

Personal Memories of Three Dutch “Saints”: Hendrik Kraemer, J.H. Bavinck, and G.C. Berkouwer

By M.L. Daneel

The hundredth anniversary of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, 1910, has led me to revisit in thought the most fruitful years of my intensive doctoral studies at the Free University of Amsterdam during the 1960s. I “spoke” again to the late theological luminaries who profoundly influenced my life abroad. Hendrik Kraemer, his publications, and particularly his crucial role in the International Missionary Conference at Tambaram in 1938, in his opposition to relativistic missiological appraisals of non-Christian religions, had made a great impression on me. I was fortunate to attend his last great conference address on *Kirche und Mission* in Basel.

It so happened that I was traveling back to Amsterdam on an old Lambretta scooter after months of traversing European countries. The travel adventure included attendance of a World Council conference in Geneva; spending many hours of discussion at Château de Bossey with the then still young and promising African theologian, John Mbiti; crossing the Pyrenees – where I had to de-coke the scooter cylinder heads with improvised tools next to the road, to find enough power for my two-wheeler, camp-equipped ‘work-horse’, to clear those mountains; camping at Barcelona to watch bull-fights and take a breather to read Hemingway's impressions on such primal spectacle; watching the gypsies dancing in the caves of their sacro monte in Granada; crossing over to Morocco to get the feel of northern Africa, to watch the illicit drug trade in Tetuan, Ceuta and Algiers, etc.

Back at Château de Bossey in Geneva, Hans Ruedi Weber told me about Kraemer's visit to Basel and insisted that I attend. I was travel weary and without a shred of clean clothes, after three months on the road. Winter was setting in and I was apprehensive of many hours of scooter-travel in the cold. I refused! But Hans insisted, had me rest up for many hours and sent my measurements ahead to Herr Witschi, director of the Basel Mission. In Basel the Kantonen-ministers held a collection for the ‘poor African student’ who lacked appropriate clothes for the Kraemer event. And of course, upon arrival – embarrassed as I was--- I found myself fitted out in a new suit, with many new shirts, ties and shoes to choose from, more refined even than most of the conference participants were wearing. Suddenly the adventurer had gone into hiding, with only a darkly tanned face hinting at a kind of ‘tropical connection.’

Listening to an aged Kraemer, still defining and emphasizing some of the basic ideas of the integral unity of Mission and Church, the Barthian-related ‘Biblical realism’ behind his views on continuity and discontinuity in the dialogical relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions, and his

plea for greater understanding and respect for 'other cultures' – as originally presented in his epic Tambaran book *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, was for me a compelling and wonderful experience.

The initial meeting in Basel led to follow-up visits at Kraemer's house in Oegstgeest, Holland. Extensive discussions on African religions and especially J.V Taylor's contribution in his classic study, *Primal Vision* (1963) – on which I had at the time produced a pre-doctoral mini-thesis – revealed that we shared substantial missiological common ground. Subsequently Kraemer advised and supported me when I planned to do fieldwork among African Initiated Churches in Africa, endorsed my final proposals and joined Prof. Johan H. Bavinck, my main advisor at the Free University, in creating a research position for me at the African Study Centre (Leiden University), next to the senior lectureship I already held at the Free University. The project itself provided sufficient funding for 3 years of AIC research in Zimbabwe. I felt utterly honoured with an unusual opportunity of a life-time, backed up by the blessings and full support of two outstanding mission leaders, both of whom already stood on the threshold of their final departure to the Beyond.

While Kraemer stood tall as an imposing Church statesman, Bavinck, by contrast, was of smaller posture, a quiet man with peaceful, if alert and sensitive, eyes and often pulling on his pipe, lit or unlit. Specialized in Missions and an added doctor's degree in Psychology, Bavinck worked for many years as a theological educator in Java before he returned to Holland to serve as Prof. in Missiology at the Free University. His theology of religions was based on a strong emphasis on missionary witness, focused on Christ's cross and resurrection, yet including dialogue based on a thorough understanding of non-Christian religions and cultures. That he took the latter missionary task seriously was evidenced in his numerous publications on World Religions, Eastern and Javanese mysticism in particular. Himself a mystic in his own right, his publications reveal a deep care, respect and love for people, whatever their religious affiliation. It was this legacy of his which he imparted to me during a final blessing on his deathbed – like an Old Testament patriarch laying hands on his successor-son – that inspired and encouraged me during a rich ministry of many years among the Traditionalists and African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe. The memory of this Dutch sage among Eastern mystics fueled the perseverance I needed for several years before I was allowed (as the first white) to attend and study from within the oracular ceremonies of the Shona high-God, Mwari, at the Matopo shrines. It also enabled me to endure accusations in Zimbabwe of being a traitor to the white cause and threats of imprisonment by the military for my refusal to be conscripted into Ian Smith's armed forces during the *Chimurenga* liberation struggle.

Bavinck at times lectured us on similar trends in both the world religions and Christianity. I can still see him talking on fatalism and futility, the close

Biblical parallel of which he found in Jeremiah 10:23 - 24, "I know, oh Lord that no one is the master of his own destiny; no person has control over his own life [some Bible translations: 'no one plans and directs his foot-steps']. "Correct your people Lord, but do not be too hard on us or punish us when you are angry; that would be the end of us." In Christianity, he maintained, such recognition of human frailty did not translate into the fatalism of abandonment of human responsibility. Instead, the challenge: 'Strive ye hard to enter God's kingdom!' remained and was fueled by the realization that God's mercy remains the condition and context for Christian endeavour. Christianity somehow knows no quit! This truth obtained greater meaning for me when Bavinck once took me down into the basement of his house in Amsterdam. The heavy, dark curtains were still there and the bench on which he had mounted his bicycle in such a way that his children could sit on it and peddle it to generate some light for him. Thus he could write his books by bicycle light during the long hours of imposed black-outs at the time of the German occupation of Holland. During the darkest hour of Europe, imposed by Nazi Germany - while millions of lives were lost - a rich harvest of academic and spiritual books was therefore brought in, to the benefit of many, by a transparent and unpretentious believer, who knew no quit!

Bavinck also had good humor. Once a student found him holding a number of letters half-way into the slot of a public mail-box. "Prof, why don't you drop those letters?" the student asked. "Well," came the laconic reply, "I have accidentally mailed my cigar in there. Now I am waiting a while to see if a fire develops."

And then there was Prof. G.C. Berkouwer, one of the most outstanding Reformed dogmaticians (systematic theologians) of his time in Europe. In my experience the three men - Berkouwer, Bavinck and Kraemer - together formed a triumvirate of 'academic saints' in Holland. Not that I pretend to know much about the qualifications for sainthood. Maybe there would have been a faint frown on the Lord's brow about Berkouwer's chain-cigar-smoking, but I think there would have been more of a divine smile at the man's endless exuberance in telling and retelling the Gospel good news - be it sheer brilliance and joy in teaching, preaching, storytelling or the endless interpretation in depth of the latest theological publications finding their way to his desk.

Berkouwer excelled as a brilliant mind and an exceptional orator. He lectured with flair and ease, rarely consulting his notes and often switching to related side-issues. Sometimes one thought he'd never find his way back to the main subject. But he never erred in rounding off a lengthy supplement on recent theological developments with a sharp summary of its value and validity for the main subject and then pick up the core thread of his lecture with ease as if he had merely paused for a moment. During classes we, as students, were therefore continually exposed to the latest theological theories and

controversies in Europe and elsewhere, as espoused by leading lay, church and academic authors. Berkouwer wrote a massive tome on Karl Barth: *Triomf der Genade* and for length of time produced a book each year in his famous series: *Dogmatische Studien*. His ability to read fast with total concentration, internalize the main theories and arguments of authors and to integrate it for immediate use in his immense memory-system was quite amazing.

I took nearly a year off to study dogmatics as an additional main subject, next to Missionary Science and History of Missions. What I had experienced in earlier years as a somewhat dry and boring subject, then became an adventure in the varied interpretations of church life, doctrines and of the nature of the message Christians try to proclaim. I enjoyed this phase of study because I was inspired to work really hard, having found that Berkouwer lived his theology because he was living for his students, attempting to equip them fully for the Christ-discipleship they had chosen. In doing so he was first and foremost a Scripture-oriented teacher rather than a speculative philosopher-dogmatician. It always struck me when I entered or left his library-study at home how fully absorbed he was in the lives of his students and their publications. Next to his own publications on his shelves stood a long row of the doctoral dissertations and other publications of his students. These were the books, rather than his own studies, that he liked to touch with fondness and reverence as he moved to or from his working desk. It was in that context that I did my oral exams and tried to keep the Ritmeester cigar he always offered, lighted, but to no avail. I was obviously too nervous to keep pulling on the darn thing while I had to unravel the disputes of theopaschitism (the 'subordination' of Jesus in relation to his Father) or the Catholic distinctions of human merit (*meritum de congruo* and *meritum de condigno*) in relation to God's grace - and such like issues. (And please don't ask me today to elaborate correctly on these subjects, because that was 50 years ago, and I have meanwhile lost a bit of the ambition and plenty of the gray cells up top!).

The introduction to an oral exam-ritual was always that of joining Berkouwer and his gracious lady on the carpet of the living room playing with some of their children (of which they had eleven!), or with their grandchildren. Berkouwer always appeared to be as jovial and unfazed by his frolicking, loud and unruly off-spring as he was in the presence of any audience he had to address. However cute the little ones, there was little anybody could do to lessen the stress I felt in anticipation of the looming ordeal of testing-time!

Nonetheless, there was a genuine ability of stimulating sound inter-human engagement in the make-up of this professor that favoured any 'beleaguered' student. For all his professional calm, his inner enthusiasm and excitement about a student's progress and critical disposition, always tended to get the better of him. During the exam you only needed to watch his body language to find clues about how you were doing and how to proceed. His

looking out of the window meant: not entirely satisfied; a broad smile seemed to convey: now you're talking, man, keep going; lighting a new cigar before completing the previous one signalled the onset of real excitement and an added challenge: good, but now show me what you really have! And if you eventually found your mentor-teacher sitting on the edge of his chair (as you were doing all the time), you instinctively knew that you were clearing the high hurdle and could afford a relaxed conclusion.

In retrospect, probing exam discussions under close, professional scrutiny - based on fairness of evaluation but never affording cheap compromise - was always a rewarding experience after months of preparation. Berkouwer led by example and I followed like a trusted member of the fold, never pressurized into a specific mould of thought but liberated to mature as independent scholar within the range of talents received. In that process the dreams about that wonderful, immense continent of my birth, Africa, and the ideals of the Western-oriented scholar of Scottish, Belgian and German ancestry started holding hands in comfort, unto new identity.

Berkouwer taught us a great deal about modern Roman Catholic authors, especially those representing the *Theologie Nouvelle*, such as Karl Rahner, Danielou, Violet and Henri de lu Bac. However, one of his great moments came when he was invited to attend the Vatican II proceedings as leading Protestant interpreter. In his positive response, regular attendance at meetings, and weekly return to the Free University to lecture on the most recent developments and to work on newspaper releases for the Dutch press, he played a role of major significance for the advancement of ecumenical ties between global Protestantism and Catholicism. As privileged students we marveled at the way this wise and comprehensively informed emissary could, by way of vivid narrative, carry the day-to-day reality of Vatican II into our midst. He made us proud... And added purpose to our lives! (It was no coincidence that I in later years became the founder of the first ecumenical movement among the African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe).

Years after his death 'myth-making' stories about Berkouwer still circulated among his friends, colleagues and former students. My favourite is the following: During the Vatican II celebrations two Dutchmen observed the festivities at St. Peter's Square in Rome. When the papal motorcade came past them with two dignitaries standing in the lead vehicle waving to the crowd, the one Dutchman shouted proudly in excitement: 'Look, there goes Berkouwer! But who that dude in the white garments next to him is, I really don't know.' 'Neither do I,' his friend concurred.

My comments here are not intended as critique of sainthood in the Roman Catholic tradition. After all I have myself hinted at three characters of the previous century who could qualify for such special attention in the service

of the Kingdom. I know too little about the spiritual conditions for such distinction. The Calvinism that has remained in my bones has not yielded the secrets in that realm. It would be more prudent for me to speak about the biblical 'cloud of witnesses'; a 'cloud' that lives in our midst, one that allows for the addition of all those Christ-like Christians, whose compelling witness and inspiration keep mobilizing us through the ages unto mission.

Finally, I wish to point out that this reflection on "the three Dutch Saints" is my somewhat indirect contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 celebrations. These are mere personal foot-notes. Nonetheless, 'foot-notes' sometimes hold significant clues for interpreting the text; and as I have been richly blessed through direct contact with the Dutch mission and ecumenical giants mentioned, it seemed appropriate to share these memories at this point in time. The Lord be praised!!