

## A Soft Spot for Paganism? Herman Bavinck and “Insider” Movements

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A highly controversial trend in missiology, often referred to as “insider” movements, is generating much debate in contemporary evangelical churches, mission agencies, and Bible translation societies.<sup>1</sup> At least one major North American Reformed church body, the Presbyterian Church in America, has established a study committee to examine its biblical fidelity.<sup>2</sup> The challenges presented by an “insider” model of missions are multifaceted and complex. They include serious questions regarding Bible translation such as whether it is legitimate to omit biological terms (e.g., Father, Son) with respect to God since such language is confusing and offensive to Muslim sensibilities. In addition this model raises crucial theological, soteriological, and ecclesiological questions regarding whether and to what extent a Muslim background believer may retain his or her Muslim identity—that is, for instance, continue to attend the Mosque, observe dietary laws, and/or recite the *shahada* or confession of faith: “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God.”

My field of expertise is not missiology, and I would not presume to attempt a final settlement on these controversial topics. I do have a particular interest in the theology of Herman Bavinck. And, somewhat to my surprise, the name “Bavinck” surfaces from time to time in the context of this debate.<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, highly gratifying that

1. Joshua Lingel, Jeff Morton, Bill Nikides, eds., *Chrislam: How Missionaries are Promoting an Islamized Gospel*, rev. ed. (Garden Grove, CA: i2 Ministries Publishing, 2012).

2. Part One of their report may be found at <http://www.pcaac.org/2012/05/report-of-the-pca-ga-ad-interim-committee-on-insider-movements/>.

3. In this essay “Bavinck” refers to Herman unless noted otherwise.

“Uncle Herman” is (finally!) getting the recognition he deserves. It is simultaneously alarming (to me, at least) that some apparently find in his doctrine of common grace a sympathetic rationale for an “insider” model of missions.<sup>4</sup> This essay aims to clarify significant confusion in this regard, first, by critically examining one repeated and misleading appeal to Bavinck, and, second, by examining the issue through the lens of Bavinck’s nature/grace polemic, which renders any appeal by “insider” advocates highly dubious at best.

## A Soft Spot for Paganism?

One purpose of Richard J. Mouw’s helpful, popular-level introduction to Abraham Kuyper is to explore ways in which Kuyper’s Neo-Calvinism might be supplemented, nuanced, or otherwise tasked to peculiarly twenty-first-century problems.<sup>5</sup> He calls this an *aggiornamento* or “updating” of Kuyper. One of the ways he has in mind is reading Kuyper in conjunction with his closest colleague, Herman Bavinck. In contrast to Kuyper’s strident antithetical language, Mouw finds in Bavinck a much more moderate tone. His first example relates directly to Islam:

Take Bavinck’s comments about Islam. In one of his hefty volumes in systematic theology he writes that “in the past the [Christian] study of religions was pursued exclusively in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics.” This meant, he says, that Mohammed and others “were simply considered imposters, enemies of God, accomplices of the devil.” Now

Herman’s nephew Johan is obviously relevant to this topic as well. For interaction with J. H. Bavinck’s missiology and Islam, see Chris Flint, “How Does Christianity ‘Subversively Fulfil’ Islam?” *St. Francis Magazine* 8, no. 6 (December 2012): 776–822.

4. There is in fact no such thing as *the* “insider” model; rather, there is a continuum of missiological approaches ranging from little to no cultural contextualization of Christianity (C1) on the one hand and near complete cultural absorption of Christianity (C6) on the other. I will use the term “insider” movement to refer to the “C4–6” end of the spectrum, which, with various nuances, encourages Muslim background believers to continue to identify as Muslims, observe Islamic law (dietary and otherwise), recite prayers, and not to leave the Mosque. For the origins of the C1 to C6 spectrum, see John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (1998).

5. *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), Section 2.

that their perspectives are becoming “more precisely known,” however, “this interpretation has proven to be untenable.” We do well to search for the ways, he insists, in which such perspectives display “an illumination by the Logos, a working of God’s Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

This is not just a “moderate” Bavinck—this is a *shockingly* moderate Bavinck. The implication is quite clear: Herman Bavinck did not believe that Mohammed was an imposter, an enemy of God, or an accomplice of the Devil. On the contrary, he was illumined by the Holy Spirit of God himself. Mouw simply leaves the matter hanging without further comment. But seeds, once sown, inevitably bear fruit.

In a recent master’s thesis J. W. Stevenson seeks to apply the biblical-theological and missiological insights of J. H. Bavinck to contemporary questions of contextualization and “insider” movements.<sup>7</sup> Drawing a contrast between J. H. and Herman, he suggests that Herman substantially softened the antithesis between Christianity and pagan religions and believed that in at least some respects paganism is a “longing for Jesus Christ.” To substantiate this claim, he proffers the same quote as did Mouw, but a bit more fully:

In the past the study of religions was pursued exclusively in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics. The founders of [non-Christian] religions, like Mohammed, were simply considered impostors, enemies of God, accomplices of the devil. But ever since those religions have become more precisely known, this interpretation has proven to be untenable; it clashed both with history and psychology. Also among pagans, says Scripture, there is a revelation of God, an illumination by the Logos, a working of God’s Spirit . . . an operation of God’s Spirit and of his common grace is discernible not only in science and art, morality and law, but also in the religions. . . . Founders of religion, after all, were not impostors or agents of Satan but men who, being religiously inclined, had

6. *Kuyper*, 77; quoting Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:318; hereafter referenced as *RD*.

7. J. W. Stevenson, “Johan Herman Bavinck and Contemporary Contextualization Among Muslims: An Evaluation of the Insider Movement,” (MAR thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, 2011). I should emphasize that Stevenson himself is not an “Insider” advocate; rather, he seems to think that Herman Bavinck is more congenial to “insider” thinking than J. H. Bavinck.

to fulfill a mission to their time and people and often exerted a beneficial influence on the life of peoples.<sup>8</sup>

Mouw left the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about Bavinck’s beliefs, but Stevenson spells them out: (1) Mohammed was not an accomplice of the Devil; (2) even amidst his error, the Spirit of God worked through Mohammed; and (3) Mohammed did provide some benefit to those around him. These observations lead Stevenson to conclude: “[W]e see in Herman Bavinck a willingness to admit that while certainly truth is mixed with error regarding salvation, we have in Islam many elements pointing toward salvation in Christ. Thus Islam could—in a limited sense—be seen as preparation for the message of salvation in Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

There are a number of problems with Mouw’s and Stevenson’s use of this quote, not least of which is the manner of quotation itself. The use of ellipses is a helpful academic tool so long as it does not serve to obscure material germane to the subject at hand. In Stevenson’s version two ellipses appear. A casual reader would not know that this small quote actually covers over two pages of material and that more than a dozen sentences are elided in the first one alone. Mouw’s version is so paraphrased that quotation marks are hardly needed.

So what is missing even in Stevenson’s expanded version of the quote? Fifteen Scripture references; appeals to the church fathers (Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Bede, Augustine), a Medieval theologian (Thomas), John Calvin, and the Reformed tradition; as well as several other relevant contextual clues. The portion of the text chosen for omission makes obvious that the author deliberately omitted all references to the Bible and church tradition, even to the point of omitting this singular sentence: “Calvin rightly spoke of a ‘seed of religion,’ a ‘sense of divinity.’” The result is a significant distortion: far from attempting to say anything unusual (much less controversial), Bavinck is self-consciously locating his views in a perennial stream of thought in the orthodox Christian tradition from its earliest times (Justin) to the more recent Reformed tradition.

8. Stevenson, 26–27; quoting Bavinck, *RD*, 1:318–19.

9. Stevenson, 29.

The Christian church has almost universally recognized—from Paul’s address in Acts 17 (cited by Bavinck) to Justin’s second-century apologetic to Thomas’s Medieval synthesis to the Swiss Reformation and beyond—that there is much “good” in the pagan world whether it be in philosophy, art, civics, or other cultural artifacts. The question is how to account for that “good.” His discussion of the tradition makes clear that, whatever he is saying, he is in significant continuity with longstanding Christian tradition. More specifically, he singles out the Reformed tradition with its doctrine of common grace as providing a uniquely helpful explanation of the problem. Simply put: everybody recognizes the relative “goods” in pagan cultures including Islamic culture. The doctrine of common grace maintains that the Holy Spirit is the sole source of good in the fallen world; the ultimate agency of any good accomplished by fallen humanity is God himself. For theologians who take the gravity of sin and the fall seriously, what, after all, is the alternative? This profoundly important doctrine enables Bavinck to (1) consistently maintain the doctrine of total depravity (an advantage, he argues, over Thomism), (2) nevertheless recognize the “good” wherever it may be found, and (3) attribute this “good” not to the account of humanity (e.g., Thomism’s “natural man”) but to God himself.

Particularly important here is that far from softening the antithesis between good and evil or blending light and darkness, the doctrine of common grace claims that any “good” in paganism is not *because* of paganism (this would blur the antithesis) but *in spite of* paganism (this starkly upholds the antithesis). It is not paganism that is to be praised in any way, shape, or form but the God who, in spite of human rebellion, continues his good works.<sup>10</sup> In his rendition of the quote Stevenson omits this revealing summation by Bavinck: “What in paganism is the caricature, the living original is here [in Christianity]. What is appearance there is essence here. What is sought there can be found here.”<sup>11</sup> Note well: paganism is “caricature” and “appearance.” It has no resources of its own but rather is parasitic of the truth.

10. Cf. his assertion: “Hereby [in the doctrine of common grace] we have not denied the serious character of sin.” Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. R.C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1989): 60–61.

11. *RD*, 1:320.

There is an important additional cue in Bavinck’s text; namely, his interest in different *disciplinary approaches* to evaluating founders of pagan religions. So, for example, Bavinck claims that in the premodern period figures like Mohammed were evaluated for strictly “dogmatic or apologetic” purposes. He believes that such a disciplinary approach is not sophisticated enough, for it rarely goes beyond assuming that the person was demon-possessed or a snake-oil salesman. This is hand-in-hand with Bavinck’s well-known fascination with the brand-new discipline of psychology about which he not only published an entire book but also critically included as a significant conversation partner in his *Dogmatics*.<sup>12</sup>

So when Bavinck writes, “[b]ut ever since those religions have become more precisely known, this interpretation has proven to be untenable; it clashed both with history and psychology,” he is providing a *disciplinary* context.<sup>13</sup> And it is precisely that context in which this (otherwise controversial) comment needs to be read: “Founders of religion, after all, were not impostors 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>14</sup> Bavinck is not stating this as an objective matter; rather, he is stating this from the relatively recent disciplinary standpoint of the psychology of religion as a *subjective* matter (i.e., “being religiously inclined”). In other words, the founders of pagan religions did not consider *themselves* demon-possessed, accomplices to the Devil, or simple con artists.

Bavinck was fascinated no less than his nephew by the psychological phenomenon of the ungodly “suppressing the truth” (Rom. 1:18ff.), and he did not believe that allegations of demon possession or “knowing frauds” were sufficient to explain either the founders of pagan religions or their successes. Bavinck took the “conversions” of these founders, whether Buddha or Mohammed, seriously. In his mind, they did have some kind of (false) religious experience which, as a subjective matter, far better explains their success than the

12. See Herman Bavinck, *Beginselen der psychologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1897); cf. *RD*, 3:556–64.

13. *RD*, 1:318.

14. *RD*, 1:319.

supposition that they were self-conscious, knowing frauds.<sup>15</sup> As his own words indicate, Bavinck's concern in this passage is that pre-modern apologetic approaches to paganism short-circuit complex questions and, as a direct result, do not take the deceptiveness of sin and the power of truth suppression *seriously enough*. He is only highlighting that lies need to resemble the truth to have plausibility; the Devil masquerades as an angel of light; false religion must provide some benefit to be successful. So he adds, "The various religions, however mixed with error they may have been, to some extent met people's religious needs and brought consolation amidst the pain and sorrow of life."<sup>16</sup> This is not only uncontroversial but also fairly obvious. There is no such thing as a religious sect that offers literally nothing for adherents to gain.

As an objective matter—or, better, from the standpoint of Christian faith—the religions they founded were false. Bavinck writes:

But the person who positions himself squarely in the center of special revelation and surveys the whole scene from that perspective soon discovers that, for all the formal similarity, there exists a large material difference between the prophets of Israel and the fortune-tellers of the Greeks, between the apostles of Christ and the envoys of Mohammed, between biblical miracles and pagan sorceries, between Scripture and the holy books of the peoples of the earth. The religions of the peoples, like their entire culture, show us how much development people can or cannot achieve, indeed not without God, yet without his special grace. But the special grace that comes to us centrally in Christ shows us how deeply God can descend to his fallen creation to save it.<sup>17</sup>

To say these religions are objectively false does not mean that the Holy Spirit is entirely absent from them. This is why Bavinck notes that, according to Scripture, there is among pagans "a revelation of God, an illumination by the Logos, a working of God's Spirit" and that "an operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace is discernible not only in science and art, morality and law, but also in the religions."<sup>18</sup> He routinely describes this as God not leaving him-

15. Cf. *RD*, 4:133–34.

16. *RD*, 1:319.

17. *RD*, 1:343.

18. *RD*, 1:318 and 319.

self “without a witness.” As revelation it establishes moral culpability, but it is insufficient to save. His comment about the founders of religions not being mere imposters or tools of Satan falls in the same vein. With such statements he is not saying that these elements “point toward salvation in Christ” as Stevenson claims but only that God’s common grace is at work in them.

By failing to recognize the disciplinary context of Bavinck’s discussion, which is of a piece with omitting all historical and biblical context, Stevenson’s first conclusion “culled” from Bavinck is entirely superficial: that Bavinck did not consider Mohammed an “accomplice of the Devil.” From an objective standpoint he certainly did believe Islam to be the work of the Devil. Whatever “goods” one might ascribe to it is solely the work of the Holy Spirit in common grace. These goods are not, in other words, to Mohammed’s credit, much less in any way salvific.<sup>19</sup> So the second conclusion, that “even amidst his error, the Spirit of God worked through Mohammed,” is not only liable to grave misunderstanding (e.g., at worst, positively endorsing Islam) but, additionally, it begs the question as to what exactly the “goods” are in Islam. And here a significant statement is omitted from the quotation:

What comes to us from the pagan world are not just cries of despair but also expressions of confidence, hope, resignation, peace, submission, patience, etc. All the elements and forms that are essential to religion (a concept of God, a sense of guilt, a desire for redemption, sacrifice, priesthood, temple, cult, prayer, etc.), though corrupted, nevertheless do also occur in pagan religions.<sup>20</sup>

Notice that what is in view here are “elements and forms” rather than material content. When this is compared with his later statement that “for all the *formal* similarity, there exists a large *material* difference between . . . the apostles of Christ and the envoys of Muhammed,” it is apparent that Bavinck is operating with a form/matter distinction. The “elements and forms” do form a point of unity and contact between pagan religion and Christianity. What

19. “By [God’s] common grace he restrains sin with its power to dissolve and destroy. Yet common grace is not enough. It compels but it does not change; it restrains but does not conquer. Unrighteousness breaks through its fences again and again.” Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 61.

20. *RD*, 1:319.



makes them divergent is their material content.<sup>21</sup> Stevenson's final conclusion, therefore, "Islam could—in a limited sense—be seen as preparation for the message of salvation in Christ," is also liable to grave misunderstanding if for no other reason than that he does not explain what he means by "in a limited sense." Materially, as it respects the actual subject matter of Muslim religious practice, Islam is not a "preparation" for the message of salvation in Christ as though Christ were a supplemental capstone to a religion already good as far as it goes. Formally, however, in the ways Bavinck himself suggests ("a concept of God, sense of guilt, desire for redemption," etc.) Christianity does in fact supply in broad daylight that for which the pagans formerly (and currently!) groped in futility (Acts 17:27).

The implications drawn from Bavinck by Stevenson are superficial and misleading, stemming from insensitivity to the biblical, traditional, and interdisciplinary contexts Bavinck is addressing. Extrapolating from these comments any congeniality, however cautiously stated, toward paganism (or, in this context, Islam) is a misreading of Bavinck's doctrine of common grace. Stevenson has hastily confused common grace with a form of natural theology. But common grace is not God's stamp of *approval* on pagan cultural artifacts, as though God declares ignorant worship in some sense good enough; common grace is his patience with and forbearance of paganism:

[T]here is nothing in Israel for which analogies cannot be found elsewhere as well: circumcision, sacrifice, prayer, priesthood, temple, altar, ceremonies, feast days, mores, customs, political and social codes, and so on occur among other people as well. . . . Yet we must not—for the sake of the kinship and connection between them—overlook the essential difference. This is the special grace that was unknown to the pagans. All pagan religions are self-willed and legalistic. They are all the aftereffects and adulterations of the covenant of works. Human beings here consistently try to bring about their own salvation by purifications, asceticism, penance, sacrifice, law observance, ceremony, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

Noting commonality does not in the slightest entail a lessening of the antithesis (indeed, he says, "we *must* not"), and Stevenson

21. *RD*, 1:342–43.

22. *RD*, 3:219; cf. "Common Grace," 41.

draws a distinction between uncle and nephew in this regard that is a mirage of his own making.

## Grace Supplements Nature?

Considered more broadly, the notion that Herman Bavinck’s doctrine of common grace gives some aid, comfort, or rationale for “insider” models for missions runs into a much bigger problem. Bavinck wrote three magisterial treatments of the doctrine: “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church” (1888), “Common Grace” (1894), and “Calvin and Common Grace” (1909). In each of these one theological construct that he is most concerned to overthrow dominates the discussion: represented in purest form by Roman Catholicism, this is the view that nature and grace represent two “tiers” of reality and that grace is a supplementary add-on (the so-called *donum superadditum*) to nature. Nature in this view (inclusive of sociocultural artifacts) is not wholly corrupted by sin but ethically neutral in and of itself, only of a lower order than that of supernatural grace. God’s grace is conceived as bringing nature, which is good so far as it goes, to its highest fulfillment or expression. It is no exaggeration to say that above all else it is this hierarchical, supplementary system that Bavinck dedicated his entire career to dismantling. In this view sin is regarded far less seriously than it ought, and the special, blood-bought grace of the Lord Jesus Christ becomes something less than fully necessary for much, if not most, of human experience.

Since Rome views nature and grace, or creation and re-creation, as two independent realities, Bavinck perceptively notes that “[n]othing remains but a *compromise* between the natural and the supernatural. . . .”<sup>23</sup> This explains “the remarkable phenomenon that Rome has always reared two types of children and has tailored Christianity more or less *to suit all men without exception*.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to explain:

Accordingly, we can find as many grades and stages of goodness and virtue as it pleases God to make. Hierarchical order and arrangement

23. “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1992): 229 (emphasis added).

24. “Common Grace,” 47 (emphasis added).

constitute the central principle of the Roman system. Hierarchy among the angels, hierarchy in the knowledge of God, hierarchy in moral life, hierarchy in the church, and, on the other side of the grave, hierarchy in the *receptacula* [places of rest]. The highest is not for everyone. The natural man of 1 Cor. 2:14 is, according to Rome, not sinful man but man without the *donum superadditum*. This man is capable, through the exercising of his gifts, of completely attaining his natural destination. *Hence the milder judgment that Rome pronounces over the heathen.*<sup>25</sup>

Bavinck saw that this nature/grace scheme can only result in syncretism, a “compromise” of greater or lesser degrees between grace and nature, or, if you will, Christianity and pagan cultural forms. And it has resulted historically in Roman Catholic syncretism with the gospel being a supplemental adornment, the fruition or fulfillment of pagan religion. The gospel *elevates* the “natural” rather than permeates and renews it. And if there were any doubt whether Bavinck properly understood the pulse of Roman Catholic theology, Rome has essentially written its own vindication of him with Vatican II’s embrace of sincere Muslims, well-meaning unbelievers, and those who “strive to live a good life” into the communion of saints.<sup>26</sup>

25. “Common Grace,” 47 (emphasis added).

26. *Lumen Gentium* 16. Many Roman Catholics understandably continue to bristle at Bavinck’s critique, claiming that he did not properly understand Roman Catholicism, particularly Thomas Aquinas. See Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Christian University Press, 1985); Eduardo J. Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism: Disputed Questions* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Echeverria, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Response to Herman Bavinck,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 87–116. While obviously beyond the scope of this essay, a few comments are in order. Attempts at exonerating Thomas from Bavinck’s charge of nature/grace dualism or a “two-tiered” cosmos are revisionist in character. This does not make them wrong. It is quite possible that a careful, nuanced reading of Thomas reveals in his thought a more integrated cosmos than is commonly assumed. The problem is that Roman Catholic theologians themselves articulate Roman Catholic dogma in precisely the dualistic terms Bavinck describes. They did so in his day (see *RD*, 2:255n69) and they continue to do so today. Echeverria admits as much: “I do not mean to deny that there have been and still are Catholic rationalists of this sort, but such rationalism is a corruption of Aquinas’s thought and by implication the teaching of Vatican I. Thus, Bavinck’s charge will not stick.” “A Catholic Response,” 99. That hardly settles matters. Recently, Roman Catholic philosopher Edward Feser took to the online pages of *First Things* to present a thoroughly dualistic version of Thomism, and he would no doubt be resistant to the notion he is “corrupting” Aquinas. “A Christian Hart, a Humean Head,” *On The Square*,

We are thus not really left to speculate what Herman Bavinck would have thought of “insider” models for missions. The theological construct that underwrites phrases like “Messianic Muslim” or “Jesus-following Muslim” and practices such as professing Christians praying Muslim prayers, reciting the *shahadah* in any number of modified forms, reading the Koran, going to the Mosque, and observing ascetic Islamic dietary restrictions is—and can only be—one that views the gospel and grace of Jesus Christ as a supplementary add-on to a pre-existing, morally neutral, socio-religious identity. Islam needs only supplementation, not death and resurrection. It needs elevation, not regeneration.

There is no doubt whatsoever, on the other hand, that Herman Bavinck believed that grace *restores* and *renews* nature. Not mere supplementation but permeation, renovation, regeneration, and renewal. Nature (much less *pagan religion*) is not ethically neutral in a fallen world but hostile to the things of God. It is upheld by the common grace of God not because it has anything in itself to commend it but because by it God insures there is a world susceptible of salvation at all.

I conclude with a final observation from Bavinck about common grace. Counterintuitive though it may be, he maintains that “[i]n this doctrine of *gratia communis* the Reformed maintained the *particular and absolute* character of the Christian religion on the one hand, while on the other they were second to none in appreciating all that God continued to give of beauty and worth to sinful men.”<sup>27</sup> It seems that many accounts of common grace play these hands off of each other. Appreciation for beauty and worth among sinful men means *downplaying* the particular and absolute character of Christianity. “Insider” movements, it would seem, promote this very thing. But they should remove Herman Bavinck’s name from their list of supporters.

www.firstthings.com, 6 March 2013; cf. David Bentley Hart’s reply in *First Things*, May 2013, 71–72. The very existence of Fergus Kerr’s *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002) indicates that Thomism is far too variegated for Echeverria or others to lay the blame of misunderstanding at Herman Bavinck’s feet.

27. “Common Grace,” 52 (emphasis added).