THE PRESENCE OF THE FUTURE
in the
Eschatology of A. A. Van Ruler
(1908 – 1970)

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Abstract
This study explores the eschatology of the Dutch theologian A A Van Ruler, including his views on the kingdom of God. This kingdom is the reign of God coming from the future, creating in the present the tension between the already and the not yet. In one sense, the kingdom is already among us and this study reveals how Van Ruler describes the presence of the future in his theology. The study commences by placing Van Ruler’s eschatology in the wide range of different eschatologies. Next it gives an exposition of Van Ruler’s views of the kingdom of God in relation to some others aspects of his theology, notably his emphasis on the creation.

The work of the Holy Spirit is important in Van Ruler’s work, but does not stand in competition with the salvific work of Christ. It enables the human person to receive grace and become involved in the coming of the kingdom and to ‘anticipate’ that kingdom of God in what we are and what we do.

To clarify the presence of the future in his theology, the concept of ‘anticipation’ is used. The German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg defined this concept in his theology. Van Ruler also worked with this idea, but used different terms from Pannenberg, especially the concept of ‘fulfilment’. For Van Ruler this word not only means ‘consummation’, but also a present experience of fulfilment: salvation is already being fulfilled among us. This ‘fulfilment’ (vervulling) is an ‘anticipation’ in the strong sense in which it is used by Pannenberg.

The study further shows that Van Ruler uses other descriptions of the presence of the future kingdom of God. He speaks of the ‘signs’ of the kingdom, he uses the concepts of ‘realisation’, ‘pre-figuration’, ‘prolepsis’ and ‘anticipation’. He does not use such concepts as precisely and well defined as Pannenberg. Nevertheless, in his own way, with images and rich descriptive power, he uses the idea of anticipation earlier than Pannenberg. In brief, this study attempts to show that Van Ruler was not only acquainted with the term ‘anticipation’, but used the idea actively and in a strong ontologically sense in his theology.

The kingdom of God, which is an eschatological reality, is already among us. This study demonstrates how Van Ruler depicts the future’s presence in his theology.
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Extended Bibliography
Preface
The aim of this dissertation is to show that and how Van Ruler understands the kingdom of God in comparison with some other theologians, notably Wolfhart Pannenberg. Van Ruler’s theology\(^1\) is eschatological in nature, with an emphasis on the kingdom of God. This kingdom is not separated from the creation, for in the eschaton the completed kingdom will restore the proton but with greater glory. The concept of the ‘kingdom of God’ incorporates a tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. The kingdom, based on the promises of God, comes from the future and so arouses hope. Van Ruler says that the kingdom ‘breaks into our reality’ with force and overwhelming power. This kingdom can come because of the completed work of Christ. His kingdom is a modality of the kingdom of God. Due to Christ’s completed work, Van Ruler argues, it is possible to speak of ‘fulfilment’, the ‘fulfilment’ of the salvific work of Christ that permeates the created world and takes place in the playroom (*speelruimte*) of history.\(^2\) Both the kingdom and the fulfilment are still ‘veiled’ or hidden in the world today, but nevertheless present. This presence of the kingdom is made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. One of the works of the Holy Spirit is to take the benefits of Christ’s work, to apply them to the believer and to spread them throughout the creation. Without the work of the Spirit the kingdom of God could not be proleptically present, nor could the kingdom be anticipated in the life of the believer.

Van Ruler uses words like ‘realisation’, ‘pre-figuration’ and ‘Gestaltverdung’ for what is termed ‘anticipation’. It is possible to speak of ‘the presence of the future’, although this presence is anticipatory in nature.

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\(^1\) For a brief overview of Van Ruler’s life see the beginning of the Introduction.
After an overview of where Van Ruler fits in the eschatological theological landscape of his time (chapter 1), his view of the kingdom, showing the various aspects which are important to Van Ruler, is discussed in chapters 2 and 3. It is not possible to understand Van Ruler’s view of the kingdom without understanding his emphasis on this world, nor to understand Van Ruler’s position on ‘fulfilment’ without an exposition of his view of history. The same may be said of ‘emergency measures’, revelation and time.

Next, and before the chapter on pneumatology, chapter 4 sets out Van Ruler’s view of the church. The church is a sign and medium of the kingdom, not the converse. The chapter on the church precedes the chapter on pneumatology, because the discussion of pneumatology leads into the chapter on ‘anticipation’ (chapter 6); the two are closely related. In the final chapter (6) the conclusion is drawn that the theme of the ‘presence of the future’ is clearly present in Van Ruler’s theology and that in some of his theological emphases he was ahead of his time. It is shown that there are parallels between Van Ruler’s theology and that of Pannenberg, especially in relation to the presence of the future kingdom in anticipatory form.

There is also a subsidiary aim included in this research, namely to make a brief comparison with the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. It is secondary and brief in aim, for it is not the intention to arrive at a full comparison of these two theologians; that would alter the boundaries of this research. Yet the similarities in their patterns of thought and concepts is remarkable and one cannot escape the strong impression that these two theologians have comparable theological and eschatological ideas, though there is no indication that they collaborated in their work. In fact it may be concluded that in some of his ideas on the presence of the future Van Ruler pre-dates Pannenberg.
The method used for this research study is based on reading Van Ruler’s major works and a great many smaller publications, dealing with eschatology. Van Ruler never wrote a Systematic Theology. His ideas, concepts and theological constructs have been harvested from his prolific writings, books and many articles. By comparison, Pannenberg’s theological concepts, although challenging, were more systematically organised and analysed with greater thoroughness and therefore more accessible. The research was reliant on written material by Van Ruler as primary source. As secondary resources, only those authors who have written about or commented on Van Ruler or have added to the discussion of Van Ruler’s theological ideas are quoted.

This study has as focus that field of theology which is called eschatology. However, it does not deal with all aspects of eschatology; aspects like ‘the after-life’, the sleep of the soul, bodily resurrection and the like, are not considered, not because they are not important, but because they detract from the main focus, which is the kingdom of God and its present actualisation. It must be said that Van Ruler did not write much on these other topics either.

It could be asked: ‘Why this study at this time?’ There is a marked and recent renaissance of interest in Van Ruler’s theology. Many of his writings are republished in the *Verzameld Werk* (Collected Works), of which now five publications in four Volumes have appeared. In total eight volumes are planned. This indicates, first of all, the great volume of Van Ruler’s writings. Secondly, it also shows the renewed interest in his works. My interest in Dutch and European theology goes back to the ten years of ministry.

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3 All of Van Ruler’s Collected Works have been edited by Dirk van Keulen.
in Europe, from 1973 to 1983. The fact that Van Ruler is being republished has led to renewed reading and study of his writings.

Only a small proportion of Van Ruler’s works has been translated into English.\(^4\) I have used my own translations in this dissertation. As a Dutch theologian Van Ruler wrote in Dutch; at times he wrote in German. In order to make the research as accessible as possible to the English reader, I have given the translation of Dutch titles in square brackets behind the original title. In the footnotes and bibliography, the short title is given in Dutch. Throughout the dissertation Dutch terms are often placed in the text between brackets and in italics (…), to indicate the actual words used in the original. It will demonstrate that it is not always possible to translate the word literally, because Van Ruler used the Dutch language very freely and in a creative manner. His language is dynamic and full of images. He was an original writer, who liked to play with words and regularly used striking imagery like ‘the dance of God’ (reidans) and ‘fire-proof’ (vuurvast).\(^5\) At times he created his own theological ‘neologisms’ and was able to break

\(^{4}\) The main translated works are the following:
1. The Greatest of these is Love (Grand Rapids 1958)
2. God’s Son and God’s World (Grand Rapids 1960)

\(^{5}\) It is unfortunate that often in the translation the play on words is lost. It is not always possible to translate his images in such a manner that the meaning is immediately apparent. Sometimes they need explanation, as e.g. with this image: “The Spirit renews our lives, but does this particularly by helping us to discover our sin. He (Spirit) is like Keith the ‘gas dog’ (Kees de gashond) who discovers the leakages.” Apparently a dog (called Keith) was used to discover where gas leakages occurred. The idea that the Spirit helps us to discover a dangerous nuisance, like Keith the dog did, is original, to say the least. Cf. Bram Van de Beek, ‘De theologie van Van Ruler’ [The Theology of Van Ruler], in *Men moet telkens opnieuw de reuzenzwaai aan de reksok*.
down theological constructs into everyday language. Not surprisingly, his radio morning devotions were popular throughout the Netherlands for a long period of time.

There is one more word that needs to be mentioned, namely ‘existence’ (*existentie*). In English one would not use it abstractly but usually speak of the existence of ‘something’. In Dutch the word can be used in general to mean things like the creation, the world, the universe, humankind, or reality as a whole. Van Ruler was in the habit of using it rather loosely, usually speaking about creation. Sometimes it is necessary to guess as to what exactly he was referring.

There are a number of persons I would like to thank. First of all my main supervisor, Professor Chris Mostert. He has been an untiring and patient ‘encourager’. Without his advice, wisdom, knowledge and guidance, I would more than once have stranded. He not only invested a great amount of time and personal attention in my work, but he also continually appealed to my love for theology and kept encouraging me. His eye for detail and precision was a great help to me. Above all he has taught me theology to be a science about God and his creation, good theology, that I was able to use as a theologian in my work. The fact that he comes from Dutch parentage and understands and speaks the Dutch language has been a considerable asset. He has helped me greatly in refining the quotations from the Dutch language.

6 Andries H Drost, *Is God veranderd?* [Has God changed?] *Een onderzoek naar de relatie God-Israel in de theologie van K.H. Miskotte, A.A.van Ruler en H.Berkhof* [Researching the relation God - Israel in the theology of K.H.Miskotte, A.A.van Ruler and H.Berkhof] [Has God changed?], (Amsterdam, Free University: A theological thesis, 2007), 120. Drost says about Van Ruler: “…hij gebruikte neologismen om zijn gedachten uit te drukken, maar was ook heel beeldend in zijn taalgebruik.” […] he used neologism to express his thoughts, and also used language with many images.]
Special thanks also go to the associate supervisor, Dr Dirk van Keulen, from the Netherlands. His detailed archival knowledge of Van Ruler has been of enormous and fundamental assistance; without his help I could not have read Van Ruler as I did. It was never too much for him to send documents, point to books available and make manuscripts available to me. He introduced me to Van Ruler’s archives. In 2007 I was privileged to visit them at the library of the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. What I know now about Van Ruler I have learned from my reading of Van Ruler, made available mainly through Dirk van Keulen. I also thank the Theological University of Kampen, which at times helped out with photocopies of Van Ruler’s writings. Both supervisors have greatly expanded my theological horizons.

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The first professor who instilled a love for theology in me was Professor Dr Klaas Runia (07.03.1926 – 14.10.2006). To his memory I dedicate this work.