

ESSAYS ON
RELIGION,
SCIENCE, AND
SOCIETY



Herman Bavinck (1854–1921)
Graphite Sketch by Erik G. Lubbers

ESSAYS ON RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND SOCIETY

HERMAN BAVINCK

JOHN BOLT, GENERAL EDITOR

HARRY BOONSTRA AND GERRIT SHEERES,
TRANSLATORS



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CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction	7
Herman Bavinck: A Eulogy by Henry Elias Dosker	13
1. Philosophy of Religion (Faith)	25
2. The Essence of Christianity	33
3. Theology and Religious Studies	49
4. Psychology of Religion	61
5. Christianity and Natural Science	81
6. Evolution	105
7. Christian Principles and Social Relationships	119
8. On Inequality	145
9. Trends in Psychology	165
10. The Unconscious	175
11. Primacy of the Intellect or the Will	199
12. Trends in Pedagogy	205
13. Classical Education	209
14. Of Beauty and Aesthetics	245
15. Ethics and Politics	261
Appendix A: Foreword by C. B. Bavinck	279
Appendix B: Theology and Religious Studies in Nineteenth-Century Netherlands	281
Scripture Index	289
Name Index	292
Subject Index	298

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Like his sixteenth-century spiritual forefather John Calvin, Herman Bavinck (1854–1921)¹ was first and foremost a son and servant of the church, dedicating his energy, his genius, and his remarkable intellect to knowing God better and helping God's people to witness more effectively to their world. But, also like Calvin, Bavinck believed that Christian renewal was not restricted to the church; the whole person in the totality of human experience, including life in society, was called to obedience before God (*coram deo*). As this English translation of a collection² of Bavinck's occasional writings on religion, science, and society goes out into the world, it is worth recalling Bavinck's first visit to North America, to the Fifth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System meeting in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on September 21–30, 1892. At this assembly Bavinck gave a keynote address with this far-reaching title: "The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations."³ Less than a year earlier at the First Social Congress held in Amsterdam, November 9–11, Bavinck had provided a discussion paper on what at that time was referred to as "the social question" with this all-encompassing

1. This introduction is not a full biographical commentary on Herman Bavinck, only an introduction to the significance of this volume. For a more comprehensive treatment, see the introductory essay in this volume by Bavinck's childhood friend, Henry Dosker, and my Editor's Introduction in any one of the four English volumes of *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8).

2. Aside from the Editor's Introduction and Henry Dosker's biographical sketch of Bavinck, this volume is a complete translation of the Dutch collection *Verzamelde opstellen op het gebied van godsdienst en wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1921). The original foreword by Bavinck's brother, the Rev. C. B. Bavinck, is provided in appendix A, pp. 279–80.

3. The speech is recorded in the Proceedings of the Fifth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System (London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1892), 48–55.

visionary title: "According to the Holy Scriptures, what general principles govern the solution of the social question, and what pointers are provided for the solution in the concrete application of these principles that is given for the people of Israel in Mosaic law?"⁴ These two titles tell us much about the man, his faith, and his profoundly catholic, Reformed, Christian vision.⁵

The Dutch Reformed Translation society was established in 1994 by people who believed that the Dutch Reformed confessional and theological tradition contained a treasury of material that would bless the worldwide church if it could only be made available in the dominant language of modern world communication. Our first project was to translate the major work of the greatest Dutch Reformed theologian, Bavinck's four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, into English with the hope that the work of translation would be carried on further by the worldwide church. That has come to pass: the *Reformed Dogmatics* is now being translated into Korean, Portuguese, Indonesian, and Italian. Bavinck's extraordinary gift as a theologian is reflected in the fact that one hundred years after it was written, the *Reformed Dogmatics* remains timely and speaks directly to issues the church faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This volume of essays demonstrates that good theology is not restricted to private matters of personal piety and faith but has an essential public dimension. The Triune God, who saves us through the work of Christ and incorporates us into the body of Christ, the new people of God, by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, is the same God who is Creator of heaven and earth. We are able to distinguish different works in the economy of the Triune God, but we may never separate them. Salvation does not take us out of creation or elevate us above it but heals and restores creation's brokenness. In theological terms, grace opposes sin, not nature; grace does not abolish nature but restores it.⁶

It is the insistence on taking creation seriously as God's revelation without in any way diminishing the necessity of biblical revelation as the key to understanding it that is the hallmark of Bavinck's writing on matters of religion, education, science, and society. In the remainder of this introduction,

4. "Welke algemeene beginselen beheerschen, volgens de H. Schrift, de oplossing der sociale quaestie, en welke vingerwijzing voor de oplossing ligt in de concrete toepassing, welke deze beginselen voor Israel in Mozaïsch recht gevonden hebben?" in *Proces-verbaal van het Sociaal Congress, Amsterdam, November 9–12, 1891* (Amsterdam: Höveker en Zoon, 1892), 149–57. This was the same congress in which Abraham Kuypers delivered his famous address later published as *The Problem of Poverty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), and the same year Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum novarum*.

5. The fullest expression of Bavinck's vision in a single essay is likely his "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. J. Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220–51.

6. For an excellent summary of Bavinck's distinctive Reformed understanding of the relation between nature and grace, see Jan Veenhof, "Nature and Grace in Bavinck," trans. Al Wolters, *Pro Rege* (June 2006): 10–31.

I shall briefly highlight four closely related themes that recur in the fifteen essays of this volume: biblical faith, revelation, and religion; Christianity and the natural sciences; Christianity and the human sciences; Christianity and politics/social ethics.

Unlike Karl Barth in the twentieth century, for example, Bavinck had no qualms about considering Christianity as a *religion* that on a formal level shares characteristics with all religions. In particular, the phenomena of revelation and faith are common to the religious life of all people (chap. 1). In the center of the human person, integrating all our faculties and diverse expressions, is what the Bible calls the *heart*, the locus of a seed of religion (*semen religionis*) or sense of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*). In his works, God is present to all people; the world is the theater of his glory; the human heart responds in faith activated by grace or in rebellious, inexcusable unbelief, but it cannot avoid responding. We humans are inescapably and incurably religious.

What is distinctive about the Christian religion is that it comes to us as a message of grace in Jesus Christ. A Christian is not just someone who knows something about God in general, but also one who believes everything promised in the gospel. The Christian faith is not a matter of subjective feeling or moral doing, but a confident trust that in biblical revelation we have been given the saving *knowledge* of the one true God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

From this it follows that the essence of Christianity (chap. 2) cannot be found in religious experience, even if sought in the experience of the historical Jesus (Schleiermacher, Harnack), or in the reduction of the historical Jesus to an idea (Strauss, Hegel), or in Christlike moral practice (Kant, Ritschl). No, only when the believer acknowledges that Jesus Christ in his person and work is the way, the truth, and the life; only when we know him to be the subject and object of our faith, the center and core of the gospel message itself—only then are we Christians. That is the essence of the matter.

Two additional things flow from this: religious studies, including the philosophy of religion (chap. 1) and the psychology of religion (chaps. 4, 9, 10, and 11), provide useful and important insights for Christian theology, but Christian theology must be clearly distinguished from and never folded into religious studies (chap. 3). In these essays, Bavinck shows himself to be extraordinarily well-informed about the latest scholarship in these matters and also very politically and culturally aware of what was happening in his nation and in Europe more broadly. Bavinck's observations and insights into such matters as the relation between will and understanding (chap. 11), the unconscious (chap. 10), and matters of education and pedagogy (chaps. 12 and 13) remain invaluable introductions to important issues that still vex us today.

Not only the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) of psychology and pedagogy—not to mention beauty and aesthetics (chap. 14), subjects on which one might at least expect a theologian to be minimally knowledgeable—but also the natural sciences receive profound treatment in Bavinck's capable hands. In addition to the straightforward treatment of evolution and development (chap. 6), which provides useful pointers to how Christians should still frame the debate today, Bavinck gives us a remarkable treatment of the topic of Christianity and the natural sciences from the political side of matters in colonial education of all things (chap. 5). That this thoughtful and thorough treatment of a very complex scientific and political matter reflects Bavinck's own public career as a member of the First Chamber in the Dutch Parliament makes this all the more remarkable. It is hardly the sort of careful and informative speech that we are accustomed to as part of our political and scientific rhetoric. More is the pity for us.

The most challenging for us, and perhaps the potentially most rewarding essays, in my judgment, are the three sociopolitical essays in chapters 7, 8, and 15. The treatment of the two Genevan reformers named Jean (Calvin and Rousseau) is fascinating, informative, and profoundly challenging to many of our contemporary commonplaces, especially the notion of equality. Be prepared to be provoked in these chapters; pay careful attention to the biblical thoughtfulness and sound reasoning. Here too, the issues Bavinck dealt with then are still with us. What we lack is the kind of biblical wisdom and historical awareness that Bavinck enjoyed in great measure. We are blessed to be able now to share them also in the English language.

English readers can be grateful to the D. R. T. S. and Baker Academic for this enriched portrait of Bavinck as a social philosopher, someone knowledgeable in the latest developments in psychology and pedagogy and culturally attuned to the spirit and spirits of his age. He was indeed the master theologian of the *Reformed Dogmatics* and is rightfully renowned for that. However, he was also more, much more as these essays show. Gratitude is also due to the competent work of translators Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, whose fluency in French and German as well as Dutch and English was required for this volume. Boonstra is the translator of chapters 1–3 and 11–15, Sheeres of chapters 4–10. Both men also checked each other's work for accuracy and consistency. The original foreword by C. B. Bavinck, Herman's younger brother, was translated by the editor. The editor was also responsible for updating the footnotes to twenty-first-century standards and for, wherever possible, correcting errors. In some instances it was not possible to trace and fully check a reference to an obscure journal; these were left as originally given and marked with an asterisk (*). In addition to Bavinck's own notes, additional explanatory notes by the editor are clearly marked. Page numbers to the original Dutch edition are set in square brackets within the text.

Bavinck's thought has been my companion in the academy and the church for thirty years. That has been a rare privilege. With gratitude and joy I join those whose work has made it possible for these essays to reach a wider audience and bless many more.

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