12 maart 2018, VU

Dear Graham Ward,

Thank you very much for your engaged and learned lecture that shows us a glance of how you will proceed in the second volume of your project ‘How the light gets in’. I listened to your lecture in the same way that I am reading your book: I learn a lot from you, your theology is challenging and I agree on your description of the present situation with which theology should be in contact and to which theology has to respond. I would say, we share the same ‘Problembewusstsein’. I am not so sure, however, that we share the same starting point.

My default position, as it were, is that of a liberal protestant theologian. I am inclined to discern some core or kernel of religion, be it Schleiermacher’s sense of dependence or Tillich’s ultimate concern or Hick’s really real that is somehow related to universal experiences or basic questions of human existence to which different religions respond differently. I agree that this perspective is old-fashioned, modern, universalist in the wrong way, perhaps even inadequate and colonial – as you named it –, even though I would like to bring forward – on behalf of a liberal Protestantism – that we know it is. There is no perspective from nowhere. Reason is situated, our outlook is local and a universal rationality usually was the rationality of western, white, middle- or upper class males. Liberal Protestantism is reasonable enough to admit it and face its own shortcomings, which, I hope, we share with other worldviews and religions. The problem seems to be that we have to face our own particularity, without claiming our own exclusivity, which would only harden our own rightness. And yet, from our own particularity, we do have opinions and claims about our global world. For my part, I think that the universality of human rights, the equality between the sexes, the rights of homo- bi or transsexuals is worthy of a strong defense and politically I do not see that the decline of the old liberal world-order is very profitable to a more peaceful, more just, more equal world. Which does not mean that I will draw back on an obsolete defense of passed orders.

As I see it, since there is no neutral or universal stance on religion, you take your side with an explicit Christian perspective. This means that you reflect on religion and the positive religions from a Christian point of view. As a consequence, a further determination of this position is needed and you clearly describe the Christian point of view by means of three axioma’s: The Triune God, the doctrine of creation and the incarnation of Christ.

First, I would like to express my admiration for the intellectual strength and width of your theological reflections expressed in your book ‘How the light gets in’. Engaged systematic theology, analogy, theo-poiesis, participation in Christ, apophasis, to name some theological topics, all represent beautiful notions you expand on in your book. At bottom, I take it, you claim that God is related to all reality and that all of reality participates in God. Knowledge of God should be embodied knowledge and is rather lived than reached by discursive reasoning. This comes quite close to an important stream of theology that was quite influential in the Netherlands in the past, before Barthian theology took over, which was called the ethical theology that wanted to mediate between liberal and orthodox theologies. It can be summarized by the short statement that God communicates life, rather than revealing knowledge about himself, and therefore its slogan ran ‘not doctrine, but life’ in respect to the Christian faith. I appreciate that, as I appreciate large parts of your theology.

Yet, what does it mean that there are three axioma’s of the Christian faith? Triune God, creation and incarnation. Of course, it is obvious that these are central notions in the history of Christian thought. But what exactly does ‘axioma’ mean? Is it normative to such an extent, that those liberal Christians that do not adhere to the Trinity, are in doubt what exactly creation means, and take Jesus’ message at heart but are reluctant to assent to his full blown divinity, fall outside Christianity? You made it perfectly clear in your book that you are aware of various Christian views. But the question that occurs is this. Since there is no legitimate universal point of view on religions, you want to take a particular Christian perspective in the conversation about religion with religions. But the articulation of a Christian perspective on the basis of axioma’s seems to get very close to an overarching description of Christian beliefs that is as impossible as a universal point of view without being normative and exclusive of at least some sorts of Christianities.

We can develop a Christian theology of religions. And still, such a theology could keep us protected from real dialogue. I am reminded of a joke I read in the work of Gerardus van der Leeuw, the famous phenomenologist of religion, according to which a Christian missionary admits that we all serve God in various ways: ‘You serve him your way, and I am doing it His’. Well, this approach has the benefit of a broad view that is not parochial, yet sticks to its own perspective. But can it really enhance dialogue?

In your lecture, you elaborated on the logos-theology of Justin Martyr and its apologetic use. [As we received a powerpoint presentation of your lecture, my thoughts followed its own course, and I will not relate in detail to the elaborations of your lecture this afternoon]. I think the logos-theology was extremely important to Christian theology in the second century. It opened up possibilities to theology. It enhanced the theological perspective that the spirit of God worked from the start in creation, in the prophets, in Greek philosophy and was uniquely present in Christ. It thereby broadened and widened the theological perspective and enabled the articulation of a coherent Christian view that was not solely restricted to Christ and his prediction in the Old Testament, but included a larger view on world-history, the cultural diversity of the Graeco-Roman world and Gods relation to the world.

And yet, I take it, this logos-theology was an attempt to talk universally about a particular experience related to the Christ-event.

Some thirty years ago, when I wrote my dissertation on the theology of Origen, I got fascinated by his discussion with Celsus, even though that was not precisely at the center of my dissertation on free will. It seems to me, that Origen’s polemics against Celsus focused on the question whether the Christian religion could have a legitimated place amongst the religions of the antique world as an allowed religion, or a religion ‘licita’. Celsus denies this. There is a wisdom of old and the true logos is an ancient logos, of which the ancient religions of the old people had some knowledge. The Jews have an ancient religion and their religion incorporates a traditional knowledge of the true logos. The Christians, however, are innovators that left the Jewish religion and the true logos of old, which makes them void of all credibility and responsibility. Celsus seems to measure out, whether the established world can offer the Christians a seat in the parliament of wisdom and religion, and he denies it. They are new, they are revolutionary, they won’t fit in the peaceful cohabitation of civilized religions that acknowledge their particular perspective on the true, universal logos of old.

Origen is clearly annoyed that Celsus discards the Christian kerygma, or narrative or myth as a childish story, which as such can never lead to any deeper religious or philosophical knowledge. Origen defends that the Christian narrative can be allegorized and lead from *pistis* to *gnosis* of the true logos. But even if he could get this point recognized, he would still refuse his seat in the religious assembly on Celsus’s terms. Celsus just wants some consensus among the wisdom of the Egyptians, the Persians, the Jews and so forth, in order to have a pacified status quo in the Roman Empire. Opposed to this, Origen claims that the logos is revealed fully and completely in Christ, and that Christians are a new people, under a new *nomos* – a new law, a new code of behavior, a new course of action. They are a new people, assembled from the various nations.

Now, this discussion is very informative and very puzzling to me, for various reasons. It shows that the logos-theology was not just apologetic, but also polemical and political through and through. It shows that the Christian movement did not just incorporate or embody a particular religious experience or perspective but also a universalist perspective on culture and humanity’s development and progress. And it seems a serious question to me, what to make of it in the light of our present situation and a Christian theology of religions. Celsus may seem like a liberal theologian, who accepts a logical essence of religion, disseminated and differently received in different religions that have to co-operate under the Pax Romana. Origen may look like an enlightened universalist, that wants to abandon the established patterns and leave the traditional wisdom at the daybreak of the new united nations under the rule of Christ the logos. Eventually, the result was a coincidence of the Roman Empire with the rule of Christs in Christendom.

I am puzzled by this, perhaps a bit confused, and not no so certain. I might even be muddle-headed to the opinion of those without doubt. But my question vis á vis the theological project of ‘How the light gets in’ would be as follows. Is a Christian theology of religions not going to develop as much a universalist perspective on religions as the old point of view of the ‘ultimate reality and the myth of Christ incarnate’ was doing? Is a universalist point of view not already implicated in the logos-theology that is estimated to be axiomatic to Christianity? How to relate universalism and particularity within Christianity and among the different religions?

In a recent book on Liberal Christianity some theologians, and I was among them, developed the fowling line of thought. The incarnation is central notion in Christianity. It implies that God became a human being and that God can be realized (his posse can turn to esse) by human beings. Also other human beings. And precisely this very notion, that God can be realized by other human beings than me or us, should prevent us from claiming our own right, but lead us toward recognition. A Hegelian notion, perhaps, but not half as bad as these notions are sometimes held to be. The point is, that recognition can only be given and received, but never forced or imposed. It is to recognition of the other that our Christian faith leads us and not to our own right. I consider this a fair and situated point of view in the conversation among the religions, in search of *gnosis* on the basis of *pistis*.

I am not quite sure whether this matches your faith seeking understanding, but nevertheless, I am thankful for your theology and your lecture this afternoon and I hope that my loose and somewhat capricious reflections may fuel our conversation. I thank you or your attention.