

# Herman Bavinck and Radical Orthodoxy: Elements of Participation in the *Reformed Dogmatics*

Wolter Huttinga

Doctoral candidate, Theological University Kampen

This paper gives a short introduction to my current research about the theological movement known as *Radical Orthodoxy* (RO) in combination with Herman Bavinck's theology. Since this occasion is a Bavinck conference, this paper focuses mainly on Bavinck and not on RO. However, to introduce my theme and to explain why I am reading Bavinck the way I do, I have to explain shortly what RO is and how it is related to Bavinck's theology.

## RADICAL ORTHODOXY

What is RO? The people connected to it do not like to see it as a clear theological “school” or even a movement. Instead, they prefer to consider it as a shared theological sensibility and more of a loose tendency among theologians.<sup>1</sup> However, what sensibility is shared?

The first characteristic is that RO theologians want to develop a post-secular theology. In the introduction to the opening volume of the radical orthodoxy series which started in 1999, the main representatives of RO—John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock—write that they want to “reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological

1. J.K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 63–70.

framework.”<sup>2</sup> Modernity has ironically proven not to honour the material as it intended to do, and RO claims that a fully theological stance is needed to overcome this.

In this respect the intentions of RO sound quite similar to the theological project of neo-Calvinism. There are important resemblances between their standpoint and the theological robustness of the works of Kuyper and Bavinck. Reformed theologians immediately recognized the main statements of RO as echoing Kuyper’s famous dictum: “There is not a single square inch of creation concerning which Christ does not say ‘Mine!’”<sup>3</sup>

In the second place, we must have a look at RO’s central theological framework—“participation.” By this they mean participation of the created in the divine, a concept that, according to Milbank, Ward, and Pickstock, stems from Plato and was successfully taken up and reworked by Christianity. Of course, this idea is linked with currents of thought that focus on some kind of “Deification” or “Panentheism” and might distance their position immediately from Reformed theology, which insists firmly on the border between the Creator and the created. However, they have strong reasons to emphasize this theme which are worthwhile to consider. Participation envisages all created beings as intimately related to God. Finite things are nothing in themselves but are seen as purely gifts from God and as giving themselves back to God. So, one can detect what they call a trinitarian logic or movement in things: things derive their existence from God and give themselves back to God. “All there is, is only because it is more than it is,” as it is strikingly formulated in the introduction. So, implicitly, RO calls for a resurgence of metaphysics.

2. J. Milbank, G. Ward, C. Pickstock, *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

3. J.K.A. Smith and J.H. Olthuis (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant and Participation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

## BAVINCK ON KNOWLEDGE AND THEOLOGY

Of course, Bavinck scholars will recognise these themes in Bavinck's works. In my first reading of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, for example, I was struck by the resemblances between key points of RO and Bavinck's thought, which is not to say that I did not notice great differences as well. In this paper my reading of Bavinck is restricted to some important remarks in his prolegomena.

What is theology, according to Bavinck? From the outset, it is clear that Bavinck intends to give his dogmatics a trinitarian character. The whole world stands in a trinitarian movement from God to God. It is the task of theology to participate in this very movement. When writing about the task of science, Bavinck argues that its aim is or should be *truth*. If theology wants to be scientific, it should be aiming for the truth that underlies all our changing and unstable worldly phenomena. In other words, theology should be metaphysical. And if theology does this, then "it returns to the old view of theology,"<sup>4</sup> Bavinck writes in the second and later editions of his *Dogmatics*. He expresses the same thought even more profoundly in the first edition. There he states that theology, aiming for truth, "returns immediately to God himself and becomes again, in the strict sense, theology"—by which he must mean that theology partakes in the speaking and thinking of God himself.<sup>5</sup>

Later on Bavinck writes in the same fashion when he defends, against the German theologian Julius Kaftan, the point that theology focuses on knowledge and not on the moral will in a neo-Kantian sense. Thus he writes:

Science exists for God's sake and finds its final goal in his glory. Specifically, this then is true of theology; in a special sense it is from God and by God, and hence for God as well. But precisely because its final purpose does not lie in any

4. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 37.

5. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 1, 1st. ed. (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1895), 8.

creature, not in practice, or in piety, or in the church, amidst all the [other] sciences it maintains its own character and nature. Truth as such has value. Knowledge as such is a good. To know God in the face of Christ—by faith here on earth, by sight in the hereafter—not only *results* in blessedness but *is* as such blessedness and eternal life. It is this knowledge dogmatics strives for in order that God may see his own image reflected and his own name recorded in the human consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Two biblical texts that continually accompany Bavinck's comments on knowledge and the character of theology are striking. The first is John 17:3 (NIV): "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." For Bavinck, salvation is simply equated with knowing God. The second text is Romans 11:36 (NIV): "For from him and through him and to him are all things. . . ." Bavinck reads the trinitarian movement in this world as "from God to God."

This is a point which Bavinck stresses time and again: the task of human thinking and especially of theological thinking is to re-think the thoughts of God. God has complete knowledge of himself, and we will never know God the way He knows himself. Nevertheless, our knowledge of God participates in God's knowledge. This participation is also stressed when Bavinck discusses the *principia* of theology. He uses the classic distinction between *theologia archetypa* and *ectypa* (God's knowledge of himself and our knowledge of God), but Bavinck wants to make clear that the three *principia* he distinguishes are "essentially one," rooted in the trinitarian being of God.<sup>7</sup>

6. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:53–54.

7. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:214.

## ELEMENTS OF PARTICIPATION

When we analyse this conception of theology in light of the tradition, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Bavinck is using elements of neo-Platonism. Or, as we perhaps should say: Bavinck stands in the respected Christian tradition that absorbed elements of neo-Platonism to speak faithfully about the relationship between God and creation. The paragon of this tradition is Thomas Aquinas, whose conception of theology is close to Bavinck's.

It is the common opinion about Thomas Aquinas that he connected his inherited Christian doctrinal tradition with the new (in his time) "scientific" way of looking at the world which was found in the works of Aristotle and that he was also heavily influenced by a more neo-Platonic line in the Christian tradition as found in Augustine and, more profoundly, in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus Erigena, and Maximus Confessor. These influences can be observed in the so-called *exitus-reditus* concept that he uses in his *Summa Theologiae*: all created things go out from God and return to God. This movement is even said to be the basic scheme of his *Summa*.<sup>8</sup> It is exactly this movement, connected with the Trinity, that is decisive for Bavinck's concept of theology, as we have seen. So what we can say about Bavinck's conception of theology, I contend, is at least that it contains elements of participation. Again, this is not to say, of course, that Bavinck would not have major objections to this scheme.

When Bavinck writes about method and organization of theology, he admits that he would have no serious objections against a trinitarian organization of dogmatic theology. "It commends itself," he writes, "by its purely theological character. Nature and history are both subsumed under God." However, there is the danger of speculative misuse when philosophers or theologians tend to sacrifice history to the system and to incorporate cosmogony into the

8. This was argued first by M. D. Chenu in 1939 but has been recently challenged by R. te Velde in his *Aquinas on God: The Divine Science of the Summa Theologiae* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 9–18.

trinitarian life of God, turning it into theogony.<sup>9</sup> Bavinck interestingly mentions the names of Erigena, Böhme, Baader, Schelling, and Hegel in this occasion. And he mentions these names more often in his dogmatics: they represent kinds of thought that envision God and the world too harmoniously together and end up in some form of monism or pantheism.

Here we begin to recognise a stance that Bavinck takes throughout his *Reformed Dogmatics*, especially in his account of the doctrine of God and Creation: on the one hand he fences off his position against deism, which creates a gap between God and creation; but on the other hand he argues against a form of pantheism, which erases the border between creator and creature. So, there is a limit to Bavinck's sympathy for participatory views on the relationship between God and the world.

However, if we can find in Bavinck's work a slight preference for the intentions of one or the other; or, perhaps better, if we can determine which position he opposes most, I would contend that Bavinck is more strongly opposed to the deistic than the pantheistic view. In continuity with his ability to see important truths in widely varying opinions, he really does see some truth in all kinds of thought that keeps God and creation intimately connected. This desire resonates with his own theological view, which I already called "trinitarian" and in which the Logos plays a central conceptual role as a mediator between creator and creation. Not only is the Logos our way to know God, but also it is the only way to know at all. It is in the Logos that we have connection to reality, to created things, and to the Creator. The Logos is the principle that connects subject and object, that makes them "correspond" in "an organic way."

In all this—and I want to end here with a more general statement—we see Bavinck as someone who is aware of the need to draw distinctions between subject and object, between God and the world, and between the persons of the Trinity. But more importantly we see his longing for oneness, for harmony, for a

9. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:111–12.

subsuming of all difference under the one and true God, who is the beginning and end and the only true existence of all things.