

Pearls and Leaven

Bavinck on Religion

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In the *Reformed Dogmatics* (1:236) Bavinck devotes no more than a single paragraph to the word “religion”; namely, its possible etymology and meaning. To be sure, he then goes on to explain in some detail the various ways in which Scripture speaks of the *objective* side of religion—essentially the ordinances of God—and the corresponding *subjective* side: the fear of the Lord.

The following passage, taken from § 7 of Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* manuscript, which is now being translated and prepared for eventual publication by Baker Publishing Group, does not present a novel or different perspective from the one given in the *Dogmatics* but a complementary one. In particular it elaborates on the difference between Cicero’s claim that religion is derived from *relegere* and Lactantius’s assertion that it comes from *religare*. The point at stake here is whether religion is primarily about divine worship or about the social cohesiveness of a people committed to a common cause. In spite of the fact that Lactantius Christianized the notion of religion, Bavinck takes the side of Cicero, a decision that seems to be confirmed by other linguists (see n. 5 below). Perhaps surprisingly, Bavinck also rejects the idea that religion is “communion with God.”

That Bavinck chooses to link religion to piety and worship is significant in view of a tendency among many neo-Calvinists after Kuyper and Bavinck to broaden the notion as in “all of life is religion.”¹ Readers will find Bavinck’s comments about the relation between “objective” scriptural religion and our human subjective experience of religion to provide wise guidance for today.

1. E.g., see Henry Vander Goot, ed., *Life is Religion: Essays in Honor of H. Evan Runner* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paideia, 1981).

Excerpt from *Reformed Ethics* § 7*

According to Cicero, “religion” is derived from *relegere*² (to go through or over again in reading, speech, or thought) and points to “everything that formed a part of divine worship” which was “heedfully repeated and, as it were, ‘regathered’ (*relegerent*)” [for guiding the practice of devout and observant religious people.]³ As we saw⁴ Lactantius, however, disputed this and sought the etymology for “religion” in *religare* (to bind together).⁵ Arguments in favor of Cicero’s view include appeals to passages in Cicero that link religion with the notion of obligation⁶ and the fact that words ending in “-io” are derived from third conjugation verbs (cf. *optio* from *opere*). Lactantius’s view, however, is defended by Fleck,⁷ Hahn, and Lange.⁸

* The following excerpt was initially translated by Antoine Theron and edited by John Bolt. It was subsequently carefully scrutinized during the week of 3–7 August 2015 by the team of John Bolt, Jessica Driesenga, Nelson Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk Van Keulen. For further information about the manuscript, see Dirk Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics: Some Remarks about Unpublished Manuscripts in the Libraries of Amsterdam and Kampen,” *Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 25–56.

2. Ed. note: For the sake of clarity, in what follows Bavinck’s original has been reconstructed and amplified by the editor. This section was difficult to reconstruct because Bavinck earlier seemed to side with Lactantius’s link of religion to *religare* (to bind together). Furthermore, the manuscript at this point mistakenly inserts *religare* instead of *relegere* as the word used by Cicero.

3. Ed note: The citation from Cicero is found in *De natura deorum* II.28.

4. Ed. note: This is a reference to an earlier section in this chapter. The Lactantius reference is to *Institutiones divinae* IV.28.

5. Ed. note: Etymological battles over the word “religion” go back to the early days of the Christian church among Greek and Roman writers as well as Christian thinkers. For a helpful, brief survey of this discussion, see Sarah F. Hoyt, “The Etymology of Religion,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 32/2 (1912): 126–29. Hoyt concludes (p. 128): “If all points are carefully considered, Cicero’s view would seem to be preferable, so that religion is not derived from *religare*, but from *relegere*.”

6. Ed. note: Hoyt, “The Etymology of Religion,” 128; the passages are *Oratio de Domo*, 105, 106, 124; the idea here is that religion involves conscientious observance and keeping of God’s commands and ordinances. That is why they need to be re-read, and re-read; in other words, *liturgy* is essential to good religion.

7. Ed. note: Bavinck does not specify here but is likely referring to Ferdinand Florens Fleck, *System der christlichen Dogmatik mit besonderer Beziehung auf die religiösen und speculatieve Zustände des Zeitalters* (Leipzig: Friedrich Fleischer, 1846).

8. Johann Peter Lange, *Christliche Dogmatik*, first part, 189 (according to Friedrich Adolph Philippi, *Kirchliche Glaubenslehre*, 1:6–7); Julius Köstlin, “Religion” *PRE*ⁿ XII, 647ff.

It is a peculiar fact that the Germans including the early Reformed always spoke of Lutheran or Reformed “religion.” Schleiermacher uses the term piety (*Frömmigkeit*) from the word *vrum* which, according to W. J. S. Müller⁹ (*Studien und Kritiken*, 1835), was the Gothic word for *primus* or first and also meant virtuous, useful, alert, valiant (in the liturgical form for baptism.) It was related to the word *uram* that meant “forward.” The word expresses only subjective religiosity; the Pharisees were also pious. The terms “devotion” and “godliness” are too ethical, too practical, too specific to embrace everything that we include in the term “religion” (*godsdiens*t). The term “faith” (*geloof*), which is etymologically related to the terms “believe” (*geloven*), “promise” (*belofte*), “vow” (*geloofte*), “betroth” (*verloven*), “allow” (*veroorloven*), and “love” (*lieven*) is also too specific for this purpose. The root of “faith” expresses a loving surrender and dedication to somebody. By contrast, religion (*godsdiens*t) is too external, and the term service (*dienst*), morphologically a masculine term, is too harsh, insufficiently tender and affectionate. Des Amorie [van der Hoeven] Jr. suggests the word “Godward life” (*Gode-leven*).¹⁰

So then what is religion (*godsdiens*t)? It is of foremost importance that we acknowledge Christianity as the only source for determining the essence of religion. To want to determine the essence of religion by trying to find what all religions have in common yields only an abstraction without substance. What is true and good in other religions can be determined and measured only by the true Christian religion.¹¹ One also has to distinguish between religion in an objective and a subjective sense. Once we understand both we may be able to grasp what they have in common.

(a) What is objective religion (*religio objectiva*)? God himself shows us in the first table of the law. It consists of the service of God (*cultus Dei*) that is described for us in Holy Scripture: the worship of God alone, going to church, observing the Sabbath, using the sacraments, communal prayer. Holy Scripture very fittingly describes it as walking in the Lord’s laws, duties, statutes, ways. Objective religion thus corresponds with what God has revealed concerning himself and how he expects us to serve him; it corresponds with the Torah and with the Holy Scripture itself. Francken therefore says that religion (*godsdiens*t) is the content of Holy Scripture.¹²

9. Köstlin, 649.

10. Abraham des Amorie van der Hoeven Jr., *De godsdiens*t: het wezen van den mensch, 2nd ed. (Leeuwarden: Suringar, 1857) 5–6.

11. Philippi, 1:2–3.

12. Ægidius Francken, *Stellige God-geleertheyd, dat is De Waarheden van de Hervormde Leer Eenvoudig ter nedergesteld, en met de Oeffening der waare*

Philippi describes objective religion as the Christ-effected restoration of the communion of God with humanity.¹³ This raises the question whether religion (*godsdiens*) is communion with God, which will be addressed presently.

(b) What is subjective religion (*religio subjectiva*)? The New Testament usually indicates subjective religion by the words “faith” (πίστις) or “believing” (πιστεύειν). This faith resides in the heart (Rom. 10:10). It is with the heart that one believes unto righteousness; it is the center, the core, the innermost point of our being, our *I*. And because faith resides in the *I*, it is an act of the whole human person, of mind, will, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:4–5; Matt. 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). How is this faith worked in us? The Holy Spirit works it in us, but through the preaching of the Word, which aims at the mind and the will. It is thus mediated through mind and will: these are the two portals, points of entry to our innermost being, to our *I*, by which the Holy Spirit carries the seed of the Word into us and there causes faith to arise (Rom. 10:14–15). And just as faith, subjective religion, is mediated by the mind and the will, it proceeds from the *I* to again work on the mind and the will. The Reformed therefore did not make the mistake of having knowing (*cognoscere*) and serving (*colere*) coexist independently in the definition of religion (*godsdiens*). Religion (*godsdiens*) is mediated by both and manifests itself in both. Faith truly is knowing and trusting; it does not exist without both.

And the Reformed definition is far better than Schleiermacher’s. Feeling is passive and receptive. Faith is reflected in feeling, and one who believes will experience to some extent feelings of contentedness and bliss. But faith is not identical to feeling. Rather, feeling is a fruit and reflection of faith. To be sure, Schleiermacher explained feeling as immediate self-consciousness. This is impossible, however; it cannot be both at once, it has to be either feeling or self-consciousness. The one can absolutely not include the other.¹⁴ Faith, then, is the unity of knowing and ability (*kennen en kunnen*), of knowledge and deed. Its only object is God; it knows God, engages God, and deals with God.

(c) What is the relation between objective religion and subjective religion? Polanus wrote, “Religion or piety is the internal cause of the service of God: the one is the cause, the other the effect.”¹⁵ To some extent

Godsaligheyd aangedrongen, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Dordrecht, 1743), 56.

13. Philippi, 1:47.

14. Philippi, 1:52v., 61v., 71; Lange, 133ff.

15. Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianæ*, 580A.

this is true. Subjective religion impels us and enables us to serve God according to his will. But objective religion is not the product, effect, and creation of subjective religion. Self-imagined or self-made objective religion is not service of God but idolatry or self-willed worship (ἑθελοθρησκεία; see e.g. Matt. 15:9, Mark 7:7, Col. 2:23). No, objective religion is already there, contained and described in Holy Scripture. Only God can decide what objective religion is and how he wants to be served. Subjective religion begins by abandoning all self-willed religion (*godsdienst*) and ceasing to be active, and instead it becomes passive and enters into the service of God according to his will. This is why Holy Scripture speaks of walking in the ways and laws of the Lord and not walking according to our own imagination. This is not compulsion because subjective religion makes us willing to walk in the ways of the Lord. And objective religion, too, is no forced system, no pressing or constricting mold for subjective religion. Quite the contrary; while objective religion is the pure and true and adequate form of the subjective, subjective religion is the perfectly fitting content of objective religion. Both are intended to permeate each other with increasing intimacy. To some extent it is still the case that objective religion stands over us like a law: as a rule for our lives to protect us from straying it had to be objectively revealed. But as subjective religion grows within us, and as faith becomes stronger and more spontaneous, objective religion increasingly becomes our own being. The two may for the moment remain partially in conflict, but they are directed to each other and inclined toward each other. One day they will fully correspond. In heaven they will both be *one*.

To conclude: religion should not be defined as communion (*gemeenschap*) with God. This is currently a common definition, for example, of Oosterzee.¹⁶ Notice, however: (a) Communion is reciprocal. There is communion between a husband and wife but not between a father and child among whom an intimate relationship of piety (*pietas*) exists. If there were religious communion between God and us, God, too, would have religion. This is not the case: religion is something human, the most human thing about our humanity,¹⁷ and therefore to speak of “human religion” is really a pleonasm, a redundancy. (b) The definition “religion is communion between God and human beings” excludes all objective religion and makes it seem as if objective religion is a matter of

16. Ed. note: Johannes Jacob van Oosterzee (1817–1882) was a professor of biblical and practical theology at the University of Utrecht. Though Bavinck does not refer to a specific title, he likely has in mind *Christelijke dogmatiek: Een handboek voor academisch onderwijs en eigen oefening*, 2 vols. (Utrecht: Kemink, 1876).

17. According to Des Amorie van der Hoeven Jr.

indifference and inferior. But such a notion is contradicted by Holy Scripture, which in the second commandment identifies the sin of idolatry, and in the land of Israel specified that it should be punished with death. This idea, however, reflected in the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and of the entire present age. (c) Because of the reasons listed in (a) and (b), the definition “religion is communion between God and human beings” is incomplete and inaccurate. Religion is not, as Klee thought, the reciprocal rapport (*Wechselrapport*) between God and a human being,¹⁸ even less is it an activity or consciousness in us. It is not the relationship itself nor the communion between God and people as such but the “certainty of the human subjects that they exist and live in this relationship and engagement,” a human way of life by virtue of and through the peculiar relationship between God and us.¹⁹ Human beings stand in a special and unique relationship to God, essentially distinct from that of angels and animals and every creature and thus are disintuiguated from all other creatures. Because of the unique relationship to God in which we stand (come to stand by faith), this relationship is distinctively expressed in all of human life. And because God in a special way places himself in a relationship to human beings, they too place themselves [49] in a unique relationship to God.

Thus we obtain the following definition: Formally, religion (*godsdi-entst*) is the distinctive relationship of human beings to God, expressing itself in all of life, based on the distinctive relationship of God to human beings. Materially, religion (*godsdi-entst*) is the child-like relationship to God that arises in a human being, based on the reconciled relation in which God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, places himself to the believer. This makes God the object of believers’ knowledge and action and leads them to walk in the ways of the Lord according to God’s will and for his glory. Religion (*godsdi-entst*) is serving God in childlike fear, in faith, with all one’s powers in the entirety of life according to his will and for his glory. Piety (*pietas*) and religion (*religio*) are therefore not identical. As Calvin correctly distinguishes, religion (*religio*) arises from piety (*pietas*). Religion (*religio*) is thus our human way of life with respect to God determined by piety (*pietas*, the child-like relation to God). Religion (*religio*) is not communion with God and the spiritual life as such, but the piety (*pietas*) that directs the mind, will, feeling, all powers

18. Ed. note: Bavinck does not indicate the source but he is referring to Heinrich Klee, *Encyclopädie der Theologie* (Mainz: Florian Kupsterberg, 1832), p. 8 § 7: “Religion is der Wechsel-Rapport Gottes und der (intelligenten, hier näher: menschlichen) Creatur....”

19. Köstlin, 641–42.

and all actions and daily walk is religion (*godsdiens*t). Religion (*godsdiens*t) is decidedly a matter of the mind, of the will, of all the powers, flowing forth from a heart in right relationship to God. Religion (*godsdiens*t) is thus the relationship of the *whole* person with heart, soul, etc. to God, governed by the standard of God's will.