

A Christian Mondrian

*Joseph Masheck (adolfloos@earthlink.net),
Professor of Art History, Hofstra University*

Just as Paul simultaneously compares the church to a body and a building and speaks of a growing temple (Eph. 2:21), and Peter calls believers living stones (1 Pet. 2:5), so also the world is both a history and a work of art. —Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*

Introduction

As an art historian I am concerned about a tendency to accuse Mondrian's and all kindred forms of "pure" or so-called "absolute" modernist abstract art of being "utopically" farfetched. Yes, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was, and still is, in a sense utopian, though we should be grateful for it: his classic "De Stijl" paintings ought to make us constructively ashamed of the way the world is. In this essay perhaps the basic Christianity of the painter may show through on a deeper level than the orientalizing fad of Theosophy, in parallel with the other founders of abstract painting.¹

There is no doubt that as a young painter Mondrian developed and expressed a fondness for the fashionable Theosophical vocabulary of his time. It is unclear, however, how much it determined the painter's practice of faith or influenced his best efforts as an artist. There is room to question whether the Theosophical side of Mondrian has been exaggerated and whether his mature writing might have a closer kinship with the Dutch Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and especially Herman Bavinck. After an introductory orientation concerned with Theosophy, abstract art, and Mondrian's earlier life, I will consider justification as a theological notion in the Protestant tradition and its link to Mondrian's artistic passion for equilibrium as a form of aesthetic justification. Mondrian will thus be portrayed as the single Protestant among the founders of abstract painting. Yet in his project Mondrian wants to go

1. Despite the Neolithic origins of conceptualized abstraction, even aestheticians often assume that abstract or non-objective art is an exception, that art is essentially representational. After a hundred years of modern abstract painting, it is time to insist that that is no better than assuming that instrumental music is not true music.

beyond justification to projecting the Kingdom of God and God's justice. I follow this up by considering parallels between Mondrian's eschatological vision and that of Herman Bavinck, even though the latter's language is not exactly the same as Mondrian's phraseology; the comparison is not direct but analogical. The Calvinist Bavinck regards God's eternal counsel and decree along with its working out in history as a work of art. This is my case for restoring to Mondrian the Christian Reformed foundation of his faith.

Mainly since the appearance of Sixten Ringbom's *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (1970) there has been such a distinct tendency to dispose of the question of spiritual significance in early abstraction by charging as much as possible to Theosophy that even what should have been taken as obvious signs of Russian Orthodoxy in Kandinsky's writings are ignored; similarly, there are attempts to stretch such neutral spirituality to cover as much as possible of Malevich, a baptized Catholic who had enough trouble with the Stalinists defending pure form, let alone faith. Now, however, appeal to Theosophy seems the only permissible secularist way to account for anything spiritual in the work of Mondrian beyond the forgivable caricature that the extreme "purity" of his classic paintings looks compatible with a Calvinist background. Yet we shall see that there are reasons for considering Mondrian to be the Protestant founder of abstraction.

Like the other founders of abstract painting before World War I, Mondrian was indeed interested in Theosophy, but the question is whether that was a substitute or a supplement for Christianity. The point must be to see what more confessional religious systems were taken for granted by artists drawn to this turn-of-the-century *symboliste*, orientalizing, syncretist tendency as a supposedly neutral cultural alternative to creedal Judeo-Christian religion. There are certainly statements by Mondrian that accord with Theosophical rhetoric, but even on that score a distinction might be made between Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Beginning in 1907, Rudolf Steiner, a Catholic interested in Goethe and science but troubled by Theosophy's hostility toward fundamental Jewish and Christian principles, began to formulate his own schismatic movement, founded in 1912, called "Anthroposophy" to indicate that it did not pretend to divine wisdom. Hence it seems significant that Mondrian always held onto the publication of Steiner's addresses to the Netherlands Theosophical Society in 1908.² Nevertheless, I am not concerned with

2. Carel Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 42. Charles Pickstone has suggested in "Mondrian, Don Cupitt, and the Cheshire Cat," *Theology* 89,

Anthroposophy but rather with Mondrian's mother tongue of Dutch Calvinism.

Theosophy and Anthroposophy had a role in broadening Mondrian's scope, yet as he entered his classic phase there are signs of turning away. A definite detachment is evident in a letter of 5 September 1920, written to Theo van Doesburg about the Belgian painter-sculptor Georges Vantongerloo's technical approach to color: "He approaches it just like an ordinary Theosophist."³ Whatever discontent lodges in this statement, Mondrian was then prepared to adduce a specifically Christian figure. In "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence" (1920) he speaks of the conservatism of inherited wealth as not the only hindrance to "the new spirit": "Today, however, the new spirit has nothing to gain from a total upheaval of our society: as long as men themselves are not 'new,' there is no place for 'the new'" (144). This is a clear allusion to St. Paul's popular trope of "putting on the new man," which originally had the dualistic meaning of spirit as positive over and against body or the world as negatively natural (Col. 3:9–10; Eph. 4:21–24; Gal. 3:27).⁴ True,

no. 729 (May 1986), 187–94, that the attraction of Theosophy was that it "neatly filled the gap left by the failure of orthodox Christianity to appear intellectually respectable, promising admittance into occult secrets and an escape from the scientific materialism which was associated with what was seen as the vulgarity of commercial bourgeois culture"; also, it seemed a way around "the dilemma of educated and scientific people who, alienated from Christianity and unversed in theology, could so easily fall into the maw of gnosticism dressed up in scientific clothes" (189). For Mondrian, the Theosophical writings would have been "a sort of parody of Calvinistic spirituality: disciplined, logical, austere, and unsentimental, truthful to the materials used and without illusions; but in their purity they are entirely unsacramental" (190). As for the dualism "which leaves matter lifeless and the spiritual vague and intangible" (191), it seems, in his writing, that Mondrian is able to escape dualism by a dialectic of surmounting one opposition in the name of yet another more enveloping one. Is this something learned or confirmed by his reading Gerald Bolland (see p. 46, n. 14 below)?

Robert P. Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," in Kathleen J. Regier, ed., *The Spiritual Image in Modern Art* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), 163–84, hopes not to confine the Theosophical Mondrian to the literary *Symbolisme* of the 1890s; but showing that the painter was interested in Theosophy earlier than had been thought only highlights having nothing to say about any work after *Evolution* (1910). Fortunately, Welsh gives in a footnote an anti-Theosophical remark as the painter was approaching his classic phase: in a note in *De Stijl* 1 (1917) "Mondrian rejects the imitation of [N.B.] astral colours' as incompatible with his approach to painting which he then described as 'abstract-real'" (183, n. 33).

3. Piet Mondrian, *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: Hall, 1986), 133; hereafter referenced in text. Importantly, Vantongerloo failed to distinguish "between the manner of nature and the manner of art."

4. Even the statement about wealth is reminiscent of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where, after reminding us that by "grace, . . . our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . though

an essay of 1922, “The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today (Architecture Understood as Our Total Non-Natural Environment),” produced statements on faith and religion as such in which both Theosophy and Anthroposophy seem personally superseded, for one thing, by a general religion-of-art idea which may have served to loosen the hold of Theosophy and Anthroposophy. For example: “Art advances where religion once led. Religion’s basic content was to *transform the natural*; in practice, however, religion always sought to harmonize man *with nature*, that is, with *untransformed nature*.” Here “untransformed nature” seems open to the meaning of *unredeemed* nature. Continuing: “Likewise, in general, Theosophy and Anthroposophy—although they already knew the *basic symbol of equivalence*—could never *achieve the experience of equivalent relationship, achieve real, fully human harmony*” (169).

A preliminary word about this key Mondrian term “equivalence.” In our philistine age many students are given the impression that the perpendicularity in Mondrian is simplistically “about” an active vertical male and a passive horizontal female in sex. This adolescent notion is based on a few very brief notations made in notebooks before the classic period began and only one or two brief comments in Mondrian’s essays with countless other binaries mentioned in “equilibrated relationships”; curiously, the great Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, whom we will compare here with Mondrian, runs into a similar problem with religious emotion.⁵ All the more unfortunately, what is lost in the popular carica-

he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich,” says: “I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, ‘He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.’” (2 Cor. 9: 13–15 RSV).

5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–08); hereafter *RD*. Bavinck had a certain anti-aesthetic attitude in reaction to a subjectivist position inherited from Romanticism and allied in particular with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834); but then, so did Mondrian when that was what was meant by art. Obviously equating art with sensuality will not capture Mondrian’s artistic essence (even when Mondrian very occasionally refers to the erotic): “One . . . naturally, slips into the error of confusing and equating religious feeling with sensual and aesthetic feeling,” Bavinck writes. “Known to us all from history is the kinship between religious and sensual . . . love and the passage from one to the other. But equally dangerous is the confusion of religious and aesthetic feeling, of religion and art. The two are essentially distinct.” Bavinck follows this, however, by matters on which Mondrian did in fact speculate (see *RD*, 1:267). The sexual motif of vertical=male, horizontal=female occurs in the architect Adolf Loos’s notorious essay “Ornament and Crime” (1909; Fr. trans. 1913) precisely as *infantilistic*.

ture is an important meaning: not that dialectical “equilibrations” do not naturally obtain between the sexes, or that this *natural* condition is dispensable; but that the natural is only the beginning of something else; namely, the *spiritual*, which is rightly accessed *through* the natural. The vertical male and horizontal female sounds like hand-me-down Theosophy compared with what this painter is saying in regard to how sensuality in dialectical equilibration may of course be *natural* enough; nevertheless, the existence of the cultural or the spiritual is the anti-naturalistic point. What could be more basically Christian, then, in view of what Mondrian writes again and again about decidedly *not* being “natural” than Paul’s words: “But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46 NAB). This is a recurrent principle for Mondrian.

Notions of the young Mondrian bolting out of the established Dutch Reformed Church and taking up Theosophy have created the impression that Mondrian intended to leave his father’s Calvinist faith behind in order to become a more avant-garde Theosophist. This story is sufficiently incomplete to amount to falsehood. Carel Blotkamp reports testimony of Mondrian’s lifelong friend Albert van den Briel to the effect that the painter began to read Theosophy at the turn of the century “when after a fierce religious crisis he turned his back on the Calvinist faith of his parents.”⁶ All I can say to this is that our friends may misinterpret our motives, since it is a fact that Mondrian (at the time, “Mondriaan”) signed up, after leaving the rather slack established Dutch Reformed Church, for an all the more theologically serious secessionist Reformed group, as we shall see. Blotkamp does also call attention to Mondrian’s exposure to certain Catholic opinions,⁷ which would at least have prepared him for the breadth of knowledge (Catholic and Lutheran as well as Calvinist) of the best new Reformed theology in the Neo-Calvinist reformist group where he seems to have been at home, some of the possible repercussions of which we can entertain here. For in actual fact, the great early abstract

6. Blotkamp, *Art*, 34. The Theosophical/Anthroposophical element in Mondrian has doubtless been exaggerated. However much it determined the mature painter’s early “spirituality,” what is at stake is the source and staying-power of a default religious attitude determining his best efforts as an artist. (Although it is tempting to associate him with the townhouse of the New York Theosophical Society, which was founded by Madame Blavatsky herself and located close to his two New York studios, the Society had not yet moved there.) Retaining a sentimental fondness for the fashionable Theosophical vocabulary of his time as a young painter will hardly matter if Mondrian’s mature intellectual phraseology declares the experience of an up-to-date Calvinist.

7. Including, early on, his Catholic friend Jan Troop as well as an ex-priest, Mathieu H.J. Schoenmakers; later (in 1922, 1930), two of Mondrian’s three brothers became Catholics. Blotkamp, *Art*, 47, 110–11, 222–23.

painter Mondrian was more of a son of the Reformed Church—albeit not in its state-established version, thus arguing all the more for his early religious commitment—than has been thought.

As a spectator, since youth, of Mondrian, and afterward as a scholar, I have always carried around the notion that the master's classic abstract "Neo-plastic" compositions of the 1920s (especially) are "about"—in that they convey insight into the workings of—a sense of justification. Reading though the master's many published texts with this in mind, however, something struck me halfway through. The texts began to tell me something else. Besides the usual evidence of, for me, justificatory "equilibration," the artist was going on about how he wished that the ideal justifications within his painting could somehow be made to solve human problems in the social world outside the work: obviously not by some arbitrary "objective" imposition of a schema but through the stresses and strains of human dialectics. This world-improvement campaign seemed irrelevant until I could see it as an extension of justification just as Mondrian had been saying all along. I now see that even what once seemed like an afterthought, the social vision of Mondrian, is by no means superfluous to his aesthetic of equilibration. That is easy to say; but if my longstanding notion of the individual painting as a matter of justification makes sense in conjunction with justification as a major Protestant theological preoccupation, then so may an extrapolation from there to what it took Mondrian longer to tell me as akin to the idea of an Isaiahan Kingdom of God and His Justice.

Here, after considering justification as such and a wider purview of the Kingdom, it will be possible to refer to Herman Bavinck's masterwork, the *Reformed Dogmatics*,⁸ and then to one of the masterworks of Piet Mondrian in the 1920s as well.

Importance of Justification

Let us consider the notion of the justification, by which sin since Adam is forgiven, as a question of divine accountancy with the scales of justice possibly in mind. We speak, after all, of a sin's *remission*, meaning that something is remitted like the payment for a debt. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536ff.) Calvin's sense of justification, which is qualitatively final, consists of a remission of sins by virtue of a subtraction or debit thanks to the addition or credit of the righteousness of Christ

8. *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1906–11) is the edition upon which the recent English translation is based.

(III.xi.xx). A negation of evil subtracted is accounted for by a surplus of good, restoring a balance. Citing Isaiah, Calvin says that “sin makes a division between man and God” (III.xi.xxi), which is a deficit that only grace can overcome.⁹ If we consider that dimensions are quantities, and proportions are qualitative relations; and if we consider the aesthetic importance of proportions—as qualitative relations of quantities—then in a classic abstraction by Mondrian the sizes of the rectangular areas (and qualitative differences of color) as well as the proportional distances between them will seem, when perfectly attuned, “justified” in a sense analogous to the theological sense of righteousness attained.

The justification of man and the world is, of course, only necessary because of the Fall of Man. Mondrian had recourse to a terminology of moral justification before publishing at all, in a notebook entry of c. 1913–1914, speaking of rendering a thing differently “from its visual appearance,” which, he says, “is something the artist is responsible for and that is justified when [it] results from an inner feeling of necessity.”¹⁰ From the origins of the Dutch movement *De Stijl* in 1917, he constantly identifies his sense of the asymmetric balance that embodies justification in design as an “equilibrated” relationship or “equilibrated plastic” relationship. Twice in a late text, the book-length “The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships” (1931), Mondrian alludes to Adam and Eve. At first mankind lives in a perfect state, practically simply breathing “without care, without even working”; and “[t]he constant, contrasting, cadenced opposition of this breathing rhythm being equilibrated, he lives in perfect equilibrium.” In the beginning Adam is “not conscious of life,” and then: “To acquire experience and knowledge, man needs total opposition. As shown by the creation of Eve in the Paradise story, primitive man’s nature requires not only outside opposition—contrary but harmonious—but also *the upsetting of his equilibrated state*, which was originally *particular equilibrium*” (*The New Art*, 256).

The sense of justification entailed in Mondrian concerns how his classic works have always appeared so amazingly perfected, so self-evidently *rendered asymmetrically perfect*, in what the French in the eighteenth century called a pictorial “economy,” that I might account for my own first appreciation of them. I have never forgotten looking at the examples in the Museum of Modern Art at the age of about thirteen or

9. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, 7th American ed., 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 1:818.

10. Mondrian, *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks*, ed. R. P. Welsh and J.M. Joosten, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1969), 1:59; quoted in Martin S. James, “Piet Mondrian: Art and Theory to 1917,” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 11–19; here p. 17.

fourteen and overhearing a docent highlighting the relational character of the patches of primary color. He must have pointed to the red and yellow, because sixty years later I remember him saying, "How much blue does the eye need?" Immediately I recognized that that was just what I was already discerning. I also already knew that this was a matter of active asymmetric balance; that is, of in some sense *justification*. More than anything circumstantial, however, it has seemed to me since then that Mondrian's definitive abstractions deal with active, inescapable, asymmetrical balances that raise the question of aesthetic justification.

Justification, of course, was the first rallying cry of the Reformation as soon as Luther posited that salvation requires "faith alone." Theologically, justification betokens atonement. Mondrian's classic paintings ostensibly propose situations of reciprocal balance with larger and smaller areas of primary color, closer and farther apart along an asymmetric perpendicular grille-work, often with wider and narrower black bands. In their composition—sometimes even in the relational arrangement of primary-colored rectangles of various sizes on the studio wall¹¹—they evoke situations of compensation as proportional "toppings-up." In his writings reciprocity and reciprocality are everywhere applied in a constant refrain of equivalent plastic relationships. Thus we seek here to apply a concept of justification to Mondrian, the Protestant among the founders of abstraction, in analogy with the ostensible balancing of the asymmetries of the primary colors in his most definitive paintings of the 1920s and with an aesthetic of asymmetrical balance shadowing the theological idea. If this seems a single-minded view of the works in question, it is nevertheless a comprehensive one.

The real lesson has theological overtones that are inevitably Christian in the way they come down from the Reformation in the central current of disputes about justification. In this we should bear in mind that on the most ordinary level craftsmen know the pleasure of justification as a setting right, a sense of getting things "squared away" as when the carpenter justifies adjacent edges by eliminating a discrepancy or as the printer justifies his type in respect to the limits of the page—one imagines, with a nice feeling of eliminating one more imperfection in the way things are. Mondrian is more dialectically complex than the craftsman because he has to set up a likelihood of disunity with only a few categorically different elements—primary colors presented in differently proportioned rectangles defined by only perpendicular black lines—in order to make

11. This has its precedents in early modernist picture-hanging; see Joseph Masheck, "Pictures of Art," *Artforum* 17 (May 1979), 26–37.

something of them by rectifying or justifying their situation. Yet that is still the source of a marvelous sense, in consequence, that because equilibrium has been earned and established after all, some idealistic things actually do prove to be worth the effort. It is as if the painting got to say, “*Now* who’s being ‘realistic’!” As a matter of fact, Mondrian did like to say that his Calvinistically pure abstract art *really was* “realistic” unlike the phony realism that settles spiritually for so much less, especially when it puts on a pretty face.

It does seem somehow Protestant to think of the this-worldly aspect of justification in craftsmanship, in carpentry, or in printing as a bringing of adjacent forms into material alignment with one another. Before becoming a Catholic, John Henry Newman made a similar observation himself in explaining justification: “In the abstract it is a counting righteous, in the concrete a making righteous.”¹² As for the real world, where works are obliged to live up to faith, Newman offers:

Serious men, dealing with realities, not with abstract conceptions, entering into the field of practical truth not the lists of controversy, not refuting an opponent, but teaching the poor, have ever found it impossible to confine justification to a mere declaring of what is also by the same grace effected. They have taken it to mean what they saw, felt, handled, as existing in fact in themselves and others. When they speak of justification, it is of a wonderful grace of God, not in the heavens, but nigh to them.... (Newman, 109)

At a point in the New Testament that quotes the Old Testament—a point that everybody aware of the Reformation is on the lookout for—the RSV shows a proliferation of the verb “to reckon,” which strikes me as carrying decided connotations of bookkeeping or accountancy. This is in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans from which it is enough to give only the first and most momentous of the no fewer than eleven examples and which also introduces a synonymy with the verb “to justify”:

What, then, shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. (Rom. 4:1–4; cf. Gen. 15:6 and other NT examples)

In Luther’s German the equivalent recurrent verb to this use of “justified” is *gerecht*, i.e., “set right,” and the equivalent of “reckoned... as righteousness” is *zur Gerechtigkeit gerechtet*, which seems forceful, something like “rightly set aright” or “rectified to rectitude.” What is more in the Dutch *Statenvertaling* (1637), which in Mondrian’s experience would have been

12. John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (1838; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 70.

as familiar as the Authorized Version, the same is consistently true through the whole chapter with the obviously parallel meanings of “justification” as *rechtvaardigmaking*, “justified” as *gerechtvaardigd*, and “righteousness” as *rechtvaardigheid*. Looking so closely at this Protestant hot spot may show us something important to Mondrian’s apperceptive outlook, so to speak; that is, what comes as *unreckoned* cultural presumption.

Without referencing Protestant theological justification, the philosopher of art Hendrik Matthes has raised the question of justice in elucidating what Mondrian meant by an “exact plastic of mere relationship.” He speaks of Mondrian’s “Neo-Plastic prophetic vocation” to herald “the realization of universal harmony” by means of a new plastic art realizing that more general possibility—inspiringly, in life as well in his precisely balanced formal structures. “According to Mondrian,” he writes, “the spiritual cannot be properly expressed in material forms, but reveals itself only in equilibrated relationships freed of all form and meaning.” Addressing the projection by which Mondrian himself likened achieved Neo-Plastic equilibrium to a good society, Matthes quotes his writing as early as 1918–19 in the journal *De Stijl*, house organ of the De Stijl movement, that “equilibrated relationship in society signifies what is just” with “the idea of justice” assumed.¹³ The question is how this relates to modern Reformed theology.

Concepts of justice and justification play a steady part in Mondrian’s unfolding view of art. While justification concerns the vindication of the individual soul before the judgement seat, the ransom-like justificatory sacrifice of Christ underwrites intra-human justifications. From “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917) onwards, Mondrian’s term “equilibrated relationship” plays this role in painting, between reciprocal parts, and beyond painting as well, in justifications of self and other.¹⁴ For example, in the “Dialogue on the New Plastic” (1919), Mondrian writes: “If... we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is *just*, then one realizes that in art too the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the times is ripe” (78). Later, in “Pure Abstract Art” (1929), he writes:

13. Hendrik Matthes, “Mondrian’s ‘Exact Plastic of Mere Relationship,’” *Kunst & Museumjournaal* 6 (1994–95), 71–83; here, 71.

14. The actual term “equilibrated relationship” is apparently derived from the Leiden University neo-Hegelian philosopher Gerardus Bolland’s *Pure Reason: A Book for the Friends of Wisdom* (1904); early on, Bolland might have attracted Mondrian by his gnostical and/or Theosophical ideas about early Christianity. If so, the term was a saving grace.

The concept of equivalent relationships is characteristic of our spiritual outlook today. Traditional moral feelings and concepts have become unrealistic due to the changed conditions of life. Fundamentally, the old morality already contained them: brotherhood, friendship, etc. It is the idea of justice. In the economic sphere, this is realized through equivalent exchange (pure trade). (224)

This seems somewhat corrected in “The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships” (1931):

From the viewpoint of the new morality, which demands justice, none of [the basic] human qualities can exist unless they are reciprocal. Given the inequality among men, the new morality cannot therefore demand these qualities before a certain degree of mutual equality is reached. For the time being, it can demand only the establishment of pure relationships and the proper education to create the equality that logically leads to the realization of these qualities. Today’s mentality is not capable of realizing them, but it is capable of *observing the logic of justice*. (273)

Some notion of justification as an evened-off fit and more—here imputed to Mondrian in painting—can be gained from Herbert Arthur Hodges, an Anglican who appreciates Catholic and Calvinist views on the subject; especially for his sense that once evenness and balance is restored (to the relation between man and God), something better than the merely equitable can be expected. “[T]he gift of justification,” writes Hodges, “[is not] confined to the cancelling of the charge-sheet and the release of the prisoner. Justification is far more than mere acquittal and remission of penalty.”¹⁵ He continues: “Man cannot win favour by being righteous, he can only obtain favour by being accounted righteous...to be justified must mean primarily to be reckoned as righteous...”; with the Reformation, however, “on the Protestant side we find a determined attempt to tie down ‘justification’ to ‘acquittal’ [as if to say *mere* symmetry] and to deny that it means anything else at all.”¹⁶ On the Catholic side (in caricature, “good works” instead of “faith”), Hodges commends the Council of Trent’s decree on justification (Session 6, ch. 7) as proclaiming something more than the neutrality of returning as it were to a zero-degree of blame or error. The decree insists that when sin is forgiven: justification “is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just, and of an enemy a friend...”¹⁷ One could say that the very *composition* of a person’s human relations is

15. *The Pattern of Atonement* (London: SCM, 1955), 67.

16. Hodges, 72–73.

17. *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, trans. J. Waterworth (London: Burns & Oates, 1848), 34.

improved, thanks to a general “infusion’ of righteousness.”¹⁸ Perhaps this is why it seems so difficult to extrapolate gracefully from Mondrian’s wonderful intuitions in the single painting to the wider bringing about of the Kingdom. The Neo-Calvinist Herman Bavinck, soon to be surveyed here, had likewise respected the Catholic position but stuck to his guns with a “forensic” notion of justification, which may, however, be more than mere symmetry by taking circumstances into account.¹⁹

Projecting the Kingdom

As mentioned above, canvassing the writings of Piet Mondrian with a view to justification has turned out to highlight something beyond justification; namely, the project by which the painter hoped and expected his aesthetic in painting somehow to inspire a better society so that, if the artist’s approach to composition bears any comparison with soteriological justification, the social direction beyond may be likened to the utmost utopia of the eschatological Kingdom of God and His Justice. With such an expanded horizon, let us consider Mondrian’s published writings with a view to possible parallels with Herman Bavinck, given that Mondrian’s idea of extrapolating from a justified state in the single painting to society at large in the Kingdom of God has a likely analogue in the Bavinck of whom Brian Mattson writes: “One begins to see clearly what Bavinck has in mind when he maintains that the *imago Dei* can only be fully treated by including *human destiny*—that is, eschatology.” A restoration of Adam in paradise is not enough for “a complete picture of the image of God”—which entails humanity.²⁰ The Kingdom of God may not prove so separable from the realm of singular justifications after all.

We cannot read Mondrian’s essays without noting everywhere his aesthetic of “equilibration” as a subject of aesthetic and quasi-moral approbation. In his first published essay, “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917), the painter writes:

With the advancing culture of the spirit, all the arts, regardless of differences in their expressive means, in one way or another become more and more the *plastic creation of determinate, equilibrated relationship*: equilibrated relationship most purely

18. Hodges, 74.

19. Cf. Bavinck in his Stone Lectures: “Finally, we may acknowledge that dogmatics, especially in the doctrine of the *ordo salutis*, must become more psychological, and must reckon more fully with religious experience.” *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans & Green, 1909), 209.

20. Brian C. Mattson, *Restored to Our Dignity: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 219.

expresses the universal, the harmony, the unity that are proper to the spirit. (*The New Art*, 29)

This is Mondrian's constant conceptual refrain. From the start, it never suggests mere compromise but always a dialectical engagement. Although acknowledged even earlier, the principle attains to definitive stature in the classic format of an asymmetric black lattice partly occupied by the primary colors plus white, or more than one white. Mondrian's determinate relational equivalents effect a sense of justification in "pure" painting:

The abstract plastic of relationship expresses this prime relationship *determinately*—by the duality of position, the perpendicular. This relationship of position is the most equilibrated because it expresses the relationship of extreme opposition in complete harmony and includes all other relationships.

If we see these two extremes as manifestations of the inward and the outward, we find that in the new plastic the bond between spirit and life is unbroken—we see the new plastic not as the denying of the fullness of life but as the *reconciliation* of the matter-mind duality. (30)

In view of the painter's Calvinism, one might already wish to take the term "determinately" predestinationally. At least we can say the perpendicularity on which so much of Mondrian's art depends cannot be other than calculated:

Although composition has always been fundamental to painting, all modern painting has been distinguished by a *new way* of being concerned with it. In modern art, especially in Cubism, composition comes to the forefront and finally, in consequence, abstract-real painting expresses *composition itself*. While in the art of the past, composition becomes real only if we abstract the representation, in abstract-real painting composition is directly visible because it has truly *abstract* plastic means. (39)

Already, however, much as conventional composition was the basis of the new "real-abstract" painting, traditional religion may prove to have been historically entailed in Mondrian's (thus more truly religious?) modernist utopianism based on Isaiah's view of the Kingdom of God and God's justice as its footing. This may be true even as art was purported to be on the verge of displacing religion. Art expresses the consciousness of an age, and religious art expresses consciousness of the universal while profane art celebrates the individual in ordinary daily life.²¹ Truly religious art transcends the commonplace and provides an entry point into the universal.²²

21. "Subjectivization of the universal—the work of art—can express the consciousness of an age either in its relationship *to the universal*, or its relationship *to daily life*, to the *individual*. In the first case, art is truly *religious*, in the second, *profane*." Mondrian, *The New Art*, 42.

22. "A high degree of the universal in the consciousness of an age, even if it is

Mondrian appeals here to religiosity as something more than a matter of vague spirituality. When we come to such claims as these, we do seem to have a believer on our hands: “*In abstract-real plastic man has an opposition to the natural through which he can know nature and thus gains knowledge of the spirit. In this way art becomes truly religious*” (50). Similarly:

Modern man... is capable of seeing the inward in equilibrium with the outward, and conversely; through relationship he knows both opposites. Precisely in this way, truly modern man sees things *as a whole* and accepts life *in its wholeness*: nature and spirit, world and faith, art and religion—man and God, as *unity*. (51)

It does seem important to pay attention to points in the artist’s writing wherever emphasis on reciprocal relationships admits of a reading in accord with a juridical justification, a sense of exchange, in analogy with humanity’s atonement as compensated by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In such passages something is elucidated in respect to the objective relations of non-objective forms that no one in Calvin’s time could have conceived as a matter of art. Had it been, he might have applauded.

Mondrian’s sense of taking faith out into the real world, and of hoping somehow to assist in bringing about the Kingdom of God, proves consonant with the Dutch Calvinist theology of his own day. Even early, an insistence on considering his abstract art “realist” was part and parcel of a campaign to somehow bring out into the world a practical sense of reciprocal justification that becomes diagrammatically ostensible in the paintings. For example: “What made free painting possible was the unique vitality of modern life, which was strong enough to break with *form*. Since pure *destruction* is impossible, modern life had to *construct* the new: a pure equilibrated plastic expression of relationship,” which was possible because of what is sometimes called common grace in Calvinism:

Free painting was able to develop because our time brought recognition that every expression *manifesting life—including art—is good and justified; that all expressions of real life are completely justified, even in their imperfection*. Rightly so, for mankind spontaneously takes the *right way*, the way of progress. (62)

Because social reconstruction—in faith, the bringing about of the “Kingdom of God”—is the true horizon of Mondrian’s vision of world-improvement by abstract art, it is significant that both pietistic religion and secular socialism are taken as inadequate to the spiritual requirements of

spontaneous intuition, can elevate its art above the commonplace; but *truly religious art* already transcends it by its very nature.... Such an art, like religion, is united with life at the same time as it transcends (ordinary) life.... Art—although an end in itself, like religion—is the means through which we can know the universal and contemplate it in plastic form.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 42.

humanity. The exclusive inwardness of the former is inadequate because it is sterile; the latter fails to do justice to the need for cultivation and development.²³

In “The New Plastic in Painting,” the term “plastic,” of course, refers to “Neo-Plasticism,” Mondrian’s revisionist sense of the plastic arts (i.e., those in which material holds the forms with which an artist invests it). By the end of this essay a Calvinist sense of what is primarily determined and an emphasis on clarity as lack of obscurity seem almost as religious as aesthetic:

Determinateness, clarity are necessities both in life and in art. *Philosophically*, we find the determinate in knowledge—although only the highest knowledge expresses the universal purely. *Aesthetically*, we find determinateness through pure plastic vision. . . . *Religiously*, clarity is faith, in the sense of direct contemplation. (72 n. x)

The universal is only accessible *indirectly* as veiled aesthetic vision opens the possibility for and gives way to clearer faith-knowledge.²⁴ There is even a moral dimension to this clarity:

Faith as a humanized, individual vision of God (its common and corrupt form) is *unclear, vague*, and largely misleading. In outward life, evil arises from the unclear: good manifests itself as *clarity*. (72 n. x)

The “Dialogue on the New Plastic” (1919) is an exchange between a painter and a singer; the painter equates strong primary color with rectilinear lines in oppositions that bring out significantly reciprocal (or “justificatory”) contrasts in an art no longer subject to nature. “*Relationship* is what I have always sought,” Mondrian the painter writes, “and that is what all painting seeks to express” (*The New Art*, 76). Such relations deserve to be extrapolated from painting to the outside world, as *De Stijl* artists were hoping to do. Mondrian expects social life at large, including religion, to follow his *De Stijl* principle of equivalent plastic relationships.²⁵

23. “One cannot cultivate the inward exclusively. Whoever tries this discovers its sterility—as we see in much of our so-called religious and social life. True social life involves outward culture in the first place but also contains culture of the inward. This means that the outward must be *constantly in process of cultivation*, that is to say, life does not tend to the outward *for the sake of the material* but only as a *means for its development*. Thus true socialism signifies *equilibrium* between inward and outward culture.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 66.

24. “As such, faith is identical with the highest knowledge: a knowledge of the universal and a transcendence of aesthetic vision, which can only contemplate the universal through a more veiled manifestation: it is contemplation of the universal in all things.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 72 n. x.

25. “If, for instance, we see that equilibrated relationships in society signify what is *just*, then one realizes that in art too the demands of life press forward when the spirit of the time is ripe. . . . All expressions of life—religion, social life, etc.—always have a common

Art is essentially a conscious but social activity. Primitive artists are “purely spiritual” insofar as they “express spirituality through objective plastic, through *composition*, through *tension of form*, and through *relative purity of color*”; otherwise, their “*subject matter*...remains religious art.” When the artist is asked, “Could profane art then be just as *spiritual*?” the answer is, “All true art is *spiritual*, no matter what subject matter it represents. It reveals the spiritual, the universal, as I have said, by its *mode of plastic expression*” (80). Reminded that what he prefers as real in older art “was created in a religious age: an age of religious *form*,” the singer asks, “Then is their art as antiquated as the religion of that time?” only to be told, “The art, like the religion, is not outdated for all, but only for those who are conscious of a new era.” This is admittedly a difficult point because it will not do to associate disbelief with Neo-Calvinism (as with modernism in Catholicism). On the other hand, if Theosophy is referenced here, even it seems to acknowledge the painter’s pre-Theosophical religiosity. In fact, often when Mondrian purports to advance a secularist modernity he seems conscious of his own religious footing. Were “[t]he Primitives right for their time,” the singer asks, “just as you think your ideas are right for the future?” The reply:

[J]ust as the spirit of the age, and therefore religion, became more *abstract*, so subject matter had to disappear.... I repeat: when the spiritual was dominant as *religion*, the spiritual had to come to the fore in that way; later, in a more *secular* age, the worldly had to dominate expression. (81)

The upshot is that while Mondrian’s attempt to initiate a utopian society can be considered secular, its values should derive from once common religious values spilled over as it were into the secular realm (as is sometimes said of Calvinism). After an exchange about subject matter in the old and the new art, our painter says:

[A]s the spiritual began to merge with the secular, it became more and more apparent that the spiritual did not reside in *religious* subject matter *exclusively*; otherwise, with the decline of religious subjects, all spirituality would have gone out of art. (81)

This dialogue was followed up with a three-way conversation between an “abstract-real painter,” a naturalistic painter, and a layman: “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Dialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)” (1919–20). Here the abstract-real painter sees the play of reciprocities of neo-plastic painting as a virtual blueprint for a more harmonious society:

basis. We should go into that further; there is much to say.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 78.

Pure plastic vision must construct a new society, just as it has constructed a new plastic in art—a society where equivalent duality prevails between the material and the spiritual, a society of equilibrated relationship. (99)

Beyond the justifications of art, for the world to come the abstract-real painter hopes first to see “joy and suffering...*opposed in equivalence*,” and only then, after “*repose*,...[a] deepened beauty enabl[ing] us to experience the feeling of freedom, which is joy” (118). As the new society will integrate material and spiritual human needs, effecting it will require sacrifice:

We must begin by sacrificing ourselves for an ideal, because at present the new society is no more than that. *In everything we do we do must begin by creating an image of what society must one day make a reality.* (119)

So the new painting makes the image of utopian life imaginable.

In “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence” (1920), it might again seem that the tragic is derided in favor of a more affirmative, optimistic modernity. But what is bad is the *un-equilibrated* tragic, i.e., tragic affect (ultimately Romantic) that does not participate in a dialectic of equilibration. Consider that the general population thinks profound art must be dour:

The old conception, which desires the tragic, predominates in the masses. Because of this we have art as we know it, our theaters, cinemas, and concerts such as they are. Tragic plastic is a negative force by which the old conception imprisons us. It serves in moralizing, preaching, and teaching... Let us not forget that our society wants *the useful along with the beautiful!* (137)

The “tragic” in contention with the modern: now there is something to *equilibrate*.²⁶ Stimulated by the Futurists’ embrace of the future, in

26. Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (1989; repr. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2004), 76, says that Mondrian

gave an idiosyncratic but fascinating value to the word *tragic*. He used it as Buddhism uses the term *dukkha*, pain or suffering, to refer to the obviously painful things in life and to all transient experience, however joyful. Nature and man’s life insofar as they are untouched by the universal are tragic.

Lipsey quotes a footnote in “The New Plastic in Painting”:

The sensitivity of artistic temperament is necessary in order to perceive the plastic expression of the tragic; one must be an artist to express it.

The artist sees the tragic to such a degree that he is compelled to express the nontragic. In this way he finally found a resolution in the plastic expression of pure relationships. (*The New Art*, 53 n. b)

Six months before the painter died in New York, several of the new, more existentialist “abstract expressionist” painters (Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and, helping to draft it but without signing, Barnett Newman) published a famous statement in the *New York Times* (13 June 1943): “We assert that only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.” What then did Mondrian contrarily mean? His was possibly a Christian

“The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists’ *Bruiteurs*” (1921), we are not surprised to hear optimistic Futurism praised for its certainty. Here we even find a reaction against original Calvinist strictness in that Calvin wanted only psalms sung in the liturgy: “most people do not understand that the ‘spiritual’ is better expressed by some ordinary dance music than in all the psalms put together” (151). But “The new art springs from an aesthetic conception quite different from the old; the absolute difference between them lies above all in the new art’s clearer and more advanced consciousness.” Old art was too much about subjective romantic self-absorption:

The new spirit, on the other hand, is distinguished by “certainty.” Instead of a question, it brings a “solution...” The tragic ceases to dominate. The old painting was of “the soul” and therefore tragic, whereas the new painting is of the “spirit” and therefore beyond domination by the tragic...” (152)

Again, with the anti-Calvinist jeer of psalmody to the exclusion of hymnody: once art’s “animality” has been destroyed, man will prefer mechanical to animal sounds:

Rhythm produced mechanically by matter alone will echo his individuality less than the rhythm produced by the human voice: *with regard to its timbre*, the rhythm of a pile driver will affect him more deeply than any chanting of the psalms. (153)

In “The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today” (1922), faith as such is on Mondrian’s mind, even under supersession by a new function for art:

Whereas “faith” requires a superhuman abstraction to produce the experience of harmony in life, and science can produce harmony only intellectually, art enables us to experience harmony *with our whole being*. It can so infuse us with beauty that we become *one* with it. We then *realize* beauty in *everything*....

How? By equilibrated plastic relationships. Applying the standard of Neo-Plastic painting will allow “*the external environment [to] be brought into equivalent relationship with man*” (168). For now, conditions are not right for this to be realized; art’s achievement here will be limited to art. Why? Up to the present religion had only adjusted people to raw nature,

theological statement. Consider Victor Strandberg, “A Hell for Our Time,” *The Christian Century* 85, no. 36 (1968): 1105, quoted by Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 239:

World history finally ends not in tragedy but in a restored paradise that goes through tragedy—the direction of the cross. The essence of tragedy is “a sense of injustice, permanent and unresolvable, never to be remedied.”

Not what Nietzsche meant; but that is possibly not the point.

and even though Theosophy and Steiner's Anthroposophy understand the idea of equivalence and harmony, they cannot achieve it.²⁷

The same problem was all the more firmly in Mondrian's mind in the next year. As the great paintings of the 1920s came into being, their author seems to have committed less thought to print. A brief text, "The Neo-Plastic Architecture of the Future" (1925), makes clear that what Mondrian has been doing in painting since the turn of the decade goes beyond conventional composition:

Neo-Plasticism, which grew out of Cubist and Futurist ideas, is based, in painting, on the great law it has revealed: that of *pure equilibrated relationship*. . . .

It is important, however, to point out that by "equilibrium" Neo-Plasticism means something altogether different from the equilibrium of traditional aesthetic. Neo-Plastic harmony arises from *constant oppositions*. The harmony of Neo-Plasticism is therefore not traditional harmony, but *universal* harmony, which to the eyes of the past appears rather as discord. (197)

As for the outside world, "Home—Street—City" (1926) is a progress report towards utopia with the artist wishing he could experience more social fraternity than he does, consoling himself with art in the meantime. Pure utilitarianism left to the engineers (as under Soviet Productivism) is denied; but in "Pure Abstract Art" (1929), Mondrian hopes for great general application of the principle of (can we say) justification and dares to take on the opposite of all justification—*inequality*:

Pure abstract art becomes completely emancipated, free of naturalistic appearances. It is no longer natural harmony but creates equivalent relationships. The realization of equivalent relationships is of the highest importance for life. Only in this way can social and economic freedom, peace, and happiness be achieved. . . .

Inequivalent relationships, on the other hand, the domination of one over another or over others, have always led to injustices. Inequivalent moral and material relationships are the cause of all past and present suffering. (224)

The short book on "The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships" (1931), summarizes much about "equivalent relationships" as a matter of establishing a condition of justification at large. Mondrian speaks of an "old morality" that is individual and particular and contrasts with a "new morality" that is *social* and concerned with *universal international justice*.²⁸ He is convinced that such a new life is arising

27. See the excerpt from Mondrian's 1922 essay at p. 40 above.

28. "The new morality is that of *social life* in contrast to the morality of the past, which strove toward the same goal but in reality fostered only particular life, individual or collective. While the morality of the past was sustained by church and state, the new morality is sustained by society. Its content, conceived abstractly, is *universal international justice*. For while the old morality, despite its essential content, in reality sustained the different particular forms—each at the expense of the others—the new morality is capable of realizing the equivalent relationship of the civilized world." Mondrian, *The New Art*, 274.

because the old culture and its morality is so inadequate to meet the needs of the day; in fact the exigencies of the time are destroying it and making it impossible to express spiritual qualities such as kindness, friendship, and charity. Overwhelmed with the concern to meet basic material needs people lack the strength to work for what they know they need and want.²⁹

From the great later aesthetic essay, “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art” (1936), certain points pertinent to the above take their places in the unfolding of the justification idea and its social repercussions. Dissatisfied with the public reception of a Neo-Plasticism that might make for an harmonious society, Mondrian wondered if it is “to attempt the impossible.” After all, the efforts by artists to enlighten humanity would require “a content which is collectively understandable.” The search, he judges, “is false; the content will always be individual. Religion, too, has been debased by that search” (291). Nevertheless, “We live in a difficult but interesting epoch. After a secular culture, a turning point has arrived; this shows itself in all the branches of human activity” (292).

Reviewing Mondrian’s texts, it is curious to see him seconding Calvin’s disapproval of the Orthodox icon (where one had expected an exception because of the highly conceptual form of the representation). On the icon:

To have emotion aroused by pure plastic expression one must abstract from figuration and so become “neutral.” But with the exception of some artistic expressions (such as Byzantine art³⁰) there has not been the desire to employ neutral plastic means, which would have been much more logical than to become neutral oneself in contemplating a work of art. (295)

This is in line with Calvin’s negativity in the *Institutes*, where the icons actually come in for special censure (I.xi.14–16). Mondrian’s iconoclasm is also so dialectical, however, that one wishes Calvin could have known it:

29. “That a new life is arising is confirmed by the fact that life today shows this often terrifying opposition to the old culture and its morality. Because man still retains much of the crude and the animal in him, excesses and even crimes occur. Instead of trying to justify them, let us emphasize the establishment of pure relationships and purified forms, which will keep these vestiges of man’s primitive state to a minimum, so that the new life can develop without terrible upheavals. But the exigencies of present-day life and the different situations it creates also increasingly destroy the morality of the past. Spiritual qualities such as kindness, disinterested love, friendship, charity, etc., become increasingly difficult to practice in life today. The individual, increasingly concerned with material cares, has no strength to spare; but it is no longer defensible for one man to profit at another’s expense simply because of their inequality.” Mondrian, *The New Art*, 274.

30. Mondrian adds this note here: “It should be noted that despite their profound expression of forms, lacking dynamic rhythm, such works remain more or less ornamental.”

In removing completely from the work all objects, “the world is not separated from the spirit,” but is on the contrary *put into a balanced opposition* with the spirit, since the one and the other are purified. This creates a perfect unity between the two opposites. (297)

It is, by the way, also plausible to think of Mondrian following a Calvinist principle of avoiding representation of even plain crosses.³¹

In his last years in London and New York, 1938–44, two or three short manuscripts and some stray notes show Mondrian thinking about religion in a very general manner, hoping to displace the religion of the churches. In them he several times expresses the notion that his Neo-Plasticism of equilibrated relationships system might be considered something like a religion without dogma. The whole struggle, however, would seem to have unremarked congruency with the last generation of Calvinist thought in Holland.

Theological Parallels

The Calvinism in which Mondrian was raised obviously had views about justification distinct from the Lutheran and Catholic conceptions. Once we understand that Mondrian started out a more active Calvinist than has

31. Viewers who find Latin crosses in Mondrian’s paintings of the 1930s with perpendicular parallels should bear in mind the painter’s negative, equally Calvinist, comments on even the plain Christian cross as a motif. In 1917 the cross is a symbolic obstacle as well as (fetishistically?) “too absolute”:

Ancient wisdom represented the fundamental inward-outward relationship by the cross. Neither this *symbol*, however, nor any other symbol, can be the plastic means for abstract-real painting: the symbol constitutes a new limitation, on the one hand, and is too absolute, on the other. (*The New Art*, 45–46)

In 1919–20 the Christian cross is not to be singled out any more than “the arms of the windmill” or other occasions of perpendicularity; as “rather literary,” it is subject to being “constantly destroyed in the New Plastic” (*The New Art*, 99). In 1923, in “No Axiom But the Plastic Principle,” Calvin himself would have seconded Mondrian’s argument that even truth is no defense against symbolic contamination: “In the symbolic, the purely plastic becomes impure because the symbolic manifests itself not as art but as truth—therefore impure, untrue, because the element of form becomes ‘a form’ (a cross, for example)” (*The New Art*, 178). In the *Institutes*, Calvin thinks people would learn more about Christ’s reconciliation of mankind by reading the Gospels than from (in the Catholic manner) “a thousand crosses of wood or stone” (I.xi §7; 1:122).

The belletrist Michel Butor defends seeing Mondrian’s forms as Christian crosses, especially in canvases from 1935–39, as something “tragic”: Butor, “Mondrian: The Square and Its Inhabitant” (1965), trans. William Brown, in his *Inventory: Essays*, ed. and trans. Richard Howard (London: Cape, 1970), 235–52, esp. 246–47. He seeks chivalrously to supply such works with Christian significance without appreciating that the reason Mondrian eschews the tragic is ultimately that the Resurrection initiates the beginning of a new world beyond tragedy (cf. pp. 53ff. above).

been supposed, there is every reason to believe that he may well have been aware of the new Dutch Calvinist theology.

For what has become clear is that when the artist moved to Amsterdam in November 1892 he was part of a new church just then forming, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, which was a union of two groups that had broken away from the National Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*): the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*, formed after a Secession in 1834, and the break-away led by famous activist preacher Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), the so-called *Doleantie* (Grievers). Both groups had found the National Church theologically lax. Kuyper is also famous for founding the Free University of Amsterdam and a political party, the Anti-Revolutionaries, which enabled him to become the Netherlands' prime minister.

It happens that on moving to Amsterdam in 1892, the twenty-year-old Mondrian had already started confirmation classes in the new separatist Reformed church, and in July 1893 he was listed as confirmed. True, he did join the Theosophical Society in 1909; but when in 1915, four years after he moved to Paris, his church membership was de-registered, this was an administrative and in no way punitive cancelation and implied no shunning on Mondrian's part.³²

Readers of the *Bavinck Review*, but not art folk, know that Kuyper had grown up in the Dutch Reformed Church and had learned about modern culture at the University of Leiden. Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), in the next generation of clergy, closer to Mondrian in age, was son of a pious minister in the new secessionist church. He went to its seminary and then decided to take on the modern and scientific culture of the late nineteenth century, also at Leiden. On finishing his doctorate in 1880, he reflected more circumspectly that though his secular studies “benefited” him, they were also a “spiritual impoverishment” (*RD*, 1:13). Whereas Kuyper was a celebrity, Bavinck—who collaborated with Kuyper on liturgical and devotional texts, despite episodes of strife—was more like the introspective Mondrian.

Mondrian's early approaches to nature, condensing and crystallizing it, at first through Cubism and then in pure abstraction, were akin to Goethe's *Naturphilosophie* and Schelling's sense of nature's equilibrium. Yes, such thinking was germane to the formulation of Theosophy as such. But it was notably also of concern to the Calvinist theologian Bavinck as he wrestled, more creatively than Kuyper, with the problem of Darwinism

32. J.M. de Jong, “Piet Mondriaan en de gereformeerde kerk van Amsterdam,” *Jong Holland* 5, no. 3 (1989), 20–23; thanks to Dirk Jongkind, Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, for translating.

in order to account for the Fall and eventual redemption of the whole natural world. Much of Bavinck's theology assents to a Trinitarian sense of creativity, in particular, a "trinitarian idea that grace restores nature" (*RD*, 1:18)—i.e., restores with a sense of justification. Likewise a Calvinist common grace, emphasized by Bavinck, is evident in the way, for him, "Christianity... creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new" (1:19). There has been some speculation on bringing the popular Kuyper into the orbit of Mondrian,³³ but in turning to the more cerebral young theologian, however, one may see a certain high-serious brilliance that would have attracted Mondrian's own genius to Bavinck.

The elder churchman certainly seems a more nineteenth-century figure. True, Kuyper does make some interesting remarks on aesthetics in his *Encyclopaedie der heilige Godgeleerdheid* (1893–94) concerning *relations* including parts and wholes such as interested Bavinck as well as Mondrian. Kuyper saw relations as means of negotiating between a subject and the outside world.³⁴ Some might even have the consistency of an image:

The artist creates harmonies of tints, which presently are seen to be real in flowers that are unknown to him. And more striking than this, by our abstract thinking we constantly form conclusions, which presently are seen to agree entirely with actual relations. (83)

33. Notably, James D. Bratt, "From Neo-Calvinism to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*: Abraham Kuyper as the Jilted Stepfather of Piet Mondrian," *The Kuyper Center Review* 3 (2013), 117–29. Bratt brings out the friendship and collaboration of Kuyper and Mondrian's father (as an art student in Amsterdam Mondrian stayed with Kuyper's publisher). I have delayed mention of Bratt's admirable essay partly because my view, as a lifelong student of abstract art—whereby no statement by Kuyper or anyone else on "beauty" in painting that does not encompass abstraction can possibly be aesthetically significant—was long in the making before it appeared; but also because I believe that Kuyper is simply not the answer to the question of Mondrian's religious spirit. Bratt as much as admits this in recapitulating this very section of his article in *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) by having Kuyper the only game in town so that when Mondrian "perfected the abstract style that produced some of Modernism's canonical works. He did so under the inspiration of Theosophy, not Calvinism" (244). As circumstantially placed as Kuyper was (yet also a possible oedipal object: witness Bratt's very subtitle), the young painter must also have been saddled by his obvious aesthetic limitations. Hence, even if Kuyper made Bavinck possible, only the very poetics of the latter's theological phraseology proved suitable for Mondrian's modernist abstract art.

My own principal earlier text on Mondrian is Joseph Masheck, "Mondrian the New Yorker," *Artforum* 13 (October 1974): 58–65, repr. in my *Historical Present: Essays of the 1970s* (U.M.I. Research Press, 1984), 77–88.

34. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), 67–83, 87, 93; hereafter referenced in text.

Nevertheless, for him contemporary impressionist painting was obliged to satisfy a naturalistic criterion. That life is hardly ideal, and our human stature is “marred by want and sin,” evoking a wayward yet recognizable sense of naturalistic consistency:

This produces a result like what occurs in the case of many paintings of the latest French school [he means Impressionism, but he is already behind in Postimpressionist times], which, at first sight, one sees, indeed, bubbles and daubs of paint, and even tints and lines, but not the image; and only after repeated attempts a view is finally obtained, so that those daubs and bubbles disappear, the tints and lines become active, and the image stands out before us. (479)

So also the human stature can thus be thought of as restored (or saved), as biblical miracles “restore” God’s handiwork as intimations of Parousia—or the Second Coming (501). Interestingly, Theosophists *do not* comprehend this, Kuyper thinks: they “do not comprehend sin” and “regeneration, which annuls and conquers sin” (346).

Let us then look instead at that theologian of the same church, who succeeded Kuyper in the chair of theology at the Free University: Bavinck. Both Kuyper and Bavinck came to America and delivered Stone Lectures in 1898 and 1908–09 respectively at the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. Kuyper’s lecture on “Calvinism and Art” was an old-time Calvinist crowd-pleaser against “sacerdotalism” (read Catholicism) including the unhealthy riches of the Catholic Church.³⁵ Getting rid of “church rule” was a curious theme for Kuyper as an obviously successful politician who played on discontent with the Dutch national church as insufficiently religious. Here, for being at odds with the Catholic Church in Italy, Garibaldi and Vittorio Emanuele became honorary Calvinists. Kuyper had an inferiority complex about Calvinist support of fine art except for the triumph of the common man (beneficiary of common grace, though that seems not so much Kuyper’s cup of tea as Bavinck’s) in Dutch realism. Considering what Kuyper thought he knew of Impressionism, it is curious that the closest he came to a modern enthusiasm in his lecture was Rembrandt, about whom there was actually a conservative, anti-modern cult at the turn of the century.

Ten years later Bavinck was much more artistically discerning as well as sophisticated in facing up to contemporary unbelief. His overall Princeton theme was the “Philosophy of Revelation.” In the “Revelation and Culture” lecture, art was not a special theme. His *bête noire* was “ethical culture” as a substitute religion, and he seems apprised of

35. Kuyper, “Calvinism and Art,” in his *Calvinism: Being the Six Stone Lectures Given at Princeton Theological Seminary, U.S.A.* (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1932), 216–57.

contemporary Catholic (sometimes heretical) “Modernism” as well as revisionist Protestant and secularist-humanitarian views of Jesus.³⁶ Not that these tendencies pleased him, but he was aware of being in a transitional time in which it was not possible to say whether modern culture was “at strife” with Christianity or religion in general. Believing in nothing supernatural, however, struck him as simply not being religious, and he showed a sympathy with originally monastic asceticism that would have appealed to Mondrian, the eremitic bachelor.

I am drawn to Bavinck by not having wished to take an easy route to the constitutionally liberal Kuyper, who had a solid reputation for bringing young people into the fold with his wildly successful, alternative Anti-Revolutionary party with its anti-pluralist “pillarisation” policy of keeping Protestant, Catholic, and secular elements of society separate. Rather I am also led to go for the one who was a brilliant theologian above all else. My assumption is that a Mondrian who dropped out of one Calvinist church in order to take—and pass—a confirmation course in another was not necessarily a constitutional liberal and may well have been interested in the most serious Reformed theologian available. He would have been interested in Bavinck’s way of comparing Catholic and Lutheran theologies against one another with amazing arrays of Scriptural citations. I would assume that the painter was as serious in investigating his own theology as he was politically, later on, in writing to a scholar of the Russian anarchist Bakunin (Arthur Lehning, 1899–2000)—much as the New York abstract painter Barnett Newman later took an interest in Kropotkin. And yes, rather than gloss over his own heretical proclivities, I assume Mondrian would even have liked to read the Bavinck, who put a certain limit on Theosophy, as had Kuyper; but Bavinck called a spade a spade by characterizing the Theosophical founders Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant as apostate Christians drawn to Buddhism (*RD*, 1:200).

With Mondrian’s thinking in mind, let us inquire into the themes of individual justification and the more social atonement leading to the Kingdom of God in Bavinck’s *Dogmatics*. In Bavinck’s view, Calvin “gained a double advantage” by separating faith and repentance in justification, which the Lutherans had conflated:

In the first place, faith could now be much more closely related to justification, and justification could now be viewed in a purely juridical sense as an act of acquittal by God. Lutheran theology on this point...is far from clear, but Reformed theology owed to Calvin its clear insight into the religious character of justification.... (3:527)

36. “Revelation and Culture,” in Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 242–69.

Bavinck gives a sense of *ex post facto* asymmetrical reciprocity to the principle of justification: “Before the elect receive faith they have already been justified. Indeed, they received this faith precisely because they have already been justified beforehand,” thanks, according to Scripture, to “the decree of election when they were given to Christ and Christ was given to them, when their sin was imputed to Christ and his righteousness was imputed to them” (3:583). Needless to say, the asymmetrical reciprocity derives from the fact that Christ is the Son of God.

The direct connection of justification with justice as such is clearly brought out. God weighs human culpability against his mercy with the handicap of grace. Though there is a justifiable wrath of God against human ungodliness and wickedness, the Gospel displays a righteousness that is apart from the law and given in Christ.³⁷ Bavinck then adduces much Scriptural evidence for according justification this forensic sense such as Luke’s statement that “tax collectors ‘justify’ (i.e., acknowledge the justice of) God” (4:206).

We must acknowledge here that in painting, all of Mondrian’s interminable compositional adjustments, each relative to the others, advance much more an effect of successive resolution than if everything had been equal to start. For insofar as compositional justification is “compositional,” it is also re-constitutive. As for the term itself, some Reformed believers have “stated that the word ‘justification’ could have a broader sense,” though others “held to the more narrow meaning of justification”; nevertheless for Bavinck,

the word as such allows us to understand by it the entire work of redemption. Just as the work of re-creation (*herscheping*) can in its totality be called a rebirth (*wed-ergeboorte*), so it is also from beginning to end a justification, a restoration of the *state* and the *condition* of the fallen world and humankind in relation to God and to itself. (4:208)

If sometimes Scripture implies an ethical sense, “when the reference is to the justification of sinners before God, it always still has a juridical meaning” (4:209).

37. “In Christ he loved the world and reconciled it to himself, not counting their sins against them. . . . Although his wrath was revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of humans, yet in the gospel God brought to light a righteousness apart from the law. . . . This righteousness, therefore, is not opposed to his grace, but includes it as it were and paves the way for it. It brings out that God, though according to the law he had to condemn us, yet in Christ has had different thoughts about us, generally forgives all our sins without charging us with anything. . . . Justification, therefore, is not an ethical but a juridical (forensic) act; nor can it be anything other than that because all evidence of favor presupposes favor, and every benefit of grace presupposes grace.” Bavinck, *RD*, 4:206.

This twofold advantage over Luther's view that Bavinck finds in Calvin has ramifications to which we might trace Mondrian's emphasis on the ultimately utopian societal impact of his never merely aesthetic "equivalent plastic relationships." For, as Bavinck writes, "Faith and justification...are not the sum and substance of the order of salvation. Luther tended to favor stopping there, to view Christian liberty especially as a deliverance from the law..." And "since repentance was included in the Christian life, Calvin could do justice also to its active side," preparing the believer, in effect, to go out and *bring about the Kingdom*. He continues:

[F]aith cannot stop at the forgiveness of sins but reaches out to the perfection that is in Christ, seeks to confirm itself from works as from its own fruits, girds itself with courage and power not only to live in communion with Christ but also to fight under him as king against sin, the world, and the flesh, and to make all things serviceable to the honor of God's name. (3:527-28)

At the end of his mammoth *Dogmatics* Bavinck links personal justification with the comprehensiveness of the Kingdom to come. For after the Second Coming and the Last Judgment comes a Renewal of Creation. This last should even satisfy secular hopes for an optimistic conclusion, managing to extend to Darwin's sense of "a still higher destiny in the distant future" *as well as* the "extravagant...expectations of the Socialists [obviously not Christian Socialists], these millennialists of unbelief, who think that in the future state of their dreams all sin and struggle will have vanished, and a carefree life of contentment will be the privilege of everyone" (4:646).

The Last Judgment is relational for Bavinck in that different souls are entitled to different magnitudes of heavenly glory in respect (recompense?) for circumstantially different conditions on earth. Such is the case when Bavinck speaks of relative glories among the elect. But it there is also a sense of relative relation even between offenses as in:

All sin is absolutely opposed to the justice of God, but in punishing it God nevertheless takes account of the relative difference existing between sins. There is infinite diversity also on the other side of the grave. (4:714)

Relativities also hold within a final comprehensive unity; for eventually all believers—and worthy fellow travelers—"enter into" a "fellowship" that,

though in principle it already exists on earth, will nevertheless be incomparably richer and more glorious when all dividing walls of descent and language, of time and space, have been leveled, all sin and error have been banished, and all the elect have been assembled in the new Jerusalem. (4:723)

Ultimately, then, "[t]he organism of creation is restored," and "[t]he great diversity that exists among people in all sorts of ways is not destroyed in eternity but is cleansed from all that is sinful and made

serviceable to fellowship with God and each other” (4:727). Now, if the world as we know it is to be redeemed, and in it we are to be ourselves, what shall we actually do in it?

The service of God, mutual communion, and inhabiting the new heaven and the new earth undoubtedly offer abundant opportunity for the exercise of these offices, even though the form and manner of this exercise are unknown to us. That activity, however, coincides with resting and enjoying. The difference between day and night, between the Sabbath and the workdays, has been suspended. Time is charged with the eternity of God. Space is full of his presence. Eternal becoming is wedded to immutable being. (4:729)

Nothing is more Mondrianesque in this scenario than the sense of how a beautifully balanced asymmetric abstraction could exemplify the prospect of a world of social reciprocity, even if he does not speak of heaven. And yet, in eschatological terms, whoever thinks that redemption is “pie in the sky” is completely wrong; for the New Jerusalem is quite as *material* as the present world:

[T]he New Testament teaches the incarnation of the Word and the physical resurrection of Christ; it further expects his physical return at the end of time and immediately thereafter has in view the physical resurrection of all human beings, especially that of believers.

And note where this leaves the Theosophist: “All this spells the collapse of spiritualism, which if it remains true to its principle—as in Origin—has nothing left after the day of judgment other than spirits in an uncreated heaven” (4:718).

Mondrian’s equivalent of Bavinck’s utopian vision is a society governed by the principle of the “equilibrated plastic relations” that one can appreciate, before the fact, in his high Neo-Plastic painting compositions. From the beginning of *Reformed Dogmatics*, the Kingdom as such is contemplated as a goal to which art can only help us part way: “Religion is life, reality; art is ideal, appearance,” writes Bavinck.

Art cannot close the gap between the ideal and reality. Indeed, for a moment it lifts us above reality and induces us to live in the realm of ideals. But this happens only in the imagination. Reality itself does not change on account of it. Though art gives us distant glimpses of the realm of glory, it does not induct us into that realm and make us citizens of it. (1:267)

I think Mondrian would have argued that his new form of painting went farther as to a point of being able to say, “We have our citizenship in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). And I also think Bavinck might have accepted this. Certainly he would have thought abstract art—where formal relationships, including Mondrianesque equilibrated plastic relationships are utterly ostensible—might provide a less distant glimpse of such sheer justification than most ordinary representational art manages to do.

A Mondrian who opened the *Reformed Dogmatics* or who heard a preacher influenced by it—especially a Mondrian who had already produced such poetic-symbolistic images as *Evolution* (1910–11; Gemeentemuseum, Hague), the candidate Theosophical favorite—would have been drawn in Bavinck’s way to its extended treatment of the basic idea that a humanity made in the image and likeness of God bridges the gap between the single soul and society. This means, among other things, that the posited image and likeness of God is surrounded by a “paradise” that seems essentially collective, which Bavinck compares to “the Kabbalah’s idea that God, who is infinite in himself, manifests himself in the sefiroth, or attributes, and that these make up the Adam Cadmon [human being]” (2:561).

In pointing to the New Jerusalem of the world to come, one might say Bavinck offers a telling figure of pictorial representation versus *abstract* painting. First, Theosophy is blamed for positing some intermediate form of corporeality, fudging the opposition between matter and spirit; for “[a]n ‘immaterial corporality’ is a contradiction that was inauspiciously taken from Theosophy into Christian theology and seeks in vain to reconcile the false dualism of spirit and matter... of thesis and antithesis” (4:620). Relatedly, worldly detail has no place in prophecy. “The error of the old exegesis was not spiritualization as such but the fact that it sought to assign a spiritual meaning to all the illustrative details,” so that “[t]he realistic interpretation... becomes self-contradictory,” as Mondrian would have loved to read (4:659). After all, Mondrian liked to term his abstract painting—for once *truly*—“realistic.” He would have liked Bavinck’s discussion of essentially symbolic ideas in Ezekiel’s vision of the future (4:660), and the way, when it comes to the problem of the last days in the Book of Revelation, the fate of Satan as scourge of humanity completely departs from realism in a narrative that is “not in chronological sequence” but rather “in a logical and spiritual sense” (4:684).

In the same passage in which he “spells the collapse of spiritualism,” Bavinck writes,

Whereas Jesus came the first time to establish...[the] kingdom of God...in a spiritual sense, he returns at the end of history to give visible shape to it. Reformation proceeds from the inside to the outside. The rebirth of humans is completed in the rebirth of creation. The kingdom of God is fully realized only when it is visibly extended over the earth as well. (4:718)

In light of Bavinck, Mondrian’s worthily utopian view of the Kingdom as a projection of the Neo-Plastic culture of equivalent relationships, in one or another diagrammatic form, seems hardly farfetched as a Christian destination. Bavinck again, on the New Jerusalem:

But although these are ideas interpreted...by images, they are not illusions or fabrications, but this-worldly depictions of otherworldly realities. All that is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable in the whole of creation, in heaven and earth, is gathered up in the future city of God—renewed, re-created, boosted to its highest glory. (4:719–20)

This would be an obvious point of departure for projective-utopian thinking on the ultimate relation of artistic representation to a changed world outside such as we find in Mondrian's own more utopian prophecies. In Bavinck's eyes:

More glorious than this beautiful earth, more glorious than the earthly Jerusalem, more glorious even than paradise will be the glory of the new Jerusalem, whose architect and builder is God himself. The state of glory (*status gloriae*) will be no mere restoration (*restoratie*) of the state of nature (*status naturae*), but a re-formation that, thanks to the power of Christ, transforms all matter (ὕλη, *hylē*) into form (εἶδος, *eidos*), all potency into actuality (*potentia, actus*), and presents the entire creation before the face of God, brilliant in unfading splendor.... Substantially, nothing is lost.... But in the new heaven and new earth, the world is as much as restored.... (4:720)

—or shall one say, finally *justified*.

Analogy and the Calvinist Logic

Analogy, which one tends to think a medieval mode of thought, gained new prominence in the early twentieth century thanks to the analytical tendency of formalization. It is no accident that after the analytical phase of Cubism, in which he participated, Mondrian's abstract painting should find significant analogies with other fields since in the early twentieth century formalism became a very basis of abstract thought. So the classical abstraction of Mondrian participates in a general early modern formalism which affected philosophy itself, including symbolic logic, not to mention music and language; and indeed, in 1917, in "The New Plastic," Mondrian looked to logic as a modernist guide:

Likewise, the new spirit comes strongly to the fore in *logic, just as in science and religion*. The imparting of veiled wisdom has long yielded to the wisdom of pure reason, and knowledge shows increasing exactness. The old religion with its mysteries and dogmas is increasingly thrust aside* by a clear relationship to the universal. This is made possible through purer knowledge of the universal—insofar as it can be known. (*The New Art*, 43–44)

In a note at the asterisk, Mondrian defensively parallels Kandinsky's theosophizing: "In *On the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky points out that Theosophy (*in its true meaning and not as it commonly appears*) is another expression of the same spiritual movement we now see in painting" (44 n. u; emphasis added).

The present essay is obviously an overarching matter of analogy, a form of reasoning approved on an analytical basis by the philosophically inclined physicist Ernst Mach in 1902: “I have...defined analogy as the relation between two systems of concepts, in which we become clearly conscious both that corresponding elements are different and that corresponding connections between elements are the same.”³⁸ Such analogies can be more than idle affinities, offering insight as homology or abstract rapport; relations such as equilibrium can be found, not as stylistic accoutrements but as centers of stylistic gravity in the working procedures of a theologian and a painter. Mach proceeds:

It seems that in mathematics, where things are indeed simplest, was the first field in which analogy first clearly revealed its clarifying, simplifying, and heuristic role. At any rate, Aristotle insofar as he speaks of it, relates analogy to quantitative relations of proportionality.³⁹

This points to an important commentary by Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle which not only illuminates why Mondrian’s classic abstractions are not grid paintings but may also serve to close the gap between Calvinist theological justification and what Mondrian meant by the essential, willfully asymmetric “equilibrated relationships” of his classic compositions; for the painter’s insistence on something more than an affectation of mathematical “equilibration” also has a counterpart in the Scholastic theology of justification.

Were Mondrian’s mature compositions based on a grid, as some presume, we might speak of a simple commutative (or associative) *equality* of their constituent units. In actual fact, they offer asymmetric mutualities composed of singular rectilinear but non-repetitive elements in what the painter refers to repeatedly in his writings as “equilibrated” relationships. Having nothing to do with the commutative interchangeability of units in a grid, these ensembles of forms evoke instead a distributive proportionality. I borrow these terms from Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of justice in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Book V, where the sense of balance in justice is quantitative as regarding too much or too little of something; for, “to suffer injustice is to have less than the

38. “Similarity and Analogy as a Leading Feature of Enquiry” (1902), in his *Knowledge and Error: Sketches in the Phenomenology of Enquiry* (1905), 5th ed. (1926), trans. Paul Foulkes, eds. Erwin H. Hiebert and Thomas J. McCormack (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976), 162–70; here, 163. In light of the greatest Anglophone aesthetic formalist, Roger Fry, I have attempted to study the philosophy implicit in Cézanne (finally solving, secondarily, the philosophical source of his famous theme of the “Cylinder, the sphere, and the cone”): Joseph Masheck, *C’s Aesthetics: Philosophy in the Painting* (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation and the Bryn Mawr College Center for Visual Culture, 2004).

39. *Knowledge and Error*, 163.

mean of justice requires,” while “to do injustice is to have more than the measure of justice. Now, the mean of justice, called the just thing, is related to exchanges and distributions as the healthful is to medicine or the well conditioned to gymnastics,” where “what is too much or too little is evil...” (§1103).⁴⁰ In his fourth lecture, “Distributive and Commutative Justice,” Thomas explains the commutative and the distributive: “the mean of distributive [justice] should be taken according to a certain relationship of proportions” (§932), while “the equal in commutative justice is not observed according to that proportionality, viz., geometrical, which was observed in distributive justice, but according to arithmetic proportionality which is observed according to the equality of quantity, and not according to the equality of proportion, as in geometry” (§950). This aspect of Mondrian, whereby the qualitative aspect of proportion over and against what could have been a repetitive grid makes such compositions *more than constructivist*.⁴¹

When as a youth I had my “How much blue does the eye need” encounter with Mondrian in the Museum of Modern Art, I was first becoming aware of this quantitative and proportional aspect; but even the same kind of thinking extends to relative position in the painted field. Let us look at one of the most logically beautiful of all Mondrian’s works: *Tableau 2* (1922) in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (see fig. 1 below). For it was while active in the De Stijl group in the 1920s that Mondrian’s rectilinear compositions attain to such an active equilibrium as is evident in this work. Here we see the relative weights of the color patches in a remarkable asymmetric balance that also concerns position within the geometric structure. For the three primaries manage to touch all four sides despite one entire corner’s being given over to a comparably solid rectangle of black; and the black patch, in turn, together with two discernibly different whites, comprises something like a rival triad of non-colors. Slim partitioning bands either do *or decidedly do not* touch—or exceed—the edge, while the halving of the open zone at the top, split between white and yellow, is akin to the halving at the left between white and blue; which also makes for a whole corner devoted to white as counterpart to the two-sided corner devoted to black. However trying to

40. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. C.I. Litzinger (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), 2 vols.; on-line at <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/Ethics5.htm> (accessed 27 November 2015). I owe the suggestion of Aquinas’s commentary to Peter McNamara, Fellow of St Edmund’s College, Cambridge.

41. I.e., analogous to the way Malevich’s suprematism manages to be *anything but* “geometric art.” Cf. my “El Lissizky: On the Side of Faith,” *Art and Christianity*, no. 71 (Autumn 2012), 2–6.

describe, this testifies to an astute play of visual intelligence, striking all at once in the painting like a strong, pure chord. The practically magnetic interdependence of parts is a pure form of that “relational composition” that long served painting as an armature for standard pictorial representation only now purged of descriptive reference—in a purgation of conventional pictorialism that is a leitmotif of the painter’s writing.

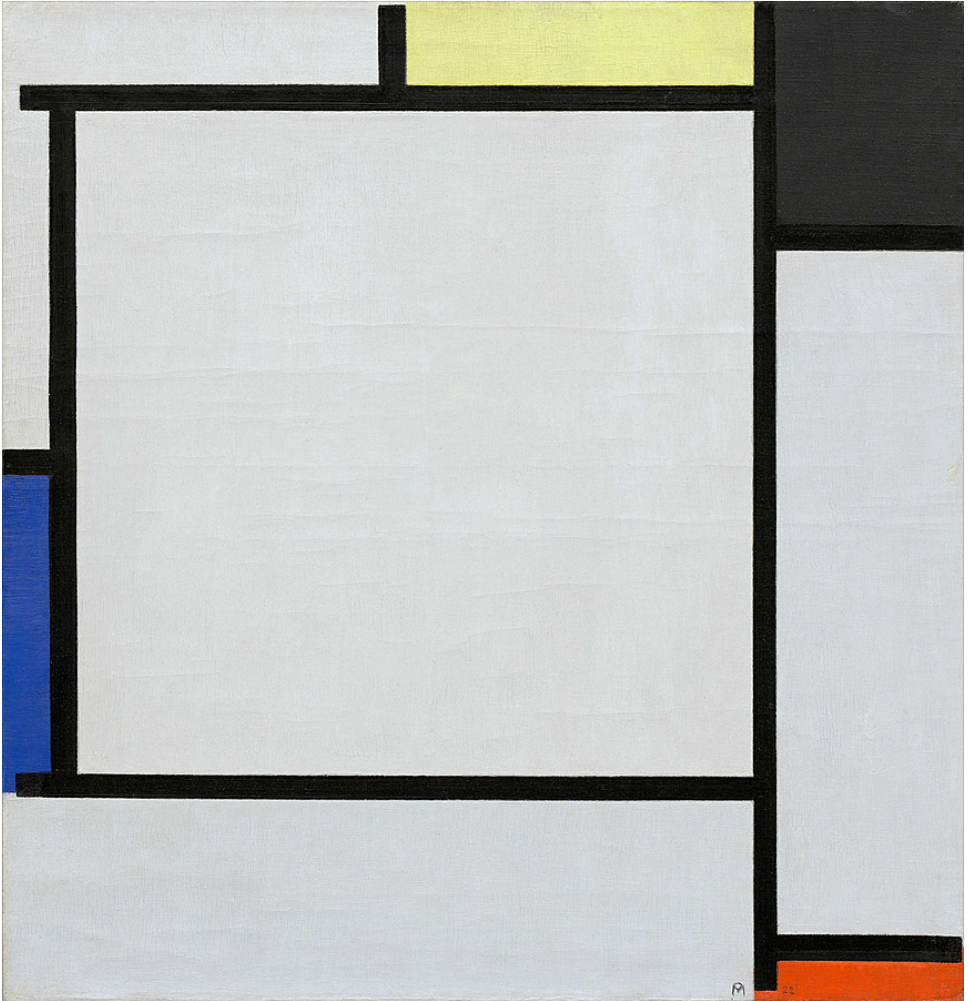


Figure 1: Piet Mondrian, *Tableau 2* (1922)
© 2015 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

Can we pair with this sense of parts so actively participating in an harmonic whole in Mondrian's *Tableau 2* something as comprehensively harmonic in Bavinck's theology? In 1919–20 ("Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue...") the painter's preoccupation with the internal relations of the work has first to be established:

Yes, all things are a *part* of the whole: each part obtains its visual value from the whole and the whole from its parts. Everything is expressed through *relationship*. Color can exist only through *other* colors, dimensions through *other* dimensions, positions through other *positions* that oppose them. That is why I regard relationship as *the principal thing*. (*The New Art*, 86)

Now there is a beautiful passage in the *Reformed Dogmatics* that could almost have inspired the then only implicit social ideal of relationality in just such a Mondrian masterpiece: "the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side" (2:577).

Additionally, classical Calvinist theology addressed the problem of the logical order of God's decrees. With predestination in mind, the question was whether God's determination of the election or reprobation (sinfulness) of any individual soul was supralapsarian (or antelapsarian), meaning that it was determined *before* the Fall of Man, or infralapsarian (or postlapsarian), meaning *after* the Fall. Owing to its many entailments—such as the foreknowledge imputed to God by his omniscience, as well as his being bound by the integrity of what are apparently the laws of his own creation—establishing the logical order would be difficult to negotiate even apart from the fact that the sequence in question should have been simultaneous at the moment of creation.

To what was important in this question in Dutch Reformed Calvinism before Bavinck (even in Kuyper's first modern schism), Bavinck offered no mere compromise but another view, one more in accord, it seems difficult not to think, with Mondrian's way of thinking. Instead of a linear chain of causes each restricting the next, he proposed to think of a field of forces allowing of what Mondrian would consider an active "equilibration." Bavinck writes:

[N]either the supralapsarian nor the infralapsarian view of predestination is capable of incorporating within its perspective the fullness and riches of the truth of Scripture and of satisfying our theological thinking. The truth inherent in supralapsarianism is that all the decrees together form a unity; that there is an ultimate goal to which all things are subordinated and serviceable.... But the truth inherent in infralapsarianism is that the decrees, though they form a unity, are nevertheless differentiated with a view to their objects; that in these decrees one can discern not only a teleological but also a causal order.... (2:391)

Perhaps we may similarly consider, as much possible at once, the mutually impinging relations between one already categorical primary color and others of the trinity red, yellow, blue, across a Mondrian canvas of the classic period (not to mention relations between lines of different widths and the areas between them) as finally simultaneously and mutually co-present.

And if, as Bavinck notes, “[g]enerally speaking, the formulation of the ultimate goal of all things as God’s will to reveal his justice in the case of the reprobate and his mercy in the case of the elect, is overly simple and austere,” soon after, Bavinck makes a statement that all the more plausibly resembles Mondrian’s dialectic of “equilibrated relationships” in painting and social life. He remarks that our human perspective is finite and limited and results in conflicts between “proponents of a causal and the proponents of a teleological world-and-life view.” But this is not so for God:

His counsel is one single conception, one in which all the particular decrees are arranged in the same interconnected pattern in which, a posteriori, the facts of history in part appear to us to be arranged now and will one day appear to be fully arranged. This interconnected pattern is so enormously rich and complex that it cannot be reproduced in a single word such as “infralapsarian” or “supralapsarian.” It is both causally and teleologically connected.... *The whole picture is marked by immensely varied omnilateral interaction.* (2:392; emphasis added)

Finally, in the same passage, Bavinck sums up in such a way as to suggest all the more adequately a classic Mondrian composition:

In short, the counsel of God and the cosmic history that corresponds to it *must not be pictured exclusively—as infra- and supralapsarianism did—as a single straight line* describing relations only of before and after, cause and effect, means and end; instead, it should also be viewed *as a systemic whole* in which things occur side by side in coordinate relations and cooperate in the furthering of what always was, is, and will be the deepest ground of all existence: the glorification of God. (2:392; emphasis added)

Perhaps we will not be surprised that Bavinck considers God’s eternal counsel and its working out in cosmic history as a work of art:

Just as in any organism all the parts are interconnected and reciprocally determine each other, so the world as a whole is a masterpiece of divine art, in which all the parts are organically interconnected. And of that world, in all its dimensions, the counsel of God is the eternal design. (2:392)

We have forgotten that a generation or two ago, in the course of treating the significance of Theosophy for Kandinsky, Ringbom also called attention to that painter’s more fundamental and perhaps more lasting Christian loyalties, in that case to Orthodoxy.⁴² Now it seems time to

42. Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of*

Joseph Masheck

restore to Mondrian the Christian Reformed foundation of his faith as well.

Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting, Acta Academicae Aboensis, Ser. A, *Humaniora* 38, no. 2 (1970), 176–80.