

# **RELIGIOUS FAITH AND VISIONS OF LIFE: A CRITICAL RETRIEVAL OF KUITERT'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF FAITH AND THEOLOGY**

## **An Exploratory Essay by Arnold De Graaff (2009), number A: 5**

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### **1. Introduction**

In the development of Reformed theology in Holland during the last fifty years Kuitert's teaching and writing has played a crucial role. His name must be added to the list of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Berkouwer. Even though he developed in a different direction after he retired, he has made a lasting contribution to theology. He was able to break away from a divine revelation based theology that held his predecessors in its grip. Because of his radical change in direction later in his life, there is a danger that his valuable insights will be lost or ignored. In many ways Reformed theology seems to be at a crossroads and tends to navigate between orthodoxy and some undefined middle ground. (1) For this reason it is important to engage in a critical retrieval of Kuitert's insights. There is much in his writings that present-day theology can build on. Most important of all, his insights are of crucial importance to develop an alternative perspective that might speak to the millions of Christians that have left the church. From the many clients I see each day I hear their deep sense of loss, the disillusionment, the search for a new home for their spirituality, and a longing for community. This exploratory paper is a beginning of such a retrieval and the formulation of an alternative vision.

Kuitert's unique contribution to theology cannot be understood apart from the period of Dutch history in which he developed his career. He was a pastor in a small village in the south-west of Holland from 1950 until 1955. There he experienced firsthand the disastrous flood when the North Sea broke through the dikes during a violent storm. The flood claimed many lives. After 1955 he became a student pastor at the University of Amsterdam until 1965. During those turbulent years fundamental changes took place in Dutch society. In 1965 he was appointed to the Free University in Amsterdam. His first assignment was in Systematic Theology, an area of theology he loved. However, after two years his assignment was changed to Ethics and only to the Introduction to Systematic Theology. He held this position until his formal retirement in 1989. During this time he wrote at least a dozen major books and numerous articles. In this first essay I am focusing primarily on his publications from 1965 until 1989.

After 1990 until the present he published more than seven other studies, in which he developed the final implications of his viewpoint. (2)

From the beginning of his career Kuitert responded frequently and passionately to the rapidly changing social situation in Holland. In hundreds of articles and numerous book reviews he struggled with and commented on all of the perplexing problems that rose during those days. (3) As a young adult during the Second World War he had to go in hiding and became part of the resistance movement. Along with many other young students at that time he immersed himself in existentialist philosophy and the theology of Karl Barth. After the war Holland was flooded with the accounts and images of the Nazi extermination camps, in which six million Jewish people were murdered along with hundreds of thousands political prisoners, homosexuals, Gypsies, and Jehovah's Witnesses. After Auschwitz nothing could be the same, including theology and ethics.

During the 60's and 70's Dutch society was shaken to its roots. People no longer "blindly" accepted the authority of the church and political leaders. They developed an independence and found their own voice. As the many booklets published during those years indicate, the inspiration and authority of the bible was widely questioned. Increased study of the origin, development and the final form of the various books of the bible radically changed the traditional view of the scriptures and the church's doctrines. The new-found emancipation and independence, the new economic prosperity and the new social security led to fundamental changes.

At the same time there was the post-war disillusionment with the past, the split within the (Christian) reformed churches during the war, the government policies with regard to the (former) Dutch colonies, the threat of a nuclear war, the peace movement, the public protests, the counter-culture, feminism and the new role of women. There was a radical change in morality with regard to sexuality, dancing, movies, Sunday observance, drugs, drinking, gambling, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, divorce, and civil disobedience. Every aspect of society was affected. All these changes led to a wide-spread "secularization" process. Within a few decades millions of people left the church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. From a deeply religious society Holland has become a "secular" society, in which Christianity now represents a minority along with other religions, particularly the Islamic faith because of the influx of foreign workers and refugees. (4)

Regardless of these fundamental changes, the basic questions of life had not gone away. As a result many people looked for new spiritual answers, since the traditional beliefs and morality no longer seemed relevant. Rather than "secularization", it is probably more helpful to see these changes in society in terms of emancipation, individualism and an emphasis on economic prosperity and consumption. There still remains a wide-spread interest in spirituality and values.

With these developments, the mindset and the worldview of people was transformed and changed drastically. T.V. images and news items from all over the world reached even the smallest villages in Holland that had been relatively isolated before the war. Issues and conflicts from every part of the globe, religious practices and local customs, space exploration and the expanding image of the universe, the rapid developments in the sciences, new archaeological discoveries, the increasing number of

nature programs, etc., became part of the daily news and entered and changed peoples' consciousness. What the parents and the grandparents could not have imagined became the common awareness of the generation that came of age after the war. The world had changed forever, including people's worldview, and there was no going back. (5)

The increased understanding of the slow development of the world over billions of years became an important part of the changing worldview. As more and more information and images penetrated people's consciousness, it began to challenge the traditional view of creation as portrayed in the book of Genesis and with it the view of God's presence in the world and his providence, and, later on, the God-image itself. It became evident that humans were late-comers - very late - in the development of the earth. Slowly it became clear that there was no perfect beginning, no paradise, no Adam and Eve as the first humans, no fall into sin, and no original promise of salvation. The traditional paradigm of "creation, fall into sin, salvation and fulfillment", became untenable. Up to the present, orthodox theology has hardly begun to incorporate this fundamental change in viewpoint. From the beginning, however, Kuitert was keenly aware of these issues and its implications, both because of his exposure to the natural sciences at the University of Amsterdam and the intense debates about the interpretation of Genesis and the theory of evolution in particular. (6)

The largest protestant church in Holland was the Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk). It came into existence during the time of the reformation. During the great synod of Dordt in 1618-1619 three forms of unity were adopted that formally unified the churches. In 1834 and in 1886, two groups split off from the national protestant church in protest against its "liberalism" and "critical" view of the scriptures. In 1892 they came together and formed the Christian Reformed Churches (de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland). During the last *fifty years* a serious attempt was made to re-unite the reformational churches in Holland. In 2004 three denominations, the Reformed Church, the Christian Reformed Church and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, finally were able to join together to form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland). This united church has about 1,800,000 members, which constitutes about 11% of the Dutch population. Meanwhile, many groups and individual congregations did not go along with the new united church. These divisions among the churches remained a life-long stumbling block for Kuitert. For him the Church of Jesus Christ did not exist, only an endless array of separate churches that disagree, excommunicate one another, or break formal ties with each other. (7,8)

It is during these turbulent times and radical social changes that Kuitert developed his controversial anthropological approach to theology. He saw clearly that if theology could not claim an exceptional position for itself at the university with an appeal to divine revelation, it would have to re-evaluate its place and role as an academic discipline. Given his assignment, this question pre-occupied him from the beginning of his academic career. In intense debate with Barth on the one hand and Pannenberg on the other, as well as many others, he developed a new basis for both Christian belief and theology. From his first publication onward, he tried to develop a third alternative between existential theology (Bultmann, Fuchs, Ebeling, and others) and the old orthodox, more rationalistic, meta-physical theology based on revelation.

Kuitert's response and that of many others to all these changes fifty years ago is as relevant today as it was then. Our mind-set has changed forever. The need for a new basis for our faith and theologizing has not changed from fifty years ago, if anything, it has increased. In view of our often agonizing world situation we need a new vision that will inspire and give rise to a new commitment and present a new call to faith and hope. Doing theology as usual and preserving as much of the old tradition as possible will not do. Whatever new direction we find, it needs to provide an alternative perspective that relates to our new global awareness, to our changed world picture, and the great challenges of our times. It needs to incorporate the changing view of the Christian scriptures and doctrines. I call it, the need for "a third alternative", a new vision of life between orthodoxy and mythology. In this struggle, a critical retrieval of Kuitert's fundamental insights can help us move forward.

## **2. Divine Revelation As The Authority For Faith And Life**

If the Christian faith and, consequently, Christian theology has no privileged position in the market place of religions, as Kuitert liked to say, then the Christian faith and theology need a new foundation. If they cannot appeal to their holy scriptures as the divinely inspired Word of God as their final authority – other religions make the same claims for their holy writings – then Christian belief needs to look for a new basis. As a result of the careful scholarship of the last century, including the work of many orthodox biblical scholars, it has become more and more apparent that the Christian scriptures are human documents. They are imbedded in the culture and history of their time of origin and reflect the period of history in which they were given their final form. These writings may be witnesses to their experiences with God and their confessions of faith, but they are not the divinely inspired Word of God.

Kuitert wrote his dissertation about the "anthropomorphic" way the scriptures talk about God (1967). If God is other than human, how else can we talk about the Transcendent One except in human terms, in human symbols and metaphors. During this time Kuitert also wrote several popular booklets about the scriptures which have been translated into English: *Signals From The Bible* (1972/1964) and *Do You Understand What You Read?* (1972/1968), in which he explored key themes in the bible and the increasing difficulties in interpreting the bible. The last booklet was part of a larger series by different orthodox theologians. It was an effort to bring the congregations up-to-date with what had been happening in biblical research. (9)

In his *Do You Understand What You Read?* he listed many of the contested passages in the bible, like: Joshua commanding the sun and the moon to stand still (Joshua 10); the legends about Elisha, the fable of Judges 9, and the "teaching story" or parable of Jonah (midrash); the rock of I Corinthians 10 that followed the people of Israel in the desert, probably based on rabbinical stories; the kidneys as the source of emotional life in Proverbs 23; Adam as the first sinner in Romans 5 and Eve as the first sinner in I Timothy 2; and so on. Many other examples are listed in the other booklets in the same series, including the many discrepancies between the gospels. In view of these problems, he asked, how can the scriptures still be considered trustworthy?

He highlighted these problems to illustrate that we cannot interpret these passages in a literal historical way. Instead, the bible must be interpreted according to its *nature and intention* as a book of faith; a

book about people bearing witness and confessing their faith. In what way can we today, with our increased knowledge of the bible, speak of its trustworthiness as the Word of God? It also raises questions about article 5 of the Belgic Confession, one of the three historic confessions of the Reformed churches. It reads: “*The authority of scripture: we receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them...because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God....*”

To most orthodox biblical scholars it had become evident during the last decades that the traditional doctrine of divine inspiration, whether “mechanical”, “literal” or “organic” (by means of the personality and worldview of the various authors) could no longer account for the scriptures as divine revelation. There were too many discrepancies and difficulties that could not be explained away. The scriptures are human writings that reflect the time of their origin. Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches added their own official booklets to this stream of publications. (10) It was a valiant effort to stem the tide. Even the attempt to “retreat” to and hold on to the central theme of the gospels - salvation in Jesus Christ – was of no avail. The choice of a central theme seemed arbitrary, since there were many themes in the scriptures, and it raised serious questions about the place and interpretation of the Old Testament. (11) Even with regard to “salvation in Jesus Christ” there are different emphases and interpretations within the New Testament.

It is interesting to see, for example, how in 2000 the *Protestant Church in the Netherlands*, which was still in the process of uniting, “cobbled together” a statement of faith with regard to Jesus Christ in which all the different views were combined together. (12)

In *De Realiteit van het Geloof*, (1966), which has been translated into English (*The Reality of Faith*), Kuitert tried to find a third position to describe the historical basis of the Christian faith. It was an alternative that was neither totally subjective and personal as in existential theology nor totally objective and timeless as in the older, more rationalistic, meta-physical theology based on revelation. The history of Israel and the early church comes to us through the accounts of many witnesses, which each have their own story to tell. However, the boundaries of their subjective accounts is in the events themselves. Their stories may differ and they are told in the language and worldview of their time, but they witness to certain events. It is like the various eye-witness accounts of a car accident. Their testimonies may differ, but no one would doubt that an accident took place. The event they experienced is the “core” and their subjective accounts are the “package” or the wrapping. These two cannot always be distinguished clearly. The only way the core tradition comes to us is in the images and words of the past. There is no voice from heaven that comes from the outside to enter our world. Thus there is no eternal, time-less revelation, we only have the time-conditioned and culturally-conditioned traditions and testimonies of faith. Although witness accounts, Kuitert did believe that there was a reality that corresponded to the believers’ faith. (13)

Because the beliefs expressed in the scriptures come to us in the images of the past Kuitert maintained that the essential meaning of that (core) tradition must be continually re-formulated. Each generation anew must appropriate and pass on the good news. We are historical creatures that can only speak in the images of our time. Worldviews change and become outdated. The images and expressions of the

near-eastern culture of long ago are mostly foreign to us. In many instances we only have sketchy information about the political, economic and social situation. For that reason alone we need historical-critical methods to interpret the scriptures in order to come to know their historical setting. The scriptures must be interpreted if we are to understand something of their meaning for us today. In fact we only have the interpreted scriptures in the bible itself and up till today. (14)

Thus far Kuitert's understanding of the historical nature of the bible and its relevance for today. What I take from it is that the accounts of the final authors are *testimonies of faith*, as Kuitert illustrates. They *bear witness* to God's covenant dealings with Israel and, through his final representative Jesus Christ, with the whole world. Thus, they are not just giving a report of some accident to the police or describing an exciting trip, rather they speak about their experience with God as believers. Their testimony is of a unique kind. They are *confessions of faith* and a *call to faith*. In short, the scriptures speak from the point of view of actual believing, of ultimate trust, surrender, certainty, and deep conviction. As in all religions, including the Christian religion, it is a place beyond which we do not ask further. It is the basic belief from out of which people live.

As testimonies of faith the history of Israel and the early church has ultimate meaning for our lives today as well. It is history that says something and that does something, not only for us but for generations to come. It is full of promise and as long as history goes on its abiding meaning will not be exhausted. It is for this reason that each generation is called to make the tradition its own, to *re-formulate* it in images of our time and to *actualize and live* that faith in our situation. Only then can we hope that the next generation can appropriate the faith in turn and pass it on to their children. More about this in later sections.

As far as I am aware, Kuitert did not return to his third alternative in relation to subjectivism (Bultmann, et al.) and objectivism (the protestant scholastic tradition). It is understandable he abandoned this approach with its view of a historical core presented in the form of witness accounts. Ultimately there was no solution to work out this distinction in practice. The historicity of many events turned out to be thoroughly "imbedded" in oral traditions, folk tales, mythological images, additions, different sources woven together, final compositions from a faith point of view, and so on. So how can one sort out what is historical and what not? As biblical scholarship advanced, it became more and more apparent that the various books of the bible went through a longer or shorter history of development and reflect the different sources and genres of their final composition.

At the same time it is unfortunate he abandoned this approach entirely, because it could have helped him to make a *connection between his anthropological foundation of religious faith and the experiences of faith witnessed to in the bible. If the various religions, including the Christian religion, are an answer to the ultimate questions of life, it would have provided him with a way to compare the answers of the biblical witnesses to those of other books of faith.*

Moreover it would have enabled him to distinguish between those testimonies that seem right and helpful and those that we would reject as outdated or even wrong. Then the scriptures could have been a great help to re-formulate our convictions and our vision of life in view of what we know today about

love, commitment, trust, care, justice, equality, respect, tolerance, sexuality, intimacy, wholeness, healing, guilt, forgiveness, redemption, happiness, peace, and so on.

Having personally struggled with the increasing difficulties of the orthodox view of the bible, Kuitert searched for a new foundation. This new basis would have to be found within this creation and within our human experience, if there is no divine voice from heaven and no divine authority. All we know is our world and our human history. To take recourse to Divine Revelation, even if focused on a (humanly chosen) central theme of the bible, was not a possibility for Kuitert. It would have meant the impossibility of dialogue with non-Christians and a privileged position for Christian theology as an academic discipline among other disciplines. For him the basis could only be found in the *common, human phenomenon of religious belief*, which could be discussed and validated with anyone who wanted to participate in the debate. We will come back to this later to see how he argued for this new approach to theology and what conditions it had to fulfill to be considered to be an academic discipline.

### **3. General Revelation vs. Special Revelation**

In coming to terms with Karl Barth's existential view of revelation, Kuitert also questioned the traditional reformed distinction between general and special revelation. This view was based on the belief by Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and many others, that all people have some awareness of a Creator. This general knowledge is not some "strange" kind of awareness, separate from God. Rather, it is "natural" to all people to have some sense of the Divine. Christians believe that God has not abandoned his creatures but has left them with some knowledge of Himself. This belief that all people have some awareness of God and of what is right and wrong, was developed further in the doctrine of general revelation and common grace.

The Belgic Confession (one of the three forms of unity of the reformed churches, along with the Canons of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism) formulates it in article 2 as follows:

"We know him (God) by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own."

Remnants of the knowledge of God, and remnants of goodness remain in people, thanks to God's general revelation and his restraining or common grace. This natural knowledge of God and this natural sense of right and wrong unites all people and makes it possible to develop and maintain a public morality. As creatures, people have an awareness of the Creator. They are focused on this world, but this world points beyond itself to something ultimate. The ordinary world in which we find ourselves is the world of God's creation. *This world with its meanings is the common meeting place for all people. In this way general revelation is the prerequisite for special revelation.* It is the foundation upon which Christian belief is built.

Although this viewpoint maintained the intrinsic connection of the scriptures and belief with this creation and our human experience, Kuitert considered it inadequate for today. First of all it assumes a rather static world picture, in which God reveals himself in nature and history. This general revelation within the world of our experience (nature and history) gives rise to a common set of values and understandings that all people share. In that more static world of the sixteenth century this view made sense. There were commonly held beliefs and values in society. But with the enlightenment this picture changed radically. It gave rise to many other viewpoints (inspired by Kant, Schleiermacher, etc.). These views of life have multiplied with the result that we live in a pluralistic society with many beliefs and values.

The key point, however, is that general and special revelation only referred to the different *content* of each kind of revelation. *Both were considered revelation.* "General" related to the common knowledge of God and the commonly held values, and "special" to the witness of the evangelists and apostles about Jesus which in turn referred back to Israel's experience with God. *"Special" was not intended to mean isolated and separate from human history and culture.* Ultimately there is only one revelation, God revealing himself to his creatures. The Creator-God is the same God as the Redeemer-God. In our human culture, carried by norms and values, we encounter the God of salvation. The distinction was confusing and easily led to the idea that general revelation was somehow lower or less important than special revelation..

This distinction is no longer adequate today, according to Kuitert. Too easily it led to the view that special revelation comes to us via a different way than general revelation, namely, in a supra-natural way. When we adopt that viewpoint we can no longer meaningfully appeal to general human knowledge and experience. Then life becomes empty and devoid of (ultimate) meaning. When life no longer reveals God's presence, then God has to break into the ordinary, secular course of life to make himself known. In the end this distinction and separation tends to lead to a new kind of dualism, as in the supra-naturalistic view of revelation of Karl Barth and others. (15) Within reformed theology too these problems concerning divine revelation and creation have never been resolved.

Although Kuitert does not refer to the issue of divine creation ordinances in this context, he could have made a similar argument. However, he does touch upon this issue in several essays dealing with ethics, both the new Roman Catholic social ethics and the appeal to scripture in Protestant ethics. He gives many examples of the untenable use of scripture to defend certain social and moral practices. (16) The idea of divinely ordained natural laws or an eternal creation order was and still is invariably used to defend the status quo and the existing power structures. Calvinistic (as well as Roman Catholic) churchmen and magistrates in Holland defended their laws and practices by referring to God's creation ordinances with arbitrary references to isolated or even fragments of texts in the bible. In this way they justified slavery, child labour, exploitation, inequality, submission to authority, class structure, holy or just wars, banning women from public and church office, the authority of husbands over their wives and children, the gruesome torturing and killing of heretics, sodomites, witches, and so on. It is a tragic history of the powerful enriching themselves and maintaining the status quo in the name of God. (17) One can wonder if with the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Calvin's birth this year, there will be any acknowledgment of the dark side of Calvinism alongside of its many positive contributions.

Kuitert rightly asserts that all of our social and political structures are of an historical nature and, therefore, relative to our time and culture. As society changes our sense of right and wrong needs to be re-formulated again and again. *We can only encounter God in this world, but his good order for life does not come to us in eternal, a-historical ordinances.* In the scriptures we can read *what God's intention is for humanity and for the world, and how that intention was understood and obeyed in a particular time of history.* (18)

As we look back, even within conservative, orthodox circles, the understanding of the eternal creation ordinances change over time, depending on the historical situation. However, every (reluctant) change leaves a world of suffering in its wake. When the views about "submission to authority", "knowing your place in society", "respecting your boss", "accepting your lot", "the evil of protesting against unfair wages", "the divine right to private property", "joining revolutionary movements" - all as part of God's will - finally began to change in Holland after the war under the pressure of the socialist party, a lot of damage had been done.

It is one thing to read the sociological studies and statistics of wages and expenses among different classes of society from 1850 to 1950 and the changes that took place over time, but it is quite another thing to read what those conditions were actually like for the workers and their families. One only needs to read *Landarbeiders* (Farmhands, 1981) by Kees Slager to realize what the implications were of these numbers. (19) The book contains the personal stories of about sixty day labourers and farmhands and their families from the islands in Zeeland, below Rotterdam. These families lived under the most miserable conditions in substandard housing and suffered extreme poverty and humiliating treatment. Even children often had to get up before dawn, walk for miles, work the land in the heat or in the rain and mud or the frost; return in the dark; had little to eat; were dead tired and had to do it all over again the next day. The work was back-breaking, and if there was no work, there was no food, or fuel, or rent, or anything else. The women had one baby after the other, because birth control was against God's will. Many children died very young and those who survived were needed to earn a few more pennies for the family. Scores of very talented children over many generations could not continue their schooling because they had to join their family and work on the land.

These dehumanizing and humiliating conditions existed for a century and a half in many other parts of the countryside as well, particularly in Friesland and Groningen. After the great flood in 1953 more radical changes came about in Zeeland. Those living then experienced the social security and old age pension as heaven on earth. My father remembers that during his school years from 1906-1912, the children of the poor families were allowed to leave early so that they could beg for a slice of bread from the rich (Christian) farmers on the way home. For many that would be the supper for the family. I am not aware that there has ever been a "truth and reconciliation" event organized by the church and the Christian political parties, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, or others that were co-responsible for these conditions. This book gives these farm workers a very personal voice and a memory.

One thing I am aware of is that orthodox theologians in Holland can argue (and condemn) as vigorously as ever about divine creation ordinances, but this time on the internet for all the world to witness. A recent flurry of controversy was occasioned by a right-wing Christian political party not allowing women

to sit in parliament. This was considered discrimination by others and the court ruled that the government could not provide financial support for this party. Texts of the apostle Paul were analysed all over again, but the verdict remained the same: the scriptures do not allow it. There were some lonely voices (by women) who recited all the passages in the New Testament that mention women teaching, leading, prophesying, evangelising, praying, co-working with others, etc. Of course these responses start from the same premises as the others with regard to scripture as divine revelation. Not only women in office in equal positions with men is condemned with an appeal to the creation order, but women's head dress, divorce, lesbian couples adopting children, homosexual marriage, as well as many other issues. In this regard certain segments of the church have not learned much from the past, or show awareness of the suffering their man-made rules have brought about.

Realizing the impossibility of making the Word of God, or God's general revelation or God's natural law or divine creation ordinances, the basis for faith and life, Kuitert searched for another foundation. He found it in the general anthropological givens about the nature of religious faith. Instead of Revelation, he asserted, we need a general *anthropological foundation* for religion, including the Christian faith. This change was a radical departure from the traditional approach. Unfortunately he started with "a small anthropological foundation" of religious faith ("een klein anthropologisch vloertje").

We could have wished he would have gone all the way. If he had done so he might have discovered more of the general nature of belief. He might have seen that the Christian religion, as a lived-faith is an integral part of life. That it shares the nature of faith with all its inseparable moments (like conviction, surrender, commitment, sharing, sacrifice, imagination, expression, celebration, etc.) with all other faiths. He might have concluded that our ultimate convictions are the visions by which we live. From there it would have led him to a fundamental comparison of various worldviews, Once on that track, he would have realized that he would have to add an epistemological, cosmological, societal, and historical foundation to his anthropological basis. Together these 'foundations' would have represented the multi-dimensional unity of creation, or, for short, a phenomenological foundation or frame of reference. See chapter 6 of my *The Gods in Whom They Trusted* (to be published in the fall of 2016). Such an extended foundation would have saved him from his rationalistic turn later on.

Given where he started from in the 1960's and what he inherited - the bible as the divinely inspired Word of God, a non-functional general revelation, and a misuse of creation ordinances with its arbitrary appeal to scripture - we can understand the limitations of the radical change he made in making the anthropology of religion the basis of faith and theology.

For Kuitert this new basis for both faith and theology can only be found in the common, human phenomenon of religious belief. Ultimate faith, which we assume or beyond which we do not ask further, seems to be a universal human characteristic. As meaning-experiencing and meaning-giving creatures, holding to some ultimate vision seems to be constitutive of our being. To trust in life and to be able to exist from day to day we need some ultimate certainty or basic faith that we hold to be true. Believing seems to be both necessary and very natural to humans. (20)

To give meaning is to place something in a larger perspective. It is this larger whole that gives everyday experiences their meaning. We cannot create this larger perspective ourselves, because we cannot overlook our lives, nor can we overlook history or look into the future. We cannot place ourselves outside of our limited existence. When we act in whatever way, we do so in the hope and in the trust of the good outcome of our actions. But we never know for sure. We act in faith. If we did not we would be immobilized. At this point Kuitert makes an important distinction. Because we first of all experience meaning, we can give meaning. There is a larger whole that gives meaning, or at least, we assume there is meaning. If we were not surrounded by meaning, we would fall into a complete subjectivism or nihilism. If we did not choose some ultimate meaning, we would be lamed and unable to act. (21)

We act upon and intervene in this world. But we always do so in the hope of the good outcome of our actions. All our personal and cultural actions show that even though we cannot oversee the outcome, we are nevertheless able to act and not retreat in fear. We seem to have a basic trust in life that we express in our ultimate beliefs about life. Here Kuitert refers to Erickson's view of the child's initial basic trust (or, when traumatized, distrust) that forms the basis of his or her emotional security (or insecurity) in life. He interprets this basic emotional trust in a broad anthropological way as a core faith ("oergeloof") or fundamental belief. It is an implicit faith in life. This does not mean that our faith is never challenged or doubted, or that we are never afraid or despair. On the contrary, it is of the very nature of faith that we entrust ourselves to what is ultimately unknown and what we cannot prove. This kind of fundamental faith is shared by all people. It is a human given. (22)

From the beginning Kuitert states that religious faith can be studied from many points of view. It can be investigated from a sociological or psychological point of view, or from a historical or a cultural-anthropological viewpoint, and so on. His own references are primarily to the philosophy and phenomenology of religion (W.C. Smith; J. Bowker), the sociology of religion (Weber; Durkheim; Berger) and the psychology of religion, particularly the idea of projection (Feuerbach; Freud; etc.). We could have wished that from his keen awareness of the basic assumptions of these various schools of thought and disciplines, he would have ferreted out more of the valuable insights of these religious studies and placed them in a more integral perspective. However he was at the beginning of this approach to theology and pretty much alone in this effort. He did realize that future studies would have to be of a much more inter-disciplinary nature. (23)

So far Kuitert has focused on what we could call the foundational or grounding role of faith - his view of basic trust or entrusting. In this way all people are "religious". In order to live and act and not be immobilized we need some secure place to stand.

## **5. The Ultimate Questions of Life**

Our beliefs not only give us an ultimate security to live from day to day, but they also provide us with answers to the existential questions that life presents. Our faith provides a foundation and makes us realise that nothing is closed off in itself and that everything points beyond itself to some ultimate dimension. It seems that every human experience has a depth or spiritual dimension that cannot be contained or explained by any "that is nothing but" view or theory. There is a mystery and wonder, a

tragicness and ecstasy to life that poets, composers, musicians, artists and actors seek to interpret. It is a depth that makes us weep or cry for joy at the unexpected outcome. We despair because it seems hopeless or we bravely face the future again, trembling, but hoping against hope. It is this depth dimension of every-day life that makes us search for answers to our ultimate questions.

Kuitert did not present an overview of these ultimate questions. In many different places, however, he referred to these core questions. (24) Following is a summary. The questions are familiar to all of us. They are the universal questions that touch upon the core issues of life. We could call them ultimate concerns or the fundamental questions of our existence. They have to do with the unpredictability of life, with suffering and death, with injustice and oppression, with cruelty and evil, with freedom and peace, with security and happiness, with sexuality and love, with the origin of life and our destiny, with the meaning and purpose of life, with our responsibilities and failures, with our need for redemption and reconciliation.

He highlighted the unpredictability and precarious of life and that we have only limited control over our existence. We must make choices, yet our freedom is limited. The future is inscrutable and impenetrable. Often life seems arbitrary and fickle. A plane crashes and kills a family eating dinner. There are many threatening forces in nature. Storms and floods can overtake and kill us in spite of severe weather warnings. There are epidemics, diseases, fires, drowning, freak accidents that kill or maim and leave survivors marked for life.

In relation to the limitations and precariousness of life, we question if there is any meaning to life at all. "Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What am I doing here? What am I supposed to do?", these are not just questions adolescents ask themselves. We wonder about the origin of life and where we came from. As a result we search for clarity, for certainty, for security, for the courage to be and face life. We make choices in the hope of a good outcome. We hope for happiness and prosperity, for health and well-being, for vitality and a good old age. We marvel at the beauty of nature and take comfort in the rising of the sun each day. We are dependent on others and are moved when someone is caring. And each time again we are surprised by the great generosity of people. We are overwhelmed when love happens. Often we are surprised by joy. How is this possible that, in spite of everything, there is care, love, joy, respect, consideration, justice, well-being and happiness in the world?

At the same time, we also face adversity and have to deal with unfairness. We experience or see the injustice in the world. There are no equal opportunities. Human rights are trampled upon. People are capable of great good and sacrifice, but also of unspeakable cruelty. In the name of God or national security, or because of greed and lust for power, people are tortured and killed. The cries of millions of children echo through the universe and will not be silenced. Extreme poverty, hunger and starvation are the lot of countless people. Modern slavery flourishes, and who will count the number of abused persons? Where does all this evil come from, or can't we ask who or what is behind our own personal and collective responsibility and failures? What do we do with our guilt and shame and our need for forgiveness? Can there be reconciliation and healing? Is there redemption?

Such is life. In the end we all die and all things pass away. Is there a future for the earth, for human kind? Is there hope beyond death and, if so, what kind of hope?

For Kuitert it is these predicaments and ultimate concerns religions and views of life seek to answer. To live and act we need some meaning and some way to make sense of our existence. Sports, reality T.V. and shopping can only distract us for so long. Religions and philosophies of life differ both historically and cross-culturally, but they all struggle with the same questions. Without some existential frame of reference we cannot live. Our experiences in life, in its depth and ultimacy, demand interpretation and explanation. The uncertainty of life and the unknown demand an ultimate frame of reference by which we can live and we do not rest until we find such a vision of life. This is how Kuitert explained both the need for and the reality of religious beliefs.

## **6. Religious Faith as Provisional Images of God**

Given that we are meaning seekers, what do people consider to be cues or signals of the Ultimate, the Transcendent or God? What do people point to? What do they consider to be revelation of God, or, if not of God, what do they assume to be self-evident, revealing, or ultimate in life? What basic assumptions do people hold and on what do people base their assumptions? What evidence do they appeal to?

It seems that from the very beginning early humans attributed meaning to the invisible powers evident in nature, in the setting of the sun and it's rising again the next day and the mystery of birth, death, and re-birth. They found evidence in the mysterious powers of the great animals they hunted that provided food and safe-guarded their precarious existence. Or they found security in the mysterious cycles of nature with its fertility, or the course of the stars, the sun and the moon. All the different powers of nature that seemed beyond their control became a source of hope, of inspiration, of dread, of sacrifice, of worship, demanding certain rituals and a way of life. As the powers and the course of nature became more and more known, all this changed. Yet, though we understand a great deal more about nature than in previous centuries, the mystery or the depth dimension of physical and organic life remains. Ultimately it is something that cannot be reduced to or grasped in biological concepts. (25)

Traditionally the answer to these questions has been that people appeal to divine revelation. Christians have turned to the bible and the Christian tradition. For Kuitert this is not a sufficient answer, since the scriptures are a collection of human documents that reflect the history and culture of their time. They are part of human history and they reflect the faith of a people at a certain time in history. There is no special divine revelation that comes from the outside and breaks into our world and the course of history. There is no authoritative Word of God that can serve as the final court of appeal.

All we have in this world is our experience and the tradition in which we stand and what it reveals to us. *Whatever signals of God there may be, they can only be found in this creation.* There is no other starting point than people's experience of Transcendence. It is for this reason Kuitert strongly opposes the views of Barth, Bultmann, and other existentialist theologians that tried to find some supra-natural entrance for God's Word, even if it is only in the flash of the existential moment and the personal encounter. (26)

As meaning makers that search for ultimate certainty, people do not choose a certain belief arbitrarily. They base their choice on what they have found meaningful in life. Ultimate viewpoints represent deep convictions. They are the kind of convictions that make people say: “the most important thing in my life is...” or, “all that matters is...” Such faith involves a deep commitment and something for which they are willing to sacrifice or even to die. Ultimate beliefs represent the truth about life, a final certainty. It is as if we are standing at the edge of what we can oversee and scan the horizon for the meaning of life. We peer into the past, as far as we can see, we consider the tradition in which we stand, we look around us at other traditions, we try to imagine the future, and then we come to our personal point of view.

Kuitert has a marvellous word for such ultimate viewpoints that is hard to translate. He calls it a “zoekontwerp”, which means an image or representation that is the result of an intense search for ultimate meaning. (27) Having searched the universe, we come to a conclusion. However, because there is no voice from the other side, no final authority, we can never have more than a provisional image. All the givens aren’t in yet. We don’t know the final outcome of the course of history. We don’t know how things will unfold. Meanwhile we live by faith and hope. We can and do hope that there is a reality that corresponds to our vision, if we have a religious faith. This is true for the Christian vision as well. God reveals himself through nature and history, which means through what people do and think and leave behind. For the truth of that vision we appeal to the cumulative experience of countless generations before us and we await its confirmation both now in our own experience and in the future. (28)

But *the answers need to make sense of our experience*. They need to be relevant, otherwise we look elsewhere. This point is crucial to Kuitert’s perspective. Out-dated points of view do not last very long. Traditions have a strong hold on life, sometimes a strangle-hold, but if they no longer fit experience they lose their relevance. Especially in times of radical social change and upheaval, old traditions are discarded. When that happens, people look for new answers and for new forms of spirituality. *People have to be able to experience the traces of God in their lives* if their ultimate belief is to be meaningful. If not, they may pay lip-service to it for a while, but sooner or later they will abandon their old belief and look for a new vision that makes more sense of their experience.

Faith is not just a basic trust and a deep surrender. It is that, but it is also a sure knowledge. Understanding is an integral part of believing, according to Kuitert. Faith has its reasons. It makes sense of our world, ultimate sense. In the end our experience is the criteria for a belief’s relevance. For a view of life is not just a vision, but something we live by; it involves a way of life. If it is meaningful, belief involves a way of living, of commitment, of celebration, of sacrifice, of action, of sharing a vision, of deeply held values, and so on. True faith, if it is really what we believe, is an integral part of our daily lives.

*By experience Kuitert does not mean that our experience becomes the final arbitrator of what we can believe and what not*. Experience is not the ultimate judge of whether or not our faith is justified. He clearly means to say that *in our experience* we need to be able to discover something of God’s presence. Where else shall we encounter Him if it is not in our daily lives? Our faith needs to be real if it is to mean anything. We need to be able to think, feel, sense, encounter something Other than ourselves and feel challenged, confronted, guided, encouraged, comforted, in short, we need to experience Him. We need

to be able to say, as the title of the book goes, "Its Him Again!" (van Peursen). Or we need to be able to answer Bonhoeffer's question, "what do I *really* believe?". How do our beliefs correspond to something real in our lives, something we can experience, something that enables us to give a good account of our faith? For Kuitert, if our statements of faith do not point to real experiences, they have little validity. Then they are other-worldly, un-communicable and un-shareable. (29)

So the question remains, how is this world and our experience revelatory? How can we meaningfully speak about the evocativeness of life? And how can we relate this revelation of Transcendence to the witness of the scriptures and the Christian tradition? In the section on "Life As Revelatory" we will seek to answer these questions. First we need to look closely at the non-religious visions of life.

## **7. Non-Religious Images or Visions of Life**

Are all beliefs, religious beliefs? Kuitert is not always clear about this issue, or, at least, he does not develop this idea. According to him, it is not easy to distinguish between religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs. Structurally both kinds of belief appeal to an ultimate source that gives meaning to daily life, and therefore should be considered "religion" ("godsdiens"). This terminology is confusing and in the end could be considered "pejorative". It would seem better to use words like "ultimate convictions", or "visions of life", or "world-and-life views", or even "faiths". In passing he mentions, perhaps somewhat flippantly, that for some the ultimate meaning of life is "Ajax", a famous Dutch soccer team, or the local pub. (30)

Nowhere, as far as I am aware, does he seriously discuss non-religious worldviews in the light of his anthropological foundation of ultimate beliefs. To do so, he would have had to *re-examine his idea of transcendence, which he considered equal to some sense of final Power or God*, something beyond which there is nothing higher or stronger. Instead it is possible to take a much more "structural" approach to ultimate beliefs. Then ultimate first of all means *that which we hold as ultimate*, that which has our ultimate trust, that which gives us certainty. Only in this way can we say that all people have an ultimate perspective or an ultimate belief they live by. In this way "religion" or faith or belief is constitutive of human nature.

One of Kuitert's (friendly) critics, P.B. Cliteur (31), makes clear that as a Humanist he finds that foundation and perspective in the meaning-giving role of his world-and-life view. It is the integrating function of ultimate life views that is central. Such basic views provide meaning, perspective, coherence, order, support, and, for the Humanist, fundamental values like freedom, autonomy, solidarity, and self-realization. With regard to the nature and function of ultimate beliefs we can only agree with Cliteur.

He also raises interesting questions with regard to ideologies and pleads for a more careful delineation. One could add other questions, like can one hold to two ultimate beliefs at the same time, like a neo-liberal ideology with its free market doctrine and a Christian faith? If so, does that mean a person lives a split life between one's private and public life, or does the one ultimately win out over the other? (32) Another question Cliteur alerts us to is how the spirit of an age, like post-modernism, affects all beliefs, whether religious or not. Non-religious visions of life are equally time-conditioned and become

outdated. As a result adherents face the same challenge of re-formulation as new experience and knowledge accumulates and changes our worldview.

One reason that religious and non-religious visions of life need to be considered on an equal basis, is because there are no absolute divisions. That is not to say that all religions and all world-and-life views are basically the same, but they all struggle with the same ultimate questions and predicaments of life. Most important, however, is that each religion and each non-religious vision sees something of the truth about life. No ultimate vision possesses the absolute truth or the whole truth. We all see partly and provisionally. This means there is a lot of need for open dialogue, for comparing and for learning from one another. Especially the Christian religion because of its dualistic and spiritualistic tendencies and history has a lot to learn from others in order to develop a more integral view of life.

For example, the spiritual psychotherapy inspired by the Buddhist faith (of practicing mindfulness and loving-kindness toward self and others), has something additional and other to offer than traditional Christian pastoral counselling. Buddhist meditation practices touch a reality and a depth of life-situations as in the tapes and books of Pema Chodron (*When Things Fall Apart; Comfortable With Uncertainty; The Places That Scare You; Awakening Loving-kindness; etc.*). These kinds of approaches teach us to be at peace at the core of our being regardless of our situation. Her approach reminds me of the pastoral counselling booklets of Nico ter Linde. He too had a way of meeting people in the depth of their distress and life-predicaments without judgment, standing next to them. (33)

## **8. Signals or Traces of God In the World**

Although Kuitert's discussion is limited to religious beliefs, given that limitation, he does raise the question how our experience reveals or points to God? The *signals of God* Kuitert refers to remain rather general and vague. What does it mean concretely that God speaks to us through nature, history and, especially, our own and our collective experience? It is clear that he does not mean some kind of very personal, mystical experience, or is it? Nor does he mean some kind of natural theology that by reason seeks to prove the existence of God, or any other variation of natural theology that is not based on revelation. How does this creation with its long evolution as we have come to know it in this twentieth century reveal God to us? Nature is both astounding, beautiful, amazing, intricate, and complex to us, but also cruel, merciless, awful, devastating, and catastrophic. Given what we are coming to know about the development of the earth and human kind, how are we to understand God's actions in nature?

Secondly, with regard to both general (Western) history and the history of Christianity, how do they reveal "God's hand" in history? How does the long, checkered history of the Christian church with its perseverance, faithfulness and caring, but also with its crusades, persecutions, murders, witch hunts, banishments, excommunications, divisions, accommodations to the morality of the time, catering to the rich and powerful, and so on - it is a long list - how does that history reveal God's guidance? Or how does the history of the Christianized Western world with its great accomplishments, but also with its endless wars, colonialism, slavery, killing, domination and plundering of the non-western world, and so on, how does that history reveal the hand of God? Were Christians not part and parcel of that history?

Can we so easily distance ourselves from that history by saying that in spite of all that God preserved his church throughout the ages, a church with its endless schisms, doctrinal disputes, lack of tolerance and outdated views that have made it irrelevant for millions of people?

Kuitert did plead for the radical renewal of the church again and again throughout his writings. For him the church needed to re-invent itself, if it was not to lose its relevancy. He believed that most, if not all, of its doctrines were outdated, including its view of scripture, the trinity, the two natures of Christ, the creation of the world, original sin, redemption, and so on. They needed to be discarded or fundamentally changed and re-formulated. But with regard to being able to elaborate upon what the “signals of God in the world” could mean, he remained too much the theologian. If the appeal to the scriptures as the final authority no longer holds, and if the only court of appeal is our collective and individual experience, much more would have to be said about that experience. His focus remained too narrow and too theological. From “a small anthropological foundation” (“een klein anthropologisch vloertje”), as he put it, he would have had to embrace a more total anthropological and cultural foundation and define his theology from out of that perspective. From that point of view he might have seen more clearly *how a “lived-faith” functions in an integral way in all of life.*

In spite of his intention there remained an ambiguity in his view of the relation between creation and redemption, between (our collective) experience and revelation. In many places he comes very close to describing how life can be revelatory, but in the end it remains somewhat vague and there is no specific content to the presence of God in our lives. After the *Reality of Faith* (1966) and two collections of essays (*Anders Gezegd*, 1970; *Om en Om*, 1972), he published his next significant study called *Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel* (1974), which has been translated in English (*The Necessity of Faith*).

Right from the beginning he states that we are surrounded by God and religion, in as much as there is a culture with its norms, values and ideals. Religion is *implicit or imbedded* in a culture. Its *norms and values* are the offspring or the result of God’s presence in this world and his future purposes for life. They have something to do with the coming of the Kingdom of God (36). It is in this world that we encounter God. There is evidence of God in our culture as we keep it afloat by *our politics, our social order, and personal morality*. We encounter him indirectly, which makes it hard at times to recognize him and to name his presence. God’s redemption of life happens *through us and our world, through our responsibility*. We have a *fundamental role* to play in God’s way with this world. God makes his way in this creation *through what we make of this world and what we do to and with each other* (34). God the Creator cannot be separated from God the Redeemer.

His next book, *Wat Heet Geloven* (1977), is an elaboration of the previous one, but it has a different emphasis, which we will come back to in the last section on theology. This study is not translated but the title and subtitle could be described as: “what do we call faith and what is the origin and structure of faith statements?”. He repeats some of the same points as in the previous book, but he does not expand further on the nature and content of the signals or cues of God in the world. In 1982 he wrote a chapter in an anniversary volume for the well-known Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx. The article is entitled (translated freely), “Revelation and Experience; these are not mutually exclusive”

(35). In it he comes as close to explaining what he means by experience as revelatory of God as anywhere else in his writings.

In this article he stated that the experiences of generations of Christians before us - the tradition handed down to us - and our personal experiences, there are also the generally accepted "*givens of experience*". By these givens Kuitert means our general knowledge or convictions about *the earth, about the structures of society, about fairness and injustice, about right and wrong, in short, about generally accepted insights and standards of morality*, as they are evident in our culture and in our time in history. In the cumulative experiences of a particular culture we can see the "deposit" of God's redeeming presence. Kuitert refers with approval to Kuyper's view of God's common grace. (36) The changing givens of experience (new practices, new insights, etc.) have often had a corrective influence on the Christian tradition, for example, with regard to the age of the earth, or what oppression and injustice means in a particular situation, and so on. *Here he touches upon what I have called a phenomenological frame of reference and a phenomenological ethics.*

All these experiences may become places where we can discover God. For example, not that the poor, or the oppressed, or the black, or the refugees, or the slums, and so on, not that these in themselves are places where we can discover God. Rather, since "the poor and the oppressed" are the special concern of God, as the scriptures bear witness and as Kuitert believed, they are the places where God's redemption *could* appear by way of *liberation, healing, and restoration*. Each generation anew will find such places where we can discover God's redeeming presence, if our (provisional) vision of life gives us the eyes to see. (37)

The different black, or liberation, or feminist, or gay, or environmental "theologies" are all invitations to discover God's healing presence. It is in these new places that our experience, both personally and collectively, present to us where we might look for God. And each generation again will have to search for that healing presence, having learned from the previous generation and the tradition of the centuries. There are no guarantees that we are on the right track and that we will find that Power. Every time again it will be a daring adventure to name our experiences "places where we discover God's redemption", (as the Dutch has it, "vindplaatsen van God's heil"). (38). From here he might have moved from 'searching' for God's presence to 'our giving form' to his redeeming call, perhaps with fear and trembling, but nevertheless, responding to the evocativeness of life and especially the voice of suffering. Given the pre-war, Dutch experience with Christian action and organizations, with its 'triumphalism' and patriarchal approach, we can appreciate Kuitert's hesitancy in this regard. Mekkes' book, *Creation and Revelation* is instructive in this context, whether we agree with his viewpoint or not. For him our faithful actions in life cannot for even one moment be separated from the presence of Christ, giving us humility and courage. They are acts of discipleship, each day and each moment again.

It is as if Kuitert is searching for something more personal, inward, human, warmer, caring, for an encounter that takes account of all that is involved in following the call to justice and caring for the other. In an interview he stated (freely translated): "I do not mean with 'God in daily life' – at least not in the first place – the presence of God assigning us our tasks. That is probably true, that God presents himself in the task of doing justice and loving our neighbor. But God only as assigning us our tasks? That

would make God another word for commandment. It would at least limit him to that". ("Ik bedoel met 'God in het gewone leven' niet (althans niet in de eerste plaats) de aanwezigheid van God als opdrachtgever. Dat zal wel waar zijn, dat God Zich...ook present stelt in de opdracht om gerechtigheid te betrachten en naastenliefde. Maar God alleen als opdrachtgever? Dat zou God tot een ander woord voor gebod maken, Hem daar in elk geval toe beperken." It is in these kinds of statements that his hesitancy to see or restrict the call to justice and the love for the other, etc. as God's presence in this world. For him that would make God too much a God of commandments. He is searching for something more, however undefined (38).

He would often start his lectures by reading a poem, which gives us a hint of his search for something more, something deeply human.... One of the poems he used to read is called "Peace" by Leo Vroman, from a collection of his poems, (2007), *Alle Malen Zal Ik Wenen*, (Every Time I Shall Weep). The poem ends with the words (freely translated):

Kom vanavond met verhalen  
hoe de oorlog is verdwenen,  
en herhaal ze honderd malen:  
alle malen zal ik wenen.

Come this evening with stories  
how the war has gone,  
and repeat them a hundred times:  
each time again I shall weep.

This hesitancy and searching speak to his great sensitivity and deep spirituality. If the personal God as described in the Bible is no longer meaningful and acceptable, how then shall we think and talk about God? How can we experience this Presence or Power in an intensely human way?

One last comment from this article that is important to note is, that it is not our experience that gives rise to revelation. Revelation is not the product of our inventiveness, or our imagination, or of our giving meaning to our experience. There has to be *a reality on which our experience is based*, if our naming it revelation is to be meaningful. Only in that way can we say that revelation is the result of our experience. They have to be *experiences* that we have recognized and named as "signals of God". It is on these experiences that our (provisional) vision of life is based. Or, as Kuitert puts it elsewhere, we trust that there is a reality that corresponds to our faith and our image of God. (39) If not, we search all over again until our vision once more makes sense of our experience. In this way revelation and experience are inseparably related.

This is as close as Kuitert came to filling in his understanding of experience and revelation. In 1968 he visited the USA to bring fraternal greetings to the Christian Reformed Church at their synodical meeting. (40) During this time he visited some other universities as well and discovered they had an entirely different method of theologizing. Instead of an appeal to divine revelation as recorded in the scriptures, there was a much more analytical approach. When he returned to Holland, this became a dominant theme in his work. From then on he focused more and more on the propositional statements (the "is" statements) of the language of faith with an emphasis on validation and logical argumentation. In as much as Christian theology is an academic discipline that reflects upon and analyzes the doctrines of the church as the norm for faith, there is nothing wrong with this approach. The pronouncements of the church too can be checked for coherence, consistency and a degree of validation, given the nature of the subject matter, namely, statements of faith. (41)

However, in the application of this general analytical method, which is basic for all theorizing, some fundamental things got lost. His one-sided and somewhat reductionistic view of analysis did not allow him to take into account the special nature of faith. It prevented him from asking himself what particular role cognition plays in the actual, concrete act of believing. In his *descriptions* of the lived-faith, he is very clear, but in his *analysis* of the “cognitive element”, as he called it, of faith-knowledge that context tends to get lost. In the is-statements the belief character of this knowledge no longer resonates. Faith statements are not just logical sentences, they are that, but they are first of all convictions, a sure knowing. It is a deep certainty that arises from a personal encounter with the Other. This means that the validation of the is-statements is not just a matter of logical coherence and consistency. It is primarily a question of the validity of the convictions, do they answer the fundamental questions of our existence.

The same can be said with his increasing focus on the role of language. At first he is clear that the language of faith, like all language, refers or points to a reality, that it signifies a particular state of affairs. In this case it points to an experience of God and his salvation. (42) Later on this connection of faith language to a reality beyond the words became more and more problematic. We will come back to these issues in the last section. Here it is instructive to compare Talstra’s view of religious language as ‘prophetic’ language.

As his view of analytic theory became more dominant in his writings, they became intertwined and started to overshadow his focus on experience and revelation. This is very evident in his 1977 publication, *Wat Heet Geloven*, (What Do We Call Faith; and what is its origin and structure?) and in his 1988 study, *Filosofie van de Theologie* (Philosophy of Theology). When we add to this his limited anthropological foundation, it becomes understandable that he could not develop his view of the relation of our (cumulative) experience to God’s revelation further. He needed an alternative foundational view of human knowledge.

## **9. Life as Revelatory**

Once more we need to ask ourselves how this world and our experience are revelatory of God’s redemptive presence? And, if so, how do we know? In the end Kuitert could not answer this question. Certainly there were no precedents, except negative ones: natural theology, general revelation, the divine creation order. None of these were acceptable or provided a point of departure for him. Ironically however, in his work in ethics he demonstrated the “answer” both in his writings and his participation in different workgroups and commissions.

From the beginning (1968; 1969) he rejected the appeal to scripture as a normative guide for moral or ethical questions, as we have seen earlier. First of all, because most of the laws and commandments are time-conditioned and reflect the cultures and customs of their origin, and are not applicable or tenable today. Secondly, the appeal to scripture has usually been very selective and arbitrary and basically served to defend self-interests, power positions, established traditions, or horrendous practices. For Kuitert this meant that there is no room for a theological ethics based on revelation. For him ethics is an autonomous discipline that focuses on the analysis and the testing of moral value arguments. Ethics presupposes morality, that is, people’s moral behaviour, their sense of right and wrong, and what they

ought or ought not to do. Ethics analyses the reasons given for their moral behaviour and challenges any inconsistencies. (43)

Given his appointment in Ethics, Kuitert focused on one “normative” area in particular, namely, medical ethics. He worked in interdisciplinary settings together with doctors, lawyers, politicians, philosophers and other theologians and ethicists. He published many articles and a number of books on medical ethics, dealing with euthanasia, suicide, medical interventions, etc. (44). His work in medical ethics has been carried forward and developed further by G. Manenschijn, A.W. Musschenga, and others.

Ethics as an academic discipline presents its own difficulties, however, since it has no particular field of investigation. Except as a subdivision of philosophy (moral philosophy), there is no general discipline called ethics. In practice, ethics deals with the “moral” side of specific human activities. As a result, we only have specific kinds of ethics, like environmental ethics, military ethics, social ethics, economic ethic, medical ethics, etc. Historically this has resulted in a strange split between “facts and values”, between one’s (factual) daily actions and the morality of one’s actions. In view of the history of this “split” it is not surprising that one professor of medicine considers it a strange phenomenon that not more doctors are medical ethicists to reflect on the “morality” of their practice. For how can a theologian-ethicist who is not trained in medicine and is not a practicing doctor comment and provide guidelines for medical procedures and research? (45) To his credit Kuitert immersed himself as much as possible in the medical practice, invited specialists to his seminars, and often worked in a team setting to develop policies.

On a personal level this split between one’s actions and its morality tends to give rise to such statements as “I am just a soldier, I just follow orders”, “I am just an engineer, I have no control over what people do with my invention”, “I just work here, I don’t set the policies of this company”, and so on. On a structural level, usually nothing is done about a problem until something goes wrong, and then the ethicists are called in and a commission is set up to provide new guidelines. But the problem starts much earlier. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, social workers, etc. are not sufficiently trained in the broad, “moral” aspects of their daily work. Or, if they have that awareness, there is often little room to act upon their insights and experience, especially if the bottom line is “profits” or the fear of legal ramifications. It is not easy to disturb the status quo or to be a whistle blower.

In spite of these difficulties, what I take from Kuitert’s work in medical ethics is that he brings a great sensitivity and an acute awareness to very difficult medical, or rather, human issues. He was able to take a fresh approach to these issues because he was unencumbered by many of the traditional and theological prejudices. This freedom allowed him to consider new directions. At the same time, at each point he checked back with his convictions about the integral unity of the person, the value and limits of human life, the boundaries of medical interventions, potential reductionistic viewpoints, and the provisional nature of our answers. With on-going advances in medical knowledge and technology, the moral dimension of the medical practice remains an urgent issue as well as a work in progress.

In an inter-disciplinary setting, theologians can certainly make their modest contribution if they are aware of their limitations. Theologians have insight in the ultimate dimension of life, including our physical being (46), but they have no special insights when it comes to the normativity of medical

practices. What Kuitert, in fact, did was to approach these medical issues from out of his own *ultimate vision of life*, including an integral view of the human person. Although he did not seem to be aware of this fact and did not account for this “pre-knowledge”, in this way, in spite of himself, he connected his analytical approach to ethics with his Christian vision of life. (47) His primary concern seems to have been to protect ethical guidelines from a divinely ordained Christian morality and creation ordinances. And who can blame him, given the history of Christian morality?

I consider Kuitert’s approach - in spite of his theory of ethics - a faithful response to the normativity of life that holds us and calls us, that corrects and pushes us forward. In this way life is revelatory. It evokes a response. It is never something we can possess, control or even predict. Life keeps changing and continually calls for new responses. In this way it is truly revelatory. It reveals to us what we ought to do. We can ignore it or we can mend our ways when we have screwed things up either collectively or individually. It is only in this historical and social process that together we come to know what is right and good for all. We can hope that if we listen faithfully, again and again, that there will be a good outcome. If not, then we can listen anew, change our ways, and find new directions.

This normativity comes to expression in all the rules, morals, values, knowledge, convictions, traditions, regularities, principles, structures, in short, what Kuitert called, in the ‘givens of experience’. These givens are embedded in our culture and our history. Some would explain these cultural givens in an evolutionistic way as adaptations to survive as a species. In line with this, some would give a purely sociological explanation and see morality as social constructions that help us to get along in society. There is no doubt that this “normativity” has survival value and helps us to live together. There are many other explanations, probably as many as there are visions of life, and each has a certain validity.

One can also *believe* that these principles embedded in our society, that are held in common and that hold us, are God’s call to love in all the different areas of life. Even though we can only know them historically and culturally, we can *believe* that they reveal something of God’s way with this world. To entrust ourselves to this vision is an act of faith, and we can believe that there is a reality that corresponds to our faith. Kuitert might add that we cannot validate this faith, except by appealing to our experience, that it makes sense of our experience of liberation, of healing, of life unfolding and flourishing.

Since we can only know this normativity historically, these norms and values are always subject to change and re-formulation. They are not eternal principles or norms. They are already there as the result of a long process of cultural tradition and practices, and they will continue to change. They are not “creational ordinances” that are assumed to be eternal and hold for all time. Nor can we call this presence of normativity “creational revelation”, as if there is some other revelation as well. There is only one revelation that comes to us in this form, creaturely. The Christian scriptures are no exception to this. In as much as they are part of this creation and its history and culture, they too are revelatory (see below). All this is a matter of faith, a faith in God’s presence in this world, *a faith that what is life-enhancing and life-redeeming will reveal itself, because He is behind it*. For this kind of vision of life, people can only appeal to their experience and give a good account of their faith, namely, why this vision gives ultimate meaning to their lives.

Even though we may be deeply committed to such a Christian vision, our faith may often be tempted. Politicians may interfere, drug and medical supply companies may put on pressure, churches may protest, situations may be too hard or too overwhelming, corruption and injustice may disgust us and tempt us to become cynical, taking the easy way out may become very appealing, or we may simply grow tired of the struggle for renewal and dealing with obstacles. In the end it remains a struggle of faith with all its despair and hope. Again and again, after disappointing or bad experiences, we are called back to believe that we, along with many others, are searching for life-giving, life-protecting, life-honouring and life-enhancing solutions and directions. Not that we can bring in “heaven on earth”. We can’t. We are not God. We have no insight into the course of history. We don’t know the outcome. We can doubt and despair, but we can also hope in the good outcome of our actions. Meanwhile life calls us in small and bigger ways, each according to our ability and our measure of well-being, and that is more than enough.

Christians have no corner on the truth in this regard. In fact, they come with centuries of pre-conceptions about life and personal imprinting in the Christian faith, including myself, that may make them unable to see or acknowledge certain aspects of a situation. That is why it takes different people from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs to discern what is life-restoring, merciful, and healing in a given situation. There is no authoritative Word of God and there are no eternal and universal creation ordinances to guide us. We only have our faith that God nevertheless reveals himself to us in the normativity of life, and it is our responsibility to respond to that evocateness of life.

Some would call this perspective an “ethicising” of the Christian faith. When they do, it usually means that, in some way and to some extent, they have split off faith from the rest of life. Then justification can be dealt with separately from sanctification. Then a minister can preach for weeks on end from the Heidelberg Catechism about sin and atonement and months later come to deal with our life of gratitude. Then faith starts to live a life of its own and is no longer relevant to daily life. The familiar words become empty and going to church becomes routine or people drift away, and if not themselves, their children. In the actual, lived-faith, the moments of surrender, entrusting, conviction, imagination, expression, celebration, sharing, action, and commitment are inseparably intertwined. Only in theory (in theology) can we separate out the knowledge of faith, the language of faith, the vision of faith, the actions of faith, etc. With a broad anthropological basis for our believing this indivisible structure of faith is self-evident.

Whenever we hear the word “ethicizing”, we can be sure we are in the neighbourhood of a dualistic vision of the Christian faith. Sometimes the concern comes from the worry that all the church will have left is a “social gospel”, a “doing-good gospel”, and “we don’t need a church for that”. In that case “there is no need for sin and atonement”, and that is “ultimately the only thing that counts”. Of course, one could do worse than be involved in “faith-in-action”. The same holds true when theologians argue about a “horizontal” or a “vertical” approach to Christian doctrine and practice. It relates to the same dualistic tendencies.

However, a lived-faith is quite different. As we have described above, seeking for life-enhancing ways in difficult situations along with others and living what seems right and helpful, requires a lot of faith. This kind of discipleship requires commitment and perseverance. It involves changing one’s ways or starting

over. There are fears, doubts, times of powerlessness, temptations, as well as moments of joy and hope. For example, when something good comes about, however small, like a troubled boy finding his voice and a new direction for his life through therapy. We can watch his smile and his lighter step, unburdened, hopeful. In that vision every right and good thing that happens, small or large, can become signals of God in the world. If only the church could support and celebrate that kind of lived-faith.

There are two philosophers who describe and elucidate this viewpoint from a “socially engaged” philosophical perspective. Each in their own way, point to the presence of transcendence in this world and how we are called to respond to this revelation. The first philosopher is C.A. van Peursen, during his life a long-time friend of Kuitert. His most well-known book that has been translated in many languages is his “cultural philosophy”, *The Strategy of Culture* (1974). The Dutch version was last revised and updated in 1992, *Cultuur in Stroomversnelling* (1999, 10<sup>th</sup> edition).

However, I first want to focus on his book on post-modernism, which is not translated in English, *Na Het Postmodernisme; Van metafysica tot filosofisch surrealisme* (1994). It is one of his last publications. In it he describes a third alternative between metaphysical philosophy and post-modern philosophy. He looked for an alternative between an empiricistic and positivistic view of reality and a supra-temporal metaphysical view. He described it as a deepening of the “naked facts”, a plus, or an intensifying of reality, which explains the term “surrealism” in the title. Elsewhere he called it a transcendence in immanence. (48)

After post-modernism with its rejection of universals and the big stories, how can we still do philosophy which abstracts and generalizes? Van Peursen’s answer is that philosophy must focus more closely on reality as it presents itself and challenges us. The other two traditions assume a static view of reality. For him, reality is dynamic, provocative, disclosing, always in process, and so is our theorizing. *Things are their meaning, they reveal* and as such they are inseparably connected and open to our experience. Our ordinary daily experience challenges us and evoke a response. In this encounter with reality, things and events disclose their real meaning. There is an ethical appeal that comes to us from outside, from the events and the world around us. (49)

In each culture and between cultures there is some common awareness of criteria, normativity, and evaluation. Situations arise that challenge and invade our ordinary ways of thinking and acting and provoke a search for new answers. Rational certainty too comes about in a process of responding rightly to what comes at us in new experiences. The certainty of our knowledge is not of the nature of eternal truths or timeless logic. It is in the encounters we face each day and decisions we must make that reality discloses its real meaning. The transcendent is not an addition, but a deeper insight into ordinary events, a disclosure of events to their real meaning. (50)

A dynamic, engaged philosophy can contribute to this process when it is focussed on ordinary people in their daily lives in which the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious all play their inseparable part. In this process there will be a clash of viewpoints and opinions that can lead to new discussions, new insights, in short, to a learning process that will foster good decision making and responsibility within a culture. It will reveal a transcendent normativity that is not available apart from a particular culture, but

nevertheless exists. These values are imbedded in our culture and come to the fore in the critical renewals in art, politics, social policy, daily encounters, and philosophizing. Such is the challenge of our culture. (51)

In his book about the *Strategy of Culture* van Peursen ends with a discussion of an “ethics of interaction”. For him ethics is a total strategy that pulls the impersonal powers in nature and society within the sphere of human decision making. All know-how, all technology, all operational procedures, ultimately leads to the question of whether something is good or bad. Our entire existence is of an ethical nature and wants to give direction to our actions. It takes courage to respond to this ethical appeal.

The strategy of a culture ought to lead to human liberation. Such an ethic can only become apparent in concrete situations and decisions. It is an ethics of interaction that comes about in the interaction between our ethical sensitivity and the concrete problems. This is not some utopia that is blind to human powerlessness and moral failure. Rather, the goal of struggling together for alternative solutions is to alleviate suffering, to deal with guilt and to work through resistance. Conflicts and aggression are perhaps even rooted in our biological make-up. We cannot ignore them, but perhaps we can channel them through our moral awareness. Normativity is the true counter force of humankind. Immanence is opened up by transcendence. If the open dimension (the transcendent) of ethical decision making becomes visible in a culture, then humans regain their true appearance or stature.

In these publications van Peursen has deepened our understanding of the normative dimension of life. The second philosopher that presents a radical socially engaged philosophy is Lambert Zuidervaart. He is a professor of philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies and an Associate Member of the Graduate Faculty in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. It is interesting and illuminating to see how he has transformed the insights of the Reformational philosophy about the divine order of creation and the “law-side” of reality, into a radical social philosophy. In this effort he has been deeply influenced and inspired by Adorno’s vision and social philosophy. This journey has led him to a critical retrieval of both Dooyeweerd’s and Adorno’s views and enabled him to come to a new vision of the arts, including popular art. (52)

He too advocates that philosophy, to be relevant, needs to be societally focussed and engaged. As such, along with the sciences and the arts, philosophy can make an important contribution to the desperately needed changes in society. In a chapter on “Metaphysics after Auschwitz”, elaborating on Adorno’s views, he states: “For suffering defies discursive treatment, yet it calls for conceptual comprehension if philosophy is to resist both forgetting and perpetuating suffering.” (53). And later on he states: “Not to attempt such an articulation would be to fail to contribute, in one of the ways that theory can, to the pursuit of human flourishing.” (54)

In keeping with this perspective, truth also becomes a very dynamic concept, something that comes close to “doing the truth”. (55) Truth, in whatever area, is what discloses life-enhancing activities and principles. As such, truth is multidimensional, it cannot be reduced to just propositional truth, even though that has its (limited) place as well. Truth occurs when people are being true in the various

dimensions of their life. “It can be seen as a dynamic, multifaceted, and fragile calling in which everyone always has a stake and to which no one can avoid making a reply.” (56) Since there is always more to discover about what is life-enhancing and life-fulfilling for everyone, no one can possess the truth. There is no absolute, time-less truth, rather it is a dynamic on-going process of disclosure that requires the experience and insights of many people. At the same time, truth in the different areas of life is also something that impinges upon us, that evokes and provokes, that holds us in its grip and calls for a response.

Van Peursen uses phrases like “the ethical appeal that comes to us from the situations we encounter each day and that call for decision” to describe the normativity of life. By comparison Zuidervaart uses words like “fidelity to societal principles” to indicate a similar state of affairs. These societal principles are embedded in a particular culture and are always already historically given. People hold these principles and are held by them in society. They are not eternal creational ordinances, instead they emerge during the course of human history. As he puts it: “By ‘societal principles’ I mean historically developed, continually contested, and widely shared expectations about how social institutions should be organized, how cultural practices should be carried out, and how interpersonal relations should be configured. Justice, truth and solidarity would be examples of such principles in contemporary Western societies.” (57)

Zuidervaart goes a step beyond van Peursen by giving more content to the “sense of values”, “ethical sensitivity” and “normativity”. By giving a few examples, like justice, solidarity, and resourcefulness, he provides us with a number of “general values”. However, he wants to make sure that these “principles” are not seen as absolutes and as unchanging and universal principles. Rather, by calling them “societal principles” he wants to emphasize *both* their compelling nature and validity *and* their historical and cultural embeddedness. As he puts it: “The principles already mentioned are not timeless absolutes but rather historical horizons. They are historically learned, achieved, contested, reformulated, and ignored, and their pursuit occurs amid social struggle.” (58) Or, as he puts it elsewhere: “Rather it (the articulation of societal principles) will emerge from the struggles of many groups and traditions to fashion and enact a ‘global ethic’.” (59) To summarize his view: “A social philosophy after Adorno requires the articulation of normative ‘universals’ that are not abstract – societal principles such as justice, resourcefulness and solidarity whose meaning neither floats in a modern heaven nor sinks into a postmodern morass but emerges historically ‘through clashes between societies and within them’.” (60)

He could have mentioned other principles that have to do with physical well-being and wholeness, or sensitive openness and expressiveness, or ecological balance and sustainability, or individual and communal life-space, or truthfulness and mutual acceptance, or, from his own area, imaginative cogency and disclosure of what is life-enhancing, etc. To avoid misunderstanding, he limited himself to those areas with which he is familiar, has been personally engaged in and has struggled with others to make a meaningful contribution. It emphasizes that these principles can only be known and realized in the actual societal struggles with many others and in the midst of conflicting opinions.

However, incorporating more of these principles in his discussions would emphasize that dimensions of life that may seem quite personal and individual, all have their societal dimension, like the practice of

psychotherapy in its context of “radical therapy or radical social work”. Our feelings and emotions have their own “normativity”, like sensitive openness, appropriateness and integration, but they do not exist in isolation. Joy is always the joy of discovering, of creating, of working, of friendship, of well-being, and so on, which immediately highlights the social and cultural context of our emotional life. At the same time, psychotherapy cannot be reduced to its “social construction”. In the actual, concrete interactions of ‘individual’ psychotherapy its radical social and ultimate context needs to become apparent, or, becomes apparent regardless of the therapist’s awareness. To mention one more example, in art, introducing other ‘foundational’ principles could broaden or perhaps just highlight that painting a landscape or cityscape can imaginatively disclose a sense of place or shelter, or a sense of safety and connection, even in the midst of dislocation or ecological threatenedness. Or it could express the opposite, a sense of social isolation, loneliness, lostness, or sadness, and so on.

These principles cannot be known abstractly, apart from our personal engagement and struggle. They require a commitment, or as Zuidervaart calls it, a fidelity to these life-giving principles. Again and again they call us to be faithful to what is life-promoting and life-sustaining. *Ultimately* it involves a calling, a calling that comes to us from beyond ourselves and points us to the Source of these principles. (61) Zuidervaart calls them God’s call to love, they are his instruction, invitation and guidance for life, so that life can flourish for all creatures and the whole creation. (62) Thus, underlying his theoretical perspective is his faith commitment and his vision of life.

Both philosophers, each in their own way, underscore and clarify the revelatory nature of our experiences and social involvements as well as the call to commitment that our experience presents - life evokes a response. In a critical essay about the views of James Olthuis with regard to therapy I have illustrated such a perspective for psychotherapy. (63)

Right from the beginning, Kuitert emphasized that unless we can connect the word God to something real in our lives, it loses all meaning. Many have lost that sense of God. The world has become different. Our mindset and our worldview has changed drastically. The old doctrines have become empty words to millions of former church-going and believing Christians. They no longer point to or relate to any real life experiences. With this loss of meaning, the word God also has died a slow death. This does not necessarily mean that people have become less spiritual than previous generations, on the contrary. Countless people are in search of a new spirituality, a new Presence, which they can relate to their experience.

Kuitert concludes his discussion by stating that we need to help one another to think about something real when we use the word God, something that brings healing and wholeness to people’s lives, and that inescapably makes us co-workers and partners. They need to be experiences that allow us to say, “There is God!”, when we see oppressed and suffering people gain freedom and new life. Then the word God is not a doctrinal term or something we learned in Sunday school, but something we can actually experience. As I have tried to make clear in this section, this can happen in small ways in everyday life and in bigger struggles, wherever there is some signal of love, care, justice, peace, sharing, respect, or equality. Wherever there is some understanding and communication, some remembrance and reconciliation, some joy and happiness, some commitment and service, there we can *believe* God holds

us and calls us. Such dedication to life-enhancing ways takes faith and hope and humility and persistence in the face of opposing forces, and most of all cooperation with many others, whether atheists, agnostics, humanists, existentialists, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, or whoever. In his characteristic way, Kuitert could have added, and maybe we could even have some fun while we are doing it.

### **11. The Philosophy of Religion and Theology as an Academic Discipline**

From the beginning of his career, Kuitert puzzled about the nature of theology, and closely related, about theology as an academic discipline. If theology is based on divine revelation and revelation serves as its last court of appeal, how can theology have a place at the university among all the other disciplines? At the state universities in Holland the theological subjects were divided in academic courses and church-related courses for the training of ministers. Systematic Theology or Dogmatics was considered a church-related subject, since it dealt with the doctrines of the church and, therefore, were faith-based. As such, it was thought, they were not subject to the general rules of analysis and investigation. As far as I know, this issue has never been resolved. In fact, with the amalgamation of different theological faculties, it has come to the foreground again.

On the one hand, Kuitert had to distance himself from the old “meta-physical” approach of Reformed theology, and on the other hand he strongly objected to the “anti-metaphysical” approach of Barth, Bultmann, Ebeling, Moltmann, etc. In his judgment they all took a “supra-natural” position, which was unacceptable to him. He wanted theology to be a normal academic discipline alongside all the other subjects like history, sociology, political science, ethics, and so on. This problem preoccupied him throughout his career. In view of this dilemma, his difficulty is understandable.

Very few, if any, at the Free University which was founded on the principles of the Christian faith, would claim a privileged position for sociology, history, psychology, biology, or mathematics, etc., today. What they might claim, or, rather, contribute from out of their Christian belief and awareness is a sensitivity to the assumptions and presuppositions of the various disciplines and the ultimate dimensions of life. They might rightly argue for the open-endedness of all states of affairs; that nothing is closed off in itself and that everything refers beyond itself. They might argue that there are no eternal truths or absolutes and that we can only know things in their historical and cultural setting, and so on. They would not claim a privileged position for their particular discipline. So why would theology be any different, especially given the new awareness of the humanness of the scriptures?

Given this background, how did he conceive of theology as an academic discipline? First of all, like all other disciplines, he posited that theology studies a particular aspect of reality, the religious or faith aspect. Thus, theology presupposes religion. Of the different approaches and sub-disciplines, Kuitert focussed primarily on the doctrines of the church, which he considered to be the task of *theology proper*, the study of God, or rather, our provisional image of God. (74)

To cover all religions, he could also describe this focus in a very general way: (systematic) theology investigates the religious aspect of reality. He specified this further by stating that it is the religious representations of peoples’ experience with God that theology studies. In their religions people give meaning to their experience. Their vision of the transcendent Power helps them to make sense of their

lives. Their ultimate visions of the Transcendent is the subject matter of theology. Since there are many religions and as a result many ultimate visions, theology cannot be a purely neutral, descriptive discipline. In the end it involves the question of *truth*, which vision answers best the basic questions of life, which vision makes the most sense of our experience.

As a universal phenomena and an integral part of human experience, religious beliefs can be investigated. It is there for all to see and to study. It is humans that construct their religious images. Moreover, the profiles of God people maintain have *cognitive* pretensions. People express their faith in is-statements. These statements can be tested as to their logical coherence and consistency. Theology can examine whether or not a particular belief system forms a coherent whole and contains any contradictions. These are the general rules of theorizing, including theological theorizing. The third rule of investigation – the most difficult and most important one – is, can the religious statements be tested or validated against reality? This cannot be done in the same way as in the natural sciences, by way of experimentation, since it concerns religious beliefs, but nevertheless. Given the special nature of beliefs, they can be tested in terms of whether or not a particular vision of God adequately answers the fundamental questions of life.

Christian theology does not start in a vacuum, according to Kuitert. There is a long history of theologizing. Present day theology, therefore, must be true to the past. It must take into account the motivations and circumstances of past formulations and see if they adequately answer the ultimate questions of life. This also means that theology is not just a “language game”, or “faith talk” that is quite acceptable and respectable today. “God talk” or profiles of God refer to real human experiences, to what people have found trustworthy, meaningful and inspiring, in short, a vision they can live by. In their expressions people make use of symbols, metaphors, or models to describe God, for no one has seen God, but that belongs to the very nature of faith, faith as a surrender to and a trust in that which they have not seen but nevertheless gives ultimate meaning to their lives.

Theology’s task is to decode the profiles of God as answers to the most fundamental questions of human existence. For example, “God is merciful” is an is-statement that is an answer to experiences of failure and the need for forgiveness. It can be tested for its validity. Does it truly answer the experience of guilt and shame and the need for reconciliation? Such statements that relate directly to people’s experiences are different from the more intellectual statements like “God is triune”, or “Jesus is both God and man”. These last kind of doctrinal statements are secondary and subservient to the first, experiential statements.

Like the other disciplines at the university, its methodology has to fit its special subject matter. Just as biology or sociology each have their own methods of investigation, so does theology. He envisioned the department of religion to be built up of three layers. The first layer would be made up of inter-religious and multi-confessional studies, including professional training for different professions in the faith communities. The second layer would consist of the sub-disciplines of the phenomenology and the philosophy of religion, as well as a special discipline that would examine the truth claims of the various profiles of God. The last layer would be the study of theology proper, the study of God, or, at least, the

claims and profiles of the knowledge of God. This department should not just be limited to the study of faith and world-and-life views.

So far Kuitert's view of theology as an academic discipline; it is enough to get an impression of his approach. Here too, his (small) anthropological foundation limits his understanding of theology. By making people's religious experiences and expressions the focal point and subject matter of theology, we would have expected a much broader and integral approach. As a fundamental aspect of life how do ultimate beliefs integrate and refer all of life experiences to what people hold as the final ground or transcendent? He gives a descriptive answer to this question, but he is unable to give a more structural answer. Basically it is the same reason why he could not give more content to the relation between experience and revelation. (See section 9). In his work in ethics he in fact related the biological and medical questions to their ultimate meaning from out of his world-and-life-view. Life, including organic life, needs to be seen in its fullness and limits.

A more integrated or structural analysis would have allowed him to ask how the different statements of faith relate to actual life experiences. All of this is crucial in evaluating Kuitert's discussion of "is-statements" or propositions in theology. Believing too has its "cognitive" moment that comes to expression in its assertions and convictions. The same is true for the actual knowledge of faith with its conceptions, its claims of validity, consistency and coherence. However, they remain faith statements. They are of the nature of belief: "I believe that...." Even in their "propositional" form they disclose something of the ultimacy of life. They disclose truth, in this case, "ultimate truth" in as much as they give ultimate meaning to our lives and call us to entrust ourselves to what is beyond us. We can wonder if in his actual analysis of the is-statements this nature of faith as conviction and certitude comes through. In his descriptions that is quite apparent. But as logical propositions they seem to lose that context and come to stand by themselves. At that point the integral connection with life experience is lost. The propositions no longer seem to highlight the ultimate or depth dimensions of reality. Even the "end-questions" or "ultimate concerns" come to stand by themselves. Are these universal questions of life really an integral part of daily life or are they mere end-questions. Is this the result of his incomplete anthropology and logicistic view of knowledge?

Following is an example of what a more integral connection between believing and other human activities could be like. Some of the insights of psychotherapy into the process of letting go of guilt and shame, and how forgiveness, reconciliation and healing take place in daily life, has something more to offer than the traditional Christian understanding of sin and salvation. There is no doubt that guilt, shame and forgiveness have an ultimate or faith dimension, but that is only one side of those experiences.

The confession of faith, "I believe in the forgiveness of sin", especially when connected with the idea of Christ died for our sins has little relevance in the practice of psychotherapy, as well as in general, because it is not integrally related to life. As the ultimate or depth dimension of an integral human experience, a word like "forgiveness" can make sense if it is a part of a whole experience and a total process. As an integral human experience, "forgiveness" first of all has to do with restoring a brokenness in interpersonal relationships. A therapist may focus on the emotional aspect of acknowledging past

failures, of making a new start, of letting go of guilt and shame and, if possible, of looking for reconciliation. The person may also be urged to acknowledge the failure to the injured party and make amends whenever possible, as is done in AA. Sometimes there is a financial or legal side that must be considered. Finally there is also an ultimate or depth dimension to the experience of forgiveness and reconciliation that has to do with a deep trust that healing and a new start are possible. It is a fundamental belief that reconciliation is possible, no matter how intense the trauma. It is a belief that, ultimately, people do not have to bear guilt or revenge forever, that forgiveness is possible, that life can be made whole.

The crucial part is that forgiveness cannot just happen in church or the confessional. It certainly cannot happen in the five minutes of the reading of the “law”, the confession of sin and the proclamation of forgiveness at the beginning of a worship service, which H.N. Ridderbos once called the spiritual weather forecast, raining and storming in the morning and clearing and sunshine in the afternoon. Forgiveness cannot happen in a spiritual vacuum. To be real, it needs to be part of a life experience. Wiersinga’s books on sin and atonement are exemplary in this regard. (75) He had a unique way of relating forgiveness and reconciliation both to the scriptures and the reality of life.

Although complex processes, these are real possibilities and challenges. They can be a part of a fundamental faith in life. Kuitert might say at this point: you don’t have to be a Christian to believe and experience such restoration and change. And that is true, but one can *believe* that we are called to this kind of redemption, including emotional and social reconciliation. That is a matter of faith and conviction. This example could be multiplied from every area of life. To give one more example, it makes sense to appoint “truth and reconciliation” commissions, and that no matter how horrendous the crimes, new beginnings are possible. In the same way, it makes sense to believe in restorative justice and community “trials” as is practiced in some native communities and is being tried out in many other places. Satisfying Justice (76) is a report of such efforts by a national church coalition of eleven member denominations working together since 1974.

Given our human experiences of healing and reconciliation it is not surprising that the scriptures contain many images of a forgiving God. These images are inseparably related to repentance, a radical turn-about, a new beginning, to doing justice and caring for the poor and the widows. In that context the people of Israel believed that, if they repented, God would not hold his anger forever and destroy his people. Many Christians may resonate to the God-image of Psalm 103, or with some of the visions from the prophets about renewal and forgiveness. “...to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments...the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” (Psalm 103:18;8) Such was their belief. This is the refrain throughout the OT: forgiveness and mending one’s ways always go together (Wiersinga).

Not many today may identify with the God-image of Paul. Paul, having witnessed the stoning of Stephen, having persecuted (Jewish) Christians, with great zeal, and having had them thrown into jail (and whatever happened to them there); he needed a very different experience of forgiveness. He had a vision of Jesus to help him with his guilt and shame. In his letter to the Galatians he wrote: “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to

destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely jealous was I for the traditions of my fathers..." (Galatians 1:13,14). Later he can write: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." (1 Cor.15:9).

What might we say today to someone who has engaged in terrible crimes, like some of the child soldiers and war children from Africa, for example? From the estimated 300.000 child soldiers world-wide some keep escaping or are being rescued. There are many organizations that are trying to intervene and come to their aid. If they escape, are rescued or even demobilized, how will they come to terms with their past? What kind of deprogramming and healing will they need? Many were drugged and forced at gunpoint to slash and burn, to mutilate and kill, to rape and humiliate, until it became automatic. Many girls were made into sex slaves, scarred for life. What kind of experiences of cleansing, healing, forgiveness and restoration might they need? If they were or become Christians what kind of message do they need to hear? How can their God-image make sense of their experience? The traditional orthodox response about forgiveness will hardly do. As Emmanuel says at the end of his memoir (*War Child; A Child Soldier's Story, 2009*), "But I still have to learn forgiveness each day, and I know I will keep doing it for the rest of my life." He concludes by saying, "Today poverty is what scares me...because poverty is like a virus that torments you mentally and emotionally. It is a slow and painful death of hope, humiliating and degrading, a parasite that sucks life from everyone it touches." (77)

In the light of these insights, theologians face the challenging task of re-examining and re-formulating all the traditional doctrines, including the doctrines of sin and atonement. Seen in a more integral way, these doctrines, related to the realities of daily life, would come out quite different than the traditional Christian formulations. In this process of re-evaluating and renewal, systematic theologians particularly, in dialogue with biblical theologians and many others, face a difficult and challenging task.

In as much as religious beliefs integrate all of life in a ultimate vision, but also refer all of life beyond itself to some transcendent or to an ultimate Source, we can question, within the Christian tradition, the God-image itself. Given our present-day experiences and understandings, how can we sketch a new provisional profile of God. Many of the old portraits, both of the scriptures and the tradition do not fit our experience anymore, particularly in light of our growing understanding of the development of the universe, the earth and humankind and historical causality. To trace such a new profile of God is a formidable task for an integral theology. Neither the old formulations, nor narrative theology, nor process theology, nor relational theology seem adequate in this regard, even though they each offer valuable contributions.

Is it possible to develop such a new integral systematic theology? Given the above, I would answer that question with a very tentative yes. It would certainly be a new kind of theology.

With regard to Kuitert's later development, maybe a general comment is sufficient for the purposes of this paper. No doubt there are many things that can be retrieved from his second set of publications after his retirement, but that would require another study.

To formulate an alternative position, Kuitert made use primarily of the insights of analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language. It is regrettable that his philosophical tools were limited in this way and

were not counterbalanced by a more “phenomenological” approach. His choice is surprising, not in terms of what he inherited and where he started from, but in terms of what he was exposed to. When he started his career there was a very strong phenomenological academic presence at the universities in Holland and he was also very familiar with the work of C.A. van Peursen, who had a unique way of combining a phenomenological-existential approach with an analytical-language approach. He often quotes van Peursen, but one-sidedly.

This one-sidedness is regrettable, because in the end it led him to a much more “rationalistic” position. Van Peursen’s view could have made him aware of the open-endedness of all phenomena, that nothing is closed off in itself, that all dimensions relate integrally to all other dimensions, that nothing can be reduced to its analytical or lingual dimension and that all of life presents an ethical demand. With his view of the nature and structure of faith and with the increasing focus on the role of language, the relation of the provisional images of faith to reality became more and more problematic. In the end this reality seemed to disappear altogether.

All this does not take away from the fact that he was on the right track by conceiving of religion, beliefs, or faith as just one dimension of reality, referring all of life beyond itself to a Presence or Power. In 2006 Petra Pronk published a book containing her recent interview with Kuitert. It is called Fluiten in het Donker, (Whistling in the Dark). (79) I could have wished she had given her book the title, Seeing Through a Glass Darkly, which to my mind would have captured more of Kuitert’s very private and deeply felt spirituality.

#### Postscript:

This exploration is an acknowledgment of Kuitert’s courageous work during difficult times and to his abiding contribution. His basic insights are of crucial importance for the millions of Christians that have left the church and that are searching for an alternative perspective.

This paper is the result of a four year exploration that started in 2005 after reading one of Kuitert’s latest books on a trip to Holland. As this paper developed I realized that the basic theme of this paper is about the unity and integrality of life, that there is no sacred realm in distinction to the profane. The ‘profaneness’ of life is utterly ‘sacred’, or, as the old view has it, that ‘all of life is religion’. Such a view requires a “referring” or “pointing to” ontology like van Peursen’s deictic ontology (“verwijzend” in Dutch), a view beyond rationalism and classical ontology. In that context van Peursen quoted Dooyeweerd’s phrase that ‘meaning is the way things exist’ (“zin is de zijswijze van all het geschapene”). In the interacting process between people and reality everything discloses meaning, meaning that makes an appeal, an appeal to foster life-enhancing ways. We could call it a total existential way of being that continually calls for choice, such is the nature of reality. I consider this a liberating and joyful way of being, because in spite of failures, life keeps calling us back and there can be restoration and reconciliation when we fail. (See C.A. van Peursen, *Verhaal en Werkelijkheid*, pp. 186,187.)

Arnold De Graaff, Orangeville, 2009

## Notes:

(Since this is a broad ranging exploratory essay, there are many other references besides the ones listed here. I trust that these are sufficient to provide the setting for the main thesis.)

(1) As an example of an undefined “middle orthodoxy” see the issues of the last six years of Theologisch Debat. One of the outstanding features of many of the articles is the attempt to relate theology to (Dutch) culture and society.

(2) For a summary and discussion of these later works see Petra Pronk’s Fluiten in het Donker, (2006), Kampen: Ten Have. See also: Casper Govaart (red.), Heeft Kuitert Gelijk? Geloven na de deconstructie, (1994), Baarn: Ambo; G.W. Neven & Renee van Riesen (red), Eenvoud bij Kuitert; analyse en kritiek, (1996), Baarn: Ten Have; M.E. Brinkman (red), Kennismaken met Kuitert, (1999), Baarn: Ten Have.

(3) For a bibliography of his publications see: Geloof dat te denken geeft; opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. H. M. Kuitert, (1989), Baarn: Ten Have; for his later works see Kennismaken met Kuitert (1999), Baarn: Ten Have.

(4) There is a wealth of publications on the “secularization process” in Dutch society and the churches. From the beginning Kuitert himself often referred to these changes. See his Anders Gezegd, (1970); Om en Om, (1972); Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, (1974). See three early publications: W.H. van de Pol, Het einde van het conventionele Christendom, (1966), Roermond: Romen; H. Van der Linde & H. Fiolet, Kenterend Getij: Peilingen in een seculariserend Christendom, (1967), Roermond: Romen; De Toekomst van Kerk en Christendom, special issue of Wending, (Febr. 1972).

(5) For an in-depth characterization of the changes in worldview, see Geert Mak, De Eeuw Van Mijn Vader, (1999), Amsterdam: Atlas; and his Hoe God Verdween Uit Jorwerd, (1996), Amsterdam: Atlas.

(6) From the beginning Kuitert was keenly aware of the profound impact of the growing understanding of the development of the earth and humankind on the Christian faith and theology. See his Anders Gezegd, chapters one, “De Goede Schepping” and chapter two, “Schepping en Evolutie”, with references to the intense debate going on at the time. See J. Lever, Creatie en Evolutie, (1958), Wageningen: Zomer en Keunings en C.J. Dippel en J.M. de Jong, Geloof en Natuurwetenschap; Deel 1, Scheppingsgeloof, Natuur, Natuurwetenschap, (1965), ‘sGravenhage: Boekencentrum.

(7) There are extensive statistics and discussions with regard to the changes within the Canadian churches. The books and articles by the sociologist Reginald Libby from the University of Lethbridge provide an abundance of references. There is an interesting reference to the changing situation with regard to liberalism, evangelicalism and neo-orthodoxy by Gerald T. Sheppard’s essay, “A Promising Synthesis” in Hermeneutics of Ultimacy; Peril or Promise, (1987), Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

(8) For some early references, see: “Er kan geen gedeelde kerk zijn, want Christus is niet gedeeld (1 Cor. 1,13). “De verdeeldheid is, Christelijk gesproken, dus een onmogelijke situatie, even onmogelijk als het voortbestaan van polygamie, christelijk gesproken, een onmogelijke situatie is.” p. 82 in Verstaat Gij Wat Gij Leest (1968); see also his contribution in Wending, (1972), “De kerk moet blijven – maar hoe lang nog?” pp. 765-773.

Orangeville, ON, is a telling illustration of such a world-wide impossible situation. There is an orthodox United Church, a Presbyterian Church, a Lutheran Church, a Christian Reformed Church, a Canadian Reformed Church (each with their own Christian school), and an Anglican Church. These churches have minor doctrinal differences.

Then there is a conservative Roman Catholic Church, a large thriving Baptist Church, and a dozen or so evangelical, charismatic, Pentecostal churches. There is a church to suit everyone's taste. All of this in a community of about 35,000 people. For many decades the majority of the people have voted conservative and endorsed the neo-liberal ideology with its destructive consequences for people and the environment. Without protest they have accepted the 12 hour continental shifts in the local factories that are often disruptive to family life and the new curriculum for the elementary and high schools that leaves the majority of non-academic students uninvolved and bored. Smoking up and drinking is the order of the day. Each week a minister writes a spiritual column in the local newspaper next to a few columns by conservative political commentators. For daily life and the community the Christian faith seems irrelevant, or, at best, seems to belong to a separate sphere of life. This does not mean that the people are not caring or generous. On the contrary, they give large amounts of money to the local hospital and are always fund-raising for one cause or another. This generosity, however, seems to be fed more by general humanistic values that the majority of the people share rather than by a Christian sense of service. Christianity is primarily about salvation, while community life is about caring and being helpful.

(9) Cahiers voor de Gemeente: Kampen: Kok

C. Augustijn, Kerk en Belijdenis (1969); Tj. Baarda, De Betrouwbaarheid van de Evangelien 1969; G.P. Hartfelt, Over Schrift en Inspiratie (1967); J.L. Koole, Verhaal en Feit in het Oude Testament (1968); H.M. Kuitert, Verstaat Gij Wat Gij Leest? (1968); R. Schippers, Jezus Christus en het Historisch Onderzoek (1969).

(10) Hoe Lees Ik de Bijbel? deel 1 en 2, (1959; 1963), Amsterdam-Brussel: Elsevierpocket; Klare Wijn (1967), 's-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum; God Met Ons (1981), Leusden: Kerkinformatie; Eigentijds Verstaan van de Bijbel (1974), Kampen: Kok.

(11) See C.J. den Heyer, in Een Bijbel – Twee Testamenten; De Plaats van Israel een Bijbelse Theologie (1990), Kampen: Kok; See also his discussion of von Rad (chapter 9) in Ruim Geloven (2000), Zoetermeer: Meinema; compare Gerbern S. Oegema's prerequisites for developing a biblical theology (p.148) in his De bijbel van toen: een boek voor nu? Baarn: Ten Have. Cf. C.J. den Heyer, Een Joodse Jezus – de Christus der Kerken; de plaats van Israel in de Christologie (1992), Kampen: Kok; and his De maaltijd van de Heer; exegetische en bijbeltheologische studie over Pascha en Avonsmaal (1990), Kampen: Kok; as well as his De Messiaanse Weg I; Messiaanse verwachtingen in het O.T. en in de vroeg-joodse traditie (1983), Kampen: Kok; and Gerbern S. Oegema, De Messiaanse Verwachtingen ten Tijde van Jezus (1991), Baarn: Ten Have; finally, compare Walter Brueggemann's critical evaluation (pp. 1-114) of O.T. biblical theologies in his Theology of the Old Testament (1997), Minneapolis: Fortress. (For this unresolved issue within Reformed theology see section 10.)

(12) Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, [www.protestantchurch.nl](http://www.protestantchurch.nl) (Oct. 2000), translated by Dr. Sierd Woudstra.

(13) H.M. Kuitert, De Realiteit van het Geloof (1966), Kampen: Kok, pp.152-185. Cf. Om en Om, "Wij ontmoeten in de bijbel de eerste getuigen, die in hun talen binnen hun horizont hun godservaring en godsgeloof onder woorden brengen." (p.187)

(14) See De Realiteit van het Geloof, pp. 186-206. Cf. note 57 with regard to re-formulating.

(15) See H.M. Kuitert, Wat Heet Geloven? (1977), Baarn: Ten Have, pp.111 and 191 for his discussion of general and special revelation. Cf. Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, pp.91,92; and Anders Gezegd, pp.132,133. With regard to the insoluble problem of the distinction cf. G.C. Berkouwer, Algemene Openbaring (1951), Kampen: Kok. With his characteristic appeal to our faith and the confession, he effectively cuts off any further reflection on the distinction and particularly on the nature of God's presence in the world. As a result he strongly opposes any

anthropologizing of theology. In this regard he stands closer to Barth than to Kuitert. See also his contribution in De Herleving van de Natuurlijke Theologie (1974), Kampen: Kok. Cf. H. Berkhof, Christelijk Geloof (1993), Nijkerk: Callenbach, pp. 78-81. One of his conclusions reads: “Van beslissend belang in deze nieuwe bezinning over de ‘natuurlijke theologie’ is de vraag of de door velen betuigde *weigering* om de theologie te anthropologiseren, metterdaad en exegetisch en dogmatisch wordt waargemaakt en of door de gang der theologie *blijkt*, dat het diepe wantrouwen van Barth – tot het einde toe – zonder genoegzame grond was.” p.16. In spite of his great contributions, Berkouwer’s lingering dualistic vision has consistently stood in the way of the renewal and further development of Reformed theology.

(16) Cf. his, Om en Om (1972), Kampen: Kok, pp.122-132; see his reference to Kuyper, Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie (1891), and his comments, “...dezelfde tonen van innerlijke verontrusting over het sociale onrecht...terwijl zich alweer...de vraag niet laat onderdrukken of zij voldoende lange adem gehad heeft om werkelijk zoden aan de dijk te zetten.” (p.118); and Anders Gezegd (1970), Kampen: Kok, pp.63-87; and Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel (1974), Baarn: Ten Have, pp.66-77.

(17) Cf. Kuitert’s statement in Wat Heet Geloven, “Maar bij mijn weten geeft geen enkele godsdienstige traditie die verbeterd en verbitterde ketterij te zien die we in het christendom tegenkomen, en heeft geen enkele godsdienstige gemeenschap om de waarheid te handhaven, zoveel mensen verbrand, verdrinken, gevierendeeld en/of voor het leven verminkt als de christelijke kerk. Het is mij niet mogelijk deze regels zonder emotie te schrijven....” (p.167)

(18) Cf. Kuitert’s “solution” to the interpretation of the many different commandments in the scriptures in Anders Gezegd, “...wij krijgen daarin (de geboden) informatie over God’s bedoeling met mens en wereld, zoals die bedoeling in een bepaalde tijd (en dat varieert in de Schrift zelf reeds aanmerkelijk) is verstaan en gehoorzaamd.” p.85.

(19) Kees Slager, Landarbeiders; verhalen om te onthouden (1981), Nijmegen: Link. It is perhaps not too much to say that “modern slavery” did not end in Holland until after the war.

(20) See his Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, pp.17,18; and Wat Heet Geloven? pp.74-85 and pp.116-128; cf. his opening statement, “...geloven is allereerst een anthropologisch gegeven in de zin van: meegegeven met of eigen aan elk mens als zin-ervarend en zin-gevend wezen. (p.75); and Filosofie van de Theologie, pp.50ff.

(21) See his Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, pp.20,21; and Wat Heet Geloven, pp.74-114; cf. particularly his statement about the relation between “meaning making” and “meaning given”, “Waar zal een mens betekenis of zin vandaan halen als hij niet eerst betekenis of zin heeft ervaren? ...de mens die handelt (is) reeds voor hij handelt door een universum van zin omringd waaraan hij zich juist oriënteert om tot zinvol handelen te kunnen komen. Zin gaat vooraf aan zin-nemen (zin-ervaren) en zin-nemen gaat vooraf aan zinstichtend of zingevend handelen., willen we niet in nihilisme (er is geen zin) of in subjectivisme (we halen de zin uit onszelf) vervallen.” (p.79,80). Maybe this kind of statement is not so far away from Schillebeeckx’ formulation and concern as Schillebeeckx may think, “Zonder ‘objectief’, zij het nooit ‘objectieverbaar’ inhoudelijk aanbod van zin zouden all gelovige interpretaties pure projecties zijn...”, and, “Juist dat moment van werkelijk, objectief, niet-geprojecteerd maar nooit objectieverbaar *aanbod* van zin mis ik in Kuitert’s Filosofie van de Theologie, althans in de uitdrukkelijke thematisering van het probleem.” (p.229) in Geloof Dat Te Denken Geeft; opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. dr. H.M. Kuitert (1989), Baarn: Ten Have. Kuitert’s statement is perhaps a bit more ‘profane’ and Schillebeeckx a bit more ‘spiritual’. However, both point to the same experience: we live in a meaning-full or evocative or revelatory world,

even though it can never be grasped or possessed as time-less truths. Given the dualistic history of Christian theology, I prefer Kuitert's more down to earth and 'profane' statements.

(22) See, Wat Heet Geloven? p.83.

(23) See, Wat Heet Geloven? p.75 with a reference to Schillebeeckx; and p.107f.

(24) See, Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, pp. 75-85; and Wat Heet Geloven? p.p.122,123; Filosofie van de Theologie, pp. 52,53; 88-90.

(25) See, Wat Heet Geloven? p.144; Filosofie van de Theologie, p.94.

(26) See, *De Realiteit van het Geloof*, pp. 37-132; *Wat Heet Geloven?* pp. 97-114; pp. 203-232. *Filosofie van de Theologie*, pp. 32-41.

(27) See, Wat Heet Geloven? pp. 115-160; Filosofie van de Theologie, pp. 64,65; 80-82; 90-92. In view of Kuitert's clear position with regard to the scriptures and his view of our provisional images of God, it is hard to understand the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of some of his (in)famous statements, like: "And human statements do not become more true if someone says they are based on revelation. All speaking about above come from below, including the statement that something comes from above." , Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, p. 28) . Cf. for example Theo de Boer, "Two Oneliners" in Harry Kuitert Zijn God, (2004), pp. 24-32. Of course, anyone can disagree with Kuitert's viewpoint, but that is different than speculating about the meaning of a particular statement. Kuitert is very clear in this respect, there are occasions in life where we can encounter God ("vindplaatsen van God's heil"), but they happen within this creation and not through some divine revelation from outside. At the same time Kuitert believed (at that time) that there is a reality that corresponds to our provisional image of God.

(28) See, Wat Heet Geloven? p. 147; Filosofie van de Theologie, pp. 90,91.

(29) See, Wat Heet Geloven? pp. 157,158; Filosofie van de Theologie, pp. 94,95.

(30) See, Wat Heet Geloven? pp. 129-139.

(31) Cf. P.B. Cliteur, "Mag levensbeschouwing worden ingelijfd bij religie?" pp. 157-168, in In Stukken en Brokken, Godsdiens en levensbeschouwing in een postmoderne tijd (1995), H.M. Kuitert (red.), Baarn: Ten Have.

(32) Most of our political leaders of the last decades in Canada have been Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, including our last "evangelical" prime minister. Their faith commitment does not seem to prevent them from "wholeheartedly" embracing a destructive neo-liberal ideology. When they presented themselves to the pope, they were all blessed.

(33) Cf. H.F. de Wit, "Fundamentele menselijkheid en de vitaliteit van religie" pp. 115-131 in *In Stukken en Brokken*.

(34) See, Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel, p.18; Wat Heet Geloven? p.142; Filosofie van de Theologie, pp.62,63.

(35) See, H.M. Kuitert, "Openbaring en ervaring: een misplaatste tegenstelling," in *Meedenken met Edward Schillebeeckx* (1982), pp.43-53.

(36) *ibid.* p.51.

(37) ibid. p.51.

(38) ibid. pp. 51, 52. It is regrettable that Kuitert could not see the call to justice and resourcefulness, and so on, as the call of God's love, the call to life-enhancement and well-being for all, a call that could include joy and recreation, or, in his own words, fun. See Brinkman's, *Kennismaken met Kuitert*, "Ik bedoel met 'God in het gewone leven' niet (althans niet in de eerste plaats) *de aanwezigheid van God als opdrachtgever. Dat zal wel waar zijn, dat God Zich...ook present stelt in de opdracht om gerechtigheid te betrachten en naastenliefde. Maar God alleen als opdrachtgever? Dat zou God tot een ander woord voor gebod maken, Hem daar in elk geval toe beperken.*" pp. 83, 84. It is in these kinds of statements that his hesitancy to see or restrict the call to justice and the love for the other, etc. as God's presence in this world. For him that would make God too much a God of commandments. He is searching for something more, however undefined.

(39) Cf. *Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel*, p.84; *Wat Heet Geloven?* pp. 147;150.

(40) See, "Reisverslag van de USA," in *Om en Om*, pp. 77-89; cf. Petra Pronk, *Fluiten in het Donker*, p. 36.

(41) See his article "Waarheid en verificatie in de Dogmatiek," in *Om en Om*, pp. 167-214. The first half of *Wat Heet Geloven?* is devoted to this theological method.

(42) In his *De Realiteit van het Geloof*, (pp. 170; 223,224) language signifies and refers to a reality outside the words. This referring character of language becomes more and more problematic. Cf. *Anders Gezegd*, p.126; *Wat Heet Geloven?* p. 99; *Filosofie van de Theologie*, p. 10; 86; cf. A.W.Musschenga, "De universele moraal als opdracht," in *Geloof dat te Denken Geeft*, Baarn: Ten Have, 1989, p. 163.

(43) H.M. Kuitert, "Het schriftberoep in de ethiek," and "Theologie en ethiek van de revolutie," in *Anders Gezegd*; and "Karaktertrekken van de nieuwere Rooms-Katholieke sociale ethiek," in *Om en Om*; and "Theologie en ethiek," in *Filosofie van de Theologie*; and "Godsdienst en moral," in *Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel*; for a discussion and critique of his viewpoint see, A. Houtepen, "Toch een christelijke moral?" and A.W. Musschenga, "De universele moral als opdracht," in *Geloof dat te Denken Geeft*, pp. 102-118; 159-178.

(44) See his, *Een Gewenste Dood; euthanasia en zelfbeschikking als moreel en godsdienstig probleem*, (1981), Baarn: Ten Have; *Suicide: Wat Is Er Tegen? Zelfdoding in moreel perspectief*, (1983), Baarn: Ten Have; *Mag Alles Wat Kan? ethiek en medisch handelen*, (1989), Baarn: Ten Have; for a discussion of his medical ethics, see *Een Mens Moet Van Ophouden Weten; Opstellen over medische ethiek en gezondheidszorg*, (1994), Baarn: Ten Have.

(45) Cf. C. Van der Meer, "Hoe medisch is Kuitert's medische ethiek?" In *Een Mens Moet Van Ophouden Weten*, p. 109.

(46) See his article "Mens en lichaam in de heilige schrift," in *Om en Om*, pp. 15-38.

(47) Cf. J.S. Reinders, *Eindigheid, respect en eerbied*. H.M. Kuitert over de morele grenzen van medisch handelen," in *Een Mens Moet Van Ophouden Weten*, p.137.

(48) C.A. van Peursen, *Na het Postmodernisme; Van metafysica tot filosofisch surrealisme*, (1994), Kampen: Kok Agora, p.128.

(49) ibid. pp. 124,135,144.

(50) ibid. pp. 130,145

- (51) C.A. van Peursen, *Cultuur in Stroomversnelling* (1999), Kampen: Kok Agora, pp. 189,215, 221,253.
- (52) Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth; Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (2004), Cambridge: University Press; *Social Philosophy After Adorno* (2007), Cambridge: University Press; *After Dooyeweerd: Truth in Reformational Philosophy* (2008), Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies.
- (53) *Social Philosophy*, p.61.
- (54) *ibid.* p165.
- (55) Compare Kuitert's article "Een immes bakje koffie; een profane title voor een serieus onderwerp: het waarheidsbegrip van het O.T.", in *Om en Om*, pp.39-62.
- (56) *Artistic Truth*, p. 99.
- (57) *Social Philosophy*, p. 74.
- (58) *Artistic Truth*, pp. 99,100.
- (59) *Social Philosophy*, p. 170.
- (60) *ibid*, p.180.
- (61) *Artistic Truth*, p.108.
- (62) *After Dooyeweerd*, p.44.
- (63) Arnold De Graaff, *A Critical Essay: An evaluation of James H. Olthuis' The Beautiful Risk; A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved.* (2001) GrandRapids: Zondervan. (on Heathwood Institute's website).
- (64) See, for example, Henk Leene, "Wereldbeeld en geschiedenisbeeld – honderd jaar Oude Testament in het GTT," and Johan S. Vos, "Het einde van de gereformeerde exegese – balans van honderd jaar uitleg van het Nieuwe Testament," in Theologie op de Drempel van 2000; Terugblik op honderd jaar Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift. (1999), Kampen: Kok. See also, Johan S. Vos, "The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture," and Tjitse Baarda, "Scripture and Historical Research," in Holy Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; Hermeneutics, Values and Society. (1997), Amsterdam: Atlanta. These views are a long ways from G.C. Berkouwer, De Heilige Schrift, I,II. (1966/67), Kampen: Kok. It is interesting to read how R. Roukema rejects Vos' conclusions. He does so, however, without indicating what some specific reformed presuppositions would be for biblical exegetical studies. He basically takes a faith position (with reference to John 14,6), which is his good right. However such a position avoids the much more difficult questions of how, for example, he would apply or use Gadamer's view of a "melting of horizons' between the past and the present, and Ricoeur's view of 'making a text one's own'. A faith position is different from one's exegetical presuppositions. Would he uncritically adopt Gadamer's view (including his presuppositions) or those of other hermeneutical approaches? If not, what would his criteria (his own presuppositions) be? With the growing awareness that every theoretical position has its (un/acknowledged) presuppositions, it is no longer sufficient or acceptable to contrast so-called neutral, positivistic, critical-historical approaches to a faith-informed approach. Academic honesty requires that one at least enters into a genuine dialogue with Gadamer's, Ricoeur's, Ankersmit's, etc., point of view and presuppositions.

(65) See C.A. van Peursen, *Verhaal en Werkelijkheid; Een deiktische ontology* (1992), Kampen: Kok Agora; and his *Na het Postmodernisme*; and L. Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth*. For Brueggemann's view see especially his *Texts Under Negotiation; the bible and postmodern imagination* (1993), Minneapolis: Fortress Press; and his section on Karl Barth in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 16-20.

(66) See, G.C. den Hertog, C. van der Kooi (red.), *Tussen Leer en Lezen; De spanning tussen bijbelwetenschap en geloofsleer* (2007), Kampen: Kok. Cf. Dirk van Keulen, *Bijbel en Dogmatiek; Schriftbeschouwing en schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuiper, H. Bavbick en G.C. Berkouwer* (2003), Kampen: Kok.

(67) *ibid.* p.107.

(68) Cf. H.G.L. Peels, "Met of zonder kapitaal? Psalm 110 aan beide zijden van de kloof," in *Tussen Leer en Lezen*, pp. 155-159; and Jan Kraus, "Een enkel opbeurend woord? Een paar opmerkingen bij Handelingen 15: 16-18," in *Tussen Leer en Lezen*, pp. 186,202-206. Both authors assume the legitimacy of the N.T. re-interpretation of the O.T. Kraus does refer to the extensive discussion of this issue. See also the references in note (11) as well as the studies by Geza Vermes, E.P. Sanders and others, as well as *Joden, christenen en hun Schrift; Een bundle opstellen aangeboden bij het afscheid van C.J. den Heyer* (2001), Baarn: Ten Have.

(69) Cf. *Tussen Leer en Lezen*, p.237; en the book review by Theo L. Hetteema, "Sprekend God," in *Theologisch Debat*, 5de jaargang, juni 2008, pp. 62,63.

(70) C. Houtman, *De Schrift WQordt Geschreven; Op zoek naar een christelijke hermeneutiek van het Oude Testament* (2006), Zoetermeer: Meinema.

(71) *ibid.* pp. 188-193.

(72) *ibid.* See the sections on "Oudtestamentische verhalen als bron van de moral?" pp. 456-468; and "Oudtestamentische voorschriften als bron van de moral?" pp. 469-485.

(73) *ibid.* See the section on "De schrift versus fossilisatie van het godsbeeld," pp. 540-553. Cf. Phyllis Treble, *Texts of Terror; literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives* (1984), Philadelphia: Fortress.

(74) For his view of theology see his *Om en Om*, pp. 167-214; *Wat Heet Geloven*, pp. 8-71; *Filosofie van de Theologie*, pp.7-41, 66-97; "Het vrije veld van de theologie," in *Rapport met de Tijd; 100 jaar theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit* (1980), Kampen: Kok, pp. 236-251; "Kerk en Theologie: onheilbare tweespalt?" In *Cultuur als Partner van de Theologie; opstellen over de relatie tussen cultuur, theologie en godsdienstwijsbegeerte, aangeboden aan Prof. dr. G.E. Meuleman* (1990), Kampen: Kok, pp. 109-124.

(75) Herman Wiersinga, *Doem of Daad; een boek over zonde* (1982), Baarn: Ten Have; and his *Verzoening als Verandering; een gegeven voor menselijk handelen* (1972), Baarn: Bosch & Keuning; the latter is based on his dissertation, *De Verzoening in de Theologische Diskussie* (1971), Kampen: Kok.

(76) *Satisfying Justice; safe community options that attempt to repair harm from crime and reduce the use or length of imprisonment*, by The Church Council on Justice and Corrections (1996)

(77) Cf. Emmanuel Jal, *War Child; A Child Soldier's Story* (2009), New York: St. Martin's Press; see the extensive documentation and references on the internet: *Kindsoldaten, de schaduw van hun bestaan; War Child International Network; Global Report on Child Soldiers*; etc.

(78) Cees Dekker, Ronald Meester, en Renee van Woudenberg (red.), *Schitterend Ongeluk of Sporen van Ontwerp? Over toeval en doelgerichtheid in de evolutie* (2005), Kampen: Ten Have; Cees Dekker, Ronald Meester, en Renee van Woudenberg (red.), *En God Beschikte een Worm; over schlepping en evolutie* (2006), Kampen: Ten Have.

(79) See Petra Pronk, *Fluiten in het Donker; in gesprek met Harry Kuitert* (2006), Kampen: Ten Have; See also her *In Zonde Ontvangen en Geboren* (2003), Kampen: Ten Have. Compare also, Martien E. Brinkman, "Een Godzoeker Sur Sang; Een schets van Kuitert's theologie," (de theoloog en de dichter), in *Kennismaken met Kuitert*, pp. 15-19.

(As a footnote at the end) On a personal note, the study of the scriptures during the last five years have given me intense satisfaction. It has allowed me to put my background in the Reformed community of the Netherlands in perspective. It has a sense of having come full circle. In our local area here in the countryside we have not found a home for our faith. We live in a "diaspora", which has made us aware of how many others find themselves in the same position. It has also given us a sense of how many other kindred and searching people there are.)