

# Religion as Revelation? The Development of Herman Bavinck's View from a Reformed Orthodox to a Neo-Calvinist Approach

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Herman Bavinck relates religion and revelation closely. This relationship is one of the foundational elements in his theology. To quote his lecture on common grace, “All religions are positive: they are based on real or supposed revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Or, as he says in the Stone Lectures, “religion as *religio insita* . . . points directly back to revelation.”<sup>2</sup> Still, there seems to be a development in the way he approaches religion and revelation. First, he leans heavily on the Reformed orthodox tradition, and later he searches for a new—say, neo-Calvinist—application of that tradition.

To trace this development we will first assess the differences between the first and the later editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* on the topics of religion and general revelation; next, compare the findings with some other statements of Bavinck; and, finally, close with some conclusions about this development and some theological remarks on this theme.

1. *De Algemeene Genade: Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 6 December 1894* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1894), 11. For an English translation, see Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. R.C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1989): 35–65.

2. *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Green and Co., 1909), 159.

## Epistemology

Bavinck's discussion of the essence of religion in the *Reformed Dogmatics* follows immediately after his treatment of general epistemology. He finishes the section on the *principia* of the sciences with a reference to the divine Logos. The eternal Word has created both the reality outside of the human mind and the laws of thought within it and has placed both in an organic connection and correspondence to each other.

The created world is thus the *principium cognoscendi externum* of all science. But that is not enough. In order to see we need an eye. "If the eye were not related to the sun, how could we see the light?" There must be correspondence, kinship between object and subject.<sup>3</sup>

All knowledge of the created world outside of us necessarily corresponds to laws of thought inside of us. Knowledge of the truth is only possible if subject and object, knowing and being, are related.<sup>4</sup> This idea of correspondence between the objective and subjective is omnipresent in Bavinck's works. The quote is from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): "Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, wie könnten wir das Licht erblicken?"<sup>5</sup> Bavinck was influenced on this point by Ethical Theology. As early as 1884 he writes in his assessment of the theology of Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874) that, according to this theologian, reason can be described as the ability to recognize the Logos in the world because of our natural relationship to the Logos.<sup>6</sup>

3. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1928), 1:207; hereafter referenced as *GD*; all references are to this edition unless specified otherwise. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:233; hereafter referenced as *RD*.

4. Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 2nd ed. (Kok: Kampen, 1913), 21.

5. J.W. Goethe, "Zur Farbenlehre" in J.W. Goethe, *Goethes Werke*, vol. 13 (Munich: Beck, 1982), 324. Elsewhere Bavinck says that it cannot be denied that to see we need both the light of the sun (objectively) and eyes (subjectively). *GD*, 2:41; cf. *RD*, 2:70.

6. *De Theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye: Bijdrage tot de kennis der Ethische Theologie* (Leiden: Donner, 1884), 79.

In his discussing of general revelation in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck writes that a certain faculty in human beings corresponds to the objective general revelation of God. Just as in science so also in religion: there is not only an external and objective but also an internal and subjective revelation. Nature and history are the external objective means of God's general revelation, while intellect, reason, and conscience are the internal means by which God makes his general revelation known. There is a revelation of God not only outside but also inside human beings. This revelation of God in us is not an independent source of knowledge alongside nature and history but serves as a subjective organ that enables us to receive and understand the revelation in nature and history. The *semen religionis* corresponds to the revelation of God in nature and history.<sup>7</sup>

These remarks raise the question of how religiosity and religions relate to revelation. Is only the Christian religion related to the seed of religion, or are other religions also fruits of revelation? If all religion depends on revelation, are all religions then also revelations?

## **The First and Later Editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics***

The paragraphs in the *Reformed Dogmatics* on the *principia* of religion open with an analysis of the word "religion" and with some remarks from biblical theology. In the Old Testament objective religion, which is identical with God's revelation, consists in the covenant, while the subjective religion that corresponds to it is the fear of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> There is no difference between the first and the later editions until Bavinck turns to the distinction between true and false religion. In the first edition he denies that Scripture teaches an essence of religion as a foundation for the specific religions. Instead, Scripture describes the relationship between God and human beings, which God himself has determined. Reformed theol-

7. *GD*, 1:312; cf. *RD*, 1:341.

8. *GD*, 1st ed. (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1895), 1:172; *GD*, 1:209; cf. *RD*, 1:237.

ogy always has taken its starting point in the *religio vera*. “No religion can object to being tested to the pure concept of religion.”<sup>9</sup>

This exclusive starting point is entirely in line with Reformed orthodoxy. Perhaps Bavinck is even leaning on the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* that he edited while a pastor in Franeker.<sup>10</sup> The *Synopsis* says that true religion proceeds from God alone “because it constitutes God’s covenant with humanity.”<sup>11</sup> Only the Christian religion is true, and that is proved by the fact that it is the only religion that displays the marks of a true religion: it acknowledges the true God, explains the true ground on which sinful human beings can be restored to God, and prescribes the right duties towards God and the neighbor.<sup>12</sup>

In the later editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* these remarks on the starting point in the *vera religio* are deleted. This is no coincidence. Bavinck changes and deletes more phrases in which Christianity as the only true religion functions as a starting point of his argument. In the first edition alone he writes, “It may nevertheless be demanded that a researcher of religions does not have a false but a true and pure [i.e., a Christian] conception of religion. Otherwise he judges all religions only from to his own possibly very distorted view and from that of his peers; for instance, from the modern view of religion.”<sup>13</sup> According to the younger Bavinck it is not only impossible to be neutral—a position he maintained throughout his whole life—but that impossibility implies that the Christian theologian should take his starting point in the *vera religio*.

The issue between orthodoxy and modernity is not a matter of method but of the truth or falsity of their starting points. The war-

9. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:174.

10. J. Polyander, A. Rivetus, A. Walaesus, and A. Thysius, *Synopsis purioris theologiae, disputationibus quinquaginta duabus comprehensa ac conscripta*, ed. H. Bavinck (Leiden: Donner, 1881); hereafter referenced as *SPT* with disputation and thesis numbers.

11. *SPT* 2.17. On the use of “religion” in Reformed orthodoxy, see Richard A. Muller, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 168–76.

12. *SPT* 2.18–20.

13. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:186.

rant for the orthodox and normative concept of religion is at least as strong as the one for the modern concept. In fact, of course, he means that the orthodox concept is stronger because orthodoxy “derives its concept from Holy Scripture in conformity with the Church of all ages, while [the modern concept] has only been valid for a short time and in the small circle of likeminded [modern theologians].”<sup>14</sup>

In the later editions all these remarks disappear, and instead Bavinck includes an assessment of the science of religion in his argument between the *principia* of religion and the concept of general revelation. Apparently he found his former position too indiscriminate and wanted to approach the phenomenon of religion from a less exclusive starting point. Whereas he argues from Christianity as the one revealed and true religion to the other religions in the first edition, in the later editions he argues from religion in general to Christianity, that he, of course, still sees as the only *religio vera*. The result does not differ too much, but the methodology does.

## General Revelation

The change in approach also appears in the way in which Bavinck introduces general revelation in the later editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics*; namely, by three paragraphs on the essence of revelation.<sup>15</sup> He first deals with religion in general before introducing the theme of general revelation.

All editions open with the claim that the concept of revelation is “the necessary correlate of all religion.”<sup>16</sup> But only in the first edition Bavinck states that

the concept of revelation includes a certain content, of which the truth must be recognized, in order to keep talking of revelation. . . . Science and philosophy must be denied the right to determine this concept a pri-

14. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:186.

15. The English translation has “The idea of revelation,” but the Dutch reads “Wezen en begrip der openbaring.”

16. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:215; *GD*, 1:255; cf. *RD*, 1:284.

ori and to fit the historical and religious phenomena, summarized under the heading of revelation, into that scheme.<sup>17</sup>

Pantheism and materialism leave no room for revelation. “If God does not exist and if, as Feuerbach says, the secret of theology is anthropology, then religion and revelation are condemned and nothing but a hallucination of the human mind.”<sup>18</sup> According to pantheism God and man are one in substance, and this leaves no room for a relationship essential for religion unless religion is seen as the realization of God’s self-consciousness in human beings. Religion is always a relationship between a human being and a divine person, whose objective and real existence is beyond all doubt for the religious consciousness. Religion always presupposes that God and man, though related, are distinct.

In the later editions Bavinck elaborates on this analysis by bringing both materialism and pantheism together under the heading of naturalism and adding a third form of naturalism: deism.<sup>19</sup> In the first edition Bavinck claimed merely that deism was untenable. One had to choose between theism and pantheism, which is in fact the same as materialism.<sup>20</sup> He concludes the paragraph with the following summary:

Religion and revelation are not two sides of one and the same thing. As the eye and the light, the ear and the tone, the Logos within us and the Logos without us are related and still different, so it is with religion and revelation. In the religious sphere it is the same as everywhere else. We come naked into the world and bring nothing with us. We receive all our food both in spiritual and natural sense from outside. In religion, the content comes from outside to us through revelation.<sup>21</sup>

Although Bavinck does not copy these phrases in the later editions, this line of thought is one of the invariables in his theology.

The difference in starting point between the editions appears more clearly in the second paragraph. In the first edition Bavinck writes:

17. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:215.

18. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:215; *GD*, 1:267; cf. *RD*, 1:295.

19. *GD*, 1:267–70; cf. *RD*, 1:295–98.

20. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:218.

21. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:217.

The purpose of revelation is none other than to awaken and cultivate religion in human beings. Everything that has this goal and is subservient to it is revelation in the proper sense. Revelation is identical with all God's works in nature and grace. It comprises the whole creation and recreation. Everything that exists and happens is a means for the pious to lift him up to God. . . . In revelation God approaches the whole human person to win him completely for his service of love. Yes, revelation cannot be only intended to place individuals in a religious relationship with God. Mankind is one, and mankind is the object of God's love. The final goal of revelation is to make mankind as a whole into a kingdom, a people of God. Revelation is not an isolated fact that stands alone in history. It is a system of God's acts beginning with creation and ending in the new heaven and new earth. It is instruction, education, guidance, government, renewal, forgiveness, etc. It is all this together. Revelation is everything God does to re-create humanity after his image and likeness.<sup>22</sup>

It is remarkable that this phrase is missing in the later editions. This indicates that Bavinck took distance from his former exclusive starting point in the *religio vera*. In the later editions he concludes that the study of the history of religions shows that the true concept of revelation cannot be derived from philosophy or the science of religion. In the first this conclusion was where he started from.

In the later editions he does claim that it is the goal of special revelation to strive to the re-creating of the whole person after God's image and likeness and to redeem humanity as an organic whole, but it is telling that he does not make this claim anymore for general revelation or for revelation in general.<sup>23</sup> Apparently he felt a need to differentiate both forms of revelation more clearly since he created more room for a general approach to general revelation.

## Science of Religion

It is not so easy to answer the question why Bavinck made this shift. The inserted paragraphs on the science of religion offer a few hints. In 1895 Bavinck is very short on the subject. He mentions the historical and the psychological methods to define the essence of religion and rejects them because it is impossible to be neutral. The historical method is "virtually impossible, because any examination

22. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:218–19.

23. *GD*, 1:318; cf. *RD*, 1:346.

of the religions presupposes a notion of religion, and a comparative study of all religions is an impossible job.”<sup>24</sup> In 1906 Bavinck writes, “This method runs into the serious objection that a comparative study of all religions is an impossible job.”<sup>25</sup> The principled impossibility has become a practical impossibility.

The second edition also offers a historical introduction to the science of religion. He explains the scientific desire to find the essence of religion from a tendency in Protestantism to look for the core of faith in universal Christian truths instead of stressing confessional particularities. Immanuel Kant sought the essence of religion in moral conduct, and Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher in religious feeling. A new science was born when George W.F. Hegel in his lectures on the philosophy of religion first studied religion inductively as a universal psychological and historical phenomenon and then defined the essence of religion deductively.<sup>26</sup>

In the first edition Bavinck dealt with the philosophy of religion to explain the historical positions on the seat of religion as residing either in the intellect, the will, or the heart. These sections are copied and expanded in the later editions, but their function in Bavinck’s argument on religion as knowledge, morality, or feeling changes. In the first edition he just describes the various positions to conclude that religion is the soul of everything: “What God is to the world, religion is to humanity.”<sup>27</sup> The conclusion is the same in the later editions, but the way that leads to this conclusion is different; for, instead of placing the orthodox Reformed view antithetically over against the other views, Bavinck sees the science of religion and especially the philosophy of religion as a method to grant religion its proper value. Instead of rendering the historical and psychological methods impossible, he writes that they are “insufficient and have to be augmented . . . by the philosophical or metaphysical

24. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:185.

25. *GD*, 1:217; cf. *RD*, 1:245.

26. *GD*, 1:217; cf. *RD*, 1:245. On Hegel as the father of modern science of religion, see also Herman Bavinck, “Godgeleerdheid en Godsdienstwetenschap,” in *De Vrije Kerk. Vereeniging van Christelijke Gereformeerde Stemmen* 18 (1892), 197–225, 202.

27. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:200; *GD*, 1:241; cf. *RD*, 1:268.



method, which establishes the validity and value of religion and hence also its ideas and actions (dogma, cult, etc.).”<sup>28</sup>

Bavinck also inserts three paragraphs in the later editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* on the philosophy of religion. He emphasizes that there is little disagreement about its value and refers to Abraham Kuyper, who closes the third volume of his *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid* (Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology) with a discussion of “The Philosophy of Religion.” Kuyper argues that true religion and false religion have a common starting point in the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>29</sup> Possibly the assessment of Kuyper’s work from 1894 explains Bavinck’s shift between 1895 and 1906. At least Bavinck uses the philosophy of religion in the later editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* to argue the value of religion in general, and this is a shift from his original exclusive starting-point in the *vera religio*.

In the three new paragraphs of the *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck shows a positive attitude towards the science of religion as long as its assumptions are not incorrect. In the first paragraph he argues that an objective approach is impossible since those who study religion cannot divest themselves of their moral and religious convictions. In the next paragraph he writes that the premise that all religions are essentially the same is false. Regardless of their differences, all religions appeal to revelation, contain certain teachings, prescribe what human beings must do, and have their own rituals. But exactly for these reasons religions value themselves as subject to the categories of truth and falsehood. In the final paragraph he claims that the science of religion has thus far led to very meager results regarding the essence of religion. The definitions of religion given from this side are often predictable, and that prompts the question whether a study of all religions is necessary for the outcome.

28. *GD*, 1:218; cf. *RD*, 1:246.

29. 1st ed. (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1894), 3:563.

## Correlation

Bavinck's critical remarks on the science of religion imply that the difference between the first and the later editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* should not be overstated. He remains skeptical about the neutrality of the science of religion. Moreover, he maintains the last paragraph of the section on the *principia* of religion without any major changes. In this paragraph Bavinck summarizes his thought on religion and revelation. He writes that we have to follow a different method than that of the science of religion to find religion's essence and origin. "It is not possible to understand religion without God. God is the great supposition of religion."<sup>30</sup> There is a certain tension between these older remarks and the new paragraphs in which he is less critical of the philosophy of religion.

Bavinck continues that religion not only presupposes that God exists but also that he reveals himself. "There is no religion without revelation; revelation is the necessary correlate of religion. . . . The origin of religion can neither be historically identified nor psychologically explained, but points necessarily to revelation as its objective foundation."<sup>31</sup> The world around us is not only the source of all knowledge revealed by God but also it is a disclosure of God's power and divinity. Human religion corresponds to this divine revelation. In religion mankind ultimately searches for an eternal life in communion with God, yes, God himself, because he only can find peace and rest in God. "In essence and origin religion is a product of revelation."<sup>32</sup> Bavinck ends the paragraph with the conclusion that religion, like science, has three *principia*: God as the essential principle, God's objective revelation as the external cognitive principle, and human receptivity—the religious faculty or aptitude—as the internal cognitive principle.

God does not do half a job. He creates not only light but also the eye to see that light. The internal corresponds to the external. . . . The question—which of the two was first, external or internal revelation—is

30. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:209; *GD*, 1:250; cf. *RD*, 1:276.

31. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:210; *GD*, 1:251; cf. *RD*, 1:276–77. Cf. his remark: "And religion always has revelation as its foundation and correlation; there is no religion without revelation." *Algemeene Genade*, 11; cf. "Common Grace," 40.

32. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:211; *GD*, 1:251; cf. *RD*, 1:277.

entirely superfluous. True religion can only exist in a perfect harmony of the internal with the external revelation.<sup>33</sup>

Just like he does with the *principia* of science, Bavinck relates the *principia* of religion to the doctrine of the trinity: the Father reveals himself in the Son and through the Spirit.

The continuity between the editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* is the claim that the essence of religion cannot be found by an inductive and deductive approach from the science of religion but only by presupposing divine revelation. Theology presumes the existence of God and his revelation. Still Bavinck's approach changes. In the first edition he started with the claim that the route of the science of religion is impassible since neutrality is impossible; starting with true religion was the only reliable method. However, in the later editions he takes the attempts of the science of religion, including the philosophy of religion, more seriously, although he finally reaches the conclusion that this method is insufficient. What once was his exclusive starting point has become his final conclusion.

## Non-Christian Religions

It is time to turn to the question of whether Bavinck's statement that all religion depends on revelation implies that religion itself is revelatory. In 1912 he wrote a sixty-two-page brochure entitled *Christianity* for the Great Religions series.<sup>34</sup> It is remarkable that he was willing to do so since the series had published brochures on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and even Pantheism before publishing one on Christianity and since one of the other authors was Louis Adriën Bähler (1867–1941), a minister who had caused a hot debate

33. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:213; *GD*, 1:253; cf. *RD*, 1:279.

34. *Het Christendom*, Groote Godsdiensten 2.7 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912); hereafter referenced in text. Some years earlier Bavinck had published an article on the essence of Christianity: "Het Wezen des Christendoms," in *Almanak van het studentencorps der Vrije Universiteit voor het jaar 1906* (Amsterdam: Herdes, 1906), 251–77; also included in his *Verzamelde opstellen op het gebied van godsdienst en wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1921), 17–34; English translation: Herman Bavinck, "The Essence of Christianity," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 33–47.

within the Dutch Reformed Church because of his statement that Christianity could learn from Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Bähler was not disciplined occasioned the start of the Reformed League in the Dutch Reformed Church in 1906. Bavinck's willingness to publish this brochure reveals his irenic attitude. He did not think that his personal faith prohibited him from doing so. As a Christian he admitted a personal interest in the subject, but a non-Christian would have a personal interest also. "Hatred makes one blind," he wrote, "but love often causes a sharper sight of things" (5).

Christianity, considered from the subjective side is a human confession: it "only stands in its truth and glory before the eye of the soul when it is perceived from the objective, theological side" (23). Turning to Christianity and pagan religions, Bavinck claims that

the lower religions (animism, spiritism, fetichism) usually still contain the acknowledgement of a supreme being called the Great Spirit, the High Father, the Great Mighty Lord, etc. But this, at least among the common people, is a dead faith; practically speaking, their religion consists of superstition and sorcery. (23)

The higher religions, however, do not lack noble characteristics. Hence they relate to Christianity not only antithetically but also provide various points of contact for missionary work. The great difference lies in soteriology: the founders of the non-Christian religions such as Zoroaster, Confucius, and Mohammed were greatly talented in marking out a way of salvation, "but each individual must after all travel that way for himself and is finally his own savior. All these religions are auto-soteric."<sup>36</sup>

Part of the brochure was translated into English for *The Biblical Review*.<sup>37</sup> In the translated article Bavinck refers to the German

35. J.S. Speyer, *Het Buddhisme*, Groote Godsdiensten 1.6 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912), J.S. Speyer, *Hindoeïsme*, Groote Godsdiensten 1.7 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912), Louis A. Bähler, *Het pantheïsme, zijn geschiedenis en zijn beteekenis*, Groote Godsdiensten 2.5 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912), and C. Snouck Hurgronje, *De Islam*, Groote Godsdiensten 2.6 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912).

36. *Christendom*, 23. Cf. his remark that all religions are based on actual or alleged revelation, but the real, material difference is *gratia*; special grace is unknown to the Gentiles. *Algemeene Genade*, 11; cf. "Common Grace," 40.

37. Herman Bavinck, "Christ and Christianity," transl. A.A. Pfanstiehl, *The Biblical Review* 1, no. 2 (1916): 214–36.

philosopher K.R. Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906) for the claim that all non-Christian religions are self-saving. Apparently he rewrote the manuscript for the translation, adding, for instance, that the “higher religions” also “afford the missionary many points of contact, and in all these grades of affinity must not be repelled but won and strengthened.”<sup>38</sup>

According to Bavinck,

in the Christian religion, Christ is, as it were, Christianity. . . . The Chinese religion is deistic, the Buddhist atheistic, the Persian dualistic, the Mohammedan fatalistic. . . . [T]hat we are able to judge all these religions in this manner from a higher point of view—acknowledging the good in them and pointing out that which is erroneous and weak in them—we have to thank Christianity, which also proves itself thereby to be the true religion, the correction and completion of all religions.<sup>39</sup>

The brochure does not relate the religions immediately to revelation, neither does it explain religions as revelation, but Bavinck’s approach is similar to that in the second edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*; for, he argues from religions to Christianity as the correction and completion of all religions. In a review Benjamin B. Warfield admired the result.

It is no small task which Dr. Bavinck has undertaken, to tell in sixty-two small pages all that Christianity is, and that, in a series in which it is brought into comparison with other “great religions.” He has fulfilled this task, however, in a most admirable manner. . . . We cannot imagine how the work could be done better.<sup>40</sup>

Bavinck generally expresses a positive view of non-Christian religions. In the *Reformed Dogmatics*—even in the first edition—he says that general revelation “is of great significance for the world of paganism. It is the stable and permanent foundation of pagan religions.”<sup>41</sup> Scripture judges all forms of paganism and explains them as apostasy from the pure knowledge of God. The philosophy of religion replaces the simple biblical view of decay from the original

38. “Christ and Christianity,” 214. For the manuscript see Archive 176 of the Historical Documentation Centre, VU University, Amsterdam (hereafter: Bavinck Archives), folder 72.

39. *Christendom*, 23–24.

40. Review of “Groote Godsdiensten: Serie II, No. 7. *Het Christendom* door Dr. H. Bavinck,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913), 538.

41. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:234; *GD*, 1:286; cf. *RD*, 1:314.

pure religion for an evolutionary theory that explains the religions from primitive forms of fetishism, animism, and ancestor worship.

But, however severely Scripture judges the character of paganism, it is precisely the general revelation it teaches that enables and authorizes us to recognize all the elements of truth that are present also in pagan religions. In the past the study of religions was pursued exclusively in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics. The founders of [non-Christian] religions, like Mohammad, were simply considered imposters, enemies of God, accomplices of the devil.<sup>42</sup>

Scripture teaches a revelation of God, an illumination of the Logos, a working of God's Spirit also among pagans. Bavinck regrets that in Reformed theology the doctrine of common grace was applied to the true, the beautiful, and the good in the heathen world, and to all the spheres of moral, intellectual, social, and political life, but that common grace was not recognized in pagan religions.

[A]n operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace is discernable not only in science and art, morality and law, but also in the religions. . . . The founders of religion, after all, were not imposters or agents of Satan, but men who, being religiously inclined, had to fulfill a mission to their time and people and often exerted a beneficial influence on the life of peoples.<sup>43</sup>

Christianity is not only antithetical to paganism, it is also paganism's fulfillment. In his *Magnalia Dei* Bavinck emphasizes that the founders of non-Christian religions lifted up the tribal religions from a state of profound degeneration and decay. In the conflict between superstition and civilization men were born who in their souls wrestled with the conflict between popular religion and their own enlightened consciousness. "By the light granted to them, they sought a better way to obtain true happiness."<sup>44</sup>

From these and similar remarks it should not be concluded that Bavinck was only positive about the non-Christian religions. In his assessment of the theology of Chantepie de la Saussaye, he summarizes Chantepie's position by saying that it is the calling of theology to reveal, present, and explain how the truth hidden in all religions

42. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:238; *GD*, 1:290; cf. *RD*, 1:318.

43. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:239; *GD*, 1:291; cf. *RD*, 1:319.

44. *Magnalia Dei* (Kampen: Kok, 1909), 54; cf. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 58.

is fully realized in Christianity.<sup>45</sup> In this early work he does not seem to agree with Chantepie because Chantepie takes an anthropological approach to theology. But Bavinck still might have been influenced by Ethical Theology in his view of the non-Christian religions.

In general, however, he is more critical than the Ethical theologians. His positive remarks are always accompanied by the acknowledgement that the religions do not lead to salvation and are a deformation of the original, true religion. The reform-religions—as Bavinck calls the religions founded by Confucius, Mohammed and others—differ only in degree and not in essence from other forms of idolatry. In his *Guide to the Teaching of the Christian Religion* (1913) he hardly mentions the positive aspects. There he stresses that everything human beings may know about God from general revelation remains insufficient. The founders of religions were “in many ways exalted high above the superstitions which they beheld around them, but even if they cut off some branches of false religion, its root was not eradicated.”<sup>46</sup>

## Philosophy of Revelation

Bavinck’s most mature thoughts on the relationship between revelation and religion are expressed in his Stone lectures, an apologetic defense of the Christian faith.<sup>47</sup> In the opening chapter

45. *Theologie van Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 83.

46. *Handleiding bij het onderwijs in den Christelijken Godsdienst* (Kampen: Kok, 1913), 17.

47. It is possible that in these lectures Bavinck responded to Warfield’s critique regarding the lack of apologetics in Amsterdam, although he does not refer to Warfield explicitly. Warfield had remarked that he was surprised that “the school which Dr. Bavinck so brilliantly represents should be tempted to make so little of Apologetics.” B.B. Warfield, “A Review of H. Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs*,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. J.E. Meeter, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 106–23, 117. This review originally appeared in *Princeton Theological Review* (1903), 138–48. Cf. “It is therefore characteristic of the school of thought of which Dr. Bavinck is a shining ornament to estimate the value of Apologetics somewhat lightly.” Warfield, “Review of *Zekerheid*,” 114. Warfield also criticized Kuyper in the introduction to F.R. Beattie’s *Apologetics: or the Rational Vindication of Christianity* (1903), expressing his regret that Kuyper gives apologetics a very subordinate place. B.B. Warfield, “Introduction to Francis R. Beattie’s *Apologetics*,” in *Selected Shorter*

Bavinck says that true religion—to satisfy our mind and heart, our conscience and our will—must lift us up high above the world, and therefore revelation is essential to all religion.<sup>48</sup> According to Bavinck, however, Reformed theology had thus far not taken the means of revelation sufficiently into account. “The old theology construed revelation after a quite external and mechanical fashion, and too readily identified it with Scripture. Our eyes are nowadays being more and more opened to the fact that revelation in many ways is historically and psychologically ‘mediated.’”<sup>49</sup> In the underlying Dutch manuscript of the lectures Bavinck formulated his criticism in even stronger terms: “The older theology did not pay much attention to the concept and history of revelation, had no eye for its historical and psychological character, for its genesis and development, identified it quickly with Holy Scripture, allowing revelation only there.”<sup>50</sup>

He develops his apologetic argument for revelation from self-consciousness apprehended as an absolute sense of dependence. That self-consciousness, paradoxically, at the same time posits human independence and freedom. Bavinck thus combines Schleiermacher’s concept of religion with Kant’s concept of human autonomy. Bavinck seeks the solution for the seeming antinomy of dependence and autonomy in the fact that of all creatures only human beings are aware of their dependence. This testimony of self-consciousness is the basis of religion and morality. Atheism is

*Writings* 2:93–105, 95. See also Henk van den Belt, “An Alternative Approach to Apologetics,” *The Kuiper Center Review* 2 (2011), 43–60.

48. *Philosophy of Revelation*, 17.

49. *Philosophy of Revelation*, 22.

50. “De oudere theologie besteedde aan begrip en gesch. der openb. weinig zorg, had voor haar histor. en psych. karakter, voor haar genesis en ontwikkeling geen oog, identificeerde spoedig openbaring met H.S. en liet dus de openbaring uitsluitend in haar bestaan.” Herman Bavinck, “Manuscript for the Philosophy of Revelation,” I, 11. The manuscript is divided into chapters and paragraphs. The quote is from chapter I, paragraph 11. Bavinck Archives, folder 7. Cf. the final Dutch text: “In de oude theologie werd deze vrij uitwendig en mechanisch opgevat, en al zeer spoedig met de Schrift vereenzelvigd. Ons oog gaat er thans hoe langer hoe meer voor open, dat de openbaring op allerlei wijzen historisch en psychologisch „vermittelt” is.” H. Bavinck, *Wijsbegeerte der Openbaring: Stonelezingen voor het jaar 1908, gehouden te Princeton, N.J.* (Kampen: Kok, 1908), 19.



unnatural and intellectually abnormal. In virtue of his nature, every man believes in God.

And this is due in the last analysis to the fact that God, the creator of all nature, has not left himself without witness, but through all nature, both that of man himself and that of the outside world, speaks to him. Not evolution, but revelation alone accounts for this impressive and incontrovertible fact of the worship of God. In self-consciousness God makes known to us man, the world, and himself.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Philosophy of Revelation* Bavinck on the one hand maintains the presupposition of Christian faith but on the other hand seeks a way to demonstrate why Christianity is the only plausible answer to the epistemological and existential challenges of modernity. In chapter 6, “Revelation and Religion,” he takes his starting point in religion as a general phenomenon: “religion is characteristic of all peoples and all men; however deeply a human being may be sunk in degradation, he is conscious of the existence of God and of his duty to worship him” (142). After discussing several theories that have tried to explain religion, Bavinck concludes that they offer no satisfactory explanation and necessarily see religion as an inborn quality.

If, however, religion as *religio insita* is an essential element of human nature, it points directly back to revelation. We stand here before essentially the same dilemma as in the case of self-consciousness. If this is not a delusion or imagination, the reality of the self is necessarily included in it; hence religion is either a pathology of the human spirit, or it postulates the existence, the revelation, and the knowableness of God. (159–60)

Bavinck concludes that both the investigation of the origin and of the essence of religion reveal “that religion and revelation are bound together very intimately, and that they cannot be separated” (163). He agrees with Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830–1902) that all religions are redemption-religions. “The first question always is, What must I do to be saved? This being so, religion everywhere, by virtue of its very nature, carries along with it the idea of revelation”

51. *Philosophy of Revelation*, 79; hereafter referenced in text.

(163).<sup>52</sup> Even the attempts to classify religions have led to the acknowledgment that revelation is necessary.

The whole chapter can be read as a defense of the importance of the former distinction between true and false religion. Bavinck writes that “it is worthy of remark that the old distribution of religions into true and false has been revived in a new form” (166). Remarkably, the original manuscript even opens with the statement: “Formerly the distinction between *religio falsa et vera* was common, and the pagan religions were seen as forms of idolatry.”<sup>53</sup> After showing that the newer approach in which all religions are only seen as different in degree and in which revelation and religion are seen as two sides of the same thing is untenable, he returns to the claim that Christianity is the true religion from the essential difference between religion and magic. “One cannot say that magic, superstition is based on revelation, has been God’s will; but of the pure religion (supposing that it exists, and for now apart from the question what it is), one must say: it rests on revelation.”<sup>54</sup> Either all religion is superstition, or religion differs from superstition and rests on the existence, knowability, and revelation of God.

52. The reference is to C.P. Tiele, *Inleiding tot de godsdienstwetenschap* (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen, 1897–1899), 1:61; 2:66, 110, 214, 215. On Tiele, see E.H. Cossee and H.D. Tjalsma, eds., *Geloof en Onderzoek. Uit het leven en werk van C.P. Tiele (1830–1902)* (Rotterdam: Stichting Historische Publicaties Rotterdamum, 2002).

53. “Maar hier staan wij dadelijk voor de vraag wat religie is. Vroeger onderscheidde men *religio falsa et vera*, en beschouwde de Heid. Godsdiensten als afgoderijen (idololatrie). De . . . der heidenen waren nog wel godsdiensten maar waren falsch. Die onderscheiding is als onwetenschappelijk . . . vervangen. Alle godsdiensten waren religie, slechts in graad onderscheiden. Openbaring en godsdienst zijn 2 zijden van dezelfde zaak. Maar daardoor kwam men in zeer groote moeilijkheid bij de vraag naar wezen en oorsprong der godsdienst.” Bavinck, ‘Manuscript for the Philosophy of Revelation’, VII, 1. Bavinck Archives, folder 7.

54. “Bij de magie, superstitie kan men niet zeggen, zij berust op openbaring, is Gods wil geweest, maar bij de zuivere religie (onderstel dat deze er is, en afgezien thans nog van de vraag wat zij is), moet men zeggen: zij rust op openbaring. Want één van beide: of God heeft Z. niet geopenbaard, en dan is er geen kennis van Hem en geen godsdienst, dan is alle godsdienst superstitie. Of: er is wel religie onderscheiden v. superstitie, en dan kan deze alleen berusten op bestaan, openbaring en kenbaarheid Gods.” Bavinck, ‘Manuscript for the Philosophy of Revelation’, VII, 8. Bavinck Archives, folder 7.

The emergence of Paganism (i.e., the false religion, superstition, magic) presupposes the true religion, the revelation of God; because otherwise there is no true or false religion, no religion or magic, but everything is magic, superstition, nonsense; just like injustice presupposes justice, truth falsehood, and evil good.<sup>55</sup>

Any critical edition of the *Philosophy of Revelation* should take the text of the manuscript into account or maybe even publish it entirely. Although it differs from the final edition, it sometimes states Bavinck's underlying intentions more clearly than the final edition.

The science of religion, says Bavinck both in the manuscript and in the final edition, must acknowledge an essential difference between magic and religion. Superstition and magic are often connected with religion, but they are neither the source nor the essence of it. Rather, they are morbid phenomena which also occur among the most advanced religions and even in Christianity, and they have adherents not only among common people but also among thousands of the cultured and educated. The great question is not how did religions originate but where superstition and magic come from. False religion points back to true religion just as sickness reminds us of health.

Superstition and magic could not have arisen if the idea of another world than this world of nature had not been deeply imprinted on man's self-consciousness. They themselves are of a later origin, but they presuppose religion, which is inherent in human nature, having its foundation and principle in the creation of man in the image of God. Hence religion is, not only with reference to its origin and essence, but also with reference to its truth and validity, founded in revelation. Without revelation religion sinks back into a pernicious superstition. (169)

This final conclusion, of course, paves the way for the discussion of true religion in the next chapter: "Revelation and Christianity." The thoughts in this chapter unfold along the lines of general and special revelation. But his emphasis differs from the *Reformed Dogmatics*. There general revelation was God's objective revelation in nature and history combined with the subjective revelation of the

55. "Het ontstaan van het Heidendom (= de valsche religie, superstitie, magie) onderstelt de ware religie, de openb. Gods want anders is er geen ware of valsche religie, geen religie of magie, maar is alles magie, bijgeloof, dwaasheid; evenals ook het onrecht het recht, de leugen de waarheid, het kwade het goede onderstelt." Bavinck, "Manuscript for the *Philosophy of Revelation*," VII, 8. Bavinck Archives, folder 7.

*semen religionis*. Here, however, Bavinck stresses the continuity between the original revelation to all mankind and the Scriptural revelation to Israel. By bringing in the notion of salvation history Bavinck gives the Reformed view of general and special revelation a certain twist. “The distinction between what has come to be called general and special revelation does not begin until the call of Abraham; before that the two intermingle, and so far have become the property of all peoples and nations” (188).

Special revelation is not set antithetically over against religiosity or religion as such but over against the corruption which entered into the religious life. It takes up, confirms, and completes everything put into human nature by general revelation. Bavinck explicitly rejects the earlier view that exclusively emphasized the antithesis, although he also objects to the view which has an eye only for agreement and affinity between general and special revelation. The essential difference between the earlier general revelation and God’s revelation to Abraham is not the unity of God or the moral law but the covenant of grace.

Every other view fails to do justice to special revelation, effaces its difference from general revelation, degrades the Old Testament, rends apart the two economies of the same covenant of grace, and even gradually changes the gospel of the New Covenant into a law, and makes of Christ a second Moses. (192–93)

Behind the Scriptures lies the revelation which begins with the origin of the human race, follows the line of Seth and Shem, and then flows on in the channel of the covenant with Abraham. The God who manifested himself to him and later to Moses is no new God but the Creator of heaven and earth “who had been originally known to all men, and had still preserved the knowledge and worship of himself in many, in more or less pure form” (191). In a footnote Bavinck refers to a work by Martin Peisker, who claimed that Adonai was also worshiped by the gentiles who had a natural (*naturhaft*) connection to Him.<sup>56</sup>

Religious science tries to explain the Christian faith from the “weak beggarly elements and the poorest possible beginnings” of religion. All these attempts will not succeed, but they have an impor-

56. M. Peisker, *Die Beziehungen der nichtisraeliten zu Jahve nach der Anschauung der altisraelitischen Quellen-schriften* (Leipzig: Drugulen, 1906).

tant value and contain a rich promise. “Through them the Christian religion will become better known in its close connection with the world and history, and the words and facts of the New Testament will be better understood in their universal significance and bearing” (199–200). They will even throw into light that Christianity is unique. Christ is the desire of the nations and the savior of the world. In the whole course of revelation the will of God “unfolds itself ever more clearly as the love of God, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Ghost” (202).

## Development

There is a development in Bavinck’s view of religion and revelation. He first was very skeptical about the possibilities of the science of religion, but later he took this science much more seriously. The early skepticism may have been caused by the academic situation in the Netherlands in which there was a strong tendency to see theology as science of religion. As early as 1892 Bavinck had written on the issue and had claimed that theology in the proper sense can only exist if faith in a special revelation is presupposed.<sup>57</sup> The distinction between true and false religion was erased by philosophy (200). The tension that characterizes his work is already present in that article. On the one hand he says that the science of religion is not based on faith and rejects the opposition between true and false, and “this is in direct conflict with the Christian faith. Because for faith Christianity is not a religion among many, not even the highest among many, but the only true religion, and all religions of the heathens are idolatry” (208). On the other hand he says that religions have a right to be studied. “The old formulas and schemes don’t work anymore. It is no longer possible to see Buddha, Zoroaster, and Mohammed as charlatans and tools of Satan” (217). Christians can also study religions to find the meaning of the nations within the history of the kingdom of God and to trace the relationship and distinction between pagan religions and the Christian

57. Bavinck, “Godgeleerdheid en Godsdienstwetenschap,” 197; hereafter referenced in text. For a discussion of Bavinck and religious science, see Jan . N. Bremmer, “Een mislukte ontmoeting: Bavinck en de godsdienstwetenschappen,” in George Harinck and Gerrit W. Neven, eds., *Ontmoetingen met Bavinck* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2005), 1–12.

religion. Still Bavinck does not think that this belongs to theology but to the historical field of the humanities.

The development in Bavinck's thought would have been stronger if he had not spoken so positively on religion from the perspective of general revelation and common grace in the first edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. The positive assessment of religion—especially in the reform-religions and their founders—was present early in his work. Bavinck admits that this positive assessment differs from the Reformed tradition that acknowledged common grace in the elements of truth in philosophy and of beauty in the arts—in the so called *spoliatio Aegyptiorum*—but not to pagan religion as such.

Our findings regarding the differences in method between the editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* reveal a growing independency in his assessment of Reformed theology. Bavinck maintained the superiority of Christianity as the true religion (*vera religio*) and his rejection of a neutral approach. Still he shifts from taking the exclusiveness of Christianity as starting point to arguing towards that exclusiveness as his final conclusion. As such the switch can be reduced to a methodological preference, but in the scope of the general development in his thought it underlines the turn from a Reformed orthodox to a neo-Calvinist view of religiosity and religions. This new view appears most clearly in the *Philosophy of Revelation* where Bavinck bases the openness to trace elements of truth in religions on a salvation-historical view of the relationship between general and special revelation.

## Conclusions

For Bavinck religion always depends on revelation. Regarding the question of whether religions as such are revelational, Bavinck's position can be summarized in three statements.

In the first place, human religion flows from the subjective *semen religionis*, the receptivity for God's revelation, which is the *principium internum* of revelation. Religion is a form of revelation; namely, the internal counterpart of God's general revelation in nature and history. The underlying presupposition is the object-subject distinction.

Secondly, because of the essential distinction between true and false religion, only those elements in non-Christian religions that are not a result of the decay of the original true religion can be seen as revelation. The recognition of elements of truth is based on the concepts of general revelation and common grace. These concepts allow Bavinck to offer positive remarks on the founders of the reform-religions. Bavinck was inspired by Kuyper on this point, and his assessment of common grace is typical for neo-Calvinism.

There seems to be a third step in Bavinck's development in the Stone Lectures where he, for apologetic reasons, goes as far as possible in reasoning from religion in general towards the *vera religio* instead of starting with that claim. There not only is the true religion seen as the key to interpret the elements of truth in the religions, but also the true religion is viewed as that which the non-Christian religions have in common with Christianity due to their common basis in the period within which general and special revelation were still one.

Bavinck's later approach nuances the strong distinction between true and false religion. He wanted to overcome the orthodox Reformed preoccupation with *vera religio* as starting point of the discussion of revelation and religion. Perhaps in the clear assessment of truth and falsehood Reformed Orthodoxy is safer than neo-Calvinism. The strength of Bavinck's approach, however, is that he explains that Christianity as *vera religio* answers the deepest need of all human beings. Bavinck longed to express the catholicity of the Christian faith in his own context and therefore refused merely to copy traditional positions. "Christianity is the true, but also the highest and purest religion, it is the truth of all religions. . . . What is sought there can be found here."<sup>58</sup>

58. *GD*, 1st ed., 1:240; *GD*, 1:291; cf. *RD*, 1:320.