

# AN OPPORTUNITY LOST AND REGAINED: HERMAN BAVINCK ON REVELATION AND RELIGION

by John Bolt

## 1. Introduction

THE QUESTION OF REVELATION dominated mainstream twentieth-century theology from the publication of Barth's *Römerbrief* through Pannenberg's *Revelation as History* and beyond.<sup>1</sup> More than a decade before Barth's theological thunderclap and well before the cultural disillusionment generated by the Great War about the very possibility of human progress, Herman Bavinck demonstrated remarkable prescience when in his Princeton Stone Lectures of 1908, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, he wrestled in depth with the doctrine of revelation as the modern theological problem. Even more remarkable, I shall argue in this paper, is the nature and scope of Bavinck's engagement with the problem of revelation. In fact, I suggest that Bavinck's treatment of the issue was not adequately followed up by his neo-Calvinist theological heirs in the twentieth century and remains a challenge for us. Specifically, unlike Bavinck himself, the neo-Calvinist theological tradition after him failed to integrate its doctrine of revelation with the reality of religion, a failure with negative results for theology and church alike. In this essay I will be proposing a reading of the history of one segment in Dutch Reformed theology in light of this claim. Because of space considerations this will have to be suggestive rather than exhaustively documented.

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1. Thus, at the very least from roughly 1920 to 1960. Gerald Downing's important *Has Christianity a Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster; SCM Press) appeared in 1964 but did not end the discussion. Cf. Ron Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Colin Gunton's 1993 Warfield Lectures, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995); Keith Ward's Gifford Lectures of 1993-94, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); and Nicholas Wolterstorff's Wilde Lectures of 1993, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). The doctrine of revelation also occupied Roman Catholic theology. See, *inter alia*, Karl Rahner, *God and Revelation, Theological Investigations* § 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Rene Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation, Including a Commentary on the Constitution "Dei Verbum" of Vatican II* (Staten Island, NY: Alba, 1966); Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday, 1985). Revelation was also the single integrating theme of American evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry's seven-volume opus magnum, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976-1983).

## 2. Revelation and Religion in Bavinck's Thought

### 2.1. *The Philosophy of Revelation*

The first noteworthy thing about *The Philosophy of Revelation*<sup>2</sup> is its title; it is not a *theology* of revelation but a *philosophy* of revelation. And Bavinck does not begin with biblical revelation, with a discussion of the various modes of revelation (theophany, prophecy, inspiration),<sup>3</sup> or even with a historical-doctrinal discussion about natural theology and the relation of general and special revelation,<sup>4</sup> but rather with the "idea" of revelation, or, more precisely, "the idea of a philosophy of revelation." The purpose of such a study is to "trace the idea of revelation, both in its form and in its contents, and correlate it with the rest of our knowledge and life" (24).

Bavinck argues that modern thought tended to make revelation as an act of God superfluous, with human autonomy making it undesirable, and the new intellectual-cultural guiding principles, first of revolution and then evolution, also making it unnecessary. Humanity and the cosmos itself were seen as self-actualizing (pp. 8-10). To the extent one could still speak of "revelation," nature itself *was* revelation. In a reflection also appropriate to the revival of "spirituality" at the beginning of the twenty-first century,<sup>5</sup> Bavinck observes, with some satisfaction, that strictly naturalistic and mechanistic worldviews were in eclipse as the nineteenth century merged into the twentieth; rationalistic intellectualism is eschewed and there is a growing openness to "religion and mysticism, for metaphysics and philosophy; and that in religion itself there is now recognized a reality and a revelation of God" (16).

However, he also observes, we should not be fooled by this development. It is in fact dangerous because "the religious craving at present asserting itself bears a pronouncedly egotistic character; it reveals a longing rather for self-satisfaction than for knowledge and service of the living God; it seeks God not above but in the world, and regards his essence as identical with that of the creature." Bavinck concludes: "All of which goes to show that the world-view, which formerly offered itself under the name of 'the scientific,' has not essentially changed, but has simply, owing to various influences, assumed now a religious form and taken up its position as a new

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2. Page references that follow in the text are to the English version, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

3. Such as his host, Benjamin J. Warfield did in his *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927; rpt. 1991).

4. As did G. C. Berkouwer in his *De Algemeene Openbaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1951; ET *General Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955]).

5. See, for example, James A Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003).

faith over against the old faith” (16). In a nutshell, the former emphasis on the transcendence of God has been replaced by a strong sense of divine immanence, of God at work in the evolution of things.

Nonetheless, though this new worldview is seriously flawed in many respects, it is also a mistake to ignore the gains of this shift for orthodox Reformed theology. Though “great” Christian theologians have always understood God’s transcendence in such a way as to honor his full immanence while respecting the genuine qualitative and essential difference between God the Creator and all creatures, it is true, according to Bavinck, that “we take this idea more seriously at present because of the great enrichment our worldview has received from science.” And this has profound implications for modifying our view of revelation. “The old theology construed revelation after a quite external and mechanical fashion, and too readily identified it with Scripture.” In contrast, “Our eyes are nowadays being more and more opened to the fact that revelation is historically and psychologically ‘mediated.’ Not only is special revelation founded on general revelation, but it has taken over numerous elements from it. The Old and New Testaments are no longer kept isolated from their *milieu*; and the affinity between them and the religious representations and customs of other peoples is recognized. Israel stands in connection with the Semites, the Bible with Babel” (22). While the recognition of this phenomenon has resulted in some exaggeration about similarities between biblical and pagan religion and a failure to acknowledge profound differences, “these historical and psychological investigations are in themselves an excellent thing. They must and will contribute to a better understanding of the content of revelation” (23).

Thus, a *philosophy* of revelation must take into consideration the revelational significance of all religious quests, be they present in the traditional or new concrete religions of the world or in philosophical “religions” such as monism, pragmatism, or idealism. Thus, in the course of two lengthy chapters (II and III) Bavinck wrestles with the mutuality and tension between revelation and philosophy and concludes that the fact of human self-consciousness is a demonstration that God reveals himself. “In consciousness our own being, and the being of the world, are disclosed to us antecedently to our thought or volition; that is, they are *revealed* to us in the strictest sense of the word” (75). Simply put: “In self-consciousness God makes known to us man, the world, and himself” (79). Bavinck goes on in the next lecture to argue that the natural diversity and unity of the world can only be found in the unity of God<sup>6</sup> and is

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6. “Thus physics calls for metaphysics; nature itself shows, in the course of its existence, that it does not exist of itself, has not been originated by evolution, but is

based on revelation. History, too, cannot even be conceived apart from revelation and religion, “without faith in a divine wisdom and power” (134). “The more we penetrate in our thinking to the essence of history, as to that of nature, the more we grasp its idea and maintain it, the more it will manifest itself as rooted in revelation and as upborne by revelation, the more it will lift itself up to and approach that view of history which Christianity has presented and wherewith Christianity in its turn confirms and supports revelation in nature and in history” (135). And finally, religion and religious experience are either “pathologies of the human spirit” or based on revelation. Bavinck concludes: “All religion is supernatural” and “religion and revelation are bound together very intimately; they cannot be separated” (163). In sum: “Revelation is the foundation of all religion, the presupposition of all its conceptions, emotions, and actions” (165). And, “the claim to divine revelation is common to all religions” (203).

The close tie between revelation and religion is a two-way street for Bavinck. Revelation must, of course, inform Christian theological interpretation of religion outside of Christianity and provide the content of Christian theology. But, our theological reflection on revelation itself must also take into account our religious experience. He notes: “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.” (209) Of course, “religious experience is neither the source nor the foundation of religious truth; it only brings us into union with the existing truth, and makes us recognize as truth what formerly was for us only and empty sound, or even was denied and opposed by us” (239).

What Bavinck did in *Philosophy of Revelation* was to make a religious, philosophically attentive anthropology foundational for a Reformed Christian dogmatic theology, formally similar to the project launched in the latter part of the twentieth-century by Wolfhart Pannenberg. Above all, he labored mightily to maintain the unity of Christian faith and human knowledge, refusing to yield to the modern impulse to reduce faith to human subjectivity.

## 2.2. In *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume I

Developing his understanding of dogmatic theology as a science, Bavinck insists that its normativity is based on revelation.<sup>7</sup>

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grounded in *revelation*” (107).

7. H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 78-80 (§§ 19-20). Note: I will be citing the English translation of Volume I in this essay but will provide Bavinck’s paragraph §§ for ease of consulting any edition of the original Dutch.

“Dogmatics can exist only if there is a divine revelation on whose authority it rests and whose content it unfolds” (80 [§ 20]). Bavinck is thus critical of both the modern turn to the subject (66-70 [§§ 17, 18]) and the search for an objective, scientific *Religionswissenschaft* (70-76 [§§ 15-16]). One could conclude, “thus it seems the correct method is that followed by the so-called biblical theologians” (82 [§ 22]). But Bavinck disagrees. Not only does the specific “school” of biblical theology he has in mind<sup>8</sup> suffer from “one-sidedness,” it ignores the important cultural, social, and confessional factors that shape all theologians and theologies. Bavinck even applies this logic to biblical revelation itself. The Christian religion is not unique in the fact that it is based on revelation, on this score it is “similar to all other historical religions” (326 [§ 90]). Even the forms and modes of revelation are similar. “Theophany, mantic, and magic, like offerings, temple priesthood, cult, etc., are essential elements in religion. Thus they occur in all religions, also in that of Israel and Christianity” (327 [§ 90]). What is remarkable is that Bavinck not only acknowledges these similarities but he also insists that “this universal religious belief in manifestation, prediction, and miracle is certainly not—in any case not exclusively—to be attributed to deception or demonic effects nor to ignorance of the natural order but is a necessary element in all religion” (326 [§ 90]).

The implications of this for theological method are spelled out in Bavinck’s treatment of the *principium internum* (§§ 130–146). The fundamental point is anthropological: “Corresponding to the external principle [revelation]...there has to be an internal principle in human beings themselves [to receive revelation]” (501 [§ 130]). Taking his point of departure from the relational character of experienced human nature—what Wolfhart Pannenberg would later call *exocentricity*<sup>9</sup>—Bavinck goes on to speak in an appreciatively critical way about the new scientific study of religion, the mediating efforts of those in the speculative tradition, the religious-empirical method, and the ethical-psychological method.<sup>10</sup> In all these, the universal religious impulse and the concreteness of religion are taken seriously and, according to Bavinck, that is a lesson that cannot be forgotten by dogmatic theology. For the purposes of this essay, my point is simply to show that for Bavinck, dogmatic theology which is normed by Holy Scripture cannot be restricted to being a biblical theology but

8. Bavinck only mentions the name of Ritschl here.

9. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), especially chapter 2.

10. Figures identified with each include: mediating theologians—Schleiermacher, Twisten, Julius Müller, Martensen, Dorner, Rothe; Religious-empirical—Fr. H. R. Frank, G. Daxer, Ihmels; ethical-psychological—Pascal, Vinet, Astié, Pressensé, Secrétan, Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, Ritschl, Herrmann, and Lipsius.

must include in its purview the reality of concrete religion and the anthropological-epistemological grounds for the possibility of revelation.

### 2.3. In *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume III

Whereas in *RD I* Bavinck is primarily concerned with methodological questions, we observe him putting this method into practice in volume III.<sup>11</sup> Thus Bavinck incorporates into his discussion of the origin of sin a discussion of Babylonian and other ancient near eastern myths (§ 309), he observes that all religions acknowledge the universality of sin (§ 317), and even some sense of human guilt (§ 338) and the rightness of punishment (§ 340). There is among all peoples and religions a belief in evil spirits (§ 342). Then consider the opening of Bavinck's chapter on the Covenant of Grace (§ 343):

Sin, misery, and death are facts whose existence is undeniable and which therefore to some extent evoke in all people a need for reconciliation and redemption. The desire for salvation, no less than the knowledge of misery, is common to all people. All are even more or less aware that redemption must come from above. "All men have need of the gods" (Homer, *Odyssey* II, 48). Just as in time of trouble the people of Israel returned to the Lord, saying "Arise and save us!" (Jer. 2:27), so extreme distress at all times prompts people to pray. "Misfortunes summon (people) to religion" (Livy). "The wretched worship the gods more than the happy" (Seneca).

From the covenant of grace Bavinck moves on to the person of Christ and the need for a mediator who can reconcile God with humanity and restore the fellowship of unity between them (§ 351)). He then observes: "Also with respect to this doctrine of a mediatorship, Holy Scripture does not stand alone but is supported and confirmed on all sides by ideas concerning such a mediatorship in the religions of all peoples." Even Israel's prophetic hope is, so Bavinck suggests, linked to broader human eschatological hope though it "developed in a manner and direction of its own" (§ 353). And the Incarnation itself, "aside from its being rooted in the Trinity, also has its presupposition and preparation in the creation.... Specifically, the creation of human beings in God's image is the

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11. Material in *Reformed Dogmatics* III will be identified by paragraph § in the text.

supposition and preparation for the incarnation of God” (§ 363). Bavinck thus links the work of Christ in redemption directly to the anthropological reality of humans created in God’s image. A full understanding of Christ’s work of redemption requires a theologically developed general anthropology based on concrete human experience. Merely citing biblical givens and biblical imagery, while important and necessary, is not sufficient. A biblical theology is not enough.

Earlier we took note of Bavinck’s claim that a contemporary soteriology, notably in the discussion of the *ordo salutis*, had to take religious psychology more seriously than earlier dogmatics had done.<sup>12</sup> Bavinck’s own expansion of his discussion<sup>13</sup> in the second edition of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* includes what I judge to be one of the most remarkable passages in the entire work. The expansion includes considerable new biblical and church-historical dogmatic material but the most striking truly new material is the move Bavinck makes from the subjectivity of Pietism to an extensive discussion of subjectivity and religious experience in modern philosophy beginning with Immanuel Kant (§ 423 ff.). Only one numbered paragraph (§ 10) and four pages are dedicated to this in the first edition, the second edition has five (§§ 423-427a) covering 33 pages. For our purposes, the most instructive new section is § 427a in which Bavinck summarizes the studies on the psycho-social development of adolescents by the American empirical psychologist Stanley Hall. Bavinck notes that “the psychological study of religious experience has brought to light the close connection existing between the psychosomatic development of the years of puberty and the religious awakening and deepening which occurs in the same period.” Thus, “there is a close connection between puberty and conversion, love, and religion, sexual emotion and religious awakening.” While Bavinck does not give blanket approval to all the claims made by Hall, he nevertheless does insist that any theological examination of conversion and the life of sanctification must incorporate insights gained from the study of human religious experience. Though one would look in vain for parallel considerations in Francis Turretin, let us say, it is this sort of investigation that figures prominently in the investigation into religious psychology by Herman Bavinck’s nephew,

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12. “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.” (*Philosophy of Religion*, 209)

13. § 43, “De Heilsorde,” in the first edition had 14 numbered paragraph subsections spread over 60 pages; § 48 in the second edition had 23 numbered sub-paragraphs (§§ 410-432, with § 427 repeated in the second edition, and labeled as 427a and 427b in subsequent editions) spread over 140 pages.

the missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964).<sup>14</sup>

To summarize: In his treatment of the work of Christ as well as in its application in human salvation, Bavinck practiced in the *Reformed Dogmatics* what he preached in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, namely moving beyond a mere biblical theology to a anthropological-metaphysically grounded foundation in religious consciousness.

### 3. The Turn to Revelation and Response (Subjectivity and Objectivity)

As we turn to Bavinck's theological heirs we notice a shift away from the attention to religion as an anthropological reality seriously to be considered in formulating theological propositions to a desire for biblical theology that is not so much metaphysically oriented as it is relationally guided.

#### 3.1. G. C. Berkouwer

On this point alone,<sup>15</sup> there is an immediately noticeable difference in the manner G. C. Berkouwer treats the subject of revelation, beginning with his dissertation, *Geloof en Openbaring in de Nieuwere Duitse Theologie*.<sup>16</sup> Berkouwer treats some of the same figures dealt with by Bavinck in *Philosophy of Revelation* and *Reformed Dogmatics* I,—notably Frank, Troeltsch, and Ritschl—but his concern, as the title of his study indicates, is with the subjectivity/objectivity polarity as expressed in the correlation of faith and revelation, and not with the relation between religion and revelation. Unlike Bavinck's strong opposition to the faith/knowledge dualism of post-Kantian theology and his insistence that theology truly deals with the knowledge of God, an insistence that leads him to affirm metaphysics and religion as foundational for doing theology, Berkouwer seems less interested in taking sides in such metaphysical questions than in transcending them by a correlation.<sup>17</sup>

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14. Cf. Paul J. Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck [1895-1964]* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), especially chapter 5.

15. The observations that follow with respect to G. C. Berkouwer are not intended as a global judgment on his theological work but only on the one issue of how to relate revelation to religion.

16. Utrecht: Kemink, 1932.

17. That "correlation" is the guiding methodological principle in Berkouwer's theology is a truism in Berkouwer scholarship. See, eg., G. W. De Jong, *De Theologie van dr. G. C. Berkouwer. Eeb Strukturele Analyse* (Kampen: Kok, 1971); H. Berkhof, "De Methode van Berkouwers Theologie," in *Ex Auditū Verbi*, ed. R. Schippers, et al.



Thus he objects to the failure of objectivists and subjectivists alike in the New German theology to realize that the proper correlativity of subject and object is maintained when a proper faith in Scripture is characterized by a “living, personal, trustworthy (*levende, persoonlike, vertrouwensvolle*) relationship.”<sup>18</sup> Berkouwer characteristically eschews “speculation” in favor of a purely biblical, relational theology.

I am less interested here in discussing, as Hendrikus Berkhof did, the development of Berkouwer’s doctrine of Scripture from the traditional position of “complete and full authority of Scripture” (*het volstrekte gezag der Schrift*), to an emphasis on the salvation content (*heilsinhoud*), to the final emphasis on the “existential tendency” (*existentiële strekking*) of Scripture,<sup>19</sup> than I am in the more fundamental question whether already in his dissertation Berkouwer shifted the parameters of Reformed theology away from those of Bavinck.<sup>20</sup> Compared to Calvin’s correlation of the “knowledge of God” and the “knowledge of man,” Berkouwer’s faith-revelation correlation is already a concession to subjectivity. It is fair to ask whether Berkouwer’s category shift does not in fact represent a capitulation to the anti-metaphysical tendency in modern theology.<sup>21</sup> At the very least, Berkouwer’s shift represents a failure to continue the resistance carried on mightily by Bavinck. Here, Berkouwer’s failure to provide a prolegomena to his series *Dogmatic Studies* is noteworthy, especially since the first volume, *Geloof en Rechtdaarding* advertised a prolegomena volume as the projected first in a series of nineteen. It is also noteworthy that Berkouwer’s first published volume was on soteriology and the series never projected a separate volume on the doctrine of God.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the metaphysical questions Berkouwer ignored were addressed by Herman Dooyeweerd in his neo-Calvinist philosophy of the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* to which we now turn, albeit briefly.

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(Kampen: Kok, 1965), 37-55; G.E. Meuleman, “De Correlatie van geloof en openbaring bij G.C. Berkouwer,” *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 65 (1965): 209-216; D. Van Keulen, *Bijbel en Dogmatiek: Schriftbeschuwing en Schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), 352-365.

18. *Geloof en Openbaring*, 242. This is exactly the philosophical move made in the GKN synodical report on Scripture, *God Met Ons*; see section III. C below.

19. H. Berkhof, *Ex Auditū Verbi*, 41-48.

20. I am indebted for this insight to a former student, Dr. Randy Blacketer.

21. On this question see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. by Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

22. See D. Van Keulen, *Bijbel en Dogmatiek*, 358ff.

### 3.2. Herman Dooyeweerd

Herman Dooyeweerd needs to be mentioned in this overview for two reasons. First, along with G. C. Berkouwer and those whom he influenced, primarily but not exclusively, as *Doktorvater*, the reformational philosophy of the *Cosmonomic Law-Idea* (*Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*) in general and Dooyeweerd's critique of Kuyper and Bavinck's metaphysics in particular, created a formidable team of opposition to the metaphysics of "scholasticism" still present in neo-Calvinism. In an essay entitled "Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer,"<sup>23</sup> Dooyeweerd included a repudiation of Bavinck's *Logos*-speculation as part of a neo-Platonic, Thomistic, scholastic religious ground-motive, at odds with the biblical, reformational, ground motive. Faith as a formal function and not human rationality should be the foundation of a reformational philosophy and theology.<sup>24</sup> On this point, Dooyeweerd reserves his praise for Kuyper alone. "Kuyper alone made a bold stroke by which with one blow he turned around the anthropological perspective in a radically biblical direction."<sup>25</sup> Influenced by the *Cosmonomic Law-Idea*, Westminster Seminary theologian Cornelius Van Til, in an extended review of R. Bremmer's *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, also highlights the need to "avoid Scholasticism" and all forms of "ontologism" in theological method in favor of a truly biblical one.<sup>26</sup>

I am more interested in the fact of Dooyeweerd's critique than in the details—because the second reason for mentioning him is the direct influence his critique (along with that of Berkouwer) played in the work of a North American neo-Calvinist, Gordon J. Spykman's *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics*.<sup>27</sup> Spykman follows Berkouwer in rejecting the "scholastic theology" of Bavinck and Berkhof in favor of a more explicitly biblical theology

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23. Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer," *Philosophia Reformata* 4 (1939): 193-232.

24. For further development of this dimension of Dooyeweerd's own thought see James H. Olthuis, "Dooyeweerd on Religion and Faith," in C. T. McIntire, ed., *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd: Reflections on Critical Philosophy in the Christian Tradition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 21-40. Kuyper develops this idea most fully in *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1909), II, 72-94.

25. "Slechts Kuyper deed hier den geweldigen greep, welke met één slag den anthropologischen kijk in schriftuurlijken zin radicaal omwendt." (Kuyper's *Wetenschapsleer*," 211-12); Dooyeweerd adds that neither the VU classicist Woltjer nor Bavinck developed this notion (p. 212).

26. Cornelius Van Til, "Bavinck the Theologian: A Review Article," *Westminster Theological Journal* 24 (1961): 48-64.

27. Published by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992; page references that follow in the text are to this work.

combined with the insights of the new reformational philosophy inspired by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.<sup>28</sup> It is to Spykman's credit that he wants to think through the philosophical and anthropological issues that are essential to theological prolegomena.<sup>29</sup> I also salute his deep desire to break the faith/knowledge dualism of modernity (p. 14) though I am not convinced that he entirely succeeds, in large measure because I am not sure he is really committed to the same unity Bavinck was. While Bavinck's metaphysics was grounded in the continuity provided by the *Logos* who created and became incarnate in Jesus Christ, Spykman introduces a new idea, a "three-factor" understanding of the Word of God, and he follows Dooyeweerd in insisting that theology is not, contra Bavinck, about the knowledge of God, but about *faith*, the so-called *pistic* or confessional function (103). He happily agrees with another thinker's definition of theology as "pistology" (104), unaware that this term was apparently a favorite of H. Richard Niebuhr.<sup>30</sup> When faith becomes the focal point of theology, even when the discussion is framed in terms of correlations between subject and object,<sup>31</sup> it is fair, I believe, to conclude as Hendrikus Berkhof does about Berkouwer's theological method, that it displays "an element of modernity."<sup>32</sup>

### 3.3. *God Met Ons* ("God With Us")

What I have been arguing up to now is that his Dutch neo-Calvinist heirs turned away from Bavinck's insistence upon connecting biblical revelation with religion as a universal anthropological constant to a more subjectively oriented "pure" biblical theology that correlates revelation with faith. Bavinck's concern to provide a metaphysically appropriate antidote to Kantian agnosticism concerning true knowledge of God was lost in the greater concern to overcome the subject/object problem. What was hinted at in Berkouwer's theological method is brought to full measure in the 1979 report on scriptural authority to the *Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland* Synod of Delft, *God Met Ons*.<sup>33</sup>

What is interesting about this report is that it does not avoid

28. See Chapter One, "Rationale and Prospectus," (*Reformational Theology*, 3-12).

29. This is an advance over his teacher Berkouwer.

30. See H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Richard R. Niebuhr *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 63-64.

31. This is exactly Niebuhr's overriding preoccupation in *Faith on Earth*.

32. *Ex Auditū Verbi*, 46.

33. *God Met Ons...over de aard van het Schriftgezag*, Kerkinformatie, § 113. Citations which follow are taken from the translation provided by the Reformed Ecumenical Council and referenced by section number.

addressing the philosophical-epistemological question but tackles it head on.<sup>34</sup> Most significantly, it points to a new understanding of truth that it claims has become self-evident in the increasingly complex, modern scientific world. Truth, is no longer to be understood in terms of the subject/object polarity, truth is “relational,” meaning “that truth always occurs within a relation, with the related of man to something else” (§ I. 6). This means, among other things, that we can say nothing about God apart from his relatedness to us, he far transcends our knowledge (§ I.11); that the time/eternity distinction is a form of Greek dualism to be rejected in favor of a biblical relational view where “eternity is always present in our ordinary time” (§ I. 13); and that we can no longer say that the Christian message is the only and true way *apriori* but await the judgment of history: “In the dialogue with the religions of the world the deciding factor must be: which truth will prove to be dependable. So here there is no definitive answer but there are new possibilities toward a genuinely biblical reflection of the spiritual relations in our expanding world” (§ I. 14). In sum: “Truth is that which is reliable” (§ I. 15).

While *God Met Ons* does refer to the religions of the world, this reference is tangential and the report does not engage in a deeper examination of the idea of revelation as such but limits itself to Scripture, biblical authority, historical criticism of the Bible, and biblical interpretation. For a more serious look at the reality of religion in relation to revelation we must turn to another heir of the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition, Harry Kuitert.

#### 4. The Turn to Religion: Harry Kuitert

Earlier in this paper I suggested that Berkouwer’s revelation-faith correlation as an attempt to account for and transcend the subject-object polarity is itself already something of a concession to modernist epistemology. I believe that this is clearly illustrated in the report *God Met Ons* and also in the progressive development of the correlation theme in the theology of another Berkouwer pupil, Harry Kuitert.<sup>35</sup> Kuitert’s dissertation, *De Mensvormigheid Gods*,<sup>36</sup> is a thoroughgoing and brilliant application of the correlation principle to

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34. For a solid critique of the philosophical arguments in *God Met Ons* see John Cooper, “The Changing Face of Truth,” in John Bolt, ed., *Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis in the Reformed Community Today* (Jordan Station, Ont., Paideia, 1986), 33-58.

35. I am here summarizing and updating an earlier treatment of Kuitert’s theological method; J. Bolt, “The Principle of Correlation in H. M. Kuitert’s Theological Method,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 14 (1979): 5-31.

36. Kampen: Kok, 1961.

the “problem” of anthropomorphic language concerning God in the Bible. Kuitert insists that making the judgment that all anthropomorphic language is accommodation to human finitude (Bavinck’s view) means that one “has at that moment stepped outside of a real relation between God and man.”<sup>37</sup> Correlation here becomes a material critical principle as well as a formal one. Being committed to seeing dogmatics as hermeneutics, as the interpretation of Scripture,<sup>38</sup> Kuitert eschews the possibility of any metaphysically oriented doctrine of God in favor of the simple biblical notion that God is the human person’s covenant partner. The only thing one can say about God is that “His Being is Being- in-Covenant” (title of chapter 7).

Though Kuitert in his dissertation remained within the faith/revelation correlation, in the course of his writing career his correlation evolves with new elements entering the picture. In *De Realiteit van het Geloof*<sup>39</sup> (*The Reality of Faith*) Kuitert, in line with his teacher Berkouwer, seeks to overcome the objectivist/subjectivist dilemma and does so with a sustained criticism of “metaphysical theology.”<sup>40</sup> Kuitert believes he has found a “third way” beyond the *fides quae/fides qua* distinction by joining objective and subjective faith in Christian tradition. The older metaphysical theology is no longer adequate because “the presuppositions on which the traditional metaphysic must function are foreign to modern thought and life” and the church should avoid “the language of a ghetto or the esoteric language of art.”<sup>41</sup> Here the correlation Kuitert uses is not simply that of Christian faith and biblical revelation, but “faith” is expanded to incorporate modern consciousness as a factor as well.

To summarize further developments in Kuitert’s thought to the present, it is enough to note that Kuitert’s correlation continues to expand beyond that of Christian faith and biblical revelation to one of general revelation and the faith (search for faith) of modern man,<sup>42</sup> to

37. H. Kuitert, *De Mensvormigheid Gods*, 95.

38. The goal of hermeneutics (and dogmatics) is the understanding of Scripture for the purpose of preaching (“*met de oog op de prediking*” (*De Mensvormigheid Gods*, 9).

39. Kampen: Kok, 1966. English translation by Lewis B. Smedes, *The Reality of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

40. There is an interesting difference in subtitles in the two editions. The original Dutch, indicating Kuitert’s primary concern with the metaphysically objective theology of Protestant Orthodoxy, carries the subtitle: “Over de Antimetaphysische Tendes in de Huidige Theologie,” while the English edition emphasizes the effort to overcome the subjective/objective dilemma: “A Way Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Existentialist Theology.”

41. *The Reality of Faith*, 141, 142.

42. A telling passage can be found in H. Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?* Trans. By Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 31: “Thus faith moves back and forth between *God-in-the-Scriptures* and *God-in-the -World*, between

a correlation of searching, hoping, humanity and the liberating God.<sup>43</sup> The final outcome of this development is Kuitert's departure from the faith/revelation correlation with its strong biblical-theological focus, to a directed attention to religion itself as a strictly human phenomenon.<sup>44</sup>

We have thus come full circle back to religion, but now without the confidence Bavinck exhibited in placing religion, though itself a response to revelation in general, under the searching light of biblical revelation. When metaphysics is set aside in favor of a purely biblical theology it does not depart altogether but returns in a different guise. That should be one of the important lessons learned from this history.

### 5. The Exception: J. H. Bavinck

What I have been arguing in this essay is that Dutch neo-Calvinist theology after Bavinck failed to incorporate into its work the insistence of Herman Bavinck on an anthropologically sensitive metaphysics of religion. Instead, beginning with Berkouwer's efforts to transcend the subjective/objective dilemma by eschewing all metaphysics and methodologically taking refuge in the idea of correlation, the door was opened for the very subjectivism that Berkouwer himself repudiated. There is, however, one significant exception to this general departure from Bavinck's position and it is, remarkably, to be found in the theological work of Herman Bavinck's missiologist nephew, Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964).<sup>45</sup>

Taking the reality of the world's concrete religions very seriously as data for Christian theology, J. H. Bavinck also was also a pioneer in the area of religious psychology and spirituality.<sup>46</sup> The links

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God as He has let himself be declared in Jesus...and God as He is busy creating a name for himself in the world. We move from the Scriptures to the world; we look to the world eager to see whether and where the covenant-partner God is at work there." (Emphasis added)

43. This is the position in H. Kuitert, *Zonder Geloof Vaart Niemand Wel* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1974); English translation by John K. Tuinstra, *The Necessity of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); and also in *Wat Heet Gelooven?* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1977). For further details, see, Bolt, "Kuitert's Theological Method," 24ff.

44. See, e.g., H. M. Kuitert, *Voor een Tijd een Plaats van God: Een Karakteristiek van de Mens* (Baarn: Ten Have, 2003); and idem., *Over Religie: Aan de Liefhebbers Onder Haar Beoefenaars* (Baarn: Ten Have, 2000).

45. See, eg., Paul J. Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck [1895-1964]* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

46. See his *Religieus Besef en Christelijk Geloof* (Kampen, 1948); *Zielkundige Opstellen* (Bandoeng: Javasche Boekhandel & Drukkerij, 1925); and *Inleiding in de zielkunde* (Kampen, J. H. Kok, 1926).

between the uncle and nephew on this point alone deserve further study.

## 6. The New Challenge:

Insight is so often a matter of timing. The idea for this essay came about when in the winter quarter of the 2003-2004 school year I taught a master's-level seminar covering the three volumes of Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*.<sup>47</sup> I had recently finished editing and helped bring into print the English translation of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume I, and was struck by key similarities of thought and by common reference to key theologians of the nineteenth-century involved in the academic study of religion, especially in its relation to the Christian religion and to issues of revelation—Lipsius, Twesten, Pfeiderer Frank, Nitzsch. Rothe, Biedermann, Tiele, and, of course, Ernst Troeltsch. I wondered what the commonality was, if any, and came to the tentative conclusion that both Bavinck and Pannenberg, *in contrast to Barth*, took religion seriously as something Christian theology has to bring into its purview. Furthermore, both, again in contrast to Barth, insisted upon a metaphysical grounding for theological claims; a kerygmatic theology is not sufficient. While they adopt quite different metaphysics—Bavinck surely would not be happy with the role that Hegel plays in Pannenberg's theology—they both repudiate the deliberate rejection of metaphysics found in much post-Barth continental theology, including, I suggest, the theology of G. C. Berkouwer.

In conclusion, from this quick overview of Dutch neo-Calvinist theology after Bavinck, I make two tentative proposals. My assumption is that the task of Reformed dogmatic theology is to provide a coherent summary of Christian truth taught in Scripture that is faithful to the church's teaching and restates this in terms that communicate effectively as well as truthfully in the contemporary context. I believe that Reformed theology today is well situated to address the global realities of religious pluralism and especially the growing tension and struggle with Islam. As Bavinck himself noted, the Reformed faith is a catholic faith and it has been blessed with an intellectual tradition, including theology, matched in Christendom only by Roman Catholicism. In that task Reformed systematic theology today has two major tasks:

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47. English edition translated by Geoffrey Bromiley and published by Eerdmans, 1991-1998. I am deeply indebted to the 15 wonderful students who participated in this seminar for their insight and profound questions about Pannenberg's theology.

1. It needs to affirm a modest natural theology that is anthropologically attuned to the concrete religious experience of people in the twenty-first century.
2. It needs a revived realistic metaphysics. The problem of modern theology, as Bavinck knew well, is the separation of faith from knowledge. Fideistic solutions that appeal to the Bible alone will not do.

I conclude this with a confirming word from John Paul II:

For faith clearly requires that human speech should, in some universal way give expression—even though voiced analogically, but no less meaningfully—to divine, transcendent reality. Deprived of this assumption, the Word of God, which despite its human language, remains divine, could signify nothing of God.<sup>48</sup>

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48. *Fides et Ratio*, § 84. My thanks to Eduardo Echeverria for calling my attention to this passage, for the insights of his unpublished essay, “Overcoming the Dualism between Faith and Knowledge: On the Relation Between the Word of God and Metaphysics,” and for our stimulating conversations about the two Hermans (Bavinck and Dooyeweerd).