

Pearls and Leaven

Herman Bavinck and Islam

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Herman Bavinck and Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936) met for the first time in September 1874 at the University of Leiden where both had enrolled as theology students. These two highly gifted students began a friendship (and correspondence) that lasted a lifetime notwithstanding different religious convictions and temperaments: Bavinck was orthodox and Reformed; Snouck Hurgronje was *vrijzinnig* (freethinking, liberal); Bavinck went on to become a Reformed pastor and the greatest Reformed theologian since John Calvin; Snouck Hurgronje turned to the study of the Semitic languages, especially Arabic, and became one of the only Westerners to have actually entered Mecca, a colonial adviser to the Dutch government, professor of Oriental Studies at Leiden, and recognizably one of the foremost Islamic scholars of his day. The correspondence between the two men has been transcribed and published (J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck, eds., *Een Leidse Vriendschap: De Briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875–1921* [Baarn: Ten Have, 1999]), and the passages below are translations from this collection by John Bolt and George Harinck.

BAVINCK TO SNOUCK HURGRONJE, JANUARY 28, 1915

In 1914 the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) had taken the side of the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary) against the Entente (U.K., France, Russia, and later Italy and U.S.A.). The Germans had

cultivated this alliance, and a jihad was called by the Turkish Sultan who, as Caliph, was the head of world Islam. Hurgronje wrote an article, "Holy War made in Germany," (*De Gids* LXXIX [1915], I, 115–147). Bavinck's letter to Snouck Hurgronje indicates his basic agreement with the latter's profound criticism of the German government but contends that the criticism does not go far enough. Here are some excerpts from the letter that show Bavinck's grasp of basic issues that remain with us today—in so many areas Bavinck had a gifted prescience because he understood *spiritual* powers and earthly powers.

. . . [though] I agree with the general direction of your article, I would go even further in condemning the Islamic politics of Germany and its toying with Islamic "holy war"—the whole business of Islamic politics, first by England, and then by Germany, thrusts the holiest treasures aside for the concerns about influence and power.

Bavinck then goes on to dispute Snouck Hurgronje's hope that exposure to the West—to the modern world—will diminish the drive to jihad in Islam. He faults Snouck Hurgronje for not fully appreciating the *religious* character of Islam—thinking of it too much as just a civilization.

I read in your article that you consider jihad to be a medieval institution that even the Muslim world itself is outgrowing . . . that there are a small group of "modern" Muslims who desire change (though they are outnumbered and not very influential) . . . that the Caliphate is merely a honorific . . . and that the jihad is losing its power among Muslims . . . that cultural influences will moderate the Muslim world. . . .

I see things quite differently; I have different presuppositions. . . . The danger of conflict [with the Muslim world] will remain as long as Islam remains Islam; no cultural influence will alter that. . . . It is precisely because I am not as sanguine as you are about the awakening of Islam, because I judge culture and civilization to be less powerful than religion and consider the strength

and influence of intellectuals far below that of the masses, particularly those who are driven by a religious idea—that is why I consider the German Islamic politics to be so dangerous.” (Translated by John Bolt)

SNOUCK HURGRONJE TO BAVINCK, DECEMBER 30, 1908

On December 30, 1908, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje wrote a letter to Bavinck on the occasion of receiving a copy of his *Philosophy of Revelation*. Key religious and theological differences between the two friends can be seen in Snouck Hurgronje’s reaction to Bavinck’s Stone Lectures:

Your position regarding Scripture seems weak to me, because on the one hand this position more or less neglects or hushes up the immense problems that even the most conservative and careful historical criticism presents; and on the other hand, because the objective character of revelations are spoken by a human mouth, written by a human hand, and canonized by a human decree, and thus are in the end subjective. I do not want to question the right to reach to this acknowledgement, but the value of an objective, infallible standard for all things, that is determined quantitatively and qualitatively by subjects, is as relative as any other persistent conviction. (Translated by George Harinck)