CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A POST-WORLD WAR II RESPONSE TO KARL BARTH AND RUDOLF BULTMANN: BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AND MODERN SCIENCE IN THE ‘DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH’ IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

In order to describe developments in the discussion of modern science and the interpretation of the Bible in the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk) in the last century, I will discuss a publication of this church from 1965/67: Geloof en Natuurwetenschap (Faith and Natural Science).1 Until 1945, the Dutch Reformed Church had paid very little attention to the problem of religion and science and its consequences for theology.2 This publication was intended as a new start to encourage attention to and discussion of the problem.

The Dutch Reformed Church is the creation of the Reformation in the Netherlands and has generally been considered the national church. Education in theology and for the ministry was entrusted to state universities, so the Church was fully cognizant with the development of scholarly research about the Bible.3 This educational system was different from that of the Gereformeerde church, which educated its

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1 Dippel and de Jong 1965, 1967. The publication was prepared by a study group appointed by the Theological Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church. Owing to the long duration of the activities of this group, it is unclear who had final responsibility for the publication: whether it was the synod, the theological commission, or the study group. I will here call the publication a ‘report,’ both because of the original synodal assignment and because it generally was considered as such.

2 This was not the case before 1900. For the period between the World Wars, see in particular the physicist, theologian, and pedagogue Kohnstamm 1926–31.

3 The so-called ‘duplex ordo’ implied a contractual cooperation of university and church which existed from 1876 until 2007. In it, the academic education of pastors was offered by the state universities and was followed by a short training period in a church seminary.
pastors at ecclesiastical institutions. This church, founded in 1886 under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper as a protest against liberal influence in the Dutch Reformed Church, was for many years a bulwark of the literal interpretation of the Bible.

The report of the Dutch Reformed Church of 1965/67 has to be considered in connection with the renewal which took place in the Netherlands after World War II. One part of this was the new church order of 1951, which can be characterized as setting out a new vision of the missionary task of the church in a modern secularizing society. The church put this task at the center of its thinking and work, by appointing commissions which were responsible for reporting on different aspects of church life and society such as education, pastoral care, politics, publicity, and broadcasting, ecumenical cooperation, etc. To understand the historical setting of our report it is necessary to pay attention to the vertical pluralism of Dutch society until the 1970s in which the different sociological groups (also known as blocks, or ‘pillars,’ from the literal translation of the Dutch term used to describe them, ‘zuil’) were ideologically, politically, and institutionally separated. For instance, theological education in the Gereformeerde church was entrusted to the (neo-Calvinist) Free University in Amsterdam and the Theological Academy in Kampen, and in the Hervormde (Dutch Reformed) church to the state universities of Amsterdam, Groningen, Leiden, and Utrecht. Consequently, the theological developments in the Hervormde and the Gereformeerde church differed greatly. In the context of our problem this difference became apparent at the Free University. Scholars there showed a considerable interest in the philosophy of the sciences, particularly in the so-called Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee of Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Hendrik Theodore Vollenhoven, of which Dutch Reformed scholars, by contrast, took hardly any notice. But this concern did not have much importance for our problem because of the strongly conservative conception of biblical interpretation at the Free University. A totally different situation existed in the Dutch Reformed scholarly tradition where historical-critical scholarship had always played an important role but where, on the other hand, interest in scientific-philosophical problems remained minimal. Thus the significance of the report Geloof en natuurwetenschap became clear in the Dutch Reformed context on which I focus in this article.

Thus in the same country and within the same Calvinist tradition sharply antagonistic developments took place. There was, however, some cooperation between the orthodox side of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Gereformeerde Church, particularly in the production of biblical commentaries. But in their theological views the two churches were radically divided from one another. (One clear example being the different reactions to the theology of Karl Barth.) Harinck 2008 and Visser 2008 clearly show how different the theological and exegetical developments were on both sides. Many things changed in the second half of the twentieth century. Both churches united as the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland in 2004, after forty years of intensive discussions. For the history and the end of the Gereformeerde exegetical tradition, see in addition Vos 1999.

After many years of preparatory discussions, the church order of 1951 put an end to the old order of 1816, which was believed to be hindering the church in its confessional task. This established the church in the position of a national religious society.