

# Revelation of a Non-Existing God

*Revelation as a Human Phenomenon,  
a Model Examined*

T.G.A.Wijnveen (Erik)

Stud. No. 0327869

October 2009

Thesis Research Master Theology  
Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University

Supervisor: prof. dr. M. Sarot  
2<sup>nd</sup> supervisor: prof. dr. J.F. Goud

## Content

<b>Content</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>2. The five Models of Revelation according to Avery Dulles</b> .....	<b>5</b>
2.1. The author and the book.....	5
2.2. Revelation as Doctrine .....	6
2.3. Revelation as History .....	9
2.4. Revelation as Inner Experience.....	11
2.5. Revelation as Dialectic Presence.....	15
2.6. Revelation as New Awareness .....	17
<b>3. 'Voor een tijd een plaats van God' and Revelation</b> .....	<b>22</b>
3.1. The author and the book.....	22
3.2. Content of the book .....	22
3.3. Kuitert on Revelation .....	28
<b>4. 'God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan' and Revelation</b> .....	<b>31</b>
4.1. The author and the book.....	31
4.2. Content of the book .....	31
4.3. Manenschijn on revelation .....	38
<b>5. 'Geloven in een God die niet bestaat' and Revelation</b> .....	<b>43</b>
5.1. The author and the book.....	43
5.2. Content of the book .....	43
5.3. Hendrikse on revelation .....	48
<b>6. A new Model of Revelation?</b> .....	<b>51</b>
6.1. Three approaches.....	51
6.2. Three approaches, one model? .....	52
6.3. The new model compared .....	57
6.4. The new model evaluated.....	58
<b>7. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>8. Cited Works</b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>9. Summary in Dutch</b> .....	<b>65</b>

## **1. Introduction**

For almost two thousand years Christian faith and theology have been based on the conviction that God revealed himself and the purpose of the world. This does however not mean that revelation has always been a major theme in Christian theology. In early decades revelation was just assumed, only in modern times it became more problematic. Nowadays when a dogmatician defines his prolegomena he has to define his sources (Scripture, tradition, reason and context (or experience) are often mentioned) and by that give account of his view on revelation. Within Christian theology many different views have been held in the past and the present.

In an attempt to create some clarity Dulles wrote his book *Models of Revelation*<sup>1</sup>. The first part of this book provides a typology of revelation. Dulles proposes a set of types specifically adapted to the theology of revelation in the twentieth century. According to him contemporary models may be divided into five major classes according to their central view on how and where revelation occurs. These types are:

1. Revelation as Doctrine
2. Revelation as History
3. Revelation as Inner Experience
4. Revelation as Dialectical Presence
5. Revelation as New Awareness

Dulles describes these models and judges them according to seven criteria (pp.16-18)<sup>2</sup>:

1. Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition
2. Internal coherence
3. Plausibility
4. Adequacy to experience
5. Practical fruitfulness
6. Theoretical fruitfulness
7. Value for dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> Dulles, Avery, *Models of Revelation*, Orbis books, New York, 1992 (first edition 1983).

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter the references in between brackets refer to Dulles (1992)

Before describing and discussing the five above mentioned models, Dulles briefly considers the possibility of Christian faith as a 'human faith' (p.8), without a classical notion of revelation. He however quickly dismisses this option and decides that 'our method, then, will be to start from a position within a faith-tradition that does appeal to revelation' (p.14). He then goes on to specify that this for him means writing from a Christian and in fact a Roman Catholic perspective. By doing this he narrows the first criterion (faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition) down and moreover, he makes it into an absolute criterion, excluding any model of revelation that does not fit into what he considers to be a Roman Catholic perspective.

Dulles' choice may or may not have been a good choice in the context in which he wrote the book. However, when we look at the current situation in the Netherlands I think leaving out a less orthodox model of revelation that questions God's role in revelation is a missed change. In recent years some of the best sold Christian books are indeed books that do propose a theology that is connected to such an attitude towards revelation. We can think of books of authors like Klaas Hendrikse, Harry Kuitert, Nico ter Linden, H.J. Adriaanse and Gerrit Manenschijn.

This thesis will look at three 'theological bestsellers' and attempt to describe in which way revelation is implied or depicted in them. The three books to be used are: *Voor een tijd een plaats voor God* by Harry Kuitert<sup>3</sup>; *God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan* by Gerrit Manenschijn<sup>4</sup> and *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat* by Klaas Hendrikse<sup>5</sup>. Although these books mainly discuss the issue of the existence of God, a view on revelation is also implied in them. After describing the views proposed in these books, I will investigate whether it is possible to compose one model of revelation based on the three described views, just as Dulles has done with the five other models. Since the aim is to come to a model, I am will not try to do justice to developments within the thought of each of these authors over the years. I will solely look at one book per author.

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<sup>3</sup> Kuitert, H.M., *Voor een tijd een plaats van God, een karakteristiek van de mens*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 2002. Translated title: For some time a place of/for God, a characterization of mankind.

<sup>4</sup> Manenschijn, Gerrit, *God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan, over de narratieve constructie van de geloofswerkelijkheid*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 2002. Translated title: God is so great that there is no need for his existence, about the narrative-like construction of faith-reality.

<sup>5</sup> Hendrikse, Klaas, *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat, manifest van een atheïstische dominee*, Nieuw Amsterdam Uitgevers, Amsterdam, 2007. Translated title: Believing in a God who does not exist, a manifesto of a atheist pastor.

I then will consider whether this model is a sixth model of revelation, or a variation to one of the already existing models. I will then assess this model in light of the seven criteria that Dulles has set, just as he has done for the other five. And by doing so I will compare this model to the other six.

The research question of this thesis will therefore be:

'What would a model of revelation, approaching Christianity as a 'human faith', look like, and how does it compare to the other models?'

## **2. The five Models of Revelation according to Avery Dulles**

### 2.1. The author and the book

Avey Dulles, S.J. (1918-2008) was a theologian, a Jesuit and from 2001 onwards a cardinal of the Roman Catholic church. When he wrote this book (1983) he was Professor of Systematic Theology at the Catholic University of America (Washington D.C.). At that moment Dulles had already published many articles and books, amongst which *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (1968) and *Revelation Theology: A history* (1969).

In *Models of Revelation* Dulles sets out to describe the importance of the concept of revelation in western religion and especially Christianity. He briefly mentions some contemporary difficulties with revelation and some attempts to come to a Christian theology without reverence to revelation. He does not immediately respond to the difficulties that he has listed, but he promises to consider them in the last chapter (p.14)<sup>6</sup>. First Dulles wants to discuss the various ways in which revelation is understood in 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian theology. In the remainder of 'part I', five models are described and compared. Part II consists of Dulles's own proposal of a view on revelation that is based on the analysis that revelation is given and transmitted by symbolic communication. By proposing his own view Dulles does not want to propose a sixth model. But 'by recourse to symbol as a dialectical tool it will be possible, ... , to enrich and correct the existing models and to achieve a fruitful cross-fertilization' (p.128). Here I will not discuss Dulles' proposal but will focus on the five presented models.

The five models present five definitions of revelation which differ fundamentally. In order to discern and define these five models, based on the views of many more theologians, Dulles tried not to focus on the terms they used, but on the reality to which the terms referred.

Although the models differ fundamentally, they are not totally disparate. Most adherents of the different models would subscribe to the following statements: (p.117)

- Revelation is God's free action in turning to his spiritual creatures.
- By revelation God communicates truth concerning himself and concerning humanity as related to him.
- The truth of revelation is spiritually important.
- Revelation comes in a finally decisive way in Jesus, the incarnate Word of God

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<sup>6</sup> In the last chapter 'revelation at its present value' Dulles does discuss the difficulties briefly.

- For Christians the normal way of access to revelation is through the church which reads and proclaims the Biblical message.

- Revelation demands a positive reception on the part of those to whom it comes.

Summarized: revelation is God's free action whereby he communicates saving truth to created minds, especially through Jesus Christ as accepted by the apostolic Church and attested by the Bible and by the continuing community of believers.

I will now describe the five models. All models will be summarized in a definition using the formula 'A discloses in the situation B the content C for the recipient D with the result E'. This definition is taken from *God: Action and Revelation*, a book by Christoph Schwöbel<sup>7</sup>.

## 2.2. Revelation as Doctrine

### *2.2.1. The Propositional Model*

The first model to be discussed, 'revelation as doctrine', is the propositional model. This model has been the dominant model in the recent past. Dulles describes two current forms of this model which together disclose this model well; conservative evangelicalism and Catholic neo-Scholasticism.

Conservative Evangelicalism holds that in principle God makes himself known through nature, but because of the transcendence of God and the devastating effects of original sin human beings do not in fact succeed in attaining a saving knowledge. Therefore supernatural revelation is necessary. Today we no longer receive revelation through the prophets, through Jesus, or through other people, but we are not left without revelation altogether. The prophetic and apostolic teaching has been gathered up for us in Scripture, which is considered to be the final revelation of God. The Bible as a whole and in all its parts is thus inspired that it is entirely free from error and is God's written word. The Bible interprets itself and thereby gives a clear message. Revelation, in this view, is equated with the meaning of the Bible, taken as a set of propositional statements, each expressing a divine affirmation, valid always and everywhere.

We can summarize using Schwöbel's formula: God discloses through the Bible propositional truth, valid everywhere and always, for all of mankind which can be understood by reason and should be believed and obeyed and is necessary for salvation.

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<sup>7</sup> Schwöbel, Christoph, *God: Action and Revelation*, Kok, Pharos Publishing House, Kampen, 1992 (Studies in philosophical theology; no.3.), p.87.

Catholic Neo-Scholasticism also distinguishes between natural and supernatural revelation. Natural revelation is given by deeds (per facta), supernatural by words. Without supernatural revelation the human race would remain ignorant of its true end and means. Revelation consequently is necessary for salvation. Supernatural revelation transmits conceptual knowledge by means of words. Revelation signifies the deposit itself, that is the body of propositional truth contained in Scripture and apostolic tradition. This revelation was committed to the Church and is authoritatively taught by pastors of the Church, who speak in the name of Christ himself and are to be believed. The ecclesiastical teaching office (Magisterium) is the universal norm for determining the content of revelation. Therefore the dogmas of the church are considered to be divine revelation. The neo-Scholastics reject the protestant view that the Bible is self-sufficient and complete.

Summarizing: God discloses through the Bible and the apostolic tradition (interpreted by the Magisterium) propositional truth, valid everywhere and always, for all of mankind which can be understood by reason and should be believed and obeyed and is necessary for salvation.

### *2.2.2. Merits and criticisms of the Propositional Model*

We will now assess the propositional model in light of the seven formulated criteria that Dulles provides. Most of the arguments given are given in Dulles's book as well. Dulles's arguments are summarized, partly rephrased, and organized by criteria and a few remarks have been added. Some merits or criticisms follow from the application of more than one of the criteria, but they are mentioned only once, namely when discussing the criterion with which they are most intimately connected.

Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition.

This model has a certain foundation in the Bible, which frequently speaks as though God delivered messages in human language. The propositional understanding of Scripture can also claim to have some basis in tradition. It might however not be truly faithful to either Scripture or the pre-reformation tradition. The Bible seems not to claim propositional infallibility for itself, nor did the ancient and medieval exegetes. Also this model does not acknowledge that tradition is wider than things explicitly said, it limits tradition to propositional truths. Finally, modern Biblical criticism calls attention to the great variety of literary forms and conventions in Scripture; this model fails to acknowledge this variety by limiting its attention to propositional content.

### Internal coherence

This model has internal coherence and it provides firm doctrinal standards.

### Plausibility

The biggest objection occurs when looking at the plausibility. The central thesis that every declarative sentence in the Bible is to be taken as expressing a revealed truth is in an age of critical thinking felt to lack plausibility by many. This is partly due to the fact that the propositional model rests on an objectifying theory of knowledge that is widely questioned in our time. It is also difficult to maintain that popes and councils have escaped the limited horizons of their days. Modern advances in science and historiography whose findings often disagree with the Biblical story also make it well-nigh impossible to use the Bible any longer as an absolute authoritative source.

### Adequacy to experience

The model is inadequate to experience. Whether or not Biblical propositions are illuminating to a believer, they should always be considered revelation.

### Practical fruitfulness

The model supports the unity and growth of the church, encourages loyalty to the foundational documents and traditions of the church and fosters a lively sense of mission, all of which will be valued positively by many believers.

### Theoretical fruitfulness

The propositional model provides the basis for a rather simple theological method (namely, systematizing the truth-content which is explicit and implicit in the inspired writings). The task of theology in this model however becomes too narrow. It fails to do justice to the critical theological task of exposing deficiencies in past and present formulations, and to the creative task.

### Value for dialogue

The doctrinal understanding has not shown itself favourable to dialogue with other churches and religions. It is an obstacle to finding common ground with other religions, every religious proposition that disagrees with a proposition in the Bible is necessarily considered to be false.

## 2.3. Revelation as History

### *2.3.1. The Historical Model*

The historical model holds that revelation occurs primarily through deeds rather than words, Its content is events instead of propositional truths. The self-manifestation of God is by historical events, not by information about God stated in divinely communicated doctrines or concepts.

This model, just as the others, comes in many different shapes and forms. In Anglo-American theology the phrase 'revelation as event' is used. William Temple states that inasmuch as God is personal he cannot be adequately be revealed through nature, but only through persons, through actors on the stage of human history. An event therefore can be revelation even though it cannot be adequately represented by propositions about it. There are no revealed truths. 'The essential condition of effectual revelation is the coincidence of divinely controlled event and minds divinely illumined to read it aright.'<sup>8</sup> The Bible in this view is not considered to consist of Gods word(s), but is considered to be the record of the acts of God, together with human responses. Described attributes of God are therefore descriptions of the ways in which God has directed history.

Oscar Cullmann distinguishes three moments in this revelation process:

- the naked event which is seen by believer and nonbeliever alike
- the disclosure of the divine plan to the prophet through the event
- the association of the new event, again in the mind of the prophet, with the earlier revelations in salvation history.

This implies that according to him events of salvation history are not self-interpreting, but yield their supernatural significance only when contemplated from the point of view of faith. The Bible accordingly is revealed prophecy concerning history.<sup>9</sup>

Pannenberg argues for a still closer identification of revelation with history. Revelation according to him is found in the history of the whole world. He considers the events to be self-interpreting; they bear their meaning intrinsically in themselves, no prophetic disclosure

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<sup>8</sup> Temple, William, in: Baillie, J. and Martin, H. (eds.), *Revelation*, Faber & Faber, London, 1937, p.107. Quoted in Dulles (1992), p.54.

<sup>9</sup> Compare: (p.56).

is needed. Faith does not precede the recognition of revelation, but revelation elicits the response of faith.

Summary: God discloses in the history of the world his great deeds (accessible for historic enquiry) for believers (or all of mankind) with the appropriate response of unwavering trust and hope in God.

### 2.3.2. *Merits and criticisms of the Historical Model*

Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition.

The historical model clearly picks up certain Biblical themes; big parts of the Bible are interpretations of history. The Bible however also represents God as freely communicating with human beings and thereby bestowing knowledge of himself. Even if God reveals himself through deeds, it would be strange to assume that that is the only possible way. Also, not all of Scripture is related to historic events (think of Job, Ecclesiastes) and one might wonder what the revelatory function of these non-historical parts of the Bible is. The historical model does not have a strong founding in the earlier theological tradition, though describing God on the basis of his deeds has always been done by Christians and Jews. One finds this already in the Old Testament. Next to that: it is difficult to argue for the historicity of many of the events without reliance on faith. So a historical approach to revelation that takes a historiographic approach to the data might end up excluding many of the deeds of God that have always been considered central to Christians (for example the most important: the resurrection). This might accordingly result in a view on God that is not faithful to Christian tradition.

Internal coherence

This model does not necessarily lack internal coherence, but the difficulty to assign a clear meaning to 'act of God' does make it problematic to come to a clear and coherent view.

Plausibility

Since it is less authoritarian, many of our contemporaries will consider this model more plausible than the propositional model. It - at least partly - concurs with generally used ways of truth finding: observing and interpreting information from

history and the present. The problem with this model is that it states that the event only becomes revelation when it is interpreted. One might wonder why in this model primacy is given to the event. It might be better to say that revelation consists of an inspired word (formal event) and a historical event (material element). Any act of God possesses features of word and of deed alike.

#### Adequacy to experience

This model has the pragmatic religious value that it brings the faithful into a more palpable relationship with God. It is about deeds of love both by God and the believers, not about an exchange of information. This is adequate to the experience of believers who in some sense experience God and react to this experience in their way of living.

#### Practical fruitfulness

This model of revelation gives great importance to life on earth, God's acts and human responses. It encourages believers not merely to believe some propositions, but to trust and hope in God and live accordingly.

#### Theoretical fruitfulness

The historical model is more organic than the propositional: it points to the total pattern of history, which can be conceptualized and re-conceptualized (without it necessarily being relativistic). It therefore opens up the way for theologies that are up to date with new insights in history, science and philosophy.

#### Value for dialogue

Historiography is important in the West, but not necessarily in other parts of the world. Therefore this approach might negatively influence ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

### 2.4. Revelation as Inner Experience

#### *2.4.1. The Experiential Model*

The previous two models focused on the objective aspects of revelation, built up in the course of history. They do not take into account the immediacy of each generation's religious access to God.

A number of theologians of the twentieth century have turned to the religious experience of the believers as the point of insertion of God's revelatory activity. Their fundamental principle is that God is both transcendent and immanent. Through religious experience it is possible for the human person to perceive the presence of the divine. The experience of God, insofar as it is God's transforming work in us, may be called grace, and grace, insofar as it brings about a new awareness of the divine, is revelation. Revelation can therefore be said to consist in an immediate experience of God who inwardly communicates with each believer. The self-revealing God makes himself present to the consciousness of the individual.

This model does not favour a sharp distinction between general and special revelation, nor is there a dichotomy between natural and revealed religion. All religion arises from some particular experience of the divine. This experience of grace is essential, otherwise religion could not rise above the level of human opinion.

The object/content of the revelation will in this view always be God himself; the sense of His presence in us. Doctrines cannot be revealed. The inner experience of revelation naturally translates itself into speech and writing, but dogmas and propositions cannot be identified with revelation itself. Doctrines are only constructions of the mind and therefore no revelation. These constructions can however powerfully suggest the truth of revelation. If there is any revealed truth in dogma than that is because dogma perpetuates the inspired symbolism by which the original witnesses expressed their revelatory experience.

The Bible, taken as a whole, is a revelation of God. It mediates divine truth - first through the prophets, then through the whole community, whose experience through many generations tests, confirms and revises them, and finally through the life of Jesus in whom religious genius reached its highest point. The divine revelation which is not realized in us, and does not become immediate, does not exist for us. Revelation therefore comes directly to every individual.

According to many of the adherents of this model the human Jesus should not be bypassed. Personal communication with God is available when one opens oneself to the inner life of Jesus as communicated in the Bible and Christian tradition. Another criterion is the quality of the experience. It must admit of repetition and continue itself as an *actual* revelation.

Summarizing: God discloses himself through immediate interior experience to the soul of the believer; this disclosure is and imparts a blessed experience of union with God and results in pious affections (a religious attitude and outlook).

#### *2.4.2. Merits and criticisms of the Experiential Model*

##### Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition

The experiential model is not a strong candidate when judged by this first criterion. First of all the Bible does not suggest in many places that people have a natural genius for religion and revelation. Time and time again special people (prophets) were used by God to get His message across. Secondly this model stands in tension with mainstream Christian tradition, although it can claim some support from the mystical traditions.

##### Internal coherence

The model itself seems to be internally coherent but probably there will not be a coherent outcome as to what is revealed. Apart from the possible criterion provided by the life of Jesus, we lack any criterion by which to assess the religious feelings. So the outcome can be anything, both world-affirming and world-denying, either atheistic, theistic or pantheistic.

##### Plausibility

The ambiguity in the value of religious feelings is also a criticism on the plausibility of the model. There is not much evidence that these experiences are to be accepted as revelatory. They could easily be nothing more than the self's experience of the self. If one would try to avoid this criticism by arguing that the experience still has to be judged, probably by the experience of salvation given in Jesus, this model would almost be altered in a variation of the historical model.

##### Adequacy to experience

In this model experience becomes a narrow concept. Revelation comes to be seen as a bare, unanalyzed datum that imposes itself on the human spirit. God becomes a strange phenomenon perceived without any reliance upon community, tradition, or other forms of worldly mediation. In fact the subject always contributes to the experience by his previous anticipations, hopes, fears etc. This implies that although

this model might be adequate to the immediate experience (believers experience the feeling as coming from outside), a closer look shows that this is not how the experience actually comes into existence.

Since this model fails to acknowledge the doctrinal and historical dimension of religion, it is difficult to distinguish between the experiences within the different religions. It is possible to claim that all experiences are in essence the same and therefore all religions are as well. This however would go against the experiences of most believers within those religions.

#### Practical fruitfulness

A great religious merit of the experiential model is that it encourages a life of devotion. Personal experience holds a central place and therefore believers will want to be spiritually sensitive by taking time for devotion. This search for personal experiences may however also result in individualism and interiority and thereby in a loss of interest in the wholeness of the church. This model can also create a privileged minority which has 'a talent for religion'. Finally, since this model does not acknowledge revealed doctrine, it can not satisfy the struggle for divine answers to deep human questions, while in fact those questions usually are important in peoples religious life.

#### Theoretical fruitfulness

Since according to this model revelation exists in a dimension different from science and has a different kind of truth, this model solves the problem of collision between revelation and scientific thought. There is however a price to pay, namely that revelatory experience only has value within religion itself.

#### Value for dialogue

This model will give a positive attitude towards other religions of which it could be claimed that with varying degrees of purity and intensity they bare witness to the self-revelation of the living God. It might however also end in a conclusion that all religion is essentially the same, which would not take serious the uniqueness of each religion.

## 2.5. Revelation as Dialectic Presence

### *2.5.1. The Dialectical Model*

After the First World war some theologians sought a theology that could honestly accept the results of critical scholarship without falling into the insipidities of liberalism. This became 'dialectical theology'- claiming that God's presence and activity could never be discovered within the realms of historical fact, doctrinal statement, or religious experience. Nevertheless these theologians were convinced that God was present and active in human history, language, and experience. Only a simultaneous yes and no, could be adequate to the mystery of faith.

The three most famous proponents of this view, Barth, Brunner and Bultmann, differed in some respects but they all considered revelation to be a mysterious salvific encounter with the living God. They leaned towards an existential and actualist theology of the word. Revelation according to them, is a highly mysterious thing, since it has to do with the self-communication of God, who is absolute mystery. God makes himself known as an absolute mystery and hence is not objectifiable. He is the concealed revealer. 'Jesus Christ is the revelation because He is the grace of God made manifest to us'.<sup>10</sup> Revelation occurs only in Christ. Christ is the revelation of God and the way to God; therefore we can speak about salvific revelation.

According to this model the Bible and the preaching of the church bear witness to divine revelation but are not revelation themselves. They become the word of God and his revelation if and insofar as Jesus Christ, the revealed Word of God, is pleased to speak to us through these chosen witnesses. When that happens, nothing has been revealed concerning doctrines, but everything has been revealed insofar as man's eyes are opened concerning his own existence and he is once again able to understand himself. Revelation means total newness of life. Revelation occurs whenever God's word is effectively proclaimed and is received in faith, and revelation is never revelation except when it is occurring.

It is only in faith that the object of faith is disclosed, therefore faith itself belongs to revelation. The object of faith is known only to faith, and this faith is the only means of access to its object.

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<sup>10</sup> Barth, Karl, in: Baillie, J. and Martin, H. (eds.), *Revelation*, Faber & Faber, London, 1937, p.53. Quoted in: Dulles (1992), p.86.

Summarizing: God discloses himself, usually when the word is preached, through Christ the word in person to a human being bringing together God and man, changing human existence and resulting in faith.

### *2.5.2. Merits and criticisms of the Dialectical Model*

#### Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition

This model does not lack Biblical basis. It sits well with the God of the Old Testament who reveals but is never totally known. It also agrees with Paul's view on the cross which is that it 'is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God'.<sup>11</sup> It also gives space to elements from the Christian tradition, among which the proclamation of Christian truth, an interest in the trinity and an emphasis on Biblical themes like sin and redemption. Conservatives might however argue that the model treats Scripture and church pronouncements too casually. Also the Biblical and traditional understanding of God as creator and sovereign Lord require an objective divine Word of revelation, which this model lacks.

#### Internal coherence

This model is in a sense incoherent: the word of God is the norm for revelation, but it is never accessible except in deficient human words. This essentially leaves God unrevealed, while the model claims that revelation takes place. One might however wonder whether, if mankind lacks the capacity to receive the word of God, there can be revelation at all.

#### Plausibility

Proponents of this model might argue that plausibility is not a requisite. The model denies the need to make faith plausible and thereby removes many objections to the Christian faith. It however also means that it is difficult to argue for dialectical theology, because it is uncertain what the argument should be based on.

#### Adequacy to experience

This model makes space for the sense of encounter with the transcendent God as absolute mystery. Many believers will at least partly recognize that experience of God

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor 1:18 (NASB)

as a mystery. This model acknowledges this sense and, moreover also liberates them from the felt threat of new liberal scholarship, that might question that sense and their faith as a whole.

#### Practical fruitfulness

The practical fruitfulness of this model does not seem to be high. Revelation, in this model, does not end in revealed truths, so there is no knowledge to build on. One can but wait for moments of revelation.

#### Theoretical fruitfulness

In this model history is used to show the mighty deeds of God, but at the same time 'salvation history' is denied. It remains unclear what the objective reality of a deed of God is, which cannot be discerned except by the faith which so interprets it. There is also an ambiguous relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Also on model revelation fails to yield knowledge. As a result, the model deprives theology of its data for theoretical reflection.

#### Value for dialogue

This model is highly unfavourable to interreligious dialogue because religion in general is considered to be something negative. Only true belief, which is only found in Christianity (but can not be equalized with) is positively evaluated.

## 2.6. Revelation as New Awareness

### *2.6.1. The Consciousness Model*

In the models so far considered, revelation is seen as something given from outside. The recipient of revelation is viewed as more or less passive. In this final model this is seen differently; it is the recipient himself who changes.

The consciousness model considers revelation to be a transcendent fulfilment of the inner drive of the human spirit towards fuller consciousness. It is a reflection of God in our consciousness. God does not reveal himself from the outside, but from within. Revelation consists of the whole complex interaction of two beings who freely open themselves to one another and give themselves. Gregory Baum states: 'Since divine revelation... is God's self-communication to man and hence his gracious entry into the dynamic process of man's

becoming fully human, it is possible to express what the Church believes by describing the new self-consciousness created by faith'<sup>12</sup>. And 'The Christian message is not information about the divine, to be intellectually assimilated. It is, rather, salvational truth; it raises man's consciousness; it constitutes a new awareness in man through which he sees the world in a new light and commits himself to a new kind of action. Revelation, understood in this perspective, is a power that transforms the world'.<sup>13</sup>

Some proponents of this model (for example Karl Rahner) present their theory of revelation in terms of an evolutionary view of the world: revelation should be understood as the process by which God, working within history and human tradition, enables his spiritual creatures to achieve a higher level of consciousness. Jesus Christ then is the unsurpassable high point of God's transcendental self-communication and of its historical acceptance. Revelation comes to expression in conceptual language that has a permanently valid content.

According to this model, all aspects of a human being are involved in the revelatory process and revelation is found in involvement in the world. Revelation is always connected with experience, correlated with human questions arising out of a specific cultural and historical context (it rejects that revelation is a matter of religious sentiment). This model insists on the involvement of reason in the appropriation of revelation (but it rejects that revelation is discerned by discursive reason). Furthermore there is attention paid to the involvement of imagination in the revelatory process. It claims that there is knowledge acquired through revelation, but no factual knowledge. A Christian can however claim to know and to be known by God.

The general approach is that revelation is fully given in the incarnation (past), but that the incarnation continues to occur as the body of Christ is being built up in the world (present) and will reach its culmination at the Parousia (future). History therefore is revelatory insofar as it provides paradigms for human self-transcendence that continue to function in the present. Believers ought not to worry about whether a Biblical story happened as it has been written down; what counts is the revealed story's symbolic power and creativity.

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<sup>12</sup> Baum, Gregory, *Faith and Doctrine*, Newman, New York, 1969, p.27. Quoted in: Dulles (1992), p.101.

<sup>13</sup> Baum, Gregory, Foreword to Greeley, A.M., *The New Agenda*, Doubleday & Company, Inc, Garden City New York, 1973, p.16-17. Partly quoted in: Dulles (1992), p.101.

Revelation does not tell us about what God is in himself but how God as he is present to human consciousness. Revelation should clarify the universal human condition and is therefore universal in intent. Therefore in any individual or community empowered by God's presence, God's revelation may be found. Both grace and revelation are universally offered to mankind. Revelation in the non-Christian religions rests on the premise that revelation does not essentially consist in doctrine but in encounter and awareness.

The former models considered faith a response to revelation. In this model that view is regarded as an oversimplification. There are different views within this model, but all see faith and revelation as partly the same. Dulles illustrates by describing the positions of James P. Mackey and W.M. Thompson; According to Mackey all revelation talk is a metaphorical or mythical description of the literal truth of faith, for Thompson faith and revelation are two ways of talking about the same thing; 'faith' is the 'revelation' (p.108).

Summarizing: God accomplished in us a breakthrough into a more advanced stage of human consciousness, the result is no specific content but a new consciousness which is faith. This breakthrough accomplishes in us a participation in God's creative-redemptive activity leading toward universal reconciliation.

### *2.6.2. Merits and criticisms of the Consciousness Model*

#### Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition

Since this model includes stages of consciousness both in personal and world history, it makes the Bible and tradition relevant again. Not as objective sources of truth, but as stages of consciousness. This view however also implies that early Christians had only access to a more limited revelation, compared to us, a conclusion that not all believers would want to draw. By repudiating the outsider God and by denying that God reveals truth, it seems to deny two central Biblical and traditional themes. Moreover, Christ becomes a mere cipher for an epochal advance in human consciousness in this model. It is therefore not surprising that this model disagrees with the view of many ecclesiastical authorities.

#### Internal coherence

This model avoids a withdrawal into sentimentalistic religiosity but places revelatory experience in the full context of human history and progress. This results in a model

that is not only coherent in respect to its view on revelation, but that also makes a coherent view on mankind in all its aspects possible.

#### Plausibility

This model does well in terms of plausibility: it matches with the concept of a dynamic and evolutionary reality and with transformalist understanding of history that is prevalent today.

#### Adequacy to experience

This model is adequate to experience in respect of its attention for the active role of the human subject in the constitution of the revealed datum. However, it only accounts for certain religious experiences and seems to dismiss others.

#### Practical fruitfulness

This model is practically fruitful: it includes human responsiveness and creative imagination and it avoids rigidity and authoritarianism.

#### Theoretical fruitfulness

Just as some other models, this model separates revelation from doctrinal formulations and thereby avoids danger of conflict between faith and science. It also escapes the problem of having to reconstruct the events of Biblical history to find the fullness of revelation. This makes it theoretically fruitful in a sense, but since it denies the cognitive value of revelation, it can only be fruitful to a certain extent.

#### Value for dialogue

This model is well adapted to dialogue with great religions and secular faiths since it values religious experiences in general positively.

We have now looked into the five models that were presented by Dulles. Five models which are, according to him, all more or less in line with Christian tradition. As was said in the introduction, Dulles has excluded all theologians who consider Christian faith as a human faith. He dismisses a theology that views Christian religion 'as embodying a rich heritage of acquired wisdom concerning the ultimate nature of reality and the proper conduct of human life, but not as conveying God's own testimony' (p.8).

We will now move on to the three monographs of Dutch theologians mentioned in the introduction. Three monographs which do approach Christian religion mainly as a human faith, as something that happens in or between human beings. After describing the views on revelation are implied in these books we will compare these views with each other and the models presented by Dulles. We will start of with the first published book: *Voor een tijd een plaats van God* by H.M. Kuitert.

### **3. 'Voor een tijd een plaats van God' and Revelation**

#### 3.1. The author and the book

H.M (Harminus Martinus) Kuitert (1924) studied theology at the Free University of Amsterdam. In 1950, after finishing his studies, he became a reformed pastor in a village in the south-west of the Netherlands. After being a village pastor, he became student pastor in the city of Amsterdam. In 1965, three years after receiving his cum laude doctorate in theology, he started his fulltime academic career at the Free University. From 1967 till 1989 he was professor, the assignment given to him was 'ethics and introduction to dogmatics'. Kuitert mainly published in the area of medical ethics. After his retirement he focused less on ethics and more on dogmatics. Since then he published many popular books in this area, the most famous being: *I have my doubts: How to Become a Christian Without Becoming a Fundamentalist*.<sup>14</sup>

All of Kuitert's publications can be seen as the different steps in his theological development. The underlying thesis of this whole development is that 'all language about that which is above originates down here, including the expression that something is from above'.<sup>15</sup> Kuitert is well-known for this statement, which he made already in 1974. In his subsequent publications Kuitert leaves traditional Christian thought more and more behind, motivated by the implications of this point of departure. This, and the fact that he is a minister in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (first of the Reformed Church (gereformeerde kerken in Nederland)) makes him a controversial theologian in the Netherlands.

#### 3.2. Content of the book

This thesis will discuss the book *Voor een tijd een plaats van God, een karakteristiek van de mens*<sup>16</sup>, one of the latest books of Kuitert, published in 2002. The backside of the book makes clear what the book is about. It is not about God, but about mankind, because it all started with mankind and its imagination. Mankind is for some time a place of God. The backside further claims that Kuitert's view will liberate us from an awful lot of images and dogmas that once seemed a necessary part of the Christian faith.

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<sup>14</sup> Kuitert, H.M., *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian Without Being a Fundamentalist*, scm Press, London, 1993. Original title: Kuitert, H.M., *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> 'Alle spreken over boven komt van beneden, ook de uitspraak dat iets van boven komt.', Kuitert, H.M. *Zonder geloof vaart niemand wel: Een plaatsbepaling van christendom en kerk*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 1974, p.28.

<sup>16</sup> Kuitert, H.M., *Voor een tijd een plaats van God, een karakteristiek van de mens*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 2002. Translated title: For some time a place of God, a characterization of mankind.

### *3.2.1. When mankind starts to speak*

In the first lines of the introduction Kuitert states 'People were around before God was, God and Gods are the product of human imagination, imagined (made into an image) experiences of existence' (p.13)<sup>17</sup>, which is both his point of departure and the conclusion of this book. It is the point of departure, since the discovery that mankind predates God gives rise to the question: why and how did religion come into existence. It will also be the conclusion, since the answer to this question will be that it all started with human experience.

According to Kuitert, the essential difference between animals and mankind is the use of language. There might be animals that are able to communicate by using sounds, but putting something into words is a human capacity. By using words people are not only able to communicate, but before that they also create a world by putting things into words (p.33). We live in a chaotic world which comes to us in many ways through our senses and experiences. When we put the different aspects of this chaotic world in to words, by naming, valuing and structuring them, we create a world of meaning. This world of meaning is a world in which people live, people who were born in a world of words and who started to also put things into words, thereby continuing the process of the creation (and change) of meaning.

The above mentioned idea of inherited language implies that every world of meaning is the world of meaning of a certain community (p.38). We might speak about 'the world of Islam' or 'the western world'. These worlds came into being at least partly independently, therefore the words, the concepts and the meaning differ. The different worlds have used language to store the meaning that they had given in different ways. These different worlds can also be called cultures.

We need these worlds of words, these traditions, to function. Without them we could not live the way we live, there would be no communication, no social activity. There is however also a downside to these inherited worlds of words. The inherited world of words is filled with valuations about who we are, about what we should consider to be good and bad, about the aim(s) of our lives etc (p.47). The language of this inherited world can become a prison for people. According to Kuitert this happens when the process of putting things into words has

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<sup>17</sup> In this chapter the references in between brackets refer to Kuitert (2002). 'Mensen waren er al voor God er was, God en Goden zijn producten van menselijke verbeelding, ver-beelde (tot beeld gemaakte) ervaringen van het bestaan'.

come to an hold. Then the world of meaning seems to be set in concrete, it becomes unchangeable and absolute.

### *3.2.2. Inheriting religious myths*

The oldest known example of a world which has been put into words is the religious myth. Myths are stories in which Gods or other supernatural creatures often are the main characters. They narrate about events from prehistoric time, from some kind of outer-time. The myths usually try to explain the reason for the coming into existence of the world. They are however more than mere explanations. Shaped as a story from long ago, a myth puts into words for people living in the present who they are, where they come from, what their place is in this world and what they should and should not do in order to sustain the world (p.50). A myth is thereby a point of calibration, it tells a community how to live and value life. Myths therefore are a key part of the process of putting the chaotic world into words and thereby creating meaning.

It should be clear that myths are imaginations, it is the world made into an image. Not an image based on a model (a depiction), but fantasy, pure imagination. It is not the world that is depicted, but (inner) experiences that are made into a story. Experiences of an awesome and unfathomable world. Primitive human beings thought that they entered the world of God(s) on a daily basis and tried to put that experience into words by creating stories, myths. These myths were meant to support the community.

Christianity has its own inherited religious myth(s), which are written down in the Bible. The Bible is just as many other myths an example of a world which has been put into words. There are many mythical stories, especially in the Old Testament, e.g. the narration about creation, the flood and Noah's escape in the arc, the story of God who visits Abraham etc. The Old Testament however is more than a set of myths. The whole body of it tells the story of how the people of Israel came into being. The old Testament therefore is a narrative unity, it has been made into a unity by the Jewish community. It tells us how the Jewish community experiences itself as the chosen people of God. By calling it a narrative unity, we basically say that it is a religious myth (p.66), it is meant to create a world of meaning. In the New Testament we find less mythical stories, but the terms of the imagined world of the Old Testament are still used: angels, satan, heaven, hell, God, sinners etc. Together with the Old Testament the New Testament also functions as a myth: a story that gives meaning.

The biggest mistake that could be made, according to Kuitert, is to consider this story to be history. We misunderstand the myth when we approach it as a historical report about how it all happened (p.70). Unfortunately this is what has happened, Christians have read the myths and considered it to be Gods revelation about the history and meaning of the world. Kuitert observes that also today an increasing number of Christians struggle with this historical approach. They struggle to hold on to these stories, which in fact is the world turned up side down: the myth was meant to support them.

### *3.3.3. The problem of misunderstanding myth*

The implications of considering the Bible to be God's revelation, historical and factual in nature, are substantial. The first implication is that believing then implies 'accepting something to be true'. Next, starting from the elements given in the Bible a whole cathedral of statements, depictions and dogmas arises. If one wants to be a good believing Christian one accordingly has to adhere to all aspects of this cathedral of knowledge. This is what has happened within Christianity. At a certain moment the process of meaning giving came to a hold. The answers were not to be changed anymore. Now, for people who want to put things into words, who want to create a world of meaning this set of answers has become alien. Mythical images were considered by the church to be depictions of reality, accordingly when science started to depict reality in a more convincing way, the Christian mythical images were discarded (p.86). The Christian story has become without meaning for those people. Kuitert thinks that this explains the fact that the number of people attending church is declining (p.80). The view that tried to preserve the value of the Bible has actually made it irrelevant.

### *3.3.4. The discontinuation of God*

It is important to note that Kuitert also considers the concept of an existing God to be the result of misunderstanding myth. He therefore thinks that for example the programme of demythologization of Bultmann is half-hearted; it still holds to an existing God, which in fact is also part of mythical imagination (p.91). According to Kuitert God does not exist, but is part of the mythical imagination of people who lived long ago. Their words are still of value, there imagination can still speak to us because we experience many of the emotions that they experienced. But just as we should not go along with their world of meaning filled with heaven, hell, angels etc, we should not go along with the God that belongs to it. In other words we should discontinue or dissolve God. The word that Kuitert uses here is the German word 'aufheben' (p.119), which both means dissolving and raising/uplifting. God is dissolved,

but also lifted to a higher realm. He becomes really transcendent: something that transcends any kind of image making. The word 'God' can still be used, not as a reference to a personal existing God, but as a word which we use to reach towards transcendence. Kuitert explains with an example: if we say 'God knows' we do not mean to say that there is an entity that knows, but we mean to say that we do not know, that our knowledge is limited (p.123). 'God' becomes close to being an equivalent for transcendence.

Transcendence is described by Kuitert as firstly the experience of something that is in the world but not of the world and secondly as something that we cannot fathom, something that happens to us (p133-134). Kuitert then connects this to the title of his book: mankind is for some time a place of transcendence. It is in mankind that one encounters something that is in this world but not of this world. That which is encountered could be called 'spirit'. Spirit is something that you cannot see, something that cannot be described. Mankind who speaks and thereby creates, is the carrier of spirit. Spirit is not 'the Holy Spirit', not a person or part of a trinitarian God. The only place where we can find spirit is in people. Kuitert considers the tendency in almost all religions to find a way in which a transcendent God also lives in people to be a support for his own view.

Kuitert is radical in this view: everything that we once called god can only be found in mankind. God is only present in this world because we are. We are not representatives or places for God to live in. We are that which once was called 'God' (p.152). God only exists because people started creating a world of meaning. And people are only human being (different from animals) because of spirit, because they started creating a world of meaning. Mankind is both part of the chaotic world and the only one to escape the chaos by putting things into words. This realisation is very important for Kuitert, he considers it to be our deliverance from a world in which we were only sinners that had to be silent and humble into a world of freedom where we dare to live.

### *3.3.5. The spirit of Christianity*

As was mentioned above, no one put things into words on his own, people do it together, that is what is called culture. Cultures develop through generations, in a long process. That which people of one culture have in common could, with a German word, be called 'Gemeingeist' (common / community spirit). Here spirit still means the same as above, it sums up habits, spirituality, aspirations, self-understanding etc. We cannot help but judge others and other

cultures based on our own culture, and there is nothing wrong with that according to Kuitert (p.165). We can and should consider cultures of violence, of nepotism or pure capitalism as wrong spirits.

Central to spirit is 'the experience of knowing that you are called upon by people around you, people who need you' (p.168)<sup>18</sup>. Kuitert bases this on the story of Cain and Abel (from Genesis 4): Cain has killed his brother Abel and thinks he got away with it. But then he hears a voice that calls upon him saying: 'where is your brother Abel?'. The myth tells us that it is the voice of God speaking. In fact it is an inner voice of Cain. But it is a voice speaking with the force only God could speak with. This being called upon (with a German word: *Anrede*) is the starting point for discovering spirit: being called upon by people who need us, which is being called upon by what in myths is called God. It has the force of transcendence, it even is transcendence that happens to people. You cannot walk away from it, you can not have control of it, it controls you. Without this experience of being called upon, when this word is not spoken to people, no-one will start creating a world of meaning and no culture will last (p.169).

In the Christian tradition Jesus of Nazareth is a central figure, this is not surprising if we see that Jesus was a person who felt called upon by anyone who needed him. He helped, without judging or discriminating. That made a great impression on his disciples and on bystanders. The *Anrede* is not exclusively Christian, making it into the central theme is. Kuitert gives some essential aspect of this Christian view on *Anrede* (p.172-173), I summarize:

- There is no ethnic limitation, no preference for one's own group.
- The person that calls upon you is someone who needs you, and often someone who is not needed by you.
- Believing then is being called upon by the example of Jesus, being called upon by people who need us. This gives us a standard which should be acceptable to all.
- This Christian spirit cannot go along with the contemporary tendency that everyone has his own truth. The *Anrede* cannot be put into perspective, it is an absolute.

To further explore the last two elements: religion as humanity is not something with no strings attached. It is an outbreak of transcendence in our chaotic world, it therefore does not need a

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<sup>18</sup> 'het zich aangesproken voelen door de mens naar je, de mens die je nodig heeft'.

semi-religious addition of mythical imagery to make it of value. Myths and rituals can be of value, but only in support of the Anrede, the humanity which is the true religion.

Humanity is at home in Western-Europe, it has become an important part of our *Gemeingeist*. This does not mean that we are safe now, humanity has to be fought for on a daily basis. The evil that is trying to destroy it also comes from us. We have to choose time and time again to listen to the voice that calls upon us. We have to choose the good, and not the bad, which would be doing that which is in our own interest. If we choose for the good, we choose to be what we are supposed to be: speaking people who create a world of meaning and who thereby are a place of God.

### *3.3.6. For some time...*

The meaning of the second part of the title of this book has become clear: mankind is a place of God. Mankind is the only place where God can be found. The title however has three words more: 'for some time'. With these first three words Kuitert wants to say that people are not a place for God for eternity, but only for some time. Inspired by Greek philosophy the Christian tradition has made the belief in an eternal soul part of its body of beliefs. Often mankind is depicted as consisting of a body and a soul (and/or a spirit). According to Kuitert this depiction is also part of mythical imagery. When we die, all is over, there is no eternal soul hidden in us. When we die we are no place of God anymore. Religion should help people accept that and help them to die and live with the death of others in a good way.

Kuitert ends his book with by again pointing out that experiencing to be called upon is the central human experience. Those people who can live according to this experience, who know what it means to really love (love as described in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13), those are the greatest people alive. They know true transcendence: transcending above one's own immediate interests.

### 3.3. Kuitert on Revelation

Revelation as such is not discussed in this book. If I am not wrong, the word is not even used in it. This should not be surprise to us, Kuitert wants to leave the mythical imagery behind, therefore he tries to avoid most phrases traditionally used in Christian theology. Kuitert probably is afraid that the connotation of a word like 'revelation' is too strong. Almost everyone will immediately think of an existing God who in some way reveals something to mankind.

The few words that he does still use (God, Spirit, word of God) all clearly acquire a new meaning in order for him to be able to still use them.

The absence of the word 'revelation' does not imply that there is no view on revelation implied. Kuitert clearly marks 'the moment of revelation'; it is an important moment because it is the moment when mankind became human. This moment is the moment when mankind experienced to be called upon. The experience of being spoken to results in mankind starting to speak and thereby creating a world of meaning and becoming a place of God. The ideal is that this world keeps developing, people keep on giving words to their lives in order to create meaning by them. Cultures are shaped and change.

Unfortunately two aspects of revelation remain unclear: firstly how to judge the level of revelation in what is called 'a wrong culture' and secondly the working of revelation in the life of a person. Kuitert states that we can consider some cultures to be wrong because they are based on for example greediness or violence. This can however be still developing cultures in which people try to create a world of meaning. If they are, the people in this culture should be considered a place of God. However, Kuitert also states that the only true transcendence is when people experience that they are called upon, and this transcendence is God. This implies that a culture based on violence is not a place of God. So the same culture can be considered both a place of god and no place of God in Kuitert's model. This problem is caused by the fact that Kuitert is not clear about where putting things into words exactly starts. First he says that it starts with the desire to understand and create value. Later on he says that it starts with the experience of being called upon. We could bring this a bit closer together by saying that putting words starts with the experience of distinguishing right from wrong, this however still does not solve the problem of judging the central experience of a culture. The Christian culture might say that being called upon is the central experience, but another culture might say that the sense of honour is the central experience. Kuitert does not seem able to give a valid reason why the Christian view is the right one, he can only refer to his own (our own) experience.

The second problem appears when we try to pinpoint how revelation happens in the life of a person. On the one hand Kuitert says that we are all born into a world of meaning, we first learn how to use the language and value of our culture. Later on we also start changing this culture, with what we learned we start to create meaning for ourselves. We learn how to put

things into words when we grow up. This would imply that everyone becomes a place of God. But again there is an ambiguity, because Kuitert also suggests that the experience of being called upon is essential in becoming human, in becoming a place of God. It seems that he has to choose, either the experience of being called upon is the source of transcendence (or revelation), or the act of putting things into words and thereby creating a world of meaning. In the first case revelation would be something that happens only in cultures that consider humanity their highest value. In the second case revelation is something that happens in everyone's life.

If we leave this ambiguity aside for a moment we can conclude that for Kuitert revelation is at least the creation of a world of meaning. We can see the chaotic world in a new way (also compare the title of one of his later books: 'viewing the same in a different way'<sup>19</sup>). His view thus closely resembles the model of 'revelation as new awareness'. Kuitert only does not acknowledge a role for an existing God in the process of revelation. True or good revelation seems to be a revelation based on the experience of being called upon, which causes us to love and help others.

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<sup>19</sup> Kuitert, H.M. *Het zelfde anders zien, het christelijk geloof als verbeelding*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 2005.

## **4. 'God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan' and Revelation**

### 4.1. The author and the book

Gerrit Manenschijn (1931) is a theologian and emeritus professor of ethics of the Protestant Theological University (Kampen). He mainly published on the relation between religion, philosophy and ethics. In addition to his academic publications he also wrote some more popular monographs. After his retirement Manenschijn focussed more on theology. The book *God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan*<sup>20</sup> is a result of this new focus.

This book is especially suitable for the interested non-theologian. Manenschijn not only sets out to describe and defend his statement that for a Christian there is no need to be sure about God's existence, meanwhile he also gives insight in different aspects of (the history of) theology. The book for example discusses many different views on revelation, the difference between a modern and pre-modern worldview, ethical language, philosophy of history, different explanations of Genesis 22. All these discussions make this book a good read for the interested non-theologian. Another advantage of these discussions is that Manenschijn not just poses his own view, but connects it to and compares it with other views. For an informed reader however, there are a few to many sidetracks. One wonders what the use is of discussing so many aspects of (the history) of theology in detail. Some explanations seem only to distract from the main argument without adding much relevant information. Since Manenschijns main aim of discussing different theologian seems to be to work towards his own view, this chapter will also mainly focus on Manenschijns evaluation when discussing these theologians.

### 4.2. Content of the book

#### *4.2.1. Truth and the existence of God*

As just has been said the central thesis of this book is that faith in the existence of God is not necessary for Christians. This central message is repeated a couple of times, phrased differently, for example: 'God is so great that there is no need for his existence. Great in grace and truth, in patience en compassion. He hides himself in order to make it possible for us to seek him and find him. He thus is a inner-language reality. Whether he exists outside of

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<sup>20</sup> Manenschijn, Gerrit, *God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan, over de narratieve constructie van de geloofswerkelijkheid*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, Baarn, 2001. Translated title: God is so great that there is no need for his existence, about the narrative-like construction of faith-reality.

language we do not know, we cannot know, and we do not have to know. The story of his engagement with mankind and the world should be enough'.<sup>21</sup> (p.221)<sup>22</sup>

The book sets out by describing the contemporary crisis of the church: the church is no longer to be found in the centre of society but in the periphery. Also less people are attending church regularly. Manenschijn believes that this crisis of the church is in fact not the real crisis, but just the crisis on the surface, the real crisis is a faith-crisis and is underneath the crisis of the church (p.32). According to him, the only solution is to start all over again, rethinking the truth of the Gospel for our society (p.33).

Manenschijn found the first indication of the direction in which the rethinking should happen in the book *Honest to God*, of the Anglican bishop John A.T. Robinson<sup>23</sup>. While disagreeing with some of the content of this book, Manenschijn was inspired by it to start his new search with one of the observations of Robinson, namely that Christian faith language assumes that God is, and that he is as a person. This however does not prove that God exists. Here theology (speaking about God, without being sure that he exists) does not cohere with faith (speaking to God in faith, imagining that He is listening). Manenschijn draws his own conclusion from this observation: In the stories about God revelation is found. We should not search for a meaning behind the stories, they do not *refer to* revelation, they *are* revelation. Religious language accordingly does not refer to a certain reality connected to God, it creates the reality that God is present.

To motivate this choice Manenschijn discusses the existence of God. To explain what faith and believing in God is he refers to Hebrews 11:1, 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. This conviction is no intellectual or experimental conviction, it means to be convinced in your heart that these things are there (p.45). In other words: if you believe that God exists, than there is no need for proofs. If you believe in God you will find many indications of his existence, if you do not believe in God you will probably find nothing in this universe to indicate the existence of a good God. The time of

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<sup>21</sup> 'God Is zo groot dat Hij niet hoeft te bestaan. Groot in genade en waarheid, in geduld en mededogen. Hij verbergt zich opdat wij Hem al zoekende zouden vinden. Als zodanig is Hij een binnentalige werkelijkheid. Of Hij buiten de taal bestaat weten we niet, kunnen we niet weten en hoeven we niet te weten. Het verhaal van zijn betrokkenheid met mens en wereld moet ons genoeg zijn'.

<sup>22</sup> In this chapter the references in between brackets refer to Manenschijn (2001).

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, John A.T., *Honest to God*, SCM Press, London, 1963.

searching for proofs of God's existence (like Anselm and Thomas Aquinas did) is over, at least since Kant<sup>24</sup>. The fact that God is not available or necessary as explanation for the existence of the world was (amongst others) a reason for Bultmann to conclude that speaking about God (über Gott reden) is something else than speaking in relation to God (von Gott reden). Manenschijn agrees with this; we cannot speak about God (as an object) since he differs totally from everything we know. We can only speak about him in a loving faith relation. Outside that relation God does not exist (for us). This implies that our thinking about God is connected to our thinking about ourselves. Our existential self thinks about our objectified self. If we believe that God defines who we are: forgiven sinners, we think about God when we think about ourselves. We can only believe and experience that we are forgiven, there is no proof. Therefore: speaking about God, is speaking about ourselves. The Christian tradition accordingly teaches that God is a personal God, since the world can only be a creation if there is a personal God who created it. Had it been an impersonal force which had made it come into being, then it could not have been called a creation (p.80).

When a believing person reads the Biblical stories he might wonder whether they tell cognitive truth (whether it really happened). Narrative theology however claims that it is far more important whether it tells a non-cognitive truth to the believer. A story has value for someone when the truth it is telling is of value for his life. If one says: 'I cannot be bothered by the fact that God created the earth', the cognitive truth does not function as a non-cognitive truth. If one says: 'God, I want to protect every living creature because you created them', the cognitive truth functions as a non-cognitive truth. In this way stories of which we do not know what they exactly meant for the author and original readers, still speak to us if they have a non-cognitive truth value for us.

According to Manenschijn, a great advantage of narrative theology is that it shows how the old Biblical stories can still speak to us, even though there is a great difference between the modern and the pre-modern worldview. Manenschijn gives four main areas in which the worldview of people in Biblical times differs from ours (p.60-64): firstly, in Biblical time people found the final cause of everything that happened in actions of gods; secondly, their way of arguing was associative and ours dissociative (they connected phenomena in an associative manner); thirdly they were conservative in the sense that there was no expectation

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<sup>24</sup> Kant showed that every proof of God's existence which refers to the world ends up in internal incoherence, since it has to use the law of causation, which in itself is part of the world (pp.98-99).

of progress, the old ways were considered to be the good ways; fourthly they explained the world by telling myths (which aims at telling how reality is subjectively experienced), not by scientific reasoning (which aims at telling how reality objectively is). A difficulty arises when these old stories are used for theology. Theologians want to make the stories relevant for people today, in order to do so some search for a meaning behind the story, which can also speak to a contemporary audience. This 'meaning for us' then becomes the meaning of the text. This happens in different types of theology. Conservative theologians may say that salvation from sin and death is only possible through Jesus Christ and then they may add that that is the meaning of certain texts. More liberal theologians may argue that in this way a meaning is put into the text and then extracted from it. In their criticism they may not notice that they are doing exactly the same, their modern mind tells them that it is impossible that Jesus' death brought salvation, and accordingly they give a different meaning to those texts or decide that the texts are not authoritative. According to Manenschijn, in both ways there is a loss of narrativity, things that belonged together are separated: tradition, myth, social habits, morals (p.69). Manenschijn argues that a narrative reading of the texts tries to keep those aspects together by looking at the context of the text and its meaning in its time.

#### *4.2.2. Revelation through the ages*

In chapters seven to thirteen Manenschijn discusses the concept of revelation in depth by describing 'revelation in the bible' and the developments in revelation theology. He describes the views of many theologians, for example Calvin, Schleiermacher, Barth, Stout, Pannenberg and discusses their strengths and weaknesses, sometimes explicating which aspects or insights of them he wants to adopt in his own view.

Manenschijn starts off by stating that in classical theology no specific attention was paid to revelation. People just assumed that God had revealed his intentions and laws to Moses, the prophets, the apostles, the evangelists and especially in and through Jesus Christ (p.108). Only in recent ages the concept of revelation has become problematic and therefore needs detailed consideration. In the Middle Ages people began to consider 'revelation' to be a set term for the source of knowledge about God, world and mankind (p.116). The Holy Spirit was considered to be the giver of certainty thereby legitimizing faith knowledge. This is a kind of a circular argument, since one has to believe in the existence of the Holy Spirit first, which belief also has to be legitimized by the same Holy Spirit. Also it is difficult to set criteria to

judge which thoughts are inspired by the Holy Spirit and which are not.<sup>25</sup> In the Reformation the focus was shifted to the bible and its inspiration by the Holy Spirit. The reformers believed that God revealed his will through the bible, which could be trusted because of the testimony of the Holy Spirit who also lives inside the believers. Later the Reformed orthodoxy changed this trust and testimony into certainty. Subscribing to the infallibility of the bible became a doctrine of faith. This objectified revelation. According to Manenschijn this was a move in the wrong direction, we need to go back to the primal experience: the story of God and mankind.

The work of the German philosopher Schleiermacher marks an important turning point in revelation theology. He does not focus on the subject of revelation (God), but on the effect of revelation in the experience of people. He thereby makes the shift from starting theology with God, to starting it with mankind's subjective experience of faith in God. It is no longer God who is central, but mankind in its experience of eternity. Manenschijn favours this shift, but does not want to make a total shift towards focussing on human experience alone. According to Manenschijn Schleiermacher's view on the religious experience is too neatly polished. There is no space for the doubt and uncertainty of religious experience, while in fact often religious experiences are intertwined and connected with doubt. Manenschijn also considers this view too philosophical and not sufficiently theological. In the end it is more about the experience of eternity than of the Eternal God. Considering the fact that in Christianity faith in a personal God is central, Schleiermacher's approach is not the way forward for Christian theology.

When speaking about revelation Karl Barth cannot be ignored. Manenschijn mentions him repeatedly and also uses a whole chapter to discuss his theology. According to Barth revelation is not an announcement, but a 'happening', an encounter which we cannot arrange ourselves. Barth's view on revelation is strictly dialectical; it is based on three theses: we have to speak about God, we cannot speak about God and we have to know that we have to but cannot speak about God (and give God all the honour). In this way Barth creates a total distinction between God and mankind which can only be undone by 'God in his revelation'. This is done by God in Christ, who was both man and God. While Schleiermacher made a total turn to start with mankind, Barth places God back into the centre of theology. Manenschijn values this positively (p.162). He however disagrees with Barth in a couple of

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<sup>25</sup> Manenschijn does not mention the role of the Catholic Church here which considered itself to be the supreme authority for defining what is of revelation and what is not. He moves straight on to discussing the reformation.

ways. First of all the price to be paid for this God centred theology is very high. In Barth's dialectical theology the created world cannot teach us anything about God, nor can history or anything but direct revelation from God.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, Manenschijn explains that Barth's emphasis on Jesus as not just the ultimate, but the only way in which God reveals himself is not coherent with (early) Christian tradition. Early Christianity viewed Jesus in his resurrection as the start of a new aeon, but also a continuation of the revelation of Jahweh that had started ages before. Part of this faith was that God had revealed himself in the past in historic events and that he would do the same in the future. Therefore Barth is not right in dismissing history when speaking about revelation. And thirdly and finally there is a major epistemological objection to Barth's theology. Barth does not want to connect revelation to experience, because that would mean that God as we know him would be partly dependent on our experience. God should therefore be thought from God. The problem is that doing that is simply impossible if this God is totally unknown. A solution seems to be to consider Christ the self-revelation of God, but still the problem remains: how can anyone recognize Jesus as the self-revelation of God if God had been totally unknown before? At minimum some idea about 'God' 'mankind' and 'Christ' is necessary to understand the concept of 'Christ revealing God to mankind'. Therefore some sense of the role of history should be acknowledged in a theology of revelation.

A complete move to 'revelation as history' is however not what Manenschijn favours. This concept of revelation has its own problems. Pannenberg is one of supporters of the idea of revelation as history. He claimed that God's self-revelation did not happen directly, but indirectly through God's actions in history (p.187). This implies that revelation is universal, available to everyone. In Jesus the right interpretation of the history of God and the people of Israel became clear. History in this sense is not a series of happenings, it is a history of people who try to understand a series of historic events. This implies that we can speak about objective history. History as we know it however, is always a passed on subjective interpretation of facts. If that is the case and a described history is the entrance to understanding the universal history of this world (and therefore revelation), also the understanding is subjective. A second problem with 'revelation as history' is that the 'history' that it refers to does not fully comply with the theory. When we look for example to the history of the exodus, we could consider it to be an interpretation of the deeds of God and

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<sup>26</sup> Manenschijn does acknowledge that Barth's theology did change over the years, but this very strict dialectical approach to revelation is always remained a dominant aspect of his theology.

conclude that God solely reveals himself through his deeds. The story itself however tells about a free God, who is able to interact with Moses directly, not only through his acts, but also through direct communication. The main problem is that there are different kinds of stories in the Old Testament. Considering the story of creation, of the burning bush, of king David, and of the exile history in the same way would not do justice to these stories. All of these are stories about how God acts and can be seen as revelation, but we cannot conclude that all of them are history. A possible solution is to separate between stories that can be considered history and those that can not be considered history. This however does not solve the problem, because this sharp distinction is not given in the Bible. The stories were never meant to be separated into two kinds. We apply a modern view of history to pre-modern stories when we try to do historical research on historic facts that could be found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament in totality is a tradition of faith-based ideas of God's acts in history. The historical information that is possibly included is not available for historical research. Manenschijn therefore concludes that in 'revelation as history' both 'revelation' and 'history' are theological constructions. 'History' is not the 'history' of the modern academic historical research, nor is it the 'history' of the bible.

Manenschijn moves on with two summarizing statements namely firstly that the idea that it is God who determines history is a *statement of faith*. And secondly that the bible tells *stories* about the history of God and Israel (p.207). We can say that those stories depict God as speaking and acting in history, but we cannot say that they are 'a series of historical events'.

Before moving to his own view on revelation, Manenschijn discusses one other prominent theologian: Paul Tillich. Tillich said that revelation points at a reality which is our ultimate concern. This reality is therefore not an object which can be investigated, it is an idea (p.208). 'Idea' in this sense is something in which we are involved but which is not available for us to influence or manipulate. It is something that always transcends our world and worldly opinions, it challenges our world. Revelation is therefore not a set of interesting facts, it touches on whom we really are, our innermost being. Manenschijn wants to adapt Tillich's theology in the sense that in Christian theology our ultimate concern is not found in a hidden transcendence that has to be and remain hidden (which could be an evil transcendence), it is a personal God who has hidden himself in order to make us search for him. If this transcendent God reveals himself, he always does so in a specific context inciting someone to a change and to action. Since there is no special language for divine announcements, this revelation always

happens in human language. Revelation comes to us in stories in which God is depicted as an actor, delivering people, and therefore as a deliverer and not a unconditional transcendence. This is important to note because it is relevant which God we believe in, in a violent or a delivering God. Therefore we need the Biblical stories to get an image of what God *is like* (but not describing who/what God *is*). Now Manenschijn comes to his main point: whether we imagine God as an idea without engagement or as a reality which we can experience, in both cases there is the uncertainty about his existence. We cannot and do not have to know whether God exists before we can believe. We have no other choice than to *imagine* that he exists.(p.219)

#### 4.3. Manenschijn on revelation

Now we hit upon Manenschijn's own position, which he will discuss in the remainder of his book: we cannot know whether God exists, we can only imagine that he exists and it is really important what we imagine him to be like (which image we make). Since we do not know whether he exists we can either keep silent about him all together, or speak about him like the Bible does: in (human) images and stories. If we choose the latter option, we have to except that God only exists in our stories about him. Manenschijn wants to hold to the idea that true knowledge about God's reality can only be given by God himself (p.219). This knowledge is however not given first and then put into stories, it is given in stories from the beginning. We only have the stories, we can consider them to be revelation. Revelation accordingly is a theological construction, interpreting the stories. In these stories we meet a God who is not absent, but hidden. He is hidden and at the same time in a special way present in our world. When people search, they can find him and repent/turn around to him. Finding God happens in and through the stories we have about him. Therefore the images about God in his transcendence and in his being hidden, are part of an inner language-reality. The images are linguistic constructions, based on peoples imaginations. God exists inside our language; whether he also exists outside of language we do not know.

Manenschijn wants to go along with narrative theology, which says that people come to faith by making the story of revelation into their own story. When in a story it is told that God is a deliverer, the believer can call God his/her deliverer. The implication of what it means for someone to consider God to be 'his deliverer' again can only be told in a story, his story. If we apply this, for example, to our view on Jesus, we can use stories and metaphors to tell about him being more than just human. To explain that he showed us who God is, that he showed

*me* who God is, but there is no special reality behind these statements, not a reality only available to believers. There is only one reality and many conceptions of this reality. The faith-conception of this reality can only be told in stories and metaphors, by which this faith-reality (faith based conception of reality) is depicted.

In order to explain what is meant by the narrative construction of the faith-reality Manenschijn first explains what morals are like. Morals are unlike electricity. Electricity was discovered, it was not invented, because it already existed before it was discovered (think of thunder and lightning). Of morals we cannot as easily say that its existence is previous to its discovery. On the one hand we feel that morals are connected to a personal decision. They do not exist independently of us, we can define them, therefore they should be called an invention. On the other hand, when we are faced with a moral dilemma we want to do the right thing. Our moral decision is not enough to make an act right, we want to do what is *really* right. In that sense morality is not an invention, but a discovery. If it is partly a discovery, we have to imagine that there is a moral reality which is more in line with 'mankind as a moral being' than all the other possible moral realities. This moral reality could be sought using purely rational argumentation, or it could be sought by tuning into the human sources of feelings and imagination. Manenschijn suggests that the best choice is to also look for human feeling and imagination, to prevent us from reasoning which might end in a moral theory which is despicable for everyone. Also our normal actions suggest that there is more to morals than just reasoning. We usually intuitively know what is right or wrong without applying moral rules to a situation, we could call that moral sensibility. In a sense there is a moral language, not a separate language with its own words, but there is a use of language that makes clear that it is used for moral verdicts. For example the use of the word 'good', we know when it is used in a moral sense. Also when someone says 'abortion is murder' everyone knows that it is a moral verdict and not a descriptive statement. In morals metaphors are used, for example the metaphor of 'moral accounting', we use phrases like 'you owe me a favour' or 'what he did balanced out earlier mistakes'. One could therefore say that morality is a reality created by mankind and the material for this creation is found in language. The referent of this morality is found inside mankind. It is the image people have (made) about what a good world should look like. Based on the (psychological) moral sources inside us we both discover and invent morality.

According to Manenschijn faith can be compared to morality. It also has a referent inside mankind: its needs and wants. We are confronted by own needs and wants and also those of others. We also often are confronted with the fact that there are needs and wants that cannot be taken care of by humans. Religion has to do with morals and acting upon misery, but it is also more, it is the trust in something higher that can be trusted (p.257). Therefore religion is a discovery: the discovery of needs and wants inside us (based on for example guilt or suffering) and the sense that there must be something higher that can take care of them. The invention of religion is the invention of God as a person. We create metaphors to speak about what is found in religion. The use of these metaphors in religious speech can be considered a speech act; when it is said that 'the word of Jahwe came to the prophet' than it became a word of Jahwe because it was considered to be a word of Jahwe by the prophet and he believed it and acted upon it. Faith therefore can be considered 'playing the game that has been started by speech act'. This implies that the referent of the religious experience is not a godly reality, but the religious sense/feeling of the believer. That is not to say that the faith-reality is not real. It is at least real for the believer and is a creative attempt to put into words what cannot be put into words. It is a subjective construction of a reality that is not available for objective examination. To explain this we can use the example of 'moral accounting'. Someone might experience forgiveness coming from God. To explain this experiences forgiveness the metaphor of accounting can be used: 'the price has been paid', 'my guilt/debt as been crossed out from the books'. This a metaphor, not a description of reality. Still we cannot say 'it is just a metaphor and not real' (p. 264).

Manenschijn goes on to explain that the creative attempt to put religious feelings into words was started long before we were born. When we were born and grew up we learned a language, including metaphors, from people who had been around a little longer. The metaphors and symbols of religious language which we learned are connected in a narrative way. This narrative starts with the stories from the Old and New Testament, which were passed on through generations because not because they wanted to give future generations an accurate account of everything that had happened. They were passed on because they were important, they were a message for the people who passed them on (p.270). This does not mean that the historicity of the stories is totally irrelevant. If there had not been a Babylonian exile, nor a return to the land of Israel, and if there had never been a historical figure called Jesus of Nazareth and if the letters of Paul were mere concoctions, not connected to any historic figure or congregation, than any faith that builds on the stories of the bible would be a

sad example of self-deceit. There should be some base in history, a historical minimum. (p.315).

Manenschijn concludes the chapter about the construction of the faith reality with some kind of a summary:

'We do not know whether God exists and we cannot know that. We do know that He exists in our faith-language, and that is nothing else than to say that we can only know him through faith. From these considerations I conclude the following. We cannot just assume that God exists and that problems only occur when we start to speak about him, who cannot be spoken about. It is the other way around: we can more or less be sure that people have experienced God as the supporting solid ground of their existence and that they have testified about that in stories about Him. But we cannot know whether these stories are true, not even when we are convinced that the witnesses were upright and trustworthy. From their stories we can only learn that they speak about God as an inner language-reality. We do not have anything apart from these stories which even are quite different from one another. To want more than that is both linguistically impossible and theologically a lack of faith.<sup>27</sup> (p.272).

To summarize Manenschijn's position on revelation we can say that at the root of it there is a sense that there is something bigger than the mankind. A religious sense that says that mankind exists for a reason, that it has been created and also that there is more to this world than suffering and guilt, something higher that can overcome suffering and fulfil human desires. This sense does not start from nothing, people are already familiar with words, stories and metaphors to talk about this experienced faith reality. Old stories are read and become personal stories for the believer. In this way old words are used and new words are found to express the experienced but inexpressible faith-reality. By these words and stories a faith-reality is constructed, expressed in stories and metaphors about God, a personal God who is hidden but can be found. This faith-reality is an inner-language phenomenon. We do not and cannot know whether this reality also exists outside language. If a person starts to live and

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<sup>27</sup> 'Wij weten niet of God bestaat en wij kunnen dat niet weten. Wij weten wel dat Hij bestaat in onze geloofstaal, en dat is niets anders dan te zeggen dat wij Hem alleen door het geloof kunnen kennen. Uit deze overwegingen trek ik de volgende conclusie. We kunnen er niet van uitgaan dat God bestaat en dat het pas moeilijk wordt als over Hem, die onuitsprekelijk is, gesproken gaat worden. Het is omgekeerd: we kunnen er min of meer zeker van zijn dat mensen God hebben ervaren als de dragende grond van hun bestaan en dat zij daarvan hebben getuigd in verhalen over Hem, maar we kunnen niet weten of die verhalen waar zijn, ook niet als wij ervan overtuigd zijn dat de getuigen oprecht en betrouwbaar zijn. Van hun verhalen weten we niet meer dan dat zij God ter sprake brengen als een binnentalige werkelijkheid. We hebben niets anders dan die verhalen en ze zijn nog heel verschillend ook. Meer willen is zowel taalkundig onmogelijk als theologisch een gebrek aan geloof'.

think from this constructed faith-reality, revelation (in the Christian sense) has happened and is happening in his life.

## **5. 'Geloven in een God die niet bestaat' and Revelation**

### 5.1. The author and the book

Klaas Hendrikse (1947) is a pastor in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands. He serves congregations in Middelburg and Zierikzee at the moment. After unveiling in some national newspapers that he is an atheist, he became known in the Netherlands as 'the atheistic pastor'. In his book *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat*, published in 2007, he defends and explains his position. His major thesis is that one can believe in God, without believing that God exists. After the book was published it was discussed in many newspapers and internetfora and in some television-programmes. The Synod of the Protestant Church reacted reserved and stated that Hendrikse's theology should not be considered the theology of the Protestant Church.

### 5.2. Content of the book

As has been said, the major theme of this book is belief in God, the thesis is the nonexistence of God. A view on revelation is implied, and revelation is mentioned a few times, but it is not specified. This paragraph will describe the content of this book, the next will discuss the implied view on revelation.

#### *5.2.1. The point-of-departure*

The book consists of four chapters. The first chapter is titled 'God does not exist - how atheists are right and wrong'<sup>28</sup>. In this chapter Hendrikse defends his position that God does not exist and that both theists and mainstream atheists are wrong. He argues that God does not exist in the way an apple-pie exists, or in other words that the concept of existing is not applicable to God. He shortens that into the statement that God does not exist (p32)<sup>29</sup>. Hendrikse claims that the idea of the non-existence of God is not his own invention but that it is already present in the Bible. Already in the Old Testament God discloses himself as 'Just go, than I will go with you' (p.51), not as a God who exists and has a name and characteristics. If statements are made about God he is depicted like a shepherd or like a deliverer. God is not a shepherd, nor does he deliver, but his name is connected to deliverance and he is experienced when people feel cared for.

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<sup>28</sup> 'God bestaat niet - het gelijk en ongelijk van atheïsten'.

<sup>29</sup> In this chapter the references in between brackets refer to Hendrikse (2007).

Hendrikse continues by explaining that Christianity, influenced by Greek philosophy, has created an existing God. It created a God who became more and more like a supreme being: all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal etc. Hendrikse wants to return to what he believes to be the original faith: belief in a God who goes with us, a God who happens between people, but who does not exist. That, according to him, is true atheism. He therefore disagrees with contemporary atheism which limits it self to the denial of statements of faith of believing people.

Much of what Hendrikse is claiming could be easily questioned. For example, his fast move from not 'existing' ('existing' is not applicable to God) to 'not existing' (God is not an existing entity) is too fast and not covered by any solid reasoning. Why is it not possible that God exists in an other, higher way? Also Hendrikse's reading of the early chapters of Genesis seems to be more influenced by his own position than that it is based on solid exegesis. It is however not the aim of this thesis to critically examine the merits of his theory and reasoning. We will therefore read this first chapter as an introduction to Hendrikse's view where we move on to the next chapters to see how Hendrikse understands believing in a God that does not exist.

### *5.2.2. Believing: Mature Dependency*

In the remaining three chapters Hendrikse explains what living life as a believing person means. According to Hendrikse believing has nothing to do with accepting something that one does not understand to be true, based on the authority of others. Believing is characterized by the way in which one deals with what happens with and around oneself. Or in other words: it is characterized by the ability to make an event into an experience (p.91). Believing has to do with our daily life, with our day-to-day reality. There is no separate religious reality, there is only one reality (p.94). It is the way in which we deal with the normal that can make the normal religious. Often a special religious language is used, but that is not necessary. If one says 'I am thankful to God' and someone else says 'I am a thankful being' it is probably only a difference in words, not in experience.

To live life as a believing person openness is needed. One needs to be willing to be touched, moved, changed, questioned etc. by events that happen in one's life. Basically this means that one needs to be willing to be vulnerable. Only then an event can hit home and can one be truly amazed by maybe even generic happenings. Hendrikse defines this attitude as 'mature dependency' (p.100). It is opposed to 'immature independency', which is connected to the

modern feel that a person is in charge of his or her own life and able to achieve whatever he or she likes. This last attitude does not acknowledge that our course of life only partly depends on our own choices and efforts. Tragic events can always happen and there just is no insurance against them, even no God (according to Hendrikse such a God belongs to a 'immature dependency') (p.101). The attitude of mature dependency should not result in passivity, but in an acceptance of the fact that we can aim for certain things in life (being happy, helping others etc) but that it is not fully up to us whether we succeed in it or not. If happiness does appear than it is not the obvious result of our own hard work but it is something to be thankful for, something to be amazed by. In such moments, when reality speaks to us, not in audible words but just like a book or a flower can speak to us, we can start to believe. Therefore the starting point of faith is the sense that which truly matters is given to us (p.104).

The next step is the acknowledgement that we are not the only one who is in that position, all people around us are as dependent on us as we are on them. This acknowledgement of mutual dependency will, for a believing person, result in a sense of responsibility to support the wellbeing and happiness of others to the best of his ability (p.105). In this way God can happen between people, and in that way God can be the creator of a good world. Hendrikse: 'I do not believe in God as the creator of the world as it is. I do believe in God as that which makes people make our world a better world' (p.115).<sup>30</sup>

A major question remains: why is it that some people do believe and some do not? Hendrikse's short answer is: our life-story. Our experiences define how we think, act, live. When we were children people and media around us gave us input. We learned to value and judge events by sets of values given to us. We heard stories that taught us how to live, and what to consider good and bad. When we grew up, we accepted some things of what we had learned and rejected other parts. Hendrikse states that only that which we have made our own, what connected to our own experience, has remained with us (p.106).<sup>31</sup> That which has remained with us has changed, first we accepted it because others said it, now it has become something of ourselves because it has matched with our experienced in a unique way. In this way we shape our own life and values. Again we see that there is something very personal

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<sup>30</sup> 'Ik geloof niet in God als de schepper van de wereld zoals die is. Ik geloof wel in God als wat mensen ertoe kan bewegen van onze wereld een betere te maken'

<sup>31</sup> 'Wat bleef, was wat jij je 'eigen' had gemaakt, wat klopte met je eigen ervaringen!'

about believing, in a sense everyone is solo-religious (p.109). This might seem and feel lonely, but then again there is the recognition that everyone is in this position. And even this very personal belief is shaped by all the experiences that we had with other people (who might have experienced the same event differently).

The attitude to life can be described as believing if trust is central in it (p.110)<sup>32</sup>. Essential in this trust is the not-knowing; it is not trusting because through an intense investigation it has proven to be reliable, but trusting based on 'emotive knowledge' (p.113).<sup>33</sup> It is like being sure about the faithfulness of your friends or the love of your partner. It is not blind trust, it is based on experience, but it is not proven. This trust can grow through time, but it can only start to grow if one first dares to trust. Unfortunately trust is not always confirmed and strengthened by experiences. Believing, according to Hendrikse, is to keep on saying 'yes' to the life of which you have experienced that it is good, also in situations where you no longer experience that it is good. (p.111). If difficult things happen in the life of a believer he is a blessed person if there are others around him to support him. Often that support makes it possible to continue believing, to keep saying 'yes'. But sometimes those people are not around, and one gets cynical and distrustful towards other people and life in general. This makes Hendrikse conclude: 'I therefore would not dare to say that one can chose to believe. And especially not that one could do so based on reasonable arguments' (p.112).<sup>34</sup>

### 5.2.3. *Believing in God*

From the beginning Hendrikse has been clear: God does not exist. A personal God, involved in our lives is an invention of the church. He however continues to speak about believing in God. According to Hendrikse it is his personal choice to remain using the word 'God'. One can just as well speak about 'believing' without using the phrase 'believing in God'. 'God' can be the word which you use to point to that in which or because of what you believe: experiences that have founded and grounded your trust. That is possible, but not necessary.' (p.116).<sup>35</sup> Words are not necessary for experiences, but to interpret those experiences and communicate them to others words are necessary. 'God' is a word that could be used to do so.

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<sup>32</sup> Hendrikse points out that 'trust' is the original meaning of the hebrew word 'aman', which we usually translate as 'believe'.

<sup>33</sup> 'gevoels-matig weten'.

<sup>34</sup> 'ik durf daarom niet zomaar te beweren dat je ervoor kunt kiezen om te geloven. En al helemaal niet dat je dat op beredeneerbare gronden zou kunnen doen'.

<sup>35</sup> 'God' kan het woord zijn waarmee je verwijst naar datgene waarin of waardoor je gelooft: ervaringen die jouw vertrouwen hebben gegrond en bevestigd. Dat kán, het hoeft niet'.

The fact that some people use the word 'god' to express their experiences and others do not does not necessarily imply that their experiences differ. Hendrikse explains by giving an example (p.116): after a difficult period an atheist might say 'I had the strength to cope with it', a humanist might say 'I found the strength', a religious person 'I received the strength' and a Christian 'God gave me the strength'. It is clear that they are saying different things, they probably also mean different things, but we might wonder whether the experience which they try to express really differs. Experiences themselves are wordless, the expression of an experience always comes after the experience itself. 'God' therefore is a word, an expression, for an inexpressible experience. This implies that communication about God is always in one direction, first I experience and then I express. We can never know whether two people mean the same when they say 'God'. Just as we probably mean something else when we say 'God' when we are fourteen year old than when we use the same word thirty years later. There is not an objective standard to judge the word by. Not even the Bible. The Bible is like people around us talking about God, we can listen to the stories, but only when the stories speak to us they can become words about God for us.

It is clear that 'experience' is the central term in Hendrikse's theology. Unfortunately Hendrikse is not completely clear about what 'experience' is. This makes it hard to fully grasp his theology. First he makes the distinction between 'event' and 'experience', (p.97) an event becomes an experience if we dare to let it enter. All experiences go with us as if we carry them around in a big rucksack, we can try to leave them behind, but in a sense they will always go with us (p.108). Experiences can build trust, and this trust (or belief) can help us to keep having a positive attitude in difficult circumstances, (p.11) and thereby influence how we experience the events. It can also work the other way around: we might not be able to trust because of bad experiences in the past. Those rucksacks and therefore also those experiences are personal and differ for everyone (p.119).

Until here Hendrikse's position is clear. His position becomes diffuse when he discusses language. As we saw, his position on the use of language is that first there is experience, and only secondly this experience can be expressed in language and even then language is not sufficient. Hendrikse agitates against Kuiterts position that one can only consider an experience to be an experiencing of God when one already knows about God (p.118), because this would suggest that there is something before the experience that makes the valuation of the experience possible. The inconsistency is this: first experience is described as a 'second':

something influenced by one's past experiences and dependent on a willingness to be vulnerable, later on experience is depicted as an absolute 'first', not influenced by anything at all and probably the same for people from different faiths. (To confuse the matter even more Hendrikse also sometimes uses 'experience' as an equivalent for 'everything that has happened in our life'<sup>36</sup>)

It would be best if Hendrikse would stick to his first use of the term 'experience'. He himself says that 'your image of God is shaped by your experiences, your history, your upbringing, your fear, your hope etc' (p.158).<sup>37</sup> It would be hard to imagine that this image of God, including all the words, metaphors and stories that one has used to understand and value this image would not in any way influence new experiences.

### 5.3. Hendrikse on revelation

The above mentioned ambivalence about 'experience' is very relevant for our discussion of Hendrikse's view on revelation since as we will see, revelation and experience are very much related in his theology.

When Hendrikse first uses the term revelation, he immediately makes clear that revelation is not to be considered 'words from God': 'That is, just like all words in and about the Bible, human language: God never spoke, it is only people who spoke and speak about God. It is not possible to do that in other words than in words from our everyday language, and then it becomes: symbolic speech about God' (p.142).<sup>38</sup> Since Hendrikse considers all speech about God 'speech from below' (p.148), he disagrees with theology that starts with God. When a theology starts with God, and thereby starts above, it can not be sure to really land below and is in the danger of remaining floating in the air somewhere in the middle. This kind of theology - and almost all theology is this kind of theology according to Hendrikse - does not hit home in the experience of people. And since God is that which happens between people when they do experience, this theology is not about God. In the one and a half pages that Hendrikse uses to specifically discuss revelation he again emphasizes that revelation does not start with God. When considering revelation we should start below. We should start '... down

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<sup>36</sup> Compare (p.110) 'But from that experience you know that...' - 'Maar uit die ervaring weet je dat...'

<sup>37</sup> 'Jouw Godsbeeld wordt gevormd door jouw ervaringen, jouw geschiedenis, jouw opvoeding, jouw angst, jouw hoop enzovoort'

<sup>38</sup> 'Dat is, net als alle woorden in en over de bijbel mensentaal: God heeft nooit gesproken, het zijn mensen die over God spraken en spreken. Dat kan niet anders dan met gewone alledaagse mensenwoorden, en dan wordt het: symbolisch spreken over God.'

here with the people who live their life as it comes to them and who because of that once in a while hit upon something that is too big for words' (p.160)<sup>39</sup>. Something that happens in our life, or a story told by someone else can become an experience, an eye-opener or a revelation.

Revelation does not begin with God. It however neither begins with mankind, and especially not with a person. It is necessary that there is something coming to us from the outside. Hendrikse gives the example of a film: you watch a film, something happens with you, you are touched, you experience something. The experience is not in the film, it comes from within, but it would not have come about without the film (p.161). Revelation is suddenly seeing something differently, seeing the same in a different way. It occurs as a human reaction to something from the outside. It occurs because of this reaction, without the reaction, there is no revelation. This shows how intertwined revelation and experience are: revelation is only possible because of people who dare to open themselves for an experience. Without openness there is no revelation.

This description of revelation only makes sense if we assume that by 'experience' experience that is made possible by a trusting mature dependency is meant. Otherwise every sudden change of mind caused by something that happens in our life would be considered revelation. If we assume that Hendrikse does not mean the latter, the shape of revelation is clear: when a person is able to see the same things differently, namely from a believing, that is trusting, point of view because of an experience he had which was caused by something from the outside and came into being by the reaction of this person, revelation has happened.

The content of revelation is not fully clear yet given the fact that is closely connected to the concept of experience and the fact that Hendrikse remains partly unclear about the concept of experience. It is clear however that the content will never be propositional. It is more like a new awareness. If one would consider experience to be a something that comes first, that is not influenced by earlier experiences and words used, then revelation can reveal anything. A revealed sense of hope for the future should then be considered the result of an event and one's own primal reaction to that. However, if one would consider revelation to be something that is influenced by both an event and by earlier experiences and words used, then revelation will always be connected to what one already believes/knows. It can be both a confirmation or a

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<sup>39</sup> '...hier beneden bij mensen die het leven leven zoals het komt, en die daarom af en toe aalopen tegen iets wat te groot is voor woorden'.

denial of earlier ways of believing. A revealed sense of hope for the future should then be considered the result of an event, earlier experiences and expressions of those experiences and one's reaction to them.

## **6. A new Model of Revelation?**

### 6.1. Three approaches

We have now looked at three books and analysed the positions on revelation that are explicitly or implicitly found in them. Before comparing them to the five models introduced by Dulles, we will first summarize the three positions and try to find out whether we can bring them together in one model.

#### *6.1.1. Kuitert*

In *Voor een tijd een plaats voor God* it becomes clear that for Kuitert the moment of revelation is the moment when mankind becomes human. This revelation is based on a experience: the experience of being called upon by people who need us, which is being called upon by what in myths is called God. It is not something that we choose or make a decision in. If we are being called upon, this being called has the force of transcendence; it is in this world but not from this world. Because of this experience mankind needs to reconsider the world around. He therefore starts to speak and thereby creates a world of meaning. Because of this newly created world of meaning we see the chaotic world in a new way.

It can therefore be said that the whole process of revelation happens inside mankind. Therefore mankind is the place where God and revelation can be found. Unfortunately two ambiguities in relation to revelation were found in this book. Firstly the level of revelation in what is called 'a wrong culture' (to what extend should a revelatory experience which points away from humanism be considered to revelation?) and secondly the working of revelation in the life of a person (is revelation the result of the experience to be called upon, or the result of putting things into words?)

#### *6.1.2. Manenschijn*

Manenschijn starts of with the fundamental problem that we cannot be sure about Gods existence. On the other hand we can be sure about the existence of God in our faith-language, his existence as something that is bigger than mankind and which we call God. He exists in our faith-language because people in the past have experienced God as the ground of their being. They have testified about him by telling stories about their experiences and thereby created an inner-faith reality in which God exists. When these stories are told, we are invited to believe. If we do we may see how the old stories are reflected in our lives. Thus they are turned into our own personal stories. The old words are used and new words are found to express the experienced (but inexpressible) faith-reality. This faith-reality is an inner-

language phenomenon, expressed in stories and metaphors. We do not and cannot know whether this reality also exists outside language. But if a person starts to live and think from this constructed faith-reality, revelation (in the Christian sense) has happened in his life.

### *6.1.3. Hendrikse*

According to Hendrikse we should not start with God when we think about revelation, we should start below. We live our life and sometimes we hit upon something that is too big for words. Something that happens in our life, or a story told by someone else. These events can become an experience, an eye-opener or a revelation. The experience is not in the event, it comes from within, but it would not have come about without the event. Revelation is suddenly seeing something differently, seeing the same in a different way. It occurs as a human reaction to something from the outside. It occurs because of this reaction; without the reaction, there is no revelation. This shows to which extent revelation and experience are intertwined: revelation is only possible because of people who dare to open themselves to an experience. Without openness there is no revelation. This openness is part of living in a mature dependent way.

Therefore according to Hendrikse revelation happens when a person is able to see the same things differently, namely from a believing, that is trusting, point of view because of an experience he had which was caused by something from the outside and came into being by the reaction of this person. The result of revelation is a new awareness, a new way of looking at the world.

### 6.2. Three approaches, one model?

There are clear similarities between these three positions on revelation, but there are some differences as well. Let us first look at the similarities. Firstly, in all three it is clear that revelation is based on a human experience and happens within a human being. Secondly, the three authors also agree on the result of revelation: when revelation has happened in someone's life, this person will view himself and the world around him in a totally different way. Thirdly there is no specific role for an existing God.

Within and next to these similarities there are however also some differences. One of the major is: all agree that revelation essentially has to do with human experience, but the kind of experience they refer to differs.

To further specify the similarities and differences I will again use Schwöbel's formula:  
'A discloses in the situation B the content C for the recipient D with the result E'.

#### *6.2.1. A discloses*

When we look at 'A discloses' we hit upon the reason why this kind of theology was excluded by Dulles. Unlike the five models presented by Dulles this model does not include a subject 'A' which discloses. According to Hendrikse and Kuitert God does not exist as a separate entity, so God does not play an active part in the process of revelation. Manenschijn does not say that God does not exist but claims that we cannot know whether he exists. Because of this ambiguity about the existence of God his view on revelation also does not include an active role for God.

We can therefore conclude that there is no 'A' in these views. Revelation does not depend on a revealing subject, but on the situation B and the recipient D.

#### *6.2.2. In the situation B*

The three authors disagree on the 'situation B' in which revelation happens. Because of earlier mentioned ambiguities in Kuitert's book it is difficult to exactly describe 'situation B' in his explanation. It is however safe to say that according to him revelation happens (1) in an already existing culture with its own 'world of meaning' and (2) by experiencing to be called upon by something which is bigger than us. In Manenschijn's book we can also recognize these two components, but in a slightly different way. Manenschijn also emphasizes that everybody already lives in a certain culture, with its own world of meaning, which he calls the (constructed) faith-reality. In contradiction to Kuitert he emphasizes the narrative construction of this faith-reality. He agrees with Kuitert that revelation has to do with sensing our and others' needs and their pain and suffering. According to Manenschijn the religious component to that sense is not just the incentive to action (the being called upon), but also the trust that there is something higher that can be trusted to take care of it. Furthermore there is a difference in the view on the influence of the believing subject on the process of revelation. Kuitert mainly depicts revelation as something that happens to someone. Manenschijn agrees that one cannot choose for revelation, but he does say that a person needs to dare to start believing in and living from the old stories, because only then revelation can continue in one's own life. Hendrikse also acknowledges a role for the believing subject. He distinguishes 'event', 'experience' and 'revelation'. For revelation something needs to happen in one's life, an event. This event is not the revelation however. The event can become a revelatory

experience if one is willing to make the event into a life changing experience; one needs to have an attitude of openness to make revelation happen. This openness is then increased by the revelation, it helps the person to view the world in a new (a trusting) way. As has been said, the connection of experience to an already existing world of meaning remains ambiguous. Since Hendrikse does claim that one's own life story influences one's beliefs, I think the most probable reading is that Hendrikse does agree with the other two authors that an already existing world of meaning does influence the revelation. In the description of the content of the experience Hendrikse differs from especially Kuitert. It is not so much the being called upon by others but more the acceptance of one's own life as something that is good, even when we no longer experience that it is good. Supporting others will be part of that, but it is not the central aspect of revelation. In its emphasis on trust it is in a way close to Manenschijn's view, it however does not mention a 'something that is bigger' which could be trusted. It is more a trust in life itself.

Let us try to summarize these views and bring them together by describing 'situation B' in which revelation happens. This situation is that there is a linguistic world consisting of metaphors and stories in which one grew up. Next to that there is an experience of something that is bigger than us (something that can be trusted, that calls upon us, that happens between people, and which can be called God).

### *6.2.3. For the recipient D*

Before discussing 'content C', we will first move on to 'recipient D', since the recipient was already partly discussed in the last paragraph. We already concluded that all three authors agree on the view that every person has already a view on the world. When revelation happens this old view is changed, but is not cancelled, so in a sense it influences the outcome of revelation. Revelation can also continue when an accepted faith-reality changes over time. This implies that 'the recipient D' is someone with an existing world view, he already values certain things in a certain way.

The role of the 'receiver' of revelation was already touched upon; Manenschijn says that a person needs to dare to start believing in and living from the old stories. Hendrikse also acknowledges a role for the believing subject: an attitude of openness is needed to make revelation happen. Kuitert seems least to support an active role for the receiver. The difficulty with this statement is the ambiguity about what is to be considered revelation. When

discussing Kuitert's book we saw that one could say that the experience of being called upon is considered to be revelation by Kuitert, but one could also argue that the process of putting the experience into words is when revelation happens. If we go for the first option we detect a disagreement between Kuitert and Hendrikse. Hendrikse claims that for an event to become an experience an attitude of openness is needed. Kuitert says that the experience of being called upon can happen to anyone (although some people have an advantage because of their upbringing). The disagreement seems smaller if one would not consider the experience of being called upon as the moment of revelation, but the putting into words. This is the case since Kuitert does acknowledge that the process of putting experiences into words and creating a world of meaning can be stopped (he accuses the church of having done so). There however still remains a difference between the three authors: Manenschijn and Hendrikse locate the 'decision' before the revelation to a person can start: one has to have an initial open attitude for a situation to speak to oneself (Hendrikse) or one has to be open to the old stories to let them speak in one's own life (Manenschijn). They do not claim that one can make revelation happen by being open; being open is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. According to Kuitert the initial experience might be based on previously learnt words or values, but revelation starts with an experience. Often it seems that Kuitert suggests that the putting into words will happen automatically when someone has the experience of being called upon. He does not emphasize the moment of choice. As has been said above, he however does acknowledge the possibility of stopping to putting experiences into (new) words. Then an old world of meaning becomes an absolute and revelation stops.

It is important to note that since the recipient cannot choose to receive revelation. Revelation is something that happens inside him, but not something that he causes. So it remains that there is no 'A' who discloses.

Keeping in mind the differences we can come to a summarizing statement: The recipient D is a person with a certain level of openness to something that is bigger than himself. He is open to being spoken to, to change his attitude and view on life accordingly and to continue living from the new insights.

#### *6.2.4. Content C*

All three authors agree that there is no cognitive content revealed when revelation happens. Knowledge will never be the result of revelation. Nor is there a disclosure of God himself in

revelation. We could therefore say that revelation as these authors understand it has no content. There is, however, more to be said. Although there is no truth revealed, a change in one's attitude and worldview does occur with revelation. Revelation therefore does result in a different way of thinking about oneself and the world around. There is no proof for this new view; it can therefore not be considered knowledge. However, if one has experienced revelation, one's thinking is connected to this new view. Especially Manenschijn emphasizes this: a new reality is constructed based on the experience of revelation. This is an inner-faith and inner-language reality; there is no proof of its existence outside faith and outside language. Kuitert speaks about a certain inner-faith reality as well, but calls it 'world of meaning'.

To conclude we can say that no specific content is revealed, but a breakthrough is accomplished in our way of viewing ourselves and the world around us.

#### *6.2.5. With the result E*

The result of revelation is, as we have seen, a new consciousness, a new way of viewing ourselves and the world around us. This new way can be called faith. Not just any new way of viewing the world is faith and the result of revelation. Kuitert speaks about 'religion as humanity', an absolute being called upon by the people around you and acting upon it. Manenschijn emphasizes a connection between the new way of viewing and the message of the old stories of the Christian tradition. Hendrikse speaks about an attitude of 'mature dependence'. When listed like this the differences seem bigger than they are. If we give it a close look we see that all three support more or less (1) an element of being influenced by the old stories of Christianity, (2) a change of attitude which can be described as an openness to the world and people around us and to the transcendent, (3) some kind of change in behaviour connected to this new world view. This can be called a 'faithful way of living'.

To summarize we can say that the result of revelation is a new consciousness which could be called faith.

#### *6.2.6. The model*

We have seen that there are some differences between the different authors. But there are also major similarities. Since the models of Dulles also hold quite a broad variety of theologians and views, I think we can conclude that also in this case the different approaches can be

brought together in one model. When we then put all our findings together, the model which we have found can be described with the following formula:

Based on an experience of something which is bigger than us and on a linguistic world consisting of metaphors and stories, in someone who is open for it and willing to continue with it, a breakthrough is accomplished in the way of viewing himself and the world around him. The result has no specific content but is a new consciousness which could be called faith.

### 6.3. The new model compared

Our next step will be to compare this new model to the other models, to find out whether we have found a sixth model or a variation of one of the five models of Dulles. It is immediately clear that this new model has hardly anything in common with the propositional model and the historical model, since both are based on a strong conviction in a existing and acting God and consider some kind of knowledge to be the result of revelation. The new model has more in common with the experiential model, since this model focuses more on the subjective experience of the believer than on an objective truth content. There is however also a substantial difference: the experiential model says that the essence of revelation is an immediate encounter with God. It is God who reveals himself to the soul a human being. This is clearly different from the new model which focuses on a change in attitude and consciousness. The dialectical model also differs on essential aspects to the new model. In model 4 it is again God who reveals himself, but God's role is even bigger here. Revelation is only revelation at the moment of revelation (by God). It is all about that moment of revelation, at that moment the revelation is real and truth. Our new model says something else: it claims that it is all about the change of consciousness that is caused by revelation. It is not that much interested in the truth value of the moment of revelation.

This leaves the fifth model: the model of revelation as new awareness, which is also called the consciousness model. Again there is the difference that this model displays God as an acting subject, and the new model does not. But apart from that the models are very similar: revelation brings forth a change in human consciousness. There is no specific content, but there is a change inside the believer. The fundamental process of revelation, namely a change of consciousness, is the same. I therefore want to argue that our new model is a variation on the consciousness model. There is a difference in the fact that the consciousness model does accept God as an actor in the process, and because of that also takes into account a certain

goal that God has with revelation. The new model does not acknowledge a role for God and therefore has less of a final end (although there are some criteria for ‘faith’, so there is a direction in which revelation is moving). But the most important distinguishing criterion (revelation as new awareness) is the same.

Since the scope of the similarities I want to argue that it is best not to consider the new model a sixth model, but a variation of model five. This can be compared to model 1, which is represented in two different ways: conservative evangelicalism and Catholic neo-Scholasticism. We will call our new model ‘model 5b’, the human-faith variation of the consciousness model. From now on we will call the variation of consciousness model with does acknowledge an active role for God ‘model 5a’.

#### 6.4. The new model evaluated

We will now evaluate the new found model 5b according to the criteria set by Avery Dulles. In this evaluation special attention will be paid to the comparison between model 5a and 5b.

##### Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition

The importance of the Bible and Christian tradition in this model is quite small. The (stories from the) Bible and Christian tradition serve as a indication of what is to be considered revelation, but do not present truth to us. When this model is used combined with narrative theology, the biblical stories do play a more important role (Manenschijn). But still revelation only happens inside the person who receives revelation now.

With respect to faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition, we already saw that model 5a seems to deny two central Biblical themes by repudiating the outsider God and by denying that God reveals truth. Model 5b moves even farther away from the tradition by not acknowledging any role for an existing God in the process of revelation. Hendrikse does argue that the idea of a non-existing God is already present as early as in the Old Testament, but he has the whole of Christian tradition against him with this reading of the Older Testament. I think it is hard to deny that God is depicted as a being who speaks to mankind. The belief in the existence of God and the idea that God has revealed himself has always been a very important aspect of the Christian faith. This model therefore is a major break with tradition.

On the other hand this model is closer to parts of Christian tradition than some of the authors suggest. Hendrikse for example describes the position of the church as if the whole church has always supported the propositional and historical model. In his book he gives the impression that he comes up with a radically new approach, different from everything which has been said by the church and other theologians. We have just seen that his approach in fact is a variation to model that is supported by more people (the consciousness model). Moreover it is also closer to the experiential and dialectical model which have also some support in churches, but which he does not mention. But it remains that of all approaches this model seems to be the least supported by the Bible and Christian tradition.

#### Internal coherence

There are no problems with the internal coherence. The model places the revelatory experience in the context of the whole human life. It shows how revelation can occur and how it affects a human being.

A difficulty with this model seems to be to define where revelation starts and what it is based on. Especially the relation between revelatory event, experience and revelation seems difficult to define; two of the authors struggle in this area. It is however possible to come to an internally coherent model.

#### Plausibility

This model seems plausible. It acknowledges the role of earlier experiences and upbringing in the process of revelation. Also it pays due account to the contemporary post-modern feel that we do not have access to knowledge about a metaphysical reality.

One could however say that the plausibility is affected negatively by the differences in the view on on what kind of experience revelation is based. The fact that the various authors, who try to find a starting point for revelation which should not be with God but with a human experience, end up with quite different answers (is it a sense of being called upon or is it a trust in something that is bigger than us?) does not support the plausibility of the model. On the other hand, the fact that they do not come up with a identical answer does not make the whole model implausible.

### Adequacy to experience

A great advantage of this model, just as model 5a, is its adequacy to experience in respect of its attention for the active role of the human subject in the constitution of the revealed datum. The weakness is also the same: it only accounts for certain religious experiences and seems to dismiss others. Some changes of consciousness should be considered revelation according to this model, but others should not. It is difficult to give and argue for clear criteria to distinguish the one from the other. For example: why, if there is no God to refer to as a objective source of truth, should a change from hedonism towards compassion for mankind be (part of) revelation and a comparable change from liberalism to communism not?

### Practical fruitfulness

This model can be considered practically fruitful. It includes the whole being of the believer. Revelation is not an event but a change of consciousness that urges to a practical response. Once revelation has happened, it keeps appealing to the believer to act and to keep on reflecting on his world view. The constructed faith reality keeps changing and keeps urging to action, since the final answer is never given. This is even more the case in 5b than in 5a since there is even no certainty that we are moving in the right direction.

### Theoretical fruitfulness

Just as some other models (amongst which model 5a), this model separates revelation from doctrinal formulations and thereby avoids danger of conflict between faith and science. It also escapes the problem of having to reconstruct the events of Biblical history to find the fullness of revelation. This makes it theoretically fruitful in a sense, but the result will never have be cognitively relevant, so the fruitfulness is only to a certain extent. The fruitfulness is further limited in model 5b because of the above mentioned uncertainty about what is to be considered revelation. Two different persons might have opposite experiences, but both consider it revelation. Since it is hard to reach a standard on which to judge the revelatory experience, the theoretical fruitfulness is limited. This especially poses a difficulty since (in some approaches) the revelatory experience has a clear objective side to it: Kuitert for example says that

when revelation is experienced there is not much of a choice. It appears as an objective call in our lives.

#### Value for dialogue

This model is well adapted to dialogue since it does not necessarily favour religious experiences of only one religious tradition. The backside of that might be that since it is hard to say what is to be considered as revelation people might value all kinds of different experiences as revelation. This might not do justice to the religious experiences of believers for whom there is a great difference between their own experience and another (opposite) experience.

We have seen above that like the other models this model has its strengths and weaknesses. If we compare model 5b to model 5a we see that in some aspects they have the same merits and criticisms. Model 5b has more uncertainty about what is to be considered of revelation. This allows it to include a broader variety of religious experiences, but it also makes it practically and theoretically slightly less fruitful. It is difficult to decide which model should be favoured, based on these differences. The biggest difference however is that 5b moves further away from the Christian tradition by not acknowledging an active role for an existing God.

I think here we hit upon the major problem of model 5b; it comes up with something quite new in the Christian tradition. Of course it should not be dismissed just because it is new; however some convincing reasoning for this model is needed for it to be accepted within the Christian tradition. An explanation needs to be given by the authors why their model is an improvement. It is a pity that especially Hendrikse, and Kuitert to a lesser extent present model 1 and 2 as the answer of the tradition. They then argue that there are major disadvantages to these approaches, and we have seen that they are right: these models do lack in plausibility and/or coherence. The third step is then to present their own approach (Model 5b) as the novel solution for this problem. It would have been very interesting if they would have compared their own view to views that can be considered part of 'model 5a'. The non-existence of God seems a presupposition, and accordingly does a lacking 'discloser A'. Manenschijn puts most effort into evaluating the history of revelation theology. I think it is therefore not surprising that he ends up with the mildest form within Model 5b: no rejection of an existing God, but a kind of agnosticism towards his existence outside our faith-language. I think that it is surprising however that he does claim that for the biblical stories

there should be some base in history, a historic minimum, to make Christianity more than self-deceit<sup>40</sup> while he does not claim that for a role for God in a faith-reality a 'realistic minimum' is needed for Christianity to make any sense.

All three authors make the important point that we do not know anything about God with certainty. Our own experiences and imagination do play a part when revelation happens. It is a valid point that should be recognized. The claim however that we should assume that God does not exist lacks support. In an attempt to increase the strength of model 5b I think it would be best to say that we do not know certainly whether or not God exists and is the discloser. But when revelation (in a Christian sense) happens, people get a new awareness; a new insight in who they are and into the world around them. Part of that new insight, and that would be my addition, is trusting that this new world of meaning makes sense, that there is a God who can be trusted (in whatever way, shape or form he may exist).

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<sup>40</sup> Manenschijn (2002), p.315.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on three books which present Christian faith as a 'human faith' this thesis presents a model of revelation, in addition to the five models which Avery Dulles has presented in his book *Models of Revelation*. This new model describes revelation in the following way:

Based on an experience of something which is bigger than us and on a linguistic world consisting of metaphors and stories, in someone who is open for it and willing to continue with it, a breakthrough is accomplished in the way of viewing himself and the world around him. The result has no specific content but is a new consciousness which could be called faith.

This new model can best be seen as a variation of one of the models already presented by Dulles, namely the consciousness model. We should therefore not consider it to be a sixth model, but model 5b. This might make us question Dulles' choice to ignore this theological approach. However, when we compare 5b to the other models we see that it avoids certain weaknesses of other models, but that it also has one major disadvantage. By not acknowledging any role for God in the process of revelation, it leaves behind a major and old belief of the Christian tradition. Unless one can argue convincingly that it is best to assume the non-existence of God, this new model of revelation should not be favoured over the other models.

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## **9. Summary in Dutch**

Deze scriptie analyseert een mogelijk nieuw model van openbaring, in aanvulling op de vijf modellen die door Avery Dulles in *Models of Revelation* gepresenteerd worden. Dulles stelt vijf modellen voor: (1) openbaring als dogma/leerstelling, (2) openbaring als geschiedenis, (3) openbaring als innerlijke ervaring, (4) openbaring als dialectische aanwezigheid en (5) openbaring als nieuw bewustzijn/inzicht. Hij beoordeelt deze modellen aan de hand van zeven criteria: trouw aan de bijbel en de christelijke traditie, interne coherentie, plausibiliteit, mate van eenkomstig met ervaring, praktische vruchtbaarheid, theoretische vruchtbaarheid en de waarde voor dialoog. Dulles heeft bij het komen tot deze modellen de benadering die geen aandacht heeft voor een rol van een bestaande God in openbaring, en die het christelijk geloof dus benaderd als een menselijk fenomeen, buiten beschouwing gelaten.

Het mogelijke nieuwe model dat in deze scriptie gezocht en geanalyseerd wordt gaat juist wel uit van de benadering waarin openbaring een menselijk fenomeen is. De basis voor een mogelijk nieuw model wordt in deze scriptie gezocht in drie boeken van Nederlandse theologen: *Voor een tijd een plaats voor God* van Harry Kuitert; *God is zo groot dat hij niet hoeft te bestaan* van Gerrit Manenschijn en *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat* van Klaas Hendrikse.

Kuitert beschrijft het moment van openbaring als het moment waarop iemand mens wordt. Deze openbaring is gebaseerd op een ervaring: de ervaring zich aangesproken te weten door mensen die ons nodig hebben. Dit is uiteindelijk je aangesproken weten door wat in de mythes God wordt genoemd. Het is iets wat ons overkomt, niet iets waar we voor kiezen. Als we ons aangesproken weten, dan heeft dat de kracht van transcendentie: het is in onze wereld, maar niet van onze wereld. Deze ervaring zorgt ervoor dat we de wereld om ons heen met nieuwe ogen gaan bekijken. We gaan er opnieuw over spreken en creëren zo een nieuwe wereld van betekenis. Volgens Kuitert voltrekt het gehele proces van openbaring zich dus in de mens.

Manenschijn begint bij het fundamentele probleem dat we niet zeker kunnen zijn van Gods bestaan. Daarbij wijst hij erop dat we wel zeker kunnen zijn van het bestaan van God binnen onze geloofstaal. Binnen de geloofstaal bestaat hij als iets dat groter is dan de mens en wat we God noemen. Hij bestaat in onze geloofstaal omdat mensen in het verleden hem ervaren hebben als de grond van hun bestaan. Ze hebben getuigd van hem door verhalen over hun

ervaringen te vertellen, daarbij een geloofswerkelijkheid creërend waarbinnen God bestaat. Als deze verhalen ook nu verteld worden, worden we uitgenodigd om te geloven. Als we daadwerkelijk gaan geloven dan kunnen deze oude verhalen opnieuw gaan leven in ons leven, en zo onze eigen verhalen worden. De oude woorden worden dan gebruikt en nieuwe worden daarbij gevoegd om de ervaren (maar niet te beschrijven) geloofswerkelijkheid uit te drukken. Deze geloofswerkelijkheid is een binnentalige aangelegenheid, het wordt uitgedrukt in verhalen en metaforen. We weten niet, en kunnen niet weten, of deze werkelijkheid ook buiten de taal bestaat. Als een mens vanuit deze geconstrueerde geloofswerkelijkheid gaat leven en denken, dan heeft openbaring plaatsgevonden, aldus Manenschijn.

Hendrikse wil bij het denken over openbaring niet beginnen bij God, maar bij onszelf hier beneden. We leven ons leven en soms worden we geraakt door iets wat te groot is voor woorden. Iets gebeurt in ons leven, of we horen een ervaringsverhaal van iemand anders. Een dergelijke gebeurtenis kan een ervaring voor ons worden, iets wat ons de ogen opent: een openbaring. De ervaring is niet in de gebeurtenis, hij komt van binnenuit de mens zelf, maar hij zou er niet geweest zijn zonder de gebeurtenis. Deze openbaring bestaat in het opeens de zaken anders zien; het zelfde zien, maar op een nieuwe manier. Hendrikse ziet openbaring dus als een menselijke reactie op iets van buiten. De reactie bewerkstelligt de openbaring. Openbaring en ervaring zijn dus erg verbonden met elkaar. Openbaring is slechts mogelijk als mensen zich open durven stellen voor een ervaring die hen zal veranderen. Zonder openheid geen openbaring. Openheid is daarom een centraal deel van wat Hendrikse 'volwassen afhankelijkheid' noemt.

Kort gezegd geschied openbaring volgens Hendriks als een persoon op grond van een ervaring die veroorzaakt wordt door iets van buiten en de reactie daarop, hetzelfde op een nieuwe, namelijk gelovige (=vertrouwend) manier gaat zien.

Bij vergelijking van deze drie opvattingen over openbaring blijkt dat er enkele verschillen zijn, toch zijn de overeenkomsten groot genoeg om tot een model te kunnen komen waarin aan alle drie voldoende wordt rechtgedaan. Dit model laat zich als volgt beschrijven:

Uitgaande van een ervaring van iets dat groter is dan wij en van een geloofstaal bestaande uit metaforen en verhalen, vindt in een persoon, die er open voor is en die bereid is het serieus te nemen in zijn leven, een doorbraak plaats in de manier waarop hij zichzelf en de wereld om zich heen ziet. Dit levert geen inhoudelijk resultaat op, maar een nieuw bewustzijn wat we geloof kunnen noemen.

Als we dit model naast de vijf modellen van Dulles leggen blijkt dat dit nieuwe model erg lijkt op één van deze modellen, namelijk het bewustzijnsmodel (model 5). We kunnen dit model daarom het best beschouwen als een variatie op een al bestaand model (we noemen het daarom model 5b) en niet als een zesde model. Het verschil blijkt uiteindelijk minder groot dan waar Dulles vanuit lijkt te gaan. Ook de andere auteurs (met name Kuitert en Hendrikse) overdrijven het verschil. Ze vergelijken hun eigen aanpak eigenlijk alleen met model 1 en 2 (Manenschijn heeft meer oog voor de variëteit en de overeenkomsten tussen zijn eigen aanpak en bestaande modellen) en niet met modellen die meer op hun eigen inzicht lijken.

Kijkend naar de zeven door Dulles gestelde criteria heeft dit model, net als de andere modellen, zijn eigen sterke en zwakke punten. Het belangrijkste zwakke punt sluit aan bij de keuze van Dulles om het buiten beschouwing te laten. Door het niet erkennen van een rol van God bij openbaring verlaat het een belangrijk en traditioneel aangehangen onderdeel van het christelijk geloof, namelijk het geloof in een bestaande God die zichzelf bekend wil maken. Tenzij men overtuigend kan beargumenteren dat het het best is om uit te gaan van het niet-bestaan van God, verdient dit nieuwe model van openbaring niet de voorkeur boven de andere modellen.