

Lombard, Christo  
University of the Western Cape

## Theology for the twenty-first century – Going beyond Barth?

### ABSTRACT

Dirkie Smit is honoured in this contribution as a theologian who has persistently and ingeniously held together two poles in Reformed theology: Karl Barth's emphasis on Christology: God's salvation and free grace as incarnated in Christ, and Van Ruler's emphasis on pneumatology: the appropriation, application and working out of God's grace in humanity, nature and history, through the indwelling power of God's Spirit. The article, based on cryptic notes in which Van Ruler offered "Critical comments on Barth's theology" (1965), provides an English translation of this unique text with explanatory footnotes. It is suggested that Van Ruler's sixteen pertinent questions to Barth, almost fifty years ago, once again deserve our careful attention and that our task remains to keep in balance the work of the Creator, the Saviour and the Spirit, which persists in working on the pneumatological question of how we as human beings are incorporated into God's ongoing, sanctifying work in nature and history.

### BACKGROUND TO THE QUESTION

The voice of special friend and colleague, and one of South Africa's leading theologians, Dirk J. Smit, rings out near and far via an enormous range of publications – inspiring ordinary Christians, challenging aspiring theologians, faithfully serving his own church and its structures as well as the Reformed tradition and ecumenical agendas, and constantly addressing issues of general concern prophetically and pastorally in church and public media. What stands out – even stronger than the sheer brilliance of his tireless stream of contributions on all fronts – is the characteristically articulate and humble way in which he operates, avoiding controversy and seeking ways and means around unnecessary confrontation and pettiness.

In the late seventies, during my first years of teaching biblical studies at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Dirkie finished his postgraduate theological studies and became minister in one of the Stellenbosch Dutch Reformed congregations – at least one church where one could hear the gospel ring out clearly during those desperate times when some of us left the "Mother church" to strengthen the anti-apartheid movement in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. Soon Dirkie became a colleague at UWC. Here he and Jaap Durand famously brought together in the Belhar Confession the theology of unity, reconciliation and justice which they developed with their students while teaching theology at this "university of the struggle"<sup>1</sup>

In 1984, when I moved to Namibia to chair the Department of Biblical Studies at the newly formed Academy for Tertiary Education, a research programme with the aim of developing a Department of Religion and Theology was soon started – with Dirkie Smit as our chief

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Boesak's involvement in the Belhar process, while he served as Chaplain at UWC, resulted in his election as President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the declaration of a *status confessionis* against the heresy of theological support for apartheid.

researcher and resource person. When we finally submitted our extensive research report, backed up by prominent church leaders and other stakeholders, the Department of Religion and Theology was one of the few departments at the newly formed University of Namibia (1993), whose existence was so thoroughly debated and motivated.<sup>2</sup> It has been a joy to move back to South Africa after almost twenty years of Namibian indulgence and once again find myself in the theological circles where Dirkie Smit operates – hopefully contributing towards a theology in service of church and society.<sup>3</sup>

In writing a short theological essay to honour and thank my friend and theological comrade it is not easy to think of a specific “point” that one could make to catch his attention – or to challenge his considerable intellectual capacities. His theological mind is so alert, his reading and thinking has always been so diversified and adaptable, so ingeniously weaving together seemingly opposing perspectives from different ages, backgrounds and paradigms, that it is difficult to find serious points of contention. We share much in terms of our own formation, our own struggles with our apartheid backgrounds, our love of the Reformed tradition in spite of its many pitfalls, our affirmation of the theological line that runs from Calvin through Barth and Bonhoeffer and further, with inclusion of strong notions of contextuality, Christian praxis, and “embodied confession” in real and ordinary daily life. I particularly appreciate Smit’s consistent combination of pious, evangelical groundedness in the mystery, the gift, the surprise of God’s abundant grace (Kierkegaard, Luther, Barth) and the contextual embodiment of that faith of the church through the ages, in new contexts (Calvin and the Dutch Reformed passion for sanctification of all areas of life, as represented, for example, by Bavinck and Van Ruler). Through this combination Smit strikes deep theological cords.

Nevertheless, in spite of this close affinity, but also because of it, in this contribution I wish to ask one simple question to all of us who share this vibrant, albeit contested, Reformed background. It is a question I have picked up from my struggles with the very original Dutch Calvinist theologian Arnold Albert van Ruler (1908-1970): Does the theological approach of Karl Barth, the theological giant of the twentieth century, still suffice for the challenges of the twenty-first century?<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, an enormous question to ask and one which cannot find a meaningful answer in this restricted format. It is almost equivalent to asking whether one can jump over one’s own shadow!

It is evident though that Van Ruler himself could not rid himself of this question. In his own words, he saw himself in his early years, in relation to Barth, as the little dog on the famous gramophone label, simply sitting there listening to “His Master’s Voice” (Puchinger 1969:356; cf. also Van Keulen 2009:94-111). When Barth died in 1968, Van Ruler movingly wrote in memoriam columns in church magazines and in the secular press (following up on similarly positive congratulatory pieces he had written two years earlier when Barth turned 80), asking “this master” only a few mildly critical questions (Van Ruler 1966a; 1968a). However, when

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2 In fact, this was one of the first departments called by that name in Southern Africa as well as the first to include the teaching of ethics.

3 Much of this fruitful collaboration now takes place under the auspices of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch – a wonderful historical irony!

4 This question was also asked by Jürgen Moltmann (1998:15): “After Karl Barth’s monumental Dogmatics, I thought, there could be no more theology (just as there could be no more philosophy after Hegel), because he had said it all and said it so well. Then in 1957 I got to know the Dutch theologian Arnold van Ruler. He cured me from the misapprehension. I discovered the Reformed kingdom of God theology and the Dutch apostolate theology.”

one studies Van Ruler's own theological development carefully, it becomes more and more apparent that his whole oeuvre can be understood as an attempt to answer this question about an adequate and relevant theology for the "twenty-first century", one that goes beyond Barth's "Christological concentration" and one which can adequately address the issues of nature, history, ecology and the socio-political realm.<sup>5</sup>

During my studies in Utrecht, in Van Ruler's study (kept in perfect order by Mrs Van Ruler for more than a decade after her husband's death), I "discovered" a handwritten note. It bore the unassuming title: "What I have against Barth", also in typed format: "Critical comments on Barth's theology" – the text of a lecture presented to a few small audiences in the mid-sixties (Van Ruler 1965).

Instead of tracing all the open and hidden battles with Barth in Van Ruler's oeuvre,<sup>6</sup> I shall translate that telegram-style text here, adding a few selected comments in the footnotes.<sup>7</sup> In this straightforward way Van Ruler's tentative questions are again posed as a challenge to us, modern-day followers or critics of Barth's theology. If I am not mistaken, Dirk Smit's theology shows signs of grappling with several of these critical points with regard to Barth's massive theological construct, in spite of his overwhelming enthusiasm for Barth's firm "No!" to natural and liberal theology, and "Yes!" to evangelical affirmation of God's grace for the whole world in and through Christ.<sup>8</sup>

## VAN RULER'S TEXT: "WHAT I HAVE AGAINST BARTH"

In what follows, I simply give my English version of the cryptic notes from which Van Ruler formulated, "hesitantly and provisionally" (see Van Keulen 2009:104), his critique against Barth in this unpublished lecture. One cannot help but think that, being sharp, imaginative pointers that could be pursued in different directions, these enigmatic notes are comparable to Bonhoeffer's prison letters. Only a few of these directions can be suggested here. It must be left to the reader to ponder the possible (and considerable!) implications of the sixteen "points",<sup>9</sup> here arranged under five self-chosen headings to order the presentation to some extent:

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5 See Van Ruler in Puchinger 1969:366: "In our time people can only laugh at the idea of theocracy, but I am convinced that it will be discovered again, in the twenty-first century, that is the punch line of the joke". He links this comment to the way of thinking that deals with reality as an ellipse with contrasting poles, such as church and state, word and reality; cf. Aalders 1973:9-27. Van Ruler's concern about Barth's monism (only Christ is "real") but also about Anabaptist impatience (only the "new creation" of the future is real) and Catholic or Neo-Calvinist dualism ("nature" must be supplemented by "super-nature"), is spelled out vividly in 1989:105-148, especially 128-132.

6 For this cf. Lombard 1996:189-206; on Van Ruler and Calvin, cf. Lombard 2009:23-36.

7 Due to space limitations, very little scope for additional comments on Van Ruler's text is left; I limit myself to one footnote per caption and concentrate on key references. In the text Van Ruler mostly gives his own perspective directly, but in some cases it is clear from the context that he first describes Barth's position before commenting on it.

8 For Smit's own wrestling with such issues of e.g. "nature, history, ecology and the socio-political realm", see part four, dealing with "Contemporary challenges", of his *Essays on being Reformed* (2009:395 ff.). My purpose in this exercise is not to try and answer Van Ruler's question on Smit's behalf, but to openly pose the question to all followers of Barth - via this sketchy and surprising lecture of Van Ruler from almost 50 years ago.

9 See Van Ruler's comments (1966b:175) on Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*: should they actually have been published; were they ready for publication?

## I. Barth's monistic ontology and epistemology

### i) *The strict methodology of Barth:*

He [Barth] really seeks only one methodological starting point from which he wishes to direct all attention on theology's "own job" in complete, concrete and consistent concentration on its "object". He thus tries to do what systematic theology, by its nature closely resembling art rather than science, could never quite tolerate historically. This strict methodological emphasis also leads to enormous speculation by Barth, who strangely, with his followers, rejects this kind of speculation. This gives Barth something extremely exact, positivistic and absolutistic, especially when one sees theology as a function of the church. Dogmatics and preaching are simply bound together too closely in such an approach.<sup>10</sup>

### ii) *Barth's principium theologiae is Christ only:*

This is problematic because the first to say that were the Gnostics! Better would be: Scripture + tradition + reason + history of religion + history of philosophy. In Barth's theology God and Christ are mixed up in each other. The Old Testament is interpreted entirely in a Christ centric [sic] way. Each periscope is approached via the question: How can one speak about this in such a way that one preaches Christ? No!<sup>11</sup>

### iii) *A hyper-realistic theory of knowledge:*

According to Barth, our knowledge of the object is given to us completely by the object itself. The object contains and is its knowledge. Barth knows only a *theologia unionis*. Everything we

10 Van Ruler agrees with Bonhoeffer's accusation of Barth's *Offenbarungspositivismus*: that he approaches the one "object" of theology, God, via a positivist construct (in an attempt to make theology appear scientifically focussed on an "object?"), which leads to a speculative over-application of the one hermeneutical key, God's revelation in Christ. The result of this is that those who think that theology has a wider task than informing the church's preaching of the significance of Christ and thus also needs philosophical speculation to apply the work of the Trinity, may stand in awe but without access to Barth's own impregnable, speculative "castle" (Van Ruler 1970:159). Van Ruler also firmly believes in speculative, "scholastic" reason (cf. Van Ruler 1947a:402; 1968b:66-67; 1970:165-169; Puchinger 1969:357) but he posits three hermeneutical "keys" (cf. Van Ruler 1969a:45-46; 1969b:79; 1969c:213) for what appears to be a "combination lock": eschatology ("the end" or outcome, not merely the "means"), Trinity ("the full God" involved in means and ends!), and predestination ("consenting humans" as God's partners). The task of theology is to understand God's involvement in history (not merely "God" as "object?") within a "philosophy of revelation" (Bavinck) that combines God, creation, humanity and history (cf. Van Ruler 1989:92-98). Thus Van Ruler seriously questions Barth's ontological and epistemological monism. For Van Ruler's broad definition of the task of theology cf. Lombard 1996:148-63; especially Van Ruler 1969b:200-13; also 1968b.

11 Van Ruler's monograph *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (1971) was written (originally in German) as a direct counter to Barth ("No!") and the typological exegesis of the *Biblischer Kommentar* series of Von Rad, Kraus, Wolff and others. In saying "Christ alone is the key to understanding God's revelation", one easily leaves behind the whole Judaic tradition fulfilled by Christ: the tradition of Israel's calling, the Torah, the prophets, and the expectation of God's rule in the world (and the tools needed to think and talk about it: reason, religious history and philosophy) – and Christianity becomes "Gnostic", not based on real creation and the known history of humankind, but on a totally "new reality" of the future. In this Barth and the Anabaptists seem to reach the same result! See Van Ruler on the Gnostics and Christ as principium of theology (1967:103): instead of choosing Christ or some "content" in Scripture, Van Ruler would choose Scripture plus the whole tradition of integrating the Bible and our understanding of history and the world in a "philosophy of history or revelation (Bavinck)!" (1989:22; 1978:19-20).

say is only true through “predicative participation” (Van Niftrik). This is, on the one hand, too much (“participation”) and, on the other hand, too little (“predicative”). Is nothing of what we say true in and by itself?<sup>12</sup>

## II. Barth’s view of creation, nature, and contingency

### i) Total rejection of natural theology:

Is it “abstract” when I look at the world or at myself? Is one only concrete when one looks at Christ as *concretissimum* of God? A total rejection of natural theology is problematic especially for the process of Christianisation.<sup>13</sup> Even as a natural person one knows quite a bit about creation. One does not need to be born again to know that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ . In creation there is no *salus* (salvation) because in and by itself it is not “lost”. That does not mean that, therefore, creation is *a-theos* and consequently it is blasphemy to suggest that God is not served by creation. Therefore, also the scheme of nature and supra-nature does not work.

### ii) Creation as prefiguration of incarnation:

With creation God intended something different than with Christ. That I exist is something different than that I am saved. (We celebrate our birthday and not our baptism; I have not been born in the church). To ontological questions we should not give soteriological answers (contra Barth). With creation God expresses something other than mere love over the creature’s being there, namely joy. In Barth’s theology we find pure supralapsarism. That is the heart of the matter, not Berkouwer’s notion of the ontological impossibility of sin.<sup>14</sup>

### iii) Contingency as a state of being threatened:

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12 Van Ruler placed great emphasis on a realistic ontology and epistemology – one that allows ample space for human “being” and “agency”, and genuine human involvement in reality: we have our own being (we do not participate in God’s being) and we have our own knowledge (we are not only “predicated” by God, by kerygma – the preached message). Cf. Van Ruler 1989:92-93.

13 In this regard my colleague, Ernst Conradie, working on science-religion dialogue and ecological issues, has pointed out that all theology is in fact a form of “natural theology”, and that the conversation with science on “nature” is only possible when creation is not only understood as *creatio* (God’s deed) but also as *creatura* (the outcome of God’s deed, for example, “planet earth”). For Conradie’s engagement with the “Kuyperian” Reformed perspectives, searching for answers beyond and behind Barth, see Conradie 2011. These insights have been put forward by Van Ruler as early as 1956 (in 1989:19): “If one rejects this Gnostic solution of soteriologising the entire world, and its consequence, namely, the irreconcilable conflict between the church and the world, then it must simply be accepted that the realities mentioned above thrust upon us theological questions which cannot be resolved in a theology that is worked out from a radically Christological viewpoint. It is not possible for the church to do without a small flicker of natural theology, be it only that of the natural laws governing the essence of earthly realities. On the other hand, it seems to be excessive poverty to be limited only to a little bit of natural theology. It is only in a fully developed trinitarian framework that one is able to determine theologically the meaning of reason, history, the state, art, and what it is to be human.”

14 This point deals with Barth’s supralapsarism: the idea that creation is merely the “stage” for God’s acts of salvation; that God’s saving act in Christ was already foreseen and “planned” before (supra) the fall (lapsus). See Van Ruler 1969b:210-211 where he argues that this idea ends in “Christosophism”. He protests that it makes a joke of God’s decision to create the world and humanity as “good” and taking pleasure in it. The pinnacle of his theological “speculation” centres in the idea of God’s pleasure, joy in creation; in having a partner and having a world. He even corrects the Apostle Paul: yes, faith, love and hope, these three, but the greatest of these is joy! (cf. Th. W. V (1972), 16-18, 27-31).

There is a problem with Barth's view of being as a necessary and unavoidable but simultaneously also as a problematic given or fact. Israel, however, is not necessary, its being there is, nevertheless, good. In this way *conservatio* is no *creatio continua* but *creatio continuata*. Here we witness a piece of worldliness of systematic theology. Through the notion of contingency as "threat of being" creation receives a dose of salvation. *Das Nichtige* is in fact threatening, but for Barth, humanity's attempt to deal with this threat (through the human faculty of will) pours down to the reality of sin. Contingency as threat to being is equivalent to stepping out of Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

### III. Barth's Christological concentration and lack of pneumatology

#### i) Absolutising Christ:

There is not only a contraction and confusion of everything in Christ (with the result of history in Barth's theology becoming Christosophy), but especially also a contraction of God in Christ. God chooses and posits and constitutes God self as the God of humans in Christ. Comment: when one tries to be too biblical in systematic theology, it will result in misfits (*gedrochtelikheden*). *Salus* (salvation) is something quite different from ontological estrangement between God's being and human existence. *Salus* relates more to guilt, death, perdition and all other secondary issues. It is of prime importance to speak of Christ-in-the-flesh in a mediatory way only.<sup>16</sup>

#### ii) The Holy Spirit is limited purely to Christology:

According to Barth, the Holy Spirit is equivalent to the power of the risen Lord: pneumatology needs a corset. However, the eschatological reach of pneumatology is much more important (than allowed for by Barth's restricted view). The Holy Spirit is the organ of or sense for the *eschaton*. Christ brought us the Spirit and is there for the sake of the Spirit. The kingdom is not God self (Ruusbroec), but the kingdom is us "before God's countenance". The Spirit is also God the Spirit "himself". Thus God dwells with us. We are a dwelling place of God in the Spirit, in a more real sense than Christ is the dwelling of God on earth.<sup>17</sup>

#### iii) Faith is not seen as a second wonder of grace by Barth:

For Barth, humanity must be dethroned. There is only one *Selbst* (one self, acting person) and that is God. In Barth's theology there is only *applicatio salutis objectiva* (application in the object itself). One must ask whether our humanity is not at stake here; and thus God's partner?

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15 Van Ruler would rather write a strong essay on "God and chaos", linking God with the contingency, the chaos, in creation (1958, in Th.W. V 1972:32-43), than conceding the point that "contingency" as such illustrates the human inclination to sin and thus justifies God's soteriologising of his own creation ("we were born to be saved"): No, we were born to be humans living in front of God; because of sin (specifically guilt!) we need God's grace (and Christ's intervention), to become human "again"! (See Lombard 1996:95-103).

16 Incarnation was necessitated by sin only, therefore, in Van Ruler's conception, the incarnation falls away eschatologically! This is the consequence of his "speculative reason"! Sin and death are "secondary" issues that were "added" to human life, which was created "good". Van Ruler follows Anselm's vicarious, mediatory logic in understanding why God became human: to add that in order to counter this work "for us" we need a strong pneumatology to ensure God's work "in us".

17 See for this Van Ruler's distinction between Christological and pneumatological perspectives, 1989:27-46.

Is this not in essence an undermining of tolerance? Is this, in political terms, not a threat to democracy? Is it not deeply inhuman if there is no eternal state of “being lost”? There are at least five points of decision involved in faith: the eternal council of God, the historical deed, the actual preaching, the mystical state, and the eventual result. As a human being I must take up and confirm the position of God; that is faith; that is doing theology.<sup>18</sup>

#### **IV. Barth's problems with human agency and identity vis-à-vis God<sup>19</sup>**

##### ***i) The open kerygmatic situation (Offene kerygmatische Situation)***

This notion of Barth does not imply *apokatastasis pantoon* (the full restoration of everything in the end). It refers to a situation being created that is “open”, and in which a person can fall or stand. This *offene Situation* is an abyss, deeper and darker than the doctrine of predestination of Dordt: no word is spoken, no human form comes into play. Not only the situation of kerugma but even the fact of the kerugma itself remains in the dark with Barth. Why should kerugma be needed if salvation is already perfect? One does not receive any answer to the question what really happens when kerugma takes place. In Barth's scheme preaching pales into a function of the congregation. The notion of “characteristics” is better than this “situation”. One needs characteristics (*sylogismus mysticus et practicus*) of election in the mystic life, while acknowledging that this doctrine of characteristics is also a labyrinth. Even so, it is much more human and articulated than the “open situation”, which is an abyss into which one falls silently.<sup>20</sup>

##### ***ii) Barth has not written one letter about predestination:***

Not even KD II, 2 [*Kirchliche Dogmatik*] deals with this since the question of predestination is not the question whether God is gracious to me (that is the matter of reconciliation and salvation); it is not even the question of justification. The question of predestination is the question whether I am prepared to live and die based on God's grace, to say yes to this gift. I must want and will it!<sup>21</sup>

##### ***iii) The being, the council and the deed of God need to be distinguished:***

This is necessary to avoid the *Vergeschichtlichung* (historicisation) of God, which assails God's divinity. I am human and creature, and God is the Uncreated (One): this needs to be acknowledged since one lives with God in thousands of ways, not merely in a strictly personal

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18 Theology is our activity before God and with God, *coram Deo*. Van Ruler lists the five activities between God and the human agent in Dutch rhyme: “Gods eeuwige Raad, de historische daad, de actuele praat, de mystieke staat, en de eindresultaat”. If all of this is only God's one-sided initiative, the relationship is undemocratic, intolerant, inhuman and far from a partnership.

19 The next five digits deal with God's action and human agency within the ambit of the work of the Spirit, illustrating Barth's deficient pneumatology. For this, see Van Ruler 1989:1-88, the three articles summarising Van Ruler's attempt at a “relatively independent pneumatology”, in which he also deals with “predestination”.

20 Van Ruler's point here is that the attempt to provide certain mystical and practical signs or characteristics of what Dordt called “predestination” is much more human than the uncertain “open situation” in Barth's understanding of kerugma, preaching, offering of the gospel. Van Ruler deals with this in his detailed approach to what happens through the work of the Spirit in a believer (cf. 1989:47-88, “grammar of pneumatology”).

21 Predestination is for Van Ruler a matter of will, choice, but then from the perspective of the mystery of how God's choice can become my choice (Lombard 1996:283-289).

relationship. This *hyperousia*, the super-essentiality of God, which stands close to the *mé on* (Being itself) must be acknowledged. With Kraemer we should affirm: God is not *cogitandus sed amandus et laudandus* (not to be thought but to be loved and praised). God can miss us, live without us, like toothache, but it pleased God to create us; that is the luxury of God's creation: the cosmos as "ornament". God took pleasure in willing and creating the plurality and singularity and solitariness in creation. In this way we can retain ontology: there is not only "history" (things happening), there is also "being" – both functionally and substantially. We can only think purely functionally, and not substantially, about one single reality, and that is: sin. These distinctions, not properly made in Barthian theology, include the reality that in God there is also an abysmal element.<sup>22</sup>

#### **iv) The Holy Spirit as sheer eschaton:**

In this conception, found in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* and in Bultmann, the Holy Spirit is equivalent to "historical reality". This means that the actual decisions made in factual reality is without choice. According to Barth, the Holy Spirit speaks the final word. However, it is certainly not true to think that saying "Spirit" means saying a final word. In fact, the last word is spoken when I say "yes" and choose myself as chosen. Would Part V of the KD (on salvation) really deal with pneumatology so that the logic is as follows: KD III on the Father, KD IV on the Son, and KD V on their Spirit? Or was Barth actually done with the Spirit in the last paragraphs of KD IV, 3?<sup>23</sup>

#### **v) Incorrect conception of the person and work of the Spirit regarding the mediation between God and humanity:**

What is given in the Mediator must still be appropriated (*zugeeignet*) and internalised (*angeeignet*) through the Spirit in the human person. There is too little of this in Barth, too little attention to the mediating character of the work of the Spirit. The Spirit seems to be in Barth totally unmediated, a flash of lightning (*Senkrecht von Oben*). However, the Spirit works through means: words, bread, water. Various aspects of mediation: tradition, office, sacrament, preaching, liturgy and congregation are all soft-soaped ("The Spirit is all of them, they are not the Spirit"). In the appropriation (*Zueignung*), appears various human "forms": choosing, judging, deciding. "Wait a moment, God and Christ are not all there is, I am also there!" The Holy Spirit works historically, horizontally, since the *eph hapax* (once and for all) of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is "available", "at our disposal".<sup>24</sup>

### **V. Barth's views on Christian witness and the role of the church in the world**

#### **i) Can being a Christian merely be equated to Christian witness?**

Am I not also a goal, a resting point, a dwelling (*kat' oiktèrion*) of God in the Spirit? Is the neighbour really more than the self? May I see myself merely as a means for the other? My

<sup>22</sup> If Van Ruler stresses the "separateness" of our human "being" or ontology, the flip-side is that God's being is a much bigger transcendent reality, with abysmal aspects. Mystics, therefore, all know "the dark night of the soul" in close dealings with the real God.

<sup>23</sup> At least Barth acknowledged towards the end of his career that he needed to work through everything once more: under the perspective of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>24</sup> Outpouring is a fact, a historical reality. Like the cross it is also "once and for all" but results in the Spirit's being there for, in, around us continually, horizontally, historically.

own salvation is more important than my witness! This also more strongly accentuates the separateness of the Christian. Jesus Christ is also a separate figure (*gestalte*) in history: with Athanasius and Barth there is too much emphasis on the inclusive and universal Christ. As Christians we are anchored in the historical Jesus, Israel and the Bible. This “separateness” is also found in the church; it is another distinguishable “form” next to and separate from the concert hall, the marriage bed, et cetera. Similarly, Christianity is a *tertium genus*, a third species all by itself. Why are Christians seen by Barth merely as “the head of Jud?” The sectarian aspect of the church is her catholicity, which is not the same as universal humanity. The brotherhood of all people is only found around Yahweh and Jesus Christ. Also the church service is to some extent an end in itself. “When you sit in the church and you meet the Bridegroom, you should not engage in prostitution by thinking how should I serve the world?”<sup>25</sup>

## ii) *The church and the world:*

Contra Barth it must be stated that the church is not the destiny of the world, just as Christ is also not the destiny of the world. Indeed something must happen to the world: it must be Christianised. However, even this Christianisation is not an end in itself but also a means. The world as created reality is the purpose, the end, not grace, nor Eucharist. With creation God had something else in mind than *salus*, salvation, viz *nostra fruitium*: that we should enjoy God and God’s creation. But we should also have something in mind for the world and not be content to merely say that it has been reconciled. We must will something Christian, viz imitation of Christ. Christianisation is articulated in mystical experience and configuration: there my heart is Christianised and my inner life modelled. The same with ethical stamping in *eirènè* and *charis* (peace and grace), and the social world: the transformation of structures (contra the revolution). The end of Marx in the West is the Buddhist Nirvana. That is why culture needs to be Christianised. Suppose that our Western culture lived under the dogma that being is absurd, would science still be possible? That is why politics is the axis around which everything revolves. The demons always withdraw themselves into the state and there they must be cast out more than anywhere else. The antidote is kingdom of God and Christ as *kurios* (Lord) and King. Christianisation is a flexible war of aggression and synthesis. Christianisation is also a deterioration of the world; taking out of it what is available, viz sin. In this process the Old Testament plays a major role. For Barth the Old Testament is merely the mirror of the negative. According to Israel, the world is creation and not theophany. Is the state only a human matter, a matter of appropriate social institute, or does God act there also as creator? In such a conception Christianisation is a mixture of particular and general revelation.<sup>26</sup>

25 The being of the church, as a species all by itself, with its own existence, is here accentuated over against the idea that the church is “nothing in itself” (cf. J. C. Hoekendijk’s idea, in line with Barth’s *missio Dei* of the church as a wagon pulled around in the world in service of the kingdom, influencing ecumenical thinking in the 1960s. “The head of Jud” was a look-alike “head” of a notorious murderer H. J. Hut, placed on a block at a village fair for people to hit, to vent their anger at, while the real head was actually preserved in a bottle. Countering such a “functionalist” view of the church, Van Ruler delivered a lecture to Moltmann’s students in 1966 (1978:53-66) on “*Die Kirche ist auch Selbstzweck*” “The church is also an end in itself”, a place of rest, a place simply “to be”). On Barth’s notion of the Christian as mere witness, see Van Ruler 1970:168-169.

26 Here the counter-position on the church is stated: it is not an end unto itself; it is indeed in service of the process of Christianization, which has the purpose of the world becoming fully the world and humanity fully human to stand before God eternally. In this process the state plays a central role. All demons drawn into the operation of power, given to the state, must be exorcised – something which can only happen under the auspices of the only real “king”, with real authority over evil. Both the philosophies of Marx (revolution of the masses without proper structural change based on justice) and Sartre (life

## BEYOND BARTH? WHITHER?

We need to walk on two legs as theologians, the “legs” serving both the church and society at large. Of Dirk Smit I have said that his theology is deeply grounded in the church’s faith, in the mystery of God’s grace, but that he is also deeply concerned about extending, giving form, applying that faith in all life contexts. In a sense this agenda asks for a combination of, and not a choice between, the theological agendas of Barth and Van Ruler. Even though Barth at one point could say “I have something better to do!” (which in context meant: “write a church dogmatics!”) when asked in his early German period why he did nothing about the threat of Hitler and Nazism, he was the one who also wrote the famous Barmen Declaration. And, even though Van Ruler’s whole life seems to have been spent on the agendas of “Christianisation” (of applying Christ in culture, politics and real life), he preached more than 2000 sermons on the good news of the gospel during his lifetime. Which contemporary minister – let alone university professor – can do that?! Both these great theologians have walked on both legs of “Christ and culture”, “Good news and its embodiment”, and the question is rather what kind of theology is better suited for the constant to and fro between the two.

Van Ruler identified certain problem areas in the Barthian approach: a too rigid monistic scheme for speaking about reality (ontology) and knowledge based on the adage of “Christ only” (epistemology) – which makes conversation with “common sense”, “science” and “nature” very problematic; thus opening the door for Gnostic notions, especially when the Old Testament and the place and role of Israel in God’s revelation is neglected or seen as only a negative mirror of what is to come in Christ,<sup>27</sup> when infant baptism (and thus the reality of the covenant through generations) is shunned, and when the Spirit of God is not fully acknowledged as third person of the Trinity (restricted to only the “power of Christ”). It is especially on this point where Barth’s relation to Calvin (“the theologian of the Spirit!”) has always been questioned in Dutch Reformed circles: How does that which Christ had done for us, outside of us, on our behalf, once and for all, become our own internalised, confirmed and willed reality, to be extended in life, given form and applied in all contexts – if not through the work of the Spirit, who is not incarnated in us, but dwelling in us? There are many more questions that could be asked.

The point is this: Should we not admit these questions as real questions in our appropriation of the Barthian gift to the twentieth century and should we not work towards more refined theological solutions instead of simply building further on a fortress that in the twenty-first century really may become impregnable, lost in cosmic or a-cosmic Christosophism, a language to which the ordinary believer has no access? (cf. See Van Ruler 1969b:211).

That Dirk Smit has long since tackled these issues and tasks can be heard on almost every page he writes but nowhere better than in his answer to the question: “Can we still be Reformed?” (2009:437-438):<sup>28</sup>

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is meaningless; all we have are dreadful choices) miss the proper authority, ordering principle needed for a philosophy of history. Only the Christian “philosophy”, seeing history as a *syntaxis* of guilt and reconciliation, can offer a true eschatology – dealing with the central problem of history and humanity: human sin and guilt (Van Ruler 1978:36-38; 1989:100-103).

27 For Van Ruler the Old Testament is the “positive mirror”, reflecting what God had in mind with creation: Israel, living from God’s Torah, knows what life, family, work, sexuality, community, true governance, etc. mean (see Van Ruler 1971:24-35).

28 In this passage, which may at first glance seem staunchly “Barthian”, various “Van Rulerian” accents

The public church in a civil society needs responsible public theology. The particular contribution of Reformed theology to this essentially ecumenical task would include, amongst others, reminders to keep searching for *a fully Trinitarian theology, responsible biblical hermeneutics, a faithful church and socially involved and responsible believers*. Reformed spirituality is about life *coram Deo*, but specifically before the face of the *living and Triune, speaking God*. Because we claim that we hear this God's word in and through the Bible, it is crucial that we *read and interpret this Bible in responsible ways*. And because we claim that the content of this word and will calls the church to obedience and to continuous reformation according to the message of this Bible, we should be concerned about how that is *implemented in the concrete, everyday life – order, structure, worship, ministries, services – of the real church*. As the – continuously transformed – members of this – continuously reformed – church, we are called to live *soli Deo Gloria*, to enjoy and to serve the honour of the living God in the theatre of God's glory, God's history and world, amongst God's creatures [italics in original].

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are inserted in ways which do make a difference to Smit's theology: the public character of the church in civil society (an aspect of Kuyper's theology which also fascinated Van Ruler); the search for a truly Trinitarian theology (which Barth acknowledged towards the end of his career as one of his failures); the accent on interpreting Scripture as Word of God (versus Barth's more esoteric Logos theology); the strong focus on implementation, embodiment, form-giving, of faith in everyday human life; in temporal and contingent forms and structures of history and the world (for which Barth's critical dialectics were not particularly well suited). It may be interesting, and a pleasant surprise, to study Smit's carefully chosen supplementary formulations "beyond Barth" throughout his oeuvre.

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#### KEY WORDS

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