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Published in:
Journal of Religion in Europe

DOI:
[10.1163/18748929-00902005](https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-00902005)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Paul, H. (2016). The Sociological Myth: A 1954 Controversy on Secularization Narratives. *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 9(2-3), 201-224. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-00902005>

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The Sociological Myth: A 1954 Controversy on Secularization Narratives

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Abstract

The term ‘sociology’ in 1950s theological discourse had connotations far beyond the field known as pastoral sociology. When in 1954 the Dutch theologian Henk Berkhof criticized “the sociological myth” that he saw permeating the churches in his country, at stake was not the legitimacy of pastoral sociology such as practiced by Wim Banning, among others, but the missionary priorities of churches in societies increasingly perceived as ‘modern’ and ‘secular.’ This article shows that, for Berkhof, ‘sociology’ was synonymous to a ‘quantitative’ mode of thinking that manifested itself most prominently in secularization narratives of a sort popularized by reform-oriented missionary theologians such as Hans Hoekendijk. A close reading of the debate following Berkhof’s attack on “the sociological myth” reveals that ‘sociology’ served as shorthand for sustained attention to the questions and concerns of “modern men,” which in turn presupposed a rather untraditional understanding of the relation between ‘church’ and ‘world’ as well as a historicist account of the relation between past and present.

Keywords

secularization – secularization narratives – pastoral sociology – Henk Berkhof – Hans Hoekendijk – Wim Banning

Introduction

When theologians in 1950s Western Europe expressed concerns about ‘sociological’ modes of thinking, or complained about ‘sociology’ becoming a tool of legitimation for drastic reforms in church practice, what was it that they

perceived as dangerous about 'sociology'? Previous scholarship has offered two answers, focusing on issues of worldview and expert status, respectively. Robin Gill offers an example of the first approach when he examines theological arguments mounted against 'pastoral sociology' – a blend of empirical sociology and practical theology that was practiced on behalf and for the benefit of Protestant and Catholic churches, mostly in church-funded institutions, in the decades following World War II. While sociologists typically doubted the objectivity and hence the scholarly validity of sociological inquiry conducted with an eye to bringing lost souls back to the church, Gill shows that theologians primarily criticized what they perceived as immanent frames (that left no room for God) and reductionist tendencies (that explained religion away) which they believed to be typical of sociological analysis.¹ Central to this first interpretation, then, is a concern about worldviews that left God out of the picture.

The second approach focuses less on arguments than on the social settings in which 'sociology' became disputed. Exemplary is a recent monograph on episcopal decision making in the post-war Netherlands, in which Chris Dols depicts theologians and sociologists as competing for expert status. While both groups were concerned about declining church attendance numbers and other perceived decreases in religious involvement, the analysis and explanations offered by sociologists – complete with charts, diagrams, graphs, and maps – was perceived as more 'scientific' and 'empirical' than religious language about sin and grace. If expertise is an attribution of social status to professionals who are perceived as providing relevant analysis, sociologists increasingly displaced theologians as experts on how to organize church life in 'modern societies.' In this view, then, theological objections to 'sociology' were arguments in a battle for status.²

Different as these interpretations are,³ they share the assumption that the 'sociology' that worried theologians was the type of work carried out in institutions such as the Catholic Social Church Institute (*Katholiek Sociaal-Kerkelijk Instituut*) – one of the most influential centers for pastoral sociology in 1950s Western Europe.⁴ This assumption, however, is in need of scrutiny. Although

1 Robin Gill, *Theology in a Social Context*, vol. 1 (Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 25–40. See also Richard H. Roberts, "Theology and the Social Sciences," in Roberts, *Religion, Theology, and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190–214.

2 Chris Dols, *Fact Factory: Sociological Expertise and Episcopal Decision Making in the Netherlands, 1946–1972* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2015).

3 Although they are complementary in principle, they can be perceived as offering competing accounts of what ultimately motivated theologians to object against 'sociology.' See, e.g., Bert Laeyendecker's critical response to Chris Dols in "Sociologen en bisschoppelijk beleid," *Religie en Samenleving* 10 (2015), 44–62.

4 Dols, *Fact Factory*, 33–77.

'sociology' in some cases clearly referred to the field of pastoral sociology, I would like to suggest that this was certainly not always the case. In postwar Western Europe, 'sociology' – here consistently between inverted commas, to convey that we are dealing with historical usages of the term – could have additional layers of meaning and, consequently, a wider range of application. It did not merely refer to practitioners of a field called (pastoral) sociology, but could also denote 'quantitative' modes of thinking or even 'empirical' modes of analysis. Just as the 'history' with which theologians in the early twentieth century had been wrestling had encompassed much more than historical scholarship,⁵ 'sociology' in the 1950s and 1960s was a multi-interpretable concept with connotations well beyond the discipline known by this name.⁶

This was perhaps nowhere as clear as in the missionary movement – here understood to encompass both practical, outreach-oriented initiatives such as 'industrial' and 'city mission' as developed in many European cities after World War II and theological modes of reflection on the church's missionary task in societies that were increasingly perceived as 'modern,' 'industrial,' and 'secular.'⁷ When missionary workers such as Edward Ralph ("Ted") Wickham, chaplain of the Sheffield Industrial Mission, argued that "only historical, sociological and psychological data can explain the situation into which we have come,"⁸ adding that "planning in the light of sociological studies" would be necessary to "transform the mind of the Church and deliver her from the present policy of mere maintenance,"⁹ they were not recommending an evening course in sociological theory, but advocating a mentality shift towards openness to the 'modern,' 'secular' world with major implications for church organization and religious practice.¹⁰ Likewise, when in 1964 the German sociologist Joachim Matthes observed that sociological concepts like 'secularization,'

5 See, e.g., Herman Paul, "Religion and the Crisis of Historicism: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 4 (2010), 172–194.

6 This is true not only for the 1950s, but also for late nineteenth and early twentieth-century debates about "the temptation of sociology," especially among Catholic authors. See Kaat Wils, "De verleiding van de sociologie: Belgische en Nederlandse katholieken en het positivisme (1880–1914)," *Trajecta* 6 (1997), 156–173.

7 Missionary 'theory' and 'practice' often closely interacted, as demonstrated in, e.g., John Mantle, *Britain's First Working-Class Priests: Radical Ministry in a Post-War Setting* (London: SCM Press, 2000).

8 E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957), 12.

9 E. R. Wickham, "Religion and the Sociologists," *The Guardian* (28 April 1961).

10 On the missionary implications of Wickham's 'sociological' orientation, see Paul Bagshaw, *The Church Beyond the Church: Sheffield Industrial Mission 1944–1994* (Sheffield: Industrial Mission in South Yorkshire, 1994), 9–44.

'masses,' 'modern man,' and 'industrial society' were widely appropriated by theologians and church leaders as means for justifying grand-scale reform, he saw this at work especially among people interested in developing 'a quasi-strategic and quasi-tactic model for missionary activity.'¹¹

What I will argue in this article is that postwar debates over the 'strategies' and 'tactics' appropriate for churches in a 'secular society'¹² were a context in which theologians, pastors, and missionary workers developed different and at times conflicting understandings of the contribution that 'sociology' could make to the churches' mission. As said, 'sociology' thereby served as a label or image loaded with connotations beyond the field of inquiry known as (pastoral) sociology. I will substantiate this claim under reference to the Dutch theologian Hendrikus ('Henk') Berkhof, who in 1954 incited a little controversy by claiming that the churches in his country were in danger of being captivated by what he called a "sociological myth." What mattered to Berkhof was not the methodological atheism of sociological inquiry or the expert status of theologians, but the church's missionary priorities in an age of dropping membership rates. Was it appropriate for the church to define its vitality in quantitative terms and, consequently, to invest much energy in countering numerical decline (e.g., by asking sociologists for advice)? Or did membership statistics draw attention away from what really mattered, from a missionary point of view, which was not quantitative but qualitative growth? While "the sociological myth" in Berkhof's definition encouraged "trust in numbers,"¹³ the Dutch Protestant theologian drew on his influential German colleague Karl Barth in developing a missionary theology focused on a "choice" for or against Jesus Christ.¹⁴

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- 11 Joachim Matthes, *Die Emigration der Kirche aus der Gesellschaft* (Hamburg: Furche Verlag, 1964), 108 n. 12. Benjamin Ziemann, *Katholische Kirche und Sozialwissenschaften 1945–1975* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 15–16 also observes that sociological discourse provided important categories of thought and action for reform-oriented clergy.
 - 12 On the rise and popularity of this concept in the British context, see Sam Brewitt-Taylor, "The Invention of a 'Secular Society'? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961–4," *Twentieth Century British History* 24 (2013), 327–350.
 - 13 I borrow this phrase from Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
 - 14 Although John Peter Gavera, "The Theology of Hendrikus Berkhof: A Critical Analysis of Aspects of a Contemporary Design of Mediation Theology" (PhD thesis, Free University Amsterdam, 2010), 115–191 offers an extensive discussion of Berkhof's thoughts on secularization, the 1954 controversy seems to have escaped his attention. The debate is also ignored in A. van de Beek et al., *Waar is God in deze tijd? De betekenis van de geschiedenis in de theologie van dr. H. Berkhof* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1994).

The Dutch Context

How remarkable was it for a critique of secularization narratives to emerge from Berkhof's pen? For Dutch Protestant readers in 1954, such an intervention could hardly have come as a surprise. For although Berkhof was still in his late thirties, he counted as a leading public theologian in the Netherlands, with a readership and influence well beyond the Netherlands Reformed Church to which he belonged.¹⁵ (This was the main Protestant denomination, with almost three million members in 1947, which then amounted to 31.1% of the population.)¹⁶ As director of the Netherlands Reformed theological seminary in Driebergen, Berkhof occupied an acknowledged leadership position that provided him with ample opportunities for training clergy, engaging with church leaders on various levels, and influencing church policies. He was, moreover, a prolific commentator on theological trends and political developments, who did not shrink from criticizing his own church and its leaders. This had become particularly clear in 1952, when Berkhof had argued in a small but much-discussed book that mainline Protestant preaching in the Netherlands had maneuvered itself into an impasse.¹⁷ Given that the closely related subjects of 'secularization' and 'sociology' ranked high on the church's agenda, it only seemed natural for someone like Berkhof to join the ongoing conversation on what 'sociology' could do for a church facing 'secularization.'

By the time Berkhof's articles appeared, the Netherlands had been experiencing more than half a century of declining church membership rates. While membership of the Netherlands Reformed Church had consistently been rising in absolute terms, it had been dropping relatively from about 54.7% of the Dutch population in 1879 to 44.3% in 1909, 34.4% in 1930, and 31.1% in 1947. Although other churches experienced rather different patterns of change – the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, had seen its membership rise from 35.0% in 1909 to 36.4% in 1930, and 38.5% in 1947 – the percentage of the population registered as “non-church-goers” (*onkerkelijken*) had climbed rapidly from 0.3% in 1879 via 5.0% in 1909 and 14.3% in 1930 to 17.1% in 1947.¹⁸

15 E. P. Meijering, *Hendrikus Berkhof (1914–1995): een theologische biografie* (Kampen: Kok, 1997).

16 Hans Knippenberg, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland: omvang en geografische spreiding van de godsdienstige gezindten vanaf de Reformatie tot heden* (Assen & Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1992), 268.

17 H. Berkhof, *De crisis der middenorthodoxie* (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1951).

18 Knippenberg, *Religieuze kaart*, 268, 273, 276.

By the 1950s, the most common frame of reference for interpreting these statistics of decline was 'secularization' (*secularisatie*).¹⁹ Given that Berkhof targeted his criticism at the often uncritical use that local clergy made of this frame, it is worth mentioning two examples of how 'secularization' was invoked by pastors and church workers in the 1950s. The first example comes from Leiden, where the Reformed congregation discovered in 1952 that only ten to fifteen percent of its members attended Sunday services.²⁰ Suspicion that attendance rates were declining must have risen earlier, given that the church council had started counting attendees on a weekly basis already a few years before.²¹ In any case, the council interpreted the statistics over 1952 as "very alarming."²² The pastors spent a long evening discussing the situation and all local church members received a leaflet that summoned them in passionate language to reconsider their absenteeism ("Don't fail to show up on the roll-call that is held every Sunday").²³ Additionally, the church council organized a meeting for elders and deacons, where academy pastor Klaus Oppenheimer explained the statistics by reading them against the background of long-term processes of 'secularization.' Under reference to a number of learned authors, he identified the causes of non-attendance as (1) a progressive dechristianization of European thought in the modern age, (2) the emergence of a mass society in the nineteenth century, (3) a spiritual vacuum caused by the rise of 'materialism' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and (4) a church that failed to respond to both the social and intellectual needs of the day.²⁴

Oppenheimer was not the only one who interpreted religious indifference in terms of long-term 'secularization.' A second example is provided by Anton B. Lam, a Protestant educationalist and youth group leader, who explained in 1953 why the teens entrusted to his care were not particularly interested in church activities. Central to his explanation was not only a 'crisis' in Dutch

19 On the concept of 'framing,' see Robert D. Benford & David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), 611–639.

20 D. J. V[ossers], "Uit de gemeente," *Leids Hervormd Kerkblad* 13, no. 40 (1953), 1.

21 P. K[loek], "Kerkbezoek 1952," *Leids Hervormd Kerkblad* 13, no. 18 (1953), 1. See also "Hervormd kerkbezoek in de Sleutelstad," *Leidsch Dagblad* (1 May 1953).

22 "Uit de gemeente," *Leids Hervormd Kerkblad* 13, no. 22 (1953), 1.

23 "Hervormde lidmaten krijgen folder over kerkbezoek," *Nieuwe Leidsche Courant* (11 December 1953).

24 K. E. H. Oppenheimer, "De oorzaken der onkerkelijkheid," *Leids Hervormd Kerkblad* 13, no. 31 (1953), 1–2 and 13, no. 32 (1953) 1–2. The articles struck a chord, judging by the fact that they were reprinted in *Woord en Dienst* 2 (1953), 270–271, 286–287 and further made available in mimeograph form ("De oorzaken der onkerkelijkheid," *ibid.*, 334).

Protestant youth work, but also, more generally, an all-encompassing crisis of European Christianity, which Lam believe to have entered its last stage.

This is nothing new, we have known this long since. Authors of name and by profession have been explaining this to us with ample proofs. While Christian faith had already been undermined by the Renaissance, it has definitively been rejected, as far as Europe is concerned, with the Enlightenment. . . . Indeed we are experiencing the end of Western European Christianity . . . The end of Christian civilization is drawing near.²⁵

Although these examples stand out for their dramatic language, they are representative for a broader trend that one finds clearly reflected in various church-related periodicals of the mid-1950s. It was a feeling of crisis expressed in terms of ‘secularization,’ ‘dechristianization’ (*ontkerstening*), and ‘growing non-affiliation’ (*ontkerkelijkheid*) that, in turn, lent a special urgency to careful examination of causes and trends. What was it that caused almost ninety percent of the Leiden Reformed congregation to stay home on Sunday morning? And what could be done about it? The felt urgency of these questions explains not only why pastoral sociology as practiced in the Netherlands by Jakob Pieter (‘Jakob’) Kruijt and Willem (‘Wim’) Banning enjoyed high visibility,²⁶ but also why Protestant periodicals published dozens of ‘sociological’ pieces, authored by pastors or missionary workers, on the threats the church encountered in specific geographic areas. Writing in 1953, Willem Sangers, for instance, wondered whether Sunday services in the Southeastern Frisian countryside “still” deserved their name when only the minister and a handful members of the church council showed up. Baptism, he continued, was “no longer” customary: this practice was “worn out” and had “faded away.” Tellingly, his report was entitled “Disaster Area!” with an exclamation mark that underlined the gravity of his findings.²⁷

25 Anton B. Lam, “Om de jeugd van de kerk (11): de wereld pleegt inbraak,” *In de Waagschaal* 9 (1953), 114.

26 See, e.g., P. de Jong, “De betekenis van het sociologisch onderzoek voor de kerk,” *Woord en Dienst* 2 (1953), 223–224; idem, “Uit de werkplaats van het Sociologisch Instituut,” *ibid.*, 272; M. A. Visser, “Benadering van het Groninger land,” *ibid.*, 334.

27 W. Sangers, “Noodgebied!” *Woord en Dienst* 2 (1953), 272–273.

Two Problems

It was this genre of secularization narratives circulating in the 1950s Protestant press that provoked Berkhof's anger. Time and again, Berkhof observed, church periodicals treated their readers on stories peppered with such phrases as "still" and "no longer." Pastors write that "part of the congregation *still* visits the Sunday service," while others complain that "the youth is *no longer* interested in matters of religion" (37).²⁸ These, however, are more than empirical observations. Words like "still" and "no longer" put church membership rates or Sunday service attendance numbers in a temporal framework by suggesting that things were better in the past and are likely to become worse in the future. In Berkhof's slightly ironic summary description:

The church is past its prime. It has emerged out of a glorious past, in which it exerted power over people and nations. And now it is on its way to a future that hardly has any space for it, unless... and then we get the incantations, the admonitions, the proposals, and so forth, all of which seek to rescue whatever can be rescued from the church's waning influence (37).

It was not primarily sociologists whom Berkhof held responsible for bringing such stories of decline into circulation. As he expressly wrote: "We can leave aside here the sociology and especially the sociography. These young sciences are rapidly bringing their methods to perfection. They focus on experience. They do not preach a myth. . . . The real preachers of the myth are instead the theologians and would-be theologians [*theologanten*] who fill the church's periodicals" (37–38). Berkhof's target were theologians and pastors who appealed to sociological literature in order to 'read the times,' interpret the statistics, and tell the church what to do.

What, then, was wrong with narratives of decline? Berkhof had two objections. The first was a methodological one that reflected his background as a church historian.²⁹ To what extent, Berkhof asked, do historical records allow

28 Page numbers in parentheses refer to H. Berkhof, "Tegen de bierkaai?" *In de Waagschaal* 9 (1954), 37–39, 53–54, 71–72.

29 Berkhof had earned his PhD degree with a thesis on Eusebius (1939), authored a textbook in church history (1941), and written a monograph on theocratic thought in the Byzantine Empire (1942, published in 1946). They were published as *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1939); *Geschiedenis der kerk* (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, [1941]), and *De kerk en de keizer: een studie over het ontstaan*

for the hypothesis that people in the past were more religious or, specifically, more Christian than their modern-day descendants? The only sources available are membership rates and church attendance statistics. But what do church membership and church attendance reveal about real religious life? It would be naïve to equate them, as if frequent church-goers are always more devout than those who skip the Sunday services. If people stop attending, does that imply that they have “become less religious” or rather “more honest” (38) than their forebears in breaking with social conventions and cultural codes? Given also that there is no lack of complaints from clergy in previous centuries about the level of religious commitment in their days, Berkhof suggested that it was plausible to assume that “the secularization has remained constant during the past few centuries” (38), even though secularized people who formerly came to church now typically stay home. Secularization narratives of the sort through which Oppenheimer interpreted the Leiden church attendance statistics therefore suffer from “an optical illusion in matters of history” (38):

We lack a historical perspective. This is why we lose a sense of proportion and make the mistake that previous generations also repeatedly made: we perceive the problems of our own time as entirely new and as almost apocalyptically disturbing, while interpreting previous times, especially if further removed from our own time, in idyllic terms (38).³⁰

Although Berkhof did not unpack how he understood the pejorative label ‘myth’ that he attached to this deficient sense of history, the term typically conveyed more than a sense of doubt about the historical accuracy of a black-and-white contrast between a sordid present and a glorious past. Judging by Wim Banning’s work from the 1950s, the word ‘myth’ also had a performative connotation. Under reference to the French philosopher Georges Sorel, Banning understood ‘myth’ to denote “an idea or complex of ideas that guides a particular group of people in their conduct and thoughts.”³¹ Although Berkhof

van de Byzantinistische en de theocratische staatsgedachte in de vierde eeuw (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1946).

- 30 Berkhof’s criticism here echoed that of J. D. P. Warners, a historian of Dutch literature who had made a similar argument just a few months earlier, in the same periodical, in response to Anton Lam’s dystopian prophecies. J. D. P. Warners, “Crisis-ziekten,” *In de Waagschaal* 9 (1954), 114–115 and idem, “De slechte wereld,” *ibid.*, 184–185.
- 31 W. Banning, *Moderne maatschappij-problemen: een beschrijvende analyse van krachten en processen in de hedendaagse maatschappij ten dienste van predikanten, maatschappelijke werkers en wersters, wika’s, en anderen* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1953), 112. For Sorel’s original notion of ‘social myth,’ see Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, 6th ed. (Paris:

did not define the term, he also hinted at the discursive power exerted by “the sociological myth” by pointing out that it had real effect on how people experienced their religious situation, thereby guiding, at least to some extent, their conduct and thought:

One refers (oh, terrible jargon!) to a “new, fresh approach that is needed,” but the pastor, church worker, elder etcetera who is sent home with such advices too often discovers that these suggestions stand in no relation to the gravity of the situation that has just been painted and that he experiences himself at a daily basis. One should not be surprised to hear that quite a few pastors are looking for other types of employment, which they hope are richer in perspective. The sociological myth that we are systematically cultivating is perhaps not the only cause of this, but certainly plays a major role through its discouraging effect (37).

Secularization narratives are mythic, therefore, to the extent that they provide the frames of reference through which people assess their situation and develop their course of action.³²

Implied in this first, historical criticism was a second, theological objection. Berkhof’s relativizing of church attendance statistics – “we attach an exaggerated or improper value to numbers” (38) – naturally raised the question what are the standards by which religious commitment should be measured. Berkhof left no doubt that an “inner choice” (38) for or against Jesus Christ was what really counted. “What matters is not knowledge of the Bible, but knowledge of salvation [*heil*] and joy over the great surprise that God has prepared for a world that is alienated from Him” (54). Pastors should therefore not be worried about such quantitative issues as the number of church goers on

Marcel Ravière, 1925), 177–182, in English translation available in *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, ed. John L. Stanley, trans. John & Charlotte Stanley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 210–212.

32 I elaborate on the notion of ‘discursive power’ as exerted by secularization narratives in Herman Paul, *Ziektegeschiedenissen: de discursieve macht van secularisatieverhalen* (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2013), 17–21 and “De erfenis van Wickham: naar een nieuwe fase in het secularisatieonderzoek,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 127 (2014), 107–128, there 119–124. The mythic dimension of secularization narratives has been addressed in Robert N. Bellah, “Between Religion and Social Science,” in Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 237–259; Peter E. Glasner, *The Sociology of Secularisation: A Critique of a Concept* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) and Detlev Pollack, *Säkularisierung: ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2003).

Sunday morning, but rather devote their attention to Christians who seek to live as “first-fruits” of God’s new creation – a reference to James 1:18. “Pastoral care has the task of confronting people with a real choice and of nourishing and arming the small group that wants to say ‘yes,’ so that they can stand as first-fruits in the world” (71).

Seen from this qualitative point of view, massively attended church services, high numbers of nominal Christians, and close entanglement of church, state, and civil society are misleading to the extent that they obscure or draw attention away from real commitment, choice, and faith. Under reference to Biblical examples (Gideon’s army of 300, Jesus’ twelve disciples), Berkhof argued that followers of Christ had always been tiny minorities and that, accordingly, the church should be “entirely indifferent towards numbers” (71). In particular, it should not lament the disappearance of what Berkhof called the *corpus christianorum* – a society in which everything and everybody was supposed to be Christian. If such a world ever existed, its disappearance should not be lamented as a process of loss, but welcomed as revealing the true nature of things. One might even “deplore,” Berkhof added, “that the number of non-church members [*buitenkerkelijken*] is not higher and that so many continue their membership without inner choice, filled with neither love nor hate” (38).

In the 1950s Dutch theological context, it could seem as if Berkhof was invoking a liberal argument here. Liberals (*vrijzinnigen*) in the Netherlands Reformed Church had been among the first to downplay the significance of church membership and church attendance as markers of Christian faith. Adriaan Faber, for example, had argued in 1953 that a declining number of church members was not identical to a declining number of non-Christians, given that there could be non-believers in the church just as there could be Christians outside its walls.³³ Also, it had been liberals like Hannes de Graaf, a future professor of ethics at Utrecht University, who had most strongly dissociated themselves from nostalgic feelings for a *corpus christianorum*, arguing that the church had become thoroughly ‘secularized,’ in the sense of losing its focus on Christ’s coming Kingdom, when it had privileged earthly power over eschatological expectation. In de Graaf’s assessment, “the sacralization of the old aeon was paid for with the secularization of Christian religion.”³⁴ This was grist to Berkhof’s mill: he approvingly paraphrased de Graaf’s conclusions (54).

33 A. Faber, “Criterium der (on)godsdienstigheid,” *Kerk en Wereld* 45, no. 35 (1953) 4–5, there 4. See also A. de Wilde, “Het nihilisme en de kerk,” *Kerk en Wereld* 46, no. 40 (1954), 1–2.

34 J. de Graaf, “Enkele kanttekeningen bij het begrip saecularisatie,” in H. Faber et al., *Uitzichten: vrijzinnig protestantse bijdragen* (Delft: W. Gaade, 1953), 27–46, there 35.

Yet, in spite of these affinities, Berkhof's relativizing of church membership statistics did not amount to a liberal move. It rather followed from a long-held, Barthian-inspired suspicion of 'bourgeois' Christianity. Ever since Berkhof had discovered the *Bekennende Kirche*, during a study stay in Berlin in 1937,³⁵ his loyalty had been with Christians who dared to challenge the religious *status quo* by reminding the church of its vocation and by criticizing its approval-seeking from the social and political powers that be. Concretely, this meant that Berkhof identified with Søren Kierkegaard more than with Hans Lassen Martensen, the Danish bishop, and with Martin Niemöller, the anti-Nazi theologian whom he had met in Berlin, more than with *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller.³⁶ In his sermons, Berkhof repeatedly lashed out against churches that are busily organizing one event after another in order to conceal the painful truth that human beings are nothing without divine grace. Also, he warned against churches that long for earthly power and against a type of Christianity that elicits neither love nor hate because it shows nothing of the "strange power" that God has revealed in Christ.³⁷ Indeed, little angered Berkhof more than what he called "a Christian bourgeois mentality without a heart, without style, without appeal [*werfkracht*], without connection between doctrine and life."³⁸ Time and again, he challenged the "empty facades" of many a traditional church and the "walls of Christian traditions and conventions" that will be of no avail against the spirit of unbelief.³⁹ Read against the background of these sermons, Berkhof's 1954 attack on the church's 'trust in numbers' simply continued his warnings against a bourgeois compromising of Christian faith.

Likewise, Berkhof's lack of tears over the death of a *corpus christianorum* consistently followed from his earlier work. As early as 1948, the then 34-year-old Berkhof had published a booklet on secularization, in which he had treated the *corpus christianorum* as a phase in European history in which the crucial difference between 'church' and 'world' had not yet become visible. Fortunately, however, processes of the sort often labeled as 'secularization' had made the distinctions progressively clear.⁴⁰ And when Berkhof argued

35 Meijering, *Hendrikus Berkhof*, 14.

36 Berkhof, *Christus en de machten*, 47.

37 These are themes addressed in sermons on 1 Corinthians 13:2 (Leiden University Library, BPL 3523/3, inv. no. 209), John 18:36 (ibid., inv. no. 210), and Philippians 3:10 (ibid., inv. no. 211). Although these sermons date from the second half of the 1940s, Berkhof used some of them again in the early 1950s.

38 Berkhof in a 1947 sermon on 1 Samuel 3:13 (ibid., inv. no. 212).

39 Ibid.

40 H. Berkhof, *Europa, de verloren zoon* (The Hague: J. N. Voorhoeve, 1948), 7–10.

in 1954 that “the blessing of secularization” consisted in its demolition of quasi-religious layers and crusts, so that people now “live in a world in which the real relations [*verhoudingen*] become visible” (54), this echoed a sermon from 1949 in which Berkhof had prophesied that the real dividing lines would become increasingly less “complicated.” As the real bone of contention, “pro and contra J[esus] C[hrist],” could no longer be ignored, religious life would become less “grey,” more “black and white.”⁴¹

In short, Berkhof’s dissatisfaction with secularization narratives of the sort circulating in the Dutch Protestant press of the 1950s was firmly rooted in a theological concern over the church’s right priorities. In Berkhof’s judgment, secularization narratives of the sort told by Oppenheimer in Leiden pursued wrong priorities to the extent that they focused on numbers and, in doing so, ran a risk of deepening existing concerns about quantitative decline instead of calling the church back to its real vocation. Berkhof could therefore approvingly cite the sharp words in which Karl Barth, speaking at the 1948 Assembly of the World Council of Churches, had condemned “all quantitative thinking, all statistics, all calculating of observable consequences.” “We may be God’s witnesses, but he has not called us to be his lawyers, engineers, managers, statisticians, and administrative directors. We are therefore not burdened with the cares that go with such activity in his service” (72).⁴²

The Fourth Man

Berkhof’s concerns about the churches’ priorities in an age of membership decline reflected a missionary theology (*apostolaatstheologie*) characterized by high expectations of the witness provided by seriously committed Christians. Among Protestants in the 1950s Netherlands, this missionary orientation was relatively widely shared: ‘mission’ (*apostolaat*) served as a key category for theologians and church workers alike.⁴³ However, within this broad consensus, sharply diverging views existed on the relation between ‘church’ and

41 Berkhof in a 1949 sermon on Matthew 16,1:4 (Leiden University Library, BPL 3523/3, inv. no. 210).

42 The Barth quotation comes from Karl Barth, “No Christian Marshall Plan,” *The Christian Century* 65 (1948), 1330–1333, there 1332. Obviously, Berkhof quoted the German original: Karl Barth, *Die Unordnung der Welt und Gottes Heilsplan: Vortrag gehalten an der Weltkirchenkonferenz in Amsterdam, 23. August 1948* (Zurich: A. G. Zollikon, 1948), 15–16.

43 J. A. B. Jongeneel, “De Nederlandse apostolaatstheologie: haar geschiedenis en vitaliteit,” *Kerk en Theologie* 49 (1998), 93–108.

‘mission.’⁴⁴ While Berkhof and others held that mission was a vocation of the church, others, such as Johannes Christiaan (‘Hans’) Hoekendijk, a newly appointed professor of Biblical theology, missionary work, and practical theology at Utrecht University, reversed the relation by treating the church as an instrument for mission. In this second view, church structures and traditions were always subordinate to missionary demands – a line of argument that justified or even encouraged radical reform of the church in the light of missionary challenges.⁴⁵ It was perhaps no coincidence, then, that it was Hoekendijk with whom Berkhof openly clashed over the “sociological myth.”

Hoekendijk had recently caused a stir among Dutch theologians and missionary workers with an article that radicalized the genre of secularization narratives to an unprecedented degree. Drawing on the German sociologist Alfred Weber, Hoekendijk had argued that the twentieth century was witnessing the emergence of the so-called “fourth man” – an ideal-type referring to the average (male) inhabitant of a “post-religious,” “post-bourgeois,” and “post-personal” society. Unlike the “third man,” whom Hoekendijk described as a typical bourgeois church-goer, the “fourth man” had no affinity with the church. His questions differed from those raised in the church, because he was a product of modern mass society. Whereas people in previous centuries may have had a clear sense of personal identity – an ‘I’ that could be summoned to convert itself – the “fourth man,” in Hoekendijk’s portrayal, suffered from *seelische Dekomposition* or fragmentation of the self. Tellingly, the “fourth man” had a number, not a name.⁴⁶

This was, of course, a secularization narrative *par excellence*. Moreover, by explaining the implications of secularization as examined by leading European thinkers for the church’s day-to-day work, the “fourth man” narrative provided not a little intellectual ammunition for pastors and missionary workers who felt, like Hoekendijk, that only a drastic modernization of the church’s missionary approach could bridge the gap between church and ‘modern man.’

44 Overviews are provided in Karel Blei, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk: haar geschiedenis en identiteit* (Kampen: Kok, 2000), 142–164; A. J. Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk vanaf 1795: geschiedenis, theologische ontwikkelingen en de verhouding tot haar zusterkerken in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, 3rd ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1986), 326–330.

45 On Hoekendijk, see Pieter van Gurp, *Kerk en zending in de theologie van Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk (1912–1975): een plaatsbepaling* (Haarlem: AcaMedia, 1989) and Frank Anthonie Petter, *Profanum et promissio: het begrip wereld in de missionaire ecclesiologieën van Hans Hoekendijk, Hans Jochen Margull en Ernst Lange* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2002), 75–116.

46 J. C. Hoekendijk, “Rondom het apostolaat,” *Wending* 7 (1952), 547–566, under reference to Alfred Weber, *Kulturgeschichte als Kulturosoziologie*, 2nd ed. (Munich: R. Piper, 1950).

For this reason, presumably, Hoekendijk's article was eagerly appropriated by clergy members such as Oppenheimer. Having treated the elders and deacons in Leiden on four causes of church attendance decline, Oppenheimer went on to explain that these four factors together had brought about "a new type of human being [*menstype*] that has no memories of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and lives in a world utterly different from ours." Oppenheimer continued:

This man has little knowledge, little memory, his mentality is materialistic. His intellect is poor. His ability for listening, attention, interest, contemplation, reflection is shriveling. . . . "He no longer knows the depths of the spirit, of love, and of God's holiness." . . . With an eye to this man, the German theologian Bonhoeffer has argued that we now enter a "religionless age" ("religionslozes Zeitalter"). . . . With an eye to him, Prof. Hoekendijk argues in his recent article on mission . . . that we live in a post-age, in the age of the emergence of the "fourth man," who is post-Christian, post-ecclesial, post-bourgeois, and post-personal. . . . Here we find the *real cause* of non-attendance, the decline in church attendance also in our congregation.⁴⁷

Did Alfred Weber as interpreted by Hans Hoekendijk indeed provide a key to understanding church attendance decline in Leiden? No, said Berkhof: "This is again an optical illusion in matters of history" (38). As long as we do not remain fixated on those exceptional men of letters and power still remembered in our history textbooks, but take into account something like "the mentality of the farm laborers in our agricultural provinces before compulsory education law and social struggle came to change their lives," it is, historically speaking, far more likely that the "third" and "fourth man" have been living together for centuries, "above and under" each other, than that the former has suddenly been replaced by the latter (38). Berkhof therefore concluded that the "fourth man" concept had to be "avoided" or, at least, be "handled very critically" (38).

Hoekendijk had little reason to take this personally. For one thing, Berkhof did not mention him by name. Neither was Hoekendijk the only Dutch

47 Oppenheimer in the first installment of his 'Oorzaken der onkerkelijkheid,' 2. Given the Bonhoeffer reference in this passage, it is worth mentioning that Oppenheimer had gone to school with Bonhoeffer in Berlin before fleeing Nazi-Germany in 1934. See Arentje Oppenheimer-Dekker, "Korte levensschets van de auteur," in K. E. H. Oppenheimer, *Het kostbare leven: overpeinzingen, observaties, herinneringen* (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1987), 9–38, there 10.

theologian in the early 1950s who drew on Weber's "fourth man" concept. Pieter Smits discussed it in his 1952 PhD thesis,⁴⁸ while the director of the church's press bureau, N. G. J. van Schouwenburg, popularized the concept in a book-length essay.⁴⁹ Banning, among others, also devoted a lecture to the "fourth man."⁵⁰ Arguably, however, Hoekendijk's treatment was by far the most influential one.⁵¹ Apart from that, Hoekendijk and Berkhof had engaged in polemics before, on the much-discussed theological question how to think the relation between church and mission.⁵² So it does not come as a surprise that Hoekendijk felt urged to defend the "fourth man" against Berkhof's accusations. In an ironic, almost sarcastic key, he dissociated himself from

all the small-minded fussing . . . to which the Fourth Man has been submitted in our church periodicals: those sentimental articles sent like rescue operations after the missionary workers to arm them against today's "disturbing situation" . . . with the meagre assurance that yesterday's situation was also rather disturbing; all those humorless, "comforting" actions that want to bandage [*omzwachtelen*] us with a "historical perspective," so that the blow does not hit too hard in this evil day of the Fourth Man . . .⁵³

The "historical perspective" invoked in this passage is an unmistakable allusion to Berkhof, simply because he was the only Dutch critic of the "fourth man" concept who explicitly called for more careful historical analysis.⁵⁴

48 P. Smits, *Kerk en stad: een godsdienst-sociologisch onderzoek met inbegrip van een religio-graphie van de industriestad Enschede* (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1952), 167–168.

49 N. G. J. van Schouwenburg, *De kerk maar sluiten?* (Baarn: Het Wereldvenster, 1953). Hoekendijk provided this book with a laudatory preface.

50 Utrecht Archives, archive Theological Seminary of the Netherlands Reformed Church, box 23, H. Berkhof, "Jaarverslag van het theologisch seminarium der Ned. Herv. Kerk over de periode 1 sept. 1953 tot 13 aug. 1954," 2. I have been unable to find this lecture in the Banning papers kept in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

51 His article was frequently described as 'well-known' and as having 'great, far-reaching significance.' See A. Dronkers, "Inventarisering der gemeente," *Woord en Dienst* 2 (1953), 251–252, there 251 and H. C. Touw, "Kerkelijke kroniek," *Wending* 9 (1954) 101–111, there 108.

52 H. Berkhof, "Kerk en zending," *In de Waagschaal* 6 (1951), 260, 264; J. C. Hoekendijk, "Gesprek onder-weg: enkele vragen naar aanleiding van dr. H. Berkhof's artikel "Kerk en zending" in "In de Waagschaal," 18 mei 1951," *ibid.*, 348–350.

53 J. C. Hoekendijk, "Aanloop naar de evangelistiek V (slot): kleine boekenparade," *Woord en Dienst* 3 (1954), 258–259, there 258.

54 Other critics included F. J. P[op], review of *De kerk maar sluiten?* by N. G. J. van Schouwenburg, *Woord en Dienst* 3 (1954), 31; Salco Herman Spanjaard, *De Christusverkondiging aan*

Pastoral Sociology

Hoekendijk's response suggests that the theologian Boudewijn Rietveld hit the nail on the head when he argued in 1957 that Berkhof's articles had not been directed against sociology as such, but against mythic accounts of 'secularization' that theologians such as Hoekendijk employed in interpreting statistics of decline.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, a second response came from a leading pastoral sociologist: Wim Banning.⁵⁶ Although Banning was indeed not an immediate target, Berkhof's criticism of "the sociological myth" was not without implications for the kind of sociology that Banning practiced, most notably in his *Handboek pastorale sociologie* (1953–1962) – a seven-volume series offering demographic, social, cultural, and religious background information on every single part of the Netherlands, with the purpose of informing clergy members about local and regional patterns of religious practice and non-attendance.⁵⁷ It is worth noting also that Banning taught pastoral sociology at Berkhof's theological seminary, where his courses enjoyed high popularity among the students because of their perceived relevance to a pastor's day-to-day work. As such, Banning's courses were often evaluated more positively than Berkhof's own courses, which mostly drew a mixed response at best.⁵⁸ Although Berkhof's

de buitenkerkelijke mens (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1954), thesis 5 and K. H. Miskotte, *Als de goden zwijgen: over de zin van het Oude Testament* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Holland, 1956), 10–14.

- 55 Boudewijn Rietveld, *Saecularisatie als probleem der theologische ethiek: inzonderheid in verband met gedachten van Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Gogarten* (The Hague: Van Keulen, 1957), 31.
- 56 On Banning, see Herman Zonneberg, *Willem Banning (1888–1971): een onderzoek naar de verhouding van zijn spiritualiteit tot zijn sociaal-politiek engagement* (The Hague: Boeken-centrum, 1978); on his sociological work more specifically, L. Laeyendecker, "Banning: sociologie, kerk en theologie," in M. L. Bomhoff-van Rhijn et al., *Banning als denker* (Utrecht: De Ploeg, 1988), 52–72. The rise of pastoral sociology in the Netherlands Reformed Church has been described by Arie L. Molendijk, "Praktische Theologie und Religionssoziologie in den Niederlanden," in Wilhelm Gräb & Birgit Weyel (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und protestantische Kultur* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 2002), 453–468 and Maarten van den Bos, "De voorlichting der sociologie: sociologie, religie en de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, 1945–1965," *Wapenveld* 63, no. 2 (2013), 10–16.
- 57 The significant role of local clergy members in providing relevant information for this handbook is apparent from Banning's correspondence: Amsterdam, International Institute of Social History, W. Banning papers, inv. no. 245.
- 58 Utrecht Archives, archive Netherlands Reformed Theological Seminary, box 20, "Rapport van het twee[de] semester van het seminarium der Ned. Hervormde Kerk (Sept. '50–Jan. '51),"

admiration for Banning's work was publicly known,⁵⁹ readers of Banning's rejoinder to Berkhof could be forgiven for wondering to what extent this was seminary politics fought out in print.

Interestingly, however, Banning's response resembled Hoekendijk's in so far as it focused not on the legitimacy of pastoral sociology, but on the danger of obstructing church reform.⁶⁰ Banning knew that not only sociologists enjoyed prestige, but that the director of the church's seminary, too, was a man whose word had weight. So what would happen when one or another conservatively-inclined church council in the country would read Berkhof's articles? It might feel strengthened in its misgivings about experiments of a sort that Banning believed to be badly needed for communicating the gospel to 'modern men' (he might have thought of religious movies or debating evenings). In Banning's words:

If that small group of pastors that I know a little is wrestling with these issues and trying to create some understanding among church council and synod, then the latter may not appeal to the thesis: go ahead steadily and bravely... isn't the congregation always a minority of first-fruits? A deep truth immediately turns into culpable conservatism.⁶¹

Admittedly, Banning also broke a lance for pastoral sociology, which he believed to have shown that non-attendance was not just a matter of personal choices against Jesus Christ, as Berkhof would say, but a "social issue" caused by a "cultural pattern" or, more specifically, a "non-Christian type of culture."⁶² Again, however, this was mentioned with an eye to the church's missionary priorities in a 'secular society.' If "cultural patterns" were more decisive than the individual agency privileged in Berkhof's analysis, then the church's highest priority should not be conversion of individuals, but "taking its part of responsibility for leading, if possible adjusting the dominant powers in this our

1-3; "Verslag over het derde semester van het Theol. Seminarium der N. H. Kerk," 2; "Rapport over het zevende semester van het Theol. Seminarium," 1.

59 Just one year before, Berkhof had dedicated his *Christus en de machten* (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach 1953) to Banning. See also Berkhof to K. H. Miskotte, 17 November 1950 (Leiden University Library, Miskotte papers, inv. no. M1S1) and Berkhof's later words of appreciation in "Banning en de Hervormde Kerk," *Sociologisch Bulletin* 12 (1958), 2-5.

60 W. Banning, "Kernproblemen der secularisatie," *In de Waagschaal* 9 (1954), 133-134.

61 *Ibid.*, 133.

62 *Ibid.*, 134.

cultural pattern.”⁶³ The real bone of contention, then, was not pastoral sociology, but the church’s missionary priorities.

Conclusion

The case study examined in this article shows, therefore, that ‘sociology’ was not a prerogative of experts affiliated with universities or church-related institutes for pastoral sociology. ‘Sociology’ was also a word invoked by pastors such as Oppenheimer in their analyses of church attendance statistics. It was a key word especially for reform-oriented clergy who felt that the church had to blame itself for numerical decline, because it had neglected the questions and concerns of ‘modern man’ (Hoekendijk’s “fourth man”). ‘Sociology’ therefore often served as shorthand for sustained attention to such neglected questions and concerns, that is, for reorienting the church’s priorities so as to make ‘openness’ to ‘modern man’ a key virtue. Indeed, not unlike ‘secularization,’ a multi-interpretable concept that could be employed for a variety of church-political agendas,⁶⁴ ‘sociology’ found its way into church-related periodicals because it lent a scientific aura to diagnoses of the church’s ills and remedies proposed against them.

This explains why Berkhof’s criticism of ‘sociology’ amounted to a battle against “all quantitative thinking, all statistics, all calculating of observable consequences” (Barth), or why its polemical edge was not directed against pastoral sociology as practiced by Banning, but against the view that quantitative decline ranked high among the threats facing the Netherlands Reformed Church in the 1950s. For Berkhof, the key question was whether the church had any good reason for deploring this decline. Didn’t such worries reveal that “we attach an exaggerated or improper value to numbers”? Wasn’t the wide circulation of secularization narratives in the Protestant press ample proof of how badly church leaders understood that faith in Jesus Christ is not identical

63 Ibid. See also F. G. de Groot, “Kernproblemen der secularisatie,” *In de Waagschaal* 9 (1954), 188–189.

64 Hermann Lübke, *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (Freiburg & Munich: Karl Alber, 1965), 93. See also Kurt Nowak, “Zur protestantischen Säkularismus-Debatte um 1930: ein begriffsgeschichtlicher Rückblick in die Präphase einer Verdammungskategorie,” *Wissenschaft und Praxis in Kirche und Gesellschaft* 69 (1980), 37–51.

to church attendance?⁶⁵ The controversy incited by Berkhof's attack on the "sociological myth" was therefore first and foremost a debate about the missionary priorities of the church in a 'modern,' 'secular' society.

It is worth highlighting, finally, how much of the controversy between, especially, Berkhof and Hoekendijk hinged on the novelty of this 'secular society.' Had Western Europe entered the age of the "fourth man" – an age that could be characterized only by post prefixes, as Hoekendijk believed? Or was this an "an optical illusion in matters of history," as Berkhof asserted? The two men's rather different assessments of the genre of secularization narratives also stemmed from fundamentally irreconcilable views of history. While Hoekendijk's argument drew on a historicist philosophy of history as articulated by Alfred Weber, which portrayed the historical process as a series of successive 'ages' or 'epochs,' Berkhof rejected this logic of succession in favor of a more complex picture in which "third" and "fourth men" could exist simultaneously, "above and under" each other. Berkhof's criticism of "the sociological myth" therefore touched the heart of Hoekendijk's missionary theology in so far as it challenged one of the premises on which it was based.⁶⁶ Although it was the church's missionary priorities that was primarily at stake in their controversy about 'sociology,' underlying the debate was a clash over the historicist subtext of secularization narratives as circulating in the missionary movement of the 1950s.⁶⁷

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- 65 Wickham's successor at the Sheffield Industrial Mission, Michael J. Jackson, would raise similar issues in his classic statement, "No New Gospel," *Theology* 69 (1966), 539–544, there esp. 543: "A distorted gospel will produce a distorted Church or an organization where priorities are wrong or false purposes are served."
- 66 On Berkhof's understanding of historicism, see Herman Paul, *Het moeras van de geschiedenis: Nederlandse debatten over historisme* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2012), 11–13.
- 67 I would like to thank Fennie Duursema for permission to consult the archive of the Netherlands Reformed theological seminary, Christiaan Veldman, my student assistant, for carrying out archival research in Utrecht and Leiden, and the participants in the Groningen workshop at which a draft of this paper was presented for valuable feedback.

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