

“Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us”: The Reformed Spirituality of Herman Bavinck

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The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, and the American response to them have confronted us with one overt and one hidden problem. On the face of it, it would seem to consist of an opposition between the success of Western culture with its parliamentary democracy and free market, on the one hand, and the incapability of the Arab world to offer a serious alternative, on the other. Whether one agrees with Huntington, who believes that this collision of civilizations is a problem that is here to stay, or that it will inevitably lead to the downfall of the Arab world and with that—to quote Fukayama—the end of the affair, the West continues to look for a solution to the problem in the political and economic sphere: Democratization and globalization are the key words.

However, even if the Americans keep repeating that their reaction to the attacks are targeted against terrorists and dictatorships and are definitely not against Islam, this religion cannot be ignored in the conflict—however much one tries. In the Arab world, there is at least some sympathy for the opinion that this conflict is a *holy war*. However, in the West, too, these attacks do not exclude the religious aspect as was clear from the images from the United States. Echoes of “Allah is great” can be heard in Islamabad, but, by the same token, we hear the words “God bless America” in Philadelphia.

For many Europeans and liberal Americans, religion in this conflict is a *corpus alienum*. However, is it not the case that they are separating themselves from reality? This is where we reach the second layer in this conflict for world hegemony, and it concerns both Western and Eastern cultures. It is the opposition between religion and modernity.¹ This opposition is less apparent and is often blurred by inaccurate perceptions. The Eastern person often criticizes the West without making the distinction between the secular and the religious—in

¹ See: Peter van der Veer, *Modern orientalism: Essays over de westerse beschavingsdrang* (Amsterdam, 1995).

casu—Christian aspects of modernity. The Western person criticizes the East for its religiosity, believing that his own modernity is a victory over religion.

The problem raised by the attacks of September 11 is not only about how the East can be reconciled with the West in political and economic terms but also concerns the place of religion within a rapidly spreading modern society. For the Western world, the latter problem is in fact the greater challenge of the two. Whoever does not know Islam cannot learn to interact with it; whoever underestimates religion in his own world banishes the heart from his own culture.

The most important lesson that can be learned from the West's history of modernity is that religion has been quite wrongly ignored. Secularization was to herald an end to religion, but religion is the common denominator of all the post-Cold War conflicts. The West, contaminated by the Enlightenment, is wary of this theme: "The irrational precinct of the mind which needs invisible spirits can be dangerous, and has brought untold misery," was how James Haught paraphrased the Western feeling toward religion. "Thinking people must strive constantly to hold it in check. . . . The evidence seems clear: To find living conditions that are safe, decent, orderly, and 'civilized,' avoid places with intense religion."²

However, if the West wishes to control conflicts such as the current one, it will have to learn not to fear them or explain them away. Extremism flourishes in situations where there is exclusion. This is not done by the secular, a-religious spokesmen but by the religious—theologians and religious leaders—those who are best deemed capable of refuting the arguments and putting an end to the power of those who propagate, or turn a blind eye to, violence. Whoever continues to marginalize religion in our modern world and to bar its participation in public discourse indirectly continues to maintain extremism. As it applies to Muslims and Christians that they should learn to respect each other, so modernity has to learn to respect religion. The time has come for a rehabilitation of theology.

However, this goal can only be reached if Muslims, Christians, and followers of other faiths do not turn their backs on modern society but continue to contribute to it as believers. That, therefore, asks for an investment from Christians.

As Christians, we look toward the Scriptures and history for guidance. In the light of the current problem, a witness from the past can be of help, such as the Dutch reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), whose work is praised for its breadth of vision and maturity of opinion. The crux of his work lies in his contemplation of the relationship between two powers that concern us now and that, in his day, were sworn enemies: the old faith and modern culture; orthodoxy and modernity. Bavinck refused to leave one out in the cold and searched throughout his life for a certain synthesis between modernity and religion. Why and how did he do this?

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²James A. Haught, *Holy Hatred: Religious Conflicts of the '90s* (New York, 1995), 232.

If, in Dutch Reformed circles, Abraham Kuyper was the man who loved pomp and circumstance, then Bavinck was the man of quiet contemplation and encounter. In his memoir, Dr. G. C. Berkouwer described Bavinck's aim in one word: catholicity.³ At that time, his dogmatic and philosophical work formed a new exposition of Christian belief in relationship to modern culture, whereby rather than the words *heathenism* and *antithesis* giving the relationship color, he used the words *synthesis* and *catholicity*.

For the theme of this publication, it is important to note that Bavinck's academic position was closely linked to his character and personal experience. His spirituality is characterized by a great respect for both modern culture and the tradition of the Reformed Faith; within this context, he only used harsh words against the excrescence of pride, on the one hand, and narrow-mindedness, on the other. His spirituality could be called moderate, but it was based on a severe tension, which even today lurks within our culture, because how can one be a modern Westerner and also a disciple of the Crucified?

Bavinck's life shows the measure to which this theme of religion and modernity and his synthetic aim in church and science was tied up with his own experiences. Born in 1854 in the Netherlands, he grew up in a Christian Reformed clergyman's family in an atmosphere that was characterized by "a somewhat unworldly sense of secessionist pietism."⁴ However, as his friend Henry Dosker, who came from the same social background and had emigrated to the United States in 1873, wrote, Herman Bavinck "was so like and yet so absolutely unlike his parents."⁵ When he opted for a theological education, it was not piety or the ministry but theology itself, an academic discipline, that was his aim. There seems to have been no question of *Kulturfeindlichkeit*. In order to learn that profession thoroughly, he even left the Theological School at Kampen, which had ties with his own Christian Reformed Church, in order to study at the theological faculty in Leiden, the breeding ground of modern theology and of many modern theologians. It was here that the question as to how to be a believer in a modern culture grew to become the most important question in his life.

In order to indicate how dangerous Bavinck's switch to Leiden was believed to be within his own secessionist circle, I can do no better than reproduce a fragment of a letter with the reaction to the news that Bavinck had not only gone to Leiden for his propaedeutic year but from the fall of 1876 on would continue with his theology studies there. This excerpt is from his friend Dosker:

³ See the chapter "Katholiciteit. H. Bavinck," in *Zoeken en vinden. Herinneringen en ervaringen* (Kampen, 1989), 40-70.

⁴ According to a friend from the same circle, Geerhardus Vos in a letter to A. Eekhof, October 28, 1932. A. Eekhof Archives, Historical Documentation Centre for Dutch Protestantism, Free University, Amsterdam (HDC). Dutch original: "den ietwat waereld-afkeerigen geest van het oud-afgescheiden piëtisme."

⁵ Henry Elias Dosker, "Herman Bavinck," *The Princeton Theological Review* 20 (1922): 449.

I thank God that you have remained true, amongst all the heathen attacks around you. What are Herman's reasons for studying theology *there* was the question which, perforce, arose in my mind. Leiden, the focal point of modernism. The names of Kuenen, Scholten, etc. are, alas, all too familiar. What can you seek there . . . Only this, in my opinion, a thorough knowledge of the plan of attack, the weapons and the enemy's strength. God help you, Herman, to remain true to your choice to persevere and to choose the clear truth of faith of our historical Christianity above all the flickering light rays of an enemy science. And yet, *you risk a lot*. We are both susceptible to the influence of apparently logical arguments. We are growing, tender plants that are bent in the storm and easily keep a misshapen form; you will, I think, have to withdraw within the narrow walls of your own opinions; you will have to be on the defensive and as a result *have* to adopt a somewhat terse opinion of the truth, while you can grow and develop *only* by attack. These are just a few points that I would like to see cleared up in your next letter. What are your reasons for studying in Leiden? What do you expect? What is the general opinion on this question?⁶

Dosker's letter was a typical secessionist reaction. Modern science was the enemy and was best avoided. Bavinck's answer to these questions has not survived, but we do know that he was familiar with the background that gave rise to Dosker's questions. When, a few years later in August 1879, Dosker visited the Netherlands, he stayed with Bavinck. The latter had nearly completed his studies in Leiden and was living with his parents in Kampen once more. During this meeting it is quite possible that while reminiscing, the same theme was discussed that Dosker had referred to in his letter of 1876: Had, with hindsight, the years spent in Leiden been useful? A few days after Dosker's departure, Bavinck wrote the following on the subject in a letter to another friend, his liberal fellow student, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje:

⁶ H. E. Dosker to H. Bavinck, December 23, 1876. H. Bavinck Archives, HDC. Dutch original: Ik dank God, dat ge tot nog toe staande gebleven zijt, te midden van al de aanvallen des ongeloofs rondom u. Wat beweegt toch Herman om *daar* theologie te gaan studeeren, was de vraag, die zich, nolens volens, aan mijn geest voordeed. Leiden, de focus van het modernisme. De namen van Kuenen, Scholten, etc. helaas maar al te zeer bekend. Want kunt ge daar zoeken . . . Dit eene, mijns inziens, een volledige bekendheid met het plan van aanval, de wapenrusting en sterkte der vijanden. God helpe u, Herman, om standvastig bij uwe keuze te volharden en de heldere geloofswaarheid van ons historisch christendom te kiezen, boven al de flikkerende lichtstralen eener vijandige wetenschap. Toch *ge waagt veel*. Wij zijn beiden vatbaar voor de invloed van schijnbaar logische argumenten. We zijn groeiende, teere planten, die door de storm gebogen worden en gemakkelijk een scheeve richting behouden; gij zult u daar dunkt me te zien moeten terugtrekken binnen de enge muren van eigen opvatting; ge zult te veel verdedigenderwijze moeten te werk gaan, en daardoor wellicht een eenigszins gedrongen opvatting der waarheid *moeten* aannemen, terwijl ge groeien en ontwikkelen kunt, *alleen* door aan te vallen. Zie hier eenige puntjes, die ik gaarne zag opgehelderd in uw volgend schrijven. Wat beweegt u om te Leiden te studeeren? Wat verwacht ge ervan? Wat zegt de algemeene opinie dienaangaande?

Leiden has been useful to me in numerous ways; I hope always to acknowledge it with gratitude. But it has made me often very poor; has deprived me not only of much excess baggage (of which I am glad) but also much of which I later learned was indispensable for my own spiritual life, particularly when I came to write sermons [as a candidate in the Christian Reformed Church].⁷

It is noteworthy that the secessionist Bavinck, even in this critical assessment of his student days, spoke of Leiden as *useful*. He did not forget modern theology and its critical questions for the orthodoxy (as far as he was concerned particularly regarding contemplations on Scripture), but it never satisfied him. Characteristic in this regard is his choice of text for his first sermon, held in Enschede in 1878. This sermon was on 1 John 5:4b: “This is the victory that overcometh the world, *even* our faith.” Here—according to a later version of this sermon—he juxtaposed the faith, of which this text speaks, and the world “that closed entirety of visible and invisible things,” which means a creation at odds with God because of sin. To this world, the arts and sciences also belonged, of which he wrote: “No matter which laurels science has accumulated in its field, never has it freed one single man’s soul from guilt and sin and aided him in appearing fearless before God.”⁸

Yet, he refused to take the consequences that he had to *choose* between faith and science. All his theological work can be regarded as a refutation of the duality of faith and culture, which was, given his secessionist background, so familiar to him and for which a meeting with modern theology offered such an opportunity. This rejection of duality, which he knew from the Secession and from Leiden, was a decisive step in Bavinck’s spiritual development and became characteristic of his Reformed spirituality.

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Bavinck took his doctoral degree in Leiden and became doctor of theology in 1880. He was not sure then which direction his life ought to take. Bavinck was careful—also toward himself. The acceptance of a position in the Christian Reformed Church in Franeker at the end of the same year did, however, bring more clarity. Dosker responded from America, happy and surprised:

I was astonished to read in the papers of your acceptance of the call of Franeker. Why? Because of the struggles, through which you passed as described in your last letter? Have the 37 articles [of the Dutch creed] become plainer or more acceptable than before? Knowing your character, I

⁷ Bavinck to C. Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, in *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875-1921* ed. J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck, (Baarn, 1999), 56-57.

⁸ H. Bavinck, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs. Leerrede over 1 Joh. 5:4b uitgesproken in de Burgwalkerk te Kampen den 30en juni 1901* (Kampen, 1901):15, 20. Dutch original: “Welke lauweren de wetenschap nu op haar terrein moge hebben behaald, nooit heeft zij ééne enkele menschenziel bevrijd van schuld en zonde en zonder verschrikking doen verschijnen voor het aangezicht Gods.”

must accept that as the most plausible explanation and I do thank the Lord for this victory of faith.⁹

In short, a victory of faith. That Dosker assessed the situation correctly despite his years of absence, appears from what Bavinck wrote to his friend Snouck Hurgronje during those months of decision-making:

Now I have left Leiden and look upon modern theology and the modern world view somewhat differently than when I was still so strongly influenced by Kuenen and Scholten, now things seem so different than they appeared then. I learned much in Leiden, but also forgot much. The latter could in part have been detrimental to me, but I am increasingly aware of its detriment. The age in which our long-held principles were flung into the melting-pot of criticism, is over. Now is the time to be faithful to the principles we now hold and to defend them with the weapons we have at our disposal.¹⁰

After years of doubt, Bavinck had come to a firm decision. It appears from letters written at a later date to Snouck in his Franeker period that modernism was gradually losing much of its appeal to Bavinck. During these “golden years,”¹¹ he was in the company of parishioners and learned to appreciate the practical side of being a clergyman. With all the respect that he continued to show for modern science, he increasingly became aware of what Dosker called “the misshapen form,” the crooked growth that he had undergone in Leiden. “No, it is true,” he wrote in a candid letter to Snouck on January 13, 1881:

Kuenen and Scholten have not influenced me much (except in the case of the contemplations on Scripture), if you thereby mean losing faith and taking on another, theirs. However, they have (it could not have been otherwise) influenced the power of and manner in which I embrace those truths. The innocence of a child’s faith, the unlimited trust in the truth as it has been instilled, you see, that is what I have lost and that is a lot, a great deal; in that way their influence has been great and strong.

And now I do know that I will never regain it. I even approve of it and am truly and sincerely grateful for losing it. In that innocence there was much that was untrue and had to be purified. And yet, in that innocence (I know

⁹ Dosker to Bavinck, February 12, 1881. Bavinck Archives.

¹⁰ Bavinck to Snouck, November 24, 1880, in *Leidse vriendschap*, ed. De Bruijn and Harinck, 75-76. Dutch original: “Nu ik uit Leiden weg ben, en de moderne theologie en de moderne wereldbeschouwing wat anders in de oogen zie, dan toen ik zoo sterk onder den invloed van Kuenen en Scholten stond, nu lijkt mij veel weer heel anders toe dan waarin het mij toen voorkwam. Ik heb in Leiden veel geleerd, maar ook veel verlerd. Dat laatste kan ten deele schadelijk voor mij gewerkt hebben, maar meer en meer begin ik dat schadelijke ervan in te zien. Het tijdperk, waarin onze van vroeger meegebrachte overtuigingen in den smeltkroes der kritiek geworpen zijn, is voorbij. ‘t Komt er nu op aan, de overtuigingen, die wij thans hebben, trouw te zijn en ze te verdedigen met de wapenen die ons ten dienste staan.”

¹¹ According to Dosker, *Herman Bavinck*, 452.

no better word to describe it) there was something that was good, that is a consolation; something that must remain if the truth is to be sweet and precious to us. And then sometimes—very rarely, because where can you find the unswerving faith of bygone times in this century?—when I meet people in my parish, who possess it and fare so well by it and are so happy, well, I cannot help it, but I wish I could believe again as they do, so happy and cheerful; and then I feel that if I had that, and could preach in such a way, animated, warm, always fully convinced of what I was saying, then I could be of help; living myself, I would live for others.

However I do know that it is over, that it is no longer possible. . . .¹²

Of modern theology he was increasingly critical. However it was not to be a final farewell. In his letters to Snouck Hurgronje, something else becomes clear—a longing that had been kindled in him through his contact with modernism. After a critical remark about the richness of faith of which he had been deprived, he finished the letter of 1879 with the wish “that we both, through struggle and doubt and suffering, always seek that which is inherently true and good . . . that we always grow closer in conviction and confession.”¹³ That longing for unity did not only concern this friendship, it was the *Leitmotiv* of Bavinck’s life. Also in science, he did not think of himself as a critic, not a cool analyst; he primarily looked for synthesis amongst his friends as well as in his faith and scholastic work.

Although in Franeker he became increasingly convinced that the Reformed principle of life had its consequences in all directions and that the church had its own life; its own creed; and, also in fact, its own science, he hoped that he would not turn deaf to the critical questions and issues of modern theology.

¹² De Bruijn and Harinck, *Leidse vriendschap*, 81. Dutch original: “Kuenen en Scholten hebben op mij (behalve in de Schriftbeschouwing) niet veel invloed gehad, als ge daaronder verstaat het verliezen van geloofswaarheden en het aannemen van andere, van de hunne. Maar zij hebben wel (hoe kon het anders) invloed gehad op de kracht en de wijze, waarmee ik die waarheden omhels. Het naïve van het kinderlijk geloof, van het onbegrensd vertrouwen op de mij ingeprente waarheid, zie, dat ben ik kwijt en dat is veel, heel veel; zoo is die invloed groot en sterk geweest. En nu weet ik wel, dat ik dat nooit terugkrijg. Zelfs vind ik het goed en ben ik er waarlijk en oprecht dankbaar voor, dat ik het verloren heb. Er was ook in dat naïve veel, wat onwaar was en gereinigd moest worden. Maar toch, er is in dat naïve (ik weet geen beter woord) iets, dat goed is, dat wel doet; iets dat blijven moet, zal de waarheid ons ooit zoet en dierbaar wezen. En als ik dan soms - heel enkel, want och, waar is het rotsensterke geloof van vroeger tijd nog in onze eeuw? - in de gemeente nog enkele mensen ontmoet, die dat hebben en er zoo wel bij zijn en zoo gelukkig, nu, ik kan het niet helpen, maar dan wenschte ik weer te gelooven als zij, zoo blij en zoo vrolijk; en dan voel ik, als ik dat had, en ik kon dan zoo preeken, beziel, warm, altijd ten volle overtuigd van wat ik zei, dan kon ik nuttig zijn; zelf levend, zou ik leven voor anderen.

Maar ik weet wel, dat is voorbij, dat is thans niet meer mogelijk.”

¹³ Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, in *Leidse vriendschap*, ed. De Bruijn and Harinck, 57. Dutch original: “dat we beiden door strijd en twijfel en lijden heen altijd nader komen aan wat wezenlijk waar en goed is ... dat wij altijd nader tot elkaar komen in overtuiging en belijdenis.”

This was the point he had reached when he was appointed professor of dogmatics at the Theological School in Kampen in 1882. His inaugural speech was on a favorite subject: “Science of Holy Theology.” This speech was not about piety but rather about *science*; he did not mean the modernistic theology but holy theology. Science and theology; they belong together.

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In answering the question as to what we have to invest in our culture today, we have to look at how these two relate to one another. Bavinck’s link between Christianity and culture was rooted in the common nature of the Christian creed, an aspect that he emphasized. By the word *common*, he meant that this creed spreads throughout the world, includes all believers, applies to all people, and is of meaning to the whole world. Christianity is a world religion, suitable to all peoples in every century and all walks of life and to every place and time. According to Bavinck, this commonness was closely connected to the one God, one Creator of all things and the one Redeemer. This Redeemer not only shed his blood for people’s sins but also for all creation. Bavinck emphasized this unity in the face of many Christians who, throughout the centuries, had limited the meaning of the gospel to the ethical—religious life—and undoubtedly did so to himself and his own contests.

“Advocates of disbelief,” so Bavinck explained, had vigorously used every form of avoidance of the world “and triumphantly declared Christianity the enemy of all culture and for that reason no longer befitting the present age, at least as far as humanity was concerned.”¹⁴

Bavinck undersigned the element of truth in this line of thought. Indeed, Christ had not come to earth to practice politics, be a scientist, or promote the arts. He came to die. Moreover, of his disciples, he demands that they follow him on this path. Whoever wants to maintain, enrich, deepen, and embellish his life will lose it; whoever prefers his parents to Christ is not worthy of him. It is better to enter into life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into hell fire. Anyone who tried to adapt these strict demands to modern demands would be deceived according to Bavinck. The gospel does not strive to improve a culture but to save it: “She measures creation by another, a higher, a moral standard and tests everything by the demand of godly justice.”¹⁵

¹⁴ H. Bavinck, *De offerande des lofs*, 2d. ed. (The Hague, 1901), 69. Dutch original: “Pleitbezorgers van het ongeloof,” zo lichte Bavinck toe, hebben gretig gebruik van gemaakt van elke vorm van wereldmijding “en triumfantelijk uitgeroepen, dat het christendom vijandig was aan alle cultuur en daarom in elk geval voor de menscheit van den tegenwoordigen tijd niet meer paste.”

¹⁵ Bavinck, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs*, 13, 14. Dutch original: “Zij legt aan het geschapene nog een anderen, een hooger, een zedelijken maatstaf en toetst alles aan den eisch der goddelijke gerechtigheid.”

In this other tendency of the gospel, Bavinck also recognized the openness to the world. Christ did not condemn culture:

All natural orders remain; they are not upturned by revolution but only created anew by the new mind. . . . Whosoever has searched for the heavenly kingdom and his justice, will receive all other things easily. The best Christian is the best citizen. With his confessions he does not withdraw from the natural life. But he carries them into life, high and proud and everywhere plants the banner of the cross. The Gospel of Christ is one good message for all creatures, for mind and heart, for soul and body, for family and society, for science and art.¹⁶

Elsewhere, for this reason, Bavinck called religion “a world-winning power.”¹⁷ However, he could not deny that the history of Christianity had often offered up as a very different image. In his opinion, it had just gone through one of the most difficult periods when, in the eighteenth century, it had floundered in pietistic waters and had no answer to rationalism. Yet, in the nineteenth century, in reaction to the reason of the Enlightenment, there had been a Christian revival, both within Protestantism and within the Roman-Catholic church. The progress booked by the Enlightenment had to be acknowledged in gratitude, but it seemed as if a giant had awoken. Bavinck pointed out that God’s Word went forth from day to day in order to exert a mighty influence in the hearts of modern people:

Notwithstanding all the criticism, the word of God comes to us in the Scriptures and tingles of mind and of life. . . . It awakens the deepest sensations and shocks the soul right down to its foundations; it finds out the sin, sharpens awareness of guilt, awakens remorse and regret, crushing the heart, but then awareness is filled with forgiveness, full of joy and happiness and enables new life and new work. And these religious, moral experiences are so powerful and rich that they are always victorious over rational arguments.¹⁸

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Offerande des lofs*, 76. Dutch original: “Alle natuurlijke ordeningen blijven; ze worden niet revolutionair omvergeworpen maar alleen door den nieuwen geest herschapen. . . . Wie het koninkrijk der hemelen en zijne gerechtigheid heeft gezocht, worden alle andere dingen in den schoot geworpen. De beste christen is de beste burger. Met zijne belijdenis staat hij niet buiten of tegenover het natuurlijke leven. Maar hij draagt ze hoog en fier het leven in, en plant overal de bannier van het kruis. Het evangelie van Christus is eene blijde boodschap voor alle creaturen, voor verstand en hart, voor ziel en lichaam, voor gezin en maatschappij, voor wetenschap en kunst.”

¹⁷ See the title of: Bavinck, *Wereldverwinnende Kracht des Geloofs*. Dutch original: “een wereldverwinnende kracht.”

¹⁸ H. Bavinck, *Het Christendom* (Baarn, 1912), 58-59. Dutch original: “Trots alle critiek, komt in de Schrift een woord Gods tot ons, dat tintelt van geest en van leven. . . . Het roept de diepste aandoeningen wakker, en schokt de ziel tot op hare fundamenten toe; het ontdekt de zonde, scherpt het schuldbesef, wekt berouw en leedwezen tot verbrijzeling des harten toe, maar dan stort het ook het bewustzijn van vergeving in, vervult met blijdschap en vreugde, en stelt tot een nieuw leven en een nieuwen arbeid in staat. En deze godsdienstige zedelijke ervaringen zijn zoo machtig en rijk, dat zij altijd weer over verstandelijke redeneeringen de overwinning behalen.”

The greatest fruits of this Christian life, as they developed during the nineteenth century, were, according to Bavinck, mercy, evangelization, and the mission. He believed particularly that the latter was of great importance because it was a force that opposed the attacks on Christianity and so—he quickly went on to add—on Western culture in the form of Islam and Buddhism. Bavinck did not believe in cultural relativism. According to him, the mission was not only powerful proof of Christianity's vitality but also one of the most important weapons in the defense of both Christianity and Western culture because culture could not do without religion. On the basis of the nineteenth-century Christian revival, Bavinck believed that

the hope was not unfounded that one day Christianity and culture, however much they were at odds now, would reach a synthesis. If God has truly come to us through Christ and in this century is the Provider and ruler of all things, then it is not only possible but also inevitable and it will appear in due time.¹⁹

In this optimistic state of mind, he was able to write to his liberal friend that he did not have to avoid modern science. After all: "May I say that I firmly believe that this age is also God's and He has planned good things for those who love him."²⁰ In his famous oration, "The Catholicity of Christianity and Culture" from 1888, his Reformed creed sounded as follows: "The Gospel is a good message not only for a few individuals but also for humanity, for families and society and the state, for the arts and sciences, for the whole cosmos, for all of creation that sighs." This was followed by a *laudatio* on faith, which in his personal life had so often been attacked but for which there was only high praise now: faith has

the promise of victory over the world. And that faith is catholic, not bound to a time or place, nor to one country or people; it can take effect under all circumstances, fits in with all forms of natural life, it is suitable to all ages, is useful for all things, is appropriate under all circumstances; it is free and independent, because it opposes nothing but sin alone and there is redemption for all sins in the blood of the cross.²¹

¹⁹ Bavinck, *Christendom*, 60. Dutch original: "de hoop niet ongegrond, dat er van christendom en cultuur, hoezeer ze thans veelszins vijandig tegenover elkander staan, eene synthese mogelijk is. Als God in Christus waarachtig tot ons is gekomen en Hij ook in deze eeuw de Onderhouder en regeerder aller dingen is, is ze niet alleen mogelijk, maar ook noodwendig en zal ze te harer tijd zeker aan het licht treden."

²⁰ Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 13, 1881, in *Leidse vriendschap*, ed. De Bruijn en Harinck, 82. Dutch original: "Mag ik het zeggen, ik geloof vast en zeker, ook deze tijd is van God en Hij heeft er wat goeds mee voor wie Hem liefheeft."

²¹ H. Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk: Ingeleid door drs. G. Puchinger* (Kampen, 1968), 38. Dutch original: "de belofte van de overwinning der wereld. En dat geloof is katholiek, aan geen tijd of plaats, aan geen land of volk gebonden; het kan ingaan in alle toestanden, zich aansluiten aan alle vormen van het natuurlijke leven, het is geschikt voor alle tijden, is tot alle dingen nut, komt te pas onder alle omstandigheden; vrij is het en onafhankelijk, want het bestrijdt niets dan de zonde alleen, en reiniging is er voor alle zonde in het bloed des kruises."

Bavinck was ready to admit that with his ideal of reconciling Christianity with culture he was aiming high, but it characterized his intention. "I do know," he wrote to Snouck shortly after pronouncing the oration, "the ideal I aim for is unattainable, but being human in the full sense of that word and then human in all things and a child of God—that seems to me to be the best of all. That is what I aim for."²²

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"The faith opposes nothing but sin alone." Thus, modern culture should not be rejected but hallowed by the faith. A high point concerning this theme in Bavinck's works can be found in his oration of 1911, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," which he pronounced as rector of the Free University where he had been professor since 1902. This speech shows that in his opinions about modern theology and modern culture on the one hand and Reformed orthodoxy on the other, he had remained the same after his crisis at the end of his student life. In his oration, he first of all described at length the high level of cultural and scientific development of the nineteenth century, particularly under the influence of technology that had led to a totally different world than that in which previous generations had lived. This part ended with this conclusion: "And we do not know what more will change in the future. Apparently we do not stand at the end, but at the beginning of a development. . . . God is doing great things in these times."²³ What is striking is the acceptance of the modern worldview and the link between it and God's work. Not without good reason did someone write: "Whoever reads the first 7 pages of the oration, imagines that he hears a modern theologian."²⁴

How did Bavinck combine his belief in sin and mercy with a loving Father in heaven with this modernity? At most, modern culture learned to know a God from afar, but the Bible reveals God at close quarters. Is that not another God? Is it not another world and another faith? In this, Bavinck held onto the firm belief that the God who, according to Romans 1, shows himself in his everlasting power is the same God who wants to be the Father of his children; the God, who in Psalm 103, is longsuffering and merciful and takes away our sins as far as east is from west: "All the Scriptures preach the unity of God, that is the unity

²² Bavinck, *Leidse vriendschap*, 136, 137.

²³ H. Bavinck, *Modernisme en orthodoxie: Rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 oktober 1911* (Kampen), 11. Dutch original: "En wij weten niet, wat er in de toekomst nog meer veranderen zal. Wij staan blijkbaar niet aan het einde, maar aan het begin van eene ontwikkeling. . . . God is bezig, groote dingen in deze tijden te doen."

²⁴ According to the Baptist vicar A. Binnerts, quoted in "Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen 1912," by C. Augustijn, in *In rapport met de tijd: 100 jaar theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit, 1880-1980* (Kampen, 1980), 95.

of the God of nature and the God of mercy.”²⁵ God is one, and as a result, Christianity is catholic.

Modern theology came off badly in this oration because Bavinck called the belief in the special revelation of Scripture a prerequisite for Christian faith. He outlined a future for Reformed theology in a modern culture, but he thought modern theology would come to nothing. Bavinck spoke in this oration about the poverty and emptiness of modern faith. In particular, Bavinck was against the modern way of thinking that the special revelation could not be determined objectively. If Christianity did not accept a revelation, an external work of God, then it had no right to exist.

The modern theologians were irritated. They felt that, due to their denial of the special revelation, they had been wrongly described by Bavinck as pseudo-believers. In a dialogue with them about his oration, he deviated completely from what he usually did when appearing in public.²⁶ He added a *personal* word to clarify his point of view, which harked back directly to the crisis in his student days. If during my education at Leiden, I took the viewpoint of modern theology,

then creation, fall, sin, atonement, forgiveness, conversion, rebirth, would have lost all their value, would become sounds, symbols. They remained realities. If I were to give them up, I would loose myself. At that point I said: that cannot be true. These realities are worth more, are facts that are more real than the difficulties in nature and Scripture. And thus, no tradition binds me except that which for myself, personally, in the depths of my soul, the life of my life, is the glory of my soul.²⁷

The discussions with his modern colleagues disappointed Bavinck, not because of the irreconcilable nature of modernism and orthodoxy—he did not want to go into that—but because of the pride and immodesty with which his modern colleagues and modern culture were convinced they were in the right. “Better than to attack orthodoxy,” he wrote, “is to inspect oneself, to review, defend oneself against its own sons,” and then Bavinck summed up the bitter fruits of modernity, which are known even today: materialism, corruption, atheism, immorality, and anarchy.²⁸ Modern culture had to learn that the threat to its survival lay not in orthodoxy but in the widespread lack of faith.

²⁵ Bavinck, *Modernisme*, 37. Dutch original: “Heel de Schrift predikt de eenheid Gods, dat is de eenheid van de God der natuur en van den God der genade.”

²⁶ See: V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam, 1921), 5.

²⁷ Quoted by Augustijn, “Bavinck ter vergadering,” 100. Dutch original: “dan verloren scheping, val, zonde, verzoening, vergeving, bekeering, wedergeboorte al hun waarde, werden klanken, symbolen. Ze bleven realiteiten. Als ik ze prijs gaf, verloor ik mijzelf. En toen heb ik gezegd: dat kan niet waar zijn. Deze realiteiten zijn meer waard, zijn reëler feiten dan de moeilijkheden in natuur en Schrift. Dus geen traditie bindt me, maar dat wat voor mij zelf persoonlijk, in ‘t diepst van mijn ziel, ‘t leven van mijn leven, de zaligheid mijner ziel is.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

Orthodoxy could possibly be conquered by another religious security but never by this modernism.

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Spirituality is the way in which a person experiences God, the world, and himself. Bavinck's relationship to God shows, much more strongly than one would expect given his openness toward culture, the characteristics of the Reformed circle in which he was raised. In this important way, too, his reflection on religion does not start with his own spirituality nor the sense of God present in the culture but in the special revelation of God in the Holy Scripture. This starting point is characteristic of *Reformed* spirituality. In writing about faith and the power of Scripture, Bavinck did not fit in with the terminology and the spirituality of modern theology—not even with that of his own Reformed theology. Whoever reads his sermon and the meditations in *De offerande des lofs* or his pastoral booklet *De zekerheid des geloofs* cannot ignore the language and the reflection that narrowly reflect the language of the Scriptures, very often verbatim—very often joyful. In his religious life, the somewhat melancholic Bavinck found the superior strength and the inspiration that taught him to accept life; elsewhere he never found the same support. Bavinck embraced, in the words of Augustine, an absolute authority in the faith, which did not deaden his doubt but did drown it out.²⁹

“Believing,” so Bavinck had discovered during his life, “is the work of God par excellence while it is his most precious and wonderful gift. It is a holding onto God, as if seeing the Invisible, knowing his love and supported by his grace, hoping for his allegiance.”³⁰ It is clear what Snouck Hurgronje meant when, after a visit to Bavinck's death bed in 1921, he wrote: “I am still completely under the impression of my last visit: saddened, but at the same time edified. I have never known my good friend to be anything other than pious. 1874-1921.”³¹

It is interesting to note that his Reformed beliefs did not hamper him in his relationship to the world in which he lived. Many in his environment—particularly those in secessionist circles, but also in modern circles—believed that the first should be subtracted from the second, either from pietistic diffidence toward the world or from the opinion that orthodoxy is equal to small-mind-

²⁹ Ibid., 109.

³⁰ H. Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs* (Kampen, 1901), 68. Dutch original: “Gelooven is het werk Gods bij uitnemendheid wijl het zijne kostelijkste en heerlijkste gave is. Het is een vasthouden van God, als ziende de Onzienlijke, een kennen van zijn liefde, een steunen op zijne genade, een hopen op zijn trouw.”

³¹ De Bruijn and Harinck, *Leidse vriendschap*, 186. Dutch original: “Ik ben nog geheel onder den indruk van mijn laatste bezoek: weemoedig, maar stichtelijk tevens. Anders dan vroom heb ik mijn goeden vriend trouwens niet gekend. 1874-1921.”

edness and underdevelopment. In relation to our current reflections on the relationship between belief and modernity, Bavinck's spirituality is of great importance. His starting point was the unity of God, which implies a catholic Christian faith—a faith of all times and of all places. Bavinck did not hesitate to discuss his old faith with his liberal friend Snouck and with modern theologians. He did not do so because he always had readymade answers, nor because he found the opinions of his opponents contemptuous. He did, however, repeatedly bring up that old Reformed faith because he was convinced that within its framework one could find a way in the modern world.

He showed that a life and also a culture without religion falls victim to cynicism and sepsis—in other words: death. The science and technology of his day were greeted as redeemers but, after initial enthusiasm, turned out not to fulfill people's souls, and around 1900, irrational movements gained ground. Theological modernism had already come to a dead end and the so-called small beliefs—magnetism, homeopathy, vegetarianism, Christian Science, theosophy, spiritism, Buddhism, and such like—reigned supreme.³² In the midst of this search for security, Bavinck held onto special revelation as the only ground on which the religion could rest. Christianity and culture are not enemies but relate to one another as direction and power, content and form. In a culture that believes it has conquered religion, Bavinck's plea is well worth contemplating.

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It is often said that Bavinck's theological and philosophical works, his sermons, his meditations, and even his personality bear the hallmark of his period in Leiden. That is not untrue. After 1902, Bavinck was to concentrate so strongly on this theme of faith and culture that, instead of continuing on the theological path, he was increasingly oriented toward the philosophical backgrounds of the modern world.

However, this conclusion is in my opinion prompted too much by the desire to place Bavinck within a modern cultural setting, or to rehabilitate his Reformed convictions from an imaginary dead end. This desire sometimes comes at the expense of recognizing that Bavinck's spirituality was influenced by Reformed orthodoxy and that it was his Reformed conviction and not his contact with modernism that enabled him to understand the world.

Bavinck's answer to the doubts and quests of his age was that faith, which can only rest in God's promises, should be honored according to its own nature—not against modern culture but within it. Seldom has the connection between the orthodox-reformed faith and the Christian and between the Christian and the humane been argued with such power and tenacity. According to

³² See the special edition of the magazine *De Negentiende Eeuw*, 25 (September 2001), about this subject.

Reformed principles, faith and culture belong together, and if a culture is not to degenerate, it will have to deal with that faith; and vice-versa. Believers should insist on interaction without fail. The current conflict points toward this necessity as much as the resistance against it does.

Globalization and democratization are strongly criticized in the Islamic world but also within Christianity. No one will deny the excrescences of these phenomena, but the question is, What is this all about? In the current conflict, too, within Western culture, its own economic and political ideals are too easily demonized and subjected to criticism. The motives of Osama Bin Laden are called understandable³³, and the values of the Islam are put on a par with those of Christianity. The twentieth century has cured Christianity and Western culture, which was in part inspired by it, of pride, but that is not the same as avoiding this culture or putting its values on a par with those of other cultures. Bavinck also knew the excrescences of his own culture and the disbelief it provoked, but it did not force him to place the antithesis between faith and culture. He left the antithesis there where it belonged: not between God and the world, not between Christianity and culture, but between sin and redemption, between whosoever turns away from God and whosoever turns toward him. There are certainly insurmountable barriers in this world, but they do not lie between the Islamic or Christian religion and Western culture but between Christianity and Islam with its suicide bombers (life and learning cannot be separated here).

Whoever fails to appreciate religion in the Arab world will never understand its essence and its power and also not understand that weapons ultimately do not help. After the worldwide coalition and the military struggle in reaction to the attacks of September 11, humanitarian, political, and economic help must come in the spirit of Bavinck, which goes hand in hand with the mission.

Whoever underestimates religion in the Western world robs the world of its critical institution and ultimately of its meaning. Concerning its meaning within Western culture, Bavinck believed that modern theology had failed. To many Westerners, it sounds like a paradox, but it is exactly orthodox Christianity of the catholic kind that cannot be missed if “the truth is to be sweet and precious to us.”

³³ See Cokky van Limpt's interview with Bram van de Beek in *Trouw*, October 16, 2001.