INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

THEOLOGY OF CULTURE, SECULARITY, AND PLURALITY

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*Crossroad Discourses between Christianity and Culture* explores the place of the Christian faith in contemporary (post)modern culture and looks at its dialogue with secular culture, the world religions, and new forms of religiosity, and at the internal dialogue between different Christian confessions. Contemporary Western culture is secular and pluralistic with respect to worldviews, and a tendency toward globalization can also be noted. What do these cultural changes entail for the Christian faith? In this introductory article I will make some comments from the perspectives of theology and philosophy of culture, thus outlining a framework for the contributions in *Crossroad Discourses*. I will do that by means of three key terms: the theology of culture, secularity, and plurality.

## Theology of Culture: A Worldview *A Priori*

An important concept in Abraham Kuyper, the father of the Neo-Calvinist movement in the Netherlands, is the idea of the "sphere sovereignty" in societal areas like education, art, church, etc., as *Van der Kooi*[1] shows. Kuyper thus acknowledges the separation of church and state: wherever the separation between church and state exists, the church no longer enjoys any pride of place and all religions are to be treated equally by the government. Kuyper's idea of "sphere sovereignty" in society can serve as a framework for the interaction of Christianity with secular culture and other religions. For this dialogue, the idea of "sphere sovereignty" entails, namely, that all parties are equal. This is a necessary condition for dialogue without compulsion or pressure by one of the dialogue partners. It is not, however, a sufficient condition, for one could ask why church and politics, faith and science should have something to say to each other. Is there a point of contact for such a discussion?

Karl Barth does not provide us with such a point of contact. Van der Kooi points out that the early Barth severed the connection between Christian faith and Western culture, albeit Barth did not thereby signify that the Christian had no responsibility toward society. To the contrary, Barth's role in the struggle of the German churches shows impressively how Christian theology unmasked the ideology of Nazism. Paul Tillich, Barth's ally against liberal theology, held that the early Barth lacked a theology of culture (Tillich 1987: 91-116). He did not find this gulf between faith and culture acceptable and developed a theology of culture himself in which he demonstrated how religion is the soul of culture (Tillich 1990: 69-85). Is Tillich's concept of religion a point of contact for the current dialogue of faith with culture?

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[1] The names in cursief refer to contributors to this volume.

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Tillich views religion as an indication for absolute meaning, for the unconditional that is present in society via values like the meaning of life, the good, the just, the true, the beautiful and personal life in love. The individual thus has an understanding of the unconditional; a religious *a priori* is part of being human. By referring to this unconditional in different areas of culture, Tillich is able to relate religion (as the experience of the unconditional) to culture. Religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion (Tillich 1967: 84). Tillich thus provides a point of contact for a dialogue between theology and culture. Christian theologians explain the ultimate meaning that people experience as the unconditional, as the God of the Bible: "God is the concrete, symbolic, religious expression of the unconditional. Of course, only religiously minded people will call such an unconditional their God" (Richard 2007: 210).

With his broad concept of religion (religion as orientation toward the unconditional) Tillich wants to demonstrate that religion is not a separate area in culture but a dimension that is part of all areas of human life. I share his intention but disagree with how he elaborated on it. I will make two remarks regarding this with a view to a cultural-theological framework for the contributions in *Crossroad Discourses*.

In his theology of culture Tillich makes use of the metaphysical view of meaning. An experience of meaning invokes a chain of increasingly larger contexts until one finally arrives at absolute meaning as the end and final justification for experiencing meaning. The "unconditional" is derived from a metaphysics in which a value like the existential meaning of life is based on a final ground in an unconditional meaning (Stoker 1996: 70-90). That is a kind of foundationalism that is criticized today by philosophical thinkers as divergent as Heidegger, Plantinga and Derrida. My next point is very much in line with this critique. This view of meaning as a chain of meaning with absolute meaning as the end does not do enough justice to non-religious people. Tillich leaves hardly any room in a secular culture for an experience of meaning that for certain people does not refer to the source of ultimate meaning, God.

In what follows I will point to a hermeneutics of finitude as an alternative for foundationalism. Here I will provide an alternative to Tillich's concept of religion in order to find common ground for dialogue between the Christian faith and secular culture as we find in the first part of this volume.

Every person has a life orientation, has to be a human being. Life is a matter of understanding (*verstehen*) people, things, and situations. It is not the unconditional that is part of being human but the appropriation of a life orientation. I call that an existential of being human: a property that each person should realize. I thus point on the one hand to the structure of being human and on the other to the way in which this existential is given worldview form, as a fragmented worldview, as a secular worldview such as humanism, as an organized religion or as a form of new spirituality outside of religious traditions (Stoker 2004: 115-18). This does justice to secularity, and a dialogue between Christianity and secular culture can be carried out.

In short, a worldview *a priori* or life orientation is part of being human and can serve as common ground in the dialogue with culture: every person has, in one way or another, a life orientation and views certain norms and

values as important. Art and the church, the church and politics have something to say to one another.

The contributions in this volume can be read on the basis of these two ideas of the theology of culture.
The first is Kuyper's (and Tillich's) acknowledgement of a secular culture and of the separation of church and state. A culture led by the church, as occurred in premodern society, is to be rejected. *De Villiers* shows that such a premodern society was more or less present in South Africa before apartheid. *Van Bijlert* explores tensions in India with respect to religion and the secular state in connection with the *Dalits*. Hinduism holds to a religious, hierarchical world order in which the Untouchables are rejected and their opportunities strongly limited. That clashes with the secular state that India is and is, moreover, at odds with human rights. It is necessary, therefore, according to Van Bijlert, to defend the democratic, secular constitution of India.

The different spheres of society have independence from the church and state and thus the church should not interfere in them. *Woldring* shows how the state needs to promote social cohesion but also to respect the independent spheres of society. Thus, Woldring writes that it is the political task of the state "to help each person conquer his 'freedom of expansion and autonomy' progressively in a positive manner" (***). One of the phenomena of a multicultural society to attract interest is the populism that we usually connect with extreme-right political parties. *Buijs* clarifies the term populism and shows that it has more nuances than is usually acknowledged.

Second, because the development of a life orientation is part of being human, there can be a fruitful dialogue on the question of how a life orientation can best acquire content through certain values in the public sphere or in a certain political or worldview conviction. Some contributors see the basic givens in culture as a "point of contact" for the dialogue between religion and culture. *Kuipers* demonstrates that Hannah Arendt's *amor mundi* can also be used in public theology. *Van Prooijen* shows that "equality" in the public sphere can be enriched by the biblical concept of justice. *Ward* shows that there is overlapping and difference between "faith" in natural science and the Christian faith. *Berendsen* searches for the connection between art and religion and makes clear what themes in art can mean for religion, whereas *Jansen* investigates what kind of language can be the bearer of spiritual values. He wants to go further than the well-known discussion on the similarity between religious language and poetic language. He investigates the spiritual values that can lie in the language of each written work and may or may not evoke transcendence of sorts.

The secular givens cited above—*amor mundi*, equality, faith, themes in art, and language as a possible bearer of spiritual transcendence—are important for the Christian faith because they can be related in one way or another to that faith, and sometimes, conversely, biblical concepts can fructify secular ideas so that there is an interchange between culture and the Christian faith. That is somewhat different, *Minnema* argues, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He claims that early modern virtues like Hamlet's

"readiness" en "timing" make him capable of combining Christian views of providence with secular views of fate.

Common ground can be sought in interreligious dialogue as well. *May* does that in dialogue with Buddhism. He points to difference and overlapping between the Buddhist notion of compassion and the Christian notion of love and maintains that, via a phenomenology of sympathy and empathy, he has found a common ground for a global ethics.

It could be wondered what kind of concept of culture is presupposed in this volume. Are we talking here about high culture, about the dialogue with art and science? And is the concern in interreligious dialogue only that of an intellectual dialogue between academically trained experts? That is not the case in this volume. *Crossroad Discourses* views culture more broadly than simply high culture: culture is not only a matter of the mind but also of the body. From the point of view of biblical anthropology, the human being is, after all, a unity of body, spirit and heart. Biblical peace, *shalom*, is a matter that concerns the whole person. Culture can be viewed as "any conversion of raw nature into a habitable world through the exercise of human labor and attention" (Cobb 2005: 41; quoted in Chun 2008: 168). The concern here is thus to give shape to material existence. *Houtepen* and *Newlands* show that the churches are also occupied with social problems, including religious violence. *Gort* supplies a Christian view of the issue of poverty. *Brinkman* also pays attention to popular culture when he looks at the influence of popular religiosity on the image of Jesus in Latin America.

A theology of culture clarifies the intertwinement of religion and culture. Everybody needs a worldview orientation, and that is also why religion is important for a culture that has become secular. A philosophy of culture approach can indicate further what secularity means for the place of the Christian faith.

## Secularity: The Immanent Frame

*Droogers* shows the consequences of the modernization of Western society for religion. Modern culture is characterized primarily by secularization/secularity, plurality and globalization. Here I will discuss secularization/secularity and globalization. In the next section I will explore plurality further in connection with interreligious dialogue.

Droogers points out that the term secularization (viewed as a social process) refers primarily to de-churchification and is less connected to the idea that religion will eventually disappear. Religion is not disappearing but is shifting more from institutional religion to spirituality that thrives outside religious institutions. Charles Taylor has explored the depths of secularity in his *A Secular Age*, and what he has to say about it clarifies the background of different contributions in this volume.

Taylor distinguishes three meanings of the term secularity (viewed as the result of a process of secularization) (Taylor 2007: 2-4, 12-15). *Secularity 1* refers to the disappearance of religion from the public sphere, i.e. social, economic and political life. *Van Aarsbergen* explores a problem in

connection with the secularized public space when it concerns ethically responsible business practices. On the one hand, morality is often connected with religion, but how is a company to make choices here if religion has disappeared from the public sphere?

*Secularity 2* concerns the decrease (in a quantitative sense) of beliefs or religious practices. The question then is how traditional churches can respond to this. Unfortunately, many in the church do not comment on this form of secularization, and thus an answer has not been forthcoming. One can point out, for example, that there is now more openness in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands for the Pentecostal movement, which carries a strong attraction for many, and in some cases also for so-called modern spirituality and approaches to faith like the prosperity gospel. Interest in esotericism has also grown. *Kranenborg* discusses the changed position of the church with respect to esotericism. Orthodox Christianity did not respond to esotericism for a long time, but interest esotericism is increasing, within the church as well. In a challenge to the church, Kranenborg asks if we can speak here of a new contextual theology.

*Secularity 3* arises when our secularized era is investigated with a view to the question of the cultural conditions under which people believe now in comparison to earlier periods. This meaning concerns understanding the conditions of modern culture on the basis of which people make or do not make a choice for a religion or for a secular worldview. Let us look at this form in more detail.

Taylor sketches the development from an enchanted to an unenchanted world. In the premodern period the human self was porous and came into contact with spirit and demons. The human being lived in an enchanted world. Slowly, the "buffered self" arose, a human self that delimited itself from evil influences from outside (Taylor 2007: 37-42). In Christianity the accent began to lie more on the internal side of the human being and on self-discipline through spiritual exercises.

In the Middle Ages the *social order* was a matter of (Platonic) "forms" that were anchored in reality as "essences." In the natural-law thinking of Hugo de Groot (1583-1645) and John Locke (1632-1704) the social order was seen as a *human construction* (Taylor 2007: 125-30). This did not in general deny any reference to God, but over time natural law was explained in an immanent way and the concept of a moral order without God arose.

With respect to *time,* a distinction was made in the premodern era between sacred and profane time. Violence within society was channeled through carnivals, allowing a time of "misrule" and a time of restoration of order. That distinction disappeared when the connection between religion and the social order became looser. Time became purely secular time, homogenous, empty time (Taylor 2007: 54-59, 129).

Because of the changed view of the human self, of the social order and of time, since the end of the eighteenth century there have been secular worldviews existing alongside organized religion. Religion is no longer self-evident in contemporary Western society but we live in a secular era. It would be wrong to argue that secularity means that the secular worldview is the only option and that religions, because of developments in the modern period, are passé. People did argue, after all, that secularization entailed the

disappearance of religion. Taylor shows that this view tacitly presupposes that a "secular age" assumes that there is only one option: the secular one. That is incorrect and, to show that, he argues that a secular age does not mean that there is only one option, the secular, but that we, secular or religious, share an immanent framework. It is the context within which we make the choice to believe or not. The changed human self, the changed social order, and time as secular time gave rise to an immanent frame in society. Taylors describes it as follows:

> So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I call the "immanent frame." (Taylor 2007: 542; cf. also 566)

What is now called the immanent frame was originally the "natural" order in contrast to the "supernatural order." The Reformation also distinguished the order of grace from the order of nature, but this order of nature has now become the *immanent frame* through which we stamp our time as secular. The immanent frame is the context in which we choose and develop our belief, and that can be a choice for a secular or religious worldview. This immanent frame is merely the context for believing in a religious sense or not, and that is something different from choosing a worldview with respect to substance.

It comes down to the question if this immanent frame is to be considered closed or open to religious transcendence. Atheists consider the immanent frame closed and develop a worldview choice for a closed world structure. It is assumed that science has demonstrated that God does not exist, or it is claimed, via a reductionistic theory of religion, that the function of religion has been taken over by something else (e.g. science) or that values can be authorized by the autonomous self. As we saw, the immanent frame is also the starting point for the believer, but in this case it is interpreted as being open to transcendence.

In addition to the immanent frame of contemporary secular culture, I would like to point to the changed view of rationality as well, which has consequences for the way in which people account for faith. The view of rationality has changed in the twentieth century. From the Enlightenment up until halfway through the twentieth century, the time in which logical positivism was prevalent, a concept of universal reason was endorsed and it was believed that an absolute foundation for knowledge existed. But we have been driven from that Garden of Eden of sharing God's point of view. We have no absolute knowledge, and that includes religion. The strong view of rationality has given way to a weaker view. Does this then entail relativism in the area of worldviews? No, the false dilemma of all or nothing should be avoided. People are finite and that means that their claims to knowledge are not absolute but limited. Many questions in life appear to be a matter of probability.

Some of the contributions in this volume can be placed against this background of epistemology and philosophy of culture.

*Griffioen* looks at the changed view of rationality in connection with religion. In his contribution on China and the Christian West he points out that, for Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Leibniz (1646-1714) natural theology was still the common ground for the relationship between Christianity and Confucianism. Such a natural theology that arrives at God through shared reason has now become impossible. The order of nature has become, as we saw, an immanent frame, and the cultural differences are now being emphasized more. Griffioen indicates new ways to present the Christian faith in a non-Western culture. *Koster* considers the immanent frame open to religious transcendence but no longer speaks of a rational justification for faith. He only wants to show the credibility of religious practices.

One can ask if globalization, the process whereby the world is experienced as one global village, does not impose a tight pattern on the different cultures. *Van de Merwe* explores this and argues that globalization produces not cultural homogeneity but multiculturalism. In a descriptive sense, the term entails that there are cultural differences and that we should not level them. Multiculturalism should not be understood as cultures that exist alongside one another but as a condition for cultural differences. *Houtepen* gives an example of multiculturalism and demonstrates that in the West multiculturalism has influenced the rise of a wider ecumenism of the three Abrahamitic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But there can also be a different response to globalization, as *Wijssen* shows in discussing a reactionary African response to globalization. Does the immanent frame that is more or less self-evident in the West also obtain for Africa? Some political leaders in Africa deny that and want to return to a time before the immanent frame, arguing for native spirituality and thus for an African renaissance.

Theology of culture shows how religion and culture can be intertwined. Philosophy of culture demonstrates that religion can be a sound option also within the immanent frame. But how can a dialogue be carried on in a society in which there are many religions and worldviews? That is a complicated question. I will limit myself to discussing the philosophical background that is determinative for religious dialogue in a pluralistic society: the shift from a foundationalist epistemology to a "hermeneutics of finitude" and a "hermeneutics of suspicion."

## Plurality and Hermeneutical Reason

Religious dialogue occurs in a pluralistic culture with a plurality of religions and secular worldviews. We will now say something more about plurality in culture.

At the end of the eighteenth century people slowly began to discover the historicity of all cultures and thus cultural differences. *Newlands* shows, among other things, how the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* takes the issues of cultural context and the problem of inculturation into consideration, and *Brinkman* gives an example of that by means of the image of Jesus in Latin America. He shows, as stated above, that the image of Jesus is stamped by the culture of Latin America.

Plurality in culture in the area of religion and worldview is a fact, but how should that be valuated? I would like to point to the changed view of rationality in support of a positive valuation. Absolute knowledge is no longer an option, and that is also true with respect to religious dialogue. The differences between the religions can no longer be bridged by rational truth as was attempted in the eighteenth century through the notion of natural religion. Natural religion was thought to lie at the foundation of revealed religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. That natural religion consisted of a rational faith in God, morality, and immortality. The differences between all the religions arose, it was held, through what revelations added to them. A common unified basis was thus imposed on religons, dictated by a reason that every human being was thought to share and was independent of historical circumstances. It was not only the discovery of the historicity of cultures that placed this concept of reason in question. In the philosophy itself—Heidegger played a decisive role here—foundationalist empistemology that was related to the general concept of reason was criticized and replaced by a broader, hermeneutical concept of reason and thus by a hermeneutics of finitude.

Foundationalist epistemology held that the basis for statements was self-evident in itself and not subject to correction, as is the case in statements like "no circle is square" or "my foot hurts." But most of our statements of knowledge concern matters that are more comprehensive and have an aspect of interpretation. Moreover, our knowledge does have a limit, as Kant showed. Since Kant, we understand that our knowledge is finite and we emphasize the dialogical structure of our knowing. The dilemma of absolute knowledge or relativism is not only to be rejected in general but also with respect to religion. It is not, as we stated above, a question of everything or nothing. The human being is finite and therefore his knowledge and insight is also limited in the area of religion. The question of religious truth cannot be decided definitively. At present religious dialogue is not conducted on the basis of a universal reason that yields universal religious truths. That whole approach has been unmasked as fiction. Rather, it occurs on the basis of hermeneutical reason and a hermeneutics of finitude. We are referred to the interpretation of holy books, but we do not have a lease on truth over against other holy books—which does not, for that matter, prevent one from holding to the truth of one's beliefs. What the philosopher calls a hermeneutics of finitude the theologian call the creatureliness of the human being, the human being as a finite, limited being, created by God.

Aside from a hermeneutics of finitude, we are also referred to a "hermeneutics of suspicion." As human beings, we are not masters of ourselves and are often, consciously or unconsciously, driven by self-interest. Texts and people can maintain unjust situations in hidden or visible ways. What philosophy calls a hermeneutics of suspicion theology calls sin, which is also present in human knowledge **(Westphal 2001:177v.)** Paul speaks of people who "suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). A religion should therefore be critical of itself and its own tradition.

One remark should still be made here. Conducting a dialogue is not only a matter for theological experts who discuss the cognitive insights of religion with one another. There are other kinds of dialogue. What was stated

above can lead to the impression that, anthropologically speaking, the human being is only mind. That would be incorrect, for the human being is also body, as I stated above. Religion is not only a matter of the human mind and heart but also one of the human body. If one looks at icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, one sees that evangelists, apostles, and saints are often depicted with eyes wide and elongated fingers as a sign that the person portrayed is a spiritual human being. The much-read Dutch novel, *Knielen op een bed violen* (Kneeling on a Bed of Violets) by Jan Siebelink, is about a group of radical Protestants with a strong sense of sin and a deep faith in God. That faith is also visible in their bodies. The main character in the novel, Hans Sievez, who himself belongs to this group, and his wife Margje are physically repelled by these people because of their deformities and strong body odour. Their descriptions lead one to believe that this sectarian group is made up of freaks. That religion is also often a matter of the body is also present in this volume.

In her contribution *Anbeek* discusses the dialogue with Buddhism in different forms of dialogue. Apart from the dialogue of experts in religion, of which *May* provides a nice example, she also discusses practical-spiritual dialogue in which the body plays a role. One can think here of, for example, sitting for a long time in meditation and breathing exercises.

An example of the above-mentioned hermeneutics of suspicion emerges in the dialogue with Judaism (Houtman and Schoon). *Houtman* sketches primarily the traditional approach of the church to the Jews and *Schoon* shows that, after Auschwitz, some churches have revised their earlier views about the Jews.

This volume also contains a treasuretrove of information on how dialogue with other religions is now being conducted. *Schouten* writes about the history of dialogue with Hindus in the Netherlands. *Hoekema* does the same for the dialogue with Islam, whereas *Speelman* discusses dialogue from the perspective of Muslims.

If, in discussing *Wethmar* and *Van Butselaar*, I refer to a parallel with epistemology, I do not touch the heart of their contributions. Nevertheless, the following observation is interesting because we see the extent to which church and theology are in step with culture. *Wethmar* shows in his discussion of the ecumenical debate on the church that this initially occurred in an atmosphere of the outdated view of reason as universal that was thought to be universally valid. It is now recognized that a view of church should be less monolithic, and there is more consideration for the plurality of views of the church. The current view of the church as a pilgrim people acknowledges that the church is still on the way, thus making it difficult, it seems to me, for a church to make an absolute claim on truth. Here we see a similar shift in the view of the church as that which occurred in epistemology as described above. I will remark that such a shift must be first of all justified theologically by an appeal to the eschatological character of the truth of the Christian faith. Christianity, after all, does live out of the promise of the coming of God's kingdom

In his contribution *Van Butselaar* shows that conversion to a certain religion is often viewed with scepticism in Europe, in contrast to how it is viewed in Africa. Can one of the causes of this be the dominance of a

(post)modern climate in Europe? Having an organized worldview, let alone being converted to one, is one area in which Christian faith deviates from (post)modern culture. Are Christians not ultimately "strangers and pilgrims on earth" (Hebrews 11:13)?

In addition to Wethmar and Van Butselaar, *Weinrich* also gives an example of ecumenical dialogue. He shows the small but significant differences between two Protestant traditions, the Lutheran and the Reformed, with respect to confession and tradition. He argues that the Lutheran view still reflects a medieval view of the church as the Body of Christ, of the ideal of a universally visible body of the church, whereas the Reformed tradition reflects more a modern striving for an ecumenical commitment of different churches, each aiming at the catholicity of a universal church.

The distinction between interreligious dialogue and ecumenism among churches has become less clear. The theological discipline of ecumenics is increasingly being directed to the interactions between church traditions in a global Christianity, and missiology is focusing more on the theology of non-Western churches, according to *Brinkman*. Interreligious dialogue has become an integral part of ecumenics and missiology. For other reasons as well, the distinction between interreligious dialogue and ecumenism has become less clear. In this connection I remind the reader that *Houtepen* discusses a broader ecumenism beyond the boundaries of the church: the Abrahamitic ecumenism of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. *Gort* argues that the practical approach to poverty will be successful only in collaboration with other world religions, which also promotes ecumenism.

*Crossroad Discourses* gives the reader a splendid impression of Christian faith in contemporary culture, both with respect to secular culture and other religions. It shows how changes in culture, such as secularity, plurality, and multiculturalism influence ecumenics and interreligious dialogue. The cultural position of the church and the religious attitude of church members is thus changing.

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## Trefwoorden

culture
epistemology
hermeneutics of finitude
hermeneutics of suspicion
plurality
secularization
secularity
theology of culture
world view apriori

Namen extra

A.Kuyper
P. Tillich
C.Taylor