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Review: Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey

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Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey, by Hendrikus Berkhof. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989. Pp. 316. \$24.95.

Hendrikus Berkhof (retired professor of theology, University of Leiden) has written this book as much for himself as for others who would read and follow what he presents. For this reason it is a mistake to come to this book without recognizing the role played by the subtitle. But this point hardly tells the story of this book. *Two Hundred Years of Theology* is not as it would appear to most potential readers at first glance, a textbook *about* or descriptive of the various significant persons, movements and philosophies which have played such significant roles in that which is often classified as "Modern Theology." This does not mean that this does not occur in these pages or that little *about* the various influential positions is not given. Quite the opposite is the case as a rule. But the reader must grasp these points in the dynamic context of the particular setting and flow and influences which each have their part to play in theological formulation. This book is no mere analysis from some lofty pinnacle above the strivings of the theological task but rather Dr. Berkhof's *own* wrestling with various theologians and theological and philosophical trends (as directly or indirectly impressing theological thinking, e.g., Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Heidegger). The purpose is to understand *how* these worked out and/or affected the relationship of the gospel message and their particular (Western) culture. This point is repeatedly emphasized throughout the text in the attempt to understand theology in light of the fact that this relationship is inevitable as Paul's own ministry may exemplify ("to the Jews I became . . . to the Greeks I became . . . in order to win . . ."). It is with this concern in mind that Berkhof makes repeated reference to the *Lebensgefühl* of each theologian as he did his work, i.e., theology done (consciously or unconsciously) as it reflects a particular era's positive or negative (etc.) "sense of life."

Berkhof does interact with almost every *major* theological and philosophical theological figure and movement in the last two hundred years ("Liberation Theology" discussed only in appropriate contexts). Unlike most such works which focus on Continental European or specifically German developments, this book gives helpful and insightful chapters on directions in the United States, Great Britain and in Berkhof's homeland, the Netherlands. Chapter by chapter, he walks *through* and *with* the life, times and individual developments in thought of each theologian as he actively engages himself in the theological task as a teacher of the gospel message in this or that setting and under varied cultural or historical influences. Some let culture dominate the message. Others give less than adequate attention to the culture in which the gospel message was given (in this book it is usually the former—Barth and Kierkegaard being among the exceptions). The result is a larger continuity which is intended by Berkhof to override the individual chapters which discuss these theologians or movements as they attempt to bring or relate the gospel to culture. Berkhof makes clear that some have done a much more effective job in this than others. But Berkhof is always irenic, avoiding hasty, caricatured judgmentalism in his negatively constructive assessments. This spirit of the work is to be appreciated. Theology, as he says, is a human endeavor not done in heaven by already glorified human beings. In the context of real human existence Berkhof says, "The Christian church must, in the name of

its Lord, be where the wayward are. And theology, as scholarly reflection on the movement of God toward his lost world, must mirror this movement in its theme" (p. 302).

This book brought forth initial hopefulness (as a possible text for "Modern and Contemporary Theology"), then disappointment (for it does not simply analyze positions point by point), and then finally a positive change of mind. This is a telling work about the nature of the theological task in the world. While Berkhof has not given much reference to Protestant Orthodoxy in the book (he apologizes for this decision and gives some of the reasons for it in the "Preface"), he does examine nineteenth century Reformed Orthodoxy in the Netherlands (Knuyper, Bavinck, Berkouwer) in light of the great cultural as well as theological impact of that movement. Some of his comments which do "slip" through are less than fully complimentary, but maybe these ought to be seen as a prod toward a greater engagement in the larger theological task (within the European context Hendrikus Berkhof is usually regarded as basically "orthodox"). The closing discussion of the *doing* of theology, the relating of the gospel to a God-estranged (but loved) world and the "future" of theology is a fine capstone to this "personal inquiry" which will become itself, it is hoped, an effective "road" toward theological insight for many more. This book is recommended.

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The Case for Christian Humanism, by William R. Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. Pp. 270. \$18.95. Paper.

The second of two books, following *Readings in Christian Humanism* and completing "a four-college project called 'Humanism in an Age of Limits: A Christian Perspective,'" *The Case for Christian Humanism* is a provocative combination of history and polemic. In an attempt to redress the imbalance the authors see in contemporary American Christianity, the book cites historical evidence and philosophical rationale for the thesis that "the classical faith confessed by Christians in every generation implies a strong and caring interest in human beings as such" (p. ix).

To be certain, the term *humanism* is a vexed one for many conservative Christians. Fraught as the term is today with overtones of "secular humanism," the authors are careful to establish early on that their view of Christianity is orthodox (p. xvii) and that they reject secular versions of humanism as standard for the Christian (chap. 1). The material in this opening chapter assures the conservative reader that the authors' epistemology and axiology are consistent with historical Christianity.

In a brief overview (chaps. 2 and 3), Franklin and Shaw trace the history of humanism from an early form, in which radical secularism was not present, to its split into "secular" and "Christian" forms. While this section is admittedly introductory, the cursory nods toward Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx are inadequate to establish the radical secularism which Christians in a post-modern culture must counter. Happily, however, the authors extend their brief discussions of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, and modern-day ecumenism in later chapters.