

The Geelkerken Case and Modern Culture.

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Introduction

In this contribution I want to throw more light on the connection between the Geelkerken Case and the European debate on cultural reorientation that arose after the First World War.

The Calvinist circle was not removed from the culture of its time, but was incorporated into it. At the church assembly of Assen, it was not a sham fight that took place or a battle over issues that had nothing to do with the modern world of 1926. Nor was the case a rearguard action, a dispute over issues that had long since been resolved. Nor did Geelkerken and the synod of Amsterdam thrash out mere petty differences, or a difference of opinion that was only of interest to the descendants of Abraham Kuyper. No, the Calvinist theologians, clergymen and elders in the provincial town of Assen of 1926 devoted their attention to a key problem within European culture. The problem can be summed up in the question: are we able to know reality?

An alert reader might remark that he has never read much about the problems of western culture in the Acts of the Assen synod anyway. He would be right, but one should realize that the Calvinists had their own linguistic usage, a fact, which if not taken into consideration, disguises a lot. In the case of this linguistic usage one should not only think of typical Kuyperian ideas such as common grace, palingenesis or elenctics, but of the theological framework of ideas as such. At that time, Calvinists understood not only God, but also themselves and the world by means of a theological terminology, as was the case for many other Christians too. A human being was a creature first and foremost; the purpose of life was conditioned by religion, and the war and the Spanish flu were seen as scourges of God. Those were the days when not only the young Gerrit Berkouwer and Herman Berkhof were sent to catechism, but also people whom we do not associate with Christianity at all, such as the poet Hendrik Marsman and the critic Menno ter Braak.

At the state universities up until approximately World War I, theology ranked as a central faculty. This applied to a greater degree for the Calvinist Vrije Universiteit founded in 1880. During the first half century of its existence, theology was for its students what philosophy would be for generations of academics in the 20th century. Moreover, at that time the church was not yet situated on an island, but was an acknowledged part of culture. The church still often dealt with worldly affairs. But that was not to last. In approximately 1926, Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* was devoured in many a vicarage, offering a new theology in which the bonds with historical reality were loosened, plunging theology into itself. However, when in the same year the synod of Assen speaks in theological terms, there is still every reason to ask which historical reality it's all about.

The circle of the Calvinist world

To clarify what the members of the synod discussed in Assen, I shall start in the smallest circle within which the case falls: that world influenced by Dutch reformed theology.

Even there the Geelkerken Case was not an isolated event, but fitted into a world-wide pattern. In the Christian Reformed Church, the American sister church of the Calvinists, legal proceedings were instituted in 1922 and 1924 on the same issues that were at stake in the Geelkerken Case. Firstly Ralph Janssen (1874-1944) was deposed in 1922.¹ Janssen was a teacher at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids and was suspected of what was then known as higher criticism: the denial of the divine character of the Bible. In the twenties all Calvinists knew exactly what the ‘highly notorious and dreaded’² higher criticism was: it was their arch-enemy from the previous century. What Janssen professed certainly looked like higher criticism at first sight, and when his ideas were branded as higher criticism, a storm of protest burst forth from among Calvinists in America and his fate was sealed.

Janssen, however, meant something quite different. He was not struggling with the question: Is the Bible God’s reliable Word, or is it a collection of fallible human testimonies? He was not a nineteenth-century man! He lived in the 20th century on this side of the great gulf that the First World War had brought about in western civilization. Here the reliability of *text* was not so much at stake, but rather the reliability of human *knowledge*. He had a modern problem: can we understand the true meaning of a text? Janssen was looking for another way of reading in order to understand what the Bible meant, and in doing so he used a profusion of other sources, or to put it in theological terms: he made ample use of the rewards of common grace. The piquancy of the situation was that Janssen had studied at the Vrije Universiteit³ and had referred to his teachers there for his use of extra-biblical sources. It was of no avail: Janssen was sacked.

Two years later one of Janssen’s sharpest critics stood in the dock of the synod: the Rev. H. Hoeksema (1886-1965)⁴. He considered Janssen to be one of the victims of Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace and had severely criticized it. In these legal proceedings too, the modern question was prominent: can we know reality? Is it only through the Bible that one can see reality⁵, or does culture also contain valuable information, as Kuyper had presumed in his nineteenth-century optimism- that is to say: about which he had not thought? The upshot was that Hoeksema was deposed, after which he formed his own denomination.

These two cases preceded the Geelkerken Case. They had aroused much interest in Dutch Calvinist circles and even professor V. Hepp of the Vrije Universiteit went to

² G.Ch. Aalders, “Critiek”, *Christelijke Encyclopaedie voor het Nederlandsche volk, I*, (Kampen: Kok, [1925]), 522; “For years one has warned against it [against higher criticism], and not without reason. We must continue in our firm stand against it” (523).

³ Janssen was enrolled as a theology student twice in the *Album discipulorum* of the Vrije Universiteit: as nr. 299 on March 13 1901 and as nr. 476 on September 23 1907. *Vrije Universiteit Archives*, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (VU). On December 5 1907 he passed his *kandidaatsexamen* and on June 23 1908 took his Master’s exam. Theological Faculty Archives. VU.

⁴ See: Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism*, 110-114.

⁵ H.J. Kuiper in *The Banner*, 2 November 1945: “Behind the rejection of the doctrine of common grace is a theological absolutism which has no appreciation for that which is historical, temporal, relative.”

America in 1924 to sound out opinion there.⁶ Then in 1926 our Geelkerken Case followed it and two years later saw the start of the Du Plessis Case⁷ in the reformed circles of South Africa. In light of the advent of modern culture, J. Du Plessis (1868-1935), professor at the *Theologische Kweekschool* (theological teacher training academy) of the Dissenting Dutch Reformed Church in Stellenbosch, no longer saw much good in the methods by which the metaphysical character of Christianity had been defended in the 19th century. In his way of thinking, he removed the nineteenth-century contrast between revelation and history and believed that Calvinists should found the authority of Scripture on other grounds than on this antithesis. In his newspaper *Het Zoeklicht* (*The Searchlight*) he tried to open up new avenues for Calvinist theology. He considered the Bible to be a historical text and denied that Jesus had metaphysical qualities. For him too the problem was not so much the authority of the text, but rather the modern experience of reality. After a lengthy trial Du Plessis was deposed in 1932.

Thus we can see that world wide there were conflicts among Calvinists in 1922, 1924, 1926 and 1928 about the question as to the meaning of the cultural watershed of the First World War for the use of the Bible. It concerned neither those theologians who wanted to free themselves of Calvinist theology, nor the theologians who wanted to resume the nineteenth-century battle half a century later. No, their actions were a sign that in the twenties, neo-Calvinism found itself in a crisis about a new problem. The Calvinists had defended the Bible against historical criticism during the 19th century and had imagined themselves safe ever since, but now they faced a new question: can we know the Bible; what does the doctrine of inspiration mean in a dynamic and ambiguous reality?

If this general crisis could be expected to erupt within the Calvinist world, then among the neo-Calvinists. They had made a spirited defense of the point that the Scripture *is* God's word. They too had tried to bring the old Calvinist theology up to date, so it was to be expected that they, more than other Calvinists, would have to pay the price when the character of the culture with which they had associated themselves suddenly and profoundly changed. The intellectual crisis that ensued is of crucial importance if one is to understand what occurred in the Calvinist world in the twentieth century.

The circle of European culture

What we have seen up to this point is that not only the Calvinists in Amsterdam or Assen, but Calvinists world wide were in a crisis owing to the changes in culture that had become apparent during the First World War. Now we can draw a second, wider circle around the Geelkerken Case and discuss further that change and the challenges it posed to contemplation.

At the time of the First World War, Europe had had a long period of peace and prosperity. Peace had prevailed since the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, the economy was

⁶ See: George Harinck, "Miskende verwantschap. Nederlands-Amerikaanse gereformeerde contacten in de jaren twintig" *Radix*, XII, (1996): 222-224.

⁷ For more information about this case see: P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975*, Part four, (Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel, 1987), 163-170.

recovering after the depression of the seventies, and Europe was the cultural center of the world. Means of communication improved rapidly: the telegraph and the telephone, in addition to the steam train and the steam ship, made it possible to see the world as a whole for the first time. Many were busy spreading the blessings of European culture around the world, and this was connected to the powerful development of the mission. The aim around 1900 was to preach the gospel to everyone world wide within one generation. Also the Netherlands was in the grip of this spirit of globalization and idealism: the Kuyper administration announced its ethical politics for the colonies; at the turn of the century, the world-wide association of missionary-minded Christian students obtained a Dutch department that rapidly gained influence, and the whole reality of the world at the beginning of the century seemed to affirm Abraham Kuyper's thesis that God, in spite of the Fall, had not abandoned this world, but had, on the contrary, left it many good things by his grace.

In August 1914 World War I put an end to all that. Even though the Germans may have thought that the war was 'frisch und fröhlich', by Christmas 1914 even that illusion had been shattered. What was disconcerting was not so much that this war shook people's trust. Every war does that. It was disconcerting that this trust did not withstand the shock. Suddenly it became clear that the cultural optimism of the preceding decades was a bubble. Trench warfare with millions killed showed that western European civilization was not that far removed from the primitive peoples elsewhere in the world, but was just as cruel, bloodthirsty and self-centered. Seen in this light, political, cultural and religious missionary endeavours were rather absurd. What looked like expansion would turn out to be what Geoffrey Barraclough called 'the dwarfing of Europe.'⁸ It is true that the Netherlands stayed out of the First World War, but they were not mentally insular. Here too one realized that the sweet world that had existed prior to 1914 had disappeared for good and that a new culture was emerging that seemed to be out of control. Whence should the new rules come, now that Christianity was deemed bankrupt? What proves to be safe and reliable when not reason, but irrationality, drives people and nations? What remains of the social structures, the ranks and middle classes when they are crushed as they were during the Russian revolution of 1917? We are familiar with these questions, as were many artists of the day, but at the time questions such as these were turning up in newspapers and were heard from the pulpit for the first time. And do not think that the Calvinists kept out of harm's way. Even when the country parson kept these questions from his parishioners, those who were interested read *De Standaard* and, in addition, the *NRC* or *Het Handelsblad*. As they usually reflected on cultural issues in theological terms, it sometimes seems as though Calvinists were less touched by the crisis or culture – not at all, but appearances are deceptive.

The new world view with which the Calvinists came into contact around the time of World War I, and which we call modern, was born out of skepticism, out of doubt. What this doubt centres around is how knowledge is possible? The 19th-century intellectual was able to know, describe, explain and control his world. The First World War showed that this trust was based on an illusion. The shock of this realization was particularly great because the immoral and unreasonable world that had remained hidden just beneath the surface of western civilization had been hidden from view by it so successfully. The confrontation with this illusion gave rise to doubts, strengthened in no

small way by the intellectual developments that were taking place at the time: Einstein enervated classical natural laws with his theory of relativity; Freud undermined morals with his theory about the uncontrollable subconscious; Bergson challenged the objective nature of time and Nietzsche broke with the idea that a word has one fixed meaning.⁹ The modern world view has three characteristics that clearly distinguish it from the old one: it is dynamic, that is to say – there is no fixed system of verification, such as reason or revelation; it is not unambiguous, that is to say – there is not one idiom that can claim general validity; and it demands adaptation, which means that in a sense, man himself has to create an acceptable world view. It is not surprising that Pablo Picasso ranked as one of the greatest artists of this age. He painted female bodies in a way never considered before, with complexions never seen before. And Hendrik Marsman wrote a poem about Amsterdam that seems to be written in code. The senses are overwrought because the familiar order of reality is missing. But what Picasso painted and Marsman wrote was recognized in a new way, in a new language, through a new imagery, namely that of the modern world.

In the mean time, we have adjusted ourselves to this modernism and can lead carefree lives in a reality of Rembrandts and Picassos, of Vondel's texts and those by Marsman, but just imagine what this break with the familiar idiom meant for the generations living around 1920. It was as if the rug was pulled out from under their feet. Contact with reality fell away or was at least drastically upset. Since then the phrase goes: take a look, you do not see what you see, and read: it does not say what it says.

New élan

Now the question arises as to how this awareness of the cultural change was addressed within Calvinist circles. In the confusion of war the question arose as to where security could be found when the pillars of civilization crumble. Clergymen rubbed their hands in anticipation: this would mean full churches once more. In the first few months, the countries involved in the war did indeed see a 'return to the altars'¹⁰ As the war continued however, the numbers no longer attending church increased dramatically. Christianity was not removed from this cultural watershed but was part of it in the broadest sense: *Christian* morality was pronounced bankrupt; it was the *Christian* world view that was subsiding. The Calvinist generation of the eighties and nineties during the 19th century, which came to the fore in the church during the twenties, was up in arms. In 1920, *De Reformatie (The Reformation)* voiced this generation's attitude to life when the first issue opened with the sentence: "By gradual transition and catastrophic events we have ended up in a totally different world."¹¹

The cultural divide did not just present itself outside the Dutch Calvinist world, but also within it. Because, more than we sometimes realize, the neo-Calvinist movement is tied up with the cultural developments of its day. By the time the First World War broke out, Abraham Kuyper had aged and, from the Kanaalstraat in the Hague, kept

¹⁰ Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (New York: 2000), 275-284.

¹¹ See for cultural and religious context of this new weekly: George Harinck, *De Reformatie, weekblad tot ontwikkeling van het gereformeerde leven, 1920-1940* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1993), 11-67.

watch over his world: the paper, the party, the university and the church. In the newspaper columns and from the pulpit it was all Kuyper *und kein Ende*, but in anti-revolutionary circles his leadership was openly questioned in 1915, and at the Vrije Universiteit, part of the student generation no longer oriented itself towards Kuyper, but rather towards Bavinck. The Calvinist *intelligentsia* (a word dating from this period) had served the case of reformed emancipation for a long time, but now that this had been achieved, it claimed its rights once more: the students and academics reflected independently. Bavinck was the proper guide for the purpose, as he indicated in a lecture for the Christian student's union in 1918. In this lecture he emphasized that Kuyper had laid aside and pushed back the problems of the modern age for tactical reasons. Kuyper had fallen back upon the sympathy of the people, and because of this did not progress intellectually and no longer looked to the future.¹²

In 1918 the Calvinists faced two problems in particular: what is knowledge, and what is history? Both problems were tied up with the central position attributed to the revelation. The problem of history had already been addressed in the previous century when historical criticism arose and the Bible was in danger of being devoured by an absolute relativization of its holy character, which meant that every text became not only bound to time and place, but also bound to the process of the oral tradition and the perspective of the narrator. On the other hand, the Calvinists had defended the character of the revelation, although they did leave some room for textual criticism. For example, in Princeton, Geerhardus Vos developed a *history* of revelation. This however turned out to be a solution that was too defensive, which did stimulate exegesis, but did not offer a solution to the intellectual problem of the status of the Bible as text. As a result of the First World War, this problem emerged strongly once more owing to a general relativization of values. The Bible became a *corpus alienum*.

The epistemological problem was also part of Kuyper's legacy. In his thesis of 1914, Valentijn Hepp had tried to stop this intellectual leak on Kuyper's part but had become stuck in a mystical foundation of knowing, which withdrew reflection on this problem from the intellectual arena once more. The cultural watershed had shaken Kant's epistemology to the ground. The connection between thinking and reality had become a problem and with that, Kant's categorical imperative. The big question was whether and how to join faith with reality. The answer modern culture gave was clear: there is no objective reality, the only reality that exists is the one created by oneself.

Around 1900, Bavinck felt he had finished his dogmatic work and shifted his attention to modern culture, the field to which he had tried to connect Calvinist theology. There he noticed various developments, the root of the matter being that the closed and objective world view of the Enlightenment was being opened up. He had his students take their PhD's in modern European and American thinkers: B.B. Keet was promoted on Ernst Troeltsch (1918), W.P. Steenkamp on Herbert Spencer (1910), Geelkerken on the fathers of the modern empirical religious psychology (1909), J.G. Ubbink on William James (1912), S. Volbeda on James McCosh and H.W. van der Vaart Smit on the philosophy of R.H. Lotze among others (1916). The professor at Leiden University, K.H.

¹² G. Harinck, C. van der Kooi and J. Vree, *Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende. Aantekeningen van H. Bavinck over de zaak-Netelenbos, het Schriftgezag en de situatie van de Gereformeerde Kerken* (Amsterdam: VU publishers, 1994), 45.

Roessingh recognized Bavinck's influence in these students: "with his broad view on the current problem of the relation between Christianity and present-day culture."¹³ In short, Bavinck made room for a re-orientation. This process was in full swing when western culture collapsed and Bavinck died in 1921. Besides Bavinck, his colleague, W. Geesink, also contributed to this process. During the scientific part of the annual meeting of the Vrije Universiteit on June 27, 1923, he lectured on Baden neo-Kantianism. Although it did not take into account fully the absolutism of Christianity, he appreciated in this movement the attention paid to the spiritual life, to the irrational and the fact that religion was placed above morals, art and science.¹⁴

Bavinck created some space, but no longer had the spiritual power to lead the new idealism that had arisen in it. The new élan took root in student circles and found expression in the *Nederlandsche Christen Studenten Vereeniging* and in the *Gereformeerde Studenten Beweging* that was founded in 1918. This movement rejected the principle that offered no meaning to life and longed for reality in religious life – for a spiritual sense of reality. In the barren stretches of senselessness and decay, their soul thirsted for God, to use the words of Psalm 42, well loved in these circles.

A hotbed of new ideas

This religious idealism sought the support of a world view. At the Vrije Universiteit around 1918, one could, broadly speaking, distinguish three directions in this field: a Kuyperian one that intended to proceed along the neo-Calvinistic course already set out, which was represented by the theologian Hepp who had been appointed Bavinck's chair in 1922. This was not where the new élan was to be found. One must look for it in the two following movements: one that orientated itself towards neo-Kantianism and was represented by the physiologist F.J.J. Buijtendijk, appointed in 1918, and the linguist H.J. Pos, appointed in 1924, and a movement that, not satisfied with Kant, tried to come to a new reflection on the epistemological question, of which H. Dooyeweerd, appointed in 1926, and D.H.Th. Vollenhoven were the representatives.¹⁵ I mention the dates of appointment on purpose because they show that no established academic careers were at stake here, but rather a process of re-orientation and nascent idealism in full swing. At the same time, they show which strategic purposes were served by these appointments, not only because Bavinck's successor Geelkerken was also mentioned, but above all, his friend J.C. Brussaard.¹⁶

¹³ Quoted from *De Hervorming*, 18 August 1917: in: J. Ridderbos Niczn "De jonge Van der Vaart Smit. De ontwikkeling van een gereformeerd theoloog tussen 1917 en 1930" in: *Jaarboek voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands Protestantisme na 1800*, 4, (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 15.

¹⁴ See: *De Heraut*, 1 July 1923. See for Bavinck's vision of neo-Kantianism his "Het Dualisme in de theologie" in H. Bavinck, *Kennis en leven. Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren*, (Kampen: Kok, 1922) 145-150.

¹⁵ See for this tripartite division D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, "Prof.dr.G.H.J.W.J. Geesink in: *Almanak van het studentencorps aan de Vrije Universiteit, 1925* (s.l.,s.a), 82-85.

The opinion held by the president-curator of the Vrije Universiteit, B. van Schelven, that cultural re-orientation should have come to an end by this time and that dogmatics finally should be taught again, seemed to have turned the scale.¹⁷ In H.H. Kuyper's opinion, Hepp's appointment ensured that dogmatics was safe.¹⁸ It turned out to be the old clergyman's last influential move; the appointment of Pos, after some persuasion,¹⁹ he let pass without comment. The *Vrije Universiteit* had to maintain its position and even had to expand before 1930 to prevent the certificates losing their validity, while behind the scenes a battle went on about the direction developments ought to take.²⁰

It was clear however that the theological faculty, with a view to the oncoming battle, was digging in. Nothing indicated that the theologians were aware of the necessity of reorientation in this new post-war cultural climate; for that matter, those at the *Theologische School Kampen* also lacked this awareness. Of course, they too had experienced the horrors of war, and had realized that many certainties were under threat. But this did not fundamentally touch them. They considered modern culture to be a nervous and restless movement. In time, civilization would fall back into reliable patterns once more.²¹

In the meantime Hepp thought that theology had a responsibility to follow the course that had been laid out. In 1922, he warned Vollenhoven "not to let the antithesis of neo-Kantianism control him because, although in that way one became an opponent instead of a supporter, one nevertheless accepted the incorrectly stated problem of neo-Kantianism."²² Hepp's theology was complete by the time he was appointed Professor; this theology knew nothing of the cultural divide.

However, younger theologians did orientate themselves towards this new culture. Except for Geelkerken, I would like to mention K. Schilder, who in 1923 borrowed the works of the German philosopher Max Scheler (1874-1928) from his fellow clergyman P. Deddens and simply devoured them. Scheler had a certain attraction because he had broken with Kant's formal philosophy and had brought an openness towards metaphysics to light. Many a Calvinist searcher tried to avoid Kant by the same route and found clues in Scheler's value ethics. Schilder enjoyed Buijtendijk's contemplations, which were influenced by Scheler, and Geelkerken appreciated him as a teacher. What was particularly stimulating in this regard was that Buijtendijk was convinced that the Bible taught an attitude towards reality that certainly allowed one to know it. Max Scheler had pointed out to him the virtue of humility, the opposite of pride. Pride wants to understand reality but fails to do so. Humility does not want to understand reality but wants to 'see' it, not in our light, our shape, but in the light it receives from God, in the light of God's revelation, not to be embraced but only to be sensed, not to be taken in, but in which one

²¹ See: G. Harinck, "Om traditie en vernieuwing. Enkele opmerkingen over leven en werk van prof. dr. V. Hepp", in: *Jaarboek voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlands Protestantisme na 1800*, (Kampen: Kok, 1993) 114-121.

²² V. Hepp to the curators of the Vrije Universiteit, 11 June 1937. Quoted in: J. Stellingwerff, *D.H.Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978). Reformator der wijsbegeerte* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1992), 54.

can lose oneself.²³ Buijtendijk called this a seigniorial attitude to life, a lasting submission to God in the midst of the reign over the world. (Matt. 6:28, Luke 12:27).

According to Buijtendijk, pride had regarded reality as an object to be possessed and had caused the crisis of culture; and it was precisely seigniorial Calvinism that contained a message of healing that would not only repair the relationship with culture but could conquer scepticism as well.

The *Valeriuskliniek*, where Buijtendijk was employed, became a hotbed of new ideas.²⁴ Should not this Max Scheler lecture at the Vrije Universiteit? Pos endeavored to bring this about.²⁵ The South African graduate Hendrik Stoker decided not to wait for this to happen and instead of graduating at the Vrije Universiteit, graduated with Scheler in Cologne instead.²⁶ Pos also studied in Germany for several semesters where he became acquainted with Husserl, the father of phenomenology, which limits knowing to the province of consciousness, leaving aside the relation to reality.

At the invitation of Scheler, Buijtendijk lectured in Cologne and kept in touch with the Roman-Catholic cultural philosopher Romano Guardini in Berlin who tried to reconcile Roman Catholicism with culture.²⁷ In the meantime Dooyeweerd disputed the compatibility of Neokantianism's logical closedness with a world view that acknowledged divine sovereignty.²⁸ Vollenhoven warned against Scheler and hoped to be cured of neo-Kantian partiality by studying French philosophy in Leipzig, developing a new epistemology around 1926 in which he tried to bridge the gap between consciousness and reality.²⁹

In short, something was brewing within intellectual Calvinist circles in those years, in particular at the Vrije Universiteit. There was enthusiasm; there were European contacts and great expectations. Would it be possible to imbed religion in modern culture? Would it be possible to bring about that which Geelkerken had said in 1920 in his sermon '*Machteloosheid en krachtsontplooiing der kerk*' (*The Church's Powerlessness and display of strength*): that the church should not reject a world that hungered and thirsted for salvation as if it were merely a concentration of heresy and immorality, rejecting it as ungodly, but should go forth mercifully and bring it to

²³ F.J.J. Buijtendijk, "De deemoed", *De Reformatie*, 2 December 1921.

²⁴ See: *Een halve eeuw arbeid op psychiatrisch-neurologisch terrein, 1910-1960. Gedenkboek uitgegeven ter herdenking van het vijftigjarig bestaan van de Valeriuskliniek te Amsterdam, uitgaande van de Vereniging tot christelijke verzorging van geestes- en zenuwzieken in Nederland*, (Wageningen: Zomer en Keuning, 1960).

²⁷ See: Henk Struyker Boudier (ed.), *De rede van het hart. Correspondentie van F.J.J. Buijtendijk en Romano Guardini*, (Zeist: 1986).

²⁸ See: Marcel E. Verburg, *Herman Dooyeweerd. Leven en werk van een Nederlands christen-wijsgeer*, (Baarn: 1989) 78-79.

²⁹ See: Stellingwerff, *Vollenhoven* (42-43).

Christ?³⁰ Neo-Calvinism was in a critical situation as these young academics clearly felt how powerless Kuyperianism was, although in the midst of modern culture new avenues seemed to be opening up.

From the academy to the synod

The time had come to keep these ideas to themselves no longer, but to interest a wider Calvinist audience in them. In 1925 Pos, Buijtendijk, Brussaard and Geelkerken decided to set up their own weekly *Woord en Geest*; word and particularly spirit, as the title of this weekly should be read, because it aimed to free Calvinists from the nineteenth-century rational way of thinking that still controlled their theology so that they could fulfill their cultural task. According to the founders, this weekly should make a plea for ‘the life of the personality and the variations in reality.’³¹

At that point, the Geelkerken Case crossed this group’s path. Some maintained that it was a typical ecclesiastical-Calvinist matter that had little to do with academics like Pos and Buijtendijk, but that is sheer nonsense. They were well aware of the fact that in the Geelkerken Case their ideas were under discussion. Pos, mind you, had started a series in *Woord en Geest* ‘Over werkelijkheid’ (‘About reality’) in which he offered reflections on the experience of reality and the consciousness of reality for his church-going readers. As a philosopher Geelkerken was not the most highly educated man of their circle, but his defence of 1925 and 1926 clearly shows that for the last few years he had breathed the same air as these academics. The clergyman defended himself with the weapons the academics had handed him. I shall give two examples. In June of 1925 Geelkerken wrote to the classis of Amsterdam referring to Augustine and maintaining that Genesis 3 refers to a reality that surpasses our comprehension.³² Up to and including the reference to Augustine this opinion is from Buijtendijk who had set proud understanding against humble feeling and empathy. And in September of 1925 Geelkerken wrote the classis an article that could have been written by Buijtendijk himself. In it he asked the classis the question as to whether Holy Scripture ‘only offers [us] ‘realities’, data of experience that must be *understood* by us rationally, or does one hear, in listening to the Scripture with faithful reverence the revelation surrounding such data, pertaining to the highest reality, in order to come closer to the spiritual *understanding* of the meaning of that data, its truth.’³³

It is a widely held view that the synod did not understand the age in which it found itself, curtailing the re-orientation that was afoot within Calvinist circles and putting the academics back on Kuyper’s track. I think that for the greater part, the synod

³⁰ J.G. Geelkerken, *Machteloosheid en krachtsontplooiing der kerk. Predikatie naar aanleiding van het ‘getuigenis’ van de generale synode der Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, uitgesproken in de Schinkelkerk, op Zondag 3 oktober 1920*, (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1920).

³² J.G. Geelkerken to the classis of Amsterdam, 22 June 1925. In: *Memorie der classis Amsterdam van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland betreffende de zaak-dr. J.G. Geelkerken...*, (Kampen: Kok, 1925), 31.

³³ Geelkerken to the classis in Amsterdam, 5 September 1925. In: *Memorie classis Amsterdam*, p.51; my italics.

indeed thought this way. They simply saw the ethical theology looming up from behind Geelkerken and thought that they were dealing with the Kuyper-Gunning conflict all over again. As if half a century had not passed by. As if the World War had not destroyed the world that Kuyper and Gunning had inhabited. As if a new experience of reality did not exist. To give you a sense of this atmosphere I quote the Rev. H.W. Laman who protested against the reading-matter on modernism in the *Gereformeerd Kerkblad voor Drenthe en Overijssel*:

Read the books of your own authors. Read them three times. Read them five times. Read them ten times (...). I have been a clergyman now for more than twenty five years but I still read Bavinck and Kuyper and Calvin and Father Brakel (...) I also faithfully read *De Bazuin*, *De Heraut* en *De Reformatie* (...) I read *Woord en Geest* too. I do this to deepen my love. The more I read *Woord en Geest*, the more I love for the synod in Assen, and I already loved it a great deal.³⁴

But these clergymen failed to notice that the synod did actually say more than 'stick to Kuyper.' In nineteenth-century Calvinist publications, one will search in vain for statements about the *klaarblijkelijke bedoeling* (obvious meaning) of a biblical story, nor of its *zintuigelijk waarneembare werkelijkheden* (realities perceptible through the senses).³⁵ Gunning knew the difference between historical and unhistorical, between fact and myth. In the nineteenth century, Kuyper and Gunning quarreled about the status of the Scriptures in the midst of other historical sources. But in the modern twentieth-century Geelkerken Case, its status was not the primary issue, but rather the cognizability of Scripture with all the other historical sources, indeed, of reality itself. According to its verdict concerning the obviousness and the realities perceptible through the sense, the synod understood this perfectly well, however traditional its verdict may be judged to have been. Thus the synod did more than just establish the fact that Geelkerken was opposed to confession. Subsequently it also stated how things stood with the cognizability of Scripture. Indeed, one could argue that this was the weakest point in the synod's verdict. Was it wise to enter into a debate about theory of knowledge that it did not master and through which it ventured onto thin ice with the word 'obvious?' Precisely this 'obviousness' of human perception was at issue in the arts, science and culture. The reaction was predictable: Buijtendijk condemned the synod for being incapable, due to lack of philosophical training.³⁶ He called the synod's decision ridiculous because in its pride it had presumed to understand God's thoughts in the first chapters of Genesis. Buijtendijk's criticism that reality had been objectified was leveled at the head of the

³⁴ Quoted in *De Bazuin*, 30 July 1926.

³⁵ For more on this matter, see the article by Koert van Bekkum in this reader.

³⁶ F.J.J. Buijtendijk, 'De leiding in de Gereformeerde Kerken,' *De Telegraaf*, 20 March 1926.

synod. To quote one other example: when the historian Johan Huizinga stayed in New York during the summer of 1926, an American colleague made a joke about the Dutch Church, which had stated that the serpent in Paradise had actually spoken.³⁷

However, in judging the synod's verdict, Buijtendijk overlooked the fact that Geelkerken had come up with issues that he himself hardly grasped. To quote Pos, the clergyman from Amsterdam lived in the 'twilight of intuition'. According to Pos, Geelkerken had 'a remarkable flair for all that is limited and defeated, also in those areas where everything that offers resistance to dynamic piety appears contestable to him.'³⁸ But more than Buijtendijk, Pos had an eye for the tensions caused by the reorientation in Calvinist circles.³⁹ He also saw that Geelkerken lacked the philosophical knowledge necessary to put forward the case correctly and that Geelkerken wanted to assert himself personally in this matter and quite consciously sought church polemics.

In fact, we find ourselves in the rather curious situation that both Geelkerken and the synod were parties in a philosophical trial for which neither was sufficiently qualified. Of Geelkerken, no philosophical defense could be expected; of the synod, no philosophical verdict. Therefore, one could ask how it is possible that this philosophical issue ended up at a church meeting such as the special general synod of Assen. The answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this article. The task I had set myself was to throw more light on and defend the thesis that the Calvinist circle in the twenties was no backwater but was, on the contrary, fully involved in the European cultural reorientation debate held after the First World War and that the Geelkerken Case dealt with a key problem of the day in that debate. I believe I have offered sufficient proof of and explanation for this thesis.

³⁷ Anton van der Lem, J. Huizinga, *Amerika dagboek 14 april-19 juni 1926*, (Amsterdam/Antwerp: Contact, 1993), 30-31 (20 April).

³⁸ Pos to Le Cointre, 25 April 1926: Geelkerken a remarkable flair for all that is limited and defeated, also in those areas where everything that offers resistance to dynamic piety appears contestable to him. According to Pos the clergyman from Amsterdam lived in the 'twilight of intuition'. Harinck and Valk, *Jeugdbrieven* (181,182).

³⁹ Pos to Le Cointre, 6 November 1925: 'When is there an end to what epistemology and historical-critical research concoct against the age-old superstition? At times I think that the plaintiffs are perfectly trustworthy: intuitively they fear a position that divides the powers of the mind between so much % faith and so much % criticism: they are the 'bons catholiques' of Protestantism!' *Ibid*, (175).