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Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology

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Introduction

Recent scholarship on the theologies of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck has reminded us that the Dutch Reformed tradition, as it emerged into the twentieth century, provided extensive theological analyses of revelation,[1] theological epistemology,[2] and the relationship of theology to philosophy[3] that offer significantly different understandings of these issues from what can be elicited from the trajectories of Ritschlian and neo-orthodox theology.[4] An issue that remains to be examined in further detail is the stance of Kuyper and Bavinck on natural theology, if only

[1] See James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2012), 131–54; Jan Veenhof, "Revelation and Grace in Herman Bavinck," in *The Kuyper Center Review,* vol. 2, *Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 3–13; and Robert S. Covolo, "Beyond the Schleiermacher-Barth Dilemma: General Revelation, Bavinckian Consensus, and the Future of Reformed Theology," *Bavinck Review* 3 (2012): 30–59; Henk van den Belt, "Religion as Revelation? The Development of Herman Bavinck's View from a Reformed Orthodox to a Neo-Calvinist Approach," *Bavinck Review* 4 (2013): 9–31; also note the analysis of Bavinck's approach to natural knowledge in Steven J. Duby, "Working with the Grain of Nature: Epistemic Underpinnings for Christian Witness in the Theology of Herman Bavinck," *Bavinck Review* 2 (2012): 60–84. My thanks to David Sytsma for his careful reading and helpful suggestions.

[2] Arvin Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," 2 parts, *Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 9–36; *Bavinck Review* 7 (2016): 8–62; and David S. Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology: The Argument and Sources of his *Principia* of Science," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, a Creator of Modern Dutch Theology,* ed. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 1–56.

[3] Cf. Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 6–16; with Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," part 1, 11–15, 31–36.

[4] Note that Barth stands quite clearly in a Ritschlian trajectory. Wilhelm Pauck, *Karl Barth: Prophet of a New Christianity?* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), 42, identified Barth's early theological approach as "Ritschlian of Herrmann's type."

because the scholarly verdicts are so diverse. One writer notes that "Kuyper reflected critically on what he perceived as an increasing emphasis on natural theology through the early centuries of the Reformed tradition,"[5] while another indicates that Kuyper's views on common grace opened up a place for natural theology.[6] One study of Bavinck's views on natural theology critiques his negative assessment of Thomist understandings of nature and natural theology as "foundationalist rationalism" from an ecumenical Roman Catholic perspective.[7] Another study finds a significantly positive appreciation of Thomism in Bavinck's thought.[8] Bavinck is also declared to be a precursor of Cornelius Van Til, despite Van Til's rather pointed criticisms of Bavinck.[9] And yet another essay indicates that Bavinck's reception of Aristotle, Reformed orthodoxy, and neo-Thomism remains to be assessed.[10]

A more detailed analysis of Kuyper's and Bavinck's views on natural theology with a closer examination of their backgrounds, sources, receptions, and critiques can lead to some resolution of these rather diverse readings of their thought. When the relationship of Kuyper and Bavinck to the Reformed tradition is examined, a significant divergence appears

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[5] David VanDrunen, "Abraham Kuyper and the Reformed Natural Law and Two Kingdoms Traditions," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 283–307, here 285.

[6] Arie L. Molendijk, "Neo-Calvinist Culture Protestantism: Abraham Kuyper's *Stone Lectures*," *Church History and Religious Culture* 88, no. 2 (2008): 235–50, here 240.

[7] Eduardo J. Echeverria, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Response to Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 87–116.

[8] Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 45–47.

[9] Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "From Antithesis to Synthesis: A Neo-Calvinistic Theological Strategy in Herman Bavinck and Cornelius Van Til," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9 (2015): 348–74; Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation: A Dogmatic Sketch," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 4 (2018): 495–516; and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Organic Knowing: The Theological Epistemology of Herman Bavinck" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017).

[10] Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), 238; cf. Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 5, 47.

within the Dutch Reformed tradition itself, given the direction taken philosophically by Herman Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and theologically by Cornelius Van Til, a direction strenuously opposed to Bavinck's recourse to the older scholasticism in general and Aquinas in particular.[11] There is also a similar difference between the Reformed theologies of Kuyper and Bavinck and the neo-orthodox reading as found, notably, in the works of Karl Barth and Otto Weber.[12] Those differences and divergences are traceable to at least four sources—a more positive immersion, particularly in the case of Bavinck, in the early modern Reformed orthodoxy; a substantively different epistemology, evidenced in the "organic" emphases found in both Kuyper and Bavinck, but also related to the older Reformed tradition and, significantly, to the thought of Thomas Aquinas; their more traditional understanding of principia;[13] and the rejection, most evident in Bavinck, of specific aspects of the Ritschlian theologies, notably of their

[11] See Cornelius Van Til, "Bavinck the Theologian—A Review Article," *Westminster Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1961): 48–64; Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 94–95; note the analysis of Van Til's critique in K. Scott Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism, the Logos Principle, and *Sola Scriptura*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72, no. 2 (2010): 359–90; and note K. Scott Oliphint, "Is There a Reformed Objection to Natural Theology?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 74, no. 1 (2012): 169–203. For a reading more critical of Van Til's assessment of Bavinck, see Brian G. Mattson, "Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (2008): 111–27; Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 2–4; and Laurence R. O'Donnell, "Neither 'Copernican' nor 'Van Tilian': Re-Reading Cornelius Van Til's Reformed Apologetics in Light of Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics," *Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 71–95.

[12] Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," in *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel, introduction by John Baillie (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 65–128; and Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, 2 vols., trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981–1982), 1:206–18.

[13] On the issue of principia, see Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 2–4, 18, 43; and Laurence O'Donnell, "'Bavinck's Bug' or 'Van Tilian' Hypochondria?: An Analysis of Prof. Oliphint's Assertion That Cognitive Realism and Reformed Theology Are Incompatible," in *For the Healing of the Nations: Essays on Creation, Redemption, and Neo-Calvinism*, ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn and Peter Escalante, 2nd ed. (Moscow, ID: Davenant Trust, 2018), 133–66.

anti-metaphysical cast and the related repudiation of "Greek" intrusion into the thought of the early and medieval church.

In addition to the set of issues just noted as distinguishing Kuyper's and Bavinck's thought from other Protestant approaches to natural theology, their critiques of deism and modernism provide a clue to the basis of their interest in the thought of Aquinas and the rise of neo-Thomism but also explain the negative reception of Roman Catholic thought on natural theology found in both thinkers. Neo-Thomism, or Third Thomism as it is sometimes called, prospered in Roman Catholic circles after the publication of Leo III's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* as the philosophical response to the challenges of modernist philosophy.[14] Suffice it to say for the moment that Kuyper's and Bavinck's thought—most notably Bavinck's—evidences three sources of their reading of Aquinas, namely, through a reading of Aquinas's own writings, by way of the Reformed orthodox reception of Aquinas, and via contemporary neo-Thomism, with the two former accounting for much of their positive reception and the last accounting in large part for the negative.

Although Kuyper was seventeen years older than Bavinck, the publication of their major works on theological prolegomena and principia were virtually contemporaneous. Kuyper's theological encyclopedia, in which his major prolegomenal arguments are contained, appeared in 1894.[15] The first edition of Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, volume 1, appeared

[14] See Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's* Summa Theologiae*: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 163–88; and Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas, Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 167–73.

[15] Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie der heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1894); in translation, Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries, introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Scribner, 1898); reprinted as *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), translating volume 1, 1–53, and the entirety of volume 2 of the *Encyclopaedie*. Hereinafter cited as *Principles of Sacred Theology*.

in 1895.[16] Bavinck had already published, in 1888, a major evaluation of the Ritschlian theology in which he was particularly critical of Ritschl's views on epistemology and metaphysics.[17] These dates are important at very least because they place Kuyper's and Bavinck's work both in relation to the thought of Albrecht Ritschl and in close proximity to the historiographical works of Adolph von Harnack and Edwin Hatch with their views on the hellenization of Christianity—both products of what can be identified as left-wing Ritschlian theology. Bavinck, accordingly, argued pointedly against the post-Harnack Hebrew-Greek dichotomy that infected so much twentieth-century theology, including that of Van Til.[18]

Kuyper and the Search for a Balanced View of Natural Theology

Kuyper lamented the loss of the balanced views of the Reformers concerning the natural knowledge of God, noting that "modernists" set aside "supernatural knowledge" and identify "natural knowledge" of God as the sole true knowledge available, while the church, largely in response to the modernist argument, tended toward arguing that supernatural knowledge alone is "of vital importance."[19] By contrast, the Reformers were "not so one-sided": they taught two means by which God can be known, first by

[16] Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1895–1901; 4th ed., 1928); in translation, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008); also note Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei* (Kampen: Kok, 1909); in translation, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

[17] Herman Bavinck, "The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl," trans. John Bolt, *Bavinck Review* 3 (2012): 123–63; originally published in *Theologische Studien* 6 (1888): 369–403; cf. John Bolt, "An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24 (2013): 81–96, here 85n8.

[18] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:603–8.

[19] Abraham Kuyper, *The Natural Knowledge of God*, trans. Harry Van Dyke, *Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 73–112, here 73; cf. against "modernism," Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism:*

the creation and providential care of the world and second by Scripture. This was the teaching of Guido de Brès in the Belgic Confession, of Calvin in his *Institutes*, and of a host of subsequent Reformed writers in the era of orthodoxy.[20]

Echoing the older orthodoxy, Kuyper adopted the distinction between archetypal theology in the mind of God and ectypal theology as embracing the various forms of finite theology that are constituted as legitimate reflections of the divine archetype and argued that theology as human beings know it is necessarily a "dependent" discipline, not only resting on the divine archetype but also determined by a correct understanding of what constitutes the knowledge of God on which theology rests.[21] The older orthodoxy's notion of a true, albeit ectypal theology characterized by various modes of knowing—revelation both natural and scriptural, union, and vision—assumed that not only is there true knowledge of God accessible to finite, fallible, and fallen human beings but that it is, ultimately, a unified knowledge that a Christian could know by means of the sources available to him—namely, the two forms of revelation, the "books" of nature and Scripture—and, on the basis of this knowledge construct a valid theology. Kuyper also drew from the older orthodoxy a clarification of the accommodated character of ectypal theology by using a further distinction between *theologia stadii* and *theologia patriae*—theology of the

The L. P. Stone Lectures for 1898–1899 (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), 3–5, 15, 16, 21–22, 46–47, et passim.

[20] Kuyper, *Natural Knowledge of God*, 73–74, citing Belgic Confession, art. 2; Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.1; I.v.1; note that Dooyeweerd saw Kuyper's use of resources from the older Reformed tradition as a relapse into "Scholastic-Aristotelian philosophy" and inimical to what he viewed as the "reformational" task of "Calvinistic philosophy"; see Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," in *On Kuyper: A Collection of Readings on the Life, Work and Legacy of Abraham Kuyper*, ed. Steve Bishop and John H. Kok (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2013), 153–78, here 156–57, 159–60, et passim.

[21] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 242, 244, 248–56, 257, etc.

"course," a pilgrim, viator theology suited to the present life, and theology of the heavenly homeland suited to the next life.[22]

This foundational understanding of the discipline of theology together with his sense of the history of Reformed thought led Kuyper to a nuanced understanding of the problems inherent in some versions of natural theology but also of the place of natural theology, properly conceived, in the encyclopedia of Christian thought. Just as Kuyper posited "degenerations" of the knowledge of God and resultant "falsifications" and "deformations" of theology, he also argued, much in the manner of the older orthodoxy, against "false representations" of natural theology as a way of knowing utterly separate and independent from "special" or "sacred theology."[23] The result of this separation would be a purely rational natural theology that presented the existence and attributes of God, works of God in providence and the moral law, even a view of the last judgment; and a special or sacred theology that added revealed doctrines concerning the Trinity, sin, and salvation.[24] This model, defective in Kuyper's view, was not the one found in the Reformed orthodoxy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—rather, it is a model characteristic of various eighteenth-century theologies, including some Reformed. In this division of

[22] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 242, 244.

[23] E.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae, in qua status controversiae perspicue exponitur, praecipua orthodoxorum argumenta proponuntur, & vindicantur, & fontes solutionum aperiuntur*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Samuel de Tournes, 1679–1685), I.iii.10.

[24] Note that this separation of the doctrine of God into a natural theology exposition of essence and attributes and a sacred theology exposition of the Trinity is characteristic of the more rationalistic eighteenth-century Reformed theologies; note, e.g., Salomon Van Til, *Theologiae utriusque compendium cum naturalis tum revelatae* (Leiden: Jordan Luchtmans, 1704); Jacob Christoph Beck, *Synopsis institutionum universae theologiae naturalis et revelatae, dogmaticae, polemicae et practicae: praemittitur Encyclopaedia theologica breviter delineata* (Basel: Imhof, 1765); Jacob Vernet, *Instruction chrétienne: divisée en cinq volumes*, 3rd ed. (Lausanne: Jean Pierre Heubach, 1771); Samuel Secretan, *La théologie chrétienne*, 3 vols. (Lausanne: Société Typographique, 1774); Alexander Gerard, *A Compendious View of the Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion; Being the Substance of Lectures Read in the University and King's College of Aberdeen*, ed. William Gerard (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1828).

theology into two separate disciplines, the greater portion of theology would be assigned to natural theology, and special theology would be left to discuss the mysteries of the faith, having "abandoned the foundation of all knowledge of God, and therefore the heart of the matter, to its twin sister," natural theology.[25]

This warning concerning a false understanding of the relationship of natural and special, or sacred, theology has some affinity with the neo-orthodox critique, which saw natural theology as purely rational and set over against sacred theology. But Kuyper, by contrast, saw this separation of the disciplines not as a condemnation of natural theology per se, but as a condemnation of the separation. Kuyper concludes, rather pointedly,

> It is, therefore, of the greatest importance, to see clearly, that *special* theology may not be considered a moment without *natural* theology, and that on the other hand natural theology of itself is unable to supply *any* pure knowledge of God. That special revelation (revelatio specialis) is not conceivable without the hypothesis of natural theology, is simply because *grace* never creates one single new reality.[26]

Importantly, Kuyper's point is not to argue in a rationalistic fashion that natural knowledge provides a foundation on which supernatural theology can be built; his point is precisely the opposite, rejecting the view characteristic of eighteenth-century rationalistic theologies and returning to a view akin to that of the Reformed orthodox—albeit based on a different, namely, "organic"—philosophical perspective. There is but a single true knowledge of God that must not be divided into separate species of knowing, one purely rational, the other purely scriptural.[27]

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[25] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 372–73.

[26] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 373 (italics original).

[27] On this issue and on the transition to the more rationalistic models in the older orthodoxy, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:300–8.

Kuyper similarly insisted that the whole of theology "must not only be construed abstractly *logically*, but also *theologically*," a point that he viewed as "defended" by Aquinas and maintained by "all earlier Reformed theologians."[28] He praises Aquinas for his identification of *theologia* with *sacra doctrina*.[29] Kuyper's reception of Aquinas was mixed. He could, as just noted, see important continuities between Aquinas's thought on certain issues and the thought of the Reformers and their successors—and he was quite ready to state categorically that "he who refuses to consult with Thomas Aquinas weakens himself as a theologian."[30] But he also took Aquinas to task for assuming that a pinnacle of theology had been reached in the positive use of ancient Greek philosophy, a point that he summarized in the comment that Aquinas had "too closely identified" theology and philosophy, thereby placing reason in judgment over theology,[31] perhaps reading Aquinas through the eyes of neo-Thomism.[32]

What might be called the ontological point of Kuyper's argument is that grace redeems an "existing reality"—it does not bring about new existences. Human nature and the cosmos as a whole, albeit in need of redemption and renewal, are not replaced by another human nature and another cosmos. Kuyper even argues that, inasmuch as faith itself belongs to the original created nature of human beings, even faith is not an utterly new capacity. His conclusion is that grace should not be viewed as having "produced a knowledge of God of its own, which as competitor runs by the side of natural theology"—this is, he argues, "unthinkable."[33]

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[28] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 236 (italics original); cf. ibid, 238, 323, where Kuyper speaks of Calvin as building on Augustine and Aquinas.

[29] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 238.

[30] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 657.

[31] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 657.

[32] Cf. the critical comments in O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas*, 170–72.

[33] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 374.

When Calvin and the Reformed confessions assume a "seed of religion" in all human beings and state that "we know God by two means, Nature and Scripture," this must not be understood as it was viewed by "the later rational supernaturalists"—and here Kuyper is thinking specifically of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rational theologians—rather Calvin and the confessions should be understood as "one simple confession, that *without the basis of natural* theology there is no *special* theology."[34] Kuyper draws on Calvin's statement that Scripture collects the "confused" conceptions of God that reside in the human mind, collects them and dispels their darkness in order to provide true knowledge of God.

Both the knowledge of God identified as natural and what is identified as supernatural rest on divine revelation: what philosophers view as a human capacity to know God is recognized by the church as the impression of God on the human heart and mind. Kuyper denies that there are atheists who absolutely lack an "internal impression of God's majesty," and he insists that "were it not for sin, the natural knowledge of God would have led man to true knowledge of God."[35] Kuyper does not, then, dissolve one principium into the other, nor does he assume that "without the Scripture as revelation there is no revelation."[36] Rather, Kuyper insists that without the reception of Scripture as revelation, human beings are thrown back on the natural principium, which, given the sinful condition, cannot yield an unconfused knowledge of God. But he also insists that the scriptural revelation exists for sinful humanity and will no

[34] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 374 (italics original), citing Calvin, *Institutes*, I.iii.1; I.vi.1; and Belgic Confession, art. 2.

[35] Kuyper, *Natural Knowledge of God*, 75.

[36] Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 232, partially quoting Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 362; and note 370–71 contra Van Til's reading. It is Van Til who dissolves all principia into a so-called *principium unicum,* namely, Scripture, as the cognitive foundation of both theology and philosophy; see Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 94–95.

longer be needed in the eschaton when the natural powers of humanity will be restored.[37]

In accord with his view of faith as an inherent human capacity belonging to the *imago Dei*, when characterizing the inward foundation, or principium, of knowledge of God, Kuyper even denies that natural and special theology can have principia that remain radically separate. There is a natural principium that is an "inborn" power in human beings, and there is an "ingrafted new principium" that draws the incomplete and corrupted knowledge of God toward the true knowledge: "The new principium joins itself to the vital powers of our nature, with its natural principium."[38] It is the "seed of religion" in human beings that renders them "susceptible to special revelation."[39]

The language of principia that Kuyper deploys here is somewhat different from that of the older Reformed orthodoxy inasmuch as he posits two pairs of principia, an external objective pair consisting in the sources of the knowledge of God, nature and Scripture; and an internal subjective pair, consisting in the inborn natural capacity of human beings to know the things of God and in the graciously ingrafted capacity to know and believe special revelation as a transformative knowledge that renews and redeems the natural capacity and its knowledge. The older orthodoxy did not typically identify inward principia, except to view reason as the principium of natural theology or to note the importance of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in relation to the scriptural principium, largely

[37] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 369; cf. Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 233, who rightly sees the parallel on this point between Kuyper and Aquinas but misreads Aquinas as holding that "nature is inherently defective" because "it partakes of the nature of non-being," thereby exaggerating the difference between Kuyper and Aquinas. Van Til is also, arguably, mistaken (230) in his view that Kuyper tends to equate "general, non-soteriological revelation" with natural theology; rather, for Kuyper, as for the older Reformed tradition, the former is the basis for the latter.

[38] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 375.

[39] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 376.

because reason has access to foundational self-evident *notiones*, *axiomata,* or *principia* that are either ingrafted or immediately recognized to be true.

The difference arises, certainly, from Kuyper's nineteenth-century Romantic sense of an organic unity of the human being that parallels and reflects a sense of the organic unity of knowledge.[40] In this assumption of "organic oneness" of knowledge and therefore also of the "encyclopedia" of theological knowledge, taken largely from nineteenth-century German idealism,[41] it was Kuyper's intent to overcome the "dualism" of the modern distinction between the natural and the supernatural. This idealist approach results in a view of the unity of natural and special theology in the regenerate that presses the theoretical issue further than can be immediately gathered either from Calvin or from Reformed orthodoxy, where the distinctions between natural and scriptural revelation and between rationally known principia and the truths learned from special revelation in Scripture remain more strictly drawn.[42]

Given his assumption of the unity of principia and of knowledge of God, the conclusion to this portion of Kuyper's argument is a mirror image

[40] On Kuyper's Romanticism and its roots in Schelling, F. J. Stahl, and Groen van Prinsterer, see Jacob Klapwijk, "Abraham Kuyper on Science, Theology, and University," *Philosophia Reformata* 78 (2013): 221–45, here 222–23; also note Harry Van Dyke, "Groen van Prinsterer: Godfather of Bavinck and Kuyper," *Calvin Theological Journal* 47, no. 1 (2012): 72–97. William Young, *The Development of a Protestant Philosophy in Dutch Calvinistic Thought Since the Time of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Piet Hein Publishers, 1952), analyzes Kuyper's philosophy largely from the perspective of Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer," *Philosophia Reformata*, vol. 4 (Kampen: Kok, 1939), without examining philosophical antecedents. Dooyeweerd's essay is available in translation as "Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," cited in note 20 above.

[41] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 19–20, citing Fichte; and cf. Abraham Kuyper, *The Antithesis between Symbolism and Revelation: Lecture Delivered Before the Historical Presbyterian Society in Philadelphia, PA* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 12, referencing "the new *German philosophy*, from Kant to Schelling" with "its splendid enthusiasm for organic oneness and systematic conception" (italics original).

[42] Note the critique of Kuyper's interest in Reformed orthodoxy in Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," 155–56, where any relationship to the older scholastic tradition is seen as a rejection of true "Christian philosophy."

of the previous argument that there can be no special theology without natural theology: although there are two sources of the knowledge of God, nature and Scripture, there is only one knowledge of God. Given this single true knowledge of God, it is just as true that "the *natural* knowledge of God, without enrichment by the *special*" can never "effect a satisfying result."[43] The problem of natural theology, then, is that it can become and in fact had become separated from special or sacred theology and, in its initial separation after the Fall, led humanity into "idolatry . . . false philosophies and equally false morals."[44]

Although he has developed a more organic view of the principia of theology and has argued their inward unity, Kuyper nonetheless retains their distinction as well as the traditional understanding of what constitutes a way of knowing as principial when he comes to the question that has bedeviled Christian reception of natural theology since the Enlightenment: "Is the *Natural* Principium able to summon that *Special* Principium before its Tribunal?"[45] Part of Kuyper's response rests on his effort to overcome the perceived "dualism" of two principia. To borrow a standard scholastic phrase, he has argued that the natural and special principia are distinct but not separate. Still, given their distinction and given, moreover, the stance of rationalist philosophy and rational supernaturalist theology, the issue of the relation and identity of the principia remains, as does the claim of philosophical and theological rationalists that one must "demonstrate the reality and reliability of the *special* principium at the bar of human reason."[46]

Kuyper indicates that the rationalist demand is not entirely unfair or implausible given what he calls the tendency of "Methodism" and of other "dualistic" tendencies to view special revelation as setting aside and utterly

[43] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 377 (italics original).

[44] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 377.

[45] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 380 (italics original).

[46] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 381 (italics original).

superseding both natural revelation and the natural principium. From his organic perspective, the special does not supersede or exclude the natural, inasmuch as what was "originally given in the Creation, is the substratum of our real existence."[47] This remaining foundational character of the natural does not, however, give it rights over the gracious or special principium, inasmuch as the natural principium was disturbed and disrupted by sin and, accordingly, "lost its competency to judge." To argue the opposite, that the natural can judge the special, is to declare that the natural is competent and, in effect, to remove "all *sufficient reason* for a special revelation."[48]

The argument here indicates an awareness of the shift that occurred in natural theology under the impact of early modern natural philosophy and in particular of deism. On one hand, the deist argumentation rested on the assumption of the utter competence of reason to develop a natural theology sufficient to human needs, not only capable of critiquing but also of replacing, even abolishing, revealed or sacred theology. On the other hand, the anti-deist argumentation of many late orthodox writers led to rationalistic arguments intended to justify the reliability of Scripture and the necessity of building a supernatural theology on the foundation of natural theology. Kuyper saw both approaches as missing the true relationship of natural and special, or "supernatural," theology—largely because of their dualistic posing of nature against supernature, which itself is, arguably, a problem brought on by early modern rationalist philosophies, particularly as they developed in the eighteenth century and led to rational supernaturalism in theology.

But Kuyper also added a second argument against the use of natural principia to judge the adequacy of special principia. In this argument, he stood more directly on the grounds specifically set forth by the older Reformed orthodoxy—indeed, by the older philosophical tradition in general. Simple consideration of the "character of a principium" demonstrates

[47] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 381.

[48] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 381 (italics original).

the problem of setting natural reason in judgment over the special principium. Echoing the understanding of principia extending back through the Reformed orthodox, to the medieval scholastics, to ancient meditation on principia, whether in Aristotle, Euclid, or the Stoics, Kuyper notes that "a principium in its own sphere is exclusive."[49] As the Reformed apologist of the early orthodox era Philippe du Plessis Mornay remarked, "Every Science [has] its Principles, which it is not lawfull to remove, be it never so little."[50] As "autonomous and sufficient unto its self,"[51] or, as the older tradition observed, as self-evident and specific to their own mode of knowing, principia belonging to one mode of knowing cannot be dislodged by the principia of another mode of knowing.

Finding the Balance: Bavinck's Reception and Formulation of Reformed Thought on Natural Theology

Herman Bavinck did not devote a separate section of his dogmatics to natural theology but rather subsumed it under the more fundamental issue of innate or implanted and acquired ideas of God in human beings. This point of organization gives a significantly different—indeed, a more traditionary—accent to his views on natural theology from what we have noted in Kuyper. Accordingly, Bavinck's remarks on the subjects of natural revelation and natural theology indicate both his acquaintance with the place of natural theology in the older Reformed tradition and his general agreement with Kuyper's antidualist approach.

But there are also significant differences with Kuyper. Although also influenced by the Romantic "organic" perspective of nineteenth-century German philosophy and by the ethical theology of Daniel Chantepie

[49] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 382.

[50] Philippe du Plessis Mornay, *A Worke concerning the Trunesse of the Christian Religion . . . Against Atheists, Epicures, Paynims, Iewes, Mahumetists, and other Infidels*, trans. Philip Sidney and Arthur Golding (London: George Potter, 1604), I.i (p. 2).

[51] Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 382.

de la Saussaye, which had argued that the rational faculties were capable of discerning the work of the Logos in the world,[52] Bavinck also sought a solution to what he viewed as the "one-sidedness" of modern thought, whether of Kant, Schleiermacher, or the German idealists,[53] looking to do justice to both external reality and the inward life of the human subject without falling into some form of dualism.[54] He identified primary aspects of this solution prior to the rise of modern philosophy in the epistemological approaches of an older philosophical tradition including the thought of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and the seventeenth-century Reformed orthodox.[55]

With Kuyper, Bavinck opposed the philosophical and theological "modernism" of his time as a movement that rendered divine revelation superfluous.[56] This opposition drew him to examine neo-Thomism,

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[52] Cf. Herman Bavinck, *De Theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye: Bijdrage tot de kennis der Ethische Theologie* (Leiden: Donner, 1884); and Bavinck's critical assessment of De la Saussaye in "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892): 208–28, here 221–23; and cf. Van den Belt, "Religion as Revelation?," 10.

[53] Herman Bavinck, "Philosophy of Religion (Faith)," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 25–31, here 28–30.

[54] Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), 83–84, 208, 211–12; on which see Bolt, "An Opportunity Lost and Regained," 82–84.

[55] On the sources of Bavinck's understanding of the "organic," see Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 65–78. Cf. Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 18–19, 22–45; with Echeverria, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 87, 95–97, 103; and Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," part 2, 10–12, where Vos finds an Augustinian theory of illumination in Bavinck that stands in some distinction from Aquinas—and that, incidentally, parallels the idealist conception that we have seen Bavinck draw from Chantepie de la Saussaye. On Bavinck's reliance on Augustine, see Michael S. Chen, "Herman Bavinck and Augustine on Epistemology," *Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 96–106, esp. 98–99.

[56] See Herman Bavinck, "Herman Bavinck's *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*: A Translation," trans. Bruce R. Pass, with an introduction by John Bolt, *Bavinck Review* 7 (2016): 63–114; and cf. John Bolt, "An Opportunity Lost and Regained," 82–83.

itself a philosophy posed against modernism, and to the conclusion that neo-Thomism was a form of rationalism embodying a defective understanding of natural theology.[57] Here again, Bavinck would return to the older tradition, notably Reformed orthodoxy, for a solution—and here also, arguably, he would find an alternative reception of Aquinas.

Similarly, Bavinck's traditionary rootage points toward a view of the relationship between Christian theology and philosophy quite opposed to the historical conclusions of Ritschlianism in the writings of Harnack and Hatch[58] and also to the views of Dooyeweerd and Van Til, which arguably arise out of a similar post-Harnackian approach to the historical narrative as well as out of a neo-Hegelian epistemology.[59] Bavinck indicated that theology is not in need of any particular philosophy but rather ought to draw eclectically on "philosophy in general," a view that he shared with the Reformed orthodox and that stands over against the Dooyeweerdian and Van Tilian insistence on establishing a fully alternative Christian philosophy. With regard to the older Christian tradition, Bavinck averred that

> neither Plato's nor Aristotle's philosophy has been held to be the true one by any theologian. That theologians nevertheless preferred these two philosophical systems was due to the fact that these systems best lent themselves to the development and defense of the truth. Present also was the idea that the Greeks and Romans had been accorded a special calling and gift for the life of culture.[60]

Specifically countering Harnack, Bavinck indicated that the patristic use of philosophy arose out of the need both to formulate and to defend

[57] Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 35–65, here 45–46, 48, 57–58; cf. Van den Belt, *Authority of Scripture*, 238; Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 5, 47.

[58] Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 6–7.

[59] Van Til's neo-Hegelian backgrounds are well documented in Timothy I. McConnel, "Historical Origins of the Presuppositional Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1999).

[60] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:608.

Christian doctrine, that this use was not uncritical, and that it recognized philosophy as a means and a servant.[61] So too, the theologians of the Reformation, after an initial hostility toward scholasticism and philosophy, turned back to these tools for the sake of theological formulation.[62]

Bavinck argued an epistemology based on the assumption that God, by means of the Word, has created both external reality and the laws of thought in the mind, yielding an intimate connection between the external world and true knowledge, between the object known and the knowing subject: "Just as knowledge within us is the imprint of things upon our souls," Bavinck writes, "so, in turn, forms do not exist except by a kind of imprint of the divine knowledge in things."[63] As Bavinck readily acknowledged, this more traditional Reformed epistemology followed Aquinas in its assumption that "the mind does not know things apart from sense perception" and followed the older tradition generally in the grounding of all knowledge on "common notions"—namely, basic apprehensions of truth accessible to all human beings.[64]

It is certainly mistaken to read this statement as a "commingling of Aristotelian and Christian principles" that fails to do justice to God as the

[61] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:607–8; cf. 603, 604, 606; note that Bavinck favorably cites (607n16) the critique of Harnack in Otto Pfleiderer, *The Development of Theology in Germany since Kant, and Its Progress in Great Britain since 1825*, trans. J. Frederick Smith (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1890), 298–99.

[62] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:608.

[63] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; cf. Van den Belt, "Religion as Revelation?," 10–11.

[64] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:226; and note 224, 232, 241–42, citing Calvin, Polanus, Zanchius, Hoornbeek, and Voetius; Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation,* 56–57; cf. Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 9–13, 23–26; Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," part 2, p. 13; and Van den Belt, "Religion as Revelation?," 12, who remarks on the similarity between Bavinck's views on religion and the Leiden *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* of 1626, an edition of which Bavinck had edited for publication in 1881. Also see the discussion of common notions in Reformed thought in J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 15, 27–48.

"one principle" of Christian theology.[65] Such critique rests on a double confusion—on one hand confusing God, the *principium essendi*, with epistemological principia; and on the other hand failing to recognize that principia, as taken cognitively, have two distinct references: first, Scripture as ultimate *principium cognoscendi theologiae* juxtaposed with the *principium essendi*; and second, truths or common notions known intuitively in and through the most basic perceptions of external reality.[66] It is also a mistake to read Bavinck's stress on common notions as a precognitive or primordial in an effort to sever its connection with the older tradition while at the same time linking his thought to nineteenth-century theories of self-consciousness.[67] Rather, Bavinck's argumentation has found common ground between the traditional understanding of knowledge as rooted in sense perception and the nineteenth-century understanding of consciousness and its interconnectedness with the world order. Bavinck categorically links his view of common notions to a traditional understanding of "right reason" as found in Aquinas and the Reformed orthodox theologian Amandus Polanus, citing Polanus to the effect that common notions are "true knowledge . . . implanted by God in the very nature of the human mind so that they can

[65] Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 94–95.

[66] The confusion is characteristic of Van Til, as noted, and is present also in Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 361–64, 367, 388–90. Note that Oliphint sees the continuity with Aquinas and the older Reformed tradition and rejects all three as inadequate, arguing that the Logos alone is the "principle of knowledge that has universal application" (389) and that Scripture is the "*principium* and measure" of "all else" (390). If Bavinck were able to respond to the critique, he might well argue that the Van Tilian approach is reminiscent of the Harnackian Hebrew-Greek dichotomy and offers an inadequate epistemology that cannot account for knowledge in general that is both true and extrabiblical.

[67] As, e.g., in Sutanto, "Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation," 500–1. Note that Sutanto's identification of what he calls precognitive truths, as distinct from propositional truth, rather misses the point that the reduction of truth generally or of revelation to propositions was not characteristic of early modern Reformed orthodox theology. Truth, as the adequation of the mind to the thing and the most basic knowledge, namely, common notions, can and were expressed in propositional forms, but these forms are subsequent to the apprehension of the truths. Such basic truths, moreover, are not "precognitive" or "primordial"—rather, they are ingrafted or intuitive and pre-ratiocinative.

govern life and generate the sciences and disciplines."[68] The echo of Schleiermacher in Bavinck's references to self-consciousness and a feeling of dependence does not lead Bavinck to build a theology in Schleiermacherian fashion on modifications of the sense of dependence—Bavinck's positive assessment of Schleiermacher rested on the latter's sense of revelation, identifiable in a form of consciousness, as "a communication not of doctrine but of life."[69] Bavinck also traces the issue of consciousness back to notions of a "seed of religion" and a "sense of divinity," as argued by Calvin and other early Reformed theologians.[70] Bavinck does not so much follow Schleiermacher as find the basis of his thought in their common ancestor.

In some parallel with Kuyper but on an epistemological ground more critical of the idealist tradition whether of Descartes or of more recent German idealist philosophers,[71] and on the assumption that all revelation comes from God, Bavinck insists that a methodological separation of natural from supernatural theology is mistaken. The problem is that this method begins with natural revelation and natural theology severed from the supernatural and then builds a theology of special revelation on the foundation of the natural.[72] He also makes the important historical point that

> whereas natural theology was originally an account, in the light of Scripture, of what Christians can know concerning God from creation, it soon became an exposition of what nonbelieving rational persons could learn from nature by the power of their own reasoning. In other words, natural theology became rational theology.[73]

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[68] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, with Jessica Joustra, Nelson D. Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk van Keulen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 193–94.

[69] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:290.

[70] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:71.

[71] Cf. Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," part 2, 10, 12, 17, 22–26, 31–34.

[72] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:74; and, perhaps more fully stated, Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 32–43; cf. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 139–40.

[73] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:78.

We have seen this point also in Kuyper, who recognized that the older, orthodox Reformed natural theologies were explicitly Christian.

Bavinck not only expressed a distinct admiration for the Reformed orthodox as well as the Reformers, he also—in considerable contrast to neo-orthodox writers like Barth and Otto Weber—tended to identify the decline of Reformed thought not so much with the rise of orthodoxy but with the decline of orthodoxy and the rise of rationalism and mysticism in the late seventeenth century and their dominance in the eighteenth century.[74] This alternative (and, I would argue, far more accurate) reading of the history of Reformed thought gave Bavinck direct and positive access to the flowering of Reformed dogmatics and the development of Reformed natural theology as a Christian discipline in the early modern era. It also served to frame Bavinck's distinction between an acceptable natural theology grounded in revelation and unacceptable natural theology, whether a product of early modern rationalism, deism, modernism, or a neo-Thomist abstraction of Aquinas's philosophy.[75] Bavinck could, accordingly, identify one positive development associated with Kant and Schleiermacher, namely, the critique of rationalist dogmatics.[76]

In his lecture "Revelation and Nature," Bavinck drew on these historical perceptions and argued pointedly against a "dualism" that severed knowledge of God from knowledge of the world and isolated knowledge of God within theology at the same time that it sequestered theology from a

[74] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:183–84, 189; there are some places where Bavinck follows a line of nineteenth-century scholarship and identifies Reformed orthodoxy as a prelude to rationalism: Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: J. Kok, 1901), 39; in translation, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1980), 41–42. As indicated in "Herman Bavinck's Lectures on the Certainty of Faith (1891)," *Bavinck Review* 8 (2017): 35–63, here 66, the material for *Zekerheid* actually dates from 1891. The work offers what is arguably a view that Bavinck set aside by the time of the second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906–1911).

[75] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:87–88, 100, 105–6, 108–9.

[76] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:106.

knowledge of the world.[77] Such dualism, moreover, is not to be associated with the Reformed tradition: the Reformers denied a sharp duality of the natural and the supernatural, specifically refusing to understand supernatural revelation as belonging to "another order," such that it would "surpass" even the intellectual powers of unfallen human beings.[78] Bavinck argues against a rigid, externalized identification of revelation that reduces it to Scripture and does so specifically for the sake of arguing, organically, that a "modified conception of revelation" recognizes that "special revelation is founded on general revelation."[79] He had even commented in the first edition of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* that

> revelation is identical with all God's works in nature and grace. It comprises the whole creation and recreation. Everything that exists and happens is a means for the pious to lift him up to God.[80]

Further, he understood revelation and the "experience of salvation" to be "intimately bound together."[81]

This organic, antirationalist, antidualist sense of the relation of the natural and the supernatural, nature and grace, points toward a distinction between general and special revelation and away from a view of "natural revelation" that removes it from relation to the supernatural. This is, again, a point that relates directly to the assumptions of the older Reformed orthodoxy,[82] arguably more than Bavinck himself realized. Even so, Bavinck

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[77] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation,* 83–86.

[78] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:304–5; cf. John Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the* Imitatio Christi*: Between Pietism and Modernism*, foreword by David VanDrunen (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 173–74.

[79] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation,* 22.

[80] Cited in Van den Belt, "Religion as Revelation?," 15; cf. Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 172–76.

[81] Herman Bavinck, "John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of his 400th Birthday, July 10, 1509–1909," *Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 57–85, here 66.

[82] Cf. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 139–41; with Bolt, "An Opportunity Lost and Regained," 84.

rejected Julius Kaftan's placement of general revelation after special revelation: "Objectively nature is antecedent to grace; general revelation precedes special revelation. Grace presupposes nature."[83] Bavinck's assumption of the unity of truth, like the Reformed orthodox, allowed him to argue that "general revelation" provided Christians with "a firm ground on which they can meet all non-Christians,"[84] a view that separates his thought definitively from the antithesis model of a later writer like Van Til.[85]

This traditionary connection is patently obvious when Bavinck presses the point that given general revelation, there is some "element of truth" present even in pagan religion—a point explained by the church fathers as grounded in the work of the Logos.[86] Bavinck argues further that the availability of these "natural truths" to all human beings through the exercise of reason was recognized by Thomas Aquinas and clarified by the Reformed orthodox in their understanding of common grace.[87] Here, Bavinck is not, as one recent writer has claimed, arguing a disagreement between Reformed orthodoxy and Aquinas.[88] Rather, he is indicating a common ground improved and clarified by a doctrine of common grace—an argument that parallels Bavinck's positive recourse to *notiones communes,* or "common notions," as foundational to understanding.[89]

Having denied the viability of dualism in knowledge, Bavinck nonetheless distinguished clearly the methodological boundaries of various sciences, arguing pointedly that physical science oversteps its bounds when it makes metaphysical judgments—and he finds science to be inconsistent when on one hand it rightly recognizes that "the question of the origin of

[83] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.

[84] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.

[85] Note Sutanto, "From Antithesis to Synthesis," 366.

[86] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:318.

[87] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:319.

[88] Contra Sutanto, "Organic Knowing," 111.

[89] Cf. Covolo, "Beyond the Schleiermacher-Barth Dilemma," 42; and Veenhof, "Revelation and Grace," 7.

things . . . lies outside of the domain of natural science" while on the other hand affirming the eternity of matter.[90] Science may also be able to recognize that there is an ultimate reality that holds all phenomena together, but it cannot determine the nature of that reality.[91] Bavinck accordingly argued that a rift between Christian religion and metaphysics is untenable: it is only religion that can deal with these ultimate issues.[92]

Bavinck's rootage in the older tradition becomes clear as he argues that beginning with Calvin, the Reformed evidenced a "friendlier posture toward natural theology" than found in Luther. This reading of Calvin's thought, it needs to be noted, is significantly opposed to the typical neo-orthodox reading of Calvin, and it permits Bavinck to identify a continuity of the subject of the natural knowledge of God among Calvin, the Reformed confessions, and later Reformed thinkers like Ursinus, Zanchius, and Polanus.[93] Just as Calvin assumed a fundamental human "awareness of divinity" and a revelation of God in the natural order, so did later Reformed writers argue the same view on the basis of a theory of common ideas, or "notions," that arise in the mind immediately via the avenue of sense perception given the innate disposition of the mind to know—which accounts both for basic truths or fundamental principles recognized in some sense by all human beings as well as for the diversity of human opinion.[94]

In accord with the majority of Reformed orthodox writers, Bavinck denied that these common notions are innate ideas in the strict sense. Rather, he affirmed that some very basic ideas, or principia, are implanted in human beings, and he identified this implanted knowledge as consisting in "common ideas," or common notions, that are recognized to be true at the point of their immediate apprehension inasmuch as they are

[90] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation,* 88–89.

[91] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation,* 91–92.

[92] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:605.

[93] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:66.

[94] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:67–68, 70–71.

self-evident.[95] These God-given, self-evident principles provide the basis for all human knowledge, whether "mathematical, philosophical, ethical, [or] . . . religious and theological."[96] Every *scientia* or intellectual discipline has its own distinct principia as well as principia shared with or sometimes derived from other sciences. As several writers have pointed out, Bavinck's understanding of the fundamental principles of knowing bears more than a passing resemblance to the thought of Thomas Aquinas.[97]

The denial of this relationship to Aquinas on the part of other writers arises, arguably, from a misunderstanding of Aquinas,[98] while its acknowledgment has led to rationalizations concerning the presumed taint of "scholasticism" in aspects of Bavinck's thought.[99] Setting aside these rather aberrant dogmatic generalizations, it needs to be observed that Bavinck's approach to common notions also ties his thought to the older Reformed tradition and, via that tradition, to a critical appropriation of the older traditions of Christian theology. This relationship to the tradition becomes even more apparent in Bavinck's further definitions of innate and acquired knowledge.

What is innate in human beings is "the capacity of knowledge," whereas knowledge itself is acquired. Bavinck's point is directed against a Lockean

[95] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:72.

[96] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:71; cf. Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 16–17.

[97] Cf. Eugene P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959), 131, 144; with Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 16–45; and Eduardo J. Echeverria, "Review Essay: The Philosophical Foundations of Bavinck and Dooyeweerd," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 14, no. 2 (2011): 463–83, here 464, 465–66, 469–70.

[98] As, e.g., in Donald Macleod, "Bavinck's Prolegomena: Fresh Light on Amsterdam, Old Princeton, and Cornelius Van Til," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 261–82, here 265.

[99] Cf. Van Til, "Bavinck the Theologian—A Review Article," 50–51, 53, 59; with Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism," 363–64; and note the critique of Van Til and Oliphint in O'Donnell, "'Bavinck's Bug'," 146–50.

critique of common notions as innate.[100] The ideas typically referred to as innate or common to all human beings, Bavinck indicates, are not strictly innate, as if human beings are born with them. Rather, the mind has a capacity for knowledge that is "activated" by something external. Thus, common notions are better understood as implanted via an immediate apprehension. With this qualification in mind, Bavinck allows the traditional distinction between implanted and acquired knowledge as identifying a principial knowledge that is "acquired spontaneously" and an elaborated knowledge that results from "discursive thinking"—the former "noetic," the latter "dianoetic."[101] The result of this argument is, as Bavinck indicates, a closing of the distinction between implanted and acquired knowledge, given that both are acquired. In the case of theological knowing, divine revelation precedes and provides the basis for both the noetic and the dianoetic knowing.[102]

It is something of a misrepresentation of Bavinck to claim this language as identifying a "primordial and precognitive" revelation that is an alternative to traditional epistemology on the basis of what Bavinck elsewhere identifies as the "external and mechanical" view of revelation that "too readily identified it with Scripture" in the "old theology."[103] Although Bavinck can draw on nineteenth-century notions of consciousness and self-consciousness, he nonetheless states that "consciousness is knowledge" and that, in the specific case of self-consciousness, it arises "through immediate experience"—the one case in which Bavinck allows that the activation

[100] On the Lockean critique of innate ideas, see Frederick C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols. (Westminster: Newman Press, 1946–1974), 5:73–76.

[101] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:72–73, citing Bernardus De Moor, and previously, 67–68, Calvin, Zanchius, Polanus, Vermigli, Maresius, Alting, Leydekker, Alsted, and Turretin.

[102] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:73.

[103] Contra Sutanto, "Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation," 500; cf. Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation,* 22; note that Bavinck's comment is not cited to any particular representatives of the "old theology," and does not find any clear parallels in his *Reformed Dogmatics.*

of knowing is not external.[104] The Reformed orthodox writers from whom he explicitly drew these epistemological distinctions did not reduce revelation to Scripture, they consistently identified fundamental or principial knowledge as implanted, and they understood "common notions" as activated by externals. What is more, the cited critique is concerned with the relation of general to special revelation and not with basic epistemological issues. Bavinck's intention, clearly, was to draw on an older epistemology that related to his assumption that what is in the intellect is first in the senses and to adapt it to the needs of his organic model of knowledge and revelation.

Accordingly, having taken up the traditional distinction between noetic and dianoetic, implanted and acquired knowledge, Bavinck denies that it belongs exclusively in the realm of natural knowledge and natural theology. He also disputes the view that innate knowledge arises from the inward configurations of human reason alone and that acquired knowledge arises purely from the world. Inasmuch as he has replaced the concept of innate knowledge with implanted knowledge, what is implanted cannot be the result of mere reasoning; rather, it is the result of an immediate impression of divine revelation on the "human consciousness." Likewise, in the case of knowledge of God, acquired knowledge is not merely derived from examination of the world; rather, it is the result of reflection on God's revelation.[105] This being the case, the distinction between implanted and acquired knowledge belongs to supernatural theology as well.

Accordingly, although there is a distinction, there can be no separation between general and supernatural revelation or, indeed, between natural and supernatural theology. Like Kuyper, Bavinck insists that supernatural revelation is not a second, separate revelation of "an independent source of

[104] Herman Bavinck, "The Unconscious," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 176.

[105] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:74.

knowledge apart from the other."[106] On one hand, supernatural revelation includes truths that can be known from nature—again, a point taken from traditional Reformed theology. Indeed, also reflecting Kuyper, Bavinck assumes the supernatural presupposes the natural as regeneration presupposes creation. In his lectures on ethics, Bavinck would emphasize the issue:

> Natural morality is the presupposition of faith. The world is the field in which the seed of the Word, prepared by the Holy Spirit, is sown, germinates, and bears fruit (Matt. 13:38). Regeneration presupposes natural birth, re-creation presupposes creation, and Scripture presupposes nature. The world, the earth, is the foundation of the church; without the one the other would be impossible, just as revealed theology (*theologia revelata*) is impossible without natural theology (*theologia naturalis*).[107]

On the other hand, right recognition of the revelation of God in nature, Bavinck insists, is possible only by way of the illumination of the Spirit: a right understanding of the general revelation of God rests on the special revelation given in Scripture.[108] Quite distinct from and opposed to the modern definitions of natural theology as a product of pure reason, "there is no such thing as a separate natural theology that could be obtained apart from any revelation solely on the basis of a reflective consideration of the universe."[109] Natural theology presupposes the revelation of God, and Scripture includes natural knowledge. This integral relationship between the two forms of revelation can be encapsulated in the fact that Scripture, "appealing to the whole created world as a witness to, and revelation of, God . . . contains germinally all that was later elaborated and dialectically unfolded in the proofs."[110]

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[106] Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 42; cf. Covolo, "Beyond the Schleiermacher-Barth Dilemma," 41.

[107] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 234 (italics original).

[108] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:304.

[109] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:74.

[110] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:76.

Conclusion

Despite their differences in formulation, Kuyper and Bavinck stand together in offering a view of natural revelation and natural theology quite opposed to the direction inspired by Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and Edwin Hatch and taken by neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth and Otto Weber. The neo-orthodox writers denied the existence in any useful or functional manner of natural revelation, entirely ruling out natural theology by denying that there can be any genuine knowledge of God apart from what is revealed in Christ. Barth, Weber and, we might add, Thomas Torrance also argued that this conclusion was a development of the Reformed tradition by largely ignoring the thought of Zwingli and Bucer and by rooting their thought in a decontextualized and highly questionable reading of Calvin, radically severing his thought from its antecedents and from the views of the Reformed orthodox writers of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The neo-orthodox understanding of natural theology also has some affinity with various modern, purely rational, purely philosophical definitions inasmuch as it views natural theology as resting solely on reason, as lacking any basis in revelation, and as entirely outside of the framework of Christian knowing. A similar pattern of argument is found in the thought of Cornelius Van Til and his followers.

Kuyper and, to an even greater extent, Bavinck retain a more positive approach to natural knowledge, natural principia, and natural theology at the same time that they deny the rationalistic separation of the disciplines of natural and supernatural theology. In the case of Kuyper, this systematic vision rests primarily on a nineteenth-century Romantic or idealist assumption of an organic unity of knowledge, albeit tempered by access to a traditional Reformed paradigm of archetypal and ectypal theology. Accordingly, if Kuyper saw a problem in earlier Reformed approaches to natural theology, this was largely a reaction to rationalistic developments in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rather than to the early and high orthodox views of writers like Franciscus Junius or Francis

Turretin.[111] Bavinck draws more from the older Reformed theology than Kuyper and registers a deeper dissatisfaction than Kuyper with Kantian thought, German idealism, and their approach to the problem of knowing and, by extension, the problem of subject and object.[112]

Bavinck's solution, looking farther back into the theological and philosophical tradition, identifies knowledge in terms of the impress of the external object on the mind of the subject, assuming that the forms or categories in the mind are grounded in the reception of forms or categories that are in the things external to the mind. Bavinck is far closer in his basic epistemology to the older tradition than Kuyper and, indeed, granting Echeverria's critique of Bavinck's assessment of the Thomistic understanding of nature and grace, far closer to Aquinas than even Bavinck himself imagined.[113] Indeed, what can be observed over against Echeverria's critique is that both Bavinck and Kuyper express appreciation for Aquinas's understanding of the task of theology and identify continuities between Aquinas and early Reformed theology, including, in Bavinck's case, a continuity in the understanding of natural revelation. The points of contention against Thomism, at least from the perspective of later twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship on Aquinas, look more like complaints against the philosophized reading of Aquinas on the part of nineteenth-century neo-Thomists—a datum that helps to explain Kuyper's and Bavinck's positive reception of Aquinas and of potentially Thomistic aspects of Reformed orthodoxy while at the same time leveling stringent critiques against perceived rationalism and dualism in Thomist thought.

In contrast to the neo-orthodox and Van Tilian theologies, both Kuyper and Bavinck assume a divine revelation in nature, and both allow that the

[111] Modifying the point made by VanDrunen, "Abraham Kuyper and the Reformed Natural Law," 285.

[112] Cf. Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," part 1, 25–26, 34–36.

[113] Cf. Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 172, 180, 189; with Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology," 46–47.

cognitive capacities of human beings have access to this revelation, albeit in a manner that is not saving. Bavinck in particular, given his epistemological assumptions concerning common notions, cannot be seen as a precursor of Van Til. Further, and more importantly, Kuyper and Bavinck both assume that natural knowledge and therefore also natural theology have a place within a Christian body of knowledge. They make this point, however, at the same time that they distance their views of natural knowledge and natural theology from the rationalistic projects of the eighteenth century. Both pointedly deny that there are two different knowledges of God and therefore repudiate the use of natural theology as a "cognate and preparatory" discipline to supernatural theology.[114]

Bavinck, like the church fathers, identified elements of truth in ancient pagan religion and philosophy and, in some contrast to Kuyper, was pointedly opposed to a Harnackian Hebrew-Greek dichotomy. In accord with the Reformers and the older Reformed tradition with its Augustinian and Thomistic accents, both Kuyper and Bavinck argue two sources, nature and Scripture, of the one knowledge of God and accordingly include natural knowledge and its principia in the sphere of Christian knowing. Arguably, the primary difference between the Kuyperian model and Bavinck's approach is that Bavinck's theology included a more profound and detailed reception of the Reformed past that enabled him both to identify more precisely the limits of his reliance on nineteenth-century patterns of thought, notably the "organic" conceptuality, and to mark out with greater clarity his positive relation to the epistemology and the doctrinal formulae of Reformed orthodoxy.

[114] Which is part of Bavinck's critique of the Groningen Theology of the nineteenth century; see his "Recent Dogmatic Thought," 213.