Introduction - Van Ruler and his theological background.

The Dutch theologian Arnold Albert Van Ruler lived from 1908 till 1970. A brief overview of his life is given here in order to place his theology chronologically. It is important to outline his theological thinking and how it was formed. Only then is it possible to place Van Ruler’s eschatology.

Van Ruler came from Reformed (Hervormd) parents, with a Calvinist pietistic emphasis, which is characteristic for the area where he grew up.¹ For the rest of his life Van Ruler struggled with the tension between the subjective and objective aspects of faith.² He was a promising student and at the special High School (Gymnasium) he started reading theology. At the age of 17 years he had made up his mind about the direction of his life. He studied theology in Groningen, in the north of the Netherlands, where he followed the developments of dialectical theology and read the works of many theologians, including Karl Barth. Until his death, Prof. W J Aalders guided his doctoral study. Th L Haitjema, professor of Dogmatics at Groningen, helped Van Ruler decide on the topic of his thesis. Van Ruler intended to write his thesis on Troeltsch, but later changed this to write on the Kingdom of God.³

In order to understand Van Ruler, we need to realise that he lived through the difficult years of World War II as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk). During this time he wrote several books. As well, he obtained his doctorate in Theology in 1947. His dissertation was entitled: ‘De Vervulling van de Wet’

(The Fulfilling of the Law), which dealt with his view of the Kingdom of God. Also in 1947 he became Professor for the Dutch Reformed Church (*de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*) at the State University at Utrecht. He taught first Biblical Theology, National Church History, Missions and later Dogmatics, Christian Ethics and Dutch Reformed Church History and Church Polity.  

Van Ruler was a very down to earth and practical theologian. In his theology he paid attention to daily life and the struggles of faith. He did not overlook evil or suffering in the world, yet continued to value creation and the joys of daily life in the world. Often his theology gives an optimistic impression. He was a keen follower of football and loved nature. He often spoke in public, gave many lectures and wrote many books and hundreds of articles. For twenty five years he gave a weekly morning devotion on the (AVRO) radio station.

Van Ruler had an ecumenical outlook and promoted the unity of the Church. This included organisational and institutional unity. However, towards the end of his life, at times he felt a lonely traveller. Not many followed his theological path and direction. At present there is a renewed interest in his work, much of which is being republished. Van Ruler can be termed a conservative theologian, but he has some very creative ideas, which are not mainstream. He is seen as a biblical scholar, yet with some innovative ideas. He died quite suddenly of a heart attack in 1970 at only 62 years of age.

Van Ruler started out as a student and follower of Barth. Even before his student days he read everything that Barth had published. At the age of 17 Van Ruler moved to the

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5 Janssen, *Kingdom, Office and Church*, 29.
University at Groningen. “At that moment he already was familiar with the name Karl Barth”. He says himself that in the beginning he followed Barth without criticism, “for me he was ‘the Master’s voice and like a little dog I listened to the gramophone’.” However, although he had always valued Barth, he distanced himself from Barth’s theology more and more as time went on, perhaps in part influenced by O. Noordmans (1871-1956). Some of the criticism that he voiced was that Barth’s work had a too strongly methodological character: Barth’s method was too exact, positivistic and absolutist, which led to enormous speculation. Yet Van Ruler always retained respect for his teacher, which he maintained till after Barth’s death. In ‘In Memoriam’ Van Ruler compares Barth with an artist: “As Mozart played with notes, Barth played with words and thoughts … The whole of Barth’s dogmatics sparkles with life. The music of the ocean is roaring through the endless pages of the many volumes of his Church Dogmatics.” The same may be said of Van Ruler and his creative works. Barth was the leading light for Van Ruler’s earlier part of his life. Van Ruler said that Barth “…operated a Kantian epistemological dualism of reason and faith, but …affirmed the inbreaking of the divine holy love in Christ, an act of revelation, enabling us to speak of God.” Later, Van Ruler distanced himself more and more from Barth’s position. Nevertheless, as can be seen from his writings, Barth remained Van Ruler’s main ‘discussion partner’ throughout his life.

6 Dirk Van Keulen, ‘Van ‘His master’s voice’ naar respectvolle kritiek - A.A. van Rulers verhouding tot de theologie van Karl Barth [From ‘his master’s voice’ to respectful criticism - A.A.Van Ruler's relation with the theology of Karl Barth] in Verder met van Ruler - Men moet telkens opnieuw de reuzenzwaai aan de rekstok maken. [Continuing with Van Ruler - One has to, time and again, make a mighty swing on the horizontal bar], ed. Dirk van Keulen, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009), 94.
7 G Punchinger, Hervormd-Gereformeerd, één of gescheiden? [Hervormd - Reformed, one or separated?] A series of interviews. [Conversations over Reformed one or divided?], (Delft: Meinema 1969), 356.
8 Van Keulen, ‘His masters voice’, 105.
11 Van Keulen, ed., Inleiding Deel 1, 24.
Who were Van Ruler’s teachers? This is not easy to answer, for usually Van Ruler does not quote sources. Only now and then does he refer to a name. He learned his dogmatics from Th L Haitjema, Professor at the University at Groningen. Professor G van der Leeuw was his teacher in phenomenology and religious history. He had great respect for Professor W J Aalders, who taught religion and philosophy. Later he began to value Aalders as a universal Christian thinker. His dissertation *De Vervulling van de Wet* (The Fulfilling of the Law), which became his ‘magnum opus’, set the tone for all that he would write and he never deviated from the theology set out in that work. Van Ruler was fascinated by, but also critical of, Abraham Kuyper and one of his first publications was a book on Abraham Kuyper and Christian culture. His writings also indicate clearly that Van Ruler was well acquainted with the views of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Marx and others.

Van Ruler’s writings are very numerous and have a particular style. Apart from his lectures, he wrote mainly for the people in the pew and he delivered devotions on the radio for a wide public. This resulted in a devotional style of writing, as many of his publications show. Van Ruler was systematic in his thinking and writing, but never became ‘a systematician’. He was against this on principle, because he claimed it was impossible to write everything in one or more Systematic Theologies. One can never write all there is to say in a ‘system’ about the kingdom of God. Neither did Van Ruler

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12 Van Keulen, ed., Inleiding Deel 1, 20.
13 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*.
14 Van Keulen, ed., Inleiding Deel 1, 24.
18 Cf. Van Ruler, ‘De Verandering’, 305.
write explicitly in an academic style, carefully citing his sources. This, however, does not mean that Van Ruler was not systematic and logical in his thinking and writing. He was a clever strategist when arguing with others academically. He wrote in a manner that showed that he looked at an issue or problem from more than one angle. He often surprised his hearers by coming up with yet one more aspect at which to look at the topic. His writing is like a person looking at a diamond, each time showing a different facet. He could be fierce and precise in speaking out against current opponents, especially the Marxist way of thinking, at the time of writing. Often there is a subtle and ironic undertone.

Where does Van Ruler fit in the philosophical streams of his day? There are two aspects which stand out in his theology. First, on no account can it be said that Van Ruler was opposed to the use of reason in theology. Rather the opposite: time and again he stressed that theology must not shun reason or the findings of science. To illustrate this, during Van Ruler’s time as professor of dogmatics, there was a great debate about the findings of science in relation to the theory of evolution and the synthesis that could be made between theology and science. Van Ruler quotes this with approval and asks whether it is not possible also to use the term evolution in relation to the eschaton.\(^\text{19}\) He was not averse to looking at the findings of philosophy or science.

Van Ruler could be termed more a follower of Hegelian than Kantian thought. Kant, with his ‘subjective idealism’, and Schleiermacher, with his stress on religious experience, brought about a dualism between faith and reason, stressing that God cannot be known through the use of theoretical reason, “since reason had no way of talking about the

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‘noumenal’ which may exist but ‘beyond our ken’.” Hegel, on the other hand, had more confidence in the power of reason. Another philosopher, whom Van Ruler only obscurely mentions, but never positively, is Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s thinking led to a dualism between faith and reason, regarding them as incommensurable. It will become obvious that Van Ruler did not agree.

In his discussion of Pannenberg, John Macquarie divides the European philosophical forerunners of Pannenberg into two camps. On the one hand there is the ‘Hegel, Marx, Bloch’ line of thought and on the other hand the ‘Kierkegaard and Heidegger’ line. The first camp (Hegel, Marx and Bloch) emphasises the work of the Spirit throughout history and enables humanity to see some rational meaning and truth, even though this may be incomplete and fragmentary. The second camp emphasises the subjective element and stresses that humanity needs to choose and decide to have faith. Ultimate meaning as ascribed to God is a personal act of faith. The second group would be more ‘fideistic’ than the first. These intellectual influences certainly played a role in Van Ruler’s theology. As will be shown, there are definite signs that Van Ruler stressed reason against a subjective emphasis on faith. Van Ruler leaned more towards Hegel and Bloch than toward Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

Bradshaw reminds us that Barth “… felt he needed to close the doors and windows of the theological house since they were banging uncontrollably as a result of the winds of outside culture. Theology needed to recover its own thought and its proper content, faith and God who discloses himself.” In an addition to Bradshaw’s statement it must be said that the more Van Ruler broke away from the influence of Barth, the more he opened the

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windows and doors again to the world, science, reason and the fresh breeze of the Spirit of God. He shifted the focus to the future, the future which God is unfolding. He was open minded in his thinking and writing, not only in regard to ecumenism, but also towards the concepts of history and science. He states: “all of us – irrespective of our discipline – are basically all concerned with the same thing, namely with ourselves or with what is real (werkelijkheid), in any case with the truth (waarheid). And the truth is not apart from God.”

Van Ruler also educated himself by reading widely. He took some interest in the earlier mystical and experiential (ethische) theologians. J H Gunning Jnr is one he quotes from time to time. He appreciates Gunning’s remark that: “it is not the world that should prove to humanity the existence of God, but that it is humankind’s task to prove to the world that God exists.” Perhaps Van Ruler took his emphasis on kingdom, creation and the future from Gunning. It is remarkable that already in 1888 Gunning stated that the gospel (het evangelie) is eschatological in nature, and that the church is not the ultimate will of God, but the kingdom. The kingdom of God is the final purpose of all historical development and also its power house. In Gunning’s work there is also a clear emphasis on this world, a point that is emphatic in Van Ruler’s own writings. Avoiding any form of pietism, Gunning says: “The believer ought not to flee from this world”. At the beginning of the first section of his dissertation, in the Introduction, Van Ruler writes: “We are deeply convinced that, just as in the first century the whole confession of faith

26 Gunning, De Toekomst des Heeren, 15.
27 Gunning, De Toekomst des Heeren, 22.
28 Gunning, De Toekomst des Heeren, 44.
was developed in a backward movement, so the renewal of the dogmatics and preaching, demanded by our time has eschatology as its point of departure.”

Later he mentions Gunning again in the context of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit and reiterates that we need to commence with the end, the eschaton, and work backwards.

Another early author quoted by Van Ruler, is Jan Ruusbroec, a Flemish mystic, who lived in a monastery near Brussels from 1293 – 1381, and emphasised a life of contemplation and meditation. Van Ruler is impressed by the various theological aspects that Ruusbroec brings together. Summarising Ruusbroec in a single sentence: “our mystical life has to be kept between the borders of the gospel and Christian ideology by common sense”.

Ruusbroec was also a strong trinitarian. Van Ruler devoted a whole lecture to Ruusbroec, probably because he found in himself the same struggles he recognised in Ruusbroec.

Van Ruler further shows that he was acquainted with authors of the Patristic, Reformation and Post Reformation periods, especially those who dealt with the concept of the kingdom of God.

A theologian whose work looms large in the background of Van Ruler’s theology is Herman Bavinck. Reading Bavinck one could easily think that one is reading Van Ruler and vice versa. There are threads that run through Van Ruler’s theology that are unmistakably similar to Bavinck’s theology. Bavinck’s emphasis on creation as basically good, the rejection of a pietism that is shy of this world, the rejection of the dualism of nature and grace, are all found back in Van Ruler. Bavinck rejects the idea that grace adds

29 Gunning, De Toekomst des Heeren, 87.
30 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 134.
32 Van Ruler, ‘Christelijk - Europese Mystiek’, 113 ff.
to salvation, that grace adds, (in the sense of elevates), to the image of God in humanity, or that grace adds to nature or to any other matter. Van Ruler is of the same mind.33

In his inaugural address, accepting the rectorship at the Theological College at Kampen in 1888, Bavinck contrasts some basic theological points between Roman Catholic and Reformed theology. This lecture covers the area of nature and grace. It exposes the teaching that the whole of creation and existence, i.e. the world, needs to be brought into the church, that everything needs to be made sacred. According to Bavinck, this indicates an under-valuation of creation. In this way there remains a dualism of creation and recreation; this Bavinck rejects. Bavinck makes it clear, that Christianity, in all its catholicity is like a yeast that permeates throughout the whole of life, culture, politics, art and the whole world. “The kingdom is not of this world, but everything (in this world) needs to be brought into service for this kingdom.”34 This is also found in Van Ruler. Like those of many other theologians, so also Bavinck’s teachings are of fundamental importance to, and undeniably present in, Van Ruler’s theology of the kingdom.

The various aspects of the kingdom of God will be looked at in more detail in the following chapters, but it is already important here to note that the aspect of the future is strongly present in the theology of Van Ruler. In brief he says: “the category of the future of God would seem to belong to a description of God’s being … It is anchored in the doctrine of God … And we look for the expression and reflection of the being of God in the works of God. We do so in the light of the triune being of God. This implies that we


do so with regard to God’s eschatological being.”  

There is also present in Van Ruler’s eschatology the proleptic aspect, seen clearly when he says “… every day in time portrays something, a pre-figuration of the last day”. He means that each day we anticipate the kingdom of God, we are living from the future. One can therefore speak of the ‘presence of the future’.

Van Ruler is averse to any idea of dualism, that we can live in two worlds, i.e. this earthly reality and the heavenly kingdom of God. He avoids the idea that there is another world or reality, beside or above the one in which we live. This existence, this life we now live, is the one that has been redeemed by God and this cosmos is the one that is being fulfilled in the eschatological kingdom of God. “The biblical expectation of the future (i.e. the eschatological expectation) is without doubt not directed exclusively towards God in such a way that the earthly perspective would be irrelevant.” The created world is not of lesser value. Rather in Van Ruler’s view, all our eschatological expectations are related to the kingdom of God in this reality and only this earthly reality. Instead of dualisms, Van Ruler likes to work with ellipses which orbit around two foci. We will see this in connection with the concepts of the eschaton, history, time, eternity and revelation.

Like all writers on eschatology, Van Ruler also stresses the death and resurrection of Christ as the ground for all eschatological hope. In Christ the kingdom is fulfilled and through the Spirit it is given to us in our everyday situation.

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35 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 49.
In summary, Van Ruler was raised in a conservative family with an emphasis on experiential faith. He stresses above all the importance of this creation. As a Reformed theologian, coming from the calvinistic Reformed tradition, he upheld the main tenets of biblical teaching, the Trinity, the atonement, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and God’s revelation in history.