhumanly strong, but by speaking to us and giving us the power of an obedient cruciform love. The God revealed in the cross and resurrection is not powerless, but He shows a different kind of power. It is a power “to surrender power, the ability to relinquish rights or privileges, for the sake of another (...) power not to dominate or to control, but to love, to enable and to release. It is not so much power over others, but a power to give oneself for others. (...) not so much a will to power as a will to love (...).” There is a powerful resistance in this love towards evil. It is real power, a power that will lead this world to its destination. So, atonement theories

---

386 For the twofold testimony to presence and hiddenness, and the fact that God’s presence to finite human creatures occurs only indirectly through finite means, see: Lowe, “Christ and Salvation,” 249. For the theme of presence and absence in the Pauline letters: Chris Tilling, Paul’s Divine Christology (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 137-165.

387 This Presence is not static as in pantheism but dynamic. It is an elusive Presence. One can call upon this Presence in experiences of emptiness and absence, open up to it in trust, and let one’s life be formed by it. This emphasis on Presence calls attention (within soteriology) to the importance of the coming of the Spirit as the reason why Jesus had to die. See: John 7:37-39; 16:7. Kevin Vanhoozer similarly moves in this direction when he writes: “Hence my thesis: the saving significance of Christ’s death consists in making possible God’s gift of the Holy Spirit.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts,” in: Charles E. Hill & Frank A. James III, The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 398-399. Or, as Michael Gorman has argued, the ultimate purpose of Christ’s death is the birth of the new covenant, which is life in the Spirit of the resurrected Lord. Gorman, The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant, 5. Only God’s own Presence saves. Jesus has inaugurated a renewed Presence of God on earth, an invasion of God’s gracious reality.

388 Justification by faith alone turns our focus from our powerlessness to God’s forgiving and enabling grace.

389 Hebrews 11:32-40 is a reminder that the power of God, received in faith, is both a power that promotes human flourishing, and a power that gives endurance in suffering and hope in the resurrection.


391 Is God’s power non-violent? René Girard has presented the cross as an unmasking of human violence (caused by mimetic desire), see: Hans Boersma, Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross, 133-151; Stephen Finlan, Problems with Atonement (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 89-93. Many Anabaptist scholars have presented the heart of the cross as God’s non-violent forgiving love, for example: J. Denny Weaver, The Nonviolent Atonement (Grand
stressing the victory of Christ are very worthwhile, as long as they stress the cruciform shape of God’s power. Colin Gunton is exemplary at this point. The second accent is related to honor and shame. The Presence of the crucified Lord reveals both the shame of our evilness and our shaming and excluding of other people and ultimately God. But rather than coming in judgment, this Presence comes with forgiveness and as a hospitable and honoring Presence. The Presence of God saves us from shame. Many people in the Western context do not feel guilty in relation to an external law or a god but they feel ashamed because they are torn apart between their ‘ideal self’ and ‘real self.’ This does not mean that guilt should not play a role in the atonement, but it does mean that a contextualized soteriology in the Western context has to pay more attention to the role of shame.

The gracious and

---

392 Gunton points out that Jesus’ victory in the desert is achieved by obedience. All the temptations are concerned in some way with the misuse of human power. It are temptations to idolatry. It is the refusal to succumb to the temptation that is Jesus’ victory. Gunton, The Actuality of Atonement, 58.

393 Cooper, Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance, 87-111.

394 N.T. Wright has proposed the thesis that Jesus’ message of forgiveness should be understood as the offer of a return from exile and a renewal of the covenant, inaugurated through his death on the cross. N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 268-274, 592-611. When Jesus identifies with his people and shares their exile, he enters both their guilt and shame. Though the penal aspects of the atonement should not be understood on basis of an economy of exchange, the fact that exile was also a punishment of God cannot be denied. Hans Boersma points to the real problem: “I contend that it is not a penal understanding of the cross as such that endangers hospitality, but rather the juridicizing, individualizing, and de-historicizing of the cross that is responsible for an imbalanced approach that legitimizes unnecessary violence.” Boersma,
forgiving face of God, mediated through the congregation, allows people to both feel welcome and to come out of hiding. Though exposure of the ‘real self’ is threatening, within a gracious, hospitable, and honoring community the story about alienation and shame can be faced. The story can be faced because of the Presence of the one who not only carried the guilt but also the shamefulness of our evil. The shameful death from which we flee, was experienced by Jesus on the cross. But He rose having overcome this shame, pronouncing love and forgiveness. Re-telling our story in light of the story of His sacrifice re-orders our lives by giving us an honorable new identity as dearly loved children. As honored children we may gain honor in the Christian community by giving up our normal ways of achieving honor and

---

Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross, 163. Within a covenantal framework, both guilt and shame have their place. Van den Brink and Van der Kooi speak to both these concerns when they describe Jesus as God’s life-giving Presence and forgiving love. G. van den Brink & C. van der Kooi, Christelijke Dogmatiek (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 348. For a radical critique on the lack of attention to shame, see: Stephen Pattison, Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 189-274.

395 “Both the Greek term prosopon and the Hebrew term panim may be translated as “face” or “presence.”” F. Leron Shults, Steven J. Sandage, The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 105.

396 Joel Green and Mark Baker present the way in which Norman Kraus, missionary to Japan, connected the meaning of Jesus’ cross with shame. Green & Baker, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross, 153-170. Though there are significant differences between Japan and the Western context, there are valuable insights that could be used in the proclamation of the gospel in the Western context. According to Kraus, the cross exposes false shame and breaks its power to instill fear. Sometimes a society’s taboos, mores and laws are distorted and this induces false shame. But there is also appropriate shame, there are things for which humans should feel shame. “The most shameful act in history was crucifying God incarnate.” (167). This type of acts alienate and destroy relationships. But on the cross Jesus responded with forgiveness. In lovingly revealing the true failure of us all, Jesus removed the stigma and hostility that alienates us from each other and God. Jesus has “borne the shame for all who through his disclosure of God’s holy love find freedom from its dread and power.” (167).

397 “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:1-2). Within Protestantism the sacrifice of Christ is not consistently associated with his resurrection. But early Christians understood Christ’s resurrection as a sign of divine acceptance of Christ's offering, just as the burning and the smoke of the sacrificial fire was a sign of divine acceptance. The eucharist was like the ritual meal signifying restored fellowship between worshipers and YHWH. Campbell, The Gospel in Christian Traditions, 41, 62, 71. See also: Christian A. Eberhart, The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 94-101. The sacrifice is not repeated within the eucharist, but the church gathers around His sacrificed and risen Presence. The gracious and hospitable Presence of God in Christ is therefore indissoluble connected with his body, the church. See also: Scot McKnight, A Community Called Atonement (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 27-28.
status, taking the role of a servant and showing forth the forgiving and embracing love of the Father in heaven.\textsuperscript{398}

The third accent is related to hope and fear. The Presence of the crucified Lord reveals both our fear of death behind our idolatry with prosperity and security and the fact that through our idolatry we diminish the flourishing of life for others and ultimately of God. But rather than coming in judgment, this Presence comes with forgiveness and as a generous and hope-giving Presence. The Presence of God saves us from fear and hopelessness.\textsuperscript{399} Instead of worrying about security and prosperity, Jesus lived from the conviction: the heavenly Father knows what we need, therefore we can seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all the things that we need will be given to us.\textsuperscript{400} This perspective does not make sense within an immanent frame because it challenges the fear of death. Only within an eschatological perspective can one be generous and participate in God’s hope-giving mission to places of darkness and despair. The Presence of God in Jesus is anticipatory of the coming of the kingdom when God will be all in all.\textsuperscript{401} For contextualized soteriology in the Western context both the generosity of Jesus’ whole ‘career’ and the eschatological character of cross and resurrection has to be underlined.\textsuperscript{402}


\textsuperscript{399} The fact that God’s Presence saves us from powerlessness, shame, and hopelessness, should not be viewed as a psychological rendering of salvation, as if ‘feeling saved’ is only what counts. Gunton insists that in eschatological perspective salvation means arriving safely at one’s destination, and all other symptoms and manifestations (such as ‘feeling saved’) are but greater or lesser stations upon the way. Gunton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, 63. By being united with Christ (through baptism) we are on our way of being purged from idolatry and become more like Jesus in relation to power, honor, and generosity.

\textsuperscript{400} Matthew 6:32-33.


\textsuperscript{402} 2 Corinthians 8:9 underlines not only the generosity of the crucifixion but also of Jesus whole ‘career’ (Gunton’s term for Jesus’ whole life from birth to ascension). See: Wright, \textit{Paul and the Faithfulness of God}, Book II, 688-689. Jesus embodied his own words: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35). Jesus, as God’s gift, shows an economy of generous grace. See: Jan-Olav Henriksen, \textit{Desire, Gift, and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 49-54. The eschatological perspective on the atonement has been emphasized by Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 151-274, 313-341.
In the approach to the gospel-salvation just presented, Berkhof has been followed in taking the feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness serious, as well as his call for contextualized soteriology and his distinction between the purpose of salvation and the ‘how’ of salvation. At other points a different road has been chosen. Berkhof believed that in the contemporary Western context one could best use the Johannine concepts of love, obedience, and glorification, rather than the juridical and cultic concepts of Paul. Through the work of, especially, N.T. Wright it has become clear that Paul’s juridical understanding was much more covenantal than later tradition would suggest. Moreover, the Western context does need accents related to power/powerlessness, honor/shame, and hope/fear. These include the Johannine concepts but also go beyond them. Gunton had fewer antennas for the feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness, but he was very aware that ‘immanence’ was the central challenge to theology in general and soteriology in particular. His treatments of ‘victory,’ ‘sacrifice,’ his recasting of ‘penal substitution,’ and his emphasis on ‘Christus praesens’ have contributed to the presentation in this section.

5.3 A GOSPEL-FRAME IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT

Section 1.1 made clear that the gospel-frame relates the gospel-narrative to the Old Testament Scriptures. It views the gospel-narrative as the continuation and climax of the ancient story of Israel and it links ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ to ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,’ the same one who is the creator of the material world. What could be said, in light of the Age of authenticity, about this gospel-frame?

a. A contextualized gospel-frame: the story of Israel

For a very long time in Western history the gospel-frame consisted in a four point narrative: creation, fall, redemption in Christ, and final consummation. Kendall Soulen shows how this standard canonical narrative emerged in the theology of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon as a response to the apologetic situation in the second century. The church tried to define its theological identity against three sets of opponents: Jews, pagans, and Gnostics.403 This standard canonical narrative unifies the Christian canon into a single coherent witness. However, there is also a weak side. The canonical narrative presents a

403 R. Kendall Soulen, The God of Israel and Christian Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 25-56. Over against the Jews the redemption in Christ was emphasized; over against the pagans it was emphasized that God’s act in Jesus Christ was done for all the world, with saving significance for everyone (so in a sense consummation was central); over against the Gnostics the creation was emphasized.
creaturely-universal foreground and a subordinate Israelite background. The corporate and historical dimensions are pushed to the back, while the individual and universal dimensions are magnified. Kant exploited this critical fault line in the standard narrative and for him Christian doctrine was the triumph of creaturely-universal spirit over historical-particular flesh.\textsuperscript{404} The important thing to notice is that within this gospel-frame the history of the Jewish people becomes largely indecisive for the conception of God and salvation. This gospel-frame makes it look as if the Biblical narrative consists in an individual story about human guilt which can be wiped clean in Christ and which then changes the destiny of the believing individual from hell to heaven. God’s plan to renew this world through the descendants of Abraham (both the people of Israel and the church) is strangely absent. Because of the individualizing and de-historicizing tendency in this gospel-frame, one could even speak about a latent historical Gnosticism.\textsuperscript{405}

In the Western context this narrative frame has lost its plausibility. The canonical narrative has tended to focus the attention on the very beginning of human history (creation and fall) and the very end of history (consummation). The plausibility of the standard account of the beginning is undermined by the influence of, for example, geology (existence of dead fossils in the oldest layers) and recent DNA research (throwing doubt on the historicity of Adam and Eve).\textsuperscript{406} The plausibility of the standard account of the end is undermined by the pervasive ‘immanent frame.’\textsuperscript{407} The destiny of one’s soul beyond death (the existence of this soul is being doubted by many) is not a major interest in a context which focuses on the flourishing of human life before death.\textsuperscript{408}

\textsuperscript{404} Soulen, The God of Israel and Christian Theology, 68.
\textsuperscript{405} Soulen, The God of Israel and Christian Theology, 81, 110.
\textsuperscript{406} At this point only the lack of plausibility is pointed out. Dependent on one’s interpretation of Genesis 1-11, one could still argue that, though not plausible, the standard account is credible. For a clear overview of different options, see: Deborah B. Haarsma & Loren D. Haarsma, Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, & Evolution (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2007). Cf. John H. Walton, The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).
\textsuperscript{407} It has also been undermined by modern biblical scholars who thought that the kingdom that Jesus preached did not arrive (delay of the Parousia). Part of the problem was that they assumed Jesus meant either an armed revolution or to the end of the world (both have not happened), rather than understanding that the kingdom has arrived with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Cf. N.T. Wright, How God Became King, 160.
\textsuperscript{408} Also at this point one could still insist on the credibility of the standard account about the end, dependent on one’s interpretation of the many warnings about hell in the New Testament. A new stream of scholarship refuses to read these verses through an individualizing and de-historicizing lens. See, for example: N.T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 280-338; Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 320-368; Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, Book II, 1043-1265; Andrew Perriman, The Coming of the Son of Man: New Testament Eschatology for an Emerging Church (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005). These new interpretations do
The standard canonical narrative should be modified by giving the Old Testament Scriptures and the history of the people of Israel a more central place. Both Berkhof and Gunton did this, following the direction of Barth. It is also crucial to emphasize God’s blessing in creation and in Israel before attention is given to sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his encounter with the modern immanent climate, discovered how often the Old Testament spoke about the blessing of earthly life. He rightly pointed out that it was important in this climate to speak of God not only at the boundaries but also at the center, not only in weakness but also in the joy and strength of life. In Old Testament studies the theme of blessing has also received new attention. A foundational line of the biblical narrative is: 1) God creates a world where differences can be a blessing through mutual dependence; 2) God blesses the gentile nations by entering a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, promoting a mutual blessing between Jews and Gentiles; 3) God consummates this world by bringing his shalom. In this reign of shalom differences are not abrogated but are taken up in an economy of mutual blessing (between Israel, the nations, and even the cosmos). This is, of course, not the whole story but it remains foundational, even when (in the New Testament) Israel gets redefined around Jesus and the Spirit. The importance of this positive ground-theme (ontology) should be asserted against a strong tradition within Christianity that has started with the negative before explaining the good news. The negative can of course not be denied, but it is precisely the incomprehensible fact of sin that it cuts itself off from God’s economy of mutual blessing. The sin of Israel is most clearly revealed in how she responds to the blessings of the covenant. So the modified canonical

---


415 This approach does not necessarily deny an historical fall, but emphasizes (with Barth) that the fall does not lie behind God’s history with Israel but within it. An understanding of the depth of sin does not have to be primarily based upon an exegesis of Genesis 3 (or 3-11),...
narrative could be: Creation—blessing through Israel—fall (fully revealed)—
redemption through Christ—consummation. This order emphasizes that sin
raised its ugly head within the covenant and that Jesus came to save his people
from their sins.416

But was there not a fall before Israel appeared? The creation texts in
Genesis 1-2, and the texts about the effects of sin (3-11), place the history of
Israel within a more comprehensive context. “The redemptive work of God
takes place within a world, indeed within individual lives that have been
brought into being and sustained by God’s creative activity.”417 Both the
blessing of the covenant and the sinful tendencies of the people of Israel are
(in Genesis) prophetically discerned within humanity at large. So the fall in sin
can also be placed before the story of Abraham begins as long as care is taken
that the election of Abraham and his descendants is not viewed solely as a
solution to the problem of sin, but as a blessing in its own right.418 In the same
way, through the coming of the Jewish Messiah God graciously invades with
his blessed presence. That is the positive ground-theme.419 This Messiah
renews the covenant with Israel and thereby enables His salvation to reach
both Jews and Gentiles.420

but upon the whole Old and New Testament. The depth of sin in the Old Testament is most
clearly revealed within the blessings of covenantal life, specifically in Israel’s life in the
centuries before the exile. The depth of sin in the New Testament is most clearly revealed in
the crucifixion of Jesus.
416 Matthew 1:21. N.T. Wright also follows this line by understanding the suffering,
crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus as his entering of the exile of Israel and starting a new
exodus. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 269.
417 Terrence E. Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of
418 For an overview of different perspectives on the interpretation of Genesis 3-11, see:
Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament, 69-89. About the historicity of Adam and Eve,
and an historical fall, see: Haarsma & Haarsma, Origins, 215-232. It seems difficult to deny
that sin as distrust against the Creator must have had a beginning in history, because even
from an evolutionary perspective the emergence of God-consciousness had a beginning in
time. Only when the latter was present, the former could happen. But in the communication
of the good news in the Western context it seems wise to stress the reality of both blessing
and sin instead of making the question about the historicity of the fall a stumbling block for
people preventing them hearing the good news.
420 Kendall Soulen’s attempt to overcome supersessionism leads him to propose a different
hermeneutical center for reading the canonical narrative: “The present account, in contrast,
suggests that the Christian canon possesses an irreducibly double focus. The hermeneutical
center of the Scriptures is the God of Israel’s eschatological reign, conceived as the final
outcome of God’s work as the One who consummates the human family in an through God’s
history with Israel and the nations. The hermeneutical center of the Apostolic Witness is
“good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12).” Soulen,
The God of Israel and Christian Theology, 113. It seems that this proposal separates what the
New Testament unites, namely the good news about the kingdom of God and the person of
b. A contextualized gospel-frame: Jesus and the God of Israel

Berkhof pointed out that people in the Western context struggle to understand the formulations of the early Church councils because they are framed in ontological language. Gunton did not think that ontology as such was the culprit, but rather a non-relational ontology. The early church came to its formulations under influence of a Greek culture about which LeRon Shults writes: “Most ancient Greek philosophers valued substance over relationality both ontologically and epistemologically.”421 He points out that the phrase ‘ton auton’ (the same) appears eight times within the Definition of Chalcedon.422 In the Western context it is important to give more space to a relational approach of the divinity of Christ and the Trinity.423

The question if the divinity of Christ was only a late development or already shared by the earliest Christians has been hotly debated.424 The work of scholars like Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado have challenged the thesis of Bousset that the epistles of Paul do not present a divine Christology.425 Building on the work of Bauckham, Hurtado, and Fee, Chris Tilling has moved the debate forward by arguing for a relational divine Christology in Paul. He argues that Second Temple Judaism did understand God’s uniqueness in a relational way, namely through the God-relation pattern with His people. Paul expresses the relation between Christ and believers with this same pattern. While there are differences, the God- and Christ- relations have the same shape, major themes and basic content.426

Jesus Christ. The present study would stress that Jesus Christ remains the hermeneutical center of both Old and New Testament, but that in knowing the mystery of Christ there remains eschatological reserve (see section 1.2).


422 “one and the same Son ... the same perfect in divinity ... the same perfect in humanity ... truly God and truly human the same ... consubstantial the same with us ... the same for us ... the same Christ ... the same Son ...” Shults, *Christology and Science*, 25.

423 Though the ‘Age of authenticity’ has an individualistic stream, relational language is very well understandable.

424 For a recent overview of the history of research, see: Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*, 11-34.


Another way to express this (as has been done in section 5.2) is to stress that Christ is the gracious presence of God. The worship of- and devotion to the presence of Christ is worship of- and devotion to God. The Christ that we meet is, however, not a docetic Christ but the incarnate Son of God. At this point Gunton helpfully expresses the incarnation in terms that are understandable in a climate that does not think in substances but in relational force fields:

(...) God differentiates himself, becoming present within one piece of finite reality (he in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’, Col. 2.9), but without either losing his general relationship to the whole or depriving that one part of its genuine humanity. In this one piece of space there are co-present two levels of reality, that which permeates everything by virtue of his creating power, and that which by virtue of that same power, he takes freely and graciously to himself, becoming what in himself he is not.

Jesus’ relation to God reveals that divinity is not a substance that fills other things by fitting into their boundaries, and humanity is not a substance whose boundaries are threatened by such ‘filling.

“The delightfully mysterious intimacy of the fully divine knowing and being-known among the Trinitarian persons is manifested in the history of this man’s fully human experience of coming-to-participate in that life as he learned to rely on the life-giving Spirit and entrust himself to the Father.”

In the ‘Age of authenticity’ the Trinity is also best approached from a relational point of view. On a conceptual level Gunton has provided solid reflections.

---

427 Tilling is not arguing for a functional Christology: “Paul’s relational Christology, the shape of his divine-Christology, raises doubts that a functional/ontological distinction can serve in understanding Paul on his own terms (as far as this is possible). As the first part of this chapter has hopefully made clear, the divine-Christological implications of Paul’s relational Christology pushes the matter beyond a merely functional conception of the significance of Christ for Paul, but neither is it stated especially in terms of Christ’s ‘being’ or ‘essence’, as in the later church creeds – even if the creeds can be fairly posited as a faithful ‘translation’ of the significance of Paul’s Christ-relation.” Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*, 249.

428 Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 119. For the difference between an Aristotelian concept of space and a relational concept of space, see: Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, edited by Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 13-221. For other proposals about communicating the incarnation after the shift to relationality (for example from Arthur Peacocke and Denis Edwards), see: Shults, *Christology and Science*, 44-55.

429 Shults, *Christology and Science*, 57.

430 Shults, *Christology and Science*, 57.
However, two emphases need to be added in order to communicate clearly in the Western context.

The first is that because people reject a thinking ‘from above,’ an approach to the Trinity which only discusses creedal formulations will not be sufficient. The true matrix of the Trinity is prayer and worship. It is in prayer and worship that one discovers that in speaking to the Father there is a divine activity from within (the Spirit) which transforms people to Christ.\footnote{Paul Fiddes stresses that for both Augustine and Gregory of Nazianzus the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ refer to the relation, not to persons at each end of the relation. Paul S. Fiddes, \textit{Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity}, 34-35. According to Fiddes, we experience three movements in prayer and worship: “The New Testament portrays prayer as being ‘to’ the Father, ‘through’ the Son and ‘in’ the Spirit. This means that when we pray to God as Father, we find our address fitting into a movement like that of speech between a son and father, our response of ‘yes’ (‘Amen’) leaning upon a child-like ‘yes’ of humble obedience that is already there, glorifying the Father. At the same time, we find ourselves involved in a movement of self-giving like that of a father sending forth a son, a movement which the early theologians called ‘eternal generation’ and which we experience in the mission of God in history. (…) Simultaneously, these two directions of movement are interwoven by a third, as we find that they are continually being opened up to new depths of relationship and to new possibilities of the future by a movement that we can only call ‘Spirit’;” (37).}

In the present Western context, communicating about the Trinity should not be separated from spirituality. Moreover, speaking about spirituality should not be separated from human sexuality. Sarah Coakley has pointed out that both Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa thought deeply about the right ordering of sexual desire (through prayer) and that their conceptions of the Trinity were intertwined with their convictions in matters of sexuality and spirituality. She insists that without contemplative prayer our desires always lead us into idolatrous directions.\footnote{Sarah Coakley, \textit{God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).}

... Freud is turned on his head. Instead of ‘God’ language ‘really’ being about sex, sex is really about God—the potent reminder woven into our earthly existence of the divine ‘unity’, ‘alliance’, and ‘commingling’ that we seek. This in turn has profound ascetical implications, of course; for no one can move simply from earthly, physical love (tainted as it so often is by sin and misdirection of desire) to divine love—unless it is via a Christological transformation.\footnote{Coakley, \textit{God, Sexuality, and the Self}, 316.}

Sexual desire is one expression of a deep desire for union with God and the mystics have often pointed to the fact that in deep prayer erotic desire is involved. If the Trinity is presented, not as a philosophical debate, but as a
description of how the divine desire seeks to engage this world, and how people can be taken up into a prayerful and responsive love (through the Son and in the Spirit), by which they are purified and re-directed towards the fulfillment of their deepest desires, the theme of the Trinity becomes a life-giving frame for the gospel-narrative in the Western context.

The second emphasis is that there are different ways of speaking about the Trinity. The language of ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ and ‘Spirit’ is the Name of God in a Christological key.434 There are also a variety of other names in the Scriptures that are related to specific experiences.435 In the use of all these names, it is important to stress that God is also unlike the names that are used. God goes beyond any language that we use. In all attempts to use different names and metaphors for pointing to the Trinity, there must also remain a principled commitment to divine mystery and unknowability.436 The divine uniqueness, expressed by the Tetragrammaton, points to Someone who is greater than all our concepts are able to contain.437 “Though our lips can only stammer, we yet chant the high things of God” (Gregory the Great).438

5.4 A CONFESSION OF JESUS CHRIST FROM THE WESTERN CONTEXT

In light of the Western context which has been characterized as an ‘Age of authenticity,’ sections 5.1-5.3 have presented a contextualized gospel-narrative, gospel-salvation, and gospel-frame. This section (and part III) will close with a confession of Jesus Christ from the Western context.

A contextual confession of Jesus Christ arises from one’s particular context, when people (or a congregation) answer Jesus’ question: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”439 Jesus does not ask this question with the purpose of gathering data. Rather, the question brings people to the point of realizing where they stand and it spurs them on to take a decision. Jesus uses

434 Kendall Soulen argues that Scripture shows three patterns of naming the Trinity, a naming in a Theological key, a Christological key, and a Pneumatological key. A major strength of his study *The Divine Name (s) and the Holy Trinity* is that it traces the oblique references to the Tetragrammaton in the New Testament. Another strength is that he shows that there is an open-ended variety drawn from common experience in naming the persons of the Trinity by virtue of its affinity with the third person of the Trinity and the mystery of divine blessing that radiates from the divine life. R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 190.

435 Soulen, *The Divine Name (s) and the Holy Trinity*, 233-252.

436 Compare part II, section 6.1.

437 For the role of the Tetragrammaton in the New Testament and Creeds, see: Soulen, *The Divine Name (s) and the Holy Trinity*, 7-46.


439 Mark 8:29.
questions to get at matters of relationship rather than information. If the canonical Gospels are used to give a once-for-all definitive answer to Jesus’ question, they block Jesus’ purpose. The canonical Gospels are a testimony and witness of the early church in response to Jesus’ question. This eyewitness testimony will always be followed up by asking: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Berkhof was well aware of this dynamic and pointed to the fact that the historical study of Jesus “is marked with a nervousness not found in other historical studies, and it demonstrates how much the New Testament proclamation of Christ compels people, also today, to take a stand.”

Certainly, the confessions about Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, his Names and titles in Old and New Testament, should be studied. But besides this there is also room for a pattern of naming and confessing that employs an open-ended variety drawn from the specific context. That will be the focus at this point.

In describing the contextualized narrative, salvation, and frame in the last three sections, a confession about Jesus Christ was already inherent. At this point, however, a further step in contextualization will be taken. In section 3.1 four different sub-contexts have been pointed out: exclusive humanism, anti-humanism, Christian faith, and alternative spiritualities. The theology of Berkhof can be seen as an attempt to contextualize in the context of exclusive humanism. Gunton focused also on exclusive humanism, but he interacted with the philosophy of anti-humanism (Nietzsche) as well. Both theologians offer valuable resources in dealing with exclusive humanism and (on a philosophical level) anti-humanism. There is, however, no attempt to contextualize in the context of the new spirituality. Yet, it could be argued that this new spirituality will be one of the major challenges for the future church in the Western context. The new spirituality is the spiritual variant of the ‘Age of authenticity,’ and they are fed from the same historical streams.

---

440 Conrad Gempf, Jesus Asked: What He Wanted to Know (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 137, 142.
442 Berkhof, Christian Faith, 272.
443 Soulen, The Divine Name (s) and the Holy Trinity, 213-231.
444 For Gunton the importance of Nietzsche was that he realized that the displacement of God was far from being a neutral development. The wiping clean of the horizon is of comprehensive intellectual, moral and social significance. Nothing is left untouched. According to Gunton the ultimate price that has to be paid for this displacement is the fragmentation of human experience and ultimately the destruction of our humanity. Gunton, The One, the Three and the Many, 28-29.
445 This stream started to become visible from the 1970-s onward.
446 The historical connection between the new spirituality and the ‘Age of authenticity’ is that both draw from Romantic and esoteric wells. Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 411-421. Taylor writes: “The ethic of authenticity originates in the Romantic period,
Certainly, there are at this moment strong differences about the actual influence of the new spirituality between, say, Western-Europe and Southern Europe, or between someone living in the countryside and one living in a major city. However, in a city as Amsterdam church pastors meet regularly people who are influenced by the new spirituality and more and more people encounter mindfulness or meditational practices through their work. The choice has therefore been made to pursue a contextual confession which is relevant to people who are involved in the new spirituality, or who are indirectly influenced by it. For those working in multi-cultural churches or in neighborhoods with low-level income, the influence of the new spirituality will probably be less visible, but even among traditional Christians one can notice a shift in convictions about, for example, the nature of God and His judgment. Many people start to think more pantheistically about God. Contextualizing the gospel in the context of the new spirituality will therefore be helpful beyond the group of active practitioners.

According to Wouter Hanegraaff, the new spirituality in the Western context (he calls it ‘New Age religion’) should be understood as a movement of cultural criticism. It is characterized by “a criticism of dualistic and reductionistic tendencies in (modern) western culture, as exemplified by (what is emically perceived as) dogmatic Christianity, on the one hand, and rationalistic/scientistic ideologies, on the other.” It is not, as popularly assumed, a product of Eastern influences. Oriental ideas and concepts have been adopted, but always by assimilating them in already existing western (esoteric) frameworks. The new spirituality sees itself as a third option between science and traditional Christianity. Truth is not discovered by merely using reason, nor by faith in a transcendent revelation, but by personal, inner revelation, insight or ‘enlightenment’ (gnosis). One is convinced that there is an evolution of consciousness leading to perfect gnosis or illumination, in which self-realization and God-realization are one and the same. This evolution is part of a bigger purposeful and creative process, bringing this world to a

but it has utterly penetrated popular culture only in recent decades, in the time since the Second World War, if not even closer to the present.” Taylor, Secular Age, 299.

See section 3.1.

An overview of the shifts in the Dutch religious landscape can be found in: Joep de Hart, Geloven binnen en buiten verband: Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2014).

Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 517.

Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 517.

Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 519.
coming New Age in which the universal interrelatedness (holism) of all things will be manifested.\footnote{Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 365-366.}

What kind of confession of Jesus Christ would emerge from a context influenced (either directly or indirectly) by this type of spirituality? Certainly, a confession within this context should both look for commonalities between Christian faith and the new spirituality, even being prepared to take over some of their language, but also look for divergences. To start with the latter, it is clear that the new spirituality is a Western phenomenon because it shares in all three idolatries mentioned in section 3.2. The \textit{first} idolatry of human power and agency in the Western context is apparent because the new spirituality emphasizes the active role of humans and it rejects the belief that human beings are dependent for salvation on a divine ‘Other,’ thereby not only rejecting the passive voice but also the middle voice of Christian spirituality.\footnote{Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 516. For the discussion about the active, passive, and middle voice, see section 3.2.A. It is interesting that, contrary to traditional Christianity, the new spirituality does minimize the factor of will. Love is almost never defined with direct reference to human actions but refers primarily to states of mind or mental attitudes. Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 291, 297. These new mental attitudes are engendered by the spiritual experience of illumination. One could say that there is here an adoration of the aesthetic-spiritual power to grasp the Beauty of the Universal Mind. The idea that one would be powerless is, according to the new spirituality, just a belief masquerading as objective truth. We are totally responsible for whatever happens to us (234).}

The \textit{second} idolatry consisted in the image of oneself as a free and fulfilled individual, self-sufficient and self-cultivating. The influence of this idolatry in the new spirituality is revealed in its critique on (Christian) religion:

the main complaint about religions is that they have degenerated into institutions of worldly power, which control and exploit the faithful, while denying them individual autonomy over their own lives; that they insist upon authoritarian doctrines, dogma’s and rituals but belittle and deny the centrality of individual religious experience; and that they teach an external God rather than the inner divinity disclosed in such personal experiences. Individual freedom and autonomy in matters “spiritual” are apparently the yardstick against which religions are measured, and against which they fall short.\footnote{Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 327. Cf. “This then, is the binding doctrine in the spiritual milieu: the belief that in the deeper layers of the self one finds a true, authentic and sacred kernel, basically ‘unpolluted’ by culture, history and society, that informs evaluations of what is good, true, and meaningful.” Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers, Willem de Koster, \textit{Paradoxes of Individualization: Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity} (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 36.}
An opposition between religion ‘from above’ (doctrines and morals) and experience ‘from below’ can be heard in this critique. The ‘from below’ is not perceived as an experience in community, but as an individual and autonomous experience. The role of the third idolatry in the new spirituality is a little bit more complex. The third idolatry consisted in the image of immanent prosperity and security. There is a sense in which the new spirituality counters this idolatry. They counter it not in the same way as the dualistic Gnosticism of late antiquity, which saw the creation of the world as a disaster, but rather from a position which affirms this world and this reality. She resists the crash materialism of Western culture and calls for a spiritual life. However, the ideal of human flourishing (a spiritual flourishing) remains the telos. Jesus’ call to follow him in the way of the cross, surrendering the telos of human flourishing for the sake of God and others, is rejected.

But it would not be right to only criticize the new spirituality. One could argue that the new spirituality focuses attention on the experiential dimension of the Christian religion. The New Testament does not omit the word ‘gnosis’ from its vocabulary, but relates it to Christ. To say it differently: the experience of the Spirit needs to be related to the Word. John V. Taylor puts it in these words:

The Spirit represents the divine action in its total impact, while the Word represents the specific direction and form which the divine action takes at one point of time. Spirit is experienced as inspiration, Word as revelation. Ruach is the eternal lying in wait in every moment, but dabar commits itself to the uniqueness of a particular moment. That is why it was not the Spirit but the Word which was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Discerning the source of spiritual experience can only be done in the light of Jesus Christ. Only a Christianity which will give due place to spiritual

---

455 “Why do the Dutch churches become empty, while New Age grows? Our main conclusion is that both the decline of Christianity and the growth of New Age during the last few decades can be understood against the background of a process of individualization.” Dick Houtman, Peter Mascini, “Why Do Churches Become Empty, While New Age Grows? Secularization and Religious Change in the Netherlands,” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 41, 3 (2002), 468.

456 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 113-114.

457 For example: “My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge [gnosis].” (Col. 2:2-3); “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge [gnosis].” (2 Peter 1:5).

experiences will be able to interact with the new spirituality. Moreover, the church should speak to the deep desires and imaginations driving the new spirituality. There is a deep desire to escape the limited consciousness of the ego and its constant judgment and blaming, resulting in guilt, fear, and shame. There is a desire to escape the fragmented world where everything is in opposition rather than in loving harmony and wholeness. The imagination of the new spirituality is fueled by a guiding vision of holism, a state of mind in which one is fully conscious of one’s interconnection with the whole of the universe.

At this point, however, classical Christian theology is deeply challenged by the new spirituality. How do we speak of God, the human being, and the world in this context? The triangle which surfaced in Berkhof’s theology (God—human being—world) is deeply ingrained in classical Christian theology. However, the new spirituality fundamentally attacks this triangle. It reacts strongly to the perceived dualisms in this triad. One is against a radically transcendent and anthropomorphic deity separated from human beings and the rest of creation, a deity who can only be blindly believed in but not experienced. One is against the idea that human beings are alienated from nature and one objects to human attitudes of domination and exploitation of this alienated nature. One is against the idea that spirit and matter are separate realities, and against otherworldly asceticism that denies the centrality of human flourishing.

Colin Gunton has made a great contribution by stressing a relational ontology, by which we can conceive the relation between humans and between the human and non-human creation. But in order to respond to the new spirituality, it is necessary that we bring together being-as-relation and knowing-as-participation. Only in this way is it possible to overcome the view of the human subject stemming from the Enlightenment, in which observation is the basic paradigm of knowing. Participating in the missio Dei means that the church can participate in God’s own life through her union with Jesus Christ, following Him in worship and mission.

---

460 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 290-301.
461 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 276, 296.
462 Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture, 516.
How can one speak about God, human beings, and the world in this climate? Often the church has thought and spoken very deistically about God, as being outside the creation. God is certainly beyond the creation and should not pantheistically be identified with it. But God is also within creation, mediating his presence through Word and Spirit. Certainly, Father, Son, and Spirit are (as) persons who speak and act, but one may also speak about the Spirit as an impersonal power working within human beings. Though these different aspects of God can be described in pairs, it is not so easy to imagine a God who is both beyond and within creation, who can be experienced as both personal and impersonal. The sense of mystery returns. Taylor pointed out how the sense of mystery disappeared during the time of providential deism. In the turn towards a more pantheistic understanding of God it is very important to explain the Christian understanding of God not just in rationalistic terms, but to allow room for mystery. There remain, however, two crucial distinctions between the Jewish-Christian view of God and pantheism. First, in pantheism God is identified with this world. In the Jewish-Christian view this is not the case. God is a dynamic presence, moving in this creation, being able to draw near and retreat. Second, God can indwell a group or a person as He indwelt the temple, but indwelling is different from identification. To meet God we certainly (also) have to turn inside and listen to the depths of our own hearts. But this honors us as being a temple of the

465 It is not a surprise that the second letter of Peter, written against a background of early Gnosticism, starts in verse three and four of the first chapter with the sentence: "His divine power [impersonal] has given us everything we need for a godly life [which could be freely translated as 'a truly spiritual life'] through our knowledge [epignosis] of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." It is also not a surprise that there is increasing attention in theological discussions for the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. Often, however, it seems only an exegetical and theological discussion between different Christian traditions. It would be helpful to make the new spirituality, as one of the factors causing the new attraction to this doctrine, a more conscious dialogue-partner. This would clarify both the importance of this doctrine for speaking to our contemporaries and clarify crucial distinctions between a Gnostic approach and an ecumenical Christian one.
466 Taylor, *Secular Age*, 223-224.
467 Reflective of this understanding is James 4:8: “Come near to God and he will come near to you.”
Holy Spirit rather than identifying us with that Spirit of God.\textsuperscript{469} The church may also speak about the whole creation as being united in Christ,\textsuperscript{470} and it can share the quest to experience this unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.\textsuperscript{471} Following the canonical Gospel of John, one could use the words: light, life, way, truth, etc. in communicating the experience of salvation.

But in all this the place of the cross remains crucial. In Colossians 1:15-20, Christ is both the agent of creation and redemption. Though the church has not always had a strong doctrine of creation, the new spirituality affirms the importance of the natural world and cosmos, but she lacks a doctrine of salvation centered in the cross. This becomes clear, for example, in the understanding of forgiveness. Normally forgiveness means that instead of repaying wrong deeds with hurtful behavior (either physically, verbally, or by relationally withdrawing), one restores the relation by pronouncing in word and deed that the other does not have to pay back the debt, thereby freeing the other from his/her guilt. For the new spirituality, however, forgiveness means the profound realization that the ‘other,’ whatever (s)he may have done, has not sinned.\textsuperscript{472} There is the replacement from a negative attitude to a positive attitude, but the basis is the denial of real evil. One believes that no one can be held responsible for the suffering of others,\textsuperscript{473} which puts the cross of Jesus in a very different light. Certainly, one could agree with the new spirituality that the constant inner critical voice, which has a judgment about nearly everything, should not be identified with God’s voice. But neither should we flee from true exposure. Though there is a fear in us to come into the light, because the light will reveal our own darkness (desires and deeds which are hurting others),\textsuperscript{474} the exposing light of Christ is also a gracious light, unlike the ‘light’ of our inner critical voice. By refusing to step into this gracious light we remain in darkness and reveal something about our deepest

\textsuperscript{469} “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Compare: Ephesians 2:21-22.

\textsuperscript{470} Colossians 1:17. On the Christological hymn of 1:15-20 see the excellent study of Wright, \textit{The Climax of the Covenant}, 99-119. Wright is not so certain that Paul used an already existing hymn rather than writing it himself.

\textsuperscript{471} Ephesians 4:3.

\textsuperscript{472} Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 301.

\textsuperscript{473} Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion and Western Culture}, 301.

\textsuperscript{474} “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.” John 3:19-21.
desires. However, when one in brokenness turns to the Lord, forgiveness is tasted.

How could Jesus’ question “Who do you say I am?” be answered from this context? An attempt is made here to provide a longer confession which uses the language of the new spirituality while remaining aware of its idolatries. The language is drawn mainly from the Gospel of John, though not exclusively so. Because the confession is a contextual confession, the Bible references should not be viewed as proof-texts, but as places in Scripture where similar language is used. The confessional language ‘You are...’ is taken as the basis for this confession. The confession under the numbers one, two, and three, is meant to counter the three Western idolatries.

Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world, showing us the path to a truly spiritual life. You call us away from merely outward religion into the reality of Your love. Your voice is not critical as the ego, but full of grace and truth. In your light we can begin to see the difference between hypocrisy and authenticity, between making a good impression and admitting the truth. You illuminate our need for your forgiving presence. It is a mysterious presence which, in God’s deep and hidden wisdom, had to go through death and resurrection to overcome the power of evil. The kindness of your presence allows us to honestly face our lives, both the good and the bad. By turning to you in brokenness we are freed from our fear, guilt, and shame. Your

---

476 The value of brokenness is beautifully expressed in a poem by Oscar Wilde: “And every human heart that breaks, In prison-cell or yard, Is as that broken box that gave Its treasure to the Lord, And filled the unclean Leper’s house With the scent of costliest nard. Ah! Happy they whose hearts can break, And peace of pardon win! How else may man make straight his plan, And cleanse his soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart, May Lord Christ enter in.” Quoted in Zacharias, Why Jesus? 227-228.
477 Strictly speaking the following will be a combination of a contextual confession and a contextual gospel. The attempt at a contextual confession cannot be more than a proposal. It is the local church (and ultimately the worldwide church) who has to discern if this confession is true to the gospel. Moreover, it is often only after an era has passed that one can truly discern what the most central confessions about Jesus (and images about Him) have been. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture (Yale: Yale University, 1999).
481 1 Corinthians 2:1-8; Colossians 1:12-23, 2:2-3; 2 Thessalonians 2:7.
482 Romans 2:3-4.
transforming presence allows us to become dead to all that is dark in us and be filled with compassion.

1. Jesus, you have freed us from the illusion that our own power is sufficient for transforming ourselves and our world. You have shown us that your love is active within and around us. Again and again you initiate new things among us. Your Spirit is a comforting, peaceful and guiding presence who is at the same time willing to disturb us in order to wake us up from materialism and consumerism into a full life. We rely on you to guide us and speak comforting and confronting words to us through the scriptures, which are a reliable witness to You and Your presence.\textsuperscript{483}

2. You have freed us from the illusion that we are alone and isolated in this world. Through your compassionate love we are re-united with other people and with nature. Your presence guides us into a hospitable and honoring community where we can put down our masks. Here your healing light is present, and our growth in true spirituality is supported by leaders who draw from the collected wisdom of the church. By giving up our spiritual autonomy we experience a taste of the unifying power of love between God, people, and nature, around a table of forgiveness.\textsuperscript{484} We experience this love, not by grasping at our own fulfilment, but by entrusting it to you and submitting to your loving will.

3. You have freed us from the illusion that death is the end of our lives. You call us into a much larger world where love drives out fear. This love inspires us to move out of our small worlds towards unknown people and places. By participating in your peaceful and compassionate mission across barriers we will get to know you more deeply.\textsuperscript{485} In joyfully sharing resources with those in need and meeting strangers of other faiths, we will discover your mysterious presence and glory in new ways.\textsuperscript{486} Even if we meet suffering and rejection, we do not worry about material or spiritual wellbeing because you will protect our body and soul even in the midst of death. We may freely give up (sacrifice) our own flourishing for the sake of others, because

\textsuperscript{483} John 5:39.
\textsuperscript{485} John 20:19-23.
\textsuperscript{486} John 7:24; 2 Corinthians 8:9-15; Colossians 2:2-3.
you will raise us and let us participate in your kingdom of love that will pervade this world in the coming new age.\textsuperscript{487}

This is true living. We are unable by ourselves to live this life. But your glorious life is in us, filling us as temples with Your Spirit.\textsuperscript{488} Your Spirit gives us hope for a life starting now but continuing beyond death. It will be life in a transformed world where people and nations will live in peace together.\textsuperscript{489} There we will know you, as we are known by You.\textsuperscript{490} You are the light of the world bringing us on the path to a truly spiritual life.

\textsuperscript{487} For example: Isaiah 11:9.
\textsuperscript{488} Colossians 1:17; 1 Corinthians 6:19.
\textsuperscript{489} 1 Corinthians 1:24. Colossians 1:27; 1 Corinthians 15: 50-58; Revelation 21-22.
\textsuperscript{490} 1 Corinthians 8:3; 13:12.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


371


Waar is God in deze tijd? De betekenis van de geschiedenis in de theologie van Dr. H. Berkhof. Nijkerk, G.F. Callenbach bv, 1994, 29-51.


Manning, Russell Re. “The Shape of British Theology in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty First Centuries.” Available at: http://www.academia.edu/497802/The_Shape_of_British_Theology_in_the_late_twentieth_and_early_twenty_first_Centuries (last accessed: 4/6/2015).


Moffitt, David M. “Affirming the “Creed”: The Extent of Paul’s Citation of an Early Christian Formula in 1 Cor. 15, 3b-7.” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und Kunde der Alteren Kirche* 99 (2007).


389


Schwöbel, Christoph. “Where do we stand in Trinitarian Theology? Resources, Revisions, and Reappraisals.” In: Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (eds.). *Recent


TEF, Staff of. *Ministry in Context. The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77).*


______. Jesus and the Victory of God. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1996.


SUMMARY

The gospel is good news about Jesus Christ. The news about what God is doing in this world in and through Jesus Christ has been proclaimed in many different contexts, in many different times and places. During this process the church contextualized the gospel so that people of different backgrounds would hear the gospel in their own language. But the process is more mysterious than translating an already fully known message. In fact the gospel points to the mysterious presence of Jesus Christ Himself and in the process of contextualization new facets of Him can be discovered. Our context does not only affect the presentation of gospel truth but also our understanding of this gospel truth.

The Western context goes through a process of rapid change and can now be described as post-Christendom, post-modern, and post-Christian. This changed context requires a new contextualization of the gospel. However, many churches proclaim a version of the gospel that has been a faithful contextualization before the West went through its rapid change. Though understandable, this hinders the communication of the good news to people who are not familiar with the Christian faith. It also brings a crisis to many Christians because though they know the good news as proclaimed by the church they do not experience it as good news. There is a disconnect that requires the church to consider the task of re-contextualizing the gospel.

The desire that has driven this research is to find an answer to the question: What are the contours of a contextualized gospel for the Western world at the beginning of the 21st century? The quest for a contextualized gospel or, in systematic theological terms ‘a contextualized Christology,’ indicates that there is a double focus in this research: both the Western context and Christology. These are not studied independently but in their interrelation.

The research consists of three parts. In part I the focus is on the theology of Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-1995). How does Berkhof analyze the Western context and what is the content of this analysis? How does Berkhof analyze Christology and what is the content of this analysis? In part II the same questions are asked of the theology of British theologian Colin Gunton (1941-2003). Both Berkhof and Gunton have given much thought to the influence of the Western context upon theology in general and Christology in particular. The strengths and weaknesses of their contributions are presented at the end of part I and II. Part III builds upon the perceived strengths of Berkhof and Gunton while trying to avoid their
weaknesses. It seeks to provide systematic proposals for analyzing the Western context and denoting outlines for doing Christology.

Part I presents an analysis of the theology of Hendrikus Berkhof, specifically his analysis of the Western context and Christology. Berkhof’s theology shows a consciously contextualized form of theology. Berkhof deeply reflected both on the intellectual question and answers within the Western context and on the ‘Lebensgefühl’ (sense of life). He noticed that shifts in the context are also visible within the church and he perceived the need of contextualizing theology in light of the shifts within the context. An analysis of Berkhof’s theology shows that three themes determine the ground lines of his contextualized theology: the theme of the world, of the human being, and of God. Changes within the Western context required him to re-formulate his understanding of these three themes. The climate of revolution and social change necessitated a re-thinking of the place of the world within theology. The climate of anthropocentrism necessitated a re-thinking of the place of the human being within theology. And the climate of empiricism and functionalism necessitated a re-thinking of the doctrine of God, specifically the doctrine of revelation. Berkhof developed his Christology in light of the changes within the Western context and his Christology is deeply shaped by the three aforementioned themes. Jesus Christ is presented as the new human covenant partner, the bringer of salvation in history, and as the Son of God. Berkhof’s theology is a beautiful example of a sensitive interaction with the context. In many ways his method of contextualization deserves imitation. However, Berkhof’s Christology did not receive the central place that it deserves. His Christology is pulled in the direction of anthropology. Moreover, Berkhof was insufficiently aware of the idolatry in the Western context and that made him vulnerable to Western notions of progress and individualism. It is precisely at these points that the theology of Colin Gunton can form a counter weight to the theology of Berkhof.

Part II presents an analysis of the theology of Colin Gunton, specifically his analysis of the Western context and Christology. Gunton’s theology shows a contextualized theology that is deeply aware of the centrality of Christology (the gospel) and the danger of idolatry in the Western context. An analysis of Gunton’s theology shows that for him three themes determine the ground lines of his contextualized theology as well: God, human perception, and world. In Gunton’s mature theology this becomes: doctrine of the Trinity, theory of human perception, and Trinitarian doctrine of creation. Gunton argues that the Mediaeval conception of God was monistic and did not allow breathing-room for the creation. Thinkers in the Modern period responded by
displacing God, but this move caused paradoxical features in Modernity, specifically with regards to rationality, time, freedom, and the human community. The result of these developments is a fragmentation of Western culture. Gunton wants to reform theology by returning to the centrality of the gospel. He develops a methodology of Christology which is thoroughly shaped by his awareness of the idolatry in the Western context. He resists approaching Christology from a dualistic perspective, from a false time-frame, by overstressing human power, or by emphasizing plurality without unity. In accordance with these methodological features, he presents Jesus Christ as Lord of creation and creature, both God and man; as the revelation of God’s eternal love in time; as God’s saving love and self-giving action; and as second person of the Trinitarian communion become flesh. Gunton’s theology is a beautiful example of a contextualized theology that is rooted in the gospel and aware of the idolatry in the Western context. At these points it deserves imitation. However, Gunton’s understanding of the gospel is one-sided and his approach to idolatry is overly intellectual because he misjudges the character and extent of our knowledge of God. By exclusively focusing on the intellectual realm, Gunton stays somewhat removed from the pain and suffering in the context.

Part III tries to build upon the strengths of Berkhof and Gunton and avoid their weaknesses. It begins by asking the question: “What is the gospel?” By drawing upon a missiologist, an historian, and a New Testament scholar, the gospel is presented as consisting of three parts: a gospel-narrative (the story about Jesus Christ), gospel-salvation (the soteriological impact), and a gospel-frame (the link of the story about Jesus with the God of Israel and the story of Israel). It is the task of the church to tell the story about Jesus Christ within every new context, in worship and proclamation, as the culmination of the story of Israel and to unpack and embody the soteriological and doxological impact of that fact. Based on this fuller understanding of the gospel, a new gospel-centered model for reading the context is developed in dialogue with Third world contextual theology and the conversation about missional hermeneutics in the Gospel and Our Culture Network. The model looks to the context through the lens of worship (as Gunton does), through the lens of salvation (as Berkhof does), and through the lens of a crucified life-style. The model does not only look to the philosophies within the context (as Gunton tends to do), but to the desire and imagination and embodied practices. With the help of this new model a reading of the Western context is developed that traces the idolatries in the Western context: the idolatry with human power, with individual self-fulfillment, and with prosperity and security. This reading also suggests how salvation and a crucified life-style could be embodied in the
Western context. In light of this understanding of the Western context, the contours of the Western gospel for the beginning of the 21st century are presented. Telling the gospel-narrative in the Western context requires an emphasis on the (priestly) mediating function of Jesus between immanence and transcendence, it requires an emphasis on the (prophetic) courage of Jesus as a warrior, and it requires an emphasis on Jesus’ life in the Spirit (as a wise man). The gospel-salvation has to be presented by emphasizing the importance of the Presence of God in Christ as the answer to the anxiety about meaninglessness. This theology of Presence needs three accents in the Western context related to power and powerlessness, honor and shame, and hope and fear. The gospel-frame has for a long time been influenced by an individualizing and de-historicizing tendency, but it should put the corporate and historical life of God’s people central again. The relation of Jesus to the God of Israel should be approached from a relational point of view. The study closes with a contextual confession of Jesus Christ in the sub-context of the new spirituality.