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GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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DEDICATION

It is an honour for me to write an article in this volume for Pieter Potgieter. In South Africa much attention is given to the political figures who led the nation out of the house of apartheid. We can, however, hardly overestimate the role of the church in this. That was true for the origins of apartheid, and is also true for its abolition. As moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, Potgieter played a central role in this process. I have great esteem for his courage in turning the course of history that his forefathers set in motion. Every person who has the blood of an African, be they white or be they black, knows what a mental struggle this implies.

The following article is not explicitly directed to this. However, its essence asks that we think again about history, and in this setting especially the context of South Africa in the last century. What is this history in respect to God's aim and the destiny of humankind? We should be reluctant to accept easy solutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relation between God's omnipotence and human freedom has been a problematic issue in Reformed theology for centuries. The question is, how can human beings be free if everything is controlled by God? And if human beings are not free, they cannot be held responsible for their acts. As a consequence they cannot be guilty. It is not a new question, as Paul in the letter to the Romans already introduces fictive opponents who argue, "Why does God complain about human sin if He Himself decides everything?" (Romans 9:19). In modern times, however, the question has become more acute, due to the increased awareness of human individuality, identity and freedom. For modern people the idea of an all-controlling God is an affront to humanity. Therefore they try to develop theologies that avoid this idea.

In this article I will discuss some of these positions in confrontation with classic models of the relation of God and human beings, and argue that they

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are not viable as a basis for solid theology. I will end with a perspective on the consequences of a wrong doctrine of God for human thought.

2. THOMAS AQUINAS

The greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, deals with our problem at several points in his work, especially in *Summa Theologica* I. Although the relation of freedom in creation and divine providence is a question to be discussed, it is clear that for Thomas no real problems arise here. In his theological framework the issue belongs to the basic rules for good theology that every student should know. He tackles the problem through the distinction of *causa prima* and *causa secundae*, a distinction learned from Aristotle. God is the First Cause; all other agents are secondary causes (*ST* I, q. 14, 2, resp.).[2] The crux of Thomas' solution is that a first cause cannot be considered as being on the same level as secondary causes. There is a categorical difference between the two.

Thus "first" must not be considered in a temporal sense. That is the mistake later deism made. The deists thought of God as First Cause only as the first link of the chain of causes and consequences. According to them, in the beginning God started the world, and subsequently all events through the history of time developed from this first impetus. For a deist God is something like the Big Bang. Thomas does not think in this way. For him "first" means that this cause is the cause of all causes. It is causality on a different level. It is the cause that causes causality on the level of the *causae secundae* (*ST* I, q. 19, 5, ad 2 and 3).

This implies that although there is causality on the earthly level, God's action is not excluded from it. On the contrary, earthly causes can only be causes because God bestows them with power.

> He governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures (*ST* I, q. 22, 3, resp.).

The whole chain of causes can only exist because God acts in it, not as a starting point but as the empowerment of any action. It can be compared with the relation of physical movements of the body and psychological mo-

2 Quotations from Thomas Aquinas are from *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Second and Revised Edition, 1920, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Online Edition Copyright © 2000 by Kevin Knight. New Advent.org/summa.

tivation.[3] Nor does Thomas limit God's action to this empowerment. God can influence events in the created world, both mediated by *causae secundae* and directly as well. In the latter case we speak of a wonder (*ST* I, q. 105, ad 7; *CG* 3, 101). But even when no wonders occur God is not excluded from acting in the world, as every event is sustained by God who is the prime cause which initiates every secondary cause.

Thomas' model seems to imply a strict determinism.[4] According to him everything is controlled by God. How can we introduce contingency in this system? Thomas dismisses these objections. They are precisely due to a negation of the categorical difference between God and the created world, between *causa prima* and *causae secundae*. On the level of the *causae secundae* we can speak of contingency.

> Those things, … which are of such kind as to be done by inferior causes are said to be possible in reference to those inferior causes. For it is according to the condition of the proximate cause that the effect has contingency or necessity (*ST* I, q. 25, 4, ad 3).

A secondary cause is never absolute, since it is a created and thus limited cause.[5] Therefore other secondary causes can always interfere.[6] As a consequence, we can never know what finally will come out of an earthly causation. Besides, we cannot survey all causes and consequences, since the human mind and rationality are limited as well. Thus what actually will happen in the future is hidden for us. From our perspective it is fully contingent. We can only make an estimation of probability. Even modern chaos theory is not

3 "Hence, as the soul is whole in every part of the body, so is God whole in all things and in each one." (*ST* I, q. 8, 2, ad 3).

4 Cf. Loofs (1959: 438):

> Bedeutsam aber ist es geworden, dass Thomas die Kausalität Gottes in den *causae secundae* ... so stark betont, dass die göttliche Providenz wie ein Fatum erscheint.

5 "No creature represents the first exemplar perfectly, which is the divine essence" (ST I, q. 47, 1 ad 2).

6 Things are said to be fortuitous as regards some particular cause from the order of which they escape. But as to the order of Divine providence, "nothing in the world happens by chance", as Augustine declares (*ST* I, q. 103, 7, ad 2).

> Certain effects are said to be contingent as compared to their proximate causes, which may fail in their effects; and not as though anything could happen entirely outside the order of Divine government. The very fact that something occurs outside the order of some proximate cause, is owing to some other cause, itself subject to the Divine government (*ST* I, q. 103, 7, ad 3).

excluded from Thomas' thought. On the contrary, it fits very well in it — at least if we keep the difference between primary and secondary causes clearly in mind. On the latter level everything always has aspects of uncertainty and is thus more or less contingent, but on the first level it is embedded in the overview God has, since He has unlimited knowledge.

> Things known by God are contingent on account of their proximate causes, while the knowledge of God, which is the first cause, is necessary (*ST* I, q. 14, 13, ad 1. Cf. also *ST* I, q. 22, 3, resp.).

It is also embedded in God's aim, since the *causa prima* is decisive for the *causa finalis*. Everything is ultimately directed to God. The whole chain of causes and contingencies in creation finally serves the glory of God (*ST* I, q 19, 5, ad 3). He is their end.

The distinction of first and second level causes is also applied to human freedom and God's action. God's creative power does not exclude our own motivations. That would only be the case if we opposed our own motivations to God's initiative beforehand. But precisely because they are of different categories they do not exclude each other. Because we touch the core of the argument here, I give two long citations.

> Free-will is the cause of its own movement, because by his free-will man moves himself to act. But it does not of necessity belong to liberty that what is free should be the first cause of itself, as neither for one thing to be cause of another need it be the first cause. God, therefore, is the first cause, Who moves causes both natural and voluntary. And just as by moving natural causes He does not prevent their acts being natural, so by moving voluntary causes He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary: but rather is He the cause of this very thing in them; for He operates in each thing according to its own nature (*ST* I, 83, 1, ad 3).

> To be moved voluntarily, is to be moved from within, that is, by an interior principle: yet this interior principle may be caused by an exterior principle; and so to be moved from within is not repugnant to being moved by another. If the will were so moved by another as in no way to be moved from within itself, the act of the will would not be imputed for reward or blame. But since its being moved by another does not prevent its being moved from within itself, as we have stated, it does not thereby forfeit the motive for merit or demerit (*ST* I, 105, 4 ad 2-3).

The categorical difference between the primary cause and secondary causes implies that you may neither add them together nor oppose them. It would be similar to adding gallons and miles. For Thomas the question about human freedom and God's omnipotence is as senseless as asking

"What is five gallons added to fifteen miles?" Someone clever might say that with a certain number of gallons of fuel you can drive a certain number of miles. That would be in line with Thomas: without gallons of fuel, no miles — without a first cause, no consequences and no events in a created world.

3. EARLY REFORMED THOUGHT

If we now turn to early Reformed theology, it is remarkable how very much this is in line with Thomas' ideas on this theme. The *Heidelberg Catechism* states that "all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move" (Sunday 10, answ. 28. Cf. Calvin, *Inst*. I, 16, 1). The similarity with Thomas' idea that God bestows creatures with causality is clear. Klaas Schilder in his commentary on the *Catechism* explicitly refers to the concepts Thomas used. God is first cause.

> This does not mean that God "was" "once", "in time" first cause, and thus "*once upon a time*" was a cause, but that He is First Cause *until now* (Schilder 1951:163).

From the very beginning Reformed theologians exclude any suggestion of deism.

> We believe that this good God, after he created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without his orderly arrangement. (*Belgic Confession* 13. Cf. Calvin, *Inst*. I, 16, 4).

Just as for Thomas, this does not imply determinism. Calvin strongly opposes the idea of "fatum" (*Inst*. I, 16, 8). just as he opposes "fortuna" (*Inst*. I, 16, 2 and 8). Like Thomas, Calvin points to the distinction of created and uncreated causes.

> Since our sluggish minds rest far beneath the height of Divine Providence, we must have recourse to a distinction which may assist them in rising. I say then, that though all things are ordered by the counsel and certain arrangement of God, to us, however, they are fortuitous, — not because we imagine that Fortune rules the world and mankind, and turns all things upside down at random, (far be such a heartless thought from every Christian breast;) but as the order, method, end, and necessity of events, are, for the most part, hidden in the counsel of God, though it is certain that they are produced by the will of God, they have the appearance of being fortuitous, such being the form under which they present themselves to us, whether considered in their own nature, or estimated according to our knowledge and judgement (*Inst*. I, 16, 9. See also his distinctions at the end of that section).

On the level that we can investigate we often see coincidences. In the created order we notice contingency and partial causes and consequences. In the hidden realm of divine providence everything has its aim, but we must restrict ourselves to this world. Calvin warns against curiosity that wants to investigate the mystery of God (*Inst*. I, 16, 9. Cf. *Belgic Confession* 13). Were we to do so, we would not respect the immense categorical difference between God and ourselves. We must trust God, but we may not confuse Him with the ambiguities of creation. Calvin holds strictly to the difference between Creator and creation. Even in eternal life we will not become of the same being as God (*Inst*.I, 15, 5).

Since there are two different levels, on the one hand God's eternal council and on the other hand created beings, there cannot be a conflict between God's eternal will and human actions. On the level of creation we are dealing with human choices, human action, human responsibility. These are not in competition with God's almighty providence. They could only be so if they were of the same kind.

We see this most clearly in the discussions of predestination. Our eternal destination is in God's hands. This does not impede Reformed theologians from speaking about human guilt. Especially the *Canons of Dordt* deal with this subject extensively. They teach a strict doctrine of *gemina praedestinatio*.

> Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race (I,7).

The number of the rejected too is unchangeable (I,11). The same *Canons,* however, can speak about human free will.

> Rebelling against God at the devil's instigation and by his own free will, he [man] deprived himself of [his] outstanding gifts (III,1).

Opponents of this document often overlook that.

The *Canons* do not explicitly discuss how the two strains of thought are related.[7] As long as we maintain the difference between God's will and human will there is no need for such a discussion. As far as we are human beings, we are free, or determined by evil spirits, by the genetic or social structure of our parents, and/or by the coincidences of life. But since we are beings that are created by God, with our whole ambiguous story we are held in his eternal providence and predestination.

7 The *Belgic Confession* 13 includes a sentence about the question of human sin, and shows more awareness of the problem, which however is solved in a way similar to Calvin's in *Institutes* I, 16, 9.

An analogy from modern physics may clarify the way Thomas and the *Canons* deal with predestination and human freedom. In physics, light can be considered both as waves and as particles. Dependent on the aim and nature of your research you can make your calculations according to the one model or to the other. Both are equally valid. You must only avoid confusing the models. In a similar way we can say that we can view a human's life both in the perspective of human freedom and responsibility and in the perspective of divine determination. Both are equally valid. You must, however, avoid confusing the models, and distinguish very carefully in what kind of discourse you use the one or the other. You must avoid speaking about human achievements in the discourse of final salvation. You must also avoid speaking about limitations on human choice in the discourse of human calling and responsibility. Our salvation is totally of God, and we are fully responsible as well, just as light is a particle and waves as well. You cannot stress the one on the cost of the other.

The similarity of Thomas and Reformation thinking is striking. The *Canons* even solve the problem of rejection in the same way as Thomas does. Both teach that eternal salvation is due to God's election. Eternal damnation, however, is not a willed act of God, but a passing over by Him.[8] The state of human beings is that they are lost in imperfection, finitude and sin. In order to be saved an active decision of God is needed. Thus rejection is not an act of God as election is. Thomas works this out even further. God gives everybody his or her own destiny as a created being. In that sense He is good to all and loves all. But He loves them in different ways, according to their own limited destiny (*ST* I, q. 22, 2, ad 2). Some people, however, received the good of eternal life; other people are deprived of it and receive only their human existence, being further left to sin and eternal loss. The latter is not an act of God but a *derelictio*, a not-doing.[9] And of course, nobody can require God to do something, because He is first cause and *actus purus*.

Although the whole structure of Thomas' thought and that of the early Reformation is similar, nevertheless we also notice some differences. The first is a different mood of speaking, especially of the writings of the six-

8 *Canons of Dordrecht* I,6. Thomas, *ST* I, 23, 3:

> Therefore, as predestination includes the will to confer grace and glory; so also reprobation includes the will to permit a person to fall into sin, and to impose the punishment of damnation on account of that sin.

9 Thomas, *ST* I, 23, 3, ad 2:

> Reprobation, however, is not the cause of what is in the present — namely, sin; but it is the cause of abandonment by God.

teenth century. They embed the doctrine of God's unchangeable will in the profession of his care for his creatures. God is

> a Governor and Preserver, and that, not by producing a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe as well as in each of its parts, but by a special providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow (Calvin, *Inst*. I, 16,1).

It is a matter of trust in a faithful God.

I will not say that Thomas does not have in mind this loving care of God, but his way of argumentation is more rational. He seems to be more interested in the solution of intellectual problems than in comfort for fugitives, as the writers in the sixteenth century were. Certainly he aimed to express a good message for human beings, but the expression of this longing is less direct. We cannot, however, ascribe this difference to the distinction of the Middle Ages and Reformation, let alone Roman Catholic and Reformed. The atmosphere of the *Canons of Dordt* is rather similar to that in Thomas, even if they are not a systematic theology but the fruit of a burning question in church life.

Another difference is that the Reformed authors refer to our limited knowledge about divine affairs and Thomas more to the ontological difference between divinity and created order. In the confusion of experiences we do not know what God's aim with our life is. We must trust Him without curiosity. For Thomas reality is less ambiguous. The framework of God's acting and human destiny has taken fewer blows than for his successors three centuries later.

4. THE CHANGE OF MODERNITY

It is remarkable how Reformed theologians at the end of the twentieth century have quite a different perspective. The careful distinction between the first cause and secondary causes has usually disappeared. God and human beings have become actors of the same category. That does not necessarily imply that they have the same power, for even created actors can have different degrees of influence. The key is that in modernity God and created beings play on the same field. Consequently they can be opposed and conjoined. Conjoining of actors means co-operation. For both Thomas and Calvin co-operation, in the strict sense of the term, between God and human beings was nonsense. In the human agent God is always acting, but not in the sense of working together, but rather as the ground of action. Similarly, according to them, there cannot be competition between God and human beings.

When we turn to modern authors we find both co-operation and competition between God and human beings.[10] It would be beyond this article to discuss the whole development and extent of this change. As an example I will refer to the anthropology of Hendrikus Berkhof (Berkhof 1990:183-215).[11] Berkhof states that God, in giving freedom to humans, took the risk they would abuse this gift. "Man was created as a risky being" (1990:192). That implies that bestowing upon human beings the opportunity to act and to cause effects restricts God's competence.

> God creates for himself a partner and allows himself to be limited and resisted by the freedom of that partner (1990:223).

The difference with Thomas is clear. Thomas also writes that God bestows creation with the dignity of causality. But never for a moment in Thomas can it be supposed that this gift would imply self-limitation or even a risk for God. On the contrary, all our acting is due to God's unlimited *actus purus*.

Self-limitation of God is an important concept for Berkhof (1990:157-159). He needs it in order to save human freedom. He borrows the concept from Emil Brunner and some earlier theologians in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Later, Jürgen Moltmann extended it to the key concept of the doctrine of creation (Moltmann 1985:99-115). The essential idea behind the concept is that in the same field of actors both God and creatures work in a similar kind of causation. Therefore they have to divide up the field. For Thomas and Calvin God and creatures worked in one and the same undivided field as actors with a different kind of causation. But, since they consider both God and mankind as actors in the field of secondary causation, Berkhof and Moltmann have to draw a line in order to limit God's

10 The conflict between Arminius and Gomarus in the seventeenth century can be considered as the first big clash of the two ways of thinking.

11 When we compare the anthropology of Berkhof 1990 (Dutch edition 1973) with his monograph on anthropology (Berkhof 1962) a remarkable shift of position must be assessed. In 1962 Berkhof sets his anthropology up from Christology. Creation, sin and human destiny are in the perspective of Christ and his work. We can see this as an anthropological translation of his former book *Christus, de zin der geschiedenis* (Berkhof 1958). In 1973 Christology, in an extremely infralapsarian way, is put after anthropology and God's way with Israel, as a new beginning to save the failed covenant. The primordial structure of anthropology is a covenant without Christ. The concept of ideal pre-existence of Christ as the obedient human being cannot change this structure (Berkhof 1990:293). It must be considered as pneumatological-eschatological promises to us.

action that endangers human freedom. According to the strict theological rules of Thomas and Calvin they do not deal with God as God. They make God like unto one of his creatures. That cannot but have far-reaching consequences for theology.

The first consequence is that theology gains a deistic bent. Seventeenth century deists excluded God from the whole of history. He was only there at the beginning. The reason for this position is clear: they conceived the first cause as a cause in time and not as the ground of causality. As far as Berkhof needs a self-limitation of God in order to save human freedom, he makes the same mistake. The difference with traditional deism is that Berkhof leaves moments in history open for new creative acts of God, to change the trend of history that humans made but which did not coincide with the aim God had for humankind. Thus a strange mixture of human freedom and divine correction, of self-limitation and intervention of God arises. Though Berkhof speaks with many nuances — and thus almost any critical statement about his theology can be refuted by an explicit quotation — the overall structure of his theology is clear. God creates human beings for freedom as partners in a covenant. When they fail, God takes new initiatives in order to preserve their destiny.

God's decisive act is the sending of the Son. Berkhof calls this a new act of creation by God (1990:293). Christ's coming is not God's own coming into the world as orthodox theology taught, but a new creation. Due to his confusion of the *causa prima* and the *causa secundae* Berkhof is forced to this. Christ must be a human being. Otherwise He is not the renewal of humanity. This human being cannot be God at the same time, because the model is either God or creature. So Christ is a strange new start for humanity. What his relation is to the former human race is not clear.[12] Continuity of humankind must be questioned in Berkhof's theology.

On the other hand, Berkhof speaks about co-operation of God and human beings. His concept of the covenant is that it is unilateral, yet bilateral in purpose (1990:235). The first is in line with his deistic tendency. Though classic Reformed theologians also argued that the covenant was monopleuron (Heppe/Bizer 1958:224), it was their opinion that the whole history of the covenant was sustained by God, in all events. For Berkhof it means God's initiative, followed by the mutual relation of God and humans. The frequent use of the word "partners" by Berkhof is telling. This suggests mutual dependence and co-operation. Consequently the human partner becomes a decisive factor in God's work in history.

12 See Van de Beek 1980:121-123.

When human beings are acting on the same level as God, the following possible outcomes must ultimately be taken in account:

- The human partners do not act according to their destiny. If God does not overrule them, the end of history will be a failure. No believer can accept this idea, when we follow the track of Israel's prophets. As Berkhof states: "None of these prophets has believed that this would be the final word of the great covenant partner" (1990:243).
- God overrules the human partner in order to avoid the failure of his purposes. Berkhof tends to this position, as he argues that in Christ God made a complete new start.

  > God himself must provide the true man, the faithful covenant partner. That new beginning from above is called "Jesus". He finally fulfils the sonship. He is the son *par excellence*. And he is that not as the fruit and climax of human religious and moral purity, but in virtue of a unique and creative act of God. Therefore, there is between Father and Son not only a covenantal relationship, but also a relationship of origin, a new covenantal relationship based on a unique relationship of origin (1990:287).

  Actually God did not accept mankind's rejection of Him. God does not stop following human beings with his love. One of my students said of this, "Thus God acts like a stalker. They should serve a restraining order on Him because He violates human freedom". Starting with human freedom, Berkhof ends with rejection of it. This is the more far-reaching because God's action is at the same level as human decision. Thomas and even the *Canons of Dordt* safeguard human freedom at the level of the *causae secundae*, while Berkhof tends to sacrifice this to the destiny of humanity as God's aim.
- Both partners agree completely. It ends with full unanimous co-operation. One must be rather optimistic about human decisions to hold this view. Nevertheless Berkhof is inclined to do so, in order to avoid one of the former outcomes. Though God intervened in the past, in the end He will convince humanity to do justice and keep peace. The Spirit who dwelt in Jesus will inspire humankind and bring them to the renewal of the world, of which Europe is a symbol of (1990:513). Actually this is a kind of dynamic semi-Pelagianism in which humanity saves itself, initiated by the Holy Spirit. Once again a deistic aspect of this theology appears. Because Berkhof thinks so positively about the future and humanity will be saved, he can even reject the idea of competition, because God and human beings meet each other in a co-

venant in which the Lord "perseveres, by constantly calling us, disturbing us, inspiring us" (1990:48).

- The former three positions are based on the belief that there is a God who provides the universe and humanity with a destiny. If we, however, opt for a position of human beings making their own decisions, why should we bring God into it? If we divide up the field of free decisions, why should we restrict ourselves to a part of it? Why should we not go for full, unlimited freedom? Then classic deism is more consequent. Deists only needed God because there had to be a beginning somewhere. They could not do without a cosmological argument of the existence of God. Modern post-mechanical science has no need for this hypothesis. So why should we not leave God out?

  If we start to put God and creation in competition, the outcome must be either to erase God from our symbolic universe in order to save human freedom, or to give up human freedom in order to safeguard humans' higher destiny. Then the classic distinction of the *causa prima* and the *causa secundae* is a guarantee both for human freedom at the human level and achieving our goal according to divine destiny.

Moltmann (1985) ends in problems similar to those Berkhof has. Though he creates an open space in God's omnipresent and omnipotent action by the idea of God's self-limitation, this space is not left free to human wishes. On the contrary, the space in which creation is called into being is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit dwells in creation and fills it with God's love. In this, creation will find its destiny.

In this way a strange model is presented. First God has to contract Himself in order to grant freedom to creation. That model fits to the modern concept of allocating human and divine acting and presence. But subsequently it is filled with the traditional model, in which the Spirit acts as God's creative power, having very much the same effect as Thomas' *causa prima*. What is really happening here is a confusion of concepts.

Both Berkhof and Moltmann — and all those other theologians who speak about self-limitation of God, or think of human freedom as contrasting with divine omnipotence[13] (or the other way around) — attempt to keep a foot in both camps. They are like scientists who do research in mo-

13 This is also the case with process theologians. Process theology also contests the idea of God as controlling power (Cobb & Griffin 1977). Like Moltmann, however, they have a more dynamic conception of God's inspiring presence than Berkhof, who speaks about intervention. However, for the process theologians too God is not *prima causa*, but challenging, luring creatures to self-realisation.

dern quantum physics using the methods of classic mechanics. The difference is that classic theology was more sophisticated and more comprehensive than modern thought. On the one hand, these designs are influenced by the modern idea of human freedom as original freedom in which human subjectivity is *causa sui*. On the other hand, they do not accept the final consequences as atheists do. In the end they cannot and will not do without God. So they introduce God, either in a secondary classic model as Moltmann does, or as arbitrary acting power as Berkhof does. Those mixed paradigms are really confusing, because neither the doctrine of God nor the anthropology is satisfying.[14] Anthropology cannot develop true freedom and theology cannot develop a doctrine of true divinity and a trustworthy eschatology. Here the classic model of medieval Scholasticism and early Reformed thought provides both a solid anthropology and a solid theology. If we are careful to observe the distinctions, human beings are fully free as created beings on the level of created freedom, but their ground of being and their final destination is ensured on the level of creative divine power.

5. KARL BARTH

If any theologian in the twentieth century has done so, then it is Karl Barth who seems to safeguard the categorical difference between God and human. One can read his whole work in this perspective. Nevertheless, if we look closer at some themes it turns out that Barth also does not escape from the modern competition model of theology. I give two examples.

In *CD* III,1 Barth deals with creation. He discusses the question whether the creation stories are history or not (*CD* III,1, § 41,1). Barth first dismisses the idea that these stories are myths. By his definition, a myth is not a narrative about what *happened*, but a story about the world that tries to explain what reality *is*. A myth is always true, but never happened. It speaks in symbolic language about the mystery of being (*CD* III, 1:84). It has nothing to do with events and acts of God. So the genre of myth cannot be used in a Christian theology of creation, as this theology focuses exactly on God's action.

On the other hand, the creation is not normal history either. Historical events are embedded in the whole stream of events from past to present.

14 Russel Botman's statement (in his unpublished M. Th. thesis) that in Berkhof's theology Christ is "nog God nog mens" is also valid in the whole field of Berkhof's anthropology and theology. If Christ is the decisive encounter of God and humanity, any uncertainty in the natures of Christ has a spin off to the whole theological concept of the relation of both.

With every event we can pose the question, "Why did it happen?" We can investigate its background and offer plausible explanations for why things went as they did. The beginning of World War II can be explained as a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles, poverty in Germany with enormous inflation, Romantic idealism, and still more factors. Historical events can be explained, more or less, and have a cause (*CD* III, 1:78). Not so creation. We cannot make clear why it happened. It can only be ascribed to the free goodness of God. That is not a cause like other causes. It is not an explanation but a gift. Nevertheless it has effects in history. Indeed, it initiates history. From the event of God's creation a whole history comes forth. Thus creation is history in its effects, but not in its causation. Therefore Barth calls it "unhistorische Geschichte" (*CD* III, 1:79-81). It is not historical in the normal meaning of the word, but nevertheless it has consequences for reality. He also uses the word "Sage" for this (*CD* III, 1:81-84).

If we analyse this concept precisely, it turns out that there is a deistic tendency in this model. Creation is a story in the beginning, and subsequently the chain of historical events can begin. God's creative activity is the first cause, which is different from all other causes. But He is not the first cause in the sense of Thomas or Calvin. He is not the cause of every event and the cause of the secondary causes in history. By introducing the idea of *unhistorische Geschichte* for creation, Barth makes God a first cause in time. That is precisely the position that Schilder so sharply (and rightly) opposes in his commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

Barth is a child of Enlightenment. He was consciously so. This, however, implies that he has to save rationality in his worldview. The consequence is that God is moved to the margins[15] or is restricted to salvation events like the birth and resurrection of Christ. These also have the character of *unhistorische Geschichte*. These are even the core of God's unhistoric acting in history (*CD* III, 1:76) as "Mitte der Zeit" because Christ is "Herr der Zeit" (*CD* III,2, § 47,1). Thus finally this salutary event becomes the whole of history. At the very end Barth comes close to Berkhof, as both suppose a human history of rational and plausible events which is sometimes interrupted (or initiated) by God's salutary acts. God's acting is a specific acting.

15 Bonhoeffer actually gives a better answer on the problem of faith and Enlightenment. He says that in the future we can only speak about God in a totally secular manner, precisely because God is not in the margins of life, but in the centre (Bonhoeffer 1970:307, 321-328, 340-342). That fits very well with the classic model. The difference is that the believer can no longer make it explicit. Theology can only be an *Arkandisziplin* (Bonhoeffer 1970:306), since it knows that the presence of God is hidden on the market place of life.

He does not act in all events, but in specific events. Ultimately the essential criticism of Berkhof on this issue is also true for Barth.

Actually Barth supposes a kind of competition between "normal" history and God's acting. This competition also is found, perhaps even more clearly, in the second example that I give: the *anhypostasia* of the humanity of Christ. Anhypostasia means that Christ cannot be considered as a human being except from his being the Son of God.[16] We cannot speak about the man Jesus without taking into account that He is God's own presence in the world. The theologoumenon was developed in order to oppose Nestorianism, as it safeguards the unity of the person of Jesus and thus the reality of salvation. In Christ God is not related to *a* human being, but to humanity as a whole. Humanity as such is saved, not a human being because of his close relation to God.

Barth also uses this concept. He is even very enthusiastic about it (Barth 1974:255). But he uses it in a way different from the early church. For him it expresses the divine initiative in incarnation, over against general human possibilities. No single human being can be the substrate for God's salvation. Thus, what served to point to the unity of humankind and the reality of God's salvation on an ontological level, is now used for the opposition of human acting and God's initiative (Van de Beek 1980:48-50). To somewhat overstate the point: the council of Ephesus supposes God to be in the whole of humanity; Barth supposes Him not to be in any human being. Thus Jesus is a stranger from heaven. He is God, but not a normal man. He is *the* true man, but that does not mean a concrete real human being, but the ideal eschatological man. Nevertheless, Russel Botman's adage "nog God nog mens"[17] is also true for Barth's Jesus. At first sight we would say: "God, but not man". But if God is put in competition to humans He is no longer God, because He appears in the same category as human beings.

It may seem odd to list Barth among theologians who do not maintain the categorical difference between God and creation. Nevertheless the essence of it is in his theology, not *although* he stresses the difference, but exactly *because* he stresses it too much. His whole theology can be viewed in the perspective of keeping God out of nature. This is due to Barth's strong opposition to the natural theology of liberal Christianity. But in so doing he lost the essence of the classic doctrine of God. He tries to safeguard God from human captivity, but in his solution he abstracts God from human nature. So actually he accepts the modern separation of God and human. It is

16 On this matter *in extenso* see Van de Beek (1980).

17 See note 14.

only a question of time then, before a further generation chooses for humanity alone.

Actually Barth would have been better off using the concept of myth for the creation story. The creative power of God is in all that is, and the beginning and ground of every being. In itself, the myth does not even deny that He is so for being as a whole, thus for the total creation. Classic theology has never denied the *creatio ex nihilo*. A myth is only wrong in Christian theology if it is about *eternal* created being, not if it is about the essential being of creation.

So at the very end it turns out that Tillich with his concept of God as ground of being is more in line with classic theology than theologians of the school of Barth and Berkhof. The problem of Tillich is that his language is so very philosophical that his Christology is very obscure. I think that in the final analysis the whole of Tillich's theology is a strong *theologia crucis*, but it is faint in language. That is why it is mainly liberal theologians who are devoted to him. His book *The courage to be* is usually interpreted on the basis of the first part of his *Systematic Theology* only. If we would take the second part more into account, a totally different image would appear. It could be a challenge for a young theologian to do so. It is far beyond this article to do it now.

6. CONCLUSION

Many present-day theologians do not accept the classic doctrine of God as it was essential for both Thomas Aquinas and Calvin. We must see what is at stake then. Ultimately the consequence is secularisation, since God no longer is considered as ground of being. Human freedom and immanent causality push theology to keep God in the margins, or in special moments of history that do not fit in normal history. They push God out of the market place. This is most strikingly visible in the wake of Barthianism, as Berkhof already warned in 1951. Nevertheless he continued this way.

Usually the change of thought is not explicit in theological writings. Sometimes it is explicitly denied. Therefore we must trace the constitutive elements. These are competition talk in the discourse about God and humans, allocation of responsibilities, or conjoining God and humans in a model of co-operation and partnership. Reformed theology especially must critically examine covenant theology, because this is an easy gate to co-operation models.

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