

ON THE WAY TO THE LIVING GOD

Willem J. de Wit



On the Way to the Living God

A Cathartic Reading of Herman Bavinck and
An Invitation to Overcome the Plausibility Crisis of Christianity

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To my parents

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| Preface

Introductory Orientation

The purpose of this study is to (re)gain perspective on the living God in a context in which the Christian faith suffers from a plausibility crisis. Situated in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, and dealing with a Dutch theologian, it is intended for readers all over the world who face a situation in which Christianity does not seem to be true and relevant any longer, in which the question resounds all day long: “Where is your God?” (Ps. 42:3).

The study is structured as a collection of essays. The first part of the first essay begins with a short walk through post-Christian Amsterdam and introduces not only the essay but also the problem of this book as a whole. The second part of the opening essay constitutes the core of this work. Reflecting on the psalm verse: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:2), it extends the daring invitation to understand the desire of one’s heart as a desire for the God who truly exists and to find a new or renewed orientation by living on the way to the living God.

The second and third essays pay attention to the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), for whom there is now a growing international interest, not least because of the translation of his four-volume dogmatics into English in recent years. Although the Netherlands were still much more Christian in his day than that they are at present, there was already a strong current “away from the cross” and it cost him a lot of struggle to remain standing as a Christian. My interest is not so much to describe his theological views as to learn from this struggle that underlies his theology. While Bavinck scholars may appreciate the new materials that are presented, I hope that these two essays will especially speak to readers who seek a mirror in which to face their own struggle between Christian and post-Christian thought.

The fourth essay serves as the methodological chapter of this study. It is partly written in reflection on the first essay. While the opening essay addresses the plausibility crisis of Christianity and the church, this essay answers the question how I seek to practice theology in a context in which not only Christianity but also theology as a scholarly discipline suffers from a plausibility crisis. The answer is structured as a tenfold invitation to search for truth and speak it.

The fifth essay answers a twofold argument for atheism that is already mentioned in the opening essay: “It is argued, on the one hand, that the concept of God is superfluous as an explanation for any state of affairs and, on the other hand, that the evil in this world is irreconcilable with a God who is infinite goodness.” The essay especially focuses on the problem of God’s redundancy. One of Bavinck’s main concerns about the modern worldview of his days was that it tried to explain the world completely without God. In answer to this challenge he sought to argue that the world cannot be understood without the

concept of revelation. My approach is somewhat different in that I myself am willing to assume that God is redundant as an explanation, while denying that such an assumption necessarily springs from or leads to atheism. I invite myself and the reader to a perspective on the world and the living God that does not use God as a (source of) explanation. In the course of the essay it becomes clear that my position also addresses the second part of the twofold argument for atheism, the problem of evil. Since the perspective on the world and the living God that I develop has implications for our understanding of Christian doctrines and the way we interpret the Bible, these issues are discussed in the last sections of the essay. Special attention is paid to the interpretation of miracle stories and the accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

The sixth essay brings this book to a conclusion, among other things with some suggestions how to use the main ideas of this study for the education of the next generation, a reflection on a hymn that expresses these ideas tersely, and a final invitation.

Acknowledgements

Now that this study has been brought to conclusion, it is time to look back for a moment. Gratitude fills my heart when I call to mind the many words of simple encouragement and constructive criticism that I received while writing this book. I want to express my gratitude by mentioning a few persons by name. Research for this study began when I worked as a junior research fellow for the International Reformed Theological Institute at VU University Amsterdam. From the moment he selected me to work at IRTI all the way till the completion of the present study Prof. Dr. Abraham van de Beek has been an advisor who inspired me to find my own way in practicing theology. Prof. Dr. Cornelis van der Kooi, my second advisor, carefully commented on the manuscript at several stages. *Bram en Kees, bedankt!*

While my move to Egypt in 2008 delayed the appearance of this book, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo also turned out to be a stimulating context for actually bringing the work to completion, even in the year of a revolution with all its subsequent hopes and fears. I thank Rev. Rutger Mauritz and Mr. Arie van der Poel of the Reformed mission board GZB and Rev. Dr. Atef M. Gendy, the president of ETSC, for their patience and encouragement. *Šukran!*

In Egypt I cherish the memories of meetings of JDS (short for John Duns Scotus), a group of Dutch theological friends. As Rev. Dr. Theo Pleizier puts it, "We share a passion for the theological heritage of the Church and its mission in today's world." One of our members, Erik de Bas, passed away at an early age. It was in the days after his death that I felt it was time for a decision and chose Herman Bavinck as my main conversation partner in theology. Throughout the years, especially Frans Hoogendijk has continuously shown interest in the progress of this study, not least during our regular Skype calls. Thanks for this true *amicitia!*

Since I am Dutch, English is not my mother tongue. While Dr. Annette K. Mosher and Mr. Laurence R. O'Donnell edited the first essay and part of the second one for earlier publication, my colleague Rev. Dr. Mark Nygard created a group of correctors who went through the English of the other chapters: Mr. Iain Baxter, Mrs. Jean Isteero, Ms. Nazli H. Rizk, Mr. Philip Jackson, Mrs. Linda Nygard, and he himself. Of course, the responsibility for any remaining barbarism is mine. *Mange takk, ya Mark and you all!*

While the responsibility for the contents of this book is also mine, I feel indebted to others beyond what could reasonably be expressed in the notes of this study. It was a privilege to be a student of so many good teachers and professors at the schools and universities at which I studied. Through studies and travel from place to place and by meeting new people and their thoughts and concerns, my horizon was extended step by step. Still, I owe most to the persons who were there when I was born, who brought me up, and who are there still today, even though I live far away in a foreign country. As a nice coincidence this study will be published in the month in which my parents celebrate their fortieth wedding anniversary. To them I dedicate his book.

Directions and Invitation to the Reader

Now that this work has been brought to conclusion, it is also time to look ahead for a moment. This study is now going to make its way to the reader. It will reach some readers in printed format and others in electronic format. Each format has its advantages: while a printed book can be put on a shelf and be read in an armchair, an electronic version can be shared and be searched for specific names or terms. Readers who are interested in the format that they do not yet have are kindly invited to visit <http://willemjdewit.wordpress.com>, at which I hope to provide a link to the electronic edition and ordering information for the printed edition, as well as possibilities of leaving a reaction and subscribing to future announcements.

For a good understanding the reader may notice some conventions that this study follows: (a) For the sake of readability, all quotations in the main text are given in English, even though they are often from works written in Dutch or another foreign language. When an existing translation is used, this is cited in the notes. In all other cases the English translations are the author's own and the original language source texts are given in the appendix. (b) Numbers between parentheses are cross references to other sections; for example, "(5.3)" refers to section 5.3. (c) References to the Psalms follow the English rather than the Hebrew (or Dutch) verse numbering. (d) As the *Chicago Manual of Style*, fifteenth edition, section 16.3, recommends, duplication between the bibliography and the notes is avoided, by keeping citations in the notes—"even the first citation to a particular work"—as concise as possible. Usually this means that the author's last name and the main title of a book or article are given. Different editions of the same work are identified by the date of publication.

The reader also deserves a brief explanation of why the term “essays” is used for the chapters of this book. Although I believe that the high goal of this study—(re)gaining perspective on the living God—is worth to be pursued, I am well aware that it cannot be reached in a simple, straightforward way. For this reason, I decided to structure this study as a series of theological essays. Characteristic for essays is a style that is both scholarly and personal. To me such a style seems to be adequate to a question that is too existential to be treated in an impersonal way and too important to be delegated to the realm of private reflection only. Moreover, the word “essay” literally means “attempt”: this study attempts to answer an ultimate question but does not claim to give the ultimate answer.

As a series of essays this study has a broken structure. The chapters are clearly interrelated but do not pretend to constitute one linear argument from the first page to the last one. On the one hand, each essay can be read more individually than is usually the case with the chapters of a monograph, and on the other hand, there are many relationships between the various essays, some of which have been made explicit, whereas other ones will be noticed by the reflective reader. Moreover, each essay is a unity in itself, but sometimes it is a fragmented unity.

The broken structure indicates that the subject matter of this study was well-nigh too heavy for me to handle it well. Nevertheless, the structure as it is now seems adequate for the subject matter. Pieces of argumentation can be very helpful to find the way, but even if I had been able to offer one long coherent and cogent argument, this as such would not have led to (re)gaining perspective on the living God. Rather, using terms that will recur in the essays, my invitation to the readers is to play with what is offered here in parts, to find meaning in it, to make sense of it, to read it with two open theological eyes—as a critical scholar and with religious receptivity—, to put aside what is not beneficial and to use the good for something better. And then, while playing with the text, the reader will hopefully discover signs in it that can be understood as references—even though broken references—to the living God. If so, this study will have fulfilled its purpose.

To put it differently, regardless whether we will meet online or in real life or by means of this book only, I hope that this work will find readers who, as wayfarers, take it as the word of a fellow wayfarer, not more and not less. A quotation from Augustine (*On the Trinity* 1.3.5) aptly expresses the hesitation and conviction and the invitation with which this book is sent to the reader:

May all who read this go with me where they are as certain as I am,
 may they search with me where they doubt as much as I do,
 may they return to me where they recognize their error,
 may they call me back where they recognize mine.
 Thus we take together the way of love,
 heading for him of whom it is said: “Seek his face always.”

1

On the Way to the Living God in Post-Christian Amsterdam

A Sevenfold Invitation to Overcome the Crisis of the Church

O Jesus Christ, shine with your light
on those who live here in the night.
Unite them with the flock you feed,
lest they would miss what they most need.

Fill with your shine of grace the hearts
of those who follow dangerous paths,
of those with their presumptuous air,
of those who inwardly despair.

Shine in the eyes of those who blind
and dark and doubting do not find
the way to you, but lost have gone.
O Light and Truth, guide you them home!

Part One: Post-Christian Amsterdam

God and Jesus, they were the great men of the past.
—A high school student

1.1 The Location, Statistics, and Question of Post-Christian Amsterdam

From my apartment in the center of Amsterdam it is just a ten minute walk to the famous, or infamous, Red Light District and another five minutes' walk to Dam square—the lively heart of the city. When I speak about Amsterdam as post-Christian Amsterdam, one may be inclined to think especially about the Red Light District, where everything is practiced that God has forbidden in his wisdom. However, this would be a grave mistake. If Christian presence is still visible in the city anywhere, it is in the Red Light District, where many Christian organizations offer facilities for those in need. Here the church is successful in making a difference.

The Dam square is much more characteristic for post-Christian Amsterdam. This vibrant place breathes the idea that life can be good without God. Certainly, the impressive *Nieuwe Kerk* (“new church,” built since 1380 and rebuilt after 1645) decorates the square, but it is no longer used for regular church services, only for exhibitions and special ceremonies. Actually, it is a living example that in Amsterdam God and the church belong to the past. In a

very subtle way post-Christian Amsterdam is even more tangible in the relatively quiet block where I live. The factual situation is that only a few people go to church, but one little word is usually added: only a few people *still* go to church.¹

The usage of the word *still* can be justified in the light of the statistics. A century ago the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck already said, “Unchurchedness is one of the most serious diseases of our time.”² He said so in the light of the 1899 census that revealed that 2.3 percent of the Dutch population did not belong to a church or any other religion. For Amsterdam, this figure was 5.9 percent.³ However, between 1900 and 2000 membership of the major protestant churches in Amsterdam decimated to just a few percent of the population. Most people who practice a religion today are Muslim and Christian immigrants from non-Western countries. In a population of almost 750,000 there are about 25,000 regular church visitors, of whom 14,000 go to migrant churches. Unchurchedness has borne fruit tenfold: today the majority of the citizens of Amsterdam have no religious affiliation at all.⁴

However, the word *still* seems to imply more. It seems to imply that the church and the Christian faith have fundamentally lost their plausibility. It is not mere circumstance that the church loses its members. The church stands for ideals, beliefs, and practices that have had their time. If some people are

1. This essay was originally presented as a paper during the sixth international conference of the International Reformed Theological Institute (IRTI) in Seoul in 2005 and has been published as De Wit, “On the Way to the Living God in Post-Christian Amsterdam” in 2008. At the time of writing, the author had lived in Amsterdam for about four and a half years. The fact that he moved from Amsterdam to Cairo in 2008 makes the question pertinent how the first-person narrator in the text and the author of this study relate to each other. Sections 4.6 and 4.8 will address this question and take into account what is said about human identity in this essay itself (section 1.6).

Given its specific location in place and time (Amsterdam 2005), the author felt unable and unwilling to elaborate the main text of the essay for the present study: except for a few stylistic corrections, it is still the same as it was written in 2005. Written as a contribution from one specific context for a conference of theologians from all over the world, the passage of years has also made it a contribution from a specific moment in time for times to come (cf. section 4.4 about the contribution of contextual theology to catholic theology). To be clear, while it is of remaining significance for the author himself that he has written this essay then and there, he readily admits that the relative significance or insignificance for others is, of course, much better judged by the readers. As is already obvious from this note itself, the notes to this essay have been updated and elaborated for the republication of the essay in the present study.

The hymn at the beginning of this essay is a free rendering of stanzas 1, 2, and 5 of Heermann’s seventeenth century German hymn “O Jesu Christe, wahres Licht.” The words “O Light and Truth, guide you them home” at the end of the English version allude to Psalm 43, which is also quoted in the final invitation (section 1.10) and which is discussed further in section 4.8.

2. Bavinck, “Buiten de kerk.”

3. Percentages calculated from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Uitkomsten der achtste tienjaarlijkse volkstelling*, 4:221 and 12:131.

4. See Kerkenraad en missionair team Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk Amsterdam, “Diepe vrede in kleurrijk Amsterdam,” section 3.1.

still Christians, they are for sociological and psychological reasons. For example, although I speak Dutch without any recognizable accent, in conversations, people openly infer from the mere fact that I go to church that I must come from the provinces. The point is that this is true. I was brought up in a safe Christian context. The present essay can be interpreted psychologically as an attempt to re-find my identity in Post-Christian Amsterdam—unfortunately for me, I do not yet have the guts to be truly honest to myself and to leave Christianity behind in order to become a post-Christian myself. Who am I to say that such an interpretation is misguided?

I only hope that the benevolent reader will discern that at least my attempt—essay in the literal sense—goes much further. It is not the desperate attempt to safeguard myself and others from becoming post-Christians. Rather, it is the invitation to move beyond the post-Christian condition. The question is not—how can one *still* be a Christian?—but—how can one *already* be a post-post-Christian?

1.2 The Threefold Plausibility Crisis of the Church

In order to be able to move beyond the post-Christian condition, it is, first of all, important to face the fundamental plausibility crisis of the church within this condition. Why is it that the Christian religion is considered to be *passé*? Why is it that the church is considered to be a remnant of the past rather than a vital option for the future (even by church members themselves)? Why is it, as I observed during a teaching practice several years ago, that a high school student can say in his simplicity that God and Jesus were the great men of the past and that other students also use the past tense when referring to God? In my perception, the plausibility crisis of the church has three dimensions, which I indicate with the triad head, heart, and hands.

Head. The *intellectual crisis* of the church is that there seems to be no sensible reason to believe that God exists, and especially that he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Moreover, even if it is granted that God may exist, there seems to be no way to say something about him with certainty. This intellectual crisis is not to be understood as if all people are outspoken atheists who willfully take position against Christianity. Of course, such people do exist, but for many people in Amsterdam, Christianity seems to belong to the past so much that they have never felt the need to take position for or against it.

Heart. The *existential crisis* of the church is that even if people acknowledge that the intellectual discussion does not result in an unfavorable position for the Christian religion, it can still be that they cannot reach it with their heart; they can feel an existential hesitation or doubt that hinders them from believing. It is not to be excluded that this is also the case for church members. They regularly read the Bible, but it does not say much to them; they pray, but they have the feeling that it is talking into emptiness.

Hands. The *practical crisis* of the church is that she does not succeed in offering a positive morality with which one can make a difference in everyday life. The church seems to take and give between droll morals and permissiveness. A concrete and attractive moral ideal is wanting.

Although this is a very brief analysis of the crisis of the church, it sufficiently indicates that we have to face some fundamental questions if we do not want to end up with a compromise between outdated Christianity and the post-Christian condition, but really hope to find a way beyond the post-Christian condition.

1.3 Answering the Post-Christian Condition

Others have already reflected on the post-Christian condition. Among Reformed Christians I perceive four tendencies of how to answer it.

First, there is the *conservative* or *confessional Reformed* answer: keep to the status quo of the church as defined in confessions of some centuries ago, and as established in practices that have been received from past generations.

Second, there is the *liberal Reformed* answer: give in to the post-Christian condition and adapt beliefs and practices accordingly.

Third, there is the *evangelical Reformed* answer: freely adapt all forms to the present condition, but maintain the fundamental Christian beliefs and ethics of the past.

Fourth, there is the *catholic Reformed* answer: exploit the rich heritage of the church of all places and times to respond effectively to the post-Christian condition.

The conservative⁵ or confessional Reformed answer is laudable for its stability, but it runs the risk of intellectual and existential dishonesty, as it has decided beforehand that the response to any post-Christian objection will be that one will, nevertheless keep to the status quo (be it labeled as “the confession” or “the Bible”). Bound as it is to the past, it does not show a way to the future.

The liberal Reformed answer is laudable for its honesty, but runs the risk of failing to make clear what Christianity still adds to the post-Christian condition. Bound as it is to the present, it does not show a way to the future.

5. The four paragraphs from “The conservative . . .” to “. . . these alternatives” were part of the original essay and therefore I did not want to rewrite or strike them (cf. note 1). However, some readers of the essay told me that they felt that this passage did not do sufficient justice to the positions of others. Perhaps this concern will already be taken away when one realizes that this section discusses four tendencies rather than four boxes. It is but natural that concrete persons find themselves on a continuum between two or more tendencies rather than that they can be fully identified with one and have to take the criticism of it personally. Nevertheless, if the feeling remains that the passage does injustice to the position of others, it can be considered as deleted as I had and have no intention to be unfair to anyone. Cf. section 4.9.

The evangelical Reformed answer seems to be quite successful, but runs the risk of understanding the post-Christian condition too superficially. It shouts down the fundamental questions rather than answering them. It may be stronger in evangelism and contemporary worship, etc. than either the conservative or the liberal answer, but when the fundamental questions become pressing, it cannot do more than find a compromise between these alternatives.

The catholic Reformed answer is most sympathetic to me. It is an honest attempt to face the fundamental questions without simply adapting to the post-Christian condition. However, it has its limits. Many of today's questions that were not discussed by the sixteenth century Reformers may have been discussed by the church fathers or the great medieval theologians, but there are also truly new questions or old answers may no longer really suffice.

In my view, the crisis of the church will remain unless we are prepared to go further, to move through and then beyond post-Christian thought. Christians may hesitate to do so. Are we not losing much that is valuable? However, we will only lose that what does not have lasting value. Although it may be painful for a moment, it is actually not a loss but a gain. We will be freed from cherished beliefs that, however, have turned out not to be true or not to be worthwhile anymore.

Only, this is not to be understood as if we should willfully throw away all what we have or believe or do now. That would mean a loss indeed. Moving into the post-post-Christian area, we do better to take the catholic Reformed repository with us.

In short, faced with the post-Christian condition of Amsterdam, I search for a post-post-Christian identity while using the catholic Reformed repository. Let us now see how this works out.⁶

6. While the present essay has been written and is intended to be read as a unity, the reader may decide to read the second and third essays first and the second part of this essay afterwards, for the following reasons:

a. The next two essays illustrate both the meaning of “the catholic Reformed repository” and the need for “a post-post-Christian identity”: I see Bavinck as a shining example of a catholic Reformed theologian and as a warning example that trying to remain standing “before” the post-Christian crisis is not sufficient—I should rather try to find my identity “beyond” the post-Christian crisis.

b. If chapters 2 and 3 are read first, it is also clear that I seek to listen first and to speak for myself afterwards in the second half of the opening essay and from chapter 4 onwards. The idea of listening to Bavinck before speaking for myself is not only a nice fiction but also reflects the reality that I had been reading Bavinck for about three years before I wrote the opening essay in 2005.

Someone suggested that the second part of this essay can also be (re)read as a conclusion to this study after the fifth or even the sixth essay.

Part Two: A Sevenfold Invitation

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

—Psalm 42:2

1.4 The Existential Invitation:

Understand the Desire of the Heart as a Desire for the Living God

I take my starting point in Psalm 42:2: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” This verse is an invitation to understand the desire of the human heart as a desire for the living God.

Many people seem to have an unfulfilled desire. This is rather clear for those people who are interested in new religions and philosophies, and probably also for those who indulge themselves in materialistic or sexual excesses, seeking in vain for existential fulfillment. But how about those who indicate that they are rather content with their life? I do not want to project an unfulfilled desire on them. However, it may be that some of them mean that they have stopped hoping for deeper fulfillment, and therefore can be rather content with their life.

On balance, I do not want to argue here that all humans factually have a *desiderium naturale* for God.⁷ I limit myself here to speaking about an invitation to acknowledge an unfulfilled desire in one’s heart and to understand this desire as a desire for the living God. This is what the psalm invites its readers to do. In face of the existential crisis that the Christian beliefs do not really touch the human heart, Psalm 42 exactly begins with the desire of the heart—the soul.

1.5 The Theological Invitation:

Believe in the Living God Only

I come to the second invitation. What does the heart desire for? The soul thirsts for the *living* God: the soul cannot be satisfied with a God who does not really exist. Although such a desire does not prove that God exists, it offers a first condition for speaking about God adequately—it must be about a God who really exists. The church must refrain from definitions of God in which he does not really exist (God as a metaphor for inter-human love, God as a character in a story, etc.) and from definitions from which it is rightfully concluded that such a God cannot exist. In her desire for the living God the soul prefers a minimally defined God who exists over a much better defined God who, however, does not exist.

7. When I wrote this essay in 2005, the theme of the *desiderium naturale* had just been discussed in several essays in Den Bok and Plaisier, *Bijna goddelijk gemaakt*.

In face of the post-Christian idea that God belongs to the past, the psalm verse invites us to make a fundamental shift, and to think about God as the one who—by his very definition—is present, actual, and the living God. In face of the atheistic claim that God does not exist, the soul cannot prove that he does exist, but she can thirst for him and does not want to call herself satisfied with anyone or anything less than him.

These considerations lead to an important theological conclusion, which hopefully will evoke discussion. In her thought the (post-post-Christian) church should give structural priority to the *living* God over the *biblical* God. That is—we should not first speak about the *Bible* and then about the *God of the Bible*, but first about *God* and then about the *Bible of God*.⁸ Keeping in memory the main character of an ancient collection of books may have some intrinsic value, but has only ultimate value insofar as this main character refers to the living God for whom the soul thirsts.

I recall the two sides of the intellectual crisis. On the one hand, there is the outspoken atheistic claim; on the other hand, people are already beyond the point of having to make a decision for or against Christianity, even to make up their mind whether they believe in a God whatsoever. Over against this second side, this verse is a powerful invitation to make up one's mind about God right now, not about "God as the great man of the past," but about the living God who is now.

However, the first side—the atheistic claim—may still need some more discussion. Has it been proven that God does not exist? If so, the heart can desire for the living God, but then this desire is in vain. Now, the atheistic claims that I have met do not say that it has been proven that God does not exist; rather, it is argued, on the one hand, that the concept of God is superfluous as an explanation for any state of affairs and, on the other hand, that the evil in this world is irreconcilable with a God who is infinite goodness. This twofold argument for atheism is by no means something new. For example, Thomas Aquinas already knew it and countered it, among others, with his famous *quinque viae* (five ways).⁹

I am not going as far here as to demonstrate that God does exist. I just remark that it may well be that God is superfluous as an explanation, but that this does not disprove his existence. It only raises the question whether there is even then any *sensible reason* (I use this term for lack of a better one) to believe in God. I think there is. Although space forbids giving a full elaboration here in this essay,¹⁰ we can take the example of this desire of the heart for the living God. Such a desire can probably be explained psychologically or even biologically. However, this explains the desire; it does not explain it away—the desire

8. See also section 1.9 on the hermeneutical invitation.

9. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I q.2 a.3.

10. For such an elaboration, see the fifth essay.

remains. Thus, even after explaining it, there remains something in the desire that can be understood as a true reference to God.

As for the problem of evil, this is indeed a challenge to belief in the living God. However, there is evil anyhow, and faith in God can also offer the best way to cope with it. This answer may not yet suffice fully, but it gives a first indication how to deal with this problem.

In conclusion, the invitation of Psalm 42 stands very strong in the light of atheistic claims. It fully agrees with them that we should not concentrate on a God who is not alive. However, it dares to see the possibility that, whatever gods may not exist, there is the living God who, by his very definition, is the God who does exist. Believing in this God and desiring for this God is not an intellectual activity in itself, but it meets any criteria of intellectual honesty.

1.6 The Anthropological Invitation:

Live on the Way to the Living God

What happens with humans who live from their thirst for the living God? Their lives gain direction. Their lives become lives *in via*, on the way.¹¹

I basically see three manners of living our human life: to stay, to stray, and to be on the way. Many people just stay or stray; these are the easy manners of conducting life. Still, our life can and should be a purpose driven life.¹² We can live towards a goal. That is to be on the way.

However, it is very important to set the right goal. Psalm 42:2 indicates just one goal—the living God. We should not be after any material or spiritual idol, only after the one who, by his very definition, is not an idol, but the living God.

In a sense, the identity of every human is eccentric¹³ in God. We know ourselves partially, in our own experience our identity can be fragmented; we do not know how the different sides of ourselves exactly relate, we are changing over time. Using the image from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, we can experience our identity as an onion—take off layer after layer in search for real identity and in the end nothing is left.¹⁴ However, God knows us fully and deeper than we know ourselves.

Conversion to a life on the way means that our eccentric identity receives a second dimension: we willfully entrust our identity in the hands of God, and by

11. Understanding life as a journey is a traditional Christian motif, but the journey motif is also present in many works of world literature, e.g., Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

12. "Purpose driven life" became a popular term through Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

13. The German term "Exzentrizität" (eccentricity) was introduced in philosophical anthropology by Helmuth Plessner and later also became part of theological vocabulary. See, e.g., Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive*, 33 and passim. In the English version *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, the German term is translated as "exocentricity." However, the translation "ec-centrity" is found, e.g., in Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:155.

14. See Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, act 5, scene 5.

living the life on the way, more and more of that identity becomes already actualized in our lives, until, having arrived at the end of the way and having come to God, we will be who we are face to face with God. Thus, living on the way to become who we are in God is true spiritual growth.

As an old man, Peer Gynt finally asked in despair, “Where was I, as myself, as the whole man, the true man?” Then his love from his youth, Solveig, answers, “In my faith, in my hope, and in my love.”¹⁵ Experiencing himself as an onion, he found himself outside himself in the one who had loved him all the time. Of course, Ibsen idealizes human love. As believers, we may find our true identity in the living God, for whom our hearts desire.

1.7 The Ethical Invitation:

Walk the Way in Love and Liberty

In principle, the idea of living on the way does not only help us to overcome the existential crisis, but also the practical crisis. Living on the way to the living God is a powerful metaphor for a positive moral ideal. In fact, it is the old biblical ideal of loving God with all of one’s capacities.

However, does living on the way not imply a very world-avoiding, even world-denying type of ethics? I would say no. As a traveler I can enjoy and love what I meet on the way. However, I cannot and need not fully bind myself to it. I think that is not a problem, but rather a relief. Conversion to a God-bound life is not giving up one’s liberty, but receiving liberty. Living a God-bound life means living a life in liberty and love towards each other (cf. Gal. 5:13).

The question may be whether I am not much too optimistic so far. First of all, there may be this desire in our heart, and we may be willing to understand this as a desire for the living God, but our heart is not always filled with this desire. Next, the ideal of living on the way with a clear-cut purpose may sound nice, but in the practice of life, it is often difficult to decide which way is to be taken—to discover where the way goes—to see the goal. The question arises whether it is not all nonsense after all.

Such objections should be answered with realism. Having a clear goal does not mean that one is constantly thinking about that goal or that the road is always clear. In the Bible the right way is both compared with a highway and with a narrow path (Isa. 35:8; Matt. 7:14). However, knowing the goal gives us the possibility to search for the right track again and not to fall back into mere staying or straying—both of which impoverish human life. Living on the way is not the easy way of life that makes all things simple; however, accepting this “struggle of life” enriches life after all.

15. Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, translator unknown, act 5, scene 10. The Norwegian original reads as follows: “Hvor var jeg, som mig selv, som den hele, den sande? . . . I min tro, i mit håb og i min kærlighed.” Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, ed. Universitetet i Oslo.

Humans are possibly glorious accidents. In a historical and scientific sense they are possibly accidental results of the evolutionary process. If we look to humans in this perspective, we cannot see the goal. Deriving a goal for human life from scientific sources is nonsense. However, humans are *glorious* accidents.¹⁶ They have the unique capacity to see further than what is just before their eyes. Ultimately, they have the capacity to thirst for the living God, for the one who is structurally prior to all physical reality. As such, that is not nonsense, but a fact. The invitation to live our life on the way to this living God is certainly an invitation to take a risk—I have not proven God’s existence, nor have I already seen the end of the way with my own eyes. But it is taking the risk of living human life in the fullest sense—of doing justice to our glorious side.

Still, there may be something of a riddle in human life. Why do we, even if we know the goal and know that it is good, still not always live in accordance with it?

16. The term “glorious accident” was introduced by evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gold and is used in the title of a book in which he is interviewed: Kayzer, *A Glorious Accident*. My attention was drawn to this term because its Dutch equivalent “schitterend ongeluk” was (re)used in the title of a volume that played an important role in the public discussion about “Intelligent Design” in the Netherlands in 2005: Dekker, Meester, and Van Woudenberg, *Schitterend ongeluk of sporen van ontwerp*.

For the Dutch reader it is good to know that the passage in which the term “glorious accident” occurs is translated in two ways in the Dutch version of Kayzer’s book. In the interview Kayzer cites (without mentioning the source) what Gould has written before: “Niet door een fout van onszelf, een kosmisch plan of welbewuste opzet, maar dank zij een *prachtig* evolutionair *toeval*, genaamd intelligentie, zijn wij de rentmeesters geworden van de continuïteit van het leven op aarde.” Next, he asks Gould to explain “dat *prachtig toeval*” further. However, as an epigraph at the beginning of the chapter that contains the interview, the same passage is rendered as follows: “Buiten onze schuld, en zonder enige kosmische opzet of bewuste bedoeling zijn we, bij gratie van een *schitterend* evolutionair *ongeluk* genaamd intelligentie, de rentmeesters van de continuïteit van het leven op aarde geworden.” Kayzer, *Een schitterend ongeluk*, resp. 132 and 109 (italics added).

Although in Dutch “schitterend ongeluk” sounds more spectacular than “prachtig toeval” and it is understandable that the former was used as a title for the book and for the television series in which the interview was broadcasted, the latter does in fact more justice to Gould’s intentions: he means that, scientifically spoken, the existence of intelligent beings was not intended and not necessary, and this is adequately expressed with the word “toeval” (“accident” in the sense of “coincidence” or “chance”), whereas “ongeluk” suggests that something went wrong and that originally there was a different plan (“accident” in the sense of “an unfortunate event”).

In case somebody would like to discuss this essay in a Dutch publication, I suggest to translate “glorious accident” as “heerlijk toeval,” especially when the term is used in reference to Jesus Christ (see 1.8). Using “glorious accident” or “heerlijk toeval” for Jesus Christ is on the edge of blasphemy, in order to say something theologically sharp (cf. 4.10). However, calling Jesus an “ongeluk” (unfortunate event) is over the edge and something I simply do not want to do.

1.8 The Christological Invitation:

See Christ as a Glorious Accident and as Sacramentally Present

I turn to the fifth invitation, the Christological invitation. I hope this one will evoke discussion. Some will probably object that I spoil my argument so far by bringing in Christ. Others may object that I bring Christ in much too late.¹⁷ And is it not a heresy to call Christ a glorious accident?

By calling Christ a glorious accident, I mean that he cannot be derived from nature or history by necessity. God's incarnation does not take place at all times and places, but took place then and there. Continuing its focus on Jesus Christ and him crucified keeps the church bound to the past. And since time goes on, the cross as a historic event belongs more and more to the past. It is hard to see how people will still seriously believe in the crucified one after a hundred thousand years (having developed over an even longer time, there is no reason¹⁸ why there would not still be humans or descendants from them over such a time). Still, Christ is a *glorious* accident. Even in his crucifixion without glory he was recognized as the Lord of glory.¹⁹

In a speech, Herman Bavinck compares Dante's *Divina Commedia* with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He says that in Dante's work the human reaches the entrance into paradise after a long way of suffering and punishments, whereas in Bunyan's work Christian loses the burden of sin at the cross and continues his way comforted and encouraged because his sins are forgiven and his salvation has been assured. And, as Christian is shown, Christ continues to keep the fire burning in the heart through the oil of his grace.²⁰

Many people do not find the cross. But those who do may experience what Christian experienced. It adds a third dimension to their eccentric identity. They can see themselves in Christ as justified and sanctified.

17. I am inclined to agree with Bavinck, "Eene belangrijke apologie van de christelijke wereldbeschouwing," 145, that, if Christ is the center, exactly for that reason "he is not the principle and starting point" of the Christian worldview. He wrote this in reaction to Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World as Centring in the Incarnation*.

18. This is put very briefly. Of course one can imagine reasons: for example, the climate may change in such a way that human life becomes impossible. However, my statement is primarily intended as an invitation to broaden one's outlook to those who do not only hope that Christ will return after a few generations at most, but also take this as a fixed given that determines their horizon. In this respect Van de Beek, *Schepping*, 215, speaks about "eschatological creationism," which he rejects just as common creationism. Nevertheless, although he reckons with the possibility of "still millions of years of world history," he does not want to exclude the possibility of an abrupt end: see Van de Beek, *God doet recht*, 314–15.

19. Cf. Isa. 53:2 and 1 Cor. 2:8. Not everybody recognized the crucified one as the Lord of glory, but Paul did (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5) and the centurion at the cross probably did too (see Mark 15:39), as well as Isaac Watts when he sung: "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died . . ."

20. See Bavinck, *Feestrede ter gelegenheid van het 25 jarig bestaan der S.S.R.*, 23–24.

The folly of the glorious gloriless cross is the key to deal both with the riddle of natural evil and of the evil in human life.

The folly of the cross should, however, not legitimate our own theological follies. That would be abusing the wondrous cross. Thus we have to face the problem of the pastness of the incarnation—of the cross. I do not have the final answer, and hope to learn from the thoughts of others. However, I have some remarks:

1. The pastness should not be overemphasized: on the timescale of the Lord, two thousand years are just two days (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8), and on the time scale of modern science, hundreds of thousands of years are just a few months on traditional time scales.²¹

2. The problem that Jesus of Nazareth has become too much a great man *of the past* is not recognized by many Christians worldwide as a problem. We may have serious intellectual problems with it, but it cannot be maintained that no one can still believe in Jesus Christ—the facts speak to the contrary. The church grew in the twentieth century as never before.²²

21. I possess a seventeenth century *Historische chronyck* (Historical chronicle) in which world history first runs from *Anno Mundi* 1 to 3950 and then continues with *Anno Christi* 1 (*Anno Mundi* = year of the world [i.e. since the creation of the world]; *Anno Christi* = year of Christ [= *Anno Domini*, A.D. = year of the Lord]). According to this count, in 2005 when this essay was written, the creation of the world had happened 3950+2005 = 5955 years ago. However, according to recent calculations the universe is 13.7 billion years old and the earth 4.5 billion, while there have been hominids for several million years and *homo sapiens* has lived from about 250,000 years ago to the present. See *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.vv. “Age of the Universe,” “Age of the Earth,” and “Human Evolution” (accessed June 30, 2010). In the mentioned copy of the *Historische chronijck* the title page is missing; probably, it is the Dutch translation of Johann Ludwig Gottfried’s German *Historische Chronica*.

The two millennia that have passed since the birth of Jesus Christ make up about 34% of world history until now on the traditional timescale of the *Historische chronijck*. However, these same two millennia make up only 0.8% of the history of humanity and only 0.000015% of the time since the Big Bang according to the recent calculations cited above. When we integrate these modern scientific time scales in our understanding of time, the question is not so much: “Why did Christ come such a long time ago?” but: “Why did he come so late?” This latter question is not new: it was already posed by Christians in the second century, for whom the time before the incarnation was also relatively much longer than the time since the incarnation. See, for example, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, 8–9. Although a second century answer may not fully answer our questions today, it is at least worth consulting it.

22. Already a century ago Bavinck saw a strong apologetic argument in the growth of Christianity in other parts of the world. Remarkably, in 1910 he still complained: “It is of small consolation over against th[e] apostacy in the civilized world, that in the heathen world missionary work is advancing. Where thousands and millions in the former turn their backs upon Christianity, . . . there are in the mission-field but tens and hundreds who in truth are converted to Christianity.” However, a year later he said: “While unbelief increases in Christian countries, mission plants one congregation of Christ after another in the heathen world. Today, mission is probably the strongest apology for the Christian faith. . . . Mission shows the power of . . . Christ.” Bavinck, “The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands,” 460 and *Algemeene Nederlandsche Zendingsconferentie, Vijf en twintigste Algemeene Nederlandsche Zendingsconferentie*, 4. See also De

3. Christ is not only bound to the past, he is also sacramentally present. The cross stood then and there, but is brought to us in bread and wine now. The sacrament at least places the pastness into perspective. It also opens up to the future and makes us God-bound—we wait until he comes. Apart from the sacrament of bread and wine, Christ is also sacramentally present in a broader sense. To mention just one example, he is the way to the living God. Being on the way to the living God is being in Christ.

Believing in Jesus Christ is not an intellectual activity; at times it can even be hard on the intellect. But having seen the glory in the accident, it is not unfair to accept the folly and live from this. In full awareness of the post-Christian condition and having studied a lot of critical New Testament studies, I still think it is intellectually honest to invite myself and others to believe in Jesus Christ.

If my argument—not taken to its badly structured presentation, but to its real intention—stands, then it means that Christian faith and Christian theology are still a most serious option beyond the post-Christian crisis. If so, in the context of Amsterdam, the question: are you already a post-post-Christian can be simplified to “are you already a Christian?”

1.9 The Hermeneutical Invitation:

Read Scripture in Relationship to the Living God

Some time ago, a neighbor invited me to write a new Bible—one that addresses the questions of our days. I politely declined.

But he had a point. The canonical Scriptures of the church are already several thousand years old. Of course, the church and her individual members have written many confessional, theological, and devotional works, but nothing has the same character and status as the books of the Bible. Is it not her fault that the church looks so much like a remnant of the past?

Surprisingly, when a new Bible translation was published in 2004, it sold very well—even in Amsterdam’s major secular bookstores. Sales were only outnumbered by Dan Brown’s, *The Da Vinci Code*.²³ The success can be explained by the fact that the Bible was not only presented as the book of the church, but also as a cultural and literary product. Apart from church editions, two literary editions appeared. I can imagine that *The Da Vinci Code* has con-

Wit, “Stoomtrein als oproep tot zendingsarbeid” (a popular article about Herman Bavinck, Cairo, and mission, which has also published as “De stoomtrein van Cairo”).

In my view, an “apologetics from missionary success” should not overplay its hand: (a) as Bavinck says, maybe not all conversions are true conversions to Christianity, (b) not all growth can be contributed to the work of (Western) missionaries, (c) mission history is also a history of mistakes and failure, (d) growth as such is not a proof of truth. However, it is a valid argument against the idea that nobody can still believe in Jesus Christ.

23. See *Elsevier*, “Da Vinci Code best verkochte boek in 2004.”

tributed to the sales; it increased the awareness among the educated that knowing the Bible helps one to appreciate arts and literature.

However, is the hermeneutics that is implied in the idea of a “literary edition” of the Bible not a bit below par? Is not any hermeneutics below par if it neglects that the character “LORD” or “God” in the Bible refers to the living God who was then, but who is also now, and for whom human hearts desire even today? The lasting value of Scripture is not laid in its historicity—sometimes it is historically accurate, sometimes it is probably not, nor in its artistic value—sometimes it has, sometimes it has not, nor in its elevated ethics—sometimes they are appealing, sometimes they are offensive. No, the actuality of Scripture lies in the actuality of the living God.

My neighbor’s question was legitimate. We have “the right” to have a Bible that is not only helpful as a guide book for the famous paintings in Amsterdam’s *Rijksmuseum*, but that also addresses the existential needs of today. However, we do have such a Bible. Of course, there are all kinds of exegetical and hermeneutical questions, but let us be fair—more has been written on them than ever before. And again, it is not always clear whether and how the character “LORD” in the biblical texts truly refers to the living God. In the light of the previous section I think that Luther’s principle *Was Christum treibet* (what refers to Christ) is still a good hermeneutical rule. Anyhow, all this does not diminish that Scripture itself is actual if only it is read in relationship to the living God. Such is a high claim, but may the present essay as a reflection on Psalm 42:2 be a modest proof that it is not nonsensical altogether.²⁴

1.10 The Ecclesiological Invitation:

Base the Actuality of the Church on the Actuality of the Living God

The church in Amsterdam is only a remnant of what it was in the past. In the light of the statistics it is difficult to say otherwise. However, there is a danger that such a statistical fact becomes a part of the identity or self-understanding of the church. If so, the downward spiral is strengthened rather than broken. Who wants to remain a member of an institution that has no future?

What the church needs is a theological self-understanding that gives her the strength to remain vital and future-oriented. Such a theological self-understanding is not to be confused with theological rhetoric that only shouts over the present condition. What is needed is a fundamental shift in her orientation.

24. The point of this section is not that theological and devotional books and essays are simply superfluous—the present essay is not an attempt to argue that it should not have been written. In my view, it is a good idea that a standard collection of classical and contemporary readings from the Christian tradition were made and published together in one volume, with the same layout as a modern Bible edition. Such a volume should not replace Holy Scripture, but, on the contrary, help to see how Scripture has remained actual under ever changing circumstances.

I invite the church to make a shift from a past-bound to a God-bound identity. The church is the community of those who are on the way to the living God. The church may still have some recognized relevance because of the secondary functions she fulfills—who would deny that she does a good job in the Red Light District—but much more can and should be said about her actuality. The actuality of the church is to be based on the actuality of the living God. Her primary and remaining task is to invite and encourage people, generation after generation, to live their lives on the way to the living God. The ideal of living on the way to the living God is an old ideal, but it is not an invitation to a past-bound life. No, on the contrary, it is an invitation to a future-bound life.

Psalm 43:4 expresses the hope that the thirst of Psalm 42:2 will be satisfied: “Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.”²⁵ As we have seen, living on the way can be hard, but it is also joyful: the eschatological expectation is characterized by hope for exceeding joy. More passages could be mentioned, but may Isaiah 35:10 suffice: those who are on the highway to Zion, will come there with singing—“Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.” Hoping for joy already fills with joy right now.

Some time ago, I wrote an article for a local church magazine.²⁶ It was on a beautiful, but rather rural hymn by the Dutch poet Jan Wit. So I decided to slightly change the last stanza in order to make it a better fit for the context of the city. I was gladly surprised by the many positive reactions from people in church about the article and especially about this stanza. As it fittingly summarizes much of the present essay, I give here an English translation:

Let then, o Lord, my heart be Thine
and let me go and see and hear
all what is Thine and every sign,
with open eyes and open ear.
It's then in Amsterdam so good,
because the heavens me salute.²⁷

25. Psalms 42 and 43 are often seen as one Psalm. See section 4.8.

26. De Wit, “Zingen met open ogen en met een knipoog.” Cf. section 6.5.

27. Based on Jan Wit, “Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren” (hymn). Wit himself does not mention Amsterdam in the fifth line, but speaks about earthly life (“het aardse leven”) in general. See further section 6.5.

2

“Will I Remain Standing?”

A Cathartic Reading of Herman Bavinck (1)

Sometimes I perceive in my own soul an unspoken desire that Scripture might not be true, that the newer criticism might be right, and in this I see something of that secret enmity that the sinful heart feels against the Holy One and that can only be overcome by faith and prayer. . . .

. . . There is so much narrow-mindedness and so much pettiness among us, and, worst of all, this is counted as piety. I know, the ideal which I strive after is unattainable, but to be human in the full, natural sense of that word and then as a human to be a child of God in every respect—that seems me to be the most beautiful of all. That is what I strive after.

—Herman Bavinck to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, Dec. 22, 1888

Part One: Overcoming by Prayer and Faith

2.1 A Tragic Hero of Faith

“Will I remain standing? God grant it!” writes the nineteen year old Herman Bavinck in his diary on September 23, 1874, the day he arrived in Leiden to study theology.¹ In the next decades he will see many of his contemporaries drift away from the cross in the current of the modern worldview and bow down to the idol of evolution.² He himself will seek to stand firm as a Christian, not by isolating himself from the world, but in an existential struggle with the intellectual climate of his days.

1. As indicated in the last note to section 1.3, the present essay and the next one can be read immediately after the first part of the opening essay and illustrate both the meaning of “the catholic Reformed repository” and the need for “a post-post-Christian identity.”

My personal interest in Bavinck goes back to my teens when I heard his name being mentioned with respect and appreciation. Even though he was not seen as *totus noster* in our Reformed denomination, he was the one nearest to us of the great dogmaticians of the last two centuries. More recently, during a church service in my native village, a pastor affectionately called him “Father” Bavinck, a term that is usually reserved for a select number of Reformed theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like “Father” Brakel (Wilhelmus à Brakel [1635–1711], who is especially known for his often reprinted pastoral theological work *Redelijke godsdienst*, published in English as *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*).

When I actually began to read Bavinck in 2002, it was a discovery for me that he is someone “near” in a different way: he does not just continue the path of the old Reformed faith, but also engages with the questions of the modern worldview, which moves away from Christ and Christianity and seeks to explain the world without God. Between Brakel and Bavinck lies most of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the rise of the theory of evolution and the evolutionary worldview. Although Bavinck obviously is a child of his time, to me he is not so much a “fa-

Before explaining the purpose of the present essay and the next one, let me first give a sketch of Bavinck’s life and work.³ Herman Bavinck was born to Jan Bavinck and Gesina Magdalena Holland in Hoogeveen, the Netherlands, on December 13, 1854. For a good understanding of Bavinck, it is important to know that he and his family did not belong to the major Dutch Reformed Church, but to a smaller, theologically more conservative Reformed denomination, that had its own seminary in the town of Kampen. This denomination rooted in the 1834 secession from the main church and father Jan was one of its pastors.

The Bavinck family moved several times: to Bunschoten in 1857, to Almkerk in 1862, and to Kampen in 1873. Herman himself lived in Zwolle from 1871 to 1873 in order to attend grammar school. From 1873 to 1874 he lived with his parents again and studied at the seminary of his church. From 1874 to 1880 he studied in Leiden, in those days the bulwark of modern, liberal theology. In Leiden Bavinck became close friends with Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936); as far as preserved, their correspondence, which continued until Bavinck’s death, has been published and constitutes an important source for

ther” from a distant age as a “friend” living in our present age. Given this hermeneutics of contemporaneity, I do not like to play down disagreement with Bavinck by pointing out the number of years between us but prefer to accept in a context of friendship that perhaps we really differ. (For Bavinck’s own affinity and distance to Brakel, see section 3.2. For Bavinck as a “father,” see also note 7 of the present essay.)

Part of chapter 2 has been published before as De Wit, “Will I Remain Standing?,” which is an elaboration of presentations in the Scholars’ Seminar of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, March 16, 2010 and at The Edinburgh Bavinck Conference, September 2, 2010. Sections 3.4 and 3.5 are a revised version of a paper that I wrote for Lee Hardy’s course on the apologetics of despair when I was a visiting PhD student at Calvin Theological Seminary in 2004.

Earlier drafts for chapters 2 and 3 were discussed during several seminars and conferences for doctoral candidates organized by the International Reformed Theological Institute in Amsterdam and Doorn. Some smaller parts are based on presentations at the conference of the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) in Newcastle, April 8, 2003, at a symposium of dogmatics department of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) in Kampen, January 26, 2004, and at the “Ontmoetingen met Bavinck” conference in Kampen, October 29, 2004. The last presentation led to two publications in Dutch: De Wit, “Herman Bavinck over de evolutieleer” (a popular overview of Bavinck’s views on evolution) and De Wit, “Beeld van gorilla en chimpansee of beeld van God?” (an edition of an early text in which Bavinck explicitly rejects the idea that human beings descend from [other] animals; see note 49).

2. Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” (diary 1874–1879), September 23, 1874. The question “Will I remain standing?” may allude to the story of the three men who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image and therefore were thrown into the fiery furnace (Dan. 3). Cf. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, 6 and Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 291: “Just as the pagan treats his idol, so modern man acts with the idea of evolution.”

3. Factual biographic data have mainly been derived from Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* and also from Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*. Gleason, *Herman Bavinck* appeared too late to be included in the discussion in this study.

understanding Bavinck.⁴ In 1880 Bavinck completed his studies with a thesis on the ethics of the reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531). After a pastorate in Franeker from 1881 to 1882 he became a professor in Kampen. In 1891 he married Johanna Adriana Schippers and after three years the couple got a daughter. From 1895 to 1901 he published his four volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, of which a revised edition appeared from 1906 to 1911 and a full English translation from 2003 to 2008.⁵

In 1880 Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) founded the Free University in Amsterdam.⁶ In 1886 he was one of the leaders of a second secession from the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1892 most churches of the two secessions united into the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.⁷ The new church now had two places to train future pastors: the seminary in Kampen and the faculty of theology of the Free University. Bavinck made strong efforts to merge the two, but when these failed in 1902, he moved to Amsterdam and became professor at the Free University in succession to Kuyper, who had become prime minister in 1901.

Through the years Bavinck was involved in the development of Christian education in various ways; his fundamental reflection in this area appeared in 1904: *Paedagogische beginselen* (Principles of Education). In 1908 he delivered the so-called Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States of America; these lectures—titled *The Philosophy of Revelation*—appeared in Dutch, English and German almost simultaneously and in Italian in

4. Bavinck and Snouck Hurgronje, *Een Leidse vriendschap*. See also the second section of the appendix of the present study.

5. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4 vols. (1895–1901; 1906–1911). The second edition contains some considerable changes from the first one. Later editions contain the same text as the second one, but from the fourth edition onwards, the pagination has been altered. The English translation (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols.) is based on the second Dutch edition. In 2010 an electronic edition became available for Logos Bible Software (which retains the pagination of the printed edition). In the present study references to the English version follow the format “volume:page #subsection.” Subsection numbers are given because they are also found in all Dutch editions except for the first one and thus make it easy to locate the source text of a passage.

6. Nowadays, the official English name of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam is “VU University Amsterdam,” but in Bavinck’s days the name was translated as “Free University.” Therefore, I use the former to refer to the university today (e.g., in section 4.10) and the latter for the university during Bavinck’s lifetime.

7. In Dutch the 1834 secession is usually called “Afscheiding” and the 1886 secession “Doleantie.” In this essay “the Secession” (capitalized) refers to the 1834 secession. In 2004 the history of the secessions partly came to an end when the Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands united into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. However, since the nineteenth century several other Reformed denominations have come into being that continue the tradition of the Secession. Being a son of the Secession, Bavinck can be regarded as a father both to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and to these other Reformed denominations.

2004.⁸ In 1911 he became a member of the Upper Chamber of the Dutch Parliament. He died on July 29, 1921.

In this essay and the next one we will follow Bavinck in his existential struggle with the intellectual climate of his days. Although attention will be paid to the preface of the *Reformed Dogmatics* and the final chapter of *The Philosophy of Revelation*, the focus is rather on personal notes, letters, less known publications, and his contemporaries' memories of him.⁹ The image that appears after a wide reading of his writings is that of a “tragic hero of faith.”

Bavinck is a hero of faith. He sought to remain standing, and he remained standing. We have no indications to the contrary. In his confrontation with the modern worldview he kept the faith.

However, we may wonder whether his attempts to overcome the modern worldview intellectually were also successful. His *Reformed Dogmatics* is impressive, if only for its sheer seize, and *The Philosophy of Revelation* displays a depth and breadth of thought that is rarely found. Still, these works can leave the feeling that they are not sufficient as an answer to the modern worldview, the way of thought that breaks away from Christianity, explains the world without God, and understands human life and culture from an evolutionary perspective.¹⁰ As Hendrikus Berkhof remarks: “After 1900 Bavinck increasingly felt that his theological direction was leading to a dead end. . . . He felt increasingly that the modern period needed a much more vigorous renewal of theology than he himself had produced or was able to produce.”¹¹ Also some texts that we will discuss later in these essays show that Bavinck, far from being always victorious, was rather a tragic hero of faith.

8. As for Bavinck, *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring* and Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, although Bavinck delivered the Stone Lectures in English, the Dutch edition is the original and the English one a translation made by his friends Geerhardus Vos, Nicholas M. Steffens, and Henry E. Dosker (see the preface of the English edition). The German edition (*Philosophie der Offenbarung*) has been translated from Dutch, whereas the Italian version (*Filosofia della rivelazione*) has been translated from English. The idea behind the Italian translation of *The Philosophy of Revelation* is that Italian protestants, who often depend on literature from the English speaking world, find in Bavinck somebody who stands much closer to them: “When we think, for example, about his analysis of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, or about his assessment of philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, it is immediately clear that his affinity with French, German or Italian culture is much stronger than that of theologians from the English speaking world.” Ferrari, “Bavinck in Italiaanse context,” 123.

9. Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* offers among others an overview of Bavinck's life and work, a Bavinck bibliography, and an overview of secondary literature, both in English and in Dutch. See also the first section of the appendix of the present study.

10. For a few pages that clearly illustrate how Bavinck understood what was going on in his days, see Bavinck, “Creation or Development,” 849–53; Dutch: *Schepping of ontwikkeling* (1901), 7–12; see also the quotations at the beginning of the third essay.

11. Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 113. Veenhof, “Bavinck and Guardini,” 20–21 (cf. 24 n23) agrees with Berkhof, but nevertheless shows appreciation for Bavinck's dogmatics as it is. For Ferrari, “Bavinck in Italiaanse context,” 121–22, it was a discovery that Bavinck himself is more interesting than that he had understood from these few lines of Berkhof.

My invitation in these essays is to read Bavinck in a cathartic way. Just as Aristotle said about Greek drama that following the hero in a tragedy brings about *catharsis* (cleansing, purification), so also following Bavinck in his existential-intellectual attempts to remain standing, even if they failed, can purify our minds and hearts from problematic patterns of thought and piety and enable us to live and theologize with a new openness and freedom amid the questions that face Christianity and the Church today.

2.2 “For the Sake of Conscience”

Shortly after the young Bavinck prayed to remain standing, his commitment to faithfulness is tested. He decides to follow his conscience, but even doing that is not so easy, as a short study of two passages in his diary will show. This study will also give some insight into the spiritual climate in which Bavinck grew up and into his personal character.

In his diary notes on September 23, 1874, the words, “Will I remain standing? God grant it!” are immediately preceded by the remark: “Leaving my parents was difficult for me, especially because I went to L[eiden].”¹² Bavinck’s problem is probably not the physical distance from Kampen to Leiden or the fact that he is no longer to see his parents daily. When he was at grammar school in Zwolle, he also lived far away from his parents, and, while he had been rather reserved with his parents, he reportedly opened up in Zwolle.¹³ The point of his remark must be then that at Leiden University he will be outside the Reformed circle and within the atmosphere of the modern worldview.

Although Leiden’s faculty of theology is not radically atheistic or turned against the church, its predominantly modern theology breathes a different spirit than his Reformed upbringing. His 1902 farewell lecture to his students in Kampen offers some insight into this upbringing:

I am a child of the Secession and I hope to remain so. . . .

The best I have I am indebted to the Secession. My father and mother were both from Secession circles. And I do not owe the Reformed confession to Dr. Kuyper, but to my father and mother. . . .

My father . . . is a simple man, but he has been foreign to all separatism, and that was even more the case with my most simple and nevertheless perfectly healthy mother.¹⁴

The autobiographical sketch that Herman’s father, Jan Bavinck, wrote at the age of almost eighty offers further insight. Herman was the second of seven

12. Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” (diary 1874–1879), September 23, 1874.

13. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 20, 27.

14. C. Veenhof, “Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6,” 123–24 (Veenhof quotes a report of Bavinck’s speech). According to Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 13, Bavinck’s mother is not from the circles of the Secession but from a Dutch Reformed family in Vriezenveen.

children, four of whom died at an early age. In a telling passage father Jan looks back on the death of his two daughters:

But did we mourn our dear dead, we did not do so without hope that they rest in the Lord and had been taken up into heaven. Already in Bunschoten, our oldest daughter Dina gave clear signs that, as we already attested, she loved Jesus, so that a pious neighbor, whom she often visited, once said about her to us: “In that child lies something good for the Lord.” Also in Almkerk, she revealed her choice to serve the Lord at several occasions, and this especially became clear at her deathbed. She liked nothing more than when one prayed with her, that one chapter or another from the Word was read to her, or that one spoke with her about God and his service. In our other daughter we did not notice such clear signs of grace, but she too was asking and longing, and we hope that the Lord our God has heard her sighs and our prayers. Nevertheless, these signs are not the foundation of our hope that our children died in the Lord; no, our hope is founded on the covenant of grace with his promises that are yes and amen in Christ Jesus. Also to our children the Lord has made his promises, promises that have also been signified and sealed to them in Holy Baptism.¹⁵

In this passage father Bavinck not only expresses his hope that his children rest in the Lord, but also he alludes to questions that were vehemently discussed in Reformed circles in those days, questions concerning the relationship between (infant) baptism and salvation, the foundation and meaning of baptism, and the way one can be certain of one’s salvation. Meanwhile, outside Reformed circles, a way of thinking was developing in which the very premises of the discussions were becoming obsolete; a modern, evolutionary worldview was gaining prominence, and “the covenant of grace” was fading into meaningless old-fashioned terminology. The hope of dying in the Lord was being replaced by the claim that there is no Lord.

Given the gap between his Reformed upbringing and the theology at the university, why does Bavinck go to Leiden? Later, he will explain that he wanted “a more academic education than the Theological School [in Kampen] could offer in those days” and that he had “a strong desire to become acquainted with modern theology first hand.”¹⁶ It is certainly not his intention to break away from the Reformed faith and to become a modern theologian; the words “Will I remain standing? God give it!” in his diary prove the contrary. But why then does Bavinck feel attracted by modern theology if he already knows that he fundamentally disagrees with it? Why will he later feel so attracted by the theory of evolution that he does not reject it once and for all but comes back to it again and again? Probably he already had doubts—existential-intellectual

15. Jan Bavinck, “Korte schets van mijn leven” (typoscript), 62.

16. Bavinck, “Ter gedachtenis,” v. See also Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 29 and Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 20.

doubts—before he went to Leiden,¹⁷ and maybe he hopes that in Leiden he will find words to make them manageable: unless the power that tries to bring him down gets a face, he will not be able to set his face against it.

At the same time Bavinck goes to Leiden for some space and fresh air. The Reformed world is safe but also small. In his 1902 farewell speech in Kampen he will explain:

In that time it was thought in [our] church that we should abandon the world to its fate, and just because I come from the circle where I come from, I felt impelled to seek my education at a university; for, because of its concern for holiness of life, that church run the high risk of losing sight of the catholicity of the church.¹⁸

For Bavinck, catholicity means not only that the church of all times and places is essentially one, but also that the Christian faith is essentially related to all areas of life. For him, it is the opposite of narrow-mindedness and pettiness, both of which he observed in his own circles.¹⁹

Bavinck also goes to Leiden for a more down-to-earth reason. As a nineteen year old he goes not only to study but also to be a student. His diary contains the following expenses estimate:

<i>Costs in Leiden</i>	
Tuition fees	270 guilders
Student Corporation membership	+14

	284
Glass of beer	15
Freshmen Society membership	50 ²⁰

Bavinck obviously reserves quite a lot of money for student life, and a day after his arrival in Leiden he goes as a freshmen to the Leiden Student Corporation. However, very soon he begins to question whether as a Christian he really belongs there. After a conversation with Rev. J. H. Donner, the Leiden colleague of his father, he concludes that he does not. Thus he writes in his 1871–1875 diary on September 24, 1874: “Decided not to become a member of the Corporation, for my conscience’s sake.”²¹ That sounds honest and principled: yesterday he

17. A letter that A. Brummelkamp wrote to Bavinck on March 2, 1878 makes clear that Bavinck already experienced an inner struggle when he went to Leiden. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 21.

18. C. Veenhof, “Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6,” 124 (quote from the report of Bavinck’s speech).

19. See for example Bavinck’s letter to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, dated December 22, 1888, which will be discussed in section 2.5.

20. Bavinck, diary 1871–1875, undated note. For Bavinck’s actual financial situation during his years in Leiden, see Harinck, “Een uur lang is het hier brandend licht en warm geweest,” 111.

21. Bavinck, diary 1871–1875, September 24, 1874. For the role of Donner, see also Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 20, 31–32.

prayed that he would remain standing, and today he does not give in to the temptation to throw himself into a world of which he knows by now that it is at odds with his Christian convictions.

But is his decision not to become a member of the Corporation really an act of faith and principle? Or is it an act of cowardice, of giving in to Rev. Donner’s pressure? Bavinck is doubly honest with himself. Thus when he copies his notes on September 24, 1874 from his 1871–1875 diary to his 1874–1879 diary, he makes a remarkable change in the final sentence:

Can I as a Christian become a member of the Leiden Student Corporation? I was in doubt: Rev. Donner came to me at half past ten in the evening, advised me against it, and—I will not become a member, so I decided. Oftentimes I wonder whether it was *only* and *purely* for the sake of conscience that I did not become a member.²²

The bird sits gloomy in his cage. Finally, the door is open and he can fly away, but he hesitates—and lets the door slam again.

Bavinck has been brought up in piety and is a pious man himself. When he goes to Leiden to study theology, he prays that God will grant that he remains standing. However, his piety entails a tremendous tension: he cannot go and delight in Leiden’s modern theology with fresh openness but must compare everything against the Reformed confession of his upbringing. Just like almost every other student in his day, he was to become a member of the Student Corporation. But for him, he is haunted by his conscience because of it. And once that he has followed his conscience and has made a decision on principle, it is not yet his final word. “Decided not to become a member of the Corporation, for my conscience’s sake” is typically Bavinck, but “Oftentimes I wonder whether it was *only* and *purely* for the sake of conscience that I did not become a member” is probably even more characteristic of him.

2.3 “Trying to Understand the Opponent”

In 1922 Coenraad Bernardus Bavinck (1866–1941) edits a florilegium from the work of his brother Herman that contains articles mostly from the eighties. In the preface he speaks about the “twinkling of youthful ardour and animation, that was so characteristic of him [Herman] in those days and that still shines in these articles.”²³ If one reads the articles along with his inaugural lecture *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid* (The science of sacred theology; 1883) and his rectorial lecture *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church* (1888),²⁴

22. Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” (diary 1874–1879), September 24, 1874 (italics replace original underlining).

23. C. B. Bavinck, “Voorwoord,” in H. Bavinck, *Kennis en leven*, [v].

24. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*; Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” Dutch: *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*.

one soon notices that brother Coenraad has not said too much. At the same time, the eighties are also years of searching and struggle for Bavinck.

When Bavinck has completed his studies in 1880, he attempts to bid farewell to Leiden and to become a good Reformed theologian. The pressure to bid farewell comes partly from his church. After the defense of his thesis in Leiden, he has to pass an ecclesiastical exam in Kampen in order to be eligible to become a pastor. During the examination pastor F. J. Bulens asks him to deliver a sermon about Matthew 15:14a: "Leave them; they are blind leaders . . ." It is fully clear to Bavinck whom Bulens means by "blind leaders," but he cannot say goodbye to his Leiden professors so cheaply. He preaches about this verse only under protest.²⁵ For many years he will keep in his study a picture of the Leiden professor Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891), one of the leaders of modern, liberal theology, who was especially famous as a historical-critical Old Testament scholar. He also does not end his friendship with Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, but rather describes his own inner change to him.

If Bavinck briefly but powerfully expresses in his diary on September 23–24, 1874, how he experienced his move from the Reformed world to Leiden, then in his letter dated November 24, 1880, he describes the opposite. He writes on the occasion of Snouck Hurgronje taking his doctoral degree (his own graduation was a few months earlier, and since then he has lived with his parents in Kampen)

And so both of us have reached the end of the academic curriculum. I can only regret that we differ so much, so very much in principle and in view of life. Nevertheless, my cordial friendship and warm interest will accompany you in spite of great difference in insight and conviction. I hope that that difference will become smaller, but I do not yet see it. Now that I have left Leiden and look upon modern theology and the modern worldview somewhat differently than when I was so strongly under the influence of Scholten and Kuenen, many things seem to me to be rather different than they appeared to me during that time. I learned a great deal in Leiden, but I also unlearned much. The latter can in part have harmed me, but I begin to see more and more what is harmful in it. The period in which the convictions that we brought with us [to Leiden] were thrown in the melting pot of criticism is over. Now it is our task to be faithful to the convictions that we hold now and to defend them with the weapons that we have at our disposal.²⁶

The duck fully plunged into the pond of modern theology and the modern worldview, but now that it has come back on the bank it soon lets the water slide down its back.

25. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 81 and Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 35. In Dutch the difference between "leidslieden" (leaders) and "Leidsche lieden" (Leiden men) is very small.

26. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, November 24, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 75–76. My English translation is partly a revision of Harinck's in "'Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us,'" 253.

When Snouck Hurgronje objects that in the days of their daily companionship he never noticed such a strong influence from Scholten and Kuenen on him—just like Kuenen, J. H. Scholten (1811–1885) was a leader of modern theology—, Bavinck answers that indeed their influence did not lead to “loss of truths of faith and acceptance of other ones, of theirs.” So for Bavinck “the convictions that we hold now” do not essentially differ from the Reformed confession with which he was brought up.²⁷

It is worthwhile to go somewhat deeper into the letter dated November 24, 1880. This will not only provide us a background for understanding the letters to Snouck Hurgronje that will be discussed later on, but also it will show us how Bavinck values and interprets somebody who thinks differently. Snouck Hurgronje and he are good friends, but they differ “in principle and in view of life,” in “insight and conviction.” He does not see this difference as a mutual enrichment; no, he regrets it and hopes that the difference will become smaller even though he does not yet see this happening. Therefore he concludes that each of them has to be faithful to the convictions that he has now and should defend them. This is Bavinck’s analysis of the difference between Snouck Hurgronje and himself: just as he has a Reformed view of life and wants to defend it, he ascribes to Snouck Hurgronje a modern view of life that he should defend with the weapons that are at his disposal.

However, Snouck Hurgronje actually does not have such outspoken convictions. He does not say that he regrets that his friend is still Reformed. In his answer he emphasizes that he “continually” has “due respect and unconstrained sympathy.” He finds that Bavinck should not neglect “the critical objections against the old view of Scripture,” but should work towards a solution of the problem. He explains: “Although I did not share your dogmatic opinions, I have never despaired of the possibility of such a solution, as usually happens in modern circles—my more or less uncertain, if you like it, sceptic point of view allowed me to deviate from the common opinion on this issue.” So, Snouck Hurgronje counts himself among the moderns, but he does not feel obliged to think after the typical modern fashion. Already a year earlier he had written: “All kinds of things bring about that my sympathies are anything but at the side of one persuasion or party and that I, since my conscience as yet forbids me to ally anywhere, preferably find my spiritual food there where I am at least certain to find seriousness.” Later on, he will call himself a “sceptic, be it without making a system of skepticism or agnosticism.”²⁸

27. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 22–26 says that Scholten imparted a thorough knowledge of older Reformed theology to Bavinck, but Vos, “Gespleten wortels van Samen-op-Weg,” 226 points out that Scholten did no longer teach dogmatics during Bavinck’s student days but rather New Testament studies. For Snouck Hurgronje’s reaction, see Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 79, and for Bavinck’s response, see Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 13, 1881, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 81.

28. Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, August 4, 1879, and December 30, 1908, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 79–80, 55, and 163.

For Bavinck, Snouck Hurgronje represents “modern man” over against whom he wants to justify himself as a Christian.²⁹ But actually Snouck Hurgronje is not such a typical modern man. In today’s terms one would rather call him postmodern: he cannot agree with grand narratives, systems, worldviews; at least he does not adopt one. In this respect Bavinck is much more modern: grand narratives do draw him.

The difference between the friends also becomes strikingly clear in the following. August 19, 1879, Bavinck writes: “If I owe something to Leiden, it is this: trying to understand the *opponent*. You also said that in your letter.” However, Snouck Hurgronje actually wrote: “You will be willing to believe that I appreciate and strive to understand also *the serious opinion of somebody else* and to sharpen the ‘organs of my own mind’ with it.” He does not use the word “opponent.”³⁰ For Snouck Hurgronje, Leiden is an environment in which he meets people who think differently, like Bavinck; for Bavinck, it is a place of confrontation with “the opponent.”

Whom or what he exactly means by “the opponent” is not fully clear. One might suppose it is Snouck Hurgronje, since Bavinck subsequently expresses the wish that nothing will take away “the tone of true friendship” from their relationship. But in the preceding sentences he speaks about “Leiden” in general:

Leiden has been useful to me in numerous ways; I hope always to acknowledge it with gratitude. But it has also often made me very poor, it has not only deprived me of a lot of excess baggage (of which I am glad), but also of much that I later on learned to value as indispensable for my own spiritual life, especially when I had to prepare sermons.³¹

In the light of this passage, the opponent may be (the representatives of) modern theology and the modern worldview in Leiden. In the discussion of his diary notice of September 23, 1874, we suggested that Bavinck went to Leiden because the power that tried to bring him down had to get a face before he would be able to set his face against it. On this point Leiden has not disappoint-

29. See Von Meyenfeldt, “Prof. dr Herman Bavinck, 1854–1954,” 109–12, cited in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 142.

30. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 57 (italics added). Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 55 (italics added). In their introduction the editors of the correspondence remark that “this understanding for each other as opponent . . . may especially be called remarkable for a polemicist pur sang like Snouck Hurgronje.” De Bruijn and Harinck, “Inleiding,” in *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 9. This remark overlooks the fact that Snouck Hurgronje does not use the word opponent for Bavinck at all.

31. Herman Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 56–57. My English translation is partly a revision of Harinck’s in “‘Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us,’” 252.

ed him: he has begun to understand the opponent. If this interpretation is right, Snouck Hurgronje in person is not his real opponent.³²

Nevertheless, in the letter dated November 24, 1880, he ascribes to Snouck Hurgronje a set of convictions that he should defend with the weapons that are at his disposal just as he himself will defend his Reformed convictions. Also in his letter of August 19, 1879, he tries to include his friend in his struggle: “My honest prayer is that, through struggle and doubt and suffering, both of us will always come closer to what is really true and good. Then would also be fulfilled what I wish with all of my heart: that we always come closer to each other in conviction and confession.”³³

However, Snouck Hurgronje does not follow a similar path of struggle and doubt and suffering. Certainly, in his letter dated December 22, 1880, he writes that Bavinck’s questions also “are and remain *the* questions” for him, but that is first of all meant empathetically, to underline the wish that he just uttered: “Let us continue to sympathize with each other’s spiritual development as cordially as before.” Also later on in Bavinck’s life struggle, he appears not so much as an opponent who is wrestling with the same questions, but as a friend who gives honest criticism from the sideline. That was his ideal in his friendship with Bavinck: “An exchange of thoughts in which one does not hesitate at all to tell each other the truth.”³⁴

If one compares Bavinck for example with pastor Bulens, his openness for those who think differently attracts attention. However, when one reads his letters to Snouck Hurgronje carefully, one gets the impression that he can appreciate others more *despite* than *in* their otherness and that he seems to understand the mental world and experience of others as a kind of mirror image of his own. “Trying to understand the opponent” is a strength, but it becomes a weakness if others are immediately understood as opponents.

2.4 “The Innocence of a Child’s Faith . . . That Is What I Have Lost”

In his inaugural lecture at the Free University in 1902 Bavinck seems to describe implicitly how in retrospect he looks at his studies in Leiden. Speaking about students of theology at state universities, he says:

When they come from a family of believers, they not only have to face a deep crisis at university, in which their religious convictions and their love for the ministry are at stake, but an even greater difficulty waits them when they return from school into church, from academic studies into life, from theory in-

32. In a later letter, however, Bavinck clearly refers to Snouck Hurgronje when he writes: “Exactly because by now I always live among kindred spirits, the control of opponents who are also friends is sometimes even more indispensable.” Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 23, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 122.

33. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 57.

34. Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, and August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 80 (italics original) and 55.

to practice. In many cases they can no longer speak because they do no longer believe. Often they no longer have anything to preach because [biblical] criticism has bereaved them of the power and the glory of the gospel. They can no longer witness because their childlike trust in the word of the apostles has been shaken. If they want to be fit for the ministry—thus it is said—, they have to forget a lot of what they heard in the lecture rooms. And if they want to keep what they have learned there, they lack the necessary inspiration and power for the fulfillment of their service and are at a loss at sick- and death-bed. How many suffer from an inner untruth that tears their lives! How many a struggle does the discrepancy between inner convictions and outward confession, between the thoughts of the heart and the words of the lips, between research in the study and the requirements of the pulpit cost them! Unhappy with their position, many search for a way out in politics, deaconate,³⁵ or philanthropy, and, to the same extent, stop being ministers of the Word and stewards of God's mysteries.³⁶

Although Bavinck speaks about students of theology in general, it seems clear that he includes himself: he came from a family of believers, he faced a deep crisis at Leiden university, he complained about his loss of childlike trust and about lack of inner conviction in his preaching, and he felt a tension between the thoughts of his heart and the Belgic Confession (to which he as a pastor was supposed to subscribe). In particular two letters from early 1881 make this clear. A letter from Bavinck to Henry Elias Dosker (1855–1926)—a school friend who moved to America—is lost, but Dosker's answer summarizes what Bavinck has written: "I was astonished to read in the papers of your acceptance of the call of Franeker. Why? Because of the struggles, through which you have passed according to your last letter? Have the 37 articles³⁷ become plainer or more acceptable, than before?"³⁸ And Bavinck himself writes to Snouck Hurgronje in reflection on his studies in Leiden:

The innocence of a child's faith, of the unlimited trust in the truth that has been instilled in me, you see, that is what I have lost and that is much, very much. . . .

35. In the Netherlands deaconate (diaconaat) refers to the ministry of the church to the poor.

36. Bavinck, *Godsdienst en godgeleerdheid*, 23.

37. The 37 articles refer to the Belgic Confession, to which Bavinck as a pastor was supposed to subscribe. As a matter of fact, later on, Bavinck, together with others, wrote a report for the synod that led to the decision to change article 36 (about the role of the civil government) of the Belgic Confession. And in 1920 he wrote a report for the synod that asked for reformulation of articles 2–8 (about the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture), article 29 (about the true and false church), and article 36 again. See Bavinck et al., *Advies in zake het gravamen tegen artikel xxxvi der belijdenis* and Bavinck, "Rapport inzake de voorstellen der particuliere synodes rakende de belijdenis." See also section 3.6.

38. Dosker to Bavinck, February 12, 1881; cited in Harinck, "Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us," 252.

I know that I will never regain it. . . . Sometimes, when I still meet some people in the congregation, who possess it and fare so well by it and are so happy, well I cannot help, but I wish I could believe again as they do, so happily and so cheerfully; and then I feel that, if I had this and could preach in such a way, animated, warm, always fully convinced of what I was saying, yes one with it, indeed, then I would be strong, powerful, then I could be useful; living myself, I would live for others.

But I know that it is over, that it is no longer possible.³⁹

If all this is Bavinck’s own experience, what should we think of the last sentence that we quoted from his inaugural lecture? “Unhappy with their position, many search for a way out in politics, deaconate, or philanthropy, and, to the same extent, stop being ministers of the Word and stewards of God’s mysteries.” Do we hear here Bavinck’s own inner tension? Does one side of him look for a way out because the Bible has become a problem for him? And does the other side call him back to the intimacy of the Word of God?

2.5 “An Unspoken Desire That Scripture Might Not Be True”

On December 22, 1888, Bavinck writes a letter to Snouck Hurgronje that gives even deeper insight into his inner struggle.

Sometimes I perceive in my own *soul* an unspoken desire that Scripture might not be true, that the newer criticism might be right, and in this I see something of that secret enmity that the sinful *heart* feels against the Holy One and that can only be overcome by faith and prayer. . . . Exactly this experience of the soul, in connection with others, ties me to Scripture and confession, although I feel in my *mind* the objections that can be brought against Christianity as deeply as you do. As for me, primarily *heart* and *conscience* prevent me from being modern and liberal. . . .

You will certainly have received my oration [*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*]. Remember when you read it that it is especially meant as some medicine against the separatist and sectarian tendencies that sometimes show up in our church. There is so much narrow-mindedness and so much pettiness among us, and, worst of all, this is counted as piety. I know, the ideal which I strive after is unattainable here, but to be human in the full, natural sense of that word and then as a human to be a child of God in every respect—that seems me to be the most beautiful of all. That is what I strive after.⁴⁰

Bavinck perceives a *desire* in his soul that Scripture might not be true. This is quite astonishing. He does not say that he *fears* that Scripture might not be

39. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 13, 1881, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 81. My English translation is a revision of Harinck’s in “Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us,” 253–54.

40. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 22, 1888, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 136–37 (italics of “*heart* and *conscience*” are original; other italics added).

true, but that he *desires* so. Apparently, Scripture is not a book (maybe we should say: a power) that makes him feel at ease. Fortunately, one might say, Bavinck also knows the objections against Christianity with his *mind*—if only he distances himself from Scripture and Christianity, both his soul and his mind will be satisfied. A narrow-minded person may not dare to distance himself, but Bavinck does not like narrow-mindedness and certainly not when it is counted as piety. In short, he is not far from being a human in the full, natural sense of that word!

The bird is sitting in the opening of the cage. It knows about the problems inside. It knows that it wants to go. And still, it remains sitting.

When Bavinck feels uncomfortable with Scripture, he does not blame Scripture, but his own desire that Scripture might not be true. That desire is not good, but sinful. It is enmity against the Holy One. Neither does he give in to what his mind says, namely, that there are many objections against Christianity. Using the means of faith and prayer, Bavinck struggles to dissociate himself from his sinful heart and his mind and to associate himself with his conscience, with that other heart that is tied to Scripture and confession, that bows before the Holy One, and that lives as a child of God. Remarkably, Bavinck does not speak about a second mind or about arguments in favor of Christianity that are also “felt” by his mind.

For Bavinck, this struggle has little to do with narrow-mindedness. Rather, he who knows this struggle will no longer worry about all those issues that do not really matter. Being human in the full, natural sense of the word is not a category that he uses to describe the mainstream of his life so far. On the contrary, real life, true humanity is an ideal for him: it will be attained when both the sinful heart and the petty piety have been overcome, but that will not be in this sublunary existence. One feels the oppression that dominates his life: just being human—for Bavinck it is an ideal, not reality. Out in the countryside the bird could sing a much more glorious song to its Creator, but it feels it cannot reach the countryside.

How shall we evaluate this letter? Does it reveal that Bavinck was a person with a well-nigh tragic religious development that made him unhappy and insincere towards sound arguments? Was that Holy One from whom Bavinck wanted to escape but could not really the living God, or was it an oppressing idol? And when we read Bavinck’s books, should we think that they spring from a disturbed mind?

Or is Bavinck one of those heroes of faith who remained standing amidst all desires and intellectual pressures? Is this letter a precious example of the true struggle of faith, of the struggle between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” (Gal. 5:17)? Are his works therefore so important because he was such an experienced Christian?

Can it be both? Can we take Bavinck’s oeuvre seriously and not discard it as the work of a sufferer from religious mania? And, at the same time, can we acknowledge that his tense self-understanding sometimes led him to self-

demonization and hindered him from developing a level-headed view, for example, on the gains and weaknesses of critical biblical studies?⁴¹

2.6 “In Prayer He Does Not Seek Himself but the Honor of his Father”

In the letter that we just discussed, Bavinck mentions two means to overcome the secret enmity of the sinful heart: faith and prayer. In this section and the next one we will seek to catch some glimpses of how Bavinck uses prayer and faith to remain standing. However, before we proceed we must note that we are approaching a private area that requires an attitude of reverence and to which our sources provide only limited access.

Indeed, to be clear from the beginning, we do not know much about Bavinck’s prayers or his views on prayer. An occasional remark in *Het christelijk huisgezin* (The Christian Family) suggests that he is used to a regular pattern of prayer: “Everything in the family has an educative function: . . . prayer and thanksgiving at the meal and the reading of God’s Word, and the morn-

41. See also the discussion of Bavinck’s letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated June 1, 1905, in section 2.7. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck offers a more matter-of-fact discussion about objections against the inspiration of Scripture. Yet even here, right at the beginning, he puts the issue at the level of an “ethical battle, which at all times has been carried on against Scripture”: “If Scripture is the word of God, that battle is not accidental but necessary and completely understandable. . . . Christ bore a cross, and the servant [Scripture] is not greater than its master. Scripture is the handmaiden of Christ. It shares in his defamation and arouses the hostility of sinful humanity.” This is not only a battle fought by outsiders, but a battle within the believers themselves: “In Scripture too there is much that raises doubt. All believers know from experience that this is true. . . . [Also] simple Christians . . . know the hard struggle fought both in head and heart against Scripture. . . . It is one and the same battle, an ever-continuing battle, which has to be waged by all Christians, learned or unlearned, to ‘take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:5). Here on earth no one ever rises above that battle. . . . There is no faith without struggle. To believe is to struggle, to struggle against the appearance of things.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:439–41 #116. What one misses in Bavinck’s argument, is a criterion to decide what belongs to the true struggle of faith and what is rather a misguided attempt to believe that something is true that is actually not true.

A reader asked whether Bavinck would have recognized himself in the term “self-demonization.” As will be clear, it should not be understood as if Bavinck had such a negative self-image that he saw himself as a demon and the personification of evil. However, at crucial moments he seeks to weaken the force of critical questions and arguments—which, if accepted, would undermine his own position—by attributing them to an evil, sinful intention in himself (self-demonization) or in others (demonization): this is what I observe in, e.g., the letters of December 22, 1888, and June 1, 1905, and the cited passage from the *Reformed Dogmatics*. In answer to the observation that he is demonizing, Bavinck could have responded that he sees such evil intentions as real and that it would be naïve if one did not reckon with them. Still, I would invite myself and others not to follow Bavinck uncritically in this regard: it may sound pious to attribute critical questions to secret enmity of the heart against God, but one could perhaps mature more in understanding if one interacted with the content of these questions, and, if others are involved, this may do more justice to them. Nevertheless, if it were still felt that the term “self-demonization” does not sufficiently do justice to Bavinck, I am willing to trade it in for something better, as I have no intention to portray him more negatively than he deserves.

ing and evening prayers.”⁴² Sometimes he writes short prayers in his diary, especially during his years in Leiden. Most of them can be categorized under the heading of loyalty: prayers to be a worthy follower of Jesus, prayers of thanksgiving that God enabled him to pass exams with good results, a prayer for humility and gratitude, et cetera.⁴³

When Bavinck is a pastor in Franeker (1881–1882), the chairman of the school board comes to his house, to take him to a meeting that he is to address. Forty years later, the chairman will relate how he overheard Bavinck in prayer:

The housekeeper of the pastor took me into the front room. The pastor would be ready in a minute, I just had to wait. I sat down, but immediately heard somebody speaking in the next room. . . . I heard Bavinck praying. Praying, begging, wrestling for wisdom, for a blessing on the work that he was about to do. I stood as if pinned to the ground and was surprised . . . that he felt so little and incapable to fulfill this work that he had to put pressure on the throne of grace. But that evening I was surprised for a second time: now about the mighty, awesome word that the pastor laid on the consciences of the hearers. It was the witness of all: we have never heard Bavinck like this!⁴⁴

If also the last part of this rather hagiographic story is true, then such intensive preparation in prayer seems to have been an exception rather than a rule for Bavinck.

Later on, when he lives in Amsterdam and leads a church service, he is asked to pray for a child that is ill. His prayer will still be remembered many years later:

The words in which this prayer was lifted up to God were very simple, but did not a deep emotion spread through the whole church? That was praying. A father prayed, who was used to praying for his own child and now loved these parents as himself, these unknown parents who had a child that was ill and who had asked for his intercession. That was true charity. We experienced it.⁴⁵

As for Bavinck’s theological views on prayer, neither the *Reformed Dogmatics* nor *Our Reasonable Faith* contains a chapter or section on prayer. Although the title might suggest otherwise, *The Sacrifice of Praise* (a popular present for young adults on the occasion of their public profession of faith) can only be called a treatise on prayer if one takes that in a much broadened sense; it does not even contain a chapter on personal prayer.

42. Bavinck, *Het christelijk huisgezin* (1908), 140; (1912), 148. Bavinck refers to a habit among Reformed Christians in the Netherlands both to pray before the meal and to read the Bible and say a prayer of thanksgiving after the meal. At the celebration of his hundredth birthday, his daughter told that every morning at half past eight he read Scripture with the family and prayed for all family members and the servants. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 272.

43. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 32.

44. See Landwehr, *In memoriam Prof. Dr H. Bavinck*, 22, who quotes this story from *Friesch Kerkblad*, August 19, 1921.

45. Van der Vaart Smit, “De Dogmatische beteekenis van Dr H. Bavinck,” 43.

A small but more relevant source to know Bavinck’s view on prayer is his three-page foreword to a practical work on prayer. Herein he first discusses Kant’s criticism of prayer (i.e., in essence prayer is an act of superstition, although public prayer can be allowed because of the impact it has on the people who listen to it) and the total rejection of prayer by others. Next, he complains about the growing abuse of prayer: people pray for physical needs only and hardly for spiritual needs: “Disconnected from the rules to which God has bound it, it serves as a means to get a sudden cure, to find lost goods again, to ascertain oneself of the success of a dubious enterprise, to gain without effort whatever the sinful heart desires.” Then, he emphasizes that prayer is a commandment that God has prescribed us, that the Lord himself has said in his Word what prayer is and which are the rules for serving and honoring him, and that there is no space for human self-will in prayer: true piety is first of all expressed in obedience. Next, he explains that prayer is also a need and privilege of the human: “An animal does not pray, but a human cannot live without prayer.”⁴⁶ Finally, he mentions the higher meaning of prayer for a Christian:

For him, it is not just an expedient from distress but a fruit of gratitude; not a burden but a pleasure; not a commandment but a privilege. Prayer is the breath of his life, the pulse of his spiritual existence, the most intimate act of communion with God. His life becomes praying without ceasing. Also in prayer he does not seek himself but the honor of his Father.⁴⁷

This foreword confirms the impression that we gained from his diary notes—that Bavinck’s piety is characterized by deep loyalty more than by confidential conversation: prayer is a commandment that loses its character of a commandment for the Christian who prays out of gratitude. The traditional phrases “prayer is the breath of his life,” and so forth, as such leave open a different conclusion, but the next sentence confirms again that he basically thinks in terms of loyalty: the Christian “does not seek himself but the honor of his Father.” Prayer as the free expression of one’s doubts and needs, without worrying whether this is according to the rules, does not seem to have been very important to him.

Although Bavinck calls prayer “the most intimate act of communion with God,” and although the mystical union between Christ and the believers is an important theme in his thinking, by this union he means that Christ indwells believers (through the Holy Spirit and signified and sealed in the Lord’s Supper) rather than that believers speak in words to or with Christ.⁴⁸ In an unpublished lecture, he explicitly recommends to be silent:

46. Should we sense here an implicit rejection of the idea that human beings descend from animals?

47. Bavinck, “Voorrede,” in Kramer, *Het gebed*, 2–3.

48. For the mystical union with Christ, see, e.g., Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 4:250–51 #480, 4:567–68 #544, 4:576–79 #546. See also Gleason, “The Centrality of the *unio mystica* in the Theology of Herman Bavinck”; Burger, “Een eeuwigdurende verbondenheid”; and the chap-

[Christ] is the great Reformer of creation; he can restore the image of God in us. How does he do so? I do not know; by a miracle, an act of creation, by one word, with one wink, in one moment. Place yourself under the mighty impression of his fascinating personality. For a moment, put aside all criticism, all reasoning; place yourself just before him, so that his eye looks in yours, his glance meets yours; take away the lid from your heart, behold him, catch his glance, so penetrating, so pure, so gentle; *say nothing, speak nothing, just behold*, and even faster than the light casts your image on the silver plate of the photographer in the camera obscura, Jesus' image falls into your soul and you are recreated according to his image. One mighty impression—and you are a print of Christ. You have to see him, to see him well, with your own eyes; you have to see him personally, then you will be like him.⁴⁹

Certainly, his personal prayers are not always wordless, as the chairman of the school board testifies, but maybe prayer as communion with God is for him more that one seeks the presence of the Lord than that one says so much to him.

If so, one may tentatively say that Bavinck's understanding and practice of prayer may have helped him to remain standing, to remain loyal to his Father, and not to give in to the modern worldview, but that they were probably not so useful for actually freeing him from the burden of the challenge of that worldview.

ter on Bavinck in Burger, *Being in Christ*. The author of this last work (a published doctoral thesis) was so kind as to send a copy of it to me; however, for reasons unknown, it did not reach me in Cairo.

49. Bavinck, "De mensch, Gods evenbeeld" (manuscript), [35]. The passage that is quoted here is immediately followed by eight lines from "God met ons" (God with us), a poem by the Dutch Jewish-Christian poet Isaäk da Costa. Bavinck will quote these same lines again in *De zekerheid des geloofs* (1901), 33 (they have been left out in *The Certainty of Faith*, the English translation of this work). In the poem Da Costa describes his own conversion experience and uses language that refers to the conversion of Paul the Apostle. It is tempting to think but hard to prove that in the quoted passage Bavinck (indirectly) describes a conversion experience of his own during which he entered consciously into communion with Christ for the first time.

Although at first sight only the language of photography may remind us that the passage is written in modern times, Bavinck actually began this lecture about the image of God with a strong rejection of a Darwinian account of human origins: "The antithesis cannot be sharper: Adam image of gorilla and chimpanzee or image of God. One has to choose between these two. . . . [We have a] 'natural horror' of the animal descent of humankind. . . . Whatever science says, we do not feel related to animals. . . . God created humankind in his image. This truth . . . is a key concept of the Bible and the presupposition of the doctrines of sin, salvation, sanctification, and glorification. If one takes it away, all of God's revelations will lack the basis on which they rest and will fall down into the depths." Bavinck, "De mensch, Gods evenbeeld," [3–6]. This first part of the lecture has been published in De Wit, "Beeld van gorilla en chimpansee of beeld van God?," which also offers a short description of the manuscript. It is clear that the lecture was intended for ordinary Christians rather than an academic audience.

2.7 “This is the Victory That Overcomes the World, Even Our Faith”

Besides prayer Bavinck also uses faith in order to remain standing. Faith is for him a means to overcome not only the secret enmity of his own sinful heart but also the world. One of the most important Bible verses in his life is 1 John 5:4b: “This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.”⁵⁰ His first sermon was about this verse. In a letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated August 3, 1878, he relates that, although the fact that he had preached his first sermon felt as a victory, he was not completely satisfied: “It inspired me less than I had thought. I did not speak with that feeling for myself as I had hoped that I would do, while the thought was continuously with me that I would always stand so far below the ideal.”⁵¹ May we infer from this that he had hoped to speak from the experience of the victory of faith over the world, whereas in fact this experience of having overcome still stood as an unattainable ideal before him?

Bavinck’s only published sermon is about the same passage. He preached it when Paul Kruger was with him in the church in Kampen on June 30, 1901. Also quotations and allusions throughout his writings show that this verse has a special meaning for him.⁵²

At the eighth congress of Dutch philologists in 1916 he speaks about the victory of the soul. He notices that the materialistic worldview has had its heyday and that there is a renewed attention upon the soul. He himself sees in science and technology a proof of the superiority of the human mind over nature and in art the victory of the ideal over reality. The highest victory, however, is the victory in the soul itself. Art can prophesy the victory over the struggles in the world and in oneself, it can make us see the promised land from far away, but it cannot take us there.⁵³ Bavinck speaks for a general scholarly audience and does not elaborate on specific Christian beliefs. However, at the end of his lecture he quotes Dante to make clear that the real victory of the soul can only be reached by faith. Art has a prophetic function, but “the happy end goes far

50. My translation of the Dutch Statenvertaling (the Bible version that Bavinck used): “Dit is de overwinning, die de wereld overwint, *namelijk* ons geloof” (italics original, indicating that a word is not found in the Greek source text). Whereas several English versions translate the Greek aorist participle *nikēsasa* with “that has overcome” (e.g., NIV and ESV), the Statenvertaling uses the present tense (“overwint”), which can be understood as a futuristic present: now, the battle with the world is going on, but faith will overcome and have the victory.

51. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 3, 1878, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 45.

52. Bavinck, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs*. For allusions, see, e.g., Bavinck, “Het christelijk geloof” (1883), 187–88, (1922), 93–94; Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 247, 249, Dutch: *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*, 45, 49; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:600 #155; Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, 45, Dutch: *De zekerheid des geloofs* (1901), 78.

53. Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel*, 27, 29, 30, 33.

beyond the earthly horizon. Therefore: ‘What reason sees, I can explain to you, but otherwise you will have to wait for Beatrice in matters of faith.’”⁵⁴

According to Bavinck’s students, he could already see beyond the horizon in his preaching and teaching:

When Bavinck lectured . . . it could happen that he was so much filled by God’s glory that he forgot us and, while speaking, gazed out of the window into endless distances, for God’s glory is endless; and we were listening speechlessly and were introduced—for our whole life—into the mystery of salvation of the Eternal and Almighty One, who is our merciful Father in Jesus Christ.⁵⁵

When he was teaching, there was something visionary or prophetic about him as if he witnessed a higher world.⁵⁶

He did much more than mere teaching. As a Christian he was able to make one feel the width and glory of God’s revelation in Christ, to make one realize the limits of the temporary over against the eternal, to make one look forward from knowing in part to the day of the full solution of the mystery. He carried one away to kneel before the throne of the Lamb.⁵⁷

When Bavinck began to speak at a mission conference, the whole room became silent, “ecumenically and universal silent”: “majesty had come into the meeting, the majesty of the greatness of God’s revelation.”⁵⁸

Do these testimonies demonstrate that Bavinck lived from the victory of faith? From his letters we have already learned that he was not unfamiliar with struggle and doubt. Remarkably, in *De overwinning der ziel* (The Victory of the Soul) he does not connect the prophetic-visionary experience with faith but with art. He continues: “The aesthetic human, says Kierkegaard, lives from moment to moment; if he could maintain himself in the moment, he would be like a god. But his danger is . . . in the emptiness between the moments; again and again, he has to go through his own emptiness.”⁵⁹ Does Bavinck here also describe his own experience, at least in part?

Still, Bavinck was not the kind of person whose life of faith concentrated on special immediate experiences. His foreword to a biography about Rev. L. G. C. Ledebouer (1808–1863) is instructive in this regard. This pastor was respected in circles that stood somewhat apart from the mainstream of the Secession tradition. According to Bavinck, Ledebouer was “a speaking example of the piety that is regarded as the highest and purest” in these circles: “He possesses all its

54. Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel*, 34 (quoting Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 18.46–48).

55. Buskes, *Hoera voor het leven*, 33; quoted in Van Deursen, “Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit,” 29–30.

56. According to Kraan, “Prof.dr. H. Bavinck,” 34; cited in Van Deursen, “Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit,” 30.

57. Van der Vaart Smit, “De dogmatische betekenis van Dr H. Bavinck,” 43.

58. Van der Vaart Smit, “De dogmatische betekenis van Dr H. Bavinck,” 43.

59. Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel*, 33–34.

characteristics, its originality, its freshness, its immediacy, but also all the peculiarities, caprices, and extravagances by which it is often accompanied.” From this biography Bavinck learns “what is the one-sidedness of this kind of godliness and what we lack ourselves.” He continues: “And when we have taken all this in and have passed it through our souls, then we willingly return to the language of *faith* of the Christian of Heidelberg [i.e. the Heidelberg Catechism] or even better to the testimonies of *faith* of the apostles and the prophets. We breathe again and revive.”⁶⁰ Living from faith rather than from experiences seems to have given Bavinck the power to live.

In his theological works, Bavinck has written much about faith, most of which we will not try to include in the discussion here. However, his very first article deserves attention. In this article, entitled *Geloofswetenschap* (Science of Faith) and published in 1880, he reflects upon the relationship between science and faith and upon the scientific character of theology. The article gives the impression that Bavinck himself is still searching.⁶¹ At the end of the article he says remarkably that God is the ultimate hypothesis, of which one already knows by faith that it is true, while one may still exhort others to search deeper and deeper to discover that God truly exists.⁶² To my best knowledge, Bavinck does not call God a hypothesis in any of his other works.⁶³ However, the implic-

60. Bavinck, “Een woord vooraf,” in Landwehr, *L. G. C. Ledebor in zijn leven en arbeid geschetst*, vii (italics added).

61. Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap” (1880, 1922). The Dutch title “Geloofswetenschap” is ambiguous in several respects: “Geloof” can be translated both as “faith” and as “belief” and can mean the attitude of faith (*fides qua*) or the content of faith (*fides quae*). “Wetenschap” can be translated as “science” or as “knowledge,” but it is also the general term for all scientific and scholarly disciplines together. Moreover, the title does not make clear whether the article will speak about an approach to science that is based on faith or about the scientific study of faith. To complicate matters further, the combination “geloof en wetenschap” (literally: faith and science) is the usual Dutch term for the problem area that is commonly called “science and religion” in English. So, “geloof” in “geloofswetenschap” may even be translated as “religion.”

Bavinck is partly aware of these ambiguities and uses them in his article, but at the same time they seem to make it difficult for him to get a full grip on his topic. By contrast, he begins his 1918 essay “Philosophie des geloofs” in a much clearer way, immediately discussing what he does and does not mean by his title. See Bavinck, “Philosophy of Religion (Faith),” cf. the editorial note on page 25 that explains why the Dutch word “geloof” in the title has been translated as “religion (faith)”; Dutch: “Philosophie des geloofs” (1918, 1921).

62. Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap” (1880), 526; (1922), 12.

63. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1:56 says that “we should not think it strange if epistemologically the statements of dogmatics and the theses of the Christian doctrine which it presents are given the status of hypotheses”; his footnotes show that others have disagreed with him about this point on the basis of his earlier publications regarding hypotheses in theology. However, if I understand him correctly, he does not call God himself a hypothesis in his *Systematic Theology* and when he speaks about proving the reality of God, he puts the word “prove” between quotation marks (*Systematic Theology*).

Dawkins, *The God Delusion* speaks about “the God hypothesis” without hesitation, but he is almost certain that this hypothesis is false. Cf. section 3.9. In the light of what has been said in section 1.5, I myself have no problem with attempts to falsify hypotheses concerning God (if such

it tension will remain: Is it possible to say in the same breath that by faith I am certain of something and that it is open for scientific research? By declaring the same statement both a matter of faith and a hypothesis for scientific/scholarly research, does one not either compromise one's academic open-mindedness or give way to doubts in matters of faith, or both? If a matter is truly open to research, is faith not simply too early if it already claims its victory and states beforehand what the outcome of research will be?

In 1908 the 25th anniversary of Bavinck's professorship is celebrated. In his thanksgiving speech at the end of the celebration, he looks back at the twenty five years and recalls what he has lost, what he has gained, and what he has kept. All are touched when they hear him speak about the third point: although it seems a miracle to himself, he has kept the faith.⁶⁴

This first part of the essay has certainly not offered an exhaustive treatment of the sources that give insight into Bavinck's inner life, but hopefully it has examined enough of his writings in order to read Bavinck in a cathartic way, to reconsider our own piety in the mirror of his, even when it appears to be problematic.

Hendrikus Berkhof describes the main problem of Bavinck's theology as follows: "For him faith was not in the first place a yielding up of one's life to a Person [Christ] but intellectual assent and submission to Scripture."⁶⁵ Berkhof's observation is confirmed by a letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated June 1, 1905, in which Bavinck writes:

I agree that the supposition on which my view of life rests, namely the truth of Holy Scripture, includes a difficult problem. I can only say this about it: the longer and deeper I live, the more I perceive that I cannot free myself from the authority of Scripture. . . . Sometimes I am inclined to break with it, but when I examine myself carefully, it is related to the evil in my human nature. . . . And conversely, the more I am, to put it this way, in a pious mood and experience better moments, *I feel totally willing and inclined to accept Scripture and to submit myself to it*, and then I have peace for my heart.⁶⁶

Bavinck does not piously and cheerfully revel in Scripture, but experiences it as an authority from which he cannot free himself, whereas at moments that he calls his best he is "totally willing and inclined to accept Scripture and to submit" himself to it. When he feels the inclination to break with it, he relates this to the evil in his human nature. Just as in his letter of December 22, 1888, so here we see that tendency to self-demonization. Does Bavinck use the Word of God as part of his spiritual armor in his struggle to remain standing, or does he

attempts are successful, they liberate us from [perhaps cherished] beliefs that are, however, not true) but would hesitate to call the living God himself a hypothesis.

64. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 299–300.

65. Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 114.

66. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, June 1, 1905, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 158 (italics added).

feel compelled to use his own arms to defend the authority of Scripture and to submit himself to it?

Even though Berkhof has a point when he says that for Bavinck faith means submission to Scripture, another passage shows that he has also clearly misunderstood Bavinck.⁶⁷ This passage is from an article entitled “Geloof en liefde” (Faith and Love; 1909) and makes clear that the deepest reason why Bavinck remained standing was not intellectual argument or blind submission, but union with Christ:

True faith has a person as its object, viz. Christ. . . . True faith does not stop at the witness of Scripture, but pushes forward through it to Christ himself, joins with him, enters into communion with him.⁶⁸

Part Two: Fighting with Reformed Weapons

2.8 “I Become and Am More and More Reformed”

When Bavinck writes to Snouck Hurgronje in the letter dated November 24, 1880: “Now it is our task to be faithful to the convictions that we hold now and to defend them with the weapons that we have at our disposal” (2.3), he does not state explicitly which weapons he has in mind for himself. However, it will soon become clear that he is especially thinking about older Reformed theology. June 16, 1881, he writes: “To be honest, I become and am more and more ‘Reformed.’ . . . I have gained more respect and more reverence for the faith and the work of faith through the centuries.”⁶⁹ In the same year, he prepares a republication of the seventeenth century Reformed theological textbook *Synopsis purioris theologiae*.⁷⁰ He explains to Snouck Hurgronje: “I did this to make some study of Reformed theology. . . . Clearer than before I see that between (let me use the familiar terms) Reformation and Revolution, in any area, both in principle and in method, in view of God, humankind, world, etc., any ‘Vermittlung’ [mediation] or reconciliation is impossible.”⁷¹ Brother Coenraad says

67. Also Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 126 n261 is of the opinion that Berkhof has represented Bavinck’s concept of faith one-sidedly. Hielema, “Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption,” 108 states that Berkhof has not perceived “the relational heart of Bavinck’s theology.”

68. Bavinck, “Geloof en liefde,” 121. In his “angelology” Bavinck says that angels are not objects of our trust or worship—“the object of true faith is the grace of God in Christ.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:450 #261.

69. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, June 16, 1881, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 88–89.

70. Polyander, Rivetus, Walaeus, and Thysius, *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, ed. H. Bavinck (1881). Father Jan Bavinck also played a role in the preparation of this edition: Herman “committed to him the final revision of the *Synopsis Purioris* (1880 [*sic*]); and as the son testified, his father ‘made many corrections.’” Dosker, “Herman Bavinck,” 449.

71. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, March 7, 1882, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 100. According to Vos, “Gespleten wortels van Samen-op-Weg,” 227, the *Synopsis* is not such a fortunate choice if

about Herman in these days: “It was the time that his eyes opened up in admiration of the richness and glory of Reformed religion and theology, the time, as it were, of a new discovery, and that is always a happy time.”⁷²

Bavinck’s choice of Reformed theology as his armor is a choice against the option to fight the modern worldview with its own weapons. In the final part of his study about the Dutch theologian Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874) he says that Chantepie holds to theory to fight the enemy in the area of the enemy and with the weapons of the enemy, whereas he believes “that a Christian can only expect victory if he meets the enemies in his own armor and in the name of the Lord of hosts, whom they mock.”⁷³

Although Bavinck knows after his years in Leiden that he (still or again) stands at the Christian, Reformed side and that he wants to fight with his own weapons of Reformed theology, he does not immediately engage in the battle. In his book about Chantepie de la Saussaye he writes: “It sounds beautiful to regain churches, schools and universities for Christ. If only it were possible and did not rather make ourselves drift away on the stream of denial!” He deems it necessary “to regain ourselves” first of all.⁷⁴ A year before, in 1883, he already said in his inaugural lecture in Kampen that “the current of our time” is away from Christ and his cross and that, in order not to drift away in that stream, “we have to build a dam against that Revolution so that at least we ourselves would remain standing and would keep the holy that has been passed down to us.”⁷⁵

When Bavinck speaks about building a dam and regaining oneself, he especially has in mind the purification of one’s thinking:

one wants to familiarize oneself with (scholastic) Reformed theology: “It is a functional textbook if one is already familiar with the subject matter.” In his view, Bavinck should rather have chosen Turretin’s *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*.

In Bavinck’s oeuvre revolution and evolution are closely related as key concepts of the modern worldview. The idea of revolution is especially dominant from the late eighteenth century (cf. the French Revolution) till the middle of the nineteenth century and the idea of evolution in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. See, e.g., his discussion of revolution and evolution in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 8–13. To Abraham Kuyper he says on the occasion of his seventieth birthday: “Over against revolution and evolution, you have sought your strength in the Gospel of the Reformation.” Bavinck, “Toespraak namens het *Nationaal Comité*,” 23–24. He also wrote a foreword to a new edition of a classic critique of the spirit of revolution: Bavinck, “Voorrede,” in Groen van Prinsterer, *Ongeloof en revolutie*.

72. C. B. Bavinck, “Voorwoord,” in H. Bavinck, *Kennis en leven*, [v–vi].

73. Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 97. Bavinck alludes to the story of David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17).

74. Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 96.

75. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, 6, 7. “That Revolution” refers to what Bavinck describes before: “According to what our opponents say themselves, the point of gravity has been moved from the ancient into the modern worldview. The Christian nations no longer accept to be ruled by him after whom they have been named.” Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, 6.

It paralyzes our strength that we have to live and depend on the principles and ideas of our opponents in many areas—in church, science and politics, in school and university, in upbringing and education. It is pertinent that we put an end to the confusion of concepts among us, that we remove all heterogeneous elements that are alien to our principle from church and school and family, from theology and all other scholarly and scientific disciplines, and that, in short, we seek our strength in isolation until we have found a stable position and have gained ground for our own feet.⁷⁶

In this way, Bavinck sets a huge task for himself. This becomes even clearer if we consider the following three points:

1. Bavinck has made the choice to go back to older Reformed theology and has edited the *Synopsis*, but this has not yet given him the key for his own thinking. In 1881 he publishes the first part of an article about Reformed theology. This first part discusses three movements in nineteenth century Dutch theology: the so-called Groningen School, Modern Theology, and Ethical Theology.⁷⁷ However, the second part, in which he promised to discuss the specific nature of Reformed theology over against these three movements, will never appear. Is this a sign that he does not yet know what is characteristic of the theological direction that he has identified as his own? In the letter in which he explained the edition of the *Synopsis* to Snouck Hurgronje, he also writes: “Before I will ever come with a work of my own, I have to know what I want and where I stand. I did not know that before and did not learn it in Leiden. The time has really come that I should realize this.”⁷⁸

In his inaugural lecture he seems to be certain of his case. He states that Holy Scripture is the only principle and the only source of knowledge of theology and that from the second century onwards theology has been built on this foundation to “that large and impressive building that we now already see rising to its roof.”⁷⁹ However, soon after he complains again: “So many highly important questions remain unsolved. And the distance between the ideal and my powers is so tremendously vast.” December 1884 he sighs that he lacks “a firm conviction of the reliability of the way in which I walk. I more or less know how one should not do it and where one should not go; and I wish that I knew the opposite equally well. But that desire has not yet been fulfilled in any part.” And August 1888 he writes: “In many respects I am still a seeker, as most are. In general, theology must cut a sorry figure for all who stand outside it, espe-

76. Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 96.

77. Bavinck, “Gereformeerde theologie 1.” See for a more mature discussion of Dutch theology in the nineteenth century Bavinck, “Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands,” 209–28. See also Bavinck, *Mental, Religious and Social Forces in the Netherlands*.

78. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, March 7, 1882, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 100.

79. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, 11.

cially because most more or less know how it is *not* possible and only some like Dr. Kuyper claim to know how it should be done.”⁸⁰

In these years Bavinck studies Reformed theology intensively. February 1884 he writes that he is “collecting building material for a dogmatics and an ethics of my own.” He explains that this means that, at least for the time being, he takes a historical approach to these subjects and familiarizes himself and his students “with that which has been given in history, and in particular with Reformed dogmatics.” The notes that he took in preparation for his lectures in these years have been preserved and confirm this picture of intensive study of Reformed theology.⁸¹ If so, especially the letter of summer 1888 raises a question: by then, Bavinck has followed the historical path for several years, but he still calls himself a seeker—is he going to find the key to develop his own position in the older Reformed theology or not?

2. To be clear, Bavinck’s ideal is not only to revive Reformed theology of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. He agrees with Chantepie de la Saussaye that also the eighteenth and the nineteenth century have something to say to “us.” With him he believes “*that* God also speaks in the storms of this century . . . and has something to say to us”; the difference is about the question “*what* he has to say to us.” Generally speaking, he means that, unlike Chantepie de la Saussaye, he does not believe that reconciling faith and science and reconquering the lost ground have priority right now. However, will he be able to become more specific? It is his ideal “to develop the contents of the Christian Reformed principles,” but if these cannot be derived from older Reformed theology right away, the question rises where and how they can be found at all.⁸²

3. Although Bavinck wants to banish all principles and ideas of the opponents and to remove all heterogenous elements from church and school and family and theology and science, he does not want to do so by separating himself from full life. His former Leiden professor J. J. Prins (1814–1898) writes in reaction to the book about Chantepie de la Saussaye a letter in which he expresses some concern about Bavinck’s course.

I can only regret the isolation that you advise. Of course, just like his Lord, a Christian should repeatedly isolate himself on the mountain to pray and to seek strengthening of faith and love, but he should also return to his work in the world and make efforts that the yeast leavens the three measures of flour. This is also true for theology. I do not see how an opposite way of action could be exonerated from sectarianism.⁸³

80. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, October 23, 1883, December 23, 1884, and August 7, 1888, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 115, 122, and 132 (italics original).

81. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, February 11, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 117. See also Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 25–56.

82. Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 96, 97 (italics original).

83. Prins to Bavinck, October 2, 1884, cited in *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 124 n1.

However, when Bavinck has received this letter, he writes to Snouck Hurgronje that in his heart he knows himself “a full enemy” “of false separatism.” He is against “Vermittlung [mediation] of two heterogenous principles and worldviews” because his own experience is that that “leads to nothing,” but he immediately adds: “Further I would like nothing better than to convey the conviction to my church, to the students to whom I teach, to everybody on whom I have some influence that nothing human is alien to the Christian.” He formulates his ideal as follows: “Let the principle be pure and uncontaminated, but let it also be applied by me to every aspect and the full width of human life, as far as possible.”⁸⁴

In his articles about the imitation of Christ in 1885–1886 he says about the monastic ideal of imitation almost the same as what Prins wrote to him:

Jesus did not come to judge the world, but to save it (John 3:17); the monk leaves the world and judges it by going to the desert. Jesus isolated himself in a deserted place early in the morning (Mark 1:35) to strengthen himself for daily work and his life work; the monk sees the essence of virtue in ascetic exercise itself and changes means into goal.⁸⁵

“The monk” seems to be exemplary for many in Bavinck’s own church who think “too exclusively.” He sees the tendency to leave the world symbolized in the seminary in Kampen: it is not a university but only a separate seminary, it is not in a real city but only in the small town of Kampen. His ideal is a Christian university and he sees this ideal partly realized in the Free University.⁸⁶

Bavinck has only one ideal. His effort to banish all principles and ideas of the modern worldview from his own thought and from the thinking of his fellow believers and to replace them with Reformed ones and his desire to live as a Christian and as a church in the world do not contradict each other. The full richness of the Reformed worldview can only become clear in the fullness of life. However, this ideal implies a twofold struggle: a struggle with the modern worldview but also a struggle with the dominant way of thinking in his church.

2.9 “Calvin Did Not Teach a Special, Calvinist Truth”

The intensity of Bavinck’s struggle became particularly clear in his letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated December 22, 1888 (cf. 2.5). One gets the impression that in the decade or so after this letter, the “struggle and doubt and suffering” (2.3) are less intense than in the decade before. The difference can be mere appearance: one of our main sources for understanding Bavinck’s struggle in the eighties were his letters to Snouck Hurgronje, but no letters to Snouck Hurgronje have been preserved from the nineties.

84. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 23, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 124.

85. Bavinck, “De navolging van Christus” (1886), 322.

86. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 23, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 124.

However, it is also possible that Bavinck is lifted up above his doubts in these years, because they are the heydays of the revival of Reformed life and theology. The groups of the 1834 and 1886 secessions find each other and constitute the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1892. Kuyper publishes his three volume *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*,⁸⁷ Bavinck himself the four volume *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bavinck sings the praises of Calvinism at an international council in Toronto in 1892 and Kuyper does the same even much more exuberantly when he delivers his Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898.⁸⁸

Before we conclude this essay with a discussion of Bavinck's catholic Reformed ideal in relationship to the preface of his dogmatics, Bavinck's usage (and non-usage) of the term Calvinism deserves some attention. Abraham Kuyper uses the term "Calvinism" for his reflection on the meaning of Christianity for all areas of life and is consequently called a Calvinist or neo-Calvinist.⁸⁹ Bavinck is also often called a Calvinist or neo-Calvinist, but I think we should stop doing so. At best, we can speak about a Calvinist period in his life.

Bavinck uses the term "Calvinism" most often in his address for the council of Presbyterian churches in Toronto in 1892, in which he speaks about the influence of the protestant reformation.⁹⁰ Reflection on his transatlantic journey makes him relativize Calvinism a bit but he does not yet distance himself from the term. In his travel account he complains that religion in America suffers from superficiality—"religion is a matter of amusement, of relaxation," but he also sees that there is much good in it and therefore he concludes: "Let American Christianity develop according to its own law. God has entrusted a high and grand calling to America. Let it strive for it, in its own way. Calvinism is surely not the only truth!"⁹¹

87. To be precise, Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* is a partial, one-volume translation of his three-volume *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid*.

88. In 1903 father Jan Bavinck writes in retrospect: "In my youth it seemed as if the Reformed confession had had its time, as if it was out-of-date and near to vanishing. . . . But by the mercy of the Lord our God over us, a turn for the better has come. By his grace, quite a few ask for the old paths again at present and want to walk on them. Is this not cheering? Does this not give hope for the future? And should we . . . not thankfully acknowledge the good that God the Lord has given to his people in the last half century?" Jan Bavinck, *De Heidelbergse Catechismus in 60 leerredenen verklaard* 1: [vii–viii].

89. See especially Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 5–9; Dutch: Kuyper, *Calvinisme*, 3–6. Kuyper was certainly not happy with every usage of the term "Calvinism." For example, regarding the practice to call some church denominations Calvinistic he writes: "Without doubt this practice would have been most severely criticized by Calvin himself. During his life-time, no Reformed Church ever dreamed of naming the Church of Christ after any man. The Lutherans have done this, the Reformed Churches never." Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 7.

90. See Bavinck, "The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations."

91. Herman Bavinck, *Mijne reis naar Amerika*, 55, 58.

In 1893 he reviews a book about the Heidelberg Catechism and in the review article he draws a distinction between “Reformed” and “Calvinistic”:

In the first place, Calvinistic is wider than Reformed. Reformed only indicates a persuasion in the areas of religion, church, and theology, but Calvinistic also includes a certain view on state and society and science, and therefore it can also be used as a name of a political party. . . . But secondly there is also a theological difference between Reformed and Calvinistic. In this sense Reformed is wider than Calvinistic. All are Reformed who agree with one of the many confessions that are generally recognized as Reformed and who belong to one of the many churches that are generally recognized as Reformed. But the name Calvinistic indicates a specific view on and representation of the Reformed truth.⁹²

In this context, he points out that Calvin himself recognized the Anglican Church as a Reformed church although the organization of this church is not Calvinistic. A year later, Bavinck expresses himself even more precisely:

The term Calvinism . . . stands for that characteristic view of life and the world as a whole, which was born from the powerful mind of the French Reformer. Calvinist is the name of a Reformed Christian insofar as he reveals a specific character and a distinct physiognomy, not merely in his church and theology, but also in social and political life, in science and art.⁹³

In these publications from 1892 to 1894 it is clear that Bavinck understands himself as a Calvinist. However, some years later one perceives a change. In 1901 he rejects the terms Calvinism and Calvinistic, at least with regard to the church, because they sound sectarian: “Calvin did not teach a special, Calvinist truth, but he intended to preach and teach nothing but the pure truth of God, the unadulterated gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹⁴ In practice, he also observes some onesidedness among the proponents of “Calvinism”:

The church and its confession are reduced to a small area. . . . But outside it is the large domain of “common grace.” And there Calvinism should rule, which is not a theological but a philosophical system . . . and which encompasses a full view of life and world. In this domain the confession of the church is of no avail. . . . Here one needs the “Reformed principles,” which nobody knows and which have not been formulated anywhere, but which nevertheless exist and have to be traced by the Free University.⁹⁵

His conclusion is that “in this way the point of gravity is more and more moved from Calvinism as religion to Calvinism as philosophy, from the church as insti-

92. Bavinck, “Calvinistisch en gereformeerd,” 67–68.

93. Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” 3; cf. Bavinck, “Het calvinisme in Nederland en zijne toekomst,” 130.

94. Bavinck, “Calvinisme.” Athanasius (ca. 295–373) already noted that only heretics name themselves after another master than Christ. See Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* 1.3.

95. Bavinck, “Belijdenis of beginselen.”

tute to the church as organism, from particular grace to common grace.”⁹⁶ He writes this in reaction to a publication of the Reformed youth association. Given his own publications, one should not read it as a rejection of concepts as philosophy, worldview, principles, and common grace as such or as a tendency to narrowminded confessionalism. If I understand Bavinck correctly, the problem of the “Calvinism” of the youth (and others) is not its width as such, but its risk that one loses the focus on the core. Even Calvinism can become a current away from the cross.

In 1911 Bavinck explicitly prefers the term Reformed over the terms orthodox, Calvinistic, and neo-Calvinistic.⁹⁷ Although one could call him a Calvinist, at least regarding his views on science, society, etc, because of the cited publications from the nineties, it seems to me better to respect his later cautions and not to use this term for him at all. If we want to identify him in a more specific way than as a Christian theologian, I suggest that we combine keywords from the titles of his lecture *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*⁹⁸ and of his *Reformed Dogmatics* and call him a catholic Reformed theologian.

2.10 A Catholic Reformed Manifesto

One of the most beautiful texts that Bavinck writes in the nineties is the preface to his dogmatics, which reads as a catholic Reformed manifesto. This preface is not found in later Dutch editions, for reasons unknown to me; it is also not included in the English edition but has been translated separately.⁹⁹ The following is my own translation of the most important parts, with headings added:

a. The communion of saints necessary to understand the dogma

Not only the believer, but also the dogmatician has to confess the communion of saints. Only with all the saints he can comprehend what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge. It is only in and through communion with them that he learns to understand the dogma, in which the Christian faith expresses itself.

96. Bavinck, “Belijdenis of beginselen.”

97. Bavinck, *Modernisme en orthodoxie*, 17.

98. For Bavinck’s understanding of the catholicity of Christianity and the church, see also Puchinger, “Na tachtig jaar herdrukt”; Brinkman, “Bavinck en de katholiciteit van de kerk”; Van Keulen, “H. Bavinck (1854–1921): Gereformeerde katholiciteit”; and Van der Kooi, “Inleiding,” in Bavinck, *Gereformeerde katholiciteit 1888–1918*.

99. Bavinck, “Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*,” trans. John Bolt. While I have made a few corrections on the basis of Bolt’s translation, I essentially made my working translation before Bolt published his. The main differences between Bolt’s and mine are (a) that he offers the whole foreword in English and I only seven significant parts, and (b) that he uses more idiomatic English while I have kept closer to Bavinck’s Dutch diction. In a few cases Bolt seems to have misunderstood Bavinck’s Dutch. For example, between my sections h. and i. Bavinck has a sentence that Bolt begins with “Some blows will definitely be struck at . . .”; however, the Dutch expression “Er is acht geslagen op . . .” is more irenic and simply means “Attention has been paid to . . .”

b. The communion of saints a consolation over against the depreciation of dogmatics

Moreover, there is an empowering strength and an excellent consolation in this communion of saints. Dogmatics is not honored today; the Christian dogma does not find the favor of this time. . . . But this makes us the more grateful that we can call on the alliance of ancestors.

c. Attention to early Christian and medieval theology

More attention has been paid to patristic and scholastic theology than is often the case among protestant dogmaticians. Men like Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas do not exclusively belong to Rome. They are Fathers and Doctors to whom the whole Christian church has obligations.

d. Attention to Roman Catholic theology

Further, Roman theology after the Reformation has also not been forgotten. Protestants are often too little aware of what they have in common with Rome and of what separates them from Rome. . . .

e. Reformed theology relatively the purest expression of truth

This dogmatics stands in closest connection to the type of Christian religion and the theology that was shaped by the sixteenth century Reformation, especially in Switzerland, not because this is the only-true expression of the truth, but because this author considers it to be the relatively-purest one. The essence of Christianity has not come out so well in its religious, ethical, and theological character and has not been conceived so deeply and broadly, so widely and freely, so truly catholicly in any confession as in that of the Reformed churches. . . .

f. Reformed theology separating the wheat from the chaff

This author considers it to be the right of the dogmatician to separate the wheat from the chaff in the history of Reformed theology. Praising the old only because it is old is neither Reformed nor Christian.

g. Dogmatics for the future

Dogmatics does not describe what did prevail but what should prevail. It is rooted in the past but works for the future.

h. Dogmatics for the present

Finally, this dogmatics desires to bear the mark of its time. It were a hopeless task to free oneself from the present, but it would also not be good before God, who does not speak to us in this age less loudly and less seriously than he did in past generations. . . .

i. Appreciation of others

Account has been rendered when departure [from the opinion of others] was an obligation. But even then the attempt has been made to appreciate the good where it was found. Continued study often revealed affinity that at first did not seem to exist at all.¹⁰⁰

100. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (1895), 1:iii–v (paragraph breaks and headings added). The first paragraph uses the wording of Ephesians 3:18–19 of the Dutch Statenvertaling.

A detailed discussion of the preface is beyond the scope of the present study. However, a number of comments and stories may illustrate how this text is exemplary for Bavinck's theological attitude and thought.

Paragraph a. immediately makes clear that Bavinck rejects theological solism and separatism. In an article about the council of Presbyterian churches in Toronto he complains that the English and Americans are too much interested in apologetics and try to solve problems too soon, so that in fact they are too much influenced by modern science and theology and lead their churches into a crisis. However, he does not want to judge too negatively: one should recognize that "God has more than one blessing and works elsewhere in his own way," and he continues:

If we truly believe in the catholicity of Christianity and the Church, we fully acknowledge the right that both appear elsewhere in a different form than in our own country. . . . More than any age our century calls us . . . to maintain communion with all the saints, so that with them we somehow understand the depth and height, the length and breadth of the love of Christ, which surpasses our understanding.¹⁰¹

For Bavinck, the communion of saints includes more than only Reformed and Presbyterian Christians. His attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church is ambivalent (see paragraph d.) rather than one-sidedly negative. In his dogmatics he pays considerable attention to Roman Catholic theology and G. C. Berkouwer is even of the opinion that "Bavinck's polemics with Rome belong to the most valuable parts on the history of dogma in his dogmatics."¹⁰² In a lecture about evangelism Bavinck emphasizes that one should not do this work "to glorify one's own name or to expand one's own kingdom": "We should cooperate in a brotherly way, also with those who do not belong to the same church." As for the Roman Catholics,

We should accept the historical right of the Church of Rome, not its errors of course. Our calling regarding the Church of Rome is not that we try to make converts among them for us, but that we bring the gospel to the lost, to whatever church community they may belong. . . . The work of evangelism may lead to the result that persons join the Reformed Church, but this is not necessarily the case. We should have a broad view and first of all seek to take sinners to the foot of the Cross—not in a methodistic, but in a Reformed sense.¹⁰³

When he reviews a Roman Catholic journal for psychology and theory of education, he has only one "reservation," that it may arouse the envy of the Protestants because they have nothing of equal quality. He himself hopes to

101. Bavinck, "Het concilie van presbyteriaanse kerken te Toronto," 928.

102. Berkouwer, "Bavinck als dogmaticus," 9. See also Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 120.

103. Bavinck, "Het begrip en de noodzakelijkheid der evangelisatie," 35, 39–40.

learn much from it.¹⁰⁴ Conversely, his own works on education have also been appreciated by Roman Catholics.¹⁰⁵

When Bavinck has made his second journey to America in 1908 and is back in the Netherlands, he speaks about his travel experiences, among other things about his visits to Dutch immigrants in Grand Rapids and Holland, Michigan. A press report of his speech crosses the ocean and reaches the people in Michigan themselves. *De Wachter* (the watchman), a Dutch immigrant magazine, takes offence at two passages, one in which Bavinck reportedly says that the immigrants from the Netherlands “have not, to their own harm, thrown themselves in the broad American stream of life, but have rather continued to live together,” the other in which he remarks: “I find that we need such a revival [as led by J. W. Chapman in Louisville, Kentucky] in the Netherlands, in our Christian Netherlands, in the Reformed Churches.”¹⁰⁶

The rejoinder of *De Wachter* to the former quotation is: “Were we to throw ourselves as individuals in the stream, we would soon be lost, the mighty stream of Methodism and materialism would sweep us away and would assimilate us entirely. We beg Prof. Bavinck’s pardon—our people are still too Reformed to be assimilated in such a way.”¹⁰⁷ As for revival meetings, *De Wachter* does not completely deny that they may contain something good and that they may even be of some use in the Netherlands, namely in places in which there is still much paganism, but Bavinck’s remark was beyond the pale:

However, that Prof. Bavinck desires an American revival in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, that beats the lot. Are the churches in the Netherlands so much in decline that he deems such extraordinary means necessary? . . .

Truly, this is a matter of principle. A Reformed church that introduces revival meetings can readily give up its name. We know from experience which evil fruits a revival meeting bears in a Reformed congregation.¹⁰⁸

The author of the article sends a copy eastward across the ocean and asks for a public reply. How does Bavinck answer? As for the first point, Bavinck emphasizes that the report of his speech was not reliable. His actual view is: “The Dutch were right to meet and closely join together in America,” however, they “will not be able to continue this situation in the long run”:

They will have to give up their Dutch life and throw themselves in the stream of American life. . . . To not a small degree it has cheered me that many Dutch

104. Bavinck, review of *Tijdschrift voor zielkunde en opvoedingsleer* 10, no. 5.

105. See, for example, Rombouts, *Prof. Dr. H. Bavinck*. Worthy of mention is also that Bavinck was “by far the most important source of inspiration” for the Old Catholic archbishop Andreas Rinkel. “. . . verreweg de belangrijkste inspiratiebron.” Smit, “De oud-katholieke receptie van Bavincks *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*,” 87.

106. *De Wachter*, “Dr. H. Bavinck over Amerika,” 4.

107. *De Wachter*, “Dr. H. Bavinck over Amerika,” 4.

108. *De Wachter*, “Dr. H. Bavinck over Amerika,” 4.

in America see this for themselves and are already busy to render account of the position they have to take in American life, not only in matters of church, but also with regard to social and political questions and in the field of education and upbringing. That is difficult, for certain, and it is dangerous too; the problems are so heavy and to err is so human. But on the other hand: what a glorious calling to apply the tested principles of the past on the full rich life that youthful and powerful America develops in every field. Of course, this all can only be done on a limited scale, for what do a mere handful of Dutch mean on a population of 90 million! But the sake is so beautiful that it rejuvenates the heart and fills the soul with enthusiasm.¹⁰⁹

As for revival meetings, he remarks that the quoted sentences are not verbally his words, but that he still takes responsibility for them. However, he had not spoken about revival meetings in general, but about one particular revival meeting that he had attended in person.

It would be unfair if I did not acknowledge that the word spoken by Dr. Chapman was simple, serious, moving, devoid of oddities and that it made a deep impression on me, even as on the entire meeting of 3,000 men above 16 years old. If the Writer had attended it, he would have experienced the same, I believe. But because he did not attend it, he cannot judge about it either; in this respect I, though a foreigner, have an advantage over him, the American.¹¹⁰

Moreover, although the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands are flourishing outwardly, “there is reason for the complaint that was repeated several times lately that spiritual life is declining and has lost its former splendour.” Therefore, there is reason to long and pray for a revival or awakening in the churches. “There is nothing in it that, because of the label ‘Methodist,’ would be condemned by the Reformed confession.”¹¹¹ Finally:

When I imagine the rich life and the mighty influence of John Wesley and calculate the influence that he exerted on the entire English speaking world and on almost all of protestant Christianity, when I consider that all our Christian associations, our activity in the field of mission, all our so-called “labor for the kingdom of God” received the impetus from him, . . . then I remain unshaken in the belief that the Reformed confession is the purest expression of the truth, but then my heart also broadens itself to the glad recognition that God has more than one blessing, that his ways are wonderful,

109. Bavinck, “Nader bescheid,” 3.

110. Bavinck, “Nader bescheid,” 3.

111. Bavinck, “Nader bescheid,” 3. This remark does not mean that Bavinck was uncritical towards Methodism or that he did not see significant differences between Methodism and Reformed theology. For example, in 1904 he stated that covenant theology is a characteristic of the Reformed confession that is wanting in Methodism. See Bavinck, “Voorrede,” in Erskine and Erskine, *Levensgeschiedenis en werken van Ralph & Ebenezer Erskine*, 6.

and that he gathers his congregation from all nations and all churches through his Spirit and Word in the unity of true faith.¹¹²

A few comments may conclude this section. Bavinck is catholic Reformed in an inclusivistic rather than an exclusivistic or pluralistic sense. The communion of saints is not only found in the Reformed tradition but also outside it. He acknowledges that other confessions and denominations also have God’s blessing, although—given the allusion to the story of Esau and Jacob where the latter receives the big blessing from Isaac and the former only a smaller one (Gen. 27:38)—he seems to assume that the main blessing is for the Reformed churches. At least, the Reformed confession remains for him (relatively) the purest expression of the truth. A pluralistic view in which the color of each confession is equally important to constitute the rainbow of catholic Christianity seems to be alien to him. He seems more able or willing to relativize confessional differences than to value them positively.

Still, Bavinck seems to understand his inclusivistic position not so much directed against confessional pluralism as against narrow-minded exclusivism. What makes him so big-hearted? On the one hand, it is the recognition that the core of the Christian faith can only be known and understood in communion with all the saints (see the preface of the *Reformed Dogmatics*) and the actual observation of good things outside the Reformed tradition (for example in John Wesley). On the other hand, he needs the consolation of the communion of saints in order to be able to remain standing over against the contempt for the Christian faith in his days. He needs to see that he does not stand alone. He needs a strategic alliance of as many as possible in order to fight the modern worldview and to stand against the force that moves Western culture away from the cross.

A passage from his preface to the German edition of *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* [Christian Worldview] may fittingly conclude this section and this essay as it expresses clearly why Christians need to unite their forces and what is at stake for Bavinck:

The contest that the Christian religion has to suffer in its core and essence nowadays should join all those who, even if separated by church, confession, or nationality, stand together on the common ground of the catholic undoubted Christian faith. Although they should not efface and forget the controversies that exist among them as if they were totally meaningless, it is their task to let them rest for a moment, because the confession that is common to all of Christianity is to be defended against attacks.¹¹³

112. Bavinck, “Nader bescheid,” 3.

113. Bavinck, *Christliche Weltanschauung*, iv. This preface is not found in the Dutch edition. The expression “catholic undoubted Christian faith” is used in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 7, in reference to the Apostolic Creed.

3

Worldview against Worldview

A Cathartic Reading of Herman Bavinck (2)

Man has undertaken the gigantic effort of interpreting the whole world, and all things that are therein, in their origin, essence and end, what is called purely and strictly scientifically, that is, without God, without any invisible, supernatural, spiritual element, and simply and alone from the pure data of matter and force. . . .

Thus presently over against the old world-view there will be placed the new world-view thought out to its latest instance and consequently applied to every department of life, namely, the irreligious over against the Christian, the atheistic over against the theistic, the mechanical over against the organic, or as it has been named, the world-view of development over against that of creation.

—Herman Bavinck, “Creation or Development,” 849, 852.

Whatever evolution thinks about the future, it affords no rest for the mind and none for the heart, because it takes away from us the Lord of the world.

—Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 295.

Part One: Answering the Modern Worldview

3.1 Prologue

Bavinck once stated that the piety of some of his contemporaries “does not rise higher than the ‘prayer of the ignorant.’”¹ “The Prayer of the Ignorant” is a text by Multatuli (1820–1887), one of the most famous Dutch writers of the nineteenth century, and opens with the following words:

I do not know whether we have been created for an end
or accidentally exist.²

These seemingly simple lines raise some fundamental questions.

1. Have we been created and is there a Creator God? And how do we know whether God exists? Is there an end, purpose, or destiny for human beings?

1. Bavinck, “Voorrede,” in Kramer, *Het gebed*, 1.

2. Multatuli, “Het gebed van den onwetende.” Bavinck expresses his esteem for Multatuli several times during his life. For example, in 1897 he praises his heroism in writing against the oppression of the Javanese (at that time, Java was part of the Dutch colonies); in a speech in the Upper Chamber in 1913 he admires Multatuli’s indignation about injustice (and then calls with a similar indignation for a better regulation for the faculties of theology); and in 1916 he recognizes that Multatuli led Dutch literature in new directions. See Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw*, 37; Speech on March 12, 1913, in *Handelingen der Staten-Generaal: Eerste Kamer 1912–1913*, 433; *De opvoeding der rijpere jeugd*, 81.

That is, should we go a specific way in order to live life as it is intended to be? Was the seventeenth-century Westminster Larger Catechism right when it answered the question about the end of humankind with the famous phrase: “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him for ever”?³

2. Or should the catechism rather have answered: “There is not such a chief and highest end, and we should not knot our freedom by urging each other to live according to such an end”? Is it possible that we accidentally exist? Although Darwin did not discuss the descent of humankind in *The Origin of Species* (1859), it was soon sensed that his work gave the clue for a natural explanation of our origin, namely that we have developed from other animals through blind natural forces. Multatuli published the prayer in 1861 and is known for popularizing (and radicalizing) Darwin’s ideas in the Netherlands.⁴

3. Are the two options that the ignorant one considers (being created for an end and existing accidentally) mutually exclusive, or can both of them be true, each in its own respect? Multatuli does not arrive at this latter possibility. His prayer reaches a climax:

Answer, Father, if you are there, answer!
Let your child not despair, Father! Don’t keep silent
at the bloodily expressed “*lema sabachthan!*”
Thus the ignorant groans at his self-chosen cross,
And winces with pain, and moans that he thirsts.

And finally he resolves the ignorance:

The Father is silent—oh God, there is no God!⁵

In this essay we will continue to follow Bavinck in his existential struggle with the intellectual climate of his day. If the previous essay paid special attention to his heart, this essay will focus more on his mind. To be sure, the difference is relative, not absolute. On the one hand, we have already seen that Bavinck used not only faith and prayer in order to remain standing but also armed himself with catholic-Reformed theology. On the other hand, when he seeks to answer the modern worldview of evolution with a worldview of revelation, as we will see in this essay, this is an intellectual exercise in which he is existentially involved.

As was the case in the previous one, this essay does not attempt to give an overview or description of Bavinck’s theology and aims by no means at completeness, but just seeks to understand how he uses theology to remain standing. Especially in the second part we will see some difficulties that remain for him and that, on further reflection, may make the building of his thought shake

3. Westminster Larger Catechism, question and answer 1. Bavinck quotes this question and answer in *Our Reasonable Faith*, 31; Dutch: *Magnalia Dei*, 22.

4. See Bulhof, “The Netherlands,” 299–300.

5. Multatuli, “Het gebed van den onwetende.”

on its foundations. If in the end the focus is on points that I see as weak and problematic, this is intended neither to deny Bavinck's qualities nor to rejoice in his weaknesses, but to clarify why I feel unable and see it as undesirable to try to answer the plausibility crisis of Christianity today by a mere repetition or modest update of Bavinck.

3.2 From Reformed Dogmatics to Worldview of Revelation

The previous essay concluded about Bavinck in the eighties:

Bavinck has only one ideal. [a] His effort to banish all principles and ideas of the modern worldview from his own thought and from the thinking of his fellow believers and to replace them with Reformed ones and [b] his desire to live as a Christian and as a church in the world do not contradict each other. The full richness of the Reformed worldview can only become clear in the fullness of life. However, this ideal implies a twofold struggle: a struggle with the modern worldview but also a struggle with the dominant way of thinking in his church. (2.8)

In 1884 he already expresses his concerns about the isolated position of the seminary in Kampen and his preference for a Christian university, a dream that he sees partly realized in the Free University (2.8).

Around the turn of the century Bavinck becomes deeply involved in attempts to unite the seminary in Kampen with the faculty of theology of the Free University. These attempts are not unrelated to the second side of his struggle. For Bavinck, the desired unification is neither just the solution of a practical question nor merely a next step in the integration process of the groups from the two secessions in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (cf. 2.1), but the recognition of his ideal. In 1902 the reality of the church is stronger than his ideal—the synod does not decide to unify the schools—, but at the same time the ideal gets a new opportunity because Bavinck himself moves from the seminary to the Free University.⁶

In the last section of the previous essay Bavinck's catholicity was especially discussed in terms of his attitude towards other denominations and confessions. However, for Bavinck the catholicity of Christianity has not only to do with the unity of the church despite the different confessions and the communion of saints of all times and places, but means also that Christianity is related to all areas of life.⁷ When he calls the Reformed confession the most catholic one in the preface of his dogmatics, he seems to have especially this latter aspect of meaning in mind. It is related to his usage of the term "worldview" or

6. These years are covered in much detail in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 46–193.

7. Van der Kooi says about Bavinck's concept of catholicity: "In short, the Christian faith encompasses human life in its entirety." "The Catholicity of Christianity and Church" is characterized by him as "Bavinck's most principal treatise of public theology." Van der Kooi, "Inleiding," 12–13.

“view of world in life” in reference to his own position. For example, in 1882 he writes already:

The Reformed is a complete view of world and life. It puts humans in a special relationship to God and therefore also in a specific relationship to all things: to family, state, society, art, science, etc. Besides dogmatic principles, there are also moral, political, social, scientific, and aesthetical principles. Nothing exists on which the Reformed principles do not put their peculiar hallmark.⁸

Especially during the last two decades of his life, after the completion of the first edition of his dogmatics in 1901, Bavinck publishes many books and articles on education, aesthetics, ethics, family, philosophy of science, social relationships, position of women, et cetera. This broadening or shift of Bavinck’s interest can be interpreted in different ways, but it seems me to be first of all an elaboration of his catholic Reformed ideal that he already developed during the eighties.

Next, it can also be seen as an escape from dogmatics (especially from older Reformed theology and from unresolved problems in his doctrine of Scripture), and as an attempt to answer the modern worldview. In this section I will put these last two points into perspective.

Not only Bavinck’s concern to understand and elaborate Christianity as a worldview but also his critical interest in the modern worldview can be traced back to the early eighties. Most notably, he wrote an article entitled “De hedendaagsche werelbeschouwing” (The Modern Worldview) in 1883, in which he identified in the many worldviews of his day one overarching worldview that is characterized by pantheism and evolution.⁹

From *Creation or Development* (1901) to *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1908/1909) the antithesis between the two worldviews is not just a theme but probably the most important issue for Bavinck. He identifies evolution as the key concept of the modern worldview and revelation as the key concept of the Christian worldview.¹⁰ In his publications on morals, science, education, fami-

8. Bavinck, “De wetenschappelijke roeping onzer kerk,” 104.

9. Bavinck, “De hedendaagsche werelbeschouwing,” 435–61. From Bavinck’s notes it is clear that he also considered the titles “Idealistisch en Materialistisch Pantheisme” (Idealistic and Materialistic Pantheism) and “De Evolutie-leer” (The Theory [or: Doctrine] of Evolution) for this article (originally a lecture). The former is found on the cover of a notebook and the latter at the top of the first page of that notebook. A separate sheet is also entitled “De Evolutie-leer” and contains the statement “Let me point out to you the origin, essence, and value of the theory of evolution, of pantheism.” See Bavinck, “Idealistisch en Materialistisch Pantheisme” (manuscript).

10. See Bavinck, “Creation or Development,” Dutch: *Schepping of ontwikkeling*; Bavinck, *Christelijke werelbeschouwing*; Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Dutch: *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring*; and also Bavinck, “Evolution,” Dutch: “Contra,” republished as “Evolutie.” Bavinck uses the term “development” (Dutch: *ontwikkeling*) as a synonym for “evolution,” possibly because “evolution” (Dutch: *evolutie*) was not yet such a familiar term as it is nowadays and possibly also because “development” more easily suggests that scientific discussions about biological evolution are related to questions of philosophy and worldview. As the Dutch term for “revela-

ly, social relations, et cetera, he seeks to make clear how different views in these areas are related to a difference in worldview and reflects on these areas from the perspective of his Christian worldview.

The terms “scientific expansionism” and “religious expansionism”¹¹ may clarify what happens with Bavinck in these years. What he sees is that the modern worldview, by assigning a central position to the theory of evolution, gives priority to the natural sciences and then draws consequences for all areas of life. In *The Philosophy of Revelation* he analyzes this as a worldview that begins from nature or the world. Over against this scientific expansionism he becomes a religious expansionist. He takes as his starting point notions from the Christian religion—God, revelation, creation, the good creation and fall of human-

tion” is “openbaring,” the contrasting pair “revelation” and “development” constitutes a nice word play in Dutch: “openbaring” and “ontwikkeling.” Bavinck uses this pair in the title for a lecture in 1907 (“Openbaring en ontwikkeling”). In the notes for this (unpublished) lecture he says among other things:

“Evolution is now the key, the all explaining idea. It is the attempt to explain our entire universe from itself, immanently, without a personal God, without something supernatural in nature or grace (religion). By it one tries to explain everything:

- a. Planetary system: Kant – Laplace;
- b. The origin of life;
- c. The species of living beings, human from animal;
- d. Society, family, state, marriage;
- e. Science, arts, religion, morality, even Christianity;
- f. Christianity is a syncretistic religion;
- g. Conversion (psychology of religion).”

“Revelation is diametrically opposed to this theory [or: doctrine] of evolution.”

“Is there only an opposition? No. Revelation and development.

Revelation should and can be conceived in a more organic, psychological, historical way. [The two] require, presuppose, help each other. Only in [on the basis of?] revelation is there room for true development:

- a. First creation, which posits being, and then the things develop according to their kinds;
- b. First preservation and then cooperation, concurrence, room for secondary causes;
- c. First birth (generation, conception) of human beings and then their development;
- d. First the aptitude [or: talent] in human beings, for science, art, religion, morality, and then the development of them;
- e. First regeneration and then revelation of it in faith and conversion;
- f. First Christ and then the growth of the congregation from him as the head;
- g. First the leaven hidden in the flour by a woman and then the process of leavening; the kingdom [is] first already a mustard seed and then growth.

Revelation in the broadest sense is the principle, origin, idea, driving force of the entire process of development, which will reach its completion in the new heaven and earth, in the kingdom of God.”

The term “organic” in the statement “revelation should and can be conceived in a more organic . . . way” refers to a central motif in Bavinck’s writings. See Eglinton, “Bavinck’s Organic Motif” and his forthcoming *Trinity and Organism*.

11. See Stenmark, *How to Relate Science and Religion*, xi–xii. Cf. section 5.4.

kind—and then elaborates these notions for many areas of life.¹² Whether willingly or forced by the demands of his age, Bavinck adopts the massive, “worldviewish” way of thinking that he sees in his opponents, and so, in a sense, he begins to fight with the weapons of the enemy.¹³

So, through the years, Bavinck’s attention shifted from dogmatics to more philosophical and worldviewish questions. This shift has been interpreted and evaluated in various ways. Th. L. Haitjema sees it as a negative development that happened because in 1902 Kuyper moved Bavinck from Kampen to the Free University: “[Bavinck] has published a large *Reformed Dogmatics* in four volumes, which shows that he was primarily a theologian and not a philosopher of culture.” However, the move “from the sphere of church and theology in Kampen . . . means the end of Bavinck’s really theological activity. Afterwards, he works in the marginal areas of philosophy of culture, occupying himself with educational and psychological and political problems.”¹⁴

Although it may be true that Bavinck later regretted the move from Kampen to Amsterdam,¹⁵ I do not see that he regretted his focus on more philosophical questions. Before he went to Amsterdam, he knew already that dogmatic questions are not the only ones that matter. In his farewell speech to the students in Kampen in 1902 he said:

We will have to face questions in the areas of politics, society and science, and especially in the area of historical criticism . . . After all, our struggle is against the spiritual forces of evil, and they work on; only, we do not notice it here at the theological seminary, because it is not in touch with real life. . . . Neverthe-

12. See Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, esp. 33.

13. Bavinck could, somewhat depreciatively, call the word “worldview” a “new-fashioned term” (*The Philosophy of Revelation*, 31) and he could criticize Chantepie de la Saussaye for fighting with the weapons of the enemy—whereas he believed that Christians can only expect a victory when they fight in their own armor (see section 2.8)—, but he was perhaps not fully aware of the fact that his definition of the problem and his own strategy of articulating and developing a/the Christian worldview were also influenced by his opponents. Apparently, he was not able or willing to transcend the problem set by his opponents and to go his own way in freedom.

14. Haitjema, “Abraham Kuyper und die Theologie des holländischen Neucalvinismus,” 353. For criticism of Haitjema’s interpretation of Bavinck, see, e.g., Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 217–20.

15. Dosker (cf. section 2.4) writes after Bavinck’s death: “Do I imagine that after 1902 a different note was sounded in his letters? Did he even regret the change? . . . At Kampen he had stood forth preeminent; at Amsterdam he was one of many unquestionably erudite teachers.” Dosker, “Herman Bavinck,” 456–57.

Willem Hillebrand Nieuwhuis, a friend of Bavinck since his student days in Leiden, had a similar impression. C. Veenhof, “Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6,” 123 says: “Has Bavinck been happy in Amsterdam? His friend Dr. Nieuwhuis once assured me emphatically that this was not the case.” However, Hepp says that he has asked Bavinck’s most intimate acquaintances and that according to them Bavinck never regretted that he left Kampen and felt fully at home at the Free University. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 295.

less, we have to aim at that mighty, glorious, rich ideal to Christianize the world by bringing in our Reformed confession into all areas of life.¹⁶

If the statement in 1882 that “the Reformed” is a complete view of world and life is programmatic, it makes sense that after completing his dogmatics Bavinck focuses more on the principles for other areas of life. It is not a break with his dogmatic ideal but the elaboration of a larger ideal that he has had from the beginning.¹⁷

The move from Kampen to the Free University in 1902 is also not exactly the dividing line between a dogmatic and a philosophical/worldviewish period in Bavinck’s life. For example, his *Foundations of Psychology* should be reckoned to the second “period” but already appeared in 1897.¹⁸ “Creation or Development” was printed in 1901 and was based on a lecture that he had delivered on various occasions the winter before.¹⁹ Also, when Bavinck publishes *Paedagogische beginselen* [Principles of Education] in 1904,²⁰ he has already been involved in the advancement of Christian education for over two decades.²¹

Some years before his death, Bavinck sells part of his dogmatic library, especially volumes of older Reformed theology, because, as he explains to

16. C. Veenhof, “Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6,” 124–25.

17. Whereas Haitjema saw a contrast between Bavinck the theologian and Bavinck the philosopher of culture, Jan Veenhof unites the two by calling Bavinck a “theologian of culture” or “culture theologian” (cultuurtheoloog)—according to him, there is “no discontinuity between Bavinck’s years in Kampen and his years in Amsterdam.” See J. Veenhof, “Bavinck en Guardini,” 11–24, esp. 20.

18. Bavinck, “Foundations of Psychology”; Dutch: *Beginselen der psychologie* (1897, 1923). The Dutch title can also be translated as “Principles of Psychology.”

19. Bavinck, *Schepping of ontwikkeling* (1901), [5].

20. Bavinck, *Paedagogische beginselen*.

21. The general background of Bavinck’s work on education is the so-called *Schoolstrijd*, the struggle for Christian education that became one of the most important political issues in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. It resulted in the foundation of many Christian schools, which gradually gained recognition and financial support from the state.

Bavinck already has a keen interest in the school question when he is a pastor in Franeker in 1881. One of the first things he does in his congregation is to inquire whether the education at the Christian school in the town is able to compete with that at the state school. When it turns out that the existing Christian school does not function well, he suggests that the congregation should consider founding its own school. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 100.

In 1890 he becomes a member of the *Schoolraad*, a national council that serves many of the Christian schools. In 1902 he suggests at a meeting of the *Vereeniging voor Gereformeerd Schoolonderwijs* that this ailing association for Reformed school education should be reformed. In 1904 he is the main author of a report that advises how this is to be done (Noordtzij, Bavinck, et al., *De toekomst van het christelijk onderwijs*). In 1906 he becomes the first chairman of a newly established school league and gives an address that is published as *De taak van het Gereformeerd Schoolverband* (The Task of the Reformed School League). April 1904 he also delivers the official speech (“Feestrede”) at the fifth lustrum of De Unie “Een School met den Bijbel,” the broadest union for Christian education, especially involved with fundraising. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 243–47.

Valentijn Hepp, he is not studying it any more.²² However, the story of this event has assumed a life of its own. For example, Hendrikus Berkhof mentions that Bavinck sold his dogmatic library around 1910, which is somewhat earlier and somewhat more than one would suspect from Hepp's information. Maarten J. Aalders even says that the sale happened when Bavinck moved to Amsterdam, so in 1902.²³

As a matter of fact, Bavinck certainly still works in the area of dogmatics in his Amsterdam years. He prepares a revised edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, which appears between 1906 and 1911, and he publishes his popular one volume dogmatics *Our Reasonable Faith* in 1909.²⁴ As for the dogmatic works that he sells later on, these are probably especially the Latin titles that he mentions in the bibliography of many a section of his dogmatics. If so, his choice to sell these works is not utterly surprising: he has collected enough information from these works in his dogmatics and his notes and no longer needs them. These are also not exactly the kinds of works that one reads for relaxation in the spare hours of a busy schedule.

Nevertheless, one should also not minimize Bavinck's shift of interest too much. When he has been a professor for 25 years (so around 1908), he writes in a letter: "As I grow older my mind turns more and more away from dogmatic to philosophical studies and from these to their application to the practical needs of the world about me."²⁵ Moreover, when the young Bavinck said that he as a Christian wanted to fight in his own armor, with the weapons that were available to him, he especially seemed to hope to find these weapons in works of Reformed theology of earlier centuries (see 2.8). However, in the *Reformed Dogmatics* one gets the impression that, although he derives a lot of information from such works, he does not really derive inspiration, let alone the key for the future of theology, from them.

In the preface to the Dutch edition of *Our Reasonable Faith* he presents this work as a contemporary replacement of, among others, Brakel's *The Christian's Reasonable Service*.²⁶ In the preface to the original Dutch edition he praises the good that Brakel's work and other works of older Reformed theology wrought in their days, but adds that, if one kept to them, one would give the impression "that Christianity does not fit our age":

22. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 317–18.

23. See Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 113 and Aalders, *125 jaar Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid aan de Vrije Universiteit*, 100. Berkhof and Aalders do not mention a source for their statements.

24. Bavinck also collected notes for a possible revised third edition of his dogmatics, although in the end it was reprinted without revisions in 1918. See Harinck, "Eén uur lang is het hier brandend licht en warm geweest," 109–10.

25. He writes this in a letter to his friend Dosker, who quotes it (without giving the exact date of the letter) in Dosker, "Herman Bavinck," 457–58.

26. Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*; Dutch: *Redelijke godsdienst*. This work was originally published in 1700. See also section 2.1 note 1.

The questions that were considered to be the most important ones in the past have lost all or most of their relevance for us. Other concerns that were not mentioned before come now to the fore. . . . We are children of a new era and live in a different age.²⁷

Although the difference is relative, it seems that Bavinck takes some more distance from older Reformed theology than he did in the preface to the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Could this explain why that preface was not reprinted in the second edition of his dogmatics? However, even if he frees himself more now from the lumber of the tradition, one may wonder whether Bavinck still has the fire to write such a dogmatic work. As it appears to me, some passages are brilliant, but as a whole the Dutch version of *Our Reasonable Faith* “is not very captivating.”²⁸

Towards the end of his life, his lectures on dogmatics at the Free University have little to do with dogmatics in the strict sense of the word and are more a critical orientation into contemporary thought. He is even called to account for it.²⁹ And he himself toys with the idea of giving up his chair of dogmatics and devoting himself fully to the study and building of a Christian philosophy.³⁰

Most remarkably, when he really enters the battlefield in *The Philosophy of Revelation*—his deepest confrontation with the modern worldview—, he cites an overwhelming amount of literature but he is not using the armor of older Reformed theology at all.

3.3 Introduction to *The Philosophy of Revelation*

Monday, November 2, 1908, late in the afternoon. Miller Chapel at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J. is crowded with people. The biennial Stone lectures—made possible “by the yield of a fund that was set up by the generosity of Mr. L. P. Stone”³¹—are being delivered again. The older visitors still remember that ten years ago Abraham Kuyper had come from the Netherlands to give his *Lectures on Calvinism*. Today, the speaker is again a Dutchman. High hopes have been aroused. In May the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* already wrote about him: “Next to Dr. Kuyper, who was the Stone Lecturer

27. Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, 2 (this preface is not included in *Our Reasonable Faith*, the English translation of *Magnalia Dei*).

28. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 249. As a matter of fact, the Dutch version of *Our Reasonable Faith* was republished only once, in 1931, after its first publication in 1909, whereas the Dutch version of *The Christian's Reasonable Service* has been reprinted several times during the last one hundred years, even as recently as 2010. Perhaps the English edition of Bavinck's work has become relatively more popular; an editorial note to Voortman's review of *Our Reasonable Faith* says that it is “better in translation than in the original language.”

29. See Aalders, “Bavinck voor de vierschaar van Deputaten.”

30. See Van Deursen, “Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit,” 31 and J. Veenhof, “De God van de filosofen en de God van de bijbel,” 233 n34. J. Veenhof has his information from C. Veenhof, *In Kuyper's lijn*, 15–16, who in turn has it from Bavinck's friend Nieuwhuis.

31. Bavinck, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, iii.

some years ago, he has done more than any living man for the revival of the Reformed religion and theology in the Netherlands.”³² In October, the *Princeton Theological Review* added that he is a theologian “of genius and of erudition worthy of the best traditions of Reformed theology,” which statement was followed by a lengthy introduction to his person and work from an (indeed well informed) “authentic source.”³³

The Dutchman—Herman Bavinck—gets up to speak. He opens by making a distinction between the religious supranaturalistic worldview and the empirico-scientific one. Throughout his lecture, it becomes apparent that revelation is the key concept of the former one and evolution that of the latter one. Just before his lecture would become too lengthy, he winds up:

When modern science arose and claimed to have found a key to the solution of all mysteries in the principle of evolution, the attempt was made to withdraw successively nature, history, man, and his entire psychical life, from the control of the existence, the inworking, the revelation of God.³⁴

Over against this attempt, he claims:

The world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation, the secret of all that exists in all its forms. The deeper science pushes its investigations, the more clearly it will discover that revelation underlies all created being.³⁵

He has caught the attention of his audience.³⁶ Day after day, they come back to hear the argumentation for his claim. He derives arguments for the reality of revelation from the nature of thought on Tuesday,³⁷ from the essence of nature on Wednesday, from the character of history on Thursday, from the concept of

32. Unsigned article “The Stone Lectures, 1908–1909,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (1908): 2.

33. Unsigned article “Herman Bavinck,” *Princeton Theological Review* 6:529.

34. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 26–27.

35. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 27.

36. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 304.

37. This second lecture has been split into two chapters in the Dutch and English editions of *The Philosophy of Revelation*, but not in the German edition. It was announced as one lecture in the “Syllabus of the Lectures on the L. P. Stone Foundation for 1908–1909.”

Apart from the splitting of the second lecture into two chapters, the syllabus and the detailed table of contents of the first seven chapters of the English edition (the Dutch and German editions do not have such a detailed table of contents) are very similar. However, the table of contents adds one item for chapter 3: “Augustine the discoverer of self-consciousness as the starting-point of a new metaphysics.” This item refers to only one paragraph in the main text (Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 63–64), but interestingly enough, the note to this paragraph reveals that it is based on a recent article by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851–1921), whom Bavinck met in Princeton and we will meet in the next section: Warfield, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Knowledge and Authority.”

religion on Friday and, finally, from the course of development through which humankind has passed on Saturday.³⁸

Princeton is satisfied. A year later, the *Princeton Theological Review* will write:

Princeton Theological Seminary will ever treasure these lectures as among the most notable given on her “Stone Foundation.” All who heard them will remember even more clearly the lecturer’s genial, serious, forceful personality; and all who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity must wish, for the sake of his whole church, as well as of the Dutch branch of it, that Dr. Bavinck, and also his eminent compatriot and predecessor as Stone Lecturer, Dr. Kuyper, will long be spared to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints.”³⁹

And immediately after the presentation of the lectures, the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* says already in retrospect: “The Seminary is fortunate in having secured such a series of masterly discussions from this distinguished leader of modern theological thought. . . . The lectures in printed form . . . will constitute a volume of great value.”⁴⁰

Indeed, the lectures in printed form offer even more than what was spoken in Miller Chapel. Firstly, they include three lectures that Bavinck delivered on other occasions during his stay in the United States of America from early September to early December. Secondly, on these other occasions he had discovered that he had to shorten himself considerably for an American audience, which is “afraid of learning and of taking some trouble to conceive something,”⁴¹ so he had not delivered the full text of his lectures at Princeton.⁴² Thirdly, the printed volume contains 463 notes, which display the wide reading on which the lectures were based.⁴³

3.4 An Apologetic of Despair (1)

In this section I will analyze part of the argument that Bavinck develops in *The Philosophy of Revelation*. Because of the length and complexity of the work, I will not try to discuss the whole work in detail, but concentrate on the final

38. For this summary, see especially Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 170.

39. Greene, review of *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 661. The quotation within the quotation is from Jude vs. 3.

40. Unsigned article “The Stone Lectures,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 2, no. 3 (1908): 5.

41. Johanna Adriana Bavinck-Schippers accompanied her husband and wrote to her family about the Americans: “They are tireless to hear sermons, but for scholarly lectures an audience cannot be found. Even if one does one’s utmost to be plain and clear, they are afraid of learning and of taking some trouble to conceive something.” Quoted in Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 303.

42. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 303–4.

43. For the broader cultural and political context of *The Philosophy of Revelation*, see Bratt, “The Context of Herman Bavinck’s Stone Lectures.”

chapter, “Revelation and the Future.”⁴⁴ After pointing out that the modern, evolutionary worldview cannot offer real hope for the future, Bavinck writes in a climactic sentence: “The world cries: Such a will of God ought to be, if I am ever to be saved; and the gospel says: There is such a will of God; lift your eyes to the cross.”⁴⁵ This passage led me to the idea that Bavinck’s argument, at least in the final lecture, can possibly be classified as an apologetic of despair.

An apologetic of despair is a Christian apologetic strategy that is, for example, also found in Pascal’s *Pensées*. It can be defined as “an attempt to push the assumptions of the secular worldview to the point where that worldview becomes untenable, to trace out the logic of atheism to its bitter and presumably unacceptable conclusions, thereby creating a new openness to the hope of the Gospel.”⁴⁶

In this essay I assume that an apologetic strategy can be called an apologetic of despair if it matches each of the following three criteria. Firstly, the strategy should address a secular, naturalistic, or atheistic worldview. Although the concept of despair can also be used in an argument against other religions—for example, in the claim that adherents of a specific religion should feel desperate inwardly since they only know about salvation through works and not through grace—I will reserve the term “apologetic of despair” for a strategy that addresses a worldview that does not reckon with God or afterlife.

Secondly, such a strategy should employ a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. That is to say, it does not primarily show that objections against the Christian faith are misguided or prove that certain truth claims of Christianity are true indeed, but it concentrates on the truth claims of an opposing worldview and undermines them by showing that they have “absurd” implications, that is, implications that the adherents of that worldview would not be willing to accept.

Thirdly, the *reductio ad absurdum* argument should have existential implications. It does not just try to show that the secular worldview does not (yet) fully satisfy the intellect, but it attempts to make clear that the adherents of such a worldview are in a most desperate situation since they fail to achieve the highest good that they are aiming at.

Before we turn to the lecture “Revelation and the Future” to analyze its argument, let me first discuss a possible *a priori* objection against classifying this work as an apologetic of despair, namely that Bavinck allegedly had little interest in apologetics and was even opposed to it. For example, Benjamin B. Warfield writes in 1903: “It is a standing matter of surprise to us that the school which Dr. Bavinck so brilliantly represents should be tempted to make so little

44. Although this chapter is a fitting conclusion to the book as a whole, it can also be read as an essay that stands alone because it is one of the three lectures that were not part of the Stone Lectures proper.

45. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 310.

46. Hardy, “The Apologetics of Despair” (course description).

of Apologetics.”⁴⁷ In the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck summarizes his own criticism of apologetics:

Apologetics as it has often been practiced was mistaken . . . in that (1) it detached itself from the Christian faith and thus put itself outside of, above, and before theology; (2) it so separated believing from knowing that religious truth came to rest in part (in natural theology, in exegetical and historical theology, etc.) or in toto, on purely intellectual proofs; and (3) that, as a result, it began to foster exaggerated expectations from its scientific labor as though by the intellect it could change the human heart and by reasoning engender piety.⁴⁸

However, it should be noticed that Bavinck criticizes the aberrations, not apologetics *per se*, about which he writes:

[Apologetics] is itself a theological science through and through, which presupposes the faith and dogmatics and now maintains and defends the dogma against the opposition to which it is exposed. Thus understood, apologetics is not only perfectly justified but a science that at all times, but especially in this century, deserves to be seriously practiced and can spread rich blessing all around.⁴⁹

He sees three “blessings” or functions for apologetics: (1) it forces “Christian theology to take deliberate account of the grounds on which it is based, of the principles on which it is constructed, and of the content it has within itself”; (2) “it teaches that Christians, even though they cannot confer faith to anyone, need not hide from their opponents in embarrassed silence”; (3) “if it seriously and scrupulously performs its task, it will very definitely succeed in impressing opponents with the truth of Christian revelation, refuting and silencing them.”⁵⁰ Since an apologetic of despair does not try to prove the gospel rationally, but, more modestly, attempts to create a new openness to the hope of the gospel (see the definition above), it does not fall under Bavinck’s criticism and it cannot be excluded beforehand that he uses such an apologetic strategy in “Revelation and the Future.”

It is also noteworthy that reviewers of *The Philosophy of Revelation* have explicitly or implicitly understood it as an apologetic work. For example, a reviewer writes about the 1953 reprint: “All in all this is still a very worthwhile volume to read and study, despite its somewhat ancient date. It effectually refutes the idea that Bavinck was not really interested in apologetics.”⁵¹ And the review of the original English edition in the *Princeton Theological Review* that called Bavinck a contender for the faith (see above) was published in the “Apologetic Theology” section of the journal.

47. Warfield, review of *De zekerheid des geloofs*, 144.

48. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:515 #134, cf. 1:55–56 #11.

49. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:515 #134.

50. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:515 #134.

51. Hills, review of *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 31.

Let us go a step further. Has Bavinck himself thought of *The Philosophy of Revelation* as an apologetic work? He does not say so explicitly, but his summary of the argument in the preface to the German edition certainly points in this direction:

For many, the concept of revelation is a superseded point of view and only remains of antiquarian value. But deeper reflection and continued investigation put it beyond all doubt that a worldview that considers *all* events in nature and history cannot lack the necessity and the reality of revelation.⁵² And the needs and demands that a uniform worldview brings with it are only answered in *that* revelation that is given us in Christianity. The following lectures are devoted to the development and confirmation of these basic ideas.⁵³

How does this relate to Warfield's contention in 1903 that Bavinck makes so little of apologetics? Warfield says so in a review of the Dutch edition of Bavinck's *The Certainty of Faith*. He criticizes Bavinck for attaching little importance to "the function of the 'evidences' in assuring us of the truth of the Christian religion."⁵⁴ As for his own view, he states:

We are arguing that Apologetics has its part to play in the Christianizing of the world: and that this part is not a small part: nor is it merely a subsidiary or a defensive part. . . . It has primary part to play and a conquering part. . . . Christianity must think through and organize its, not defense merely, but assault. It has been placed in the world to *reason* its way to dominion of the world. And it is by reasoning its way that it has come to its kingship.⁵⁵

Thus, Warfield argues both for negative and for positive apologetics, for the refutation of arguments against Christianity and for offering positive arguments ("evidences") for the Christian faith.

In the preface to the second, enlarged Dutch edition of *The Certainty of Faith*, Bavinck says that he has elaborated and clarified several ideas in the light of some questions and remarks. He especially mentions Warfield's "friendly

52. Bavinck elaborates this point especially in chapters 4–7.

53. Bavinck, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, iv (italics original).

54. Warfield, review of *De zekerheid des geloofs*, 148.

55. Warfield, review of *De zekerheid des geloofs*, 146 (italics original). See also Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 329–31; Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812–1921*, 302–3; Bristley, "From Probability to Certainty," esp. 167–68; Van den Belt, "Geloofs-zekerheid tussen objectief en subjectief," 25–32; Van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the *Autopistia* of Scripture," 32–43; and Van den Belt, "An Alternative Approach to Apologetics."

In the last essay Van den Belt reads *The Philosophy of Revelation* as an apologetic work and compares it with Warfield's approach to apologetics. Van den Belt sent me a copy of his essay when I was doing the final editing of the present study and I have not been able to consult the other essays that were published in the same volume, such as Harinck, "Why Was Bavinck in Need of a Philosophy of Revelation?" and Mattson, "Bavinck's 'Revelation and the Future.'"

and instructive review.”⁵⁶ When we read through the additions,⁵⁷ we get the impression that he meets his Princeton colleague part of the way, but principally sticks to his own conviction. For example, he says:

If in the Scriptures we were dealing with ordinary history, and sinful self-interest and human hardness of heart played no role, the proofs for their truth would generally be regarded as sufficient. The blame for man’s unbelief lies not in God and His revelation but in man himself.

Nevertheless, because of the subjective inclination of the human heart, all proofs are insufficient to move man to believe.⁵⁸

In Princeton Bavinck introduces his final lecture as follows: “The arguments for the reality of revelation, derived from the nature of thought, the essence of nature, the character of history, and the conception of religion, are finally strengthened by the course of development through which mankind has passed.”⁵⁹ In this case, the Dutch word for “argument” is “bewijs,” a word that is usually rendered as “proof” or “evidence.” Does this indicate that Bavinck now meets Warfield more than halfway, in spending most of his lectures on bringing forward “bewijzen” (evidences) for the reality of revelation? Or have the translators rightly sensed that neither “evidences” nor “proofs” is a correct translation in this case? Have they sensed that Bavinck is doing apologetics but in a different way than in which it has been practiced at Princeton?⁶⁰ Did Warfield himself sense this when, together with G. Vos, he prepared the manuscript of *The Philosophy of Revelation* for the printer?⁶¹

If the argument of Bavinck’s lectures or at least the final lecture can be characterized as an apologetic of despair, it does indeed differ from Warfield’s approach. An apologetic of despair is at variance with both negative and positive apologetics in that it does not concentrate on specific arguments in favor of or against Christianity, but on an alleged alternative to the Christian faith. It attempts to show that this alternative is—perhaps intellectually but in any case existentially— untenable: if it were true, we would be in an utterly hopeless

56. Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs* (1903), 5.

57. Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs* (1903), esp. 28–31, 65–66, 75–77, 81–83, 86–87, 89–90, 92–94, 97–98, 104–105.

58. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, 27; Dutch: *De zekerheid des geloofs* (1903), 65–66.

59. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 170.

60. In the first lecture Bavinck distinguishes between a branch of theology that strives to maintain the truth of revelation “by way of aggression or defence” and a philosophy of revelation that “will trace the idea of revelation, both in its form and in its content, and correlate it with the rest of our knowledge and life.” While he does not use the term “apologetics” at all in this context, he seems to refer to positive and negative apologetics when he uses the words “aggression” and “defence.” What Bavinck has in mind to do in his lectures is something other than these kinds of apologetics, but it may still be a kind of apologetics. See Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 24.

61. See Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, v.

situation. Such an analysis of the alternative does not prove the gospel but can create a new openness to it.⁶²

Although the word “despair” or its Dutch equivalents “wanhoop” and “vertwijfeling” are not found frequently in his writings, there are some instances in which Bavinck uses despair in a sense that can be associated with an apologetic of despair. In the eighth lecture of *The Philosophy of Revelation* Bavinck speaks about despair in a passage about conversion:

Nevertheless conversion must remain conversion. What it is no science or philosophy can tell us, but we learn from Holy Scripture alone. If this does not tell us, or is not to be trusted in what it tells us, we are in *despair* as to the redemption of the world and the salvation of mankind. Philosophy may teach us through the lips of Kant and Schopenhauer—though even this always under the influence of Christianity—that if sin is to be really eliminated from human nature, a sort of regeneration is necessary. But it can never proclaim the glad tidings that such a conversion exists, nor can it show the way to obtain it.⁶³

There are several remarkable elements in this quotation: according to Bavinck, insofar as philosophy is right, it is so because it is (still) under the influence of Christianity, and thus philosophy cannot function as a substitute for Christianity. Even more importantly, for Bavinck conversion seems not to be primarily a matter of obligation but of “glad tidings.” And without this gospel of conversion we are in despair.

There are also two interesting passages in the *Reformed Dogmatics*:

The doctrine of providence is not a philosophical system but a confession of faith, the confession that, notwithstanding appearances, neither Satan nor a human being nor any other creature, but God and he alone . . . preserves and governs all things. Such a confession can save us both from a superficial optimism that denies the riddles of life, and from a presumptuous pessimism that *despairs* of this world and human destiny⁶⁴

In the end, is it good or evil, God or Satan, Christ or the antichrist who will win? History itself fails to furnish an adequate answer.

From the viewpoint of the present world (*Diesseits*), no satisfying explanation of the world is possible; on this position there is all too much reason for the *despair* of pessimism. And our sense of justice, which a righteous God has himself implanted deep in the human heart, therefore demands that at the end of time the balance of justice be redressed.⁶⁵

62. See Hardy, “The Apologetics of Despair.”

63. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 235–6 (italics added).

64. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:618–19 #306 (italics added).

65. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 4:596 #549 (italics added to the word “despair”).

In short, when Bavinck speaks about despair explicitly, his point is that without trust in God we are left with despair. This is a line of thinking that is also found in an apologetic of despair.⁶⁶

As noted, Pascal's *Pensées* are a typical example of an apologetic of despair. To what extent did Bavinck have an affinity with him? In his discussion of the "ethical-psychological method" of dogmatics, he spends some lines on Pascal:

The ethical-psychological method came especially into vogue, however, by the work of Pascal and Vinet. In both cases there was as yet no opposition between this method and the historical arguments. The historical proofs even form a necessary element in Pascal's apologetics and were greatly valued by him personally. Still, he gave to these historical proofs another place and meaning. His *apologia* is anthropological; it proceeds from humanity's misery and seeks to arouse in people a felt need for redemption. It then shows that those needs remain unmet in pagan religions and philosophical systems and find satisfaction only in the Christian religion as based on the faith of Israel.⁶⁷

Bavinck does not evaluate Pascal in particular, but, after discussing among others Kant and the Kantians A. Ritschl and R.A. Lipsius, he gives a general evaluation of the ethical-psychological method. He esteems the emphasis on the correspondence between religion as an objective historical power and the moral needs of human beings:

The satisfaction of the human heart and conscience are the seal and crown of religion. A religion that has no consolation to offer in time of mourning and sorrow, in life and in death, cannot be the true religion. . . . The contrast often made between truth and consolation does not belong in religion. A truth that contains no comfort, which does not connect with the religious-ethical life of human beings, ceases by that token to be a religious truth. Just as medical science in all its specialties is oriented to the healing of the sick, so in religion people have the right to look for peace and salvation.⁶⁸

However, he also stresses that this method is insufficient to be the one and the only: although a true religion must give comfort, not every religion that gives comfort is true, and the gospel is not a ready match for the needs of the people as they themselves picture those needs. "The often-repeated claim that Christianity corresponds to human needs brings with it the very real danger that the truth is tailored to suit human nature."⁶⁹ The fact that Bavinck mentioned that Pascal also valued historical proofs probably indicates that this criticism does not apply to Pascal. In general, when Bavinck cites Pascal in the *Reformed*

66. The "presumptuous pessimism" in the first quotation from the *Reformed Dogmatics* is noteworthy: in the next section we will see how Bavinck tries to draw the proud pessimists out towards the end of "the second movement" of his lecture "Revelation and the Future."

67. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:537 #141 (italics original).

68. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:552 #145.

69. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:552–53 #145.

Dogmatics, he does so with assent and without criticism.⁷⁰ His approval of Pascal's apologetic method also becomes clear in the following quotation:

Pascal, in the first part of his apology, attempted to arouse in people an awareness of their misery and need for redemption and peace. And through and after Schleiermacher most theologians have arrived at the insight that religion is unique and can be known only in a manner corresponding to that uniqueness. . . . By making this statement Christian theology indeed takes its starting point in the human subject. The accusation of subjectivism immediately launched against this position, however, is unwarranted and in any case premature.⁷¹

In short, Bavinck seems to endorse an apologetic of despair that attempts to create a new openness to the hope of the gospel, if only it does not attempt to create a new gospel based on our needs (which would be subjectivism).

Finally, the ninth lecture of *The Philosophy of Revelation* contains the following interesting paragraph:

Not only does Scripture teach that man has lost himself, and may lose himself more and more, but our own experience also testifies to this. Man is lost before God, for he does not give himself to God, and does not serve him in love, but flies from him, and hides himself from his presence. He is lost for his neighbor, for he abandons him in his need, and sacrifices him to his own interests in the struggle for existence. He is also lost for himself, for there is a cleft between his being and his consciousness, a dissension between his duty and his desire, between his conscience and his will. That is the reason why we seek diversions in the world; instead of re-collecting our thoughts we scatter them, and in proportion as with our representations and imaginations, with our thoughts and desires, with our inclinations and passions, we move in various directions, we lose more and more the centre of our own life. Man is ever losing himself more and more. No treasures are able to compensate for the spiritual loss of our soul, for when the soul is lost all is lost. Nothing fills the emptiness, nothing replaces the loss, nothing covers the poverty. For this reason Christ brought the kingdom of heaven to earth; he implants it in the hearts of men, and thereby gives them back to God, and their neighbor, and also to themselves. Peace with God carries with it for man peace with himself also; the cleft between his conscience and his will is filled up; the discord between his being and consciousness is reconciled; his soul with all its powers is brought back to unity in the fear of God's name. His duty becomes his choice, and his choice his privilege. Conversion is a turning back to God, but at the same time a coming to one's self.⁷²

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:38 #309, 3:101 #323, 3:123 #327, and 3:471 #407.

⁷¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:564 #147.

⁷² Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 257–58.

There are many allusions to Pascal in this paragraph and it cannot surprise that in a note Bavinck makes clear that this passage is indeed meant as a paraphrase of Pascal.⁷³

In conclusion, although Warfield rightly sensed that Bavinck did not share his confidence in apologetics, it seems very possible to read *The Philosophy of Revelation* as an apologetic work. The question is rather: what kind of apologetics is it? My intuition that at least the argument of the final lecture, “Revelation and the Future,” can be characterized as an apologetic of despair seems to be in harmony with what Bavinck writes elsewhere, but it still has to be tested in an analysis of the lecture itself. To this we will turn now.

3.5 An Apologetic of Despair (2)

The table of contents of the English version of *The Philosophy of Revelation* offers the following outline of the tenth lecture:

- Christianity according to many a negligible factor in future development.
- Self-consciousness and self-sufficiency of modern man as reflected in the energetic world-view.
- Efforts after race-improvement through artificial selection, reform of education in all grades of schools, and entire reconstruction of society.
- Utopian expectations built on these efforts seemingly based on immanent development but in reality resting on deification of the creature and issuing in the strangest conceptions with reference to the future both on earth and beyond the grave.
- Superstitious character of the doctrine of evolution.
- The meliorism of James.
- Condition of present-day culture.
- Neither science nor philosophy able to afford certainty with regard to the future.
- Religion alone able to do this, especially Christianity because it believes in God the Creator, Reconciler, and Restorer of all things.⁷⁴

Basically, the lecture consists of three movements. First, Bavinck offers an overview of modern expectations concerning the future and especially emphasizes how these expectations are rooted in evolutionary thinking (pages 270–295 in the English edition). Then, in the paragraphs about the “superstitious character of the doctrine of evolution”, a turning point comes: Bavinck argues that “if one ponders a little more deeply”, evolutionary thinking does not give reason for hope but for pessimism and that in fact nothing apart from religion “can give that security with regard to the future which we have need of” (pages 295–306). And finally he shows how Christianity gives this security (pages 306–315).

73. See Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 344 n14. Bavinck mentions Pascal also in other works, e.g., *Our Reasonable Faith*, 22.

74. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 10.

We are especially interested in the last two movements, but will first pay attention to the first movement, which does not only offer a fascinating mirror of the age a century ago but also the necessary background to understand Bavinck's argument thereafter.

The first movement. The outline above states that the lecture starts with the point that Christianity is said to be a *negligible* factor in future development, but this is phrased too weakly. What Bavinck points out is that it is said that Christianity must be *rejected* if modern culture is to advance. The problem with Christianity is that "it gives a bill of exchange for the life hereafter, which perhaps will never be honored, and makes men indifferent to this life; it does not stimulate to activity, but recommends as the highest virtues, patience, forbearance, obedience, and contentment."⁷⁵

Bavinck characterizes the self-understanding of "the modern man" as follows:

The modern man no longer feels himself a miserable creature, who has fallen from his original destiny, and no longer regards the earth as a vale of tears, which has taken the place of the original paradise. He can conceive nothing more wonderful than this beautiful world, which has evolved itself from the smallest beginnings and has reached its highest point of development in grand and mighty man. He is in his own estimation no mere creature, but a creator and redeemer of himself and society. More and more he becomes his own providence. And he is so, and becomes so through his work, for labor is creation.⁷⁶

The evolutionary process, of which we have evidence all over the world, presses on not only forward, but also upward, to meet the light, the life, the spirit. It is only necessary that man understand this process, and take an active part in it; he must feel his responsibility for the carrying of the process through by man, and for its advancing through him to a higher type of being.⁷⁷

Here, it becomes clear again that, in Bavinck's perception, evolution plays an important role in modern self-understanding: we are the products of a rising evolutionary line, on which our hope and action is to be based. Action is especially required in three realms: we have to strive after race-improvement through artificial selection; education must be reformed according to evolutionary scientific principles ("He who takes into account the lesson of evolution quickly comes to the conclusion that the present-day system of education is one great error"⁷⁸); and society must completely be rebuilt:

Church, and state, and society, religion, morality, and justice, marriage, family, and school, habits and laws, and our whole culture are,

75. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 270–71.

76. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 270–71.

77. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 274.

78. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 278.

notwithstanding many foreign elements which have intruded from elsewhere, built on a Christian basis and animated by the Christian spirit. He who desires such a reform may, no doubt, make a beginning, but who knows what the end will be, and who can estimate the cost? None the less, if such a reformation is to be wrought, it cannot be satisfied with a mere change in the system of education; it must proceed to a total rebuilding of society.⁷⁹

Bavinck especially sees the socialism of Marx as the movement that aims to reform society. Although the influence of Marx is less nowadays, in general this tendency to cut Western (European) society free from its Christian roots seems to continue to the present day. There is something prophetic in Bavinck's words.⁸⁰

Bavinck observes that adherents of the modern worldview tend to emphasize that it is and should be based on science and that they deny all transcendence and metaphysics. However, he remarks that as soon as metaphysics is rejected, it gets back in by the backdoor: "The superhuman task of transforming society into a state of peace and joy requires more than ordinary human power; if God himself does not work the change, hope can be cherished only when human power is divinized."⁸¹ Moreover,

By banishing metaphysics, materialism has no longer an ethical system, knows no longer the distinction between good and evil, possesses no moral law, no duty, no virtue, and no highest good. . . .

. . . With all his wisdom and strength man is powerless against . . . nature in the end, unless it be subject to a will which maintains man in his superiority above it. That is the reason why, even when theism is denied, the true reality, the world-will which is hidden behind phenomena and very imperfectly manifested, is nevertheless always thought of as analogous to that of man, and especially as an ethically good will. Notwithstanding all his self-confidence and self-glorification, man is, in every possible world-view, incorporated in a larger whole, and is explained and confirmed by that totality. Metaphysics,

79. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 281.

80. Bavinck is also aware of (what would turn out to be) the antecedents of the Nazi regime: "This race-glorification acquires such a serious character, and so far exceeds all bounds, that the virtues of the race are identified with the highest ideal. *Deutschtum*, for example, is placed on a level with Christendom, and Jesus is considered as an Aryan in race," and: "War is, according to Moltke, an element of the world-order, as it is established by God, in which the noblest virtues of men are developed, such as courage and self-denial, faithfulness to duty, and self-sacrifice; without war the world would become a morass, and would sink into materialism." Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 302–3, 303–4.

Van Tonder, "Oorlog is voordelig," assumes that the last quotation expresses Bavinck's own opinion and he agrees with it: did not Christ himself say that he had not come to bring peace? (Matt. 10:34). As a matter of fact, Bavinck did not find it worthwhile to refute Moltke explicitly, but simply remarked that a culture in which such things are said "is often treated with deep disdain, not only by Christians, but by the children whom it has fed and nourished." Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 304.

81. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 288–89.

that is the belief in the absolute as a holy power, always forms the foundation of ethics.⁸²

Bavinck points out that in his day evolution takes the place of such metaphysics:

The modern man derives his faith and animation, his activity and his optimism, from the idea of evolution, which according to his belief governs the whole world. If he endeavors restlessly to establish a holy and happy kingdom of humanity on earth, and stands firm in his belief in its realization notwithstanding all difficulties and disappointments, this can be explained only in one way, – that he feels himself borne on by the true reality, which is hidden behind the oftentimes very sad phenomena. Striving and laboring to attain his ideal, he believes himself in harmony with the innermost motive-power of the world, with the mysterious course of nature. To work, to endeavor, to strive, to become, is the deepest meaning of the world, the heart and the kernel of true reality. The doctrine of evolution thus takes the place of the old religion in the modern man.⁸³

For many, evolution also gives hope for the future of the human race—we have developed from animals, so why will we not develop further to *Übermensch-er*?—and of the individual: death is certainly not a punishment of sin but possibly a transition to a higher existence (“many adherents of the evolutionary doctrine are at the same time advocates of spiritualism”).⁸⁴

Meanwhile, Bavinck already offers some criticism: the doctrine of evolution is “no science”; it does not rest on undeniable facts but is rather contradicted by the facts. Furthermore, “All change in the world, as if it were nothing, is identified with development, development with progress, progress with material welfare or ethical culture, with liberty or morality.” And,

Although monism in its different forms denies that the absolute power which rules the world has personality, consciousness and will, yet it always speaks of this power as if it were a person. Consciousness, instinct, will, labor, endeavor, development, aim, and holiness are unintentionally ascribed to it; it is even identified with absolute divine love in a naive way, which is in direct antagonism to the scientific pretensions of the speakers.⁸⁵

Not very flatteringly, Bavinck concludes: “Just as the pagan treats his idol, so modern man acts with the idea of evolution.”⁸⁶

The second movement. Having outlined the eschatological hopes that are based on “evolution,” Bavinck reflects on this position further:

82. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 289–90.

83. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 290–91.

84. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 292–95.

85. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 291.

86. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 291. See also section 2.1 note 2.

But whatever evolution thinks about the future, it affords no rest for the mind and none for the heart, because it takes away from us the Lord of the world. If there is no being, but only becoming, then there is no final state, either on this side of death for humanity, or on the other side for the individual man. The doctrine of evolution is even mortally wounded by this eternal process, because the idea of a never-ending development means a process without aim, and thus no longer a development. For every state exists only to make way for another; as soon as the kingdom of man came into existence it would pass away, and this the more because, according to the testimony of science, the present world and the present humanity cannot last eternally. If there is no omnipotent and holy God who exists above the world, and is for it the goal and resting-place of its strife, then there is no final end, no completion of the process of the world, and no rest for the human heart.⁸⁷

The notion of rest is important here. For Bavinck, it includes “rest for the mind” (intellectual satisfaction) and especially “rest for the heart” (existential peace); if a religion (or a substitute for religion) does not offer such rest, it cannot be true.⁸⁸ It is not fully clear whether Bavinck sees this rest as the end of a way of becoming and development (“eschatological rest”) or as a rest that can be experienced here and now, but maybe we should not make a sharp distinction: hope for eschatological rest can give us rest here and now.

The reason why evolution cannot provide rest is exactly the reason why it seemed to give hope: the ongoing development seems to hold a promise, but in fact the only promise can be that nothing will come that will remain. Therefore, Bavinck concludes: “An optimism which is exclusively built on evolution is always transmuted into pessimism if one ponders a little more deeply.”⁸⁹

Next, Bavinck inquires whether philosophy, culture and/or science can offer us the security with regard to the future which we have need of, but concludes in each instance that it is not the case: there is much uncertainty in philosophy; science and technology may be used equally well for evil as for good; as for culture, “The great number of reformers who appear to-day in every domain of thought and action, indeed, sufficiently shows that culture, with all its blessings, does not content the heart, and does not meet all the needs of the soul” and “he who considers the moral corruption which has attacked our culture at the core, and takes into consideration the perils which press upon us from without, . . . feels the anxious question rising within him, whether our whole modern culture is not destined sometime to devastation and annihilation like that of Babylon and Egypt, Greece and Rome.”⁹⁰

87. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 295–96.

88. Cf. the quotation from Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:552 #145 in the previous section: “The satisfaction of the human heart and conscience are the seal and crown of religion. A religion that has no consolation to offer in time of mourning and sorrow, in life and in death, cannot be the true religion.”

89. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 297.

90. See Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 297–305 (quotations: 304, 305).

Bavinck is aware that not everyone feels the same need for security with regard to the future, but that does not make him deny that humans actually have such a need:

This need of security cannot be voided by saying that every one must do his duty and leave the future to itself. For though there is great truth in the Christian motto, "Blind for the future, and seeing in the commandment," such true resignation is not born of doubt, but of faith, and does not leave the future to itself, but to God's fatherly guidance. . . . If the world at the end of its development is dissolved in a chaos, or sinks back into everlasting sleep, the value of personality, of religious and ethical life, and also of culture, cannot be maintained.⁹¹

Bavinck does not say explicitly but seems to imply that if persons who have broken away from Christianity say that they do not have this need of security, they can only say so because they are still more Christian in their thinking than they are willing to admit.

The third movement. Having punctured all the balloons of alleged security, Bavinck turns to religion and argues why this can offer security:

First, it always includes faith in a divine power, which is distinct from the world, far above it, and can govern and guide it according to its own will; and, secondly, it puts man himself personally into connection with the divine power, so that he sees in the affairs of God his own affairs, and allied with God can defy the power of the whole world, even unto death.⁹²

Next, he makes a quick move from religion to Christianity:

But this idea of religion has only come to its true and full embodiment in Christianity. For all religions which exist without the special revelation in Christ, and equally all confessions and world-views which differ from it, are characterized by this common peculiarity, that they identify God and the world, the natural and the ethical, being and evil, creation and fall, and therefore mix up religion with superstition and magic. There is only one religion which moves on pure lines and is conceived altogether as religion, and that is Christianity.⁹³

One can question the way Bavinck uses the concept of religion. Does he purposely define it in such a way that Christianity becomes the only true religion? Is that not a cheap rhetorical trick? Maybe he is more nuanced: on the one hand, he certainly derives his concept of religion from Christianity (after all, one may not know what true religion is unless one knows the true religion), but on the other hand, he formulates his concept of religion in such a way that it can answer our need for security with regard to the future. Only because Christianity also meets this need can it be called the true religion indeed.

91. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 305.

92. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 306.

93. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 306–7.

Next, Bavinck elaborates how in Christianity God is the creator, the reconciler, and the restorer and renewer of all things. He emphasizes that the gospel—the good news that there is an almighty and merciful will of God, which gives us certainty with regard to the destiny of the world and our own life and fate—cannot be derived from this world but nevertheless acknowledges the reality and meets the need of this world. Thus, he can say:

But the world of science and art, culture and technique, knows nothing of such a merciful will of God. It can advance no further, with all its thoroughness and sagacity, than the postulate that there must be such a will of God. But even this result of human knowledge and effort is a significant fact; for it contains the confession that the whole world, with all its development, is lost and must perish if it is not sustained and guided by an almighty will, which can cause light to appear out of darkness, life out of death, and glory out of suffering.⁹⁴

Then the climax of the lecture of follows:

What eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man to conceive otherwise than as a wish or a sigh, is revealed to us in the gospel. Jesus Christ came into the world to preserve it and to save it. This is the content of the gospel and the testimony of Scripture in spite of all criticism and opposition. By this testimony the prophets have lived, and the apostles and the whole Christian Church, and by it men will live till the end of time. For the truth of this testimony lies outside and beyond the bounds of all criticism in the system of the whole world, in the existence of the Christian church, and in the need of the human heart. The world cries: Such a will of God ought to be, if I am ever to be saved; and the gospel says: There is such a will of God; lift your eyes to the cross.⁹⁵

Although we have had to leave aside many details, this is basically the argument of Bavinck's "Revelation and the Future."

Having analyzed the lecture, we are now in the position to answer the question: can Bavinck's argumentative strategy in this lecture be characterized as an apologetic of despair? Does it meet the three criteria that we formulated earlier in this section?

The first criterion was: the strategy should address a secular, naturalistic, or atheistic worldview. It goes almost without saying that Bavinck's argument meets this criterion. The modern, evolutionary worldview that Bavinck ad-

94. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 309. See also the following passage: "Man is indeed what Scripture describes him, and the world appears as Scripture shows it to us. A superficial view may indeed deny it; deeper experience and more serious inquiry always lead back again to the acknowledgment of its truth; the greatest minds, the noblest souls, the most pious hearts have repeated and confirmed the witness of Scripture from age to age. Scripture therefore does not stand isolated in its contemplation of the world and life, but is surrounded, upheld, and supported on all sides by the *sensus communis* of the whole of humanity; there is neither speech nor language where its voice is not heard." Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 311–12.

95. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 309–10.

dresses certainly belongs to this family of worldviews and may even be its representative *par excellence* (even when “evolution” itself is ascribed religious traits and is no longer a purely secular concept).

The second criterion was: the strategy should employ a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Such a *reductio ad absurdum* is especially found in what we called the second movement: evolution seems to warrant good hope for the future, but, in fact, it can only be a reason for pessimism.⁹⁶

The third criterion was: the *reductio ad absurdum* argument should have existential implications. This is what Bavinck also argued in the second movement: evolution (and philosophy and science and culture) cannot give rest for the mind and for the heart.

Thus, all three criteria being met, the answer is affirmative: yes, Bavinck’s argumentative strategy in “Revelation and the Future” can be characterized as an apologetic of despair. In addition, we may recall the definition of an apologetic of despair that we adopted at the beginning of the previous section: “It is an attempt to push the assumptions of the secular worldview to the point where that worldview becomes untenable, to trace out the logic of atheism to its bitter and presumably unacceptable conclusions, thereby creating a new openness to the hope of the Gospel.”

Especially in the third movement, Bavinck works toward this new openness to the hope of the gospel. He invites us to understand the dissatisfaction with which the modern worldview leaves us, especially with regard to our questions about the future, as a cry for an almighty and merciful will of God. Then he says that such a will of God has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, also at this point, Bavinck’s argumentative strategy is that of an apologetic of despair.

Part Two: Difficulties of the Christian Worldview

3.6 The Problem of Scripture

Students wrote in reference to Bavinck: “Man walks in riddles here on earth.”⁹⁷ Bavinck himself said more piously: “Man is a riddle which solution is found in God alone.”⁹⁸

At the beginning of the previous essay, I called Bavinck a tragic hero of faith and the study of him in these essays a cathartic reading, referring to Aristotle’s theory of theatre. I have considered dividing these two essays together into five acts like in a classical tragedy, but felt that a historical person is not so

96. Graham, “Bavinck’s *Philosophy of Revelation*,” observes that Bavinck also uses a *reductio ad absurdum* argument in, e.g., the fourth lecture, “Revelation and History.”

97. According to Veenhof, “Bavinck and Guardini,” 12, this line of the Dutch poet De Gesteet was quoted in the 1916 students’ almanac of the Free University in order to characterize Bavinck.

98. Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, 14; cf. *Our Reasonable Faith*, 23.

easily fit into such a schedule. Nevertheless, we may see *The Philosophy of Revelation* as the climax of Bavinck's life struggle, as his biographer Bremmer says: "In this work we meet the matured struggle in Bavinck's own personal life between the Christian faith of revelation [or: belief in revelation] and the evolutionistic, positivistic way of thinking of the nineteenth century. That gives the book, and much of his other writings, an existential trait."⁹⁹ From now on, Bavinck still broadens his thinking in his publications, but no longer seems to deepen it. If one goes below the surface, it seems that his thought was on a road of deconstruction, that he was even more willing than before to recognize the difficulties that his own positions implied, without formulating a positive alternative.¹⁰⁰

Before we turn to Bavinck's difficulties, let us remain one more moment at the climax. When Snouck Hurgronje has received the Dutch edition of *The Philosophy of Revelation*, he writes Bavinck to say thanks and to express his appreciation, but also to repeat his common point of criticism: "Your position regarding Scripture always seems to me to be weak."¹⁰¹ However, this time

99. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 251. To me, it remains somewhat curious that *The Philosophy of Revelation* generated relatively little response. For example, in 1911 a reviewer of one of Bavinck's other works remarks: "In my humble opinion, there are very few persons, both among the modern and the orthodox in the Netherlands, who overlook the currents of this time with such a clear view as Dr. Bavinck does. Anyone who has read and studied his *Philosophy of Revelation*, which is still much too little known in our 'culture circles,' knows this." Kromsigt, review of *Modernisme en orthodoxie*, 214.

100. For Bavinck's last years, see especially Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 310–41; Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 248–70; and Harinck, Van der Kooi, and Vree, "*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*." For Bavinck's reflection on World War I, see especially Van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck and the War Question"; Dutch: "Wij zitten met dezen oorlog in groote verlegenheid."

101. Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 30, 1908, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 163. Earlier instances in which Snouck Hurgronje reminds Bavinck of problems in his doctrine of Scripture and calls him to revise it are, for example, the letters dated:

December 22, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 79;

January 24, 1883, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 107–8;

June 18, 1895, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 146–47: a reaction to the first volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*: "Whereas, as far as I am allowed to judge the matter, you have argued your position in a very strong, scholarly way in other chapters, it seems to me that you have not dealt with the objections of biblical criticism seriously enough";

January 29, 1905, quoted in Augustijn, "Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen, 1912," 109–10 n98: "More and more, your view on Scripture seems me to be the weak point of your doctrine";

October 23, 1905, quoted in Augustijn, "Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen, 1912," 110: "In my opinion, Calvinism should revise its doctrine of Scripture in order to be able to live on in full honesty to itself";

a lost letter, written early 1908, on the occasion of Bavinck's 25th anniversary as a professor, referred to by Bavinck in his letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated January 3, 1909, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 165.

In later letters, Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture is no longer a point of discussion. It should be noted that, although Snouck Hurgronje finds Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture problematic, he

Bavinck seems to answer more confidently than he did before and points out that Snouck Hurgronje has misunderstood him:

I understand your skepticism. But since my lectures are also intended for others than kindred spirits, I have never called upon the authority of Scripture as such, but I have only said: a) this is how the human and the world look like. Without a higher, almighty and merciful power it will perish, and b) from the mouth of prophets, Christ and the apostles, a testimony comes of which the core is: such an almighty and merciful will *does* exist, even if the appearance of all things is against it. Well then, this testimony is a *fact*, aside from all Bible criticism; it exists and it will exist, despite all denial or opposition. To accept it and to acknowledge it as truth is certainly an act of faith, but to which the whole world and especially our own heart urges us. And to accept it as truth is at the same time to accept it as revelation from God, for otherwise one cannot accept it as truth.¹⁰²

The Philosophy of Revelation does not solve the tension in his relationship to the Bible and the problems in his doctrine of Scripture, but it seeks to defend and present the Christian faith in a way that by-passes most of the problem.

The tension is not solved. In later years Bavinck says to his future biographer Hepp that most of all “the problem of Scripture” needs a solution.¹⁰³ Hepp assumes that Bavinck thought especially about the question of whether concrete moral prescriptions, for example in the Sermon on the Mount, should

also has some kind of hidden admiration for him: “I can add that . . . already in our student days, I could get irritated when I heard the naïve remark that ‘one could not understand’ (the idea was that nobody could) how a smart man could also be a believer of Scripture. More than once I answered: this will not be the only thing that you do not understand and that is still true.” Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, June 1, 1904, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 156.

102. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 3, 1909, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 164–65 (italics original). When I read this letter about eight years ago, I formulated six questions to it:

“(1) Has Bavinck stated the problem of human and world correctly? Not everybody would agree with his analysis.

(2) Has Bavinck sufficiently explored the different possibilities for a solution? Now he comes with a solution of which he himself acknowledges that the appearance of things is against it and that it is contested.

(3) Even if one agrees with Bavinck that despite all criticism we find God’s almighty and merciful will expressed in Scripture, is our knowledge in this area of such a nature that we can build a full philosophical and dogmatic system on it? From knowing existentially one cannot just derive positive knowledge.

(4) The argument is present as a road from a problem to a solution, but was the actual way of thinking not the opposite: there was already a solution—revelation—and now a problem had to be created to it?

(5) Is it right to see revelation as an answer to human need—human need as it is already known without the light of special revelation? Is this not against the content of special revelation, which is more and different than what people experience themselves as their need?

(6) Does Bavinck’s whole argument not display some narrowing of thought?”

To these six questions, I add now as a seventh question: “In how far do these questions also apply to that what will be said in the next essays of this study and in how far not?”

103. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 331.

still be followed literally by the church today. On the one hand, this is a valuable observation. Whereas *The Philosophy of Revelation* deals with the problem that the Christian faith is contested at an intellectual, academic level, in *The Imitation of Christ and Life in the Modern World* (1918) the plausibility crisis of Christianity is located in everyday moral life:

All these questions come together in the question about the imitation of Christ and life in the modern world. Is there still room for such an imitation in the cultural life of the present? Can it still be taken seriously by people in the state, in industry and business, in the marketplace, the stock-exchange and the bank, in office and factory, in science and art, in war and at the front?¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, in the way Hepp discusses the issue, it seems that he tries to take away the depth of Bavinck's problem with Scripture, which raises the question why then Bavinck would have said that most of all the problem of Scripture needs a solution.¹⁰⁵

Although others have studied Bavinck's doctrine (and usage) of Scripture in much detail¹⁰⁶ and it is not my purpose to repeat that research here, some observations can be made:

1. Apart from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin published many commentaries on the Bible. Augustine wrote expositions on, among others, all the Psalms. Karl Barth became famous because of his *Epistle to the Romans*. In Bavinck's voluminous oeuvre, however, there is not a single work in which he exposes a particular book of the Bible verse by verse. He certainly sees the need of good commentaries. Thus he writes in a review of the Dutch translation of Calvin's commentary on Acts:

Of course, it does not offer everything that we now, in our days, would expect from an exposition of this book of the Bible. . . . We should produce independent, scholarly commentaries on Scripture that meet the needs [lit.: are at the height] of this age.¹⁰⁷

And in his preface to the Dutch translation of Matthew Henry he writes:

104. Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het moderne leven* (1918), 7; (1922), 120. My translation is partly a revision of Bolt's: Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ and Life in the Modern World," trans. John Bolt (typescript), 4–5. For Bavinck's views on the imitation of Christ, see also Bolt, "The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck" and Van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ," 78–91 (unfortunately, I was not able to consult this article).

105. See also Harinck, Van der Kooi, and Vree, "*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*," 24.

106. See especially Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*; Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 68–225 (pages 69–70 give an overview of earlier literature on Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture); Van den Belt, "Autopistia," 249–314 and the corresponding chapter in Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology*.

107. Bavinck, review of Calvin, *De handelingen der apostelen*. Cf. Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 542–44.

Of course, it would be too much if one claimed that Henry's Bible commentary meets the needs of today in all respects. But we are still so very poor in this area. The ideal would be that a popular, short, continuous, reliable, and practical commentary of Scripture were produced that took advantage of newer research, was based on the foundation of a scholarly exegesis, and was composed by a group of able and pious men.¹⁰⁸

Bavinck's wishes were fulfilled. In 1922 both a scholarly commentary on the New Testament and a more practical commentary began to appear.¹⁰⁹ However, he himself had already passed away in 1921. When he developed the doctrine of Scripture in his dogmatics and wrestled with the problem of Scripture till the end of his life, he did so mainly in an exegetical vacuum.

2. The previous essay quoted a passage from Bavinck's inaugural lecture at the Free University in 1902, in which he says about fellow theologians:

Often they have no longer anything to preach because [biblical] criticism has bereaved them of the power and the glory of the gospel. . . . Unhappy with their position, many search for a way out in politics, deaconate, or philanthropy, and, to the same extent, stop being ministers of the Word and stewards of God's mysteries.¹¹⁰

Is this, willy-nilly, also the direction in which Bavinck feels that his own life is going? As a matter of fact, he gets more and more involved in politics¹¹¹ and preaches less and less.¹¹² His works on worldview, education, etc. certainly seek to offer a Christian perspective, but they are not the works of a scribe who continuously brings out new and old things from the treasures of the Bible.¹¹³ If so, the question arises again whether the last two decades of Bavinck's life simply display a natural broadening of his work and vision or whether they are not also an escape from an unresolved problem with Scripture.

3. In 1920 Bavinck writes a report for the synod that identifies three themes in the Belgic Confession that need revision:

The divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, articles 2–8 of the Belgic Confession; the doctrine of the true and false church, in connection with the pluriformity of the church that is now accepted by many, article 29;

108. Bavinck, "Voorrede," in Henry, *Letterlijke en practicale verklaring van het Nieuwe Testament*, vii.

109. These series were titled *Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament* and *Korte verklaring der Heilige Schrift*, respectively.

110. Bavinck, *Godsdienst en godgeleerdheid*, 23. See section 2.4.

111. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 219–42.

112. Bavinck's own excuse was that preaching was time-consuming because he was not allowed to travel on Sundays and thus would have to stay in a congregation that he visited for a whole weekend. See Van Deursen, "Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit," 29.

113. Of course, this is not to suggest that Bavinck ignored Scripture completely in his later works. See, e.g., Bavinck, "Biblical and Religious Psychology," which is a translation of the first part of Bavinck, *Bijbelsche en religieuze psychologie*.

and that of the office of the magistracy in article 36 in connection with the newer views on the relationship of church and state.¹¹⁴

Remarkably, the comments on articles 29 and 36 indicate a direction in which the change of the articles should go, but the comment on the articles on Scripture does not indicate such a direction. So, by the end of his life, Bavinck puts the problem about which he has thought so much but that he has never sufficiently solved on the table of the synod. The burden that he has carried individually is now (again) a task for the church as a whole and, sooner than perhaps expected, he himself will be able to and be called to lay his tired head down.

There is something odd in it that this great theologian is better known for his struggle with the problem of Scripture than as a steward of divine mysteries from the Scriptures.

3.7 Difficulties

In the Bavinck Archives, among documents from the second decade of the twentieth century, I found a piece of scrap paper with the heading “Moeilijkheden” (Difficulties). The handwriting is Bavinck’s. There is no explicit indication whether Bavinck lists the difficulties on a specific occasion or just for himself. Although it is theoretically possible that Bavinck only summarizes the difficulties that have been brought forward by somebody else, it seems more plausible that he himself perceives something difficult in the various items in the list:

Difficulties

Days of creation.

Decay and death before humankind.

Creation of humankind: Adam, Eve

The Lord *planted* a garden

Created Eve from a rib of Adam.

Chronology of the Bible, in connection with those of China, India, Egypt,

Babylon

Standstill of the sun

Balaam’s ass

Jonah in the fish

Daniel

Touching of the bones and becoming alive

Unclean spirits in the swine

Daniel

Parousia—time¹¹⁵

114. Bavinck, “Rapport inzake de voorstellen der particuliere synodes rakende de belijdenis,” 154.

115. Bavinck, “Moeilijkheden” (piece of scrap paper; italics replace original underlining).

This list could have many different headings, depending on the person who wrote it: “Things that cause great amazement,” “Things that demonstrate how exalted Scripture is,” “Things that need to be explained symbolically,” “Things that no right-minded person believes anymore,” et cetera. For Bavinck, the list contains “Difficulties.” He does not put Scripture behind himself once and forever, but he does also not piously and cheerfully revel in Scripture.

Although it would go too far to discuss each listed item individually, it is worth to see how some of them fit in the larger context of his writings. Bavinck begins his list with the days of creation. In the *Reformed Dogmatics* he rather extensively discussed the interpretation of Genesis 1 in relationship to scientific research of his days. He did not suggest that he had a fitting answer to all questions, but he ended in a hopeful tone: “So as Christians and as theologians we await with some confidence the *certain* results of the natural sciences. Theology has nothing to fear from thorough, multifaceted research.”¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, here on the piece of scrap paper, the days of creation are listed under the heading “Difficulties.”

“Decay and death before humankind” constitute a second difficulty for Bavinck. In contrast to the days of creation and the next items on the list, the question of decay and death before humankind is not explicitly addressed in the Bible in the first chapters of Genesis. What is said, is that God sees that it is good what he has called into being, that man will die if he eats from the tree, and, when he has eaten, that the earth is cursed because of him and will bring forth thorns and thistles. From this, one may conclude that death and destruction are consequences of the fall of humankind rather than that they precede it.

In his dogmatics, Bavinck stated that in a sense creation itself was infralapsarian: when God created the world, he took the fall already into account; the state of primordial harmony was of such a kind that it could be subjected to futility and decay in the event of human transgression.¹¹⁷ So, Bavinck did not see the emergence of thorns and thistles, et cetera, as a new act of special creation after the fall, but rather explained it with help of Charles Darwin: without good care of human beings existing species became degraded and adulterated: “The possibility of such adulteration has been raised beyond any doubt by modern science.” Animals who now eat meat possibly did not do so before: “Darwin . . . has demonstrated that animals can grow accustomed to a changed diet, citing various examples to this effect.” Bavinck concluded: “Scripture in any case is much more rational than what is sometimes peddled in the name of science.”¹¹⁸ While in the case of the days of creation, Bavinck awaited the certain results of the natural science “with some confidence,” here he trusted that he had Darwin and rationality already at his side.

116. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:507 #278.

117. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:182 #340.

118. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:181 #340. Bavinck refers to Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*.

However, the piece of scrap paper suggests that he is no longer fully convinced by what he wrote in the dogmatics: maybe he was able to explain the appearance of death and decay *after* the fall in scientific terms,¹¹⁹ but scientists also speak about death and decay *before* human beings appeared on the earth. How to relate this scientific insight to the belief that God has created everything good is a difficulty that he has not solved yet.

Which problem does Bavinck perceive when he writes “Creation of humankind: Adam, Eve”? So far, he has consistently rejected the idea that human beings descend from animals, but maybe he feels that he has to reconsider his position: what the Bible says about the creation of humankind can perhaps be understood as a symbolic description of what actually happened in a long process of evolution. If Bavinck is indeed thinking in this direction, his difficulty becomes clear: in the Bible the entire human race descends from one specific couple, Adam and Eve, and it is not clear that this monogenistic view can be reconciled with an evolutionary account of human origins. This is not an isolated problem for Bavinck, but affects much of his theological system:

The unity of the human race, as Scripture teaches, is . . . not a matter of indifference, as is sometimes claimed, but on the contrary of the utmost importance: it is the presupposition of religion and morality. The solidarity of the human race, original sin, the atonement in Christ, the universality of the kingdom of God, the catholicity of the church, and the love of neighbor—these all are grounded in the unity of humankind.¹²⁰

The next difficulty that Bavinck mentions is: “The Lord *planted* a garden.” In his dogmatics, he discussed the Garden of Eden in relation to the question of the original abode of humankind. Although he knew that the church fathers did not seek to determine the location of paradise exactly and often explained it allegorically, he himself assumed on the basis of Genesis 2 that Eden was located in Asia. For him, this was not at odds with science: although anthropologists suggested all kinds of countries as the cradle of humanity, in the end most scientific data pointed towards a location in Asia: “Scripture and science unite in the witness that it is in Asia that we must look for the original abode of man.”¹²¹

However, even if the location of the garden is not a problem, one can be surprised that Scripture says that the LORD God *planted* a garden (Gen. 2:8), as if he were a human being. The emphasis on the scrap paper indeed suggests

119. An intrinsic weakness of Bavinck’s explanation seems to me to be that it is built on the assumption that the presence or absence of care by a few human beings can affect the course of evolution of animals and plants all over the earth in a relatively short period of time.

120. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:526 #282.

121. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:529 #283. In *Our Reasonable Faith*, 186–87, he speaks in a similar way: “In modern times scholarship has come to reinforce this teaching of Scripture. . . . Ethnology, the history of civilization, philology, all point to Asia as the continent where once the cradle of mankind stood.” One can only speculate about the question how Bavinck would have dealt with the current scientific insight that humankind comes “out of Africa.”

that Bavinck sees the difficulty in the word “planted.” Still, the anthropomorphic expression as such can hardly be his problem. In his dogmatics he took the anthropomorphisms in Scripture positively: “All creatures, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, furnish names with which to somewhat bring home to us the greatness of God.”¹²² He also indicated when God planted the garden: on the sixth day of creation, which he supposed to have been longer than our normal days because the first two chapters of Genesis mention so many events that happened on it.¹²³ However, Bavinck is now probably entertaining a further reinterpretation of the days of creation, from “historical days of unusual length” to “symbolic days” that do not reflect one specific moment or period in history.¹²⁴ If so, God “planting” or bringing into being of a physical garden at a geographical location becomes difficult to imagine.

The next item in the list is the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib, which is related in Genesis 2:21–22. In *Our Reasonable Faith* these verses inspired Bavinck to write beautiful words about the relationship between man and woman,¹²⁵ but he did not discuss the question whether they should be understood as a literal or only as a literary description of the origin of the woman. However, he critically discussed the theory of evolution and concluded:

One of the proponents of the evolutionary view admitted it bluntly: the choice is between evolutionary descent or miracle; since miracle is absolutely

122. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:101 #179. Gen. 2:8 is wanting in Bavinck’s fairly extensive list of anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible (*Reformed Dogmatics* 2:100–1 #178), but probably for no specific reason.

123. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:500 #276.

124. February 2, 1917, Bavinck defends among the professors of the Free University the statement: “Since the reliable results of the newer natural and historical science are incompatible with the common exegesis of the biblical creation story, it is necessary to revise this exegesis especially with regard to the time, the length, and the order of the work of creation.” Quoted in Harinck, Van der Kooi, and Vree, “*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*,” 77 n84.

In 1919 he writes: “Gen. 1–2 [are written] from a human point of view. Six tableaux (Augustine).” Harinck, Van der Kooi, and Vree, “*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*,” [60] (page 17 of Bavinck’s manuscript that is presented in this work). In his *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck explicitly said that the church has not condemned Augustine’s non-historical interpretation of the days of creation as a heresy, but nevertheless felt that Augustine’s interpretation and even more some modern variations on it do “violence to the text of Holy Scripture.” See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:479–500 ##271–76 (esp. pages 483, 499).

What Bavinck writes in 1919 seems me to go a step further than what he said in 1917. I can imagine that the statement in 1917 in fact felt too much as an adjustment of exegesis to science rather than as an attempt to read Genesis on its own terms. If Bavinck had been able to make clear that a symbolic interpretation in line with Augustine does not do less but more justice to the text of Scripture than a historical interpretation (be it with six times 24 hours or six longer periods of time), he might have overcome a problem that was significant for him. However, we simply do not have a text from him that makes this clear. As it stands now, we do not know whether the short note of 1919 indicates that he has overcome the problem or that he is only more willing than before to accept some compromise between Scripture and science.

125. See Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 189–90.

impossible [from a scientific point of view] we are compelled to take the first position. And such an admission demonstrates that the theory of the descent of man from lower animal forms does not rest on careful scientific investigation but is rather the postulate of a materialistic or pantheistic philosophy. . . . [It is not a hypothesis to explain facts, but it devises facts to confirm a hypothesis.]¹²⁶

The last item that I will discuss here briefly is “Balaam’s ass.” At a meeting of modern theologians in 1912 A. Binnerts stated:

Whether [Bavinck’s] acceptance of Scripture as a historically infallible, inspired book is wholeheartedly?

I doubt.

The famous speaking ass of Balaam is at odds with [Bavinck’s] organic worldview. And to assume that the last verse of Psalm 137—“Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”—is inspired by the Holy Spirit should not be easy for someone who has sensed the rustling of the living spirit of God in his own soul.¹²⁷

In the postscript to his lecture Binnert repeated his point:

Prof. Bavinck knows the system of God’s acts that he calls “special revelation” from the Bible. If the Bible is not longer historically infallible and inspired—if Prof. Bavinck does no longer consider to be true that Balaam’s ass spoke and that the last verse of Psalm 137 was inspired by God’s Holy Spirit, then from his position he will no longer be able to say anything certain about the system of God’s acts and the entire ingeniously structured building will collapse.¹²⁸

Bavinck has not simply laid this aside as unfair criticism, but has put Balaam’s ass on his list of difficulties.¹²⁹ Perhaps the building of his theology is shaking indeed.

3.8 Evaluation

In 1883 Bavinck understood that the temple of theology was approaching its completion (cf. 2.8). Superficially seen, that completion came very near in Kuyper’s *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* and his own *Reformed Dogmatics* in the nineties. But more and more it becomes clear that he has not overcome

126. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 196. The words between brackets are missing in the English edition, but are found in the Dutch original: *Magnalia Dei*, 211–12.

127. Binnerts, *Nieuw-gereformeerde en moderne theologie*, 20. For Psalm 137:9, cf. sections 4.10 and 5.7.

128. Binnerts, *Nieuw-gereformeerde en moderne theologie*, 29–30.

129. In 1926 the synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands discussed the question whether the serpent in Gen. 3 spoke with a physically audible voice and the question has been raised what Bavinck would have said about this question. In absence of a clearer answer, I assume that he would have called the speaking of the serpent just as Balaam’s ass a “difficulty.”

some structural difficulties.¹³⁰ In section 2.1 we quoted Berkhof who said: “After 1900 Bavinck increasingly felt that his theological direction was leading to a dead end. . . . He felt increasingly that the modern period needed a much more vigorous renewal of theology than he himself had produced or was able to produce.”

For the sake of clarity, Berkhof’s words deserve some nuancing. Bavinck is deeply aware of difficulties and problems, over against which he remains standing in faith, but which he does not overcome theologically. However, I do not remember a passage of Bavinck in which he himself fully admits that his theological direction is leading to a dead end. Still, we as readers may get this feeling when we reflect further on his writings.

For example, Bavinck did not come to the point that he accepted that human beings descended from other animals. He was not convinced that science had proven it.¹³¹ However, science was also not proving the contrary and given his growing openness to a more symbolic interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis, one might expect that sooner or later he would have come to see the need for positive theological reflection on human descent. However, given his consistent rejection of the attempts of others at this point and his own strong emphasis on good creation and fall, the unity of the human race, the idea that grace restores (originally good) nature,¹³² not only in his theology proper but also in his publications on education, morals, social relationships, et cetera, it seems that some simple alteration of the building of his theology and worldview would not suffice then.

Moreover, Bavinck was keen to argue that God does not only work in supernatural way but also and even primarily works through natural causes. However, if there seems at least to be a possibility that even the existence of human beings can be explained in a natural, scientific way, the question becomes the more pregnant why natural causes alone would not be enough. If the world cannot be understood without God, it makes sense to believe in God, but if more and more of the world can be explained in a natural way without refer-

130. The text published in Harinck, Van der Kooi, and Vree, “*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekend*” is mainly a list of problems, questions, and disputed issues. To be sure, Bavinck is still “Reformed” in that he does not move to a different theological camp or positively develop a new theological position. He is not building a new temple now that the old one is shaking.

131. See, e.g., Bavinck, “Evolution,” esp. 115.

132. For Bavinck’s “grace restores nature” motif, see especially Veenhof, *The Relationship between Nature and Grace According to H. Bavinck*; Dutch: *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 345–65. Whether this is the central motif of Bavinck’s theology, is a matter of debate. For critical voices, see Gleason, “The Centrality of the *Unio Mystica* in the Theology of Herman Bavinck,” especially chapter one, and Hielema, “Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption,” e.g., 286: “Summarizing Bavinck’s theology as one which emphasizes ‘grace restores nature’ is reductionist; it limits God’s work of grace to restoration and it highlights the creation in ways which do not do justice to Bavinck’s themes of glorification and the priority of the pearl over the leaven.”

ence to God, the question becomes pregnant as to why and whether one should still assume God's existence and see his hand in and behind the natural causes.

One can rightly hesitate to draw all these implications and conclusions so quickly. But one can also speak too long about "difficulties," without taking steps to go further. Perhaps it is best to accept that the shaking temple with its structural difficulties collapses. In its radical extremity Bavinck could heroically resist the modern worldview, but in a more indirect way it still worked corrosively for his type of theology.

O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. (Ps. 79:1 ESV)

Bavinck himself remained standing. He kept the faith. There is no indication to the contrary. But his theology seems to lead us to a dead end. This raises the question: why would one keep to a faith for which one has no arguments and why would one encourage others to keep the faith and try to communicate it to a next generation? Is it not better to take some time for grief and mourning, remembering the good days with Bavinck and the beautiful parts of his arguments, and then go home, robbed of illusion, in a strange mood because this theological agony has come to an end?

3.9 Epilogue

In the garden a chick was weeping. The gardener came along and asked: "Why are you weeping?" The chick answered: "How could I else but weep? My eggshell is broken." The gardener tried to comfort the chick: "The eggshell broke because you have grown too large for it. Don't weep but rejoice!" The chick stopped weeping and the gardener went on. After some time, the gardener saw from a distance that the chick was building a new and larger eggshell. He hurried to the chick, but it just climbed into the eggshell and closed the last gap from within. The gardener cried: "What have you done, dear chick?" The chick did not answer. The gardener left, weeping.

Bavinck was a pious man and he has produced an impressive theological oeuvre. Nevertheless, it leaves the impression that he was unequal to the modern worldview that he sought to answer. For me, he symbolizes the slow but steady movement of Christianity and the church into a plausibility crisis. Abiding in his mental world is like abiding in a glorious (though sometimes scary) dream. At some point, the dream world runs to its limits and, whether one likes it or not, one may awake from the dream. It occurs to me that Bavinck entered the stage where the dream begins to collapse, but did not wake up and come to the full awareness that his beautiful Christian worldview was but a dream. However, once one has come to this awareness, one can also look with new eyes to the modern, post-Christian worldview. Is it really a threatening monster and not rather the voice of someone who tries to wake me up?

The opening essay analyzed the crisis of Christianity and the church in post-Christian Amsterdam as a threefold plausibility crisis, having an intellectual, an existential, and a moral dimension (affecting “head,” “heart,” and “hands” respectively). Regarding the intellectual dimension it said among others: “This intellectual crisis is not to be understood as if all people are outspoken atheists who willfully take position against Christianity” (1.2).

This probably holds true today as much as it did when I wrote these words down in 2005. Still, outspoken atheism seems to be on the rise. In 2006 Richard Dawkins published his *The God Delusion*, which soon became a bestseller. Although Dawkins writes from Britain and sometimes seems to address Christian America rather than post-Christian Amsterdam, his message has also been picked up in the Netherlands and has been popularized on billboards as: “Probably, there is no god; dare to think for yourself, and enjoy this life!”¹³³ At the end of the preface to the paperback edition of his book, Dawkins himself combines the three elements of (a) God’s non-existence, (b) thinking for oneself, and (c) good life:

People, when given the right encouragement to think for themselves about all the information now available, very often turn out *not* to believe in God and to lead fulfilled and satisfied—indeed, *liberated*—lives.¹³⁴

This sentence strikes me as the voice of someone who wants to wake us up. It is an invitation that should not be ignored. Even though Dawkins’ book is perhaps not the most detailed and nuanced discussion of the arguments pro and con “the God hypothesis” (as he calls it), I see two reasons to recommend it: 1. the book helps one to understand the plausibility crisis of Christianity and the church; 2. Dawkins has a positive, liberating message, which is worth of being heard. Let me elaborate these reasons briefly.

1. *Dawkins’ book helps one to understand the plausibility crisis of the church.* As said, the opening essay discussed the plausibility crisis of the church under the headings “head,” “heart,” and “hands.”

Under the heading *head*, I remarked that “there seems to be no sensible reason to believe that God exists.” This is well-illustrated in *The God Delusion*. Dawkins counters many arguments for God’s existence with ease. Not everybody may like Dawkins hostile attitude towards religion and not everybody may give support for atheistic billboards, but many a person may agree that the reasons for God are much weaker than the arguments against his existence. Christians and other religious people who think that they have sensible reasons to believe in God do well to read Dawkins, in order to discover why others are not too impressed by these reasons and maybe they will begin to see flaws in their own arguments.

133. See the website of Atheïstische Campagne, the organization that is responsible for these billboards.

134. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2007), 22 (italics original).

As for the *heart*, it is clear that although Dawkins puts high value on rational thought he is not a one-sided rationalist. As is clear from the quote from his preface, he hopes and trusts that people by thinking clearly will find existential fulfillment and satisfaction. Compare this to Christians who want to believe what they are supposed to believe but actually doubt it or who want to pray like they ought to pray but actually feel that they are talking into emptiness. There seems to be an existential gap between what Christianity promises and what it actually delivers, a gap that is at least much smaller in post-Christian thought in general and in atheism in particular.

As for the *hands*, I said that the church “does not succeed in offering a positive morality with which one can make a difference in every-day life. The church seems to take and give between droll morals and permissiveness” (1.2). This is amply illustrated throughout the second half of *The God Delusion*. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, and in Christian groups today Dawkins finds much that is shocking and disgusting and against his moral sense. On the other hand, when it comes to positive Christian moral principles, these are in fact so general that one can easily agree with them and keep to them without believing in God.

In sum, *The God Delusion* can help to articulate the plausibility crisis that the church has to face in Amsterdam. A Christian student of theology in Cairo said to me: “I cannot imagine that somebody does not believe in God or can do without religion. Religion is the most basic thing in my life.” If this student would like to help the church in Amsterdam to overcome its crisis, I would recommend him to read *The God Delusion*, neither in an attempt to convert him to atheism nor as an apologetic exercise how to refute such a book, but just to help him understand why for many a person life without God is much more plausible than what the church has to offer. Of course, I would also emphasize that not every post-Christian is as outspoken as Dawkins and certainly not so militant.

2. *Dawkins has a positive, liberating message, which is worth of being heard.* Dawkins is militant. Still, I hear more in his book than just enmity against religion. Here is a man who is deeply concerned about the fact that so many people delude themselves and others with religious ideas. If you are a religious believer, Dawkins may at first look like an enemy and the first reaction might be: how can I defend myself against his attacks? But Dawkins does not want to kill you. He uses force, not against you, but to wake you up from your dream, to break open the jail in which you are imprisoned. He offers you a key to release yourself from your chains. He offers weapons and exercise to withstand irrational religious thoughts that can have such an impact on your life. You may take it for granted that your religion asks you to believe things without questioning although they seem to be untrue if you secretly think about them and tells you not to do a lot of things even though it is not clear why they are bad in themselves. However, Dawkins invites you not to take this for granted and to find a more fulfilling way of life.

This, at least, is the implicit invitation that I hear in the quote from his preface: “People, when given the right encouragement to think for themselves about all the information now available, very often turn out *not* to believe in God and to lead fulfilled and satisfied – indeed, *liberated* – lives.” This invitation deserves a serious hearing. As for me, I hope that readers take my seven-fold invitation in the opening essay seriously and that they do not judge it on the weaknesses in its presentation but on its real intention (cf. 1.8). If I hope that others will deal with me in this way, I should deal with Dawkins in the same way. Before pointing at the speck in his eye, let me first make sure that I have removed the log from my own eye and have seen the best in him (cf. Luke 6:31, 41).

When Dawkins calls for liberation from religious bondage, this should not be understood as a call for libertinism. He argues at length that atheism is not a license to sin, but a call to do the good for the sake of the good itself and not out of fear for God. One may disagree with some of his actual moral positions, but such differences of opinion also exist within and between religions.

To me, it appears that the problem of religious bondage is serious. The dark sides of religion may become especially visible in religiously inspired terrorism and wars, but there are also problematic aspects that are less visible and nonetheless real. For example, the virtue of faith as ultimate trust in the invisible God is often extended into an obligation to accept many things as true without questioning although it is not at all clear true that these things are really true. Doubt about these issues is seen at best as a pastoral problem and at worst as a sin about which one should feel guilty. Many religious groups have specific obligations and prohibitions that are seen as the will of God and non-observance of them is seen not just as disloyalty to the group but as a sin condemned by God. Obviously, many people go along with their religion rather well, but this should not hide the fact that others are really suffering from the bondage of it. And even if people do not suffer, they may be living in a cave, not knowing that they have never tasted the real light of the sun.

When Jesus came to proclaim liberty to captives, when the apostle Paul reminded the Galatians that they were called to live in freedom and that they should not burden themselves again by a yoke of religious bondage, it is clear that Dawkins’ ministry of liberation stands so much closer to them than religions that offer a burden of unfounded or even false truth claims and prescriptions in the name of God. Dawkins does not prescribe what one should believe, but invites one to think for oneself and to search for the truth. Searching for truth does not hold the promise that you will find it immediately, but it holds the promise that once you have found it, the truth will set you free.¹³⁵

Dawkins’ book and especially the quoted passage is a post-humorous invitation to Herman Bavinck. He would have saved himself much of his existential-intellectual struggle, yes, he would have been able “to be human in the full,

135. Cf. Luke 4:18; Gal. 5:1, 13; and John 8:32.

natural sense of that word,” if only he had been able to listen to this voice. Dawkins’ invitation is even more addressed at the first-person narrator in the opening essay who said: “Unfortunately for me, I do not yet have the guts to be truly honest to myself and to leave Christianity behind in order to become a post-Christian myself” (1.1). Dawkins seeks to reach this person and to help him come out as a post-Christian atheist: you do not have to suppress that inner counter-voice that all of your religion is based on misunderstanding, no, you are free to follow it and it will make you happy. Someone who looks for existential fulfillment and liberation in Christianity but does not find it there, should have the will and the guts to cast the net at the other side, in the waters of atheism.

3.10 Perspective

After all these good words for Dawkins, it is worthwhile to hear again what Bavinck says in *The Philosophy of Revelation*:

Whatever evolution thinks about the future, it affords no rest for the mind and none for the heart, because it takes away from us the Lord of the world.¹³⁶

This is a warning that even the modern worldview of evolution may not be able to bring our existential-intellectual struggle to an end. Or did Bavinck just portray the worldview of evolution in such dark colors in order to make his own worldview of revelation appear brighter? In fact, his suggestion that the Christian faith offers rest for mind and heart seems to be at odds with his own life struggle, which we have followed in the previous essay and in this.

We are torn between Bavinck and Dawkins. Shall we take away the Lord of the world and be happy or shall we cling to him, accept the struggle, and hope that this will lead to true rest?

One little point in the quotation from Bavinck may help us move beyond the dilemma. The Dutch original of the quote does not use the present but the perfect in the final phrase. A literal rendering would be: “. . . because it has taken away the Lord of the world.” Maybe unconsciously, Bavinck uses words that are derived from John 20, where Mary Magdalene explains why she is weeping near the open grave: “Because they have taken away my Lord.”¹³⁷

Now it is certainly true that there are evolutionists who would like to get rid of the Lord of the world. But for them it is sufficient that the Lord lies dead in the grave. If the church wants to sit mourning near a dead Lord, then that is up to her. If the church wants to sit mourning near an old fashioned worldview, near the ruins of a collapsed temple of theology, then she can feel free to do so.

However, if the Lord has not been taken away, but has gone away himself, maybe because his church should not cling to the old, then he may appear again

136. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 295. See section 3.5.

137. John 20:13 (KJV). “Because” is left out in modern versions, but the Dutch equivalent “omdat” is used in the Statenvertaling, with which Bavinck was familiar.

to the church in the shape of the gardener and call her by her name. His word will break through the eggshell in which she had locked herself up. She will see and sing:

Thou callst, o Lord, new life to bound,
a garden blooms round th' open grave,
and stalks are rustling on the ground
where seed itself for dying gave.¹³⁸

In the following essays,¹³⁹ I will explore this possibility of (re)gaining perspective on the living God in and beyond the post-Christian condition. To be clear, the invitation to go as a post-post-Christian on the way to the living God cannot promise higher satisfaction than atheism. The attraction of both traditional Christianity and post-Christianity will remain and that double attraction can tear a human being so much that hardly any perspective remains on the small and sometimes barely traceable way beyond the post-Christian crisis (cf. 1.7). However, when sight on the way is found, it is clear that the freedom that Dawkins offers can only be appreciated as a temporary phase: it is a liberating affirmation that a non-existent god does not exist and that bad religion is bad religion indeed. It delivers *from* all kinds of religious abuses and patterns of thought that run into a dead end, but the question what this freedom is *for* remains unanswered.

As for Bavinck, the next essays will not painstakingly explain where I agree with him and where I differ from him. However, I see a double discontinuity and a threefold continuity. Bavinck tried to remain standing, to build a dam in order not to be swept away in the stream of the modern worldview. Although such a dam may work for individuals and some communities, the risk is real that the dam will break one day. Moreover, it denies the value of the post-Christian condition as a break with the negative aspects of religion. And most important, it does not help to overcome the post-Christian condition. So, the first discontinuity is that I am more willing to accept the modern worldview and the post-Christian condition, and the second discontinuity is that I even seek to move beyond it, to a truly post-post-Christian position.

Still, I also want to emphasize threefold continuity with catholic-Reformed Christianity of which Bavinck is a representative: 1. Not everybody goes through the same existential-intellectual struggle between Christian and post-Christian thought and some may develop from a traditional Christian position to the post-post-Christian perspective to which I invite in a much more gradual way. 2. I do not want to suggest that my position is completely original. Apart from differences, the attentive reader will also see many a continuity with Bavinck. 3. Most important, gradually the understanding may grow that the

138. My translation of Jan Wit, "Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren" (hymn). See further section 6.5.

139. When I refer here to the "following essays," this includes the second part of the opening essay, which can also be read before the fourth essay or after the fifth. See section 1.3 note 6.

experience of the church running into a dead end, into the plausibility crisis caused by the post-Christian context and, after that, the experience of seeking and even somehow finding perspective on the living God beyond the post-Christian condition is not an experience that means a break with Christianity but rather an experience that is best understood in terms offered by the Christian tradition. The Christian faith itself may offer the language of finding life beyond a dead end.

In the end, neither continuity nor discontinuity is a goal in itself. They only count insofar as they bring us closer to the truth. They are only means that can help us to find the narrow path to the living God.

At the end section 3.8 we saw signs that the temple of Reformed theology was showing cracks in the last years of Bavinck's life and was about to collapse. We do not attempt to save it, but sadly see how it has come down. The temple is destroyed. That is the starting point for the next essays.

The deepest hope is the hope that does not deny death, but that dares to see beyond death. When we return to the area of the temple of theology, it is neither to see whether the temple is still standing after all, nor to mourn what is past, nor to turn time back and restore everything to its old glory, but in the hope that a modest new structure may be possible and that perhaps there is still something of value between the broken fragments. Maybe all we can do is just organize some of the pieces, so that a space is created to meet in the open air in order to worship the living God.

*To be a theologian is
to live and engage
in a conflict of worldviews
in order to (re)gain perspective
on the living God.*

4 | Searching for Truth On Theological Method

In many respects I am still a seeker, as most are. In general, theology must cut a sorry figure for all who stand outside it, especially because most more or less know how it is *not* possible and only some . . . claim to know how it should be done.

—Herman Bavinck to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, August 7, 1888

Despite the general increase of attention for religion there is an academic reserve regarding the discipline of dogmatics. For a wide audience, dogmatics is equal to inflexibility and imposed authority. Within the university, the difference between empirical and normative studies plays an important role. . . .

Moreover, there is an ongoing differentiation of disciplines, accents, and names within the faculty of theology. . . . The face of dogmatics displays a very diverse and fragmented image. . . .

Which function do you ascribe to dogmatics or dogmatic theology? Does the discipline have a number of recognized methods? Which criteria do you use yourself? What is the appropriate literary genre?

—Invitation to a symposium at VU University Amsterdam in 2008

Theology suffers from a double plausibility crisis. Not only does it share in the general plausibility crisis of Christianity and the church as sketched in the opening essay, but its status as a scholarly discipline is also deeply doubted. This doubt is not only felt and expressed by outsiders, but also by theologians themselves, including me. Still, I do not despair. In this essay I will explain the most important methodological considerations that underlie the present study and will answer the question of how I seek to practice theology. The essay is structured as a tenfold invitation to search for truth: the first seven sections constitute the invitation proper, the eighth is an illustration of what is said in the seventh, and the last two sections are invitations to speak the truth that has been searched for.¹

1. In the two previous essays I listened to Herman Bavinck, but from now on I will speak for myself. In the second part of the opening essay I have also already spoken for myself and I see that part indeed as the beginning of the second half of this study (cf. section 1.3 note 6). The present essay will speak about “existential-intellectual conversation” with Bavinck in the two previous essays. Although that conversation implicitly goes on and I will refer to Bavinck from time to time, this essay itself is not primarily intended as a conversation with Bavinck about theological method.

It may rather be called a methodological monologue. Inspiration for writing such a monologue in which I clarify my theological method came from the symposium “Leer in discredit? De plaats en functie van de dogmatiek” [Doctrine Discredited?: The Place and Function of Theolo-

Part One: Searching for Truth

4.1 Search for Truth Concerning the Living God

I invite myself and others to understand theology as a search for truth concerning the living God and his relationship to the world and to humankind. From one perspective, it almost goes without saying that this is what theology is about and it may even sound tautological to call theology a search for truth concerning the living God. However, from another perspective, this understanding of theology is seen as so problematic that theology should either redefine itself or abolish itself, at least as a scholarly discipline.

For many scholars it is simply a matter of definition that God cannot be the object of their research. In their view scholars as scholars cannot directly participate in the quest for God. They can study the source texts (scriptures, creeds, etc.) of a religious tradition, but God himself falls outside their scholarly paradigm. Of course, they may meet the character “God” in their source texts, but in their scholarly work they lack the tools and methods to discover and decide whether the character “God” in these texts really refers to the living God,² and so they keep silent about this final question.

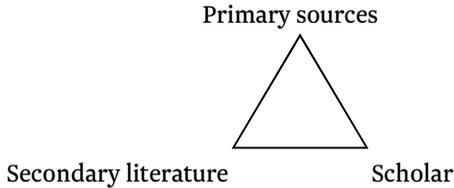
gy], organized by VISOR (VU Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society) at VU University Amsterdam July 3, 2008, on the occasion of C. van der Kooi’s inauguration as a professor of Western Systematic Theology. The second quotation at the beginning of this essay has been translated from the invitation to this symposium. During the symposium, seven leading Dutch theologians (A. van de Beek, E. Borgman, A. van der Kooi, H. M. Vroom, B. Kamphuis, J. Muis, and H. Veldhuis) explained how they practice dogmatics or systematic theology. Since their statements did not converge into one shared method and I did not recognize myself fully in one of the contributions, I felt that the time had come when I myself should answer the question that had occupied me for many years, namely how I can and want to practice true theology in a scholarly and sound way.

Because I felt that I had already theologized in practice in what is now the opening essay of this study, I decided to write this methodological monologue partly in reflection on that essay, thus creating a kind of internal dialog within this work. The section on existential-intellectual conversation had already been written earlier, while the section on Psalm 42–43 is a relatively late addition to the present essay. The idea of the two triangles in the first section came to mind while teaching a course on Research Principles and Methods at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, fall 2009. The trigger to express my theological thoughts in invitations springs from a lecture by David F. Ford for the dogmatics department of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) in Kampen on April 26, 2001.

As for the statement that theology’s status as a scholarly discipline is deeply doubted, see also the back cover of Van den Brink, *Een publieke zaak*: “The presence of theology in its original meaning of ‘speaking about God’ is no longer taken for granted at universities today. Being based on belief this type of theology allegedly does not meet the academic criteria of scholarship or science.” Van de Brink’s study offers readers of Dutch a broader orientation in questions regarding the relationship between science, religion, and theology on which the present essay and the next one can only touch briefly.

2. For my usage of the term “the living God,” see section 1.5 and also the end of section 4.8.

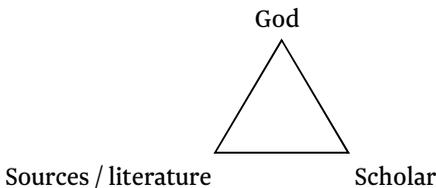
I myself work with two basic paradigms, which I call the historical one and the theological one. The first one understands scholarly research as a process of interaction between primary sources, secondary literature, and the scholar herself. This can be illustrated with the following triangle:



All angles are important: neither is it acceptable to base oneself as a scholar on secondary literature only, without going to the primary sources, nor will one gain maximal insight in the sources if one ignores what has already been observed about them in the secondary literature, nor should one limit one's own role to gathering what the secondary literature says about the primary sources; however, when all three angles interact, something new may be born that takes scholarship a step further.

Although I find this historical paradigm helpful, I also see the need to go beyond it. Society does not only need scholars who can study the sources afresh, but also scholars who can deal with questions that cannot be answered by studying sources only. Preeminent among this latter type of questions is the quest for God. As long as we keep to the historical paradigm in theology, our search for truth concerning the living God indeed stops at the character "God" in our primary sources and our final question remains unanswered.

I can use the historian's triangle as a tool, but my main paradigm is better visualized with a different triangle:



In this paradigm, scholarly theological research is understood as a process of interaction between God himself, source texts and secondary literature, and the scholar herself. My invitation to understand theology as a search for truth concerning the living God and his relationship to the world and to humankind implies an invitation to practice theology according to this paradigm. But let me immediately add a word of warning to this invitation. It is one thing to state a paradigm and another thing to make it operational for oneself and again an-

other thing to get work according to this paradigm accepted in the academic world. It may sound great but be unmanageable in practice.

Such problems should not entirely deter us. It was a major struggle for me to put the first essay on paper, but it is there. Moreover, it passed through a double, blind, refereeing process and has been published in a volume from a reputable academic publishing house. So my experience with the opening essay is that working and writing according to the theological paradigm is challenging but not impossible. Because of this positive experience, one of the goals of the present essay is to elucidate the implicit methodological choices in the first essay.

Still, I can imagine the criticism that I am broadening the definition and changing the paradigm of scholarship too lightly in order to include the search for God in it. The main objection against the invitation of this essay is probably simply this: God can or should not be part of scholarly research. This objection can be put forward for various reasons, four of which I will discuss in this section: one may maintain

- (a) that God does not exist, or
- (b) that God is too holy to make him an object of research, or
- (c) that we cannot say anything about God with certainty, or
- (d) that God becomes a science stopper if we allow for him in our research.

As for (a)—that God does not exist—, it is perhaps a matter of fact that God-according-to-some-definition does not and cannot exist, but I am also not interested in speaking about God-according-to-that-definition, but rather about the living God. In the opening essay I have not proven that the living God does exist, but have noticed that much atheistic thought, valid as it may be in itself, does also not disprove the existence of the living God. I will develop this line of thought in the next essay. For now, it seems fair to say that the debate about God's existence has not yet been decided, but that it kills the debate or at least its quality if one forbids that serious academic work is done on it.

As for (b)—that God is too holy to make him an object of research—, this idea is probably based on a one-sided picture of research. If we think about research as killing an animal, laying it on the dissecting table, cutting it open, and putting it part by part under the microscope, then indeed it is not only extremely impious but also utterly impossible to make the living God an object of research: we cannot catch and kill him.³ However, in many scientific and scholarly methods the object of research is not caught and killed, but studied alive. Moreover, in my understanding of theology, the research focus is also not so much on God in himself as on God in his relationship to the world and to humankind. Indeed, we seek to (re)gain perspective on the living God in order to be able to live on the way to him, but we do not expect to see him face to face already in this life. In fact, the emphasis on God's holiness can lead us in two directions: it can make us stop thinking about the relationship between the

3. Unless, of course, he becomes man and does not try to escape death.

Holy One and us and thus lead to practical atheism on pious grounds, or it can make us reflect on the relationship between the Holy One and us and thus stimulate theology. In this study I opt for the latter.

As for (c)—the idea that we cannot say anything about God with certainty—, this objection can partly be answered along the lines of the discussion of (a) and (b). In short, uncertainty can make us stop searching, or make us the more eager to search, in order to gain at least some more certainty.

As for (d)—the idea that God becomes a science stopper if we allow for him in our research—, this point indeed deserves some attention. Using God as a “science stopper” means that when we try to explain a phenomenon or an event and find it difficult to give a sufficient natural explanation, we say: “God has done this, and thus further research for a natural explanation is superfluous or even an act of unbelief.” Many scholars and scientists, both believers and unbelievers, deem it wrong to use God as a science stopper. They adhere to methodological naturalism, which means that they only allow for natural explanations in scientific and scholarly work. In many disciplines this works well and makes it possible that persons with varying religious persuasions work together.

Methodological naturalism becomes problematic, however, if one works in an area in which one suspects or believes that some events actually did not happen in a natural but in a supernatural way—for example, miraculous events about which the Bible reports. In such cases, should scholars indeed only allow for natural explanations and reject supernatural explanations as unscientific, or does their work actually become more open-minded if they allow both for natural and supernatural explanations (and maybe a combination of them)?

I will discuss this issue more fully in the next essay, but let me briefly state my position here. Theoretically, I see the possibility of developing a philosophy of science that allows for divine interventions and for supernatural explanations in scientific/scholarly work under specific conditions, without falling into an anything-goes-attitude and an uncontrolled use of God as a science stopper. However, actually, I deem it more likely that God’s relationship to the world does not imply divine interventions in the natural order and so there is no need to see God as a (source of) supernatural explanation. How I then seek to take biblical miracle stories seriously will become clear in the last two sections of the next essay.

For now, it will be evident that I neither defend using God as a science stopper nor actively oppose methodological naturalism. However, if, as is often claimed, personal faith in God and methodological naturalism in scientific and scholarly work can go together well in one person, it is reasonable that we allow for a discipline that can reflect on such a position more deeply than all individual scientists and scholars can do for themselves—this reflection on the relationship between God and the world and humankind is exactly what is at the heart of theology. In short, point (d) is not an argument against my understanding of theology, but rather in favor of it.

Now that we have faced some of the objections against the invitation to understand theology as a search for truth, more specifically as a search for truth concerning the living God and his relationship to the world and to humankind, let us also consider some of the promises and prospects of such a conception of theology.

First, understanding theology as a search for truth does justice to the object of theology as discussed in the opening essay (1.5). Here, both the words *search* and *truth* need to be emphasized. If the desire of the heart is the desire for the living God, only the *truth* about the true God can really fulfill the heart. Ideas that are not actually true may be attractive for some time, but when their untruth becomes apparent, they leave the heart empty. This is not to say that it is always easy to know the truth about God and many would agree that it is impossible for human beings to come to a full knowledge of the true God during our life here on earth. Seeing God face to face, knowing him as we have been known, is not something that is given to us here and now. Therefore, theology is a *search* for truth. The theologian is a wayfarer, not somebody who has already reached the end of the way.

Second, understanding theology as a search for truth makes it an honest practice, even if it fails to achieve its goal. The variety of positions that have been taken by theologians, both past and present, and the sometimes very outspoken truth claims including condemnations of other positions, may have led to the impression that theologians are not so much concerned about the truth as about their cherished beliefs and ideas. Over against this impression, theologians can enhance their reputation and integrity if they understand their work as a search for truth and are open to correction if the truth happens to be different from what they had thought. People who honestly search for truth keep their honor if they fail to find the truth or only come to a very partial understanding of it.

Third, understanding theology as a search for truth makes it at least initially clear why it is good that theology is practiced as a scholarly discipline in universities or similar institutions. Without being too idealistic about universities, they are certainly places that can remind theology of its task to search for truth rather than to convey to opinions that (some group in) society wants to hear and they can offer (at least relative) freedom for this search. Even if theology admits beforehand that the nature of its object probably prevents that it will ever come to a full understanding of the truth of its object, this is not a reason to exclude it from the university and to consider thinking about God as a matter of private opinion only. Of course, thinking about God is a personal issue and it should not become an exclusive privilege of people within the academic world. However, academic theologians can supply the market with well-informed opinions that have gone through a process of trying several paths of thought and of discovering which ones run into dead ends and which hold the prospect of coming closer to the truth of God.

In short, the quest for God is too important to be treated as a matter of personal opinion only. Certainly, it is a personal matter, but it is also a matter that deserves more reflection than each individual person can do for himself or herself. As a historian one can rightfully say: “Searching for God and speaking about God is not my specialism.” But as a theologian I see it as one of my core tasks to contribute to the quest for God. For this very reason, I have made it the purpose of the opening essay and this study in general to (re)gain perspective on the living God. If this raises methodological questions, let us neither deny them nor let them deter us from our quest, but let us face them as challenges that are to be overcome.

4.2 Search for Truth by Focusing on Ultimate Questions

The quest for truth concerning the living God and the aim to (re)gain perspective on the living God can be classified as ultimate or final questions. Such questions have usually been thought through by myriads of people, both professionally and personally. The exact wording of such questions may differ from person to person and from time to time, but it is clear that they recur again and again. A final answer to them is highly desired but hardly found. Of course, not everybody is attracted by every ultimate question and some people have learnt to stop posing them at all, but whoever attempts to review the literature sees how overwhelmingly much has been written that contributes to the answering of final questions in general and our question in particular.

Since giving ultimate answers to ultimate questions is so hard, two more modest directions can be chosen to do provisional work: seeking a preliminary answer to a final question and seeking a final answer to a preliminary question. It is not so easy to say which direction is the best. Quoting from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas wisely remarks: “The slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things.”⁴ This statement clearly favors the first direction. However, Aristotle himself is more balanced and after the quoted passage he continues that he is still going to treat a less lofty, more down-to-earth issue about which more certainty and completeness can be reached.

I see the advantages of both directions. I have written a master’s thesis that took the second direction—seeking a final answer to a preliminary question. As a modest contribution to the ultimate question of Jesus’ Messiahship, it dealt with Dead Sea Scroll 4Q521, of which only a few hundred words have been preserved. Most attention went to just two lines:

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I q.1 a.5. Cf. Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* 1.5 (645a 1–4). This dictum is also cited by Bavinck, “Creation or Development,” 853; Dutch: *Schepping of ontwikkeling* (1901), 14; and Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, 100 n67.

[For the hea]vens and the earth will listen to his anointed one
[and all that] is in them will not turn away from the commandments of the ho-
ly ones.⁵

Actually, the focus was still narrower. The main question was: who is or are meant by the phrase “his anointed one” (which can also be rendered as “his anointed ones,” “his Messiah” or “his Messiahs”)? I reviewed virtually all of the scholarly literature on this question, identified eleven different positions, compared the arguments and developed my own position, namely that the Hebrew term in case refers to one anointed one, who can properly be called a Messiah, has prophetic traits and has both heaven and earth as his audience, and that this Messiah is either really a prophetic Messiah or a royal Messiah with a prophetic function.

This was not a futile quest. As an expression of deep human hope, Dead Sea Scroll 4Q521 turned out to be a fascinating text in itself, and it certainly sheds some light on the Jewish messianic expectations in the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament and on several New Testament passages. I could not give a final answer to the ultimate question whether Jesus is the Messiah, but I gave a final answer to the preliminary question of who is meant by the phrase “his anointed one” in Dead Sea Scroll 4Q521. Or did I? Did I not rather respond to this preliminary question with a preliminary answer?

The present study takes the other direction and seeks a preliminary answer to a final question. Although in the interpretation of Bavinck I sometimes displayed my interest in small snippets of text, the overall question how to (re)gain perspective on the living God in a post-Christian context is an ultimate one for me.

These thoughts about ultimate questions and preliminary answers do not only constitute an invitation in themselves, but also provide a background for the next invitation, to which we will now turn.

4.3 Search for Truth beyond Church Dogmatics and Religious Studies

The invitation to understand theology as a search for truth concerning the living God sounds in a field that can be characterized by two opposite poles: church dogmatics and religious studies. In a religious studies approach religion is understood as a human phenomenon and the truth claims of a particular religious group concerning God are studied without evaluating the truth of these claims. In a church dogmatics approach the truth claims of someone’s own religious group are taken as an expression of truth that has already been revealed; the emphasis is not so much on searching for truth as on reflecting on (alleged) truth that has already been given. My understanding of theology as a search for truth is not a compromise or a middle position between these two

5. 4Q521 fragment 2 column ii lines 1–2. For text, translation and discussion of this passage, see De Wit, “Expectations and the Expected One.”

poles, but relates to them as the vertex (top) of a triangle relates to the angles at the baseline.

One reason why theology is not more often practiced as an open search for truth concerning the living God is probably that such a search is such a daring task. It is easier not to speak about God himself at all or to keep to traditional truth claims concerning God. However, some of the most pertinent questions of humanity will always be ignored if one does not attempt to move above the baseline of the triangle. People ask ultimate questions and theology is the discipline to deal with these questions in a scholarly way. Often, it will break down the ultimate questions into a series of penultimate questions and answer these one by one. However, a series of answers to penultimate questions is not yet an answer to an ultimate question. People also want to see how this last step can be taken, because only then will their questions be answered. It is simply not fair if theology on the one hand dwells on the ultimate questions that many individual persons ask and on the other hand, after answering a lot of penultimate questions, refuses to answer the ultimate questions and says that it is the individual person's own task to do so. Theology should not shy away from its core task.

Answering ultimate questions has a personal, existential dimension. As this seems to be implied in the nature of the questions, it can hardly be seen as a weakness or a scholarly flaw if this dimension becomes apparent in theological work that deals with such questions. Scholarly work that deals with ultimate questions should not set itself off from more popular works by lacking the personal, existential dimension, but by adding a stronger intellectual dimension. Theologians who are wholesaling in answers to ultimate questions without serious reflection become populists, but when they offer existential-intellectual answers to ultimate questions they can make a contribution to society that is helpful and valuable for specific groups or persons within it.

Still, theologians should be clear about the status of their answers. They may be answering ultimate questions, but they are not giving ultimate answers to these questions and not even penultimate ones, but rather antepenultimate. As a Reformed Christian, I see it as a task of the church (e.g., a meeting in a synod) to give penultimate answers, while the ultimate answers are to God alone. Theologians should listen to the ultimate questions that they hear within society (be it uttered by a dominant or by a marginalized group) and should try to answer these questions, but they should resist the temptation to play God and give ultimate answers.

It will be clear from the above that the type of theology to which I invite, namely theology as a search for truth concerning the living God and his relationship to the world and to humankind, is not meant as a depreciation of the religious studies approach. Religion in general and theological reflection in particular are human phenomena that can be studied as such. Within a university the religious studies approach makes the study of religion and theology more comparable to work on similar human phenomena in other faculties. If a

theological faculty emphasizes too much the uniqueness of its objects of research and therefore the right of a special status, special methods, and special criteria for scholarly quality, it runs the risk of insularity, which may make it miss important advancements in other disciplines and may pave the way for distrust among outsiders of its legitimate place within the university.

I am also open to the possibility that all religious phenomena can be explained in a natural way and that there is no need to refer to God as a source of explanation. I have already hinted to this in the opening essay (1.5) and I will argue it further in the next one. However, one can not only look at (religious) phenomena in order to explain them, but also in order to understand them in relationship to the living God. To be brief, it is this second way of looking that cannot be dealt with in a religious studies approach and that legitimizes a distinctively theological approach.

The distinction between church dogmatics and the type of theology to which I invite may still need some further clarification. It will be clear that there is a difference between an open search for truth and reflection on (alleged) truth that has already been received. However, in practice the two types of theology may come rather close together. Church dogmaticians will also carefully listen to voices that dissent from the received truth of the church in order to acknowledge their parts of truth and otherwise to refute them in a fair way. They are not necessarily narrow-minded. Practitioners of the third type of theology can also not be unlimitedly open-minded. They have to start their search somewhere and may feel challenged to try to find the truth between two or three different points of view rather than between all existing and theoretically possible points of view. Often they will also be members of one religious community rather than of none or many. Still, in terms of theological method, the third way seems to be preferable, in that it does not specify beforehand how and where truth can be found, but understands such issues as part of the field of research.

From a Christian point of view one could object that an open search for truth may sound honest but is actually a denial of the fact that the truth has already been given to us in the person of Jesus Christ. If so, an open search for truth would be an act of unbelief and Christians should not participate in it, but should rather take their starting point in the fact that Jesus is the truth. From an Islamic point of view one could similarly argue that the truth has already been given in the Qur'an and that an open search for truth is a grave sign of disrespect for the Qur'an. However, as opposed to these kinds of arguments, it may be hoped that both Christians and Muslims discover in their own traditions the legitimacy to participate with fellow human beings with whom they fundamentally disagree in a communal search for truth.

4.4 Search for Truth in Context for the Sake of Catholic Theology

So far, I have argued that our theological method as such should not be exclusively Christian beforehand, because it gives at least the impression that one is not genuinely interested in a search for truth. Especially if one feels trapped between two traditions or even worldviews, it feels insincere to oneself if one simply takes the truths of one tradition or worldview as a starting point. Still, I do not reject the idea of Christian theology altogether. The opening essay has not been written in the name of the church, but it has been written on behalf of the church. As expressed in the subtitle, it is an invitation to overcome the crisis of the church.

The word “church” can refer both to the local church and to the worldwide church of all times and places. Correspondingly, Christian theology can be practiced as contextual and as catholic theology. The relationship between these two types of theology deserves ongoing discussion. Here my invitation is to see contextual theology as a contribution to catholic theology. This is also the implicit choice in the opening essay and, moreover, it is reflected in its pre-history.

I wrote the essay as a paper for an international conference of Reformed theologians from all over the world.⁶ Amsterdam is far away for people who live outside the West. Still, it was exactly the contributions of non-Western theologians during earlier similar conferences that inspired me to have my paper explicitly come up from the context of Amsterdam. It was my impression that participants from Africa and Indonesia, for example, and in part also from the Hungarian-speaking regions relatively more often brought their context into their contributions than Western European and North American participants did. For the sake of balance, I as a Westerner decided to prepare a contribution in which I make my context explicit.

Such a decision is not unique: there is a growing awareness that not only Latin American, African and Asian theology is contextual, but also Western theology. At a theoretical level, “a growing awareness” is spoken too weakly: “all theology is contextual” has become a commonplace that itself may need some critical nuance by now. In practice, however, non-Western theologians still seem to produce much more explicitly contextual theology than Western theologians.⁷ I hope for a growth of Western (European) contextual theology, which can, for example, also be read by Christian missionaries from other parts of the world who prepare themselves to come and bring the gospel back to Europe.

Contextual theology is risky, however. Contextual Christian theology runs the risk that, for the sake of relevance in our own situation, we lose sight of the

6. See section 1.1 note 1.

7. Unfortunately, I cannot be more precise than giving this impression. I am not aware of statistical information about the production of Christian theology worldwide.

unity with the confession of the church of all times and places. We should rather seek and honor this unity. As early as the second century bishop Irenaeus of Lyon stated that the churches from the German regions to Egypt believe the same and hand down the same—just as the sun is one and the same all over the world, so does the same light of truth shine everywhere.⁸ From a Christian point of view it is wrong to speak about contextuality without a sense of catholicity. The idea of “living on the way” also implies that we should not attach ourselves fully to our own context (cf. 1.7).

However, contextual theology can also be understood as a contribution to catholic theology. If in a specific context we find words that touch reality, they can also turn out to be relevant in a different context. Especially in a context of crisis things can become critical that exist elsewhere as well but that are still inarticulate over there. And although an experience of crisis can lead to narrowing of vision, it can also open eyes and lead to a renewed orientation.

4.5 Search for Truth in a Creative Reflective Way

What is the main work of a theologian? Some theologians read a lot. This is good, but reading as such does not always get theology further. For me, the heart of theology is constituted by reflective and creative thought. Reflection is reflection on what comes to us, from Scripture and tradition, from fellow theologians and from other disciplines, from church and society, in printed form or on the screen, in debates and conversations, in nature and culture, and through our own experience of life. The purpose of this reflection is not to construe a theory of everything, but to search for creative solutions to overcome problems, bottlenecks, and seemingly dead ends.

When I call creative-reflective thought the heart of theology, I especially have in mind the discipline of theology that is traditionally called “systematic theology” or “dogmatics.” The term theology itself is often taken in a broader sense and includes for example also biblical studies, church history, and practical theology. Such disciplines can be seen as ancillary and providing the systematic theologian with information to reflect on and at the same time as finding guidance in the creative reflective thoughts of the systematic theologian. However, when offering guidance to other disciplines, the creative-reflective theologian should not see herself as a mistress but rather as a maidservant (*ancilla*) who assists others in reading the Holy Scriptures and in shepherding the people of God. If we do not only see creative-reflective thought as the heart of systematic theology but also as the core of all theology, we should keep Jesus’ word in mind: “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:44 NRSV). Put differently, more than one picture can be drawn of the relationship between the various theological disciplines. In one picture crea-

8. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.2; cf. De Wit, “Just as the Sun is One and the Same throughout the World . . .”

tive-reflective systematic theology is the core and culmination point, but in another, equally legitimate picture the study of the Holy Scriptures is the core and Practical Theology the culmination point of the entire theological enterprise.

However, the importance of creative-reflective thought in the discipline that is traditionally called “systematic theology” or “dogmatics” makes it worthwhile to rename this discipline “creative-reflective theology,” especially because of the disadvantages of the traditional names. “Systematic theology” and “dogmatics” are often associated with the vices of dogmatism and systematization. Even though these associations are usually not correct, it is frustrating if again and again one has to start by explaining what is not in a name. Moreover, the reservations above regarding the church dogmatics approach to theology make it less desirable to call the type of theology that I have in mind dogmatics, even if the word “church” is left out. Dogmatics is also so much of a Christian term that non-Christians may be unhappy participating in the search for truth under this name.

As for “systematic theology,” this name draws attention to only one aspect of theologizing and not even the most important one: systematizing, building a system, can be a tool, but it is not the core of theologizing. If we take it seriously that we are on the way to the living God, we are wayfarers and the work of the theologian is to be a pathfinder rather than to be a constructor of big buildings. As a wayfarer it is good to take some time for systematizing activities such as drawing a map or building a camp to take some rest, but the real purpose is to go forth and find the way again and again.

The best term to express what theology is about might be “pathfinder theology,”⁹ but as that name is probably a bit too playful to last long, I propose “creative-reflective theology,” referring to the two main elements that are important for this type of theology: reflection and creativity. In all that comes to me and on which I reflect, I try to see signs that mark the way of truth—the way to the living God.¹⁰ To the notion of reflection should be added the notion of creativity. On the way, we meet questions and problems, that were not yet known to previous generations or that they were not yet able to face sufficiently. We need imagination, ideas, and solutions to come further. This creativity is, however, not to be understood as if I try to create the truth instead of that I search for it. Rather, we need creativity to find the truth.

This last point deserves some further discussion. Bavinck correctly remarks: “We do not create the truth and we do not spin it out of our brain.”¹¹ This is an important point for him. In the first article that he published he stat-

9. The Dutch word for “pathfinder” is “padvinder,” which is also the common name for a (Boy) Scout.

10. The notion of seeing signs or references will be elaborated further in the next essay. See also already the hymn at the end of the first essay.

11. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 81.

ed already: “As created beings we stand on the foundation of what has been created, so only after experience we can know; we can only ‘think *afterwards*’ [or: *reflect*].”¹² In another article he elaborated this further: “Science should not create and fantasize, but only describe what exists. We think *afterwards* what God has thought *beforehand* and has given an embodied shape in creation.” For Bavinck, describing has a deeper meaning than the usual one: to him, it means “reproducing in words” and “mirroring in our consciousness the system in the things themselves.” “Tracking the system of things” is to him “a calling and duty and desire that God himself has put in the human heart.”¹³

Still, although it is clear that Bavinck’s understanding of describing and “thinking afterwards” goes deeper than listing obvious facts and memorizing them, he seems to lack an intermediate category in his concept of science. As humans, we do not only have the choice between either fantasizing or “thinking afterwards” (reflecting), but we can also think creatively and we can positively use that capacity in scientific and scholarly work. This certainly introduces a subjective element into science, but whoever tries to eliminate subjectivity entirely, does not safeguard science but rather kills it.

In short, a creative-reflective understanding of theology presupposes recognition rather than denial of the person of the theologian as the theologizing subject. This point can be elaborated further in relationship to the opening essay.

4.6 Search for Truth Recognizing the Person of the Theologian

A friend asked me to whom the invitation in the first essay is addressed. I answered: “To myself.” Of course, that should not be understood as if I alone were the intended reader and everybody else were only offered an opportunity to read what I had to say to myself. It is meant much more inclusively: since I have really tried to speak to myself as a human being, I may hope that I have also really spoken to other humans. No doubt, I have not always succeeded. My personality is both a blockade and a bridge. By concentrating on questions that are for me *the* questions I can pass over the questions of somebody else. The turn to one’s own personality can be a turn from humankind. However, the opposite is even more of a risk: that I focus on “questions of humankind” that are not even for me *the* questions. If we want to eliminate the blockade nature of our own personality, we will also not be able to use the bridge nature of it.

12. “Als geschapen wezens staan wij op den grondslag van het geschapene, kunnen dus eerst na ervaring kennen; wij kunnen slechts *nadenken*.” Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap” (1880), 519; (1922), 7 (*italics original*). Bavinck plays with the Dutch compound verb “nadenken”: in common usage it means “to think” or “to reflect,” but Bavinck puts weight on the fact that “na” as a preposition means “after.”

13. Bavinck, “Het voor en tegen van een dogmatisch systeem” (1881), 453; (1922), 60 (*italics original*). For a further theological elaboration of these ideas, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:587 #152. See also Van den Belt, “Autopistia,” esp. 299–302.

Although the biblical commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself” does not mean that we should love ourselves first of all, it certainly implies that in our love for the neighbor we have ourselves as a point of reference. As a theologian I cannot think through all the questions of all people, but by searching for answers to the questions that really concern me, I make a modest unique contribution to helping humanity deal with the many great questions with which it struggles.

The relationship between personality and humankind as expressed here shows a parallel with the relationship between contextuality and catholicity (cf. 4.4). At the same time, attention to one’s own personality, attention to the questions with which one struggles personally, can also prevent contextual theology from derailment. Contextual theology is trendy and an exposé in which one deals with the context of a (often vulnerable or marginalized) group easily looks good in an international community of theologians. The risk that one exploits the weak theologically in order to score for oneself in a safe context is at least potentially present. However, the risk of derailment is lower if one keeps to questions with which one honestly struggles for oneself. Conversely, attention to the context can prevent concentration on one’s own questions from deteriorating to theological exhibitionism and played authenticity.

In the opening essay I am not only implicitly present as one of the readers, but also explicitly as a first-person narrator. This makes the questions concerning personality and authenticity even tenser. For who is this first-person exactly: the author himself or a creation of the author? In an ordinary sense, the former is the case: the first-person is the author himself. The reader will also start to read the essay as non-fiction and not as fiction. At the same time, something strange is going on. When I wrote the essay, I indeed lived in an apartment in the center of Amsterdam and from there I could take the reader for a short walk through post-Christian Amsterdam. However, by now I live in Cairo and time has introduced a fictive element into the first-person in the essay. This is of course only an external circumstance, but my thinking has also developed through the years. And apart from the change through time, was the author able to fully express himself in the first-person narrator at the time of writing? In the anthropological invitation it is said: “We know ourselves partially, in our own experience our identity can be fragmented; we do not know how the different sides of ourselves exactly relate, we are changing over time” (1.6). Also for the author this means that he cannot know himself fully and consequently cannot introduce himself fully into a text. Moreover, the author has various sides, experiences, feelings, and trails of thought, on which he does not have full grip and which he cannot include all in one essay. The author also presents the first-person narrator in such a way that the implied readers can identify with this character. Finally, the author knows about a word limit and therefore he purposely makes a selection of everything that could be said. Thus, although I neither intended to create a fictive first-person character nor aimed at played authenticity, authenticity itself has something playful and that does

not matter. Not in deadly seriousness or exhaustive description but in play does the personality come to life and reveal itself—even if only partially—to others.

Still, a question can remain: I as an author, I as a first-person narrator in the text and I as the implied reader—do I not move too much in too narrow a circle? The risk is real. The tension between a traditional-Christian worldview and a post-Christian worldview—which are both not just something of others, but with which I also cannot identify right away—raises the question of where I stand myself, who I am. Both ways of thinking press so heavily that there is hardly any space for an own identity. The feverish search to find that identity nevertheless can result in an overconcentration on one's own personality. But it is exactly this moving in too narrow a circle that the opening essay seeks to break. The notion of the eccentricity of human identity in God breaks the obsession of getting a complete grip on one's own identity: it is not possible and it is not necessary. Also the notion of going the way to the living God breaks the moving within too narrow a circle. Further, the essay shows that life on the way does not lead to antisocial avoidance of the world, but to a life of freedom and love for each other. Also at another level the essay breaks the narrow circle: although I have cited few theologians, I have continuously used the treasures of the catholic Reformed tradition. The essay is a conversation rather than a monologue.

4.7 Search for Truth in an Existential-Intellectual Conversation

Theologians should not be captives of their own thoughts. One way to break through this captivity is by reading what others have written. However, I have already warned: “Some theologians read a lot. This is good, but reading as such does not always bring theology further” (4.5). Maybe this is still spoken too positively. Maybe reading a lot is not good at all. Especially for an ultimate question like the quest for God it makes no sense to try to read all the literature that somehow relates to it. One has to make a meaningful selection. Long before the current information boom of books, journals and websites, the sage already warned of the danger of too many books. Thus the Roman philosopher Seneca remarks:

Be careful, however, lest this reading of many authors and books of every sort may tend to make you discursive and unsteady. You must linger among a limited number of master thinkers, and digest their works, if you would derive ideas which shall win firm hold in your mind. Everywhere means where. When a person spends all his time in foreign travel, he ends by having many acquaintances, but no friends. And the same thing must hold true of men who seek intimate acquaintance with no single author, but visit them all in a hasty and hurried manner.¹⁴

14. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Epistula 2.2* (*Moral Epistles*, trans. Gummere, 1:7).

It is this advice that has inspired me to seek an in-depth engagement with Herman Bavinck rather than to enter into discussion with many authors. In the past years I read not only Bavinck's major books and articles but also many of his minor articles, letters and unpublished notes. About the value of such details Bavinck himself writes with regard to the study of Goethe:

No one, by the mere act of gathering into his consciousness a complete account of Goethe's life and labors, to their smallest details, will attain the truth concerning Goethe; such knowledge is a mere chronicle, not science;¹⁵ a photograph, not a painting; a copy, not a living reproduction. Science aims at something higher: it seeks not the dead, but the living; not the transitory, but the eternal; not the reality, but the truth. Only it does not find the truth apart from the reality. Whosoever wants to know Goethe must inform himself as to his person and labors.¹⁶

Chapters 2 and 3 presented the result of this in-depth engagement with Bavinck in brief and have hopefully shown that taking the time to study him in detail indeed leads to an understanding of him that one can hardly or not at all gain if one only reads some of his main works.

Seneca compares the intimate acquaintance one has to seek with a thinker with friendship. The other is not just an object of research or a holy hero or a source for some good insights—friendship implies a conversation between your ideas and mine, between you and me. Friendship can blind the eyes to the weaknesses of the other, but, as Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje writes in a letter to Bavinck, it can also imply “an exchange of ideas without any hesitation to tell each other the truth.”¹⁷ Although there are limits to the extent that one can become friends with an author who has already deceased, the model of friendship remains preferable over an approach in which one sees an author only as an object or a source. I call the kind of exchange of ideas that Snouck Hurgronje sought existential-intellectual conversation.

In an existential-intellectual conversation both heart and mind are involved. In the form of a text it ideally involves heart and mind of the author, of the conversation partner, and of the reader; in the case of this study: of me, of Bavinck, and of you. I hope that (the first part of) this study has offered the reader the opportunity to engage in the conversation not only intellectually but also existentially, but it is of course up to the reader to accept this invitation or not. As for me, I think it has already become sufficiently clear that this book is not merely an intellectual exercise but that I am existentially involved. Here it is worth emphasizing that I also put full stress on the intellectual aspect of the

15. The word “science” may sound somewhat awkward in this context. It should be noted that it is a translation of the Dutch word “wetenschap,” which, like the German word “Wissenschaft,” has a broader meaning than the English word science: it embraces all academic disciplines and the integrated knowledge that results from them.

16. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 81.

17. Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 55.

conversation. An exchange of cries from the heart that block rather than open up the possibility of discussion is not worth the name of existential-intellectual conversation.

However, to what extent do we have access to Bavinck's mind and heart? In chapters 2 and 3, we depended on what he has written (and, to some extent, on what his contemporaries who knew him personally have written about him). But do pieces of writing reveal to us the mind, let alone the heart, of their author? And do texts that were written for a variety of readerships and during about four decades reveal one mind and heart? The following considerations may clarify this issue:

a. If, as suggested in the opening essay (1.6), the idea makes sense that the identity of every human is eccentric in God and that God knows us fully, deeper than we know ourselves, this also applies to Bavinck. God knows him better than he knew himself.

b. The general nature of Bavinck's writings is rather favorable for knowing his mind and heart. They are not mere statements of widely accepted facts or very technical discussions, but, as also others have observed (cf. 3.6), often have an existential dimension. Bavinck found rest for head and heart in the Christian faith, but at the same time he continued to be in search for it.

c. Undeniably, there are developments in Bavinck's thinking. For example, he himself acknowledged that his attention was shifting from theology to philosophy (see 3.2). Moreover, when speaking in public or writing, his audience certainly influenced what he said or did not say. However, this does not mean that there are different Bavincks who can only be treated one by one, but rather that each of his works in its own way refers back to its author, so that, taken together, one gets an impression of the richness of his mind and heart. Just in the way as Bavinck suggested how we can know Goethe, we can know him.

All in all, conditions to have an existential-intellectual conversation with Bavinck are rather favorable.

A next issue is: in what sense is existential-intellectual conversation a method to answer ultimate questions? As said, one should not expect to find final answers to final questions (4.2, 4.3). However, good ideas are often born in good conversations. Existential-intellectual conversation challenges one to think further than methods do that aim at finding certain answers to smaller questions. Even if one has not found a satisfying answer by the end of the conversation, one may conclude that it was good to have the conversation. The invitation to participate in an existential-intellectual conversation is the invitation to take a risk, but it is the risk of using the best of our human capacities for an ultimate concern, of doing justice to our glorious side (cf. 1.7).

In the ongoing discussion of whether theology proper can be regarded as a scholarly discipline, the method of existential-intellectual conversation can constitute a middle ground. A rabbi said: "If two sit together, and words of

Torah are between them, the Shechinah rests between them.”¹⁸ And Christ says: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”¹⁹

—The present study can be read as a sustained conversation about the wonderful opening words of the Bible, which have so deeply influenced the worldview of many people through the centuries: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1 ESV). Two are sitting together, Bavinck and me, and words of Torah are between us; if you as the reader join us, three are gathered.—

The divine presence is not a presence that we can create. Our words in the conversation can refer to God, but we can also disguise ourselves in them, and often we cannot say beforehand what we are doing. The presence is a presence according to the promise and theology is theology *in spe*, theology in hope. Theology can afford us rest for head and heart, can give us the awareness of the reality of God himself, but here our rest is also revoked again and again. Eternal rest is elsewhere. This conception of theology does not compromise the scholarly character of theology, but, on the contrary, creates space for it. Theology *in spe* is theology *in via*, on the way. Our theologizing is talking on the way and does not pretend that we have already reached our final destination; it is scholarly insofar as it seeks for quality talk.

4.8 Search for Truth in Conversation: Psalm 42–43 and the First Essay

In the present study, the notion of existential-intellectual conversation does not only apply to our interaction with Herman Bavinck, but also to the conversation between the author of Psalm 42–43²⁰ and me, which in essence already took place in the first essay. As an illustration of what I mean by existential-intellectual conversation, this section will continue the interaction with the psalm by making a comparison between the psalm and the opening essay. Although the psalm and the essay differ in genre, time of origin, et cetera, there are many parallels between them, some of which I already had in mind while writing the essay and some of which have become apparent on further reflection. After some thoughts about the author of the psalm, I will pay attention to some of these parallels.

The author of Psalm 42–43 is unknown. The superscription probably suggests that the psalm is intended for the Sons of Korah rather than that it has been written by them. In the past one saw David as its composer, but nowadays

18. *Mishnah 'Abot* 3.2, in Montefiore and Goldsmith, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 23.

19. Matt. 18:20 (ESV). For a discussion of the relationship between this verse and rabbinic sayings, see, e.g., Flusser, “‘I am in the Midst of Them’ (Mt. 18:20).”

20. The unity of Psalm 42–43 is not an established fact, but the absence of a title at the beginning of Psalm 43 in many manuscripts and the repetition of the refrain (Pss. 42:5, 11; 43:5) make it plausible and it is assumed by many commentators. See, for example, Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 323–29; Eaton, *The Psalms*, 178–82; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 435–42; and Terrien, *The Psalms*, 348–56.

it is usually assumed that the psalm does not offer sufficiently specific indications to identify its author.²¹ Still, one can object to the statement that the author of the psalm is unknown that, according to many Christians, God himself is the true author of Scripture and so also of Psalm 42–43.

However, for three reasons, I do not want to read the psalm from the perspective of divine authorship from the beginning. First, it feels like a *petitio principii* if, in the struggle between Christian and post-Christian thought, one assumes from the outset that God exists and has written or at least inspired the Holy Scriptures. Second, if one assumes it beforehand, this is at odds with the Reformed confession that the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts that the Scriptures are from God²²: one cannot claim such a witness as a given before one has actually carefully read them. Third, the psalm does not pretend to be spoken or written by God or in the name of God; on the contrary, the psalmist speaks about God and to God and does not even avoid strong language: “Why have you forgotten me?” and: “Why have you rejected me?” (Ps. 42:9; 43:2 ESV). Possibly we can finally conclude that these are not only deeply human words to God, but also words from God. However, we would either flatten or overload the interpretation of the psalm if we take this for granted beforehand. Therefore, at least for the time being, I assume that the author of Psalm 42–43 is unknown.

Still, it should be noted that I did not discover Psalm 42–43 in a course on ancient Israelite literature, but in the circle of family and church where these two psalms are such a beloved part of God’s Word because they are such an adequate expression of the experience of God’s people. When I wrote the opening essay, I did not read the psalm from a flat neutrality, but from a positive *Vorverständnis* (preconception) and I also cannot suppress that here. Nevertheless, I hope that I am sufficiently critically aware of my *Vorverständnis* to be able to offer a reading of the psalm that can also be approved by others who know the psalm from a different community of readers or read it for the first time right now.

Let us now draw the comparison between the psalm and the opening essay, by paying attention to four parallels.

1. First, there is an “I” in the psalm in whom the poet no doubt expresses his own experience. When he says “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God,” he refers to his own soul. At the same time, this first-person narrator is a creation of the psalmist for the sake of the reader or singer, who can identify with this first-person figure in order to express his or her own experience. The poet did not write the psalm as a document to offer an opportunity to historians in a later time to determine what he was dealing with then and there. In the church

21. See Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* 2:127–28 and further, e.g., Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 326; Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 438 (Kraus takes the Korahites as the editors of a book of songs); and Terrien, *The Psalms*, 356.

22. See Belgic Confession, art. 5.

we do not sing the psalm to keep in mind that some thousand years ago there was an unknown poet who had a soul that thirsted for the living God. Likewise, I have not written the essay for the sake of a potential historian or biographer who might be interested in how I experienced Amsterdam then and there, but I hope that I have introduced the first-person narrator in the essay in such a way that at least some readers can identify with him and that the essay may help them to express and clarify their own experiences and thoughts.

Exegetes differ in opinion whether the psalm should be read as an “individual lament” (in which the poet speaks for himself personally), a “national lament” (in which the poet speaks for the people) or a “royal lament” (in which the poet has the king speak as the head of the people).²³ The first opinion seems to be the most likely and it is at least improbable that somebody could write such a text without drawing from personal experience and without the intention that individual persons could hear their experience in it. Nevertheless, in the context of the Psalter, one can hear more in this psalm than a strictly individual voice. Psalm 42–43 is immediately followed by a national lament and a royal psalm. One can recognize the king in Psalm 42, if in verse 4 the first-person does not only remember that he walked with the crowds to the house of God, but also that he led them in procession.²⁴ One can hear the people speaking in the psalm because they search protection against another, ungodly people (Ps. 43:1). Moreover, the mocking “Where is then your God?” elsewhere takes the form “Where is their God?” and then clearly refers to the people.²⁵

Jesus uses the words from the threefold refrain to express the experience of his own soul in Gethsemane: “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.”²⁶ The fact that Jesus understands the psalms in reference to himself should not prevent the church from identifying itself with the first-person in the psalm: when Christ prays the psalms, he can speak collectively for his people. He does not take the psalms from us, but rather teaches us to use them. However, just as in the context of the Hebrew canon the collective is secondary to the individual in the psalm, this remains the case when the psalm is read as part of the Christian canon: in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus had to pray this psalm alone because his disciples did not pray with him, but slept.

Also nowadays, the psalm may speak most to people who are in a situation in which they are lonely and contested, far away from the celebrating multitude of before. Only on second reflection one sees that one is not alone: there is not only the fellowship over the centuries with the unknown psalmist who was in a similar situation, but there is also Christ who prays this psalm and there is the

23. See Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 325.

24. The reading and meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, however. See, e.g., Eaton, *The Psalms*, 178; cf. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 323.

25. Ps. 42:4, 11 (“your God”); Pss. 79:10; 115:2 (“their God”). See Eaton, *The Psalms*, 180.

26. Matt. 26:38 (ESV), cf. Mark 14:34. The Greek word for “sorrowful” is *perilypos* and is also used in the refrain in the Septuagint version of the psalm. As *perilypos* is not used frequently, the allusion seems to be intended.

collective of the seven thousand individuals who in the night of doubt and despair have not fallen to their knees before credulity or unbelief, but continue to hope in the living God.

If there is a parallel between the psalm and the opening essay, and one recognizes the voice of Christ in the first-person of the psalm, one may wonder whether the “I” in the essay can also be the voice of Christ. Of course, this suggestion should never be understood as if the natural author is or claims to be Christ. However, because the author has created the first-person in the text, and by the act of writing and publishing and the passage of time, this “I” has less and less become the author himself, there is space for others and even for Christ to identify with the first-person in the text. If indeed the creative reflection of the author in the first essay has not just been fantasizing, but has helped to come closer to the truth, one may see a (broken) reference²⁷ to Christ in the “I” of the essay, and hope that Christ is still walking through post-Christian Amsterdam, although the author is no longer living there.

2. A second parallel between the psalm and the essay is the role of the geographical context in it. The psalmist describes his location concretely: the land of Jordan and of Hermon, Mount Mizar.²⁸ Still, his context is more than a geographical area. It is a reality of life in which he is taunted by enemies and feels all God’s waves of water coming over him. In a similar way, post-Christian Amsterdam is a concrete geographical area—one can make the same walk from my apartment through the Red Light District to Dam Square—which however refers to a reality of life—a world in which church and Christian faith have lost their naturalness and suffer from a deep plausibility crisis.

3. Third, there is a parallel between the multiplicity of voices and directions of speaking. In the psalm the poet is present in a twofold way, as “I” and as “my soul.” Sometimes the two seem to be virtually identical, but in the refrain they are distinguished and the “I” addresses his soul with the call to hope in God. So, when I said that the invitation in the essay is addressed to myself (4.6; cf. 4.9), this has a parallel in the psalm.

There is also the counter-voice that says: “Where is your God?” It is not clear who is speaking these words. Psalm 42:3b is probably best translated as: “All day long it is said to me: ‘Where is your God?’” The emphasis is not on who says it, but on the fact that it is said and that all day long. Verse 10 identifies the speakers as “my adversaries,” but even then it remains unclear who they are. Moreover, it is unlikely that in the land of Jordan and of Hermon and on Mount Mizar the poet is continually surrounded by physical persons who say: “Where is your God?” This is the same in Amsterdam. Explicitly atheistic advertising is still relatively rare and on Dam Square one certainly finds more Christian evangelists of all sorts than people who try to impose the good news of *The God Delusion* on you. Nevertheless, it is a reality: “All day it is said: ‘Where is your

27. For the notion of broken references, see section 5.6.

28. Ps. 42:6; it is not beyond doubt that Mizar is a geographical proper name.

God?” The problem is that one cannot simply say that this voice speaks nonsense. In verse 9 the poet himself says that he feels forgotten by God.

Next, there is God, not as a speaking voice, but as the one about whom the psalmist speaks, to whom his soul thirsts without words, to whom he sings an unspoken song, to whom he wants to speak and to whom he finally simply says what is at stake, by which manner he creates the way to a renewed perspective on the presence of and encounter with God.²⁹ The author’s relationship to God is bizarre: God is the rock in whom he trusts and the one who forgets him, the one for whom he thirsts like a deer that lacks water and the one who makes his presence felt in a tremendous overflow of water. This does not have an exact parallel in the essay, but some of this tense love³⁰ can be felt in it too.

How should one evaluate the voice in the refrain in the light of the above? Does the poet, in the midst of all contradictory sounds and feelings, most purely express what he wants to say in the words: “Hope in God”? Or is “Hope in God!” a second taunting counter-voice, which makes things even more difficult? This second option cannot be excluded entirely. When the poet remembers what was before and what is now past tense, it is too quickly and too easily spoken (even though it is he himself who says it): never mind, hope in God, everything will be fine again! After the first refrain, he does not continue: “My soul is no longer cast down and in turmoil,” but on the contrary he says: “My soul is cast down.” Also the second refrain seems to be spoken too quickly.³¹ Only when one has actually said to God what is not good and a new perspective is born on the way ahead, can the refrain have the last word.

A similar figure of thought is found in the essay. There is a double counter-voice: on the one hand the post-Christian call to consider God and faith and church to be passé, on the other hand the Christian call to be just a good Reformed Christian and to keep everything essentially as it was. Over against this double counter-voice, I search for a post-post-Christian identity, a way with a perspective for the future, the way to the living God. In the end, it turns out to be possible to simplify “post-post-Christian identity” to “Christian identity,” and then the Christian call is no longer a counter-voice but that which I say myself.

29. See especially Ps. 42:1–2, 8, 9; 43:1–2, 3–4. Although the “volative nuance” of the cohortative can be very weak (see Jouön and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 346 §114*b*), it makes sense to take it into account in verse 9 and to translate “I want to say” or “I will say” rather than simply “I say.” In this verse the poet has in mind to address his complaint to God, but it is only in Ps. 43 that he actually does so.

30. For “tense love” as a description of the relationship between God and human beings, see Van de Beek, *Gespannen liefde*.

31. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 329 remarks: “When the psalmist stops speaking to himself (Ps. 42) and addresses his words to God (Ps. 43), the beginning of his deliverance is in sight. . . . The literary structure may reveal the solution for reality; when one turns from the memories and burdens within the mind and boldly addresses to God a plea for deliverance, the first step is taken on the path that leads ultimately to a restoration of the life of praise and to mental and spiritual health.”

Let me add one more observation about the voice of the taunters. It is obvious that Psalm 42–43 is about an experience of evil, but it is less easy to define the nature and source of the evil: is it the absence or silence of God, the downcastedness of the soul or the taunting of the enemy? What is cause and what is consequence? Most grieving are the words that are spoken all day long: “Where is your God?” However, the problem would not be solved if these words were simply deleted. Rather, they help to articulate the problem, so that one can begin to seek for a solution.

The opening essay can also be read as an attempt to deal with an experience of evil, namely the evil of the plausibility crisis of Christianity and the church in post-Christian Amsterdam. In a superficial analysis of the situation one might blame the people who explicitly deny God’s existence or display disinterest in him as the cause of the crisis. However, in fact, they have helped to articulate the problem. Indeed, they have not solved the problem for me, but without them I would also not have been pressed to search so deeply and to reach the same clarity of perspective.

4. A fourth and final parallel that deserves attention is that both the psalm and the essay speak about God as the living God. This is the most obvious parallel, but also the one that may raise a sharp question: do the psalmist and I mean the same by the term “the living God”? In the opening essay the living God is the god who really is, over against all our conceptions of God. It is not proven that the living God really exists, but it is stated that only the living God can satisfy my heart’s desire. Did he not exist, the deepest thirst of my soul would never be quenched. In the end, I cannot live with only my idea or conception of God. The one for whom my soul desires is not the one whom she can conceive purely and clearly, but the one who, when it comes to the crunch, really is there.

Is this also what the psalmist means? Kraus understands the phrase “the living God” in Psalm 42:2 especially as the life-giving God, who “alone is able to supply ‘life,’ i.e., deliverance and salvation, to a person who languishes and has fallen into the sphere of death.”³² Such an interpretation is among others supported by verse 8, which speaks about “the God of my life.” Understanding God as the life-giving God who cares for my life is valuable: our hesitation to define God and our criticism of our conceptions of God should not lead to the other extreme that we do not develop a positive understanding of and relationship to God. However, it should matter whether God is only our nice fantasy about the source of our life or that he really is there. Maybe this is also what the psalmist

32. See Kraus, “The Living God,” 102. In his commentary on Psalm 42 Kraus rather gives a summary of the various shades of meaning of “the living God” in the Old Testament: he “is the God who is not subject to any change or limitation, who therefore has no part in the fate of the divinities that die and rise again. [He] has demonstrated his life in the history of the people. God is appealed to in the oath. In him people in prayer look for the fountain of life (Ps. 36:9). Life knows that it is dependent on him, and sustained and determined by him.” Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 439.

first of all wants to say: he thirsts for the God who is alive, who really is. Possibly, the Psalmist consciously first spoke about “the living God” (focusing on God’s life) in verse 2 and then about “the God of my life” (focusing on his own life) in verse 8. However, another translation of the same Hebrew phrase in verse 8 is also worth consideration: “my living God,”³³ not in the sense of “the living God whom I have invented” but in the sense of “the true living God on the way to whom and in relationship with whom I seek to live.” If so, the psalm and the essay in essence say the same.

Part Two: Speaking the Truth

4.9 Speak the Truth Modestly, in Invitations

So far, we have seen what it means to *search* for truth and how it can be done. Let us now consider how we can *speak* the truth that we have found, insofar as we have found it. To be clear, the distinction between searching and speaking is only a practical one—not everything could be said at the same time in this essay—and should not be understood as if there were a strict distinction between theological method and theological rhetoric. We can only focus our search and decide what deserves attention and what can wait if we know how and for whom we are going to speak. And perhaps it only becomes clear in communication what is verily true. So, properly spoken, we have not yet completed our discussion of searching, but will conclude it now with a discussion about speaking the truth. To this end I extend a bipartite invitation: (a) speak the truth modestly, in invitations; (b) speak the truth boldly, if necessary *contra Deum aut bonos mores* (against God and/or the good morals). Part (b) will be discussed in the next section. In this section I will elaborate part (a), by explaining why I speak in invitations and to whom the invitations in the opening essay were addressed.

“The most important moods of theology are not indicative and imperative (although they are practised most), but interrogative, subjunctive and optative.” This sentence in my notes of a lecture about “The Future of Our Field” by the British theologian David F. Ford³⁴ has been particularly influential for the shape of the first essay and this study as a whole, as it has triggered me to express my theological thoughts in invitations.

Inviting is an alternative to both *describing* what has been believed and done, and *prescribing* what should be believed and done. There is also some difference between *advising* and inviting, in that the latter is more personal: I

33. See Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 151 §9.5.3b. As a matter of fact, several Hebrew manuscripts leave out the possessive pronoun “my” in verse 8, so that both verse 2 and verse 8 simply speak about “the living God.”

34. See the first note of the present essay.

can advise people which way to take and I can invite them to go that way together with me.

Speaking in invitations is first of all a way of expressing the results of theological research and reflection. Thus, the choice for an inviting mood influences the genre of a theological publication. However, this is not unrelated to the nature and method of theology. Research on some questions leads to factual answers and research on other questions to clear prescriptions, but there are also big questions to which one cannot likely give such clear-cut answers. If one only practices theology in a descriptive or prescriptive mood, one has to ignore these big, ultimate questions or to concentrate on derived questions that do not yet answer the main question. The choice for an inviting mood opens the way to address the ultimate questions themselves as it allows for answers to which one can be committed but that need not be ultimate themselves.

The question may be raised whether invitation is a scholarly category. In my view, it is or at least can be: speaking in invitations is a scholarly way of speaking insofar as it does justice to the object of theology. That object is too relevant to be ignored but also too much surrounded by epistemological problems to be spoken about in simple descriptive or prescriptive language. Speaking in invitations then expresses scholarly prudence without sliding down into non-committal language.

An invitation is only a true invitation if it has an addressee. As said, when a friend asked to whom the invitation of the opening essay is extended, I answered: "To myself." Just as the author of Psalms 42 and 43 exhorted his own soul to hope in God, I invited myself to live on the way to the living God. Of course, the invitation is not only addressed to me, but also to the readers. On further reflection I can distinguish four groups of readers for the first essay: Reformed theologians all over the world, Christians in Amsterdam, post-Christians in Amsterdam, and "ideal" readers of the essay. Let me discuss each of these groups briefly.

1. *Reformed theologians all over the world.* As said before (4.4), I originally wrote the essay as a contribution for an international conference of Reformed theologians from all over the world. Although I knew that some Dutch persons would attend the conference, I primarily wrote with foreign participants in mind.³⁵ The scholarly character of such a conference is not so much constituted by highly specialized work as by mutual reflection on themes that concern church and theology in various contexts. At a meta-level, then, the sevenfold invitation in my contribution was (and is) a two-way invitation to the catholic Reformed community to enrich my thoughts with perspectives from

35. For inhabitants of Amsterdam, the short walk through the city at the beginning of the essay must feel as a caricature of their situation, but for an international audience this seemed to me to be better than to say nothing. Moreover, I already tried to oppose a caricature by not posing the challenge for the church one-sidedly in the Red Light District or, for example, in neighborhoods with many social problems.

other parts of the world and to see whether my Amsterdam-born ideas make sense in other contexts as well.

2. *Christians in Amsterdam*. According to its subtitle, the essay is an invitation to overcome the crisis *of the church*. So it is at least implicitly an invitation to the church in Amsterdam. As a matter of fact, only a few persons who are active in congregations in Amsterdam have read the essay so far and I have not attempted to make it widely known among Christians in Amsterdam. Maybe I felt some hesitation. Is the setting not too somber about the current state of the church? Does the division in four types of Reformed answers to the crisis of the church not pigeon-hole congregations and pastors too much?³⁶ I had written the invitation, but I still hesitated whether I should really send it to the addressees.

3. *Post-Christians in Amsterdam*. The opening essay is clearly not written as an evangelism treatise for post-Christians to invite them back to church. Still, the invitations could be rewritten in such a way that they become invitations to them. Post-Christians are the indirectly implied readers.

4. *“Ideal” readers*. So far, I have identified three groups of real implied readers. The ideal addressees of the invitation have traits of each of these groups and can be characterized as follows. They are people who feel stuck between the invitation of secular, post-Christian, atheistic or “somethingistic”³⁷ thinkers and the invitation of those who say: “Just be good-Reformed.” Neither do they want to fall between two stools, nor do they see compromise as a solution, nor do they expect much of renewal upon renewal. In particular to them in this tension I extend the invitation to find the way to the core, the narrow path to the living God.

4.10 Speak the Truth Boldly, if Necessary *contra Deum aut bonos mores*

Now that we have seen that we should communicate the results of our search for truth modestly, I also want to extend the invitation to speak the truth boldly. Especially because discussions about truth can be sensitive, it is important that church and society create sanctuaries in which truth claims can be discussed openly even though they are seemingly or really at odds with the received truth claims (e.g., articles of faith) of a community. Although universities usually offer such an open atmosphere, VU University Amsterdam, for example, has stipulated one important restriction: the university forbids that theses contain something *contra Deum aut bonos mores*.³⁸ However, my final invitation is that, if necessary, we should exactly do this: speaking against God or good morals.

36. Cf. section 1.3 note 5.

37. For the term “somethingism” (Dutch: ietsisme), see section 5.8.

38. See Bestuur der Vereniging voor christelijk wetenschappelijk onderwijs, “Statuut, houdende regelen voor de Vrije Universiteit” (= “Statuut VU”), section 2.25 paragraph 4.

My objection to the stipulation of the university is that it hinders the development of theology to a full-fledged scholarly discipline. It stimulates theologians to limit themselves to questions of secondary importance and to avoid questions that really matter. Who really wants to say something for God, should, as a scholar, also create space for dissenting voices.³⁹

The statement is especially fatal for the theological interpretation of Scripture. It stimulates that exegetes collect a lot of information about a text but do not come to a real interaction with the text. For example, doctoral candidates can now mention all kinds of details about Genesis 22 and they can organize the interpretations of others, but in the end they cannot evaluate the contents of the text itself—if they are of the opinion that Abraham did well in sacrificing his son they speak against the good morals, but if they maintain that he should have disobeyed God's commandment they speak against God, at least in the opinion of many. This is especially a problem for the interpretation of the Psalms. Psalmists often say what they have against God: "Why have you forgotten me?"; "Why have you rejected me?"; "Why are you sleeping?" Sometimes they speak shocking language: "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!"⁴⁰ Are doctoral candidates allowed to defend that these words are *contra Deum aut bonos mores* but that they are nevertheless rightly spoken, or do the candidates themselves then pass a limit?

The question is also: who determines whether something is *contra Deum aut bonos mores*? In the case of the thesis, this is probably the examination committee. A century ago it was still relatively easy at VU University Amsterdam: all professors belonged to the same denomination and as a doctoral candidate one knew what one could or could not say. When the university was founded in 1880, it had been said that Muslims and Jews were also welcome, but when in the early twentieth century "both a son of the old Israel and a confessor of the Qur'ān" asked to obtain the doctoral degree from VU University Amsterdam, that request was immediately rejected because "the departure from the [Calvinistic] principles . . . was too obvious."⁴¹ Nowadays, the situation is very different and both professors and doctoral candidates from many persuasions are welcome. More and more, doctoral candidates who would like to take a position regarding an important theological issue (for example, whether Jesus is truly God) may meet somebody in the examination committee according to whose tradition the position of the candidate is blasphemous and *contra Deum*.

One should not try to ban such issues from university in order to avoid that somebody might be offended. A university serves church, state, and society best by fostering a free attitude towards them and upholding its position as a sanctuary. The search for truth is not served when sensitive religious issues are

39. For this reason section 3.9 paid attention to Richard Dawkins' invitation to atheism.

40. Pss. 42:9; 43:2; 44:23; 137:9 (ESV).

41. H. H. Kuyper, *Evolutie of revelatie*, 47.

suppressed but when they are made a subject of discussion. Jesus himself made statements that were so blasphemous to the ears of others that they decided that he should be killed (Matt. 26:65–66). A university can choose to silence followers of Jesus or of his opponents with its rules, but it can also choose to take the mutual differences to the level of a scholarly conversation and a communal search for truth.

To be clear, I do not plead to speak *contra Deum aut bonos mores* rashly. It is not a light thing if one really has something against God. And good morals are good morals not for nothing. However, sometimes the way of truth runs on the edge of blasphemy, and whoever is really a theologian will go even there to search for it.

5

Toward a Binocular Worldview Recognizing God in a World Explained without God

Man has undertaken the gigantic effort of interpreting the whole world, and all things that are therein, in their origin, essence and end, what is called purely and strictly scientifically, that is, without God, without any invisible, supernatural, spiritual element, and simply and alone from the pure data of matter and force.

—Herman Bavinck

People, when given the right encouragement to think for themselves about all the information now available, very often turn out *not* to believe in God and to lead fulfilled and satisfied—indeed, *liberated*—lives.

—Richard Dawkins

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

—Psalm 19:1–4b (NRSV)

The opening essay mentioned a twofold argument for atheism: “It is argued, on the one hand, that the concept of God is superfluous as an explanation for any state of affairs and, on the other hand, that the evil in this world is irreconcilable with a God who is infinite goodness” (1.5). In this essay I will interact with this argument more deeply. I will especially focus on the claim that the concept of God is superfluous as an explanation for any state of affairs, which I will call here the problem of God’s redundancy.¹

1. Several readers remarked that this essay reminds them of what others have written, both in terms of similarities and of divergencies. For example, two Dutch readers referred to the work of the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel, who speaks about God as “more than necessary.” Although I had the privilege of attending Jüngel’s lectures on ecclesiology in Tübingen in 1999, I did not intend to allude to Jüngel in the present essay, but find it interesting and stimulating that others see the parallel. Egyptian friends referred to Arabic works of both Muslims and Christians of which this essay somehow reminded them. I hope that readers in other contexts will also experience that it resonates in their minds with what they have read elsewhere. However, it would be beyond the nature and purpose of the present study to elaborate all these possible resonances in the present essay and it would also be against Seneca’s warning that one should not read too many different authors and books (see section 4.7).

The problem of God's redundancy is not experienced by everyone. Indeed, for many humans it feels rather weird to suppose that the world could exist without a God who created it and maintains it. Many people also experience something of God in their lives or see miracles happen to themselves or others, which confirm their conviction that God exists. They may even have the impression that others who deny God's existence do so against their better judgment, in order to have a license for immoral behavior.

However, there are also humans who really experience the problem of God's redundancy and these are often well-educated people. They see that God as a formula to explain the world is often redundant because more and more phenomena can be explained in a natural way. They are also aware that religious experiences as such do not prove that God really exists. Moreover, they are inclined to approach miracle stories with some suspicion: of course, remarkable and unexpected events do happen, for example healings when one had already given up hope, but they are at the same time conscious of the human inclination to enlarge miracles or to have imagination or hope rule over reality. They also see that it is always difficult to show that something remarkable or miraculous is really the work of God.

To be sure, there are also well-educated people who do not think that God is redundant as an explanation. They see that science, at least until now, but maybe due to its very nature, has left many questions unanswered. It is not their ignorance but rather their knowledge that leads them to the conclusion that ultimately the world cannot be understood without God.

Given this situation, if someone is asked to reflect explicitly on the claim that God is redundant as an explanation, we may expect at least three kinds of reactions:

1. One can try to show that the claim is not true and that we need God as an explanation in order to be able to understand the world and the universe.
2. One can accept the claim and draw the consequence that God indeed does not exist.
3. One can accept the claim and see whether there are other, non-explanatory, reasons to believe in God.

The position that I will develop in this essay is a reaction of the third kind. Step-by-step, I will invite myself and the reader to a perspective on the world and the living God that does not use God as a (source of) explanation. In the course of the essay it will become clear that my position also addresses the

As for my own resonances, although the ideas in this essay have grown over time, I remember that a moment of critical insight took place while I was listening to a guest lecture of Peter Van Inwagen at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2004, even though his point was different from that which I am arguing here.

An early draft for this essay was discussed during a meeting of the Promovendiberaad van de Gereformeerde Bond in early 2005. Sections 5.1 to 5.6 were presented at the Scholars' Seminar of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, December 7, 2010. The interpretation of Psalm 104 in section 5.7 is a revised version of De Wit, "Hoe groot zijn uw werken, o HEERE!"

second part of the twofold argument for atheism, the problem of evil. The perspective on the world and the living God that I develop in this essay also has implications for our understanding of Christian doctrines and the way we interpret the Bible, and this is what will be discussed in the last part of the essay. Special attention will be paid to the interpretation of miracle stories and the accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

Part One: Seeing the World with Open Eyes

5.1 The Invitation of the Binocular Worldview

In an address about the Reformation and Dutch national life Herman Bavinck says:

The Dutch are realistic, they have an open eye for reality; they are not brilliant, not intuitive; they neither have deep thoughts, nor spectacular speculations, nor proud and daring systems of philosophy. . . . But then again the Dutch look at reality precisely and patiently, and they notice the light of divine glory that descends into it from above.²

Bavinck says that the Dutch have an open eye, but his description suggests that it is even better to say that they have two open eyes. They see the world in two ways: a. they look at it precisely and patiently; b. they notice the light of divine glory that descends into it from above. The exact-scientific and the religious view on the world do not conflict with each other but complement each other; together they offer an overall picture with depth.

We can also look with two "eyes" when we consider the question of where babies come from. One can tell children that they are brought by the stork, but nowadays they tend to soon know that things are different. Christian friends often send me birth announcement cards with sentences like "God gave us ..." or "From God's hand, we received" Are these attempts to make family and friends believe that the baby does not originate from sexual intercourse but has been brought by the Superstork? I do not think so. Much more likely, God's hand is noticed in the natural course of affairs. Neither does "From God's hand, we received ..." seem to mean: of course, everything happened in a natural way now, but once in a distant past God created life and in this indirect sense the child is a gift of God. No, the idea is: this child here and now has come into being in a fully natural way and is at the same time a wonderful gift from God's hand.

The above shows that in principle a *sensus naturalis* (an awareness of the natural connection of things, a "natural eye") and a *sensus religionis* (an awareness of the religious, a "religious eye") can well go together. When hu-

2. Bavinck, "De Hervorming en ons nationale leven," 20. Bavinck refers among others to famous scientists and painters of the seventeenth century, the Golden Age of the Netherlands.

mans who are blessed with two normal physical eyes use these two eyes together, they do not see two entirely different objects, but they see the same from two slightly different perspectives, and because of this they can see depth. Maybe this also applies to the natural and the religious eyes: with them, we do not view two separate worlds, but the same world from two perspectives, so that we can see depth in it.

This may require some exercise, just as when we use a pair of binoculars for the first time. Maybe we first have to focus the left glass separately and then the right glass and only then we can adjust the two glasses to each other, so that we can see depth. It requires scientific education to develop our natural eye and religious education to develop our religious eye, and an integrative type of education to learn to use both eyes together, but once we have mastered this, we will see depth and have a binocular worldview.

5.2 The Invitation of the Naturalistic Assumption

One of the core questions in this essay is whether the binocular model also works if one extends the *sensus naturalis* to a naturalistic assumption. Naturalism is defined in a variety of ways, but here the view is meant that every phenomenon has a purely natural explanation (be it known to humans at present or not) or does not require an explanation at all. I speak about a naturalistic *assumption* because one cannot prove that naturalism is true. Bavinck mentioned that in his days humanity was undertaking the task of explaining the world in a purely natural way,³ but until now this task has not yet been completed. However, for a variety of reasons, the assumption is worth consideration and Christians especially should not rule it out beforehand.

1. The progress of science during the last centuries, which led to natural explanations for many phenomena that seemed unexplainable in a natural way before, at least gives some confidence that the naturalistic assumption may hold true.

2. Although belief in naturalism and belief in God the Creator of heaven and earth are sometimes seen as opposites, so that one has to choose (nobody can serve two lords), the naturalistic assumption as we defined it is not *a priori* in conflict with belief in God the Creator:

- a. the naturalistic assumption is a belief rather than a fact, but it is not a (pseudo-)religious belief: believing in God means entrusting one's soul and salvation to God, whereas the naturalistic assumption does not imply this kind of existential trust;

- b. although one can arrive at the naturalistic assumption from an atheistic starting point, it can also be traced back to the Christian doctrine of creation: the idea of created order fosters the hope that natural explanations can be found and a proper understanding of the Creator-creation distinction does not

3. Bavinck, "Creation or Development," 849; Dutch: *Schepping of ontwikkeling* (1901), 8.

encourage us to use God as a supernatural wild card to finish as yet incomplete natural explanations but rather discourages us from doing so.⁴

3. As far as I know, attempts to show that there are phenomena for which the possibility of a natural explanation must be ruled out have not yet led to widely accepted results. There are cases in which it appears to be very difficult to find a sufficient natural explanation, such as the origin of life, but such cases prove that the naturalistic assumption is indeed an assumption rather than that it is misguided.

4. The naturalistic assumption fosters a healthy skepticism to all kinds of claims about supernatural events. This is not to be confused with a closed mindset that denies that special and unexpected things happen. Rather, it is a refusal to close one's mind to the possibility that even the most extraordinary things can be explained in a natural way. The laziness of unbelief and the laziness of gullibility are both to be avoided.

For the sake of clarity, two explanatory notes are in place before we proceed. Firstly, as said above, naturalism is defined in a variety of ways. In "the naturalistic assumption" naturalism means *weak ontological naturalism*, in contrast to *strong ontological naturalism* which by definition claims that God does not exist whereas for weak ontological naturalism the question of God's existence is an open question. It also stands in contrast to *methodological naturalism*, which says that in science and also, for example, in historical studies we should only give natural explanations and refrain from supernatural explanations without, however, making the ontological claim that there really are no supernatural interventions in the natural order and that a natural explanation for everything really exists.⁵

Secondly, naturalism is often discussed in relationship to the theory of evolution. To be sure, the naturalistic assumption and the theory of evolution do not need to go together. For example, one can share the naturalistic assumption and still not be convinced that science has sufficiently proven that humans descend from other animals. If so, one does not resort to a supernatural explanation, but rather waits till a more convincing natural explanation has been found or actively searches for it oneself. Conversely, one can accept the theory

4. This is, of course, not to say that all who seek to maintain the category of supernatural explanation use God at random as a supernatural wildcard. Section 4.1 mentioned "the possibility to develop a philosophy of science that allows for divine interventions and for supernatural explanations in scientific/scholarly work under specific conditions, without falling into an anything-goes-attitude and an uncontrolled use of God as a science stopper."

5. See also section 4.1. The terms "supernatural explanation" and "supernatural intervention" may raise the question as to what is meant by the word "supernatural." Throughout history this term has been used in various ways. See for example Ward, "Supernaturalism." In my understanding, only the living God is supernatural: if even he did not actually exist, there would be nothing or nobody supernatural at all. However, if he exists and is the Creator of "heaven and earth," the dividing line between supernatural and natural becomes the same as in the distinction between Creator and creation (creature).

of evolution and still not share the naturalistic assumption: the fact that one accepts a natural explanation for human origins does not necessarily imply that one has to assume that there is a natural explanation for everything. Nevertheless, in practice, the theory of evolution and the naturalistic assumption often go together and reinforce each other. Darwin's breakthrough would probably not have happened without a prior assumption that there might be a natural explanation for the origin of species and has in turn given confidence that natural explanations can be found for more phenomena that at first sight could only be explained in a supernatural way.

5.3 The Invitation to See References

Does naturalism imply atheism? As said, *weak ontological naturalism* is not atheistic by definition, but it might imply atheism on further reflection. If every phenomenon has a purely natural explanation (be it known at this moment or not) or does not need an explanation at all, it does not immediately follow that God does not exist. But it raises a question: if God is not needed as an explanation for anything, why would one still assume that he exists? Should one not rather take Ockham's razor and remove him as a superfluously assumed entity from our thinking? Moreover, supposed that the naturalistic assumption is true and God still exists, can he be involved with this world?

This latter question I answer affirmatively: God can indeed be involved with the world. Only, he cannot be adduced as an explanation for phenomena because in that case we would give a non-natural explanation whereas our definition of naturalism says that there are only purely natural explanations. This is not a problem, however. Explanation is a concept that concerns the causal relationships between creatures. God himself may be so different from the creatures and the Creator-creature-relationship may be so different from the relationship between creatures among each other that the word explanation does not apply to his relationship with his creation.

To be clear, this is not a trick of definition and it has consequences for our reflection and talk about the Creator-creature-relationship: God should not turn up later on as a non-natural explanation while we artificially avoid the word explanation. As long as God actually functions in our thinking as a non-natural explanation, our conception of God is at odds with the naturalistic assumption. If we conceive God as the first cause in a series of causes, our conception is in conflict with the definition of naturalism, and the same is the case if we explain an unusual phenomenon as a divine intervention in the natural order.

However, naturalism leaves the full possibility to say that God thinks and wills his creation in its entirety and in all its parts and at all moments of time. If the naturalistic assumption is true and it belongs to the character of creation that there are no phenomena that have a non-natural explanation, this can be

willed by God, for example to maintain the difference between the Creator-creature-relationship and the creature-creature-relationships.

Thus, the naturalist assumption need not imply that one thinks about God's power in a limited way. God who in himself stands outside or above time has structural priority to all creatures. He is not the deistic God who at the beginning of time constructed a clock or machine that from then on runs by itself. Neither is he the supernaturalistic God who at the beginning of time constructed a clock that in principle runs by itself but in which he sometimes intervenes to make it run better. On the contrary, as said, he is the God who thinks and wills his creation in its entirety and in all its parts and at all moments of time.

Viewed apart, this conception of God does not necessarily exclude that he is able to intervene in the natural order of creation or to interfere in it in a special way or even that he actually does and has already done so, but neither does it necessarily imply that he is able to do so or has already done so. Perhaps God does not want to make such an intervention or special interference or perhaps he has not wanted to provide his creation with the possibility that it could be dealt with it in such a way. Therefore, our conclusion at this point is that so far we have not met a reason why the naturalistic assumption and faith in God, the almighty Father, the Creator of heaven and earth, would exclude each other.

However, is there any reason to believe that God actually exists if one follows the naturalistic assumption? Should one not rather conclude that the concept of God is redundant? I touched on this question above and will discuss it further now. If we point to the possibility of God's existence, but do not see him as an explanation for anything, what reason do we have to assume the actuality of his existence? The naturalistic assumption may not cogently imply atheism, but does it not give all occasion to atheism in practice?

Still, I am not sure that the answer to this last question should be affirmative. For some phenomena, a full natural explanation does exist, but there is more to them than this explanation. Even when the full natural explanation is known, *surprise* may still remain. Sometimes surprise will even be greater if we do not assume a supernatural action of God as an explanation, but search for a natural explanation and find it. Compare for example: "It is no wonder that there is life on earth because God brought it in a supernatural way" and "It evokes great wonder that, as improbable as it may seem to be, life on earth has a purely natural explanation." In scientific and scholarly research, one can treat this surprise as a side effect that is nice but to which one does not attach further value. It also seems to be beyond doubt that there is a natural explanation for the fact that we get surprised or amazed. Nevertheless, at the same time, one can also treat surprise in a different way, attach meaning to it, see a *reference* in it.

When we pay attention to this reference in a wonderful phenomenon, we do not search for an explanation, but for an *x-planation*. In principle, the naturalistic assumption neither encourages us to do so nor does it keep us away from it. However, the *sensus religiosis* or the religious assumption encourages

us to search for an x-planation.⁶ Just as the *sensus naturalis*, the *sensus religionis* is not equally well developed in every person. This may have to do with the structure of the brain and with education and development. One may have arrived at a way of thinking in which the naturalistic assumption and the religious assumption exclude each other, so that one does not develop the one or the other further, or even suppresses it. However, this does not exclude that many persons have a *sensus religionis*.

For the origin of a baby, a purely natural explanation can be given. At the same time, one can see something in the newborn child that refers to God. "From God's hand, we received . . ." is the x-planation of the origin of the baby. Explanation and x-planation do not exclude but complement each other.

Without being exhaustive, I would like to mention five phenomena in particular in which one can see a reference even if one has explained them in a natural way: seeing glory, being loved, being filled with the spirit, being addressed, and being liberated/free. These phenomena frequently occur in the Bible: people actually did experience them and desired to experience them. Stephen saw God's glory, Moses prayed: "Show me your glory," Paul said that God's love has been poured out into our hearts, John witnessed that we love because God first loved us, Paul trusted that nothing can separate us from Christ's love, Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, the prophets knew themselves addressed by God, Paul knew himself liberated by Christ, etc.⁷ One can see glory in that very special way in which Stephen and Moses saw it, but also when one goes out into nature on a beautiful spring day and witnesses with Jan Wit:

Thou hast, o Lord, dressed up the field,
to splendid flowers it gives birth.
The carefree birds call us to yield
that Thou doest not forget the earth.
And all this is a reference
to mystery that earth transcends.⁸

Until now, I have tacitly supposed that the references refer to God, but I have not yet argued it. We see the reference to a mystery, but we have not yet arrived at the mystery itself. However, let us summarize where we have reached so far.

1. The *sensus naturalis* and the *sensus religionis* do not exclude but complement each other. This is the basis of the binocular model.
2. From the *sensus naturalis* one can arrive at the naturalistic assumption, the assumption that every phenomenon has a purely natural explanation (be it known to human beings at present or not) or does not need a natural explanation at all.

6. It should be noted that in my discussion *sensus religionis* and religious assumption are more or less synonyms, whereas the naturalistic assumption is an intensification of the *sensus naturalis*.

7. See Acts 7:55; Exod. 33:18; Rom. 5:5; 1 John 4:19; Rom. 8:35–39; Gal. 5:1.

8. My translation of Wit, "Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren" (hymn). See further section 6.5.

3. This naturalistic assumption is not the same as the theory of evolution, but they seem to reinforce each other. There are no sacred areas (not even, for example, the origins of life, of humanity, of religion, and of morality) for which it would be forbidden to find a natural/evolutionary explanation.

4. This naturalistic assumption is not (a priori) at odds with faith in God, the almighty Father, the Creator of heaven and earth. However, if one accepts it, one cannot express the Creator-creation-relationship in terms of explanation, but this is possibly a gain rather than a loss.

5. Whereas on the basis of the *sensus naturalis* and the naturalistic assumption one can search for an explanation for phenomena, one can search for an x-planation of phenomena on the basis of the *sensus religionis*, the religious assumption. In the latter case the question is: to what do these phenomena refer?

6. An argued answer to the question whether the references refer to God, whether the religious assumption puts us on to the Creator-creation-relationship has not yet been given.

5.4 The Invitation to Distinguish and Combine Science and Religion

The results of the previous sections can be related to an ongoing discussion: the model of the two eyes is one model among the many models for the relationship between *science* and *religion*. The most famous classification of such models is Ian Barbour's, who distinguishes between *conflict*, *independence*, *dialogue* and *integration* models.⁹ The binocular model tends to the *independence* position in that it emphasizes that science and religion are two different perspectives on reality and that the scientific eye is concerned with searching for explanations, for understanding things in their mutual relationship, whereas the religious eye is concerned with searching for x-planations, for understanding the references in things. However, it also tends to the *dialogue* or even *integration* position: although it leaves space to develop the scientific eye and the religious eye independently (just as with a normal pair of binoculars one adjusts the lens for one eye first and closes the other eye at that moment), it aims at seeing depth by viewing the world with two eyes together (just as a normal pair of binoculars is not intended for use with one eye all the time).

The distinctive character of the two eyes model is perhaps even better understood in Mikael Stenmark's terms. He distinguishes between two extreme positions: *scientific expansionism* and *religious expansionism*. Scientific expansionists have much confidence in science and in what can be researched in the name of science and "they maintain that the boundaries of science can and should be expanded in such a way that something that has not been understood as science can now become a part of science." "In some versions, scientific expansionism . . . even attempts to offer a substitute for traditional religions, and

9. See Barbour, "Science and Religion: Models and Relations."

thus science itself becomes a religion or a worldview.”¹⁰ Religious expansionists, on the other hand, “agree in general terms that the boundaries of religion could and should be expanded in such a way that religion in some way becomes an important element of the scientific enterprise; religion becomes relevant for areas that were not previously considered part of its domain.”¹¹

In the highdays of postmodernism, such expansionism easily sounded too totalitarian to be appealing, but nowadays it has regained some popularity. For example, in his prizewinning *Evolutionair denken: De invloed van Darwin op ons wereldbeeld* [Evolutionary Thought: The Influence of Darwin on our Worldview], Chris Buskes gives a sympathetic overview of what can be called contemporary scientific expansionism. In his epilogue he writes:

At present, we cannot yet oversee the many implications of the theory of evolution because the revolution continues unabated. Possibly, the Darwinian paradigm will grow to full stature in the twenty first century, the century of biology. Only then will it be possible to take stock. At the same time, the theory of evolution will encounter opposition because not everybody is willing to embrace it and to accept its consequences. Religion, which continues its renewed advance, will more often and more fiercely clash with the insights of progressing science. The gap between knowledge and belief will be wider and wider and the differences of opinion almost unbridgeable. But we should not compromise, because the Darwinian revolution is irreversible, unless the zealots become in charge and the world is wrapped in darkness again.¹²

As examples of contemporary religious expansionism, Stenmark mentions the Christian Alvin Plantinga and the Muslim Mehdi Golshani. When Buskes speaks about the “renewed advance” of religion, he has among others the Intelligent Design movement in mind.¹³

In my view, both scientific expansionism and religious expansionism have the right to exist: it is fully legitimate that around science in a restricted sense and religion in a restricted sense one draws circles of consequences, implications, suspicions and perspectives. The area where the circle of science and the circle of religion overlap can be perceived as a conflict zone, but it can also be the very area in which one can see depth.

Models for the relationship between science and religion should not be understood as attempts to determine *the* relationship between “the” science and “the” religion. Science is not one: there are many disciplines, some of them divided into different schools; questions and theories gain and lose prominence in the course of time; even the concept of science itself is subject to change. Neither is religion one. There are many religions with many directions within

10. Stenmark, *How to Relate Science and Religion*, xi–xii.

11. Stenmark, *How to Relate Science and Religion*, xii.

12. Buskes, *Evolutionair denken*, 434 (the title can be translated not only as *Evolutionary Thought* but also as *Thinking Evolutionarily*).

13. Cf. Buskes, *Evolutionair denken*, 274–83.

them. The world religions are marked by continuity through the ages, but they also change continually. Moreover, the phenomenon of religion as such and also each religion has many dimensions. For example, Ninian Smart distinguishes seven dimensions that to a greater or lesser extent can be found in many religions: the practical and ritual dimension, the experiential and emotional dimension, the narrative or mythic dimension, the doctrinal and philosophical dimension, the ethical and legal dimension, the social and institutional dimension, and the material dimension.¹⁴ In short, given the high number of variables on both sides it is not possible to unequivocally determine or prescribe the relationship between science and religion in general.

However, models for science and religion have a descriptive value if one sufficiently specifies what kind of religion and what kind of science one has in mind. Even so, a classification is rarely completely neutral. For example, Barbour counts creation science among the conflict models, which constitute one extreme of his spectrum of models. However, creation scientist Ariel Roth has given his book *Origins* the subtitle *Linking Science and Scripture* and seems to treat creation science as an integration model, so that it should rather be classified at the other extreme of Barbour's spectrum.¹⁵ The ideal of neutrality can only be reached by more careful description, in which both the conflict element and the integration element are given proper attention.

Still, in this essay the two eyes model does not function primarily as a description but rather as an invitation. For example, the question is not whether somebody has already considered the relationship between the Christian religion and the theory of evolution according to the binocular model, but whether it is good to do so. To be clear, given the variation within Christianity, the kind of Christianity that I will speak about later in this essay is the post-post-Christian position of the opening essay that intends to use the treasures of the catholic Reformed tradition and happens to be essentially in line with it.

At the end of this section, let me give another example of what it means to think about the relationship between science and religion in a binocular way, to see with two eyes. The boy is ill. What should the mother do? Does she take him to the hospital? Or does she pray for healing? She does both. Is it a trick to double the chances for healing? No. Is it meaningless? No. She simply knows it is good as does the boy.

5.5 The Invitation of the Thirsting Heart

Postponing the full answer to the question why one would believe in God given his redundancy as an explanation to the next section and taking the risk of some overlap, let us reflect here further on the soul's thirst for God about which we spoke in the opening essay (1.4, 1.5).

14. Smart, *The World's Religions*, 13–21.

15. Roth, *Origins: Linking Science and Scripture*, Dutch: *Oorsprong: Wetenschap en Bijbel verenigd*. The Dutch subtitle means: "Science and Bible united."

Does the thirst of the heart for God answer the question as to whether God exists? At first sight, the answer is a simple “no.” One cannot derive the existence of the object of desire from the sole fact that one desires. The thirst for God is probably explainable in a natural, psychological or maybe even biological way. However, when the desired has been explained, it has not been explained away—the desire remains. Therefore, one can also search for an x-planation for the desire. One can understand it as a reference to God.

The strength of the invitation of Psalm 42:2 is that is not an invitation to believe in one’s own projection, to satisfy oneself with a self-made God. It takes seriously the atheistic exhortation not to believe in a god who does not live. However, as said in the first essay, “it dares to see the possibility that, whatever gods may not exist, there is the living God who, by his very definition, is the God who exists.” Believing in the living God is not an intellectual activity and it is not based on proofs for God’s existence, but it meets the criteria of intellectual honesty (cf. 1.5).

Believers and atheists do not differ too much. Piety that is not true piety, unsound arguments for God’s existence—those who believe in the living God hate it as much as atheists do. But there is a crucial difference: does one conclude on the basis of all the not-knowing and all the objections that one should not believe in God, or does one, chastened by the not-knowing and the objections, hope for the living God even more purely?

The experience of many believers is that the way of hope is often a dark way full of doubt, temptation and lassitude, but they also meet signs that make sense in the perspective of hope, signs that they can see as coming from and therefore referring back to the living God. They meet these references for example in the phenomena mentioned above: seeing glory, being loved, being filled with the spirit, being addressed, and being liberated/free.

In short, given the naturalistic intuition, the living God is redundant as an explanation, but he is not redundant for the life of the believers: he is even the focus of their hope and desire. He is not their self-made God, because they know that a self-made God would never be able to satisfy their deepest thirst. They know that they have not yet seen the living God face to face, and that nourishes both doubt and desire and hope. But again and again, they see something of his signs and they search for them, and so they go with open eyes through the world, living as seeing the Invisible One.

5.6 The Invitation of the Cross

Anyone who goes through the world with open eyes cannot ignore the problem of evil. When there is a beautiful baby in the cradle, it is not difficult to write: “From God’s hand, we received . . .” One does not need great faith to see a gift of God in such a child. But what if the child dies after half a year, or if the baby does not look well-formed, or if the expectant parents decide to terminate the pregnancy, or if a couple does not see its desire to have children fulfilled? Do we

also see God's hand in this? Or is that blasphemy? Or does it simply show that, on further reflection, it is nonsense to talk about God's hand? Does one run into all kinds of contradictions if one tries to give x-planations?

You can feel that a word of Scripture has spoken to you, you can believe that you have heard God's voice and then it still turns out that you were wrong. It is part of God's glory that the earth trembles when he looks at it (Ps. 104:32; cf. 5.7), and that majestic glory is visible in an earthquake or tsunami with its thousands of dead. Countless examples and variations can be mentioned. Sometimes the references are absent where we would like to see them. Sometimes there are references, but we hesitate to say that they refer to God or the divine. If we want to continue speaking about references, we will have to speak about *broken* references.

We could certainly choose to have only a primary experience of the references that we meet in our lives, without attempting to organize or reflect on them, but the question is whether we can maintain this in the end. Does it not either lead to ignoring references or to the development of a very limited theory because it is only based on our personal experience so far?

We could also think that the references that we perceive in things refer to the divine in these things themselves, that is, we can develop a pantheistic view. But if these same things also contain signs of brokenness, the divine and the broken themselves would seamlessly coincide in the very same thing, and the question is whether that is convincing.

We could also assume that the references refer to God insofar as they are not broken. If so, we could join a religion that collects the religious experience of the ages and shows major paths through it, so that we are not limited to the references that we have met on our own path of life. Still, the question is: how convincing is a religious tradition if it is only based on unbroken references? It may appeal to a desire for wholeness, but considered from some distance the question of plausibility occurs. If only the whole references confirm the plausibility of faith in God and the broken references undermine it, we should pose the question as to whether such a religion does justice to reality.

At this point, the Christian religion is more plausible: it knows the revelation of the Lord of glory without form or glory on the cross (cf. 1.8). The brokenness of the references does not constitute an argument against the Christian religion, but one in favor of it.

Christian theology is a theology of glory. It is a tremendous loss if we are not allowed to see references to God in all the glory that we see in this world. But Christian theology takes these references as broken references. It is based on the paradoxical revelation of the glory of the cross. As *theologia gloriae*, Christian theology is *theologia crucis*.

5.7 The Invitation to Sing Psalms in the Face of Evil

This section is best read as an interlude between the first and second part of this essay. It could have been left out without interrupting the main argument that runs throughout the essay, but, now that it is here, it is a prelude to the invitation to read Scripture with open eyes and even more a postlude to the brief discussion of the problem of evil in the previous section. Although we have seen that the problem of God's redundancy need not lead to atheism and that Christ crucified is the key to the twofold problem, there can still be that spark of doubt that suddenly becomes an inferno when one is confronted with evil. Therefore, some further reflection seems appropriate before we continue the main argument of the essay.

To be sure, one can play the problem of evil down and maintain with Richard Dawkins that it is only a weak argument for atheism because it shows that God is not good rather than that he does not exist.¹⁶ However, according to classical theology the statement "God is not good" is a contradiction in terms: "The word 'God' means that He is infinite goodness."¹⁷ And even if we are reluctant to give a definition of God (cf. 1.5), we hope that the living God will quench the thirst of our hearts, not with bitterness, but with love.

Still, if we do not want to play down the problem of evil but seek to deal with it, we should realize that dealing with this problem may have several meanings. One of them is that one tries to demonstrate that God may have good reasons to allow the existence of evil. For example, Thomas Aquinas, referring to Augustine, maintains that it exactly belongs to the infinity of God's goodness that, by his omnipotence and goodness, God can allow¹⁸ evil to exist and bring forth good even out of evil.¹⁹ In Herman Bavinck's theology, the fall plays a central role: the first humans were created in a state of integrity, but then fell into sin, and this fall is the origin of all subsequent evil, both natural and moral, both suffering and sin.²⁰ However, apart from the difficulty that science seems to disprove rather than to prove that a state of integrity has existed before the present natural and human condition which is marked by suffering and evil, the fall as such does not explain why a person in a state of integrity who has the free choice between good and evil would choose for evil rather than for good. Bavinck himself was not unaware of this problem, discussed it at some length, and then concluded: "With all this we have established nothing other and nothing more than the possibility of sin. How that possibility became a reality is and

16. See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 135.

17. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theological*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I q.2 a.3 obj.1, cf. I q.2 a.3 re.1.

18. Thomas uses the verb *permitto*, "to permit." On the technical meaning of this verb for Augustine and Thomas, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:60 #313.

19. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* I q.2 a.3 re.1, cf. Augustine, *Enchiridion* 11.

20. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:25–190 ##307–42. For the idea that natural evil and suffering are consequences of sin, see especially 3:176–82 #340.

will presumably remain a mystery.”²¹ True as this may be in itself, it renders improbable that the doctrine of the fall can solve the problem of evil so adequately that the atheistic temptation will disappear.

However, dealing with the problem of evil can also mean that one does not try to solve the problem of evil, but rather accepts evil as a reality that can be faced in many different ways. This latter approach seems to me to be better: I seek for keys to deal with experiences of evil, keys that do not break my relationship with the living God, but rather strengthen it. In my view, one of the best places to find such keys is in the Book of Psalms. In fact, my discussion of Psalms 42–43 in the first and fourth essays has already shown how this double Psalm can help us deal with the evil of the taunting question “where is your God?” Elsewhere I have reflected on the question of how the words “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (Psa. 137:9 ESV) can help us deal with evil that is inflicted on us by others.²² Here I will discuss how Psalm 104 offers keys to deal with the problem of natural evil.

Psalm 104 is a beautiful hymn. The poet considers nature and sees God’s work everywhere. Right at the beginning he urges himself to bless the Lord and confesses:

O LORD my God, you are very great!
You are clothed with splendor and majesty. (Ps. 104:1 ESV)

This Psalm invites us to see God in the creation, preservation and governance of the world.²³ In doing so, it does not ask us to close our eyes to natural evil, but rather invites us to include it in our reflection on the relationship between God and the world.

The Psalm does not describe the LORD as a “sweet” God, who only makes the birds sing and the buds burst. No, the LORD is a majestic God, who even has a hand in thunderstorms and earthquakes. God uses wind and lightning to achieve his ends: “He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants” (Ps. 104:4 NIV).

Verse 6 and 7 say about the earth:

21. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:69 #315. Thus, Bavinck does not claim to know the origin of the first sin: “Sin . . . does not have an origin in the true sense of the word, only a beginning. . . [As for] the impossibility of explaining the origin of sin, . . . it should be said openly and clearly: we are here at the boundaries of our knowledge” (3:69–70 #315). See also section 3.7.

22. See De Wit, “Your Little Ones against the Rock!”

23. For a division between verses that speak about preservation (*creatio continua*) and governance (*gubernatio*) and verses that speak about creation (*creatio prima*), see Hossfeld, “Psalm 104,” 88.

You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
 the waters stood above the mountains.
 At your rebuke they fled;
 at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. (ESV)²⁴

The image is that the deep or primeval sea covered the earth and even the mountains, but with a threatening rebuke²⁵ and thunder God called it to its appointed place.²⁶ In Ancient Near Eastern mythology, the primeval sea was seen as a dangerous power that was fought by the gods. Possibly one saw this in a storm at sea: the waves tried to rise up high, but were then knocked down by the wind. In a sense, this is what one finds here: God combats the power of the deep with another power of nature, the thunder. However, it is not a fight in which it is an open question who will win, God or the primeval sea. No, God makes his battle cry heard and immediately the waters flee to their appointed place. In the play of the elements, in which a human can feel so feeble, God's power becomes clear.

Also in the animal realm we can see God's majesty, if we have an eye for it. Verses 20 and 21 say:

You make darkness, and it is night,
 when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
 The young lions roar for their prey,
 seeking their food from God. (NRSV)

The roaring of the lions is a prayer to God for a prey. Their roaring can terrify us and for the poet that must have even more have been the case: most of us know lions only from zoos and safari parks, but at that time they could roam around your house and your herd. Still, the poet says: listen carefully to the roaring of the lions: it is a prayer to God, it is the way in which they express their dependence on the Creator.

Verse 26 speaks about Leviathan and the sea: "There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it." Leviathan is a monster. Sometimes it seems to be a crocodile, sometimes a terrifying sea animal. It is the symbol of evil, the power that disturbs the goodness of creation.²⁷ But what does this verse say? Do not fear that power too much. Leviathan is also a creature of God. It is terrifying, but its area of play is limited to the sea. Observed from some distance one can see what the monster is doing: playing like a child in the swimming pool.

It is also possible to translate verse 26 as: "There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play with it." If so, God wants to play himself and for

24. NRSV translates most verbs in the present tense.

25. See Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. לָעָרַף.

26. See verse 8. It is debated whether this verse says that God called the waters or rather the mountains and valleys to their appointed place, but the first seems most likely (pace ESV).

27. Cf. Uehlinger, "Leviathan לְוִיָּתָן."

that purpose he has created Leviathan. What does this mean? Leviathan, symbol of evil, of which you fear that it will suddenly hit you, is only an innocent animal that God has created as a playing tool or playmate. For us, Leviathan can really look like a monster, but we should not think that God is not able to match it. For God the contest with Leviathan is only play, and such a terrifying animal is only a soft toy for him.

God takes care of his creatures. Verses 27 and 28 say:

These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

However, God also makes his creatures return to dust by taking their breath away, verse 29:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

In fall, leaves fall and trees become bare. Animals die in their time. Everything reminds us that humans also do not have eternal life on this earth. God is a God of life and of death. Still, the poet does not only speak about the return to dust in a negative way. In spring everything will be fresh and green again. Verse 30 says: “When you send forth your Spirit,²⁸ they are created, and you renew the face of the ground” (ESV).

Verse 32 speaks about LORD’s involvement in earthquakes and volcanic eruptions:

Who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!

These are awesome natural phenomena against which we are powerless. However, God only has to look at the earth and a heavy earthquake takes place; he just has to give a little slap to a mountain and a volcano erupts.

The poet is much impressed by all these works of God. He knows that God is eternal, whereas he lives here only temporarily. However, his limited time of life he wants to fill with worship, verse 33: “I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.” He also prays that the Lord himself may enjoy his creation, verse 31: “May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works.”

Do we sing along? Or do we feel some hesitation? Does the poet not too easily see God’s hand in every natural phenomenon? God sends his lightning—even when it hits somebody fatally? God takes care that the lions get their food—does he not have mercy with the savaged kid? The eruption of the volcano is magnificent—but under the lava there are thousands of casualties.

28. Or “your breath.” For the “pneumatology” of this Psalm, see Hossfeld, “Psalm 104,” 92.

This is a difficult issue, but some thoughts may help us:

1. The Psalm does not say that we should praise God because kids are savaged and humans are buried under lava, but only because he takes care that lions have sufficient food and he shows his majesty when the mountains smoke. It is good to consider the evil implications, but the Psalm is not as sadistic as to glorify them.

2. Of course, we could say that God has nothing to do with natural disasters, but how does that help us? To whom should we then go if we are hit by them? If God has nothing to do with the power of nature, then it is an independent, fully arbitrary power. However, the Psalm entitles us to believe that God has a hand in it and that still, although he is not a sweet God, he is a good God. The Psalm invites us to believe that “God moves in a mysterious way” and that “behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.”²⁹ To be clear, in this Psalm natural evil is not a consequence of or a punishment for moral evil. When the Psalmist prays in the last verse: “Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more” (Ps. 104:35 ESV), this is not a prayer that God may use lightning or lions to remove the sinners from the earth. Nor is there any suggestion that God has begun to make earthquakes and volcanoes happen since humans have sinned. What the Psalmist describes, is a world with lightning, lions, Leviathan and frightening natural phenomena, in which there is a place for working and praising people, but in which there should not be sinners. Thus, in this Psalm, natural evil is not a punishment for moral evil, but an integrated part of God’s dealing with creation, and although this may horrify and terrify us at first, the Psalm invites us to grow and to see it also as divine play.

The most profound about God and chaos is expressed only when one dares to see in chaos more than God’s wrath and more than the birth of God’s kingdom. The most profound is this that chaos is God’s play. He has made Leviathan to play with it. . . . *We* are God’s play. The crucial point is not just the courage to be, but the willingness to play. “May I have a dance with you?” is what God asks us, and the core of our existence depends on the question whether we are willing to accept this invitation.³⁰

3. We should not expect to gain full knowledge of God from the observation of general natural phenomena only. If we only had nature with natural evil as an integral part of it, we could not know for sure whether this was the work of God and compatible with his goodness. But we have Jesus Christ and him crucified. We know that God had his Son hang on the cross in darkness for three hours. There he left his Son alone in Godforsakeness. There he seemed to play a sadistic game, but actually, by the death of his Son, he saved the world.

29. See Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (hymn).

30. Van Ruler, “God en de chaos,” 44 (italics added).

Since we live in a world in which such a thing happened, we can see this earth with all its ups and downs as the work of the living God.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all. (Ps. 104:24 ESV)

I hope this discussion of Psalm 104 has made clear how singing Psalms can help us live in relationship to the living God in the face of evil. Sometimes they are the key to find a surprising and surprisingly simple answer to a deep question. The following story, from the hand of Multatuli (cf. 3.1), is a classical statement of the problem of natural evil in Dutch literature:

—Behold, my son, how wise Providence has made everything. That bird lays its eggs in its nest. The young will hatch out by the time that there are worms and flies to feed them. Then they will sing a song of praise for the glory of the Creator who showers his creatures with blessings.
—Do the worms sing along, daddy?*)

*) The questioning son is still waiting for an answer.³¹

As far as I know, a direct answer to the question of the son has not yet been given. Still, if the father had known his Bible well enough, he could have answered immediately: “Yes, the worms do sing.” In the Bible, a worm is singing, for the Psalmist says: “I am a worm and not a man” (Ps. 22:6 ESV). We even know what the worm is singing: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1). Jesus speaks these words from the cross (Mark 15:34). He is the singing worm.

Part Two: Reading the Bible with Open Eyes

5.8 The Invitation of the Triune God and Other Religions

The cross of Jesus Christ is not a universal idea but a contingent event then and there (cf. 1.8). The cross cannot be derived from independent reflection; one has to meet it in order to see that it answers to the reality of life. Since around the cross a religion has developed and a church who has carried on that religion through history, it is possible to meet the cross here and now. It is not lost in the past but presented by the church everywhere, through word and sacrament.

If one has come to the cross, one is now invited by the church to adopt her Trinitarian way of speaking about God, a way of speaking that is based on the references that Israel has seen and recorded in the Hebrew Bible and that the

31. Multatuli, *Ideen* 1, idea 345. In theological literature this story is cited by, e.g., Van den Brink, *Als een schoon boec*, 10.

church herself has noticed and digested since Jesus' ministry, cross and resurrection. The church invites us to x-plain the references that we notice ourselves as (broken) references to the Triune God, as revelation from God. When the church sings: "And all this is a reference to mystery that earth transcends" (5.3, 6.5), this mystery is the mystery of the Triune God. If one has discovered the cross, one may accept this invitation of the church willingly.

Then, doubt can strike. Does the church not also ask us to believe all kinds of things that are based on nothing, are utterly unlikely, or are simply in conflict with our scientific knowledge? Doubt can even strike back against our turning to the cross. Is that which we have seen in the cross really so special or can we also get it elsewhere or is it after all an illusion? Does the church address the religious intuition of humans but fail to take their naturalistic intuition seriously? Does she teach them to distrust it? Does she respond to questions in this regard with very sophisticated answers that leave one feeling that the point of the question is still unanswered?

Moreover, even if the naturalistic assumption is not atheistic in itself or by implication, Christians may fear that it has a corroding effect on Christianity: if we assume that there is a natural explanation for everything, does this not flatten our understanding of the Bible and corrode core Christian beliefs? If we accept the naturalistic assumption and the binocular worldview, even though we do not end up as atheists, we may lose the Christian faith and only keep the vague notion that there must be "something."

Here, I would first of all like to restate what I have said before: we may indeed have to go through a painful process of losing initially (1.3). However, let us not shrink from it, but rather discover that this process of losing is at the same time a process of liberation.³² As said in the opening essay: "We will be freed from cherished beliefs that, however, have turned out not to be true or not to be worthwhile anymore" (1.3).

Still, my invitation in this and the following sections is to consider whether, on proper analysis, the naturalistic assumption and the binocular worldview do not flatten but rather deepen our understanding of the Bible and do not corrode the Christian faith but give us renewed access to it. To this end, I will focus on the interpretation of biblical miracle stories and on the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the next two sections. However, let me first sketch the broader corollary by indicating how one can understand and develop a catholic Reformed conception of God, and of Christ and the Holy Spirit in particular, from a binocular perspective and how one can appreciate the relationship and differences between Christianity and other religions.

Doctrine of God. For Bavinck, and probably for many other catholic Reformed theologians, a major concern is that our concept of God remains theistic and does not slip into either deism or pantheism.³³ As I have argued above

32. Cf. the notion of a cathartic reading of Herman Bavinck in section 2.1.

33. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:331 #231 and passim.

(5.3, 5.6), I am indeed advocating neither deism nor pantheism. Whether the position that I propose in this essay is theistic depends on how one defines theism.

For example, Chris Buskes defines it as “the idea that God has created everything, has revealed himself, and still intervenes in the world.” According to him, in theism, God’s continuing care for his creation “takes shape in divine interventions and miracles.” To be sure, although he considers theism to be “less dogmatic and intolerant” than fundamentalism, he nevertheless calls it an extreme position that is incompatible with the theory of evolution and he associates it with crusades, inquisition and terrorism.³⁴

My first reaction to Buskes is: “If this is theism, I am simply not a theist.” However, Buskes offers a scale of positions regarding religion that, in descending strength, runs as follows: fundamentalism, theism, deism, pantheism, “somethingism,” humanism, agnosticism, and atheism.³⁵ If I am not allowed to challenge the scale as such but am simply asked to indicate where I am on it, I would opt for a place between fundamentalism and deism rather than for a place on the lower end of the scale, and I expect to be there in a big company of other believers. Some of them will glorify crusades, inquisition and terrorism, but most of them will abhor such things as much as I do. Some of them will indeed reject the theory of evolution, whereas others identify themselves as “evolutionary theists” and maybe even actively promote openness toward the theory of evolution among fellow theists. Many would not be happy to exclusively locate God’s continuing care for his creation in divine interventions and miracles: they would as much, or even more, stress that God’s care becomes apparent through the natural order of things—even though they may struggle with the experience of God’s absence at the same time.³⁶ The question is indeed whether, on proper analysis, the acceptance of miracle stories as part of Holy Scripture needs to imply acceptance of the category of supernatural intervention in the natural order and thus the rejection of the naturalistic assumption. This question will be discussed in the next two sections.

In short, the position that I develop in these essays is theistic, if that is the term for a position that affirms God’s existence and that is not fundamentalistic, deistic, pantheistic, or so on. However, I do not care too much for this term, am not happy with all of the ideas that are associated with it, and would rather prefer to call myself somebody who believes in the living God.

Christology. Catholic (including Catholic Reformed) theologians affirm that Jesus Christ is both God and man or, put differently, that the man Christ Jesus is

34. Buskes, *Evolutionair denken*, 286–87.

35. Buskes, *Evolutionair denken*, 287–88. “Somethingism” is a literal translation of the Dutch term “ietsisme,” which is used for the position that “there is ‘something’ higher that is at the basis of everything and that makes itself felt in surprise about existence”; contrary to my position, “it tends to religious vagueness and eclecticism.” Buskes, *Evolutionair denken*, 288.

36. For this paradox of feeling both God’s presence (even as too pressing) and his absence, see, e.g., Ps. 42 and the discussion of it in section 4.8.

God in our midst. From a binocular perspective, it is possible and maybe even mandate to accept the real humanity of Jesus, which implies among others that, in principle, he can be the object of historical research. At the same time, one can see references to God in him. I have spoken about the broken references at the cross and we may also see them at other moments during his earthly life. The binocular model does not dictate as such whether, on the basis of these references, one should say that Jesus stood in a special relationship to God or that he himself is God in our midst. For other reasons, I prefer the latter expression, because it is the clearest *denial* that Christianity is about extolling, divinizing, or even deifying a human person.

Pneumatology. Understanding the work of the Holy Spirit from a binocular perspective has several advantages. The experience of being filled with the Spirit, especially known from the New Testament, does not fully coincide with the Holy Spirit himself. The experience as such is a phenomenon that can be explained in a natural way. There is continuity between the “holy spirit experience” or spiritual experience and the Spirit himself, but it is a broken continuity. Spiritual experiences may lead to excesses that can hardly be contributed to God, and some experiences may be related to psychological disorders that we should not disguise with religious talk about the Spirit. At the same time, our speaking about the Holy Spirit should not become so docetic that, although we confess that the Holy Spirit works, we do not want to see this work in any spiritual experience. Such a docetic view on the work of the Holy Spirit may rightly be based on the assumption that there is a natural explanation for any human spiritual experience, but it ignores that what can be explained in a natural way can also be x-plain in a religious way, especially if such a religious x-planation is able to acknowledge the brokenness of references.³⁷

Theology of Religions. Other religions also appeal to the religious intuition and can also be understood as organized x-planations of references. Insofar as these references come from God and refer back to him, these religions too are based on revelation. However, they have come into being around other historical contingent events than the ones that are foundational for Christianity, in particular the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In the events of other religions one can perceive references that partly overlap with those of Christianity and partly not. Even if there are rather similar events and rather similar references are seen, each religion may x-plain them in its own way.

A qualitative comparison of religions is possible. For example, does a religion make historical claims that it cannot give up even though scholarly re-

37. Although Bavinck did not use the distinction between explanation and x-planation, he also sought to maintain that conversion can be a psychological process and work of God's will at the same time. “This whole process of conversion, which begins with the awakening of the consciousness of guilt and misery and develops itself into a hearty joy in God through Christ, is from the beginning to the end psychologically mediated. . . . Conversion and faith . . . occur thus in a psychological way, which takes into account each man's character and environment, yet they are a revelation of [God's] will.” Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 240–41.

search shows that they are not true? And what is the quality of the praxis of life to which a religion exhorts? Has the fact that some specific historically contingent events were missed (or undervalued) led to gaps in a religion that become apparent as soon as one compares it with a religion that has dealt with these events? Is a religion capable of binocularity, so that, when scientific and scholarly knowledge grows, the religion can continue to exist in an authentic way? In short, the comparison can be among others about the events that are taken into account, the relationship between explanations and x-planations, and the specific x-planations that are given. Such a comparison does not need to presuppose that all religions are equal and basically about the same, but can lead to a critical appreciation of both similarities between religions and the otherness of other religions as well as the unique elements of Christianity.

If so, a binocular perspective can help to articulate a Christian theology of religions: it can account for the existence of other religions and their specific qualities and lacunae, without falling into common places such as that “the plurality of religions shows that no religion is true,” “all religions are equally true,” or “other religions are lower stages on the road to Christianity.” For interreligious dialogue, it could be helpful if representatives of specific religions could agree on the binocular model as such, but it is not an absolute requirement: although I may see it as a weakness of another religion if, for example, its relationship to science cannot be expressed with help of the binocular model, I do not want to close myself off to meeting others who for one reason or another are less happy with the binocular model.

The invitation to both Christians and adherents of other religions to express themselves in terms of the binocular model stands, and whoever extends an invitation, takes the risk that others do not accept it, although the hope is that they will do so.

5.9 The Invitation of Miracle Stories

If this essay has retained any readers to this point, it may now lose some of them, whereas others may become excited. As for me, I think that this section is worth to be written, even if it happens to offer only a partial understanding of the riddle of miracle stories and not the full truth about them. My basic attitude is this: what I seek to do is to promote true *faith* and to avoid both *unbelief* and *credulity*. Even if one disagrees with my approach to miracle stories in general or the interpretation of a specific miracle story in particular, I hope one can at least agree on this basic attitude. Moreover, if one is not convinced that my approach is applicable to all miracle stories in the Bible, one may still find it helpful for some. Let me begin with a general statement about reading Scripture and then consider its implications for reading miracle stories.

Holy Scripture can be read from both a naturalistic and a religious perspective—this statement can be seen as a further implication of the organic concep-

tion of inspiration.³⁸ Christians are invited to read the Bible in a binocular way. The church can and should be open to scholarly research to its Holy Scriptures: it has nothing to honor or hide that would fail in careful research. Historical-critical and literary approaches to the Bible deserve all space, but should be complemented with a religious way of reading.³⁹ Again, in order to read Scripture with religious receptivity, scholarly knowledge can be very helpful, although at first it may be difficult to see how the two are related, just as it can be difficult at first to adjust the two lenses of a pair of binoculars in such a way that they together give one view with depth.

This adjustment of the two lenses can be particularly difficult when we see that the Bible relates many miraculous and wonderful events, which, at least at first sight, are difficult to explain in a natural way. It may raise the question as to whether we should either reject the stories about such events as nonsense or abandon the naturalistic assumption. Understandable as this question may be, I would like to raise a counter question: is it possible that it is exactly the two eyes model which can be helpful in dealing with such miracle stories in a fruitful way?

In one of his volumes on the Historical Jesus, John P. Meier argues, under reference to research on miraculous healings in Lourdes, that there are healings for which no natural explanation is known. He suggests that in such cases an atheist will assume that a natural explanation does exist even if it is not known to us, whereas a Christian will assume that such healings are wrought by God in a supernatural way, while a historian as a historian will have to leave the question open as to whether such healings were caused in a natural or a supernatural way.⁴⁰

However, in my view, it is at least worth considering whether the Christian can agree with the atheist's assumption that there is a fully natural explanation for such miraculous healings, even if it is not known to us. Let me be clear: I am not referring here to some protestant prejudice that God does not work in Lourdes. On the contrary, I suggest that, at least in some cases of healings for which we do not know the explanation, we consider saying both at the same time: (a) we assume that this healing has a natural explanation, *and* (b) not as a supernatural explanation, but as an x-planation, we believe that God has wrought this healing. We say the second, not to diminish the first, but because, even if we already knew the natural explanation, something remarkable remains in this healing—there is a reference in it that calls for an x-planation.

38. For the theory of organic inspiration, see especially Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:431–35 #114. It will be clear that my position is not simply a reiteration of Bavinck's theory: I feel especially unsatisfied by his elaboration in *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:439–48 ##116–17, where—as he might have hesitated to accept my “further implication” as an improvement on his theory.

39. See also section 1.9. For a discussion of the main paradigms of biblical interpretation, see, e.g., Holladay, “Contemporary Methods of Reading the Bible.”

40. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 2:515–21.

When patients are healed in Lourdes nowadays, a doctor may have examined them before and can again examine them afterwards. Even though it may remain a mystery what exactly happened at the moment of healing, a lot of questions can be answered in a medical, scientific way. When we talk about miracles in the Bible, we should realize that we are in a different position: the only thing we have are miracle *stories*, that is, *texts* that speak about miracles (I take the term *story* in a broad and rather neutral sense: it neither implies nor excludes historicity). So, when we consider whether there is a natural explanation for a biblical miracle, we should remain clear that this is first of all a quest for a natural explanation of how a text or story has come into being.

For example, when we read that Balaam's donkey spoke, our first question is not: "Can we give a natural explanation of how a donkey can speak?" but: "Can we give a natural explanation of how this text about a speaking donkey came into being?" The answer to the second question might be that the historical Balaam had actually heard his donkey speak, but maybe the speaking of the donkey is only a literary motive in the text⁴¹ and then the quest for an explanation of how a historical donkey may have spoken becomes irrelevant and misplaced.

To be sure, there are at least five possibilities of how miracle stories may have come into being:

41. M. W. Chavalas, "Balaam," 76 (referring to D. Marcus) speaks about Numbers 22:22–30 (the story of Balaam and the donkey) as "a literary device that exhibits irony, satire and parody throughout the story, most likely in an attempt to downgrade the prophet."

To be sure, *within* the narrative world of the Book of Numbers and the Hebrew Bible in general, it feels plausible that the LORD opens the mouth of the ass because so many mighty deeds are ascribed to LORD. Moreover, it is exactly because of the discrepancy between this narrative world and the world of everyday experience (in which asses do not speak human language) that the story "works" and draws our attention. However, at some point of reflection this discrepancy raises the question whether the author reports a historical event, uses a literary device, etc. Although the author had probably a different purpose with the narrative than stimulating this kind of reflection, once the question is raised, we should face it openly and see that there are more possibilities than that (a) the author is lying or himself misled, or that (b) the living God intervened supernaturally at some point in the past to make a particular historical ass speak human language. The term "literary motive" or "literary device" is used here to show that there are more possibilities than just two, not to claim that this is the only and fully adequate possibility. However, it has the advantage that it makes clear that an author cannot only have a donkey speak in a text, but can also have the LORD open the mouth of the donkey. It makes us aware that the character LORD in the text is not simply identical with the living God himself; however, by telling this rather playful story about the LORD the author reconfirms his belief in the God who is structurally prior to his imagination. If so, the reader who reads the Scriptures in search for the living God may find him, even if only through broken references (cf. section 1.9).

For clearness' sake, the discussion so far should not be confused with a discussion about the question whether the text should be regarded as inspired by God or not. Both historical accuracy and playful imagination do not necessarily imply or exclude divine inspiration (which I regard as a category of x-planation rather than explanation, but one could even disagree on this last point). Cf. note 45 of the present essay.

a. The text relates an actual event that was remarkable and provides information in a matter-of-fact way.

b. The text offers a more colored interpretation of an actual event that was remarkable; the coloring can be the work of the author or redactor, but also of oral tradents (transmitters) who were directly or indirectly the source of information for the author.

c. The text is the product of creative thought, be it of the author or of an earlier person who spread the story orally; creative thought can be pure fantasy, but it can also be a story that according to the author could have happened and/or that stands in a clear relationship to reality as it is actually experienced.

d. The text is rooted in an evil intention: the author wanted to deceive people or with best the intentions he used an oral story that was originally made up with evil intentions.

e. The text is rooted in a stupid misunderstanding: people misunderstood something but, orally or written, communicated their misunderstanding as if it were the truth.

Popular discussions of biblical miracle stories sometimes only take into account options a., d. and e.: the story is either an accurate, factual description of a historical event or it is a lie or at best a stupid misunderstanding. The dividing line between a. on the one hand and d. and e. on the other is then again equated with the dividing line between supernaturalism and naturalism: if one believes that God can intervene in a supernatural way, one assumes that biblical miracle stories should be explained in way a. and should be read as accurate accounts of an actual supernatural intervention by God; if one does not believe that there is a God who intervenes in a supernatural way, one assumes that the miracle stories are either lies or at best based on stupid misunderstanding.

In order to be able to take the Bible seriously and to do justice to it, we should take the discussion to a higher level. First of all, although we should not exclude in advance that the human authors of the books that we have in our Bibles were liars or full of ignorance (possibilities d. and e.), we may pose the question of how reasonable it is to suppose that they were. If their works were of the worst kind, the chance would have been relatively low that these works were transmitted and received as canonical. So, unless we find clear indications to the contrary, let us take the authors seriously and assume that they were conscious and conscientious in what they were writing.

However, a conscious and conscientious writer can still do much more with words than merely reporting historical facts. This is why an explanation of how a miracle story came into being may also be sought in directions b. and c., and not only a. A few points are also to be considered in the case of biblical miracle stories.

1. Even in Western societies today, some people like miracle stories more than others do. It is not always easy to say whether people who tell and pass on miracle stories are really so gullible that they believe that the most miraculous things really happened or that they just like the miracle stories as such and are

simply not so much interested in verifying whether things actually happened or not. In Egypt all Christians know the story that the mountain of Moqattam was moved on the prayer of a simple man. Some tell the story and end it by saying: “It is of course only a story.” Others have tried to prove when the movement of the mountain actually happened.⁴² Fortunately, again others only tell the story and do not spoil it either by trying to give the historical evidence or by playing it down with “It is just a story.” Although rational criticism of miracles also existed in biblical times,⁴³ it was relatively less developed and widespread than today, and so there was less need either to prove that a miracle story had actually happened or to admit that it was “just a story.”

2. Even though it is probably not the major difference between then and now, it is possible that observers of certain events in biblical times spoke about them as miracles because they had no clue of an explanation, whereas we with our present scientific knowledge would be able to relate them as immediately intelligible events.

3. In many cases, there seems to be an interplay between the miracle stories in the Gospels and the Old Testament. For example, when we read that Jesus calms a storm on the sea and we know the Hebrew Bible, it is difficult not to think of Psalm 107: “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed” (Ps. 107:28–29 ESV). However, (a) did the story about Jesus calming the storm and this Psalm first exist independently and are they only associated later on (maybe even only by us as readers)? Or, (b) did Jesus speak to the storm in order to give his disciples a silent hint that in and through him the LORD of Psalm 107 is present and at work? Or, (c) did the evangelist (or an earlier follower of Jesus) read Psalm 107 and, in a moment of pious reflection, create a story in which Jesus does what Psalm 107 says? When we notice intertextuality between the Old Testament and miracle stories in the Gospels, we cannot say a priori which line of interpretation [(a), (b) or (c)] is most appropriate: it probably varies from case to case and even after careful study of individual cases we cannot come to a final verdict.

4. When one finds a high number of miracle stories in one text, one should not immediately understand this frequency as an argument against the historicity of the related events, but rather reckon with a process of natural selection. For example, the Old Testament writes about many centuries: if, from all that actually occurred, people preferred to pass on those events that were most remarkable and miraculous, it is understandable that we now have a

42. According to The Church of Saint Samaan the Tanner, *The Biography of Saint Samaan the Shoemaker*, 64–72, the date of the miracle was November 27, 979.

43. For example, Marcus Aurelius writes that he learned “not to give credit to what was said by miracle-workers and jugglers about incantations and driving away of daemons and such things.” Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 1.6 (“Meditations,” trans. Long, 253). For a general discussion of the attitude towards miracles in ancient times, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 2:535–616.

lot of remarkable stories in a relatively small corpus of texts. However, religious or cultural environments that have a religious or cultural preference to pass on stories about wonderful events, may be the same environments in which a relatively large number of new miracle stories come into being on the basis of creative thinking, so that in the end it is difficult to say for a specific corpus of texts which stories relate events that actually happened and which stories spring from imagination.

5. We should be aware of the fact that not all readers have the same primary intuition about the right interpretation of the text. Two readers who both seek to take a text seriously may still come to rather different conclusions about it. For example, some readers read the Bible from the presupposition that texts should be taken as historical-literal accounts of events unless they are clearly marked as a different genre (e.g., as a parable or a poem). When they read Genesis 3, they do not find explicit markers of a different genre and thus they faithfully accept that there was a historical serpent who spoke human language. Others, however, take the fact itself that there is a speaking serpent in the text as an obvious indication that this is not a text that should be read as a factual account of a historical event. Both groups of readers make seek to take the Bible seriously, but they may come to almost opposite conclusions what it means to do justice to the text.

Having seen that in the case of the Bible options d. and e. are not particularly likely as explanations of how miracle stories have come into being, whereas option b. and c. deserve more attention than they sometimes receive in popular discussion, let us now have a closer look at option a. We should certainly not discard this option too easily. Miraculous things for which we do not know the explanation do not only happen in fairy tales but also in real life.

If somebody describes in a text the conjuring tricks that she has seen in a “magic” show, the readers may have great difficulty to imagining how these tricks may actually have happened, but they should not deny that she has given a fair description of what she has seen. Even if conjurers call their work “magic” and we do not understand how they can do their acts, we assume that they use special human and natural capacities and not supernatural powers. In modern physics there are also things that feel very counterintuitive at first and that are only somehow understood after intensive study. And from time to time healings do occur for which doctors cannot give an explanation. Still, as we have argued above, we should not jump to the conclusion that the true explanation for such healings is a supernatural one. It seems just as reasonable to assume that there is an unknown natural explanation—which does not make the healing itself less real.

If we too easily take recourse to supernatural explanations, we may in fact become less surprised and close our religious eye. I was very much impressed when I saw the unique rock formations in Egypt’s White Desert. Some of them look like the work of modern artists. Would I be more surprised and have more reason to praise the Creator if I assumed that God had put these rocks in their

present shape here in a supernatural way? I don't think so. I praise God's greatness because his creation has the capacity to develop such rock formations over thousands of years in a purely natural way.⁴⁴

Let me conclude this section with some general observations:

1. Although we have not analyzed specific biblical miracle stories in detail, I think this section has made clear that it is not easy to argue on the basis of the existence of miracle stories in the Bibles that events have happened that can only be explained in a supernatural way. If so, the Bible does not constitute a falsification of the naturalistic assumption. This gives us some additional confidence that we are on the right track when we embrace the naturalistic assumption.

2. Even more importantly for the overall argument of this essay, we have seen that we can accept the naturalistic assumption and take the Bible seriously at the same time. The fear that the naturalistic assumption could only be combined with vague and undefined religiosity but not with a catholic type of Christianity that seeks to take the Bible seriously is unfounded.

3. What I have not argued, and would not be able to argue, is that the Bible itself is written from a binocular perspective. The authors of the Scriptures have not indicated in which case they give an explanation and in which case an x-planation, simply because they were not familiar with this distinction. To keep to the imagery and taking the risk of oversimplification, they looked at the world with two eyes and saw depth, but they were not aware of what they saw with which eye. If so, the binocular model is not very helpful for exegesis proper (that is, to understand, as far as possible, what the authors said within/from their own worldview), just as the doctrine of Christ's two natures is not very helpful for exegesis proper, but it can be a valuable aid to hear and receive the biblical texts and message in our (or at least: my) context.

4. My insistence on the consideration of the possibility that biblical miracle stories do not contradict the naturalistic intuition and that they probably should not be explained as reports of supernatural interventions also has a pastoral concern. Although it is good to be open for the unexpected and not to lock ourselves up in the limits of what we think is possible, we can also speak too easily about supernatural miracles: we may give others (or ourselves) false hope and fail to teach them to accept limitations and to take responsibility themselves. If God really used supernatural interventions, this would also make the problem of evil even more pressing, because it would raise the question as to why God does not intervene more often. However, in my view, it probably belongs to the nature of the natural order that God has created that on the one hand unexpected and presently unexplainable things can happen but that on

44. When I visited the colored canyon on the Sinai Peninsula, another visitor remarked: "These colors look as bright as if somebody painted them yesterday." It made me realize how amazing it is that the opposite is the case: these colors were produced in a natural way over a course of time and there was no need for a painter to come yesterday.

the other hand this order cannot simply be negated by supernatural interventions (if so, this is not a limitation to God's power, but rather to the possibilities of creation).

5. Finally, this section should not be reduced to the claim that miracle stories can be explained in a natural way. Miracle stories do not first of all call for an explanation. Maybe we call them miracle stories exactly because the precise explanation is not obvious. There is something remarkable in them and this draws our attention to a reference—a reference that in principle remains if we have understood more of the explanation. The core of the miracle story is that we follow the reference and come closer to God. Babies are wonderful, but to a large extent we know where they come from and why they are as they are. At the same time, we can see a reference in them and confess: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well" (Ps. 139:14 ESV).

5.10 The Invitation of the Resurrection

We now come to what is probably the most challenging test for our claim that acceptance of the naturalistic assumption and the binocular worldview need not alienate us from the Bible but on the contrary can lead us to a better understanding and appreciation of the Bible: how does such a claim relate to the core message of the New Testament that God has raised Jesus from the dead?

I see three main options as to how we can understand this relationship. As a Christian, I could in principle be open to all of them, but as a theologian I will try to argue which option seems to me to be most convincing.

Option one: we take the statement "God has raised Jesus from the dead" as an explanation.

Option two: we take the statement "God has raised Jesus from the dead" as an x-planation.

Option three: we take the statement "God has raised Jesus from the dead" neither as an explanation nor as an x-planation but as belonging to a third category.

As for this last option, the "third category" that it presupposes may be a new way in which God will relate to his creatures in the eschatological new creation, of which something has already become visible in the resurrection of Jesus. This option raises the question, however, whether the present creation in which we live has the possibility that God acts in it in a different way that belongs to the new creation. Such a third category should neither belong to the category of explanation (otherwise option three would be identical to option one) nor should it be complementary to the category of explanation (otherwise option three would be identical to option two), but it should render the category of explanation ontologically void. However, neither do I know whether the category of explanation can be rendered ontologically void in this world, nor

do I see a compelling reason why we should postulate that it has actually happened in the case of Jesus' resurrection.

What we can say, is that Jesus' resurrection is surrounded by an epistemic barrier. When we ask for the explanation of the fact that early Christians came to believe so firmly that God has raised Jesus from the dead, many aspects of this question may remain unanswered because we do not have more information. If so, it can be prudent and wise to reach the point where we stop posing the question for a further explanation. However, this means that we accept an epistemic barrier and more personally that we discover that faith in God does neither require nor imply that all our questions are answered. We do not know what is beyond the epistemic barrier, but it is more modest to assume that there is an explanation that we do not know rather than that the category of explanation is rendered ontologically void.

As for option one, if we take the statement "God has raised Jesus from the dead" as an explanation, it is by definition a supernatural explanation because the statement has God as its subject. This does not mean that option one necessarily implies a full denial of the naturalistic assumption and the binocular worldview: we can also treat it as an exception that proves the rule. At first sight, this may seem to be a fairly attractive option: it is not easy to imagine a natural explanation for Jesus' resurrection and it makes sense that God has acted in the case of the resurrection of his own Son in a different way than the usual way in which he deals with his creation. However, on closer analysis, this option becomes less attractive:

1. It presupposes that the present creation in which we live has the possibility that God acts in it in the way of supernatural intervention, but we do not know whether it really has this possibility.

2. It seems to ignore the epistemic barrier. If we had a video tape of what happened in the tomb at the moment of Jesus' resurrection, and if we had scientific doctors reports of examinations of Jesus' just before and just after his resurrection, we could try to argue that there is a specific ("irreducibly complex") point that cannot be explained in a natural way and where a supernatural explanation seems to be appropriate. Even so, as in the case of a healing miracle, we may wonder whether it is not more plausible to assume that there is an unknown natural explanation. However, we have nothing that comes close to a video tape, scientific reports, etc. The stories about the resurrection as we have them in the New Testament were written several decades after Jesus' life on earth. The differences between the stories give us the impression that they are not simply factual reports. The stories may have evolved in reaction to questions about and objections to the message that Jesus had risen from the dead. Such considerations need not, contrary to what all these stories say, lead us to the conclusion that Jesus has not risen from the dead. But they remind us that our sources do not enable us to say what exactly happened, let alone to formulate a detailed explanation. So there is an epistemic barrier and we do not know what is beyond this barrier, but it is (again) more modest to assume that there

is a natural explanation that we do not know than that we introduce as an exception the category of supernatural explanation.⁴⁵

3. It may also be confusing for the life of faith if we treat Jesus' resurrection as an exception that has nothing to do with the way we experience the world in general. In his study *The Resurrection of the Son of God* N. T. Wright seems to understand the resurrection as a supernatural intervention; however, he does not want to treat it as an isolated exception but rather as the principle of a renewed view on God and the world and of a new self-commitment of the believer.⁴⁶ In my view, this isolation is better avoided if we do not assume a supernatural explanation for Jesus' resurrection but a natural one, just as we may assume that there are natural explanations for the things that happen in our life today, even if we do not know what they are. At the same time, we can and should give full weight to the x-planation that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Even if we had the full natural explanation of how and why the early Christian narratives and statements about Jesus' resurrection came into being, there would most likely still be something most surprising and wonderful in them. "Grand phenomena do not strike us the less when we have discovered something of their wonderful mechanism."⁴⁷ Something so amazing calls us to give this x-planation. May it shape and sharpen the lens of our religious eye, and in this way also the depth that we see when we view the world with two eyes.

For these reasons, if I have to choose between the three options that were mentioned at the beginning of this section, I am inclined to choose for the second option, which can be formulated more precisely as: we assume that the New Testament stories about Jesus' resurrection can be explained in a natural way, even though we do not know the explanation, and that such an explanation (or series of explanations) is coherent with the x-planation that God has raised Jesus from the dead.⁴⁸ If this is indeed a valid option, it means that ac-

45. I can imagine that someone would object that if we accept that the New Testament writings have been inspired by the Holy Spirit the epistemic barrier has been overcome: even if the human writers wrote several decades after the events, the Holy Spirit has made sure that they exactly recorded what happened at the moment of the resurrection. My answer is that even if we assume the full historical accuracy of the resurrection accounts in the Gospels, we still have the question how we should harmonize the accounts into one historical reconstruction (which will always be our fallible attempt) and the fact that the Gospels simply lack the kind of information and of scientific exactness that one needs if one wants to argue a case of irreducible complexity that can only be explained in a supernatural way. Moreover, without going into the details of a doctrine of inspiration, I think that accepting a text as inspired first of all should mean that we accept the text as it is, including the questions that it leaves open. If so, inspiration does not mean that the epistemic barrier has been overcome, but rather that we should respect the epistemic barrier.

46. See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, esp. 717, 722–23, 735–36.

47. Basil the Great, *Hexaemeron* 1.10 ("The Hexaemeron," *NPNF2*.8:57). Cf. section 6.4.

48. As said in the previous section, the New Testament itself is not written with an interest in making a distinction between explanations and x-planations. I have no intention of imposing

ceptance of the naturalistic assumption does not need to alienate us from the Bible, but can rather help us to understand and appreciate Scripture better, at least if we combine it with the religious assumption in a binocular worldview and seek to read the Bible with two eyes.

My main objective in this essay has been to face the sense that God does not exist. I have focused on the naturalistic assumption, which seems to be major cause of this sense. Rather than trying to show that the naturalistic assumption is not tenable, I have accepted it but challenged the idea that it leads to atheism. I have extended the invitation to consider that it is coherent with faith in the God who has revealed himself in Christ crucified and that it is also coherent with faith in the God who has raised Jesus from the dead.

I readily admit that my argument in this section has left a number of questions unanswered. I have argued that it is reasonable to assume that the New Testament stories about Jesus' resurrection can be explained in a natural way, but I have not actually formulated a natural explanation. My main reason for not formulating an explanation is the epistemic barrier: we simply do not have enough relevant information. I also see that the resurrection stories certainly contain elements that are not easily explained in a natural way.⁴⁹ Still, I hope I can offer at least some further thoughts that clarify my position and its implications.

1. I do not accept the dilemma that either Jesus has been raised from the dead in a supernatural way or he has not been raised from the dead at all. The assumption that the New Testament stories about Jesus' resurrection can be explained in a natural way (so they are not reports of anything that actually happened in a supernatural way) is not synonymous with a denial of the resurrection. To be clear, it is also not the opposite: assuming that a resurrection story has a natural explanation does not necessarily imply that one assumes that the person has really been raised from the dead. If I heard a resurrection story about just anybody, I would be very skeptical and probably rightly so. But the New Testament stories with their shared deep conviction that "the Lord has risen indeed" are not told about just anybody, but about the Lord Jesus who died on the glorious gloriless cross. Despite moments of doubt, I am inclined to agree with the disciples and to say: indeed, the Lord has risen indeed.

2. I prefer the classical formulation "The Lord has risen indeed" or "The Lord has truly risen" (Luke 24:34 ESV, NET) over "The Lord has bodily risen" (which is nowadays sometimes seen as a hallmark of orthodoxy). Although the

these categories on the New Testament—in exegesis proper, I would rather try to understand the New Testament from its own worldviewish categories. However, in order to be able to receive what the New Testament says as reality, we need to (implicitly or explicitly) connect it with categories of our worldview.

49. For a critical discussion of some less successful natural explanations, see Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 697–706.

emphasis on the body can be understood over against some other interpretations of the resurrection (for example, that Jesus only survived in the memory of his disciples) and the New Testament does not exclude the body from the resurrection, it should also be noted that it leaves many questions regarding the nature of the resurrection body open.

For one thing, Jesus' resurrection does not seem to be a matter of resuscitation ("coming back into a more or less identical life, to face death again at some point in the future"⁵⁰). The stories tell us that Jesus' resurrection body appears and disappears suddenly. It seems to have left the grave before the stone is removed (in Matthew) and to move through closed doors. Jesus' appearances seem to have been more realistic than simply a feeling that "he is still there": he is not a ghost that cannot eat. But the stories also describe moments of doubt and non-recognition, which suggests that there was something special about Jesus after his resurrection. Wright calls Jesus' resurrection body a "transphysical" body, "a body which was still robustly physical but also significantly different from the present one, . . . not . . . *less* physical, as though it were some kind of ghost or apparition, but more." He adds: "As historians we may have difficulty imagining such a thing. But, equally as historians, we should not hold back from affirming that that is what the early Christians were talking about."⁵¹

Still, the New Testament says more and this requires us to stretch our imagination even further. It says that Jesus has ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God. From one perspective, this is of course not difficult to imagine at all: we can imagine that high in the air there is a beautiful palace with a big hall and in the middle of it a throne on which God is seated and Jesus at his right hand. But then we will hasten to add that this is figurative language and that it should not be taken literally. In fact, there is of course not such a place a number of kilometers or miles above the earth, which we could reach with a plane or a rocket. God is a pure and omnipresent spirit. He does not have a literal right hand, at which an embodied person can sit. Moreover, the language of ascension and sitting at God's right hand expresses something of what Christians want to say about Jesus—it emphasizes his exalted position—, but if it is stretched too much, it might suggest that he is the most exalted human being rather than that he himself is God.

We keep ourselves on the safe side if we stress that this language is figurative, symbolic, metaphoric, that it seeks to express something about which we cannot speak otherwise, and that we simply reject strange and undesired consequences that would follow from an exact, literal interpretation of this language. However, what then is the relationship between the language about the resurrected Jesus who appeared to his disciples and the language that we use for the ascended Jesus now? These considerations do not lead to a denial that "Jesus has bodily risen," but are a warning that such a phrase is also not the

50. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 316.

51. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 478.

helpful unequivocal statement to discriminate between what we mean and do not mean by Jesus' resurrection.

3. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul sees a relationship between Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection. Some readers may wonder how I understand our eschatological resurrection. For this reason, I give here some thoughts as to how one can think about resurrection given a common-sense understanding of modern science. These ideas should certainly not be taken as dogmas themselves but only as a help to express the Christian hope in our context.

According to neuroscience, concepts such as spirit/soul/mind should not be understood as independent entities but as functions of the brain, which implies that they will die when the brain dies.⁵² However, since God knows us fully and our identity is eccentric in God (cf. 1.6), even when our present psychosomatic existence has fully died and nothing of it survives, God can give our identity a new psychosomatic⁵³ existence. I do not expect that the resurrection will happen on our present earth or even in our universe, as our earth and this universe do not seem to be able to exist forever.⁵⁴ Resurrection does not mean that I will be built up again out of the same atoms that were in my body when I died (and which may have become part of the bodies of others afterwards), but that I will have the same (and at the same time renewed and purified) identity. As "God knows me fully" is not at odds with the naturalistic assumption and the resurrection will not take place in this universe, but in a new creation where the Creator-creature relationship may be different than here, these ideas are fully coherent with the binocular model.

If somebody asks: "But how do you know that such a resurrection will happen?," I can only answer: from a general analysis of human nature I cannot give any hope of resurrection and from a general analysis of nature I can only say that this earth and universe do not seem to be fit for resurrection and eternal life—my hope is only founded in the fact that Jesus' disciples have seen him alive after he died and that these meetings have given them hope that we will live with him. This is not too much of a reason, but hopefully just enough as a guideline to live on the way to the living God.

4. Let us now see how the thoughts about our resurrection can help us to imagine and conceptualize Jesus' resurrection. The idea that our identity is fully known by God and eccentric in him may also be helpful in speaking about the relationship between Jesus and God. Given Jesus' unique personality here on

52. Although both Christians and non-Christians may for a moment think that such scientific insights are at odds with the Christian faith, they may in fact be rather coherent with what the Bible says. See, e.g., Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*.

53. Maybe better called a "pneumosomatic existence" given Paul's differentiation between the present *sōma psychikon* "psychical body" and the future *sōma pneumatikon* "pneumatic body" in 1 Cor. 15:44.

54. I do not believe that this is predicted in the Book of Revelation, but that book certainly stimulates our imagination to think about a new heaven and a new earth, without a sea and without the need of the sun and the moon (Rev. 21:1, 23).

earth, in which God was with us (cf. 5.8), his identity is also in a unique way in God. I will not elaborate this here, but it seems to open up possibilities for careful formulations about the relationship and the distinction between the Father and the Son and maybe also between Christ's two natures. Among others, it may offer us somewhat more conceptual language to speak about the realities that are expressed in the more figurative language of sitting at God's right hand.

If the continuity between present life and resurrection life is a continuity of identity rather than of consisting of the same atoms, this raises the question of why Jesus' tomb was empty. For example, in the Gospel of John, Jesus shows the wounds in his body to Thomas, which affirms the continuity of identity, but he enters the room when the doors are closed, which suggests that the body is not made up of exactly the same kind of material, let alone exactly the same atoms that were put in the tomb. It is quite possible that in the Jewish context of the New Testament a resurrection without an empty tomb would not have been accepted as a real resurrection, but in itself, a new psychosomatic existence of Jesus' identity does not seem to be at odds with the idea that the matter of his old *sōma* decayed in the grave. If so, we can confess that Jesus has risen indeed even if we do not yet know what will be the final outcome of the historical debate whether Jesus' tomb was found empty a few days after his execution or that the story of the empty tomb is a later tradition.

Expressed in more conceptual language than the New Testament authors use themselves, Jesus' appearances have at least made clear to his disciples that his identity has not gone lost but is still present in a wonderful way and is sometimes even perceivable by our senses. Although they may already have believed in an eschatological resurrection of the dead before, it is now primarily this presence of the risen Lord that founds the hope for their own resurrection. However, whether they fully equate the nature of existence of the risen Lord (the "transphysical" body) with the nature of existence that they will have on the new earth is simply not clear: they do not speculate at all about questions as to whether they will also appear to each other from time to time, will be able to move through closed doors, etc. Only, just as he will not die again, they will not die again—so much is clear.

As has already been stated, all these thoughts do not constitute a complete explanation of Jesus' resurrection; some are only thinking possibilities and not established facts. They are not the Easter gospel itself, but only aids. Still, these thoughts may have some value: the resurrection stories face us with basic questions of worldview: how do we think about God, the world, and ourselves? Depending on our starting position, we may have to go a shorter or longer road before we are able to receive the resurrection narratives not out of credulity or with unbelief, but in the true receptivity of faith. On this road, critical interaction with these thoughts may be helpful, at least for some persons.

After this concentration on the resurrection we should step back a moment. A time span of almost two thousand years has passed since the early

Christians came to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Such a time span does not only constitute part of the epistemic barrier, but it also raises the question as to how we deal with the resurrection as a moment that belongs to a more and more distant past. In answer to this question, the least we can say is that if we approach the resurrection from a binocular perspective, there is a relationship between Jesus' resurrection, the way we experience God and the world now, and our eschatological resurrection. For example, when we see broken bread and wine with two open eyes, we see the Lord through signs and we are reminded of the hope that we will see him face to face.

6

Going with Open Eyes Conclusion and Perspectives

So [Moses] goes up the mountain of desire boldly asking this: to enjoy beauty not just in reflected images as in a mirror, but face to face. And the voice of God granted what he asked precisely in what it denied him; in a few words it plumbed immeasurable depths of thought. God's boundless generosity agreed to the fulfillment of his desire, yet without promising that that desire would be satisfied or lessened. . . .

For God says: You cannot see my face, for humankind cannot see me and live. By this, scripture does not mean that this causes the death of those who look at God—how could the face of life ever cause the death of those who draw near to it? . . .

This truly is the vision of God: never to have one's desire for God satisfied, so that the more one looks towards what one can see, the more one is drawn on by the eager longing to see more. There is no limit that can be set to our growth in our Godward life, since the good has no limit, and the desire for the good is not brought to an end by being satisfied.

—Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 232–39 (selections)

6.1 Existential Freedom and Intellectual Engagement

When I briefly summarized the preceding essay to a student, he asked me: “Do you believe in your own ideas?” I answered: it really depends on what you mean by the expression “believe in” (cf. 5.2). I certainly do not believe in my ideas in the way I believe in God. I put my trust in God, not in my own thoughts. I do not expect to be saved because of my thinking. And if it turns out that I have made some errors in reasoning and drawn conclusions that are not tenable, perhaps I will be disappointed but my life will not become worthless. However, if one means by “believe in” that I do not disagree with what I have written and that I am willing to try to defend my position as far as possible, then, of course, I believe in my ideas. Others have not forced me against my own will to defend the position that I have outlined here.

My attitude at the end of this study can be summarized with two terms: “existential freedom” and “intellectual engagement.” Let me first explain what I mean by existential freedom.

The previous essay has sought to face the sense that God does not exist insofar as it is related to the problem of God's redundancy. It was suggested that even though it may be true that God is superfluous as an explanation for any state of affairs in the world (the [*weak ontologica*] naturalistic assumption), we can see references in this world that can be x-plained as references

from and to God. Hence, it was argued that we should look with two eyes at the world, a naturalistic and religious one, in search of explanations and x-planations and in order to see depth (a binocular worldview). Next, it was noted that the references are broken references, a reality that is taken seriously at the heart of the Christian faith, in the message of Christ crucified. Finally, although the biblical miracles and in particular Jesus' resurrection may at first seem to be at odds with the naturalistic assumption, it was sketched how one can take the Bible seriously from a binocular worldview.

If this argument stands, then the naturalistic assumption need no longer give us the sense that God does not exist. In the spiritual struggle between Christianity and atheism, the naturalistic assumption is no longer the natural ally of atheism. In itself it is a rather neutral position, and we saw that it can even be a good friend to Christianity. Hopefully, this brings some people on the way to the living God, people who have been atheists so far because they thought intellectual honesty required this from them although their hearts thirsted for God. Hopefully, this also convinces some Christians that they should not fight the naturalistic assumption as such for religious reasons, but only the atheistic implications that some want to draw from it.

Although I primarily consider the naturalistic assumption to be a serious option for scientific reasons, I have also given some Christian theological reasons: for example, in my view, the Creator-creation distinction is better honored in weak ontological naturalism than in supernaturalism. However, I have not argued that naturalism is certainly true and alternative positions are certainly wrong and/or irreconcilable with the Christian faith. Here the notion of "existential freedom" becomes important: it does not touch the core of the Christian faith whether we assume that there is a natural explanation for all phenomena or that some have a supernatural explanation. Of course, it will have some influence on how we articulate the faith in more detail, which may imply that we discover that there are more viable ways to articulate the faith. As people living on the way to the living God we are existentially free and not bound to specific philosophical concepts or a specific worldview. We use what is suitable and leave it again when it becomes less suitable.

People who live out of this existential freedom are open-minded. For example, as scientists who study how the first life on earth came into being they are existentially open both to the possibility that it has a natural origin and to the possibility that it has a supernatural origin. In principle, this makes them less biased than other scientists who are existentially closed to either the possibility that it has a purely natural origin or that it has a supernatural origin.

Existential freedom does not exclude intellectual engagement. Although we are open for alternatives, we can find one position particularly helpful and worthy of being developed further and of being shared with others. For me, years of reflection on the naturalistic assumption and developing the binocular worldview have helped me address the sense that God does not exist and mature in the way I can deal with questions of science and religion, both regarding

the natural sciences and biblical studies. I hope that others will feel invited by what I have developed here and also that it can be used to educate the next generation.

6.2 The Hope of a Desperate Cry

To be sure, these essays ought not end in an overconfident tone. The wayfarer knows the feeling that what he has written is perhaps all nonsense, that his hope in the Lord is in vain, that he will never see God face-to-face at the end of the way, that God does not exist. Herman Bavinck tried to fill the evolutionist with despair because of the untenability of the latter's eschatological expectations, but the Christian himself can be filled with despair about his own beliefs and expectations as well. He knows that the language of hope is sometimes not more than a desperate cry.

Moreover, the previous essay has answered two problems that at first sight seem to lead to atheism: the problem of God's redundancy and the problem of evil. Hopefully, they have made clear that these problems do not necessarily lead to atheism and are actually much better dealt with when we understand the world and our own life in relationship to the living God. However, the main purpose of this collection of essays was not just to answer atheism, but to (re)gain perspective on the living God beyond the post-Christian crisis. Atheistic thought is part of the post-Christian condition, but still the post-Christian condition cannot be reduced to atheism. The church has not yet overcome its plausibility crisis when it has only addressed atheism.

Certainly, the essays in this volume do not only offer a reply to atheism but also present a positive alternative that in itself addresses more dimensions of the post-Christian condition than atheistic arguments only. However, I am not sure that all feelings of implausibility with regard to the Christian religion have been addressed sufficiently. The core of the first essay is probably the Christological invitation, and the central role of Jesus Christ in overcoming the problems of God's redundancy and of evil has become clear in the fifth essay time and again. Still, I feel that I have not yet sufficiently spoken about Jesus Christ. We can treat him as an important historical figure of about two thousand years ago or we can use him as the keystone for our theological thoughts, but it remains difficult to make clear that this historical person who lived then and there is truly the deepest revelation of the living God.

However, this last problem is not typical only for the post-Christian condition of Amsterdam, but may arise anywhere when Christians and non-Christians alike seek to think about the core of the Christian faith. If so, the central conclusion of the present study is that although the post-Christian condition calls for a fundamental rethinking of the theological articulation of the faith—which should not be avoided and to which these essays have made some contributions—, the real plausibility crisis of the church is not specifically related to the post-Christian condition but rather to heart of the Christian faith

itself, namely the folly of Christ crucified. Is it nonsense, blasphemy, or truth if one says that Christ crucified reveals the wisdom of the living God? Do I owe my life in the fullest sense of the word to the fact that a man in his thirties died almost two thousand years ago?¹ The present study has not fully answered these questions, but hopefully functions as an impetus for further reflection on them, both among Christians and non-Christians.

I have considered adding another essay in which I take up this impetus myself, but perhaps that is too much and the reader may first want to digest the thoughts that have been offered so far. I also feel too tired to do so.² I understand very well why people choose a pious or impious practical atheism and “achristology,” and refrain from reflection on the living God and the Lord Jesus Christ. It makes life lighter and easier and less fatiguing. However, there is a third option next to the all too exhausting one of going the whole way searching alone or the all too easy one of not going the way at all, and that is going the way together with others. In a beautiful reflection on Psalm 42 Augustine says:

There is another point to be observed in the hart. It is reported of stags . . . that when they either wander in the herds, or when they are swimming to reach some other parts of the earth, that they support the burdens of their heads on each other, in such a manner as that one takes the lead, and others follow, resting their heads upon him, as again others who follow do upon them, and others in succession to the very end of the herd; but the one who took the lead in bearing the burden of their heads, when tired, returns to the rear, and rests himself after his fatigue by supporting his head just as did the others; by thus supporting what is burdensome, each in turn, they both accomplish their journey, and do not abandon each other. Are they not a kind of “harts” that the Apostle addresses, saying, “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the Law of Christ”?³

1. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1. Bavinck experienced that the current of time was away from the cross and tried to remain close to it by building a dam, thus taking the risk that the dam would break one day. A change of imagery cannot completely solve the problem, but perhaps it is somehow helpful. The cross is not located at a fixed place and we do not build a dam to safeguard ourselves and to keep us close to the cross. Whether we like it or not, we are children of our time and being swept away in the current of time. However, if the cross itself is also being swept away in the stream, we may find it as a piece of driftwood near us: while we are about to drown and die, we may clutch it and survive.

2. A reader friendly commented: “Would it not be better to delete such a personal outporing?” For a good understanding it should be noted that this is the outporing of the first person narrator in the text, who is neither unrelated to the author nor identical with him (cf. 4.6 and 4.8). If one reads on, one will see that the tiredness of the first-person narrator becomes meaningful: he will move backwards and the reader is invited to take the lead during the next stage on the way to the living God. Readers who rather identify with the first-person narrator and feel tired themselves may read Augustine’s prayer at the end of this study as a self-exhortation not to give in to feelings of fatigue but to seek the living God.

3. Augustine, *Enarratio in Psalmum* 41.4 (“Expositions on the Book of Psalms,” *NPNF* 1.8:133 [Ps. 42, sect. 4]). The words quoted from the apostle are from Gal. 6:2.

In this study, I have walked ahead. Now that I am tired, I do not leave the herd, but join the back of it and invite others to take lead in going the way to the living God.

As a word of encouragement for those who will take lead now, let me give a short reflection on Psalm 77. In this psalm Christ speaks in Godforsakenness at the cross.⁴ God's way is a holy way, but it has run into a dead end. Remembering the past, keeping in mind God's great works, is an act of self-torment and emphasizes that the hand of the Most High has changed (Ps. 77:11). The living God who does miracles—that is past tense. And yet, remembering also gives new courage. The way had run into a dead end, at the sea, at the cross, but God's way still ran further, through the sea, through death. We can no longer get hold of it: God's footprints were invisible and we can no longer see anything of it (Ps. 77:19). Nevertheless, we can remember it and take new courage from it. Even if the way has run into a dead end indeed, God can pave the way for us anew.

If our hope is reduced to a desparate cry, such a cry is the language of Psalms and of Christ on the cross, and again and again, it is not the last word.

6.3 Educating the Next Generation

The last verse of Psalm 77 adds a new perspective: "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps. 77:20 NRSV). God is invisible, but in the work of human beings his guidance becomes visible. Sometimes I see references, even if only broken references, in the work of fellow humans and it helps me a step further on the way. I humbly hope that what I have written will also be helpful for others.

In particular, I hope that what I have developed in these essays can be useful for educating the next generation, be it as a model that underlies an educational program or as a series of concepts that are offered to students for critical discussion and comparison with other positions. Let me give a few examples.

1. In primary education with children of various religious and non-religious backgrounds one can do exercises that make them aware of different ways of looking at the world, so that they begin to develop both "eyes." At a certain age, one can have them discover how binoculars work and then explain how the binoculars can also be a metaphor for the way we look at the world, for example, to distinguish between different kinds of answers to the question "where do we come from?"

2. In secondary education, when students themselves begin to pose questions about the relationship between science and religion, the binocular model is simple enough to offer students a positive starting point to think further

4. In Psalm 77 "it is not just any individual who speaks . . . , but a petitioner with responsibility for the fate of Israel; the psalm is a 'lament of a mediator.'" Hossfeld, "Psalm 77," 275. As was argued in section 4.8, when we say that Christ speaks in a psalm, this does not exclude but include the possibility that others recognize themselves in the first-person narrator in the psalm.

about this relationship. If school or state laws forbid that questions of religion are discussed in science classes, but it is clear that students have a religious background that makes it difficult for them to accept and give a proper place to what is taught in a particular science class, it is probably appropriate that a teacher explains the binocular model in a few minutes.⁵

3. Christian schools may make it one of their educational goals that students learn to see the world with two open eyes and also read the Bible in a binocular way. When students are ready for it, this educational philosophy can also be discussed explicitly and critically compared with other worldviews and approaches to the Bible and to questions of science and religion.

4. In tertiary education and for example meetings of Christian students, the ideas of these essays can be used and discussed and internalized further. Some students may even be so brave as to read these essays for themselves. In theological education, where students often have their first encounter with scholarly approaches to the Bible, I hope these essays will help them to read the Bible both scholarly and religiously and to discover that one approach need not be at the expense of the other but that they can reinforce each other. Moreover, I would be highly honored if in reply to these essays students wrote something better than the present ones.

6.4 A Night under the Open Sky

Camping in the desert, I have the opportunity to watch the sky and see the stars at night. In the city one could do the same, but clouds often cover the sky and there is always a lot of light pollution and earthly affairs usually make one forget to look upwards. In the desert I see the sky as Abraham must have seen it when the LORD said to him: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them” (Gen. 15:5 NRSV).

Watching the sky, I feel very small. I stand on a small planet in an immense universe. I envy past generations who could at least believe that the earth is the center of the universe. Basil the Great (ca. 329–379) mentioned the view of some early scientists that it is not only a fact but also a necessity that the earth occupies this central position. He himself piously added:

If there is anything in this system which might appear probable to you, keep your admiration for the source of such perfect order, for the wisdom of God. Grand phenomena do not strike us the less when we have discovered some-

5. It should not be overlooked, however, that the specific beliefs of some Christian and other religious denominations are not easily rearticulated in the binocular model. The binocular model may be helpful to prevent a tension or to overcome it, but it should not be used to deny the tension that some students experience between their religious upbringing and what is taught in some science classes. Cf. section 5.4.

thing of their wonderful mechanism. Is it otherwise here? At all events let us prefer the simplicity of faith to the demonstrations of reason.⁶

By now we know that it is otherwise and that the early scientists were wrong. By now we know that not even the sun is at the center. By now we know that we are somewhere in the back of beyond of the universe.

I recollect the verse “God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars” (Gen. 1:16) and remember that Calvin commented on it:

Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. . . . This study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God. Wherefore, as ingenious men are to be honoured who have expended useful labour on this subject, so they who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise.⁷

For Basil and Calvin, it was easy to appreciate the sciences because they experienced them as a stimulus to observe the universe also with a religious eye and to perceive God’s wisdom. However, those who have followed Calvin’s exhortation have discovered things that do not display divine wisdom. For what is the wisdom of the fact that we live on such a small planet in the back of beyond of the universe?

Are Christians not very superficial and have they ever really watched the sky when they say that the Copernican worldview does not constitute a challenge for their faith at all? Was the often ridiculed Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) in fact not much better aware of what was at stake when he said:

All what God says, also about natural things, is true; God says that the world stands still and motionless and that the sun goes around, and thus this is a certain and unarguable truth.

That . . . the sun would stand motionless and that the earth would turn, is a fabrication of people whose heads turn too much. We believe Holy Scripture.⁸

Or is it possible that God wants to have to do with a small planet in the back of beyond of the universe? Does the cosmos exactly in this way display divine wisdom? I remember what Paul the Apostle said:

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. . . . God chose what is foolish in the world to

6. Basil the Great, *Hexaemeron* 1.10 (“The Hexaemeron,” *NPNF* 2.8:57).

7. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* 1:86–87.

8. Brakel, *Redelijke godsdienst*, 1:50 (section 1.2.31) and 1:226 (section 1.8.14). Cf. Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:64–65 and 1:275. For Brakel, see also section 2.1 note 1.

shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:25, 27–29 NSRV)

Can we now see this principle of divine wisdom at a cosmic scale too? Can we now see a deeper dimension of divine wisdom than Basil and Calvin could?

It is getting cold and my neck has become stiff from looking upwards. If I want to be able to turn my head tomorrow, I will have to sleep now. I go into my tent.

Just when I close my eyes, a Psalm comes into my mind: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” Was that feeling of littleness, that feeling of being an accident in a vast universe, really something caused by our present-day knowledge of the cosmos? Did the Psalmist not feel the same some millennia ago? And still, he dared to continue: “Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” I realize: man is an accident in a vast universe, yet a glorious accident. I breathe out: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:3–4, 5, 9 ESV).

Then I sleep.

6.5 The Hymn of the Open Eyes

One of the most beautiful Dutch hymns is titled “Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren.” This hymn makes a good recapitulation of some of the main ideas of the fifth essay. It is the same hymn to which I referred at the end of the first essay and about which I wrote an article for an Amsterdam magazine.⁹ As a conclusion of this study, I give the Dutch hymn, my provisional English translation of it, and a condensed version of the magazine article.

Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren de aarde met haar wel en wee, de steile bergen, koele meren, het vaste land, de onzekre zee. Van U getuigen dag en nacht. Gij hebt ze heerlijk voortgebracht.	The earth with all its ups and downs, o Lord of lords, belongs to Thee, steep mountains and cold lakes and lawns, the steady land, th' unsteady sea. To Thee bear witness day and night. Thou hast created them so bright.
Gij roept het jonge leven wakker, een tuin bloeit rond het open graf. Er ruisen halmen op de akker waar zich het zaad verloren gaf. En vele korrels vormen saam een kostbaar brood in uwe naam.	Thou callst, o Lord, new life to bound, a garden blooms round th' open grave and stalks do rustle on the ground where seed itself for dying gave. And many grains though none the same make up one bread loaf in thy name.

9. De Wit, “Zingen met open ogen en met een knipoog.”

Gij hebt de bloemen op de velden met koninklijke pracht bekleed.	Thou hast, o Lord, dressed up the field, to splendid flowers it gives birth.
De zorgeloze vogels melden dat Gij uw schepping niet vergeet.	The carefree birds call us to yield that Thou doest not forget the earth.
’t Is alles een gelijkenis van meer dan aards geheimenis.	And all this is a reference to mystery that earth transcends.
Laat dan mijn hart U toebehoren en laat mij door de wereld gaan met open ogen, open oren om al uw tekens te verstaan.	Let then, o Lord, my heart be Thine and let me go and see and hear all what is Thine and every sign, with open eyes and open ear.
Dan is het aardse leven goed, omdat de hemel mij begroet.	Then is my earthly life so good, because the heavens me salute. ¹⁰

The author of “Aan U behoort, o Heer der heren” is Jan Wit (1914–1980). He has written several hymns that have become well-known in the Netherlands and he has also contributed to a new metrical version of the Psalms. Rich, playful imagery and a wealth of biblical allusions are characteristic of his poetry.

What are Wit’s sources of inspiration in writing this hymn?¹¹ First, he looks carefully around in this world. As for the “steep mountains” in the first stanza—he has possibly visited the Alps in Switzerland. As for the “uncertain sea”—of course, he does not yet know about the 2004 tsunami that killed more than two hundred thousand people, but the images of the 1953 flood are probably still in his mind.¹²

Second, he takes his starting point from an older hymn, of which the first stanza reads as follows: “This earth is Thine, o Lord of lords! | Thine is its wonderful orbit, | Thine are its mountains, valleys, lakes, | its streams and its ocean. | Thine is the day, Thine is the night: | all only live by Thy power.”¹³ Wit has two objections against this hymn: it is too much of an enumeration and the repeti-

10. The following working translation in prose is intended as a help for readers with a limited knowledge of Dutch who would like to understand the wording of the original: “To Thee, o Lord of lords, does | the earth with all its ups and downs belong, | the steep mountains, cold lakes, | the solid land, the uncertain sea. | Day and night bear witness to Thee. | Thou hast created them gloriously. || Thou callst, o Lord, young life to wake up, | a garden blooms round the open grave. | Stalks rustle on the field, | where seed gave itself to get lost. | And many grains together constitute | a precious bread in Thy name. || Thou hast dressed the flowers on the fields | with royal beauty. | The carefree birds mention | that Thou doest not forget Thy creation. | It’s all a parable (or: resemblance) | of a more than earthly mystery. || Let then, o Lord, my heart be Thine | and let me go through the world | with open eyes, open ears | to understand all Thy signs. | Earthly life is good then, because the heaven greets me.”

11. Wit himself has written a commentary on his hymn (Wit, “479”). My interpretation of the hymn takes this commentary into account but also offers my own reflections.

12. The 1953 North Sea flood killed more than two thousand persons. Most victims were Dutch.

13. Howitt-Botham, “Deez’ aard is uw, o Heer der heren!” (hymn).

tion of “Thine” feels cumbersome. He tries to improve it, but the result is a new hymn. Especially in the next stanzas does the difference become apparent: the old hymn offers rather general religious poetry of nature, whereas Wit incorporates numerous Christian motifs.

Third, Wit knows his Bible. The first two lines of his hymn are a poetic rendering of a psalm verse: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps. 24:1 NRSV). The line “To Thee bear witness day and night” is also based on a psalm verse: “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge” (Ps. 19:2 NRSV).

The second stanza of the old hymn read: “Thine is this earth, lovely shining, | when sun’s heat melts its ice. | Thine is it, sparkling in the beauty of spring, | dressed with blossoms as a bride, | Thine is it, when the waving wheat field | promises a rich, beautiful harvest day.” “The beauty of spring” and “the waving wheat field” give Wit the clues for his second stanza, which, however, becomes very different:

Thou callst, o Lord, new life to bound,
 a garden blooms round th’ open grave
 and stalks do rustle on the ground
 where seed itself for dying gave.
 And many grains though none the same
 make up one bread loaf in thy name.

In this stanza, the poet shows his capacity to let normal earthly life be normal earthly life and to connect it with the reality of faith at the same time. “A garden blooms round the open grave”—that refers to the graveyard where we bury the beloved deceased: it is often a beautiful garden, and there we stand around the open grave. But it also refers to Joseph of Arimathea’s garden, where the open grave is not a sign of death but of life. When we look from the perspective of Easter, even the graveyard bears signs of paradise and our blooming garden gives a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth.

When the poet goes through the fields, he hears the rustling stalks *and* he hears Jesus saying: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24 NRSV). When the poet eats his bread, his daily bread, it reminds him of an early Christian Eucharistic prayer: “Just as this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and then was gathered together and became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom,”¹⁴ and of Paul’s word: “There is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17 NRSV), and he sings: “And many grains . . . make up one bread loaf in Thy name.”

The flowers and the birds in Wit’s third stanza do not require any comment: everybody knows them, and every reader of the Bible recognizes Jesus’

14. *Didache* 9.4 (“The Didache or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” ed. Holmes, 261).

call not to worry (Matt. 6:25–34). As for the last two lines of this stanza, here the poet summarizes all that preceded. He has looked around and he has seen the things as they are: the earthly things are created by God and refer back to God: “And all this is a reference to mystery that earth transcends.”

Wit’s final stanza reads:

Let then, o Lord, my heart be Thine
and let me go and see and hear
all what is Thine and every sign,
with open eyes and open ear.
Then is my earthly life so good,
because the heavens me salute.

Here the lines of the preceding stanzas converge: the “earth” of the first stanza recurs in the fifth line; the “open grave” of the second stanza leads to the “open eyes and open ear” in the fourth line; the “reference” of the third stanza is here indicated with “sign” in the third line. The hymn displays a clear unity.

However, is it not too farfetched to see a connection between “open grave” and “open eyes”? At first sight it is, but one should consider that Jan Wit was physically blind. When he sings about “open eyes,” this is still in the future for him, but because of the open grave he can already look forward to it—because of the open grave he can already go through the world with open eyes. He who cannot see natural light calls this hymn “an ode to earthly life insofar as it is seen in heavenly light.”¹⁵

This hymn is beautiful in its description of nature, its play with language and its allusions. The poet has the book of nature and the book of Scripture continually making eyes to one other.¹⁶ It is a charming song. Still, we expect a church hymn to offer more than aesthetical enjoyment only. Beauty can also be deceiving. This desired deepening is offered in the personal dedication in the final stanza (more a prayer to God than a promise from our side), which then influences the interpretation of the entire hymn: “my heart” is at stake. When my heart belongs to God, I do not flee from the world, but I will go through it.

In the end, I have only one problem with this hymn. I called it the power of the poet that he is able to let normal earthly life be normal earthly life and to connect it to the reality of faith at the same time. But is this also true for people in a city like Amsterdam? City-dwellers know steep mountains and rustling stalks from holidays only. Intuitively, this hymn reminds me of the polders of the Green Heart of Holland, through which I used to cycle to school every day. It does not sing spontaneously in me when cycling over Dam square in Amsterdam. For this reason, I suggest that we slightly adapt the final stanza in the context of the city:

15. Wit, “479,” 1100.

16. See for the notion of the two books among others Belgic Confession, art. 2.

Let then, o Lord, my heart be Thine
 and let me go and see and hear
 all what is Thine and every sign,
 with open eyes and open ear.
 It's then in Amsterdam so good,
 because the heavens me salute.¹⁷

6.6 A Final Invitation

The ideal essay is so tensely and tersely written that the reader says at the end: “This essay is worth reading again,” “I want to read more of its author,” and “I myself will play further with the main idea of this essay.” The author begs the reader’s pardon that the essays in this study have fallen so far short of the ideal.

But has this study at least reached its main goal? According to its subtitle this study is an invitation to overcome the plausibility crisis of Christianity. This invitation has certainly been extended in various ways throughout the study, but has the reader felt able to accept it? Has the reader actually (re)gained perspective on the living God? I hope that this is the case and that many a reader will say: this or that section offered me the key to overcoming the crisis.

However, a benevolent reader honestly remarked about the concept version of this study that for him it did not yet fully live up to the expectations that the subtitle aroused. I partly recognize this feeling myself. Writing this study has helped me to go further on the way in numerous ways, but I am not yet an arrived post-post-Christian.

17. My Dutch adaptation of Wit’s stanza runs as follows: “Laat dan mijn hart U toebehoren | en laat mij door het stadhart gaan | met open ogen, open oren | om al uw tekens te verstaan. | Dan is ’t in Amsterdam zo goed, | omdat de hemel mij begroet.”

From different sides I have been urged to add some reflections to this study about a theme like “On the Way to the Living God in Post-Christian Cairo” (post-Christian in the double meaning of “islamic” and “secular”) or “. . . in Post-Revolution Cairo” (after the revolution of January 25, 2011). However, I have felt that it is better to keep the focus of this study sharp and to keep it located in Amsterdam only. From the context of post-Christian Amsterdam this is a contribution to catholic theology and a book intended for readers all over the world who face a situation in which Christianity does not seem to be true and relevant any more. In my humble opinion, this study as it is now is already relevant for people in Cairo, because the plausibility of post-Christian Amsterdam also exists here, be it at a smaller scale and less visible—but therefore also less addressed in theological reflection.

Of course, readers who are interested in the author’s experiences in Egypt and are able to read Dutch may read his blogs at Weblog Willem-Jan de Wit and at Reformatorisch Dagblad (website), although his blog posts are usually not intended as deep theological reflections. As for now, just one thought. Even more than by the omnipresent call of the minaret or the demonstrations at Tahrir Square is Cairo characterized by its *zāḥma*. This Egyptian Arabic word can be translated as “crowdedness” and does not only refer to the chaos on the roads, but also to the bustle and busyness of life in general with some twenty million people living on one spot. It is in the midst of all of this, even literally in the traffic jam, that one can change the last lines of the hymn again and sing: “It’s then in Cairo’s *zāḥma* good | because the heavens me salute.”

For this reason, I feel the need to extend a final, most radical invitation. It is the invitation to die with Christ. Dying with Christ can have several aspects of meaning, and one of them needs to be highlighted now: dying from our religion or worldview.

Although the focus on the death of religion in the death of Christ springs from the current plausibility crisis, it is not unprecedented in the New Testament. For example, in the Gospel of Mark one can discover the death of religion in three different ways. The insanity of religion is exposed by the fact that the leaders want to have Jesus killed on the mere accusation of blasphemy (Mark 14:63–64). Moreover, the messianic dreams of Jesus' disciples (e.g., Mark 10:17) run into a dead end. Finally, Jesus himself cries in godforsakeness from the cross (Mark 15:34).

We should bring the Christian worldview and the modern, post-Christian worldview to the cross, along with any other worldview, religion, or ideology that seeks to captivate us. We should bring the plausibility crisis and all our open questions, doubts, and despair to the cross. We should even bring our helpful insights and liberating concepts to the cross in case they no longer open us up for God but become a new eggshell—concepts like “living on the way,” “a cathartic reading of Bavinck,” “a binocular worldview.” Even “the cross” has to be crucified if we are abusing it theologically to mask untruth by its folly. Yes, even “the living God” has to die if that expression has begun to refer more to our own concept of God than to God himself.

The bondage of religion can be so strong that we cannot or do not dare to liberate ourselves from it. Therefore, we should go to the cross and die with Christ, so that the bondage is broken by death—so that the world, even the world of religion, is crucified to us and we are crucified to the world, even the world of religion (cf. Gal. 6:14).

Dying with Christ the burden is broken. We are dying, and behold, we live (cf. 2 Cor. 6:9). The need to make plausible what feels implausible is over. All untruth and irrelevance has died to us. And all what is true and relevant will become clear to us in its own time. We have overcome the plausibility crisis or, rather, it has been overcome for us. And if it seeks to get its grip on us again, let us remember Christ crucified again.

If the church cannot find any other significance for herself in our present age, let she limit herself to this: a ministry of liberation from all bondage of religion and worldview and presumptuous certainty, fear from others' opinions, and inner despair, by inviting us to the cross to die with Christ, so that we may live in liberty and love going with open eyes the way to the living God.

The invitation stands and I pray that the reader will accept it.

While directing my attention to the rule of faith, I sought you,
as much as I was able, as much as you enabled me,
and I desired to see with insight what I believed,
yes, I pondered and worked a lot.
Lord my God, my only hope, hear me
so that I do not become fatigued and unwilling to seek you,
but that I may ardently seek your face always.

When we will have reached you,
the many things we said without reaching you will pass away,
and you alone will remain all in all,
and without end we will say one name,
praising you in one,
while we too have become one in you.
—Augustine, *On the Trinity* 15.28.51

Appendix

Bristley's Bavinck Bibliography and Dutch Quotations

This appendix provides the source texts of quotations in the essays that were translated by the author of this study. Moreover, it offers some comments on and additions to Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* and Bavinck and Snouck Hurgronje, *Een Leidse vriendschap*. It contains the following sections:

- Bristley's *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck*
- Bavinck's Correspondence with Snouck Hurgronje
- Quotations from Unpublished Documents
- Quotations from Bavinck's Published Works
- Quotations from Other Literature

The numbers *after* the source texts of quotations refer to the sections of this study in which the quotations are given in English. Although not all source texts in the last section are related to Bavinck, it will be clear that this appendix is primarily intended for Bavinck scholars and students who are able to read Dutch. Other readers may ignore it.

Bristley's *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck*

Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* offers among others an overview of Bavinck's life and work, a Bavinck bibliography, and an overview of secondary literature, both in English and in Dutch. Bristley has updated J. Veenhof's older bibliography of Bavinck's works (published in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 425–46; additions in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 299–301) by listing recent editions and translations and by adding a few items missing from Veenhof's work such as the articles "Death" and "The Fall" that Bavinck wrote for the 1915-edition of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Despite all its qualities, Bristley's guide still contains some omissions and mistakes.

The following are a few items that are missing both from Veenhof's and from Bristley's bibliography:

- a. Bavinck, "Nader bescheid," which is a reaction to *De Wachter*, "Dr. H. Bavinck over Amerika" (see section 2.10). During one of my visits to Heritage Hall in the Hekman Library of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI in 2004, a staff member gave me copies of these articles.
- b. Bavinck, "Geloof en liefde." Bavinck mentions this article in his own (incomplete) bibliography "Lijst mijner geschriften."
- c. Bavinck, "Dr. Bavinck over de zending," a short speech about mission, delivered by Bavinck at the annual meeting of the Free University.
- d. Bavinck, untitled contribution, in *Gods groote daden aan Israël*. In this short contribution Bavinck agrees with mission among Jews and states his hope: "Zij zijn en blijven beminden om der vaderen wil. Als de volheid der Heidenen zal ingegaan zijn, zal gansch Israël zalig worden, en hunne aanneming zal dan het leven uit de dooden, de vernieuwing van hemel en aarde zijn." (They are and remain beloved for the sake of the fathers. When the fullness of the Gentiles will have come in, all Israel will be saved, and their acceptance will be life from the dead, the renewal of heaven and earth.)

In his “Lijst mijner geschriften” (unpublished) Bavinck also lists some items for which I have not (yet) done further research: “Eene nieuwe Dogmatiek (Shedd’s Dogm. Theol. 1888) in de Bazuin 1888 of 1889?,” “Een missionair predikant, Kamper Kerkbode 3 Dec. 98,” “Hoofdartikel in Prov. OV. & Kamper C. (over benoeming van Meerkerk tot avondschoolopz) 10 Dec. ’98,” “Rede over Comenius, op de verg. v. Chr. Onderw Hilversum 22 Mei 1907.”

A few more comments on Bristley’s guide: probably due to a technical problem, the descriptions of the Hungarian translations on page 116 lack almost all accented letters; for the correct spelling, see Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 445. Bristley records that *Our Reasonable Faith*—the English version of Bavinck’s popular one volume dogmatics *Magnali Dei*—has been translated into Chinese and Korean. Actually, an Arabic translation in four volumes is also available and can now be found on the internet: بين العقل والإيمان *bayna al-’aql wa-al-imān* [Between mind and faith]. Bristley gives only one English translation of *De offerande des lofs*, viz. *The Sacrifice of Praise*, trans. John Dolfin, but a second one is available on the internet: *The Sacrifice of Praise*, trans. Gilbert Zekveld. He leaves unmentioned that a searchable version (in revised spelling) of the second edition of the *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* is available in *Online Bijbel DeLuxe: Studie-editie 2002* or its successor the *Online Bijbel Studie DVD* (various editions).

On page 128 Bristley describes *Een Leidse vriendschap* as “a biographical study [that] explores the correspondence” between Bavinck and Snouck Hurgronje, but it is rather an annotated edition of the correspondence itself (on page 139 n91 he seems to confuse Snouck Hurgronje, *Amicissime* with *Een Leidse vriendschap*). To his overview of Bavinck’s letters on page 139 can be added: Bavinck to Henricus Beuker, July 1, 1884, in Beuker, *Abgeschiedenes Streben nach Einheit*, 385–87.

In his section “Bavinck Scholarship in Dutch” on pages 144–45 Bristley has not attempted to list Dutch articles on Bavinck. Actually some tens of Dutch (scholarly) articles and essays on various aspects of Bavinck’s life and work exist, but it is also beyond the scope of the present study to attempt to give a full list. At present, the best starting point for finding literature about Bavinck and his context in Dutch is probably the extensive bibliography in Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 684–719.

For English translations of Bavinck and literature about him since the publication of Bristley’s guide, see John Bolt, “Bavinck Bibliography 2008–2009,” *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 89–92 and John Bolt and Laurence R. O’Donnell, “Bavinck Bibliography 2010,” *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 174–77. One important addition can be made to these bibliographies: Bavinck, *Gereformeerde katholiciteit 1888–1918*, ed. Van der Kooi (2008), which offers a new Dutch edition of some of Bavinck’s most important writings: *De katholiciteit van Christendom en kerk*, *De zekerheid van het geloof*, *Modernisme en orthodoxie*, *Het problem van de oorlog*, *De navolging van Christus in het moderne leven* and the chapter on the divine counsel from the *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*. For the most recent developments in Bavinck studies, see the website of The Bavinck Institute at Calvin Theological Seminary.

These additions and comments notwithstanding, Bristley’s guide is a very helpful tool for finding one’s way to Bavinck’s writings.

Bavinck’s Correspondence with Snouck Hurgronje

Een Leidse vriendschap contains 29 letters from Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck (these letters have been published before in Snouck Hurgronje, *Amicissime*) and 76 letters from Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje (not 66, as said in the introduction, page 12). Bavinck often writes in answer to letters or postcards that have not been preserved (or which location is at least unknown). However, three letters from Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck that are not included have been quoted in earlier publications. For the sake of completeness, I give the quotations here.

When Snouck Hurgronje has received Bavinck’s *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, he writes January 29, 1905: “. . . komt mij steeds meer de schriftbeschouwing voor, het zwakke punt uwer leer te zijn. Met de bezwaren, waartoe eene ernstige studie der bijbelboeken aanleiding geeft—

geheel afgezien van den dogmatischen grondslag des vorschers—wordt daarin m.i. niet ernstig rekening gehouden, een groot gebrek, dat slechts kan blijven voortbestaan zoolang de gemeente, de schrift slechts door vele intermediairen kennend, te dien aanzien geene eischen stelt.” Augustijn, “Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen, 1912,” 109–10 n98 (the first sentence has been quoted in 3.6).

June 1, 1905, Bavinck answers with a letter that is published in *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 157–58. October 23, 1905, Snouck Hurgronje replies from Teltevreten (Jakarta): “Wat ge mij nader omtrent uwe beschouwing der Schrift schrijft, heb ik meer dan eens, in min of meer gewijzigden vorm van u gehoord, en ik kan mij erin verplaatsen, dat ge u daarbij nederlegt, maar het is en blijft in mijn oog een uiterst zwak punt uwer wereldbeschouwing. Of men al zegt: anders is de natuur, is de geschiedenis mij een raadsel, daarmee rechtvaardigt men niet eene oplossing van het raadsel, die eene onderstelling in zich sluit, waartegen zoo gewichtige en onweerlegde bedenkingen ingebracht zijn als tegen het supranatureele karakter der Schrift. . . . Met het aprioristische van denk- en zedewet laat zich dit niet vergelijken, want wat wij voor denk- en zedewet houden, kan blijken iets anders te zijn en dan zijn wij bereid, onze voorstelling dienaangaande te herzien, maar de Schrift is eene bepaalde verzameling van gewijde documenten, over welker oorsprong, samenhang en karakter in de laatste eeuw veel licht is opgegaan, dat men niet met eene algemeene phrase kan negeeren. . . . Mij dunkt, dat het Calvinisme zijne schriftbeschouwing zal moeten herzien om in volle oprechtheid jegens zichzelf voort te kunnen bestaan.” Augustijn, “Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen,” 109–10 (first and third fragment in the main text, second fragment in note 98) (the last sentence has been quoted in 3.6).

Exactly six years later, October 23, 1911, Snouck Hurgronje writes to Bavinck about his *Modernisme en orthodoxie*: “Zooals al hetgeen gij mij uit uwe pen te lezen gaaft, heeft ook dit stuk mij gesticht, in dezen zin, dat het mij noopte over allerlei vraagstukken, die het leven ons opgeeft, ernstig na te denken. Gij hebt in hooge mate de gave vanuit den streng begrensden kring, waarin gij leeft, te spreken niet alleen tot geestverwanten in den engeren zin van het woord.” Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 135.

The following is an overview of the quotations from *Een Leidse vriendschap* that have been translated in the present study. The overview follows the order of pagination of *Een Leidse vriendschap*, which is also the chronological order of the letters.

De Bruijn and G. Harinck, “Inleiding,” in *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 9: “Dit begrip voor elkaar als tegenstander, dat vooral voor een polemicus pur sang als Snouck Hurgronje opmerkelijk mag heten . . .” (2.3).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 3, 1878, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 45: “Toch was ik in zooverre onvoldaan, dat het mij minder inspireerde dan ik gedacht had. Ik sprak niet met dat gevoel voor mijzelf, als ik gehoopt had dat ik doen zou; terwijl de gedachte, altijd zoo ver beneden 't ideaal te blijven staan, me onophoudelijk bijbleef” (2.7).

Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 55: “. . . eene gedachtenwisseling, waarbij men niet in het minst schroomt, elkaar de waarheid te zeggen” (2.3; 4.7). “Gij zult wel willen gelooven, dat ik er prijs op stel en dat het mijn streven is, ook anderer ernstige overtuiging te begrijpen en daarmêe mijne eigen geestesorganen te scherpen.” “Allerlei zaken brengen mée dat mijne sympathieën alles behalve aan de zijde van ééne richting of partij zijn en dat ik, daar mijn geweten mij vooralsnog verbiedt, mij ergens aan te sluiten, het liefst mijn geestelijk voedsel zoek daar waar ik zeker ben althans ernst te vinden” (2.3).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 56–57: “. . . de toon der ware vriendschap . . .”; “Leiden is me van veelzijdig nut geweest; ik hoop het altijd dankend te erkennen. Maar het heeft me ook dikwerf zeer arm gemaakt, me ontnomen, niet alleen veel ballast (daar ben ik blij om) maar ook veel dat ik thans in den lateren tijd, vooral als ik preeken maken moest, als onmisbaar voor eigen geestelijk leven leerde beschouwen.” “Heb ik iets aan Leiden te danken dan is het dit: den tegenstander trachten te begrijpen. Dat zegt ge nog in uw brief.” “Mijne oprechte bede is het, dat we beiden door strijd en twijfel en lijden heen altijd nader

komen aan wat wezenlijk waar is en goed. Dan zou tegelijk vervuld worden wat ik met mijn gansche hart wensch, dat wij altijd nader tot elkaar komen in overtuiging en belijdenis" (2.3).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, November 24, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 75–76: "En zoo hebben wij beiden dan het einde van de academische loopbaan bereikt. 't Kan me alleen maar spijten, dat we zoo ver, zoo ontzachtlijk ver in beginsel en in levensbeschouwing uiteengaan. Toch blijft mijne hartelijke vriendschap en warme belangstelling u vergezellen ondanks nog zoo groot verschil van inzicht en overtuiging. Dat dat verschil kleiner zal worden hoop ik, maar zie ik nog niet. 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 Scholten en Kuenen 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. Dit 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" (2.3).

Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 79–80: ". . . steeds den noodigen eerbied en ongedwongen sympathie . . ."; ". . . de kritische bezwaren tegen de oude Schriftbeschouwing . . ."; "Ofschoon ik uwe dogmatische meeningen niet deelde, heb ik aan de mogelijkheid dier oplossing toch nooit gewanhoopt, zooals dat in moderne kringen gewoonlijk geschiedt—mijn meer of min onzeker, als ge wilt sceptisch standpunt veroorloofde mij die afwijking van de gewone meening in dezen." ". . . blijven wij steeds even hartelijk als vroeger in elkaars geestelijke ontwikkeling deelnemen." ". . . devragen zijn en blijven . . ." (2.3).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 13, 1881, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 81: ". . . het verliezen van geloofswaarheden en het aannemen van andere, van de hunne" (2.3). "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. . . En nu weet ik het wel, dat ik dat nooit terugkrijg. . . Als ik dan soms . . . in de gemeente nog enkele menschen 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, ja er één mee, o me dunkt, dan was iks terk, machtig, 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" (2.4).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, June 16, 1881, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 88–89: "Eerlijk gezegd, ik word en ben steeds meer 'gereformeerd.' . . . Ik heb meer eerbied gekregen en meer piëteit voor het geloof en den geloofsarbeid der eeuwen" (2.8).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, March 7, 1882, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 100: "Ik deed dit, om daarbij wat studie te maken van de gereformeerde theologie. . . . Helderder dan weleer zie ik in, dat tusschen (laat mij de bekende termen gebruiken) Reformatie en Revolutie, op elk terrein, in beginsel en methode beide, in de beschouwing van God, mensch, wereld enz. elke 'Vermittlung' of verzoening onmogelijk is." "Voor ik ooit met een eigen werk optreed, moet ik weten wat ik wil en waar ik sta. Ik heb dat vroeger niet geweten en in Leiden niet geleerd. Het wordt waarlijk tijd dat ik dat beseft" (2.8).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, October 23, 1883, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 115: "Zoovele vragen van 't hoogste gewicht blijven onopgelost. En de afstand tusschen 't ideaal en mijn krachten is zoo verbazend groot" (2.8).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, February 11, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 117: ". . . verzamelen van bouwstof voor eene eigen dogmatiek en ethiek." ". . . in het historisch gegevene, vooral natuurlijk in de gereformeerde dogmatiek." (2.8)

J. J. Prins to Bavinck, October 2, 1884, quoted in Bavinck and Snouck Hurgronje, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 124 n1: "Dat isolement, waartoe gij adviseert, kan ik slechts betreuren. Zeker, de christen moet zich, evenals zijn Heer, gedurig afzonderen op den berg, om te bidden, en versterking zoeken van geloof en liefde; maar telkens moet hij dan toch tot zijn werkkring midden in de

wereld terugkeren en zich beijveren, dat het zuurdeeg allengs de drie maten meels doordringe. Dit geldt van de theologie evenzoo. Ik zie niet in, hoe eene tegenovergestelde handelswijze van sectarisme zou zijn vrij te pleiten” (2.8).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 23, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 122, 124: “Mij ontbreekt het . . . aan vaste overtuiging van de betrouwbaarheid van den weg, dien ik zelf bewandel. Ik weet zoo ongeveer vrij goed, hoe en waarheen het niet moet; en ik wenschte, dat ik het tegengestelde even goed wist. Maar die wensch is nog in geen en deele vervuld” (2.8). “Juist wij ik thans altijd onder geestverwanten leef, is mij de controle van tegenstanders die tevens vrienden zijn soms te onmisbaar” (2.3). “. . . van valsch separatisme . . . een volslagen vijand.” “. . . Vermitteling van twee heterogeene beginselen en wereldbeschouwingen . . . tot niets leiden kan.” “Voor het overige zou ik niets liever willen dan aan mijn kerk, aan de studenten die ik onderwijs, aan allen op wie ik enigen invloed oefenen kan, de overtuiging te verschaffen, dat aan het christelijke niets menschelijks vreemd is.” “Rein, onvermengd blijve het beginsel, maar dit wensch ik toe te passen op heel ’t menschelijk leven, in al de breedte die het toelaat.” “. . . al te exclusief.” “. . . een seminarie en dan nog wel in Kampen” (2.8).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 7, 1888, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 132 (italics original): “En voorts ben ik voor mijzelf in veel opzichten nog een zoekende, zooals de meesten. De theologie over ’t algemeen moet op allen die buiten haar staan wel een armzaligen indruk maken. Zeker, omdat de meesten wel zoo ongeveer weten, hoe het *niet* kan en slechts een enkele als dr. Kuiper meent te weten, hoe het wel moet” (2.8).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 22, 1888, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 136–37: “Soms bespeur ik in mijn eigen ziel een onuitgesproken wensch, dat de Schrift niet waar mocht zijn, dat de nieuwere kritiek gelijk hebben mocht, en daarin zie ik iets van die geheime vijandschap, die het zondig hart tegen den Heilige gevoelt, en die alleen door het geloof en het gebed overwonnen kan worden. . . . Juist deze zielservaring in verband met andere bindt mij aan Schrift en belijdenis vast, ofschoon ik in mijn verstand even diep de bezwaren gevoel die er tegen het christendom kunnen ingebracht worden als gij. Het is voor mij in de eerste plaats het *hart* en het *geweten*, dat mij belet modern en liberaal te zijn. . . . Mijne oratie hebt ge zeker ontvangen. Bedenk bij de lezing dat ze vooral bestemd is als eenige medicijn voor de separatistische en seclarische neigingen, die soms in onze kerk zich vertoonen. Er is zooveel enghartigheid, zooveel bekrompenheid onder ons, en ’t ergste is dat dat nog voor vroomheid geldt. Ik weet wel, het ideaal waar ik naar streef is hier onbereikbaar, maar mensch te zijn in den vollen natuurlijken zin van dat woord en dan als mensch in alles een kind van God – dat lijkt mij ’t schoonst van alles. Daar streef ik naar” (2.5).

Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, June 18, 1895, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 146–47: “Terwijl gij, zoover ik de zaak beoordeelen mag, in andere hoofdstukken uw standpunt wetenschappelijk zeer sterk hebt gemaakt, scheen het mij, dat gij de bezwaren der Schriftcritiek niet ernstig genoeg behandeld hebt” (3.6).

Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, June 1, 1904, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 156: “Ik mag daarbij voegen, dat ik . . . mij reeds in onzen studententijd vaak ergerde, waar ik de naïeve uitspraak vernam, dat men zich ‘niet begrijpen kon’ (de bedoeling was, dat niemand zulks kon) hoe een knap man tevens Schriftgeloovig kon zijn. Meer dan eens heb ik toen daarop geantwoord: dit zal wel niet het eenige zijn, dat gij niet begrijpt en dat toch zoo is” (3.6).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, June 1, 1905, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 158: “Mijnerzijds stem ik toe, dat de onderstelling, waarop mijne levensbeschouwing rust, namelijk de waarheid der Heilige Schrift, een moeilijk probleem insluit. Ik kan er eigenlijk dit alleen van zeggen: naarmate ik langer en dieper leef, bemerk ik, dat ik van het gezag der Schrift niet los kan komen. . . . Soms heb ik er wel eens de neiging toe, om er mede te breken, maar als ik mij zelf dan goed onderzoek, dan hangt dat saam met het booze in mijne menschelijke natuur. . . . En omgekeerd, naarmate ik, laat ik het zoo maar zeggen, vromer gestemd ben en betere oogenblikken doorleef, voel ik mij tot aannemen van en onderwerping aan de Schrift volkomen bereid en geneigd, en heb vrede voor mijn hart” (2.7).

Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 30, 1908, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 163: “. . . sceptisch, zonder van scepticisme een systeem te willen maken” (2.3). “Zwak schijnt mij altijd uw standpunt ten aanzien der Schrift” (3.6).

Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 3, 1909, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 164–65: “Uwe sceptis begrijp ik. Maar wijl mijne lezingen ook voor anderen dan geestverwanten bestemd zijn, heb ik mij nergens op het gezag der Heilige Schrift als zoodanig beroepen, maar heb ik alleen gezegd: a) zoo en zoo ziet de mensch en de wereld er uit. Zonder eene hoogere, almachtige en genadige kracht gaat zij te gronde, en b) nu komt daar uit de mond van profeten, Christus en de apostelen een getuigenis, waarvan de kern is: zulk een almachtige en genadige wil *is* er, al is er de schijn van alle dingen ook tegen. Welnu, dit getuigenis is een *feit*, afgezien van alle bijbelcritiek; ’t ligt er en ’t blijft er liggen, trots alle ontkenning of bestrijding. Dat aan te nemen en als waarheid te erkennen, is zeker eene geloofsdaad, maar waartoe heel de wereld en vooral ons eigen hart ons dringt. En het als waarheid aan te nemen is tegelijk het te erkennen als openbaring van Godswege, want anders kan men het niet als waarheid aannemen” (3.6).

Finally, let it be hoped that the quotations in the present study will encourage a reader to produce a full English translation of the correspondence between Bavinck and Snouck Hurgronje. Without these letters one misses a dimension of who Bavinck was.

Quotations from Unpublished Documents

Bavinck, diary 1871–1875, undated note and September 24, 1874: “Kosten te Leiden | Collegegeld f 270 | Lid Corps + 14 | — | 284 | Glas bier 15 | Lid Groen Societeit 50.” “Besloten geen lid te worden van ’t Corps om mijns gewetens wille” (2.2).

Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” (diary 1874–1879), September 23 and 24, 1874 (italics replace original underlining). “’t Afscheid van mijn Ouders viel me zwaar, vooral hierom, dat ik naar L. ging. Zal ’k staande blijven? God geve het!” (2.1; 2.2). “Mag ik lid worden als Christen van ’t Leidsche Stud.-Corps. ’K twijfelde: D^s. Donner kwam ’s avonds te half elf bij me, ried ’t me af en—ik word geen lid, zoo besloot ik. Dikwerf vraag ’k me af, of ’t wel *alleen* en *zuiver* gewetenshalve was, dat ik geen lid werd” (2.2).

Bavinck, “Idealistisch en Materialistisch Pantheïsme” (manuscript): “Laat me U wijzen op de wording, het wezen en de waarde der Evolutieleer, het pantheïsme” (3.2).

Bavinck, “De mensch, Gods evenbeeld” (manuscript), [3–6] and [35] (the first quotations have been published in De Wit, “Beeld van gorilla en chimpansee of beeld van God?”): “De tegenstelling kan niet scherper: Adam beeld van gorilla en chimpansee, of beeld van God. Men moet tusschen deze beide kiezen.” “. . . ‘horror naturalis’ van ’s menschen dierlijken oorsprong.” “Wij voelen ons, ondanks alle uitspraken der wetenschap, niet verwant aan de dieren.” “God schiep den mensch naar zijn beeld. Deze waarheid . . . is een grondbegrip des Bijbels, onderstelling van de leer der zonde, der verlossing, der heilig- en der heerlijkmaking. Neem haar weg en alle openbaringen Gods missen het voetstuk, waarop zij rusten en storten weg in de diepte.” “Hij is de groote Reformator der Schepping, hij kan het beeld Gods in ons herstellen. Hoe hij dat doet? Ik weet het niet; door een wonder, een scheppingsdaad, door één woord, met één wenk, in één oogenblik. Stelt u eens onder den machtigen indruk zijner boeiende persoonlijkheid. Zet voor een oogenblik alle kritiek, alle redeneering eens ter zijde, plaatst u vlak voor hem, zoodat zijn oog in ’t uwe staart, zijn blik den uwen ontmoet, licht het deksel af van uw hart, aanschouwt hem dan, vangt zijn blik op, zoo doordringend, zoo rein, zoo zacht, zegt niets, spreekt niets, ziet alleen, en sneller nog dan het licht uw beeld laat vallen in de camera obscura op de zilverplaat van den photograaf, valt Jezus’ beeld u in de ziel en zijt gij naar zijn evenbeeld herschapen. Eén machtige indruk—en gij zijt een afdruk van Christus. Gij moet hem zien, goed zien, met eigen oogen; gij moet hem zien persoonlijk, dan zijt gij hem gelijk” (2.6).

Bavinck, “Moelikheden” (piece of scrap paper; italics replace original underlining): “Moelikheden || Scheppingsdagen. | Verderf en dood vòòr den mensch. | Schepping v d mensch: Adam,

Eva | De Heere *plantte* een hof | Schiep Eva uit een rib v Adam. | Chronologie des Bijbels, in verband met die van China Indie Egypte Babylonie | Stilstand der zon | Bileams ezelin | Jona in den visch | Daniel | Aanraking der beenderen en levend worden | Onreine geesten in de zwijnen | Daniel | Parousie – tijd” (3.7).

Bavinck, “Openbaring en ontwikkeling” (notes for a lecture): “Evolutie is nu de sleutel, de alles verklarende gedachte. Ze is de poging, ons gansche heelal uit zz., immanent te verklaren, zonder pers. God, zonder iets supranatureels in natuur of genade (religie). daarmee tracht men alles te verklaren: | a. planetenstelsel: Kant – Laplace | b. oorsprong v. leven | c. de soorten v. levende wezens, mensch uit dier | d. maatschappij, gezin, staat, huwelijk. | e. wet. kunst godsd. zedel., ook ’t Christ. | f. ’t Christ. is syncret. Godsdienst | g. bekeering (relig. psychologie).” “Tegen deze evolutieleer staat Openbaring lijnrecht over.” “Is er dan enkel tegenstelling? Neen. Openb. & ontw. | Openb. moet en kan meer organisch, psychologisch, historisch opgevat. eischen, onderstellen, helpen elkaar. Alleen in de op. is er voor eigenl. ontw. plaats. | a. Eerst de schepping, die ’t zijn poneert, en dan ontwikkelen zich de dingen naar hun aard. | b. Eerst de onderhouding en dan de medewerking, concursus, plaats voor de 2^o oorzaken. | c. Eerst de geboorte (generatie, conceptie) v. d mensch en dan zijn ontwikkeling. | d. Eerst de aanleg in den mensch, voor wet. kunst religie zedel. en dan ontw. daarvan. | e. Eerst de wedergeb. en dan openbaring daarvan in geloof en bekering. | f. Eerst Christus en dan de groei van de gemeente uit Hem als ’t Hoofd. | g. Eerst ’t zuurdesem door vrouw in ’t meel gelegd en dan ’t doorzuringsproces. Koninkrijk eerst al een mosterdzaad en dan de groei. | De openbaring in ruimsten zin is beginsel, oorsprong, idee, drijfkracht van ’t gansche ontwikkelingsproces, dat zijn einde bereikt in nieuwe hemel & aarde, in ’t Godsrijk” (3.2).

J. Bavinck, “Korte schets van mijn leven” (typoscript), 62: “Doch betreunden wij onze lieve dooden, wij deden dit niet zonder hope, dat zij in de Heere ontslapen en in den hemel opgenomen waren. Onze oudste dochter Dina heeft reeds in Bunschoten duidelijke blijken gegeven, dat zij, gelijk wij reeds van haar getuigden, Jezus liefhad, zoodat eene vrome buurvrouw, bij wie zij veel kwam, eens, van haar sprekende, tot ons zeide: ‘In dat kind ligt iets goeds voor den Heere.’ Ook in Almkerk openbaarde zij bij verschillende gelegenheden hare keuze om den Heere te dienen, en vooral op haar sterfbed kwam dit duidelijk uit. Niets had zij liever, dan dat met haar werd gebeden, dat een of ander hoofdstuk uit het Woord haar werd voorgelezen, of met haar over God en Zijn dienst werd gesproken. Van onze andere dochter, Femia, merkten wij zulke duidelijke blijken van genade wel niet, maar ook zij was vragende, uitziende, en wij hopen dat de Heere onze God hare verzuchtingen en onze gebeden zal verhoord hebben. Doch niet op deze blijken rust als grond onze hope, dat onze kinderen in den Heere gestorven zijn, maar onze hope is gegrond op het verbond der genade met Zijne belofte[n], die in Christus Jezus ja en amen zijn. In dit verband heeft de Heere ook aan onze kinderen Zijne beloften toegezegd; beloften welke in den H. Doop hun ook beteekend en verzegeld zijn” (2.2).

Quotations from Bavinck’s Published Works

The following quotations have been alphabetized by title, ignoring the Dutch articles “De,” “Eene,” and “Het.”

Bavinck, “Het begrip en de noodzakelijkheid der evangelisatie,” 35, 39–40: “. . . om eigen naam te verheerlijken of eigen koninkrijkje uit te breiden.” “We behooen daarbij in broederlijken zin samen te werken, ook met degenen, die met ons niet van een zelfde kerkelijk beginsel zijn.” “We moeten ten aanzien van de Roomsche Kerk haar historisch recht aanvaarden. Natuurlijk niet haar dwalingen. Onze roeping tegenover de Roomsche kerk is: niet onderhands zielen te winnen, maar het Evangelie te brengen aan verdwaalden, tot welke kerkelijke gemeenschap zij ook behoord hebben. . . . Het werk der Evangelisatie kan leiden tot aansluiting bij de Gereformeerde Kerk, maar behoeft dat niet te doen. Ons past hier de breedheid van beschouwing: zondaren te brengen aan den voet van het kruis. Niet in methodistischen, maar in Gereformeerden zin” (2.10).

Bavinck, “Eene belangrijke apologie van de christelijke wereldbeschouwing,” 145: “Indien Hij het middelpunt is, is Hij daardoor juist niet het beginsel en het uitgangspunt” (1.8).

Bavinck, “Belijdenis of beginselen”: “De kerk en hare belijdenis wordt tot een klein gebied beperkt. . . . Maar daarbuiten ligt het groote terrein der ‘gemeene gratie.’ En daar moet het Calvinisme heerschen, dat niet een theologisch maar wijsgeerig stelsel is . . . en een heele levens- en wereldbeschouwing bevat. Met de kerkelijke belijdenis kan men op dit terrein niets aanvangen. . . . Hiervoor zijn de ‘Gereformeerde beginselen’ van noode, die wel niemand kent en die nergens geformuleerd zijn, maar die er toch zijn en door de Vrije Universiteit moeten worden opgespoord.” “Op deze wijze [wordt] het zwaartepunt hoe langer hoe meer verlegd, uit het Calvinisme als religie in het Calvinisme als filosofie, uit de kerk als instituut in de kerk als organisme, uit de particuliere genade in de gemeene gratie” (2.9).

Bavinck, “Buiten de kerk”: “De onkerkelijkheid is eene der grootste kwalen van den tijd” (1.1).

Bavinck, “Calvinisme”: “Calvijn leerde n.l. geen bijzondere, Calvinistische waarheid, maar hij bedoelde niet anders te prediken en te leeren dan de zuivere waarheid Gods, het onvervalschte Evangelie van den Heere Jezus Christus” (2.9).

Bavinck, “Calvinistisch en gereformeerd,” 67–68: “In de eerste plaats is Calvinistisch ruimer dan Gereformeerd; Gereformeerd duidt alleen eene richting aan op godsdienstig, kerkelijk en theologisch terrein, maar Calvinistisch sluit ook in eene bepaalde beschouwing van staat en maatschappij en wetenschap, en kan daarom ook als naam van eene politieke partij dienst doen. . . . Maar ten tweede is er tusschen Gereformeerd en Calvinistisch nog een theologisch verschil. In dezen zin is Gereformeerd ruimer dan Calvinistisch. Gereformeerd zijn allen, die instemmen met eene van de vele algemeen als gereformeerd erkende geloofsbelijdenissen en tot eene van de vele algemeen als gereformeerd erkende Kerken behooren. Maar de naam Calvinistisch duidt aan eene bijzondere beschouwing en voorstelling van de Gereformeerde waarheid” (2.9).

Bavinck, *Het christelijk huisgezin* (1908), 140; (1912), 148: “Alles voedt in het huisgezin op, . . . de bede en de dankzegging aan den disch en de lezing van Gods woord, het morgen- en het avondgebed” (2.6).

Bavinck, *Christliche Weltanschauung*, iv: “. . . daß die Bekämpfung, welche die christliche Religion in ihrem Kern und Wesen heutzutage zu erleiden hat, den Zusammenschluß aller derer bewirken muß, die, wenn auch durch Kirche, Bekenntnis oder Nationalität getrennt, doch auf dem gemeinschaftlichen Boden des allgemeinen ungeweihten christlichen Glaubens stehen. Es ist ihre Aufgabe die Kontroverse, welche zwischen ihnen bestehen, zwar nicht, als ob sie ganz ohne Bedeutung waren, zu verwischen und zu vergessen, sondern doch für einen Augenblick ruhen zu lassen, weil es gilt, das Bekenntnis, das dem ganzen Christentum gemeinsam ist, gegen Angriffe zu verteidigen” (2.10).

Bavinck, “Het concilie van presbyteriaanse kerken te Toronto,” 928: “. . . dat God meer dan eenen zegen heeft en dat Hij ook elders werkt op eigene wijze.” “Indien we waarlijk gelooven aan de Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk, erkennen wij ten volle het recht, dat beide elders in eene gedaante optreden die afwijkt van die in ons eigen land. . . . Meer dan eenige tijd roept onze eeuw ons op . . . de gemeenschap te onderhouden met alle heiligen, opdat wij met hen iets verstaan van de diepte en hoogte, de lengte en breedte van de liefde van Christus, welke de kennis te boven gaat” (2.10).

Bavinck, “Geloof en liefde,” 121: “Het ware geloof heeft dus een persoon tot voorwerp, n.l. Christus. . . . Het echte geloof blijft echter toch niet bij het getuigenis dier Schrift staan, maar dringt door haar heen tot Christus zelve door, sluit zich bij Hem aan, treedt met Hem in gemeenschap” (2.7).

Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap” (1880), 519; (1922), 7: “Als geschapen wezens staan wij op den grondslag van het geschapene, kunnen dus eerst na ervaring kennen; wij kunnen slechts *nadenken*” (4.5).

Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (1895), 1:iii–v: “Niet alleen de geloovige, ook de dogmaticus heeft belijdenis te doen van de gemeenschap der heiligen. Alleen met alle de heiligen kan hij

begrijpen, welke de breedte en lengte en diepte en hoogte zij en bekennen de liefde van Christus, die de kennis te boven gaat. Eerst in en door hunne gemeenschap leert hij het dogma verstaan, waarin het christelijk geloof zich uitspreekt. Bovendien ligt er in deze gemeenschap der heiligen eene sterkende kracht en een uitnemende troost. Dogmatiek is thans niet in eere; het christelijk dogma deelt niet in de gunst van den tijd. . . . Maar des te meer stemt het dan tot dank, een beroep te kunnen doen op het bondgenootschap der voorgelachten. Om deze redenen is er aan de patristische en scholastische theologie meer aandacht gewijd, dan anders wel bij protestantsche dogmatici het geval is. Mannen als Irenaeus, Augustinus, Thomas, behooren niet uitsluitend aan Rome. Zij zijn patres en doctores, aan wie de gansche christelijke kerk verplichtingen heeft. Voorts is ook de Roomsche theologie na de Hervorming niet vergeten. Er is onder de Protestanten menigmaal te weinig bekendheid zoowel met hetgeen hun met Rome gemeen is als wat van Rome hen scheidt. . . . Het nauwst echter sluit deze dogmatiek zich aan bij dat type, hetwelk de christelijke religie en theologie in de zestiende eeuw door de Reformatie, bepaaldelijk in Zwitserland, ontving. Niet omdat dit de eenig-ware, maar wijl het naar de overtuiging van den schrijver de relatief-zuiverste uitdrukking der waarheid is. In geen confessie is het christelijke in zijn religieus, ethisch en theologisch karakter zoo tot zijn recht gekomen; nergens is het zoo diep en breed, zoo ruim en vrij, zoo waarlijk katholiek opgevat als in die van de Gereformeerde kerken. . . . Schrijver dezès [acht] het het recht van den dogmaticus, om in de geschiedenis der Gereformeerde theologie tusschen koren en kaf onderscheid te maken. Het oude te loven alleen omdat het oud is, is noch gereformeerd noch christelijk. En dogmatiek beschrijft niet wat gegolden heeft, maar wat gelden moet. Zij wortelt in het verleden, maar arbeidt voor de toekomst. Daarom eindelijk wenscht deze dogmatiek ook het stempel te dragen van haar tijd. Het ware een onbegonnen werk, zich los te maken van het heden; maar het zou ook niet goed zijn voor God, die in deze eeuw niet minder luide en ernstig tot ons spreekt dan in vorige geslachten. . . . Waar afwijking plicht was, is er rekenschap van gegeven. Maar ook dan is er naar gestreefd, om het goede te waardeeren, waar het te vinden was. Dikwerf deed voortgezette studie verwantschap ontdekken, die aanvankelijk heel niet scheen te bestaan" (2.10).

Bavinck, *Godsdienst en godgeleerdheid*, 23: "Als eerstgenoemden uit een geloovig gezin komen, gaan zij niet alleen aan de akademie eene zware crisis tegemoet, waarbij hun godsdienstige overtuiging en hun liefde tot het ambt op het spel komen te staan. Maar nog grooter moeilijkheid wacht hen, als zij van de school in de kerk, van de wetenschap in het leven, van de theorie in de practijk terugkeeren. Zij kunnen in vele gevallen niet meer spreken, omdat zij niet gelooven. Zij hebben dikwerf niets meer te verkondigen, omdat de kracht en de heerlijkheid van het Evangelie hun door de critiek werd ontroofd. Zij kunnen niet meer getuigen, omdat hun kinderlijk vertrouwen op het woord der apostelen werd geschokt. Als zij geschikt voor het ambt willen zijn, — zoo is er gezegd — moeten zij veel vergeten, van wat zij in de akademie-zalen hebben gehoord. En als zij behouden willen, hetgeen zij daar hebben geleerd, missen zij voor de vervulling van hun dienst de noodige bezieling en kracht, en staan aan krank- en sterfbed verlegen. Hoevelen lijden daarbij onder eene innerlijke onwaarheid, die het leven verscheurt! Wat strijd kost hun de tegenstelling tusschen inwendige overtuiging en uitwendige belijdenis, tusschen de gedachten des harten en de woorden der lippen, tusschen de onderzoekingen in het studeervertrek en de eischen van den kansel! Met hun positie ontevreden, zoeken velen dan een uitweg in politiek, diaconaat of philanthropie en houden in diezelfde mate op, bedienaren des Woords en uitdeelen van Gods verborgenheden te zijn" (2.4; partly in 3.6).

Bavinck, "De Hervorming en ons nationale leven," 20: "De Nederlander is realistisch aangelegd, hij heeft een open oog voor de werkelijkheid; hij is niet geniaal, niet intuïtief, hij heeft geen diepe gedachten, geen grootsche bespiegelingen, geen trotsche en stoute stelsels van wijsbegeerte. . . . Maar daartegenover is aan den Nederlander wel eigen een nauwkeurig en geduldig bezien van de werkelijkheid en een opmerken in die werkelijkheid van het licht van goddelijke glorie, dat daarin van boven nederdaalt" (5.1).

Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, 2, 14, 211-12: ". . . dat het Christendom bij deze eeuw niet past." "De vraagstukken, die men vroeger als de gewichtigste beschouwde, hebben voor ons geheel of groot-

tendeels hunne beteekenis verloren. Andere belangen, door hen niet genoemd, dringen zich thans op den voorgrond. . . . Wij zijn kinderen van een nieuwe tijd en leven in eene andere eeuw” (3.2). “De mensch is een raadsel, dat alleen in God zijne oplossing vindt” (3.6). “Eén van hare voorstanders sprak het open uit: er blijft slechts de keuze tusschen de afstammingsleer en het wonder; daar het laatste op wetenschappelijk standpunt volstrekt onmogelijk is, zijn wij wel genoodzaakt, in de eerste onze positie te nemen. Doch daaruit blijkt dat ook, dat de afstammingsleer niet een resultaat van nauwkeurige wetenschap, maar een postulaat van materialistische of pantheïstische wijsbegeerte is. . . . Zij is niet eene onderstelling tot verklaring van feiten, maar zij construeert feiten tot bevestiging eener onderstelling” (3.7).

Bavinck, *Mijne reis naar Amerika*, 55, 58: “Godsdienst is een zaak van amusement, van ontspanning.” “Laat het Amerikaansche christendom zich naar eigen wet ontwikkelen. God heeft een hooge en grootsche roeping aan Amerika toebetrouwd. Strevende het die na, op eigene wijze. Het calvinisme is toch niet de eenige waarheid!” (2.9).

Bavinck, “Nader bescheid,” 3: “De Hollanders hebben goed gedaan, met zich in Amerika bijeen te voegen en zich nauw aan elkander aan te sluiten.” “. . . in dezen toestand op den langen duur niet zullen kunnen volharden.” “Dan zullen ze in diezelfde mate hun Hollandsche leven moeten prijsgeven en zich moeten werpen in den vollen stroom van het Amerikaansche leven. . . . En het heeft mij in niet geringe mate verblijd, dat vele Hollanders in Amerika dit zelve inzien, en reeds druk bezig zijn, om niet alleen kerkelijk, maar ook sociaal en politiek, op het gebied van onderwijs en opvoeding zich rekenschap te geven van het standpunt, dat ze in het Amerikaansche leven hebben in te nemen. Dat is moeilijk zeer zeker en ook gevaarlijk; de problemen zijn zoo gewichtig en dwalen is zoo menscheijk. Maar aan de andere zijde: welke eene heerlijke roeping, om de beproefde beginselen van het verleden toe te passen op het gansche rijke leven, dat het jeugdige en krachtige Amerika op elk gebied tot ontwikkeling brengt. Natuurlijk kan dit alles slechts geschieden op kleine schaal, want wat beteekent een handjevol Hollanders op eene bevolking van 90 milioenen[sic]! Maar de zaak is zoo schoon, dat zij het hart verjongt en de ziel met geestdrift vervult.” “Maar het zou oneerlijk zijn, indien ik niet erkende, dat het woord, toen door Dr. Chapman gesproken, eenvoudig, ernstig, aangrijpend was, aan alle vreemdigheden was gespeend, en op mij, evenals op de gansche vergadering van 3000 mannen boven de 16 jaar, een diepen indruk maakte. Als de Schrijver ze had bijgewoond, zou het hem, geloof ik, op dezelfde wijze zijn gegaan. Maar omdat hij ze niet bijwoonde, kan hij er ook niet over oordelen; in dit opzicht ben ik thans, ofschoon een vreemdeling, tegenover hem, den Amerikaan, in het voordeel.” “Er is reden voor de in den laatsten tijd meermalen herhaalde klacht, dat het geestelijk leven achteruitgaat en zijn vroegeren glans heeft verloren.” “Er is daarin niets dat met het etiket: methodistisch, door de Gereformeerde belijdenis veroordeeld zou worden.” “En als ik dan naga het rijke leven en den machtigen arbeid van John Wesley; den invloed bereken, die van hem op heel de Engelsch sprekende wereld en op schier heel de Protestantsche Christenheid is uitgegaan; als ik bedenken, dat al onze Christelijke Vereenigingen, onze activiteit op het gebied der zending, heel onze zoogenaamde ‘arbeid voor het koninkrijk Gods’ van hem den stoot heeft ontvangen, . . . dan blijf ik onverzwakt in het geloof, dat de Gereformeerde belijdenis de zuiverste uitdrukking van de waarheid is, maar dan verruimt zich mijn hart tot de blijde erkenning, dat God meer dan eenen zegen heeft, dat zijne wegen wonderbaar zijn, en dat Hij zijne gemeente uit alle volken en uit alle kerken door zijn Geest en Woord vergadert in eenigheid des waren geloofs” (2.10).

Bavinck, “De navolging van Christus” (1886), 322: “Jezus is gekomen niet om de wereld te veroordeelen, maar om haar te behouden Joh. 3 : 17; de monnik verlaat de wereld en begeeft zich in de woestijn om haar te veroordeelen. Bij Jezus was afzondering in eene woeste plaats des morgens vroeg Mark 1 : 35 sterking voor de dag- en levenstaak; de monnik stelt in de oefening, in de askese het wezen der deugd en verandert middel in doel” (2.8).

Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het moderne leven* (1918), 7; (1922), 120: “In het middelpunt van die vraagstukken staat dat naar de navolging van Christus en het moderne leven. Is er voor die navolging nog plaats in het cultuurleven van den tegenwoordigen tijd? Kan men

met haar nog rekenen in den staat, in nijverheid en handel, op de markt, op de beurs, in de bank, het kantoor en de fabriek, in wetenschap en kunst, in den oorlog en aan het front?" (3.6).

Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel*, 33–34 (quoting Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 18.46–48): "De aesthetische mensch, zegt Kierkegaard, leeft van oogenblik tot oogenblik; als hij zich in het oogenblik handhaven kon, zou hij een god gelijk zijn. Maar zijn gevaar ligt . . . in de leegte tusschen de oogenblikken; altijd weer moet hij door zijne eigene leegte heen." "Maar het blijde einde gaat ver boven den aardschen gezichtseinder uit. Daarom, 'Wat de rede ziet, kan 'k U verklaren; | Maar verder moet gij wachten | Op Beatrice in zaken des geloofs'" (2.7).

Bavinck, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, iii-iv: "Durch die Erträgnisse eines Kapitals, das durch die Großherzigkeit des Herrn L. S. [sic; correct: L. P.] Stone gestiftet wurde" (3.3). "Wohl ist der Begriff der Offenbarung für Viele ein überwundener Standpunkt und hat nur noch einen antiquarischen Wert. Aber tieferes Nachdenken und fortgesetzte Untersuchung stellen es über jeden Zweifel, daß eine Weltanschauung, die *alle* Geschehnisse in Natur und Geschichte in Betracht zieht, der Notwendigkeit und der Wirklichkeit einer Offenbarung nicht entbehren kann. Und den Bedürfnissen und Forderungen, die eine einheitliche Weltanschauung mit sich bringt, entspricht allein *die* Offenbarung, welche uns im Christentum gegeben wird. Die nachfolgenden Vorlesungen sind der Entwicklung und Befestigung dieser Grundgedanken gewidmet" (3.4).

Bavinck, "Rapport inzake de voorstellen der particuliere synodes rakende de belijdenis," 154: "De goddelijke ingeving en autoriteit der H. Schrift, art. 2–8 van de Ned. Geloofsbel., de leer over de ware en de valsche Kerk, in verband met de thans door velen aangenomene pluriformiteit der Kerk, art. 29, en die over het ambt der overheid in art. 36 in verband met de nieuwere beschouwingen over de verhouding van Kerk en Staat" (3.6).

Bavinck, review of Calvin, *De handelingen der apostelen*: "Natuurlijk geeft ze niet alles, wat wij thans, in onzen tijd, van eene uitlegging van dit Bijbelboek zouden verlangen. . . . Wij moeten dus komen tot zelfstandige, wetenschappelijke Schriftverklaringen, die op de hoogte staan van dezen tijd" (3.6).

Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 96–97: ". . . dat God ook in de stormen . . . in deze eeuw . . . tot ons spreekt en ons iets te zeggen heeft; . . . wat Hij ons te zeggen heeft." "Het klinkt schoon, kerken, scholen, universiteiten voor Christus te herwinnen. Indien het maar mogelijk ware en niet veel meer onszelven mede deed afdrijven op den stroom der ontkenning!" ". . . onszelven te herwinnen." "Het verlamt onze kracht, dat wij op velerlei gebied, op kerkelijk, wetenschappelijk, staatkundig terrein, in school en universiteit, in opvoeding en onderwijs leven en teren moeten van de beginselen en denkbeelden onzer tegenstanders. Het komt er daarom op aan, om aan de begripsverwarring die in groote mate bij ons heerscht een einde te maken; uit kerk en school en huisgezin, uit Theologie en alle andere wetenschap de heterogeene, aan ons beginsel niet passende elementen te verwijderen, en dus althans zolang in isolement onze sterkte te zoeken, totdat wij zelf een vast standpunt ingenomen en een eigen terrein voor onzen voet gewonnen hebben." ". . . den inhoud te ontfouwen der christelijke gereformeerde beginselen." ". . . dat de Christen dan alleen op de zege rekenen kan, als hij tegen de vijanden optreedt in zijne eigene wapenrusting en in den naam van den Heer der heirscharen, dien zij honen" (2.8).

Bavinck, "Toespraak namens het *Nationaal Comité*," 23–24: "Gij zelf hebt toch . . . tegenover revolutie en evolutie in het Evangelie der Hervorming uwe kracht gezocht" (2.8).

Bavinck, "Het voor en tegen van een dogmatisch systeem" (1881), 453; (1922), 60: "De wetenschap heeft niet te scheppen en te phantaseeren, maar alleen te beschrijven wat bestaat. Wij denken *na*, wat God ons eeuwig *voor* gedacht heeft en in de schepping belichaamd een gestalte heeft gegeven." ". . . weergeving in woorden, . . . afspiegeling in ons bewustzijn van het systeem in de dingen zelve." "Het systeem der dingen op te sporen is veeleer roeping en plicht en een zucht, door God zelve in het hart des menschen gelegd" (4.5).

Bavinck, "Voorrede," in Henry, *Letterlijke en practicale verklaring van het Nieuwe Testament*, vii: "Het ware natuurlijk te veel, wanneer men beweren wilde, dat deze Bijbelverklaring van HENRY in alle opzichten aan de tegenwoordige behoeften voldoet. Maar wij zijn op dit terrein

nog nameloos arm. Het ideaal zou zijn, dat er eene populaire, korte doorlopende, degelijke en praktische verklaring der Schrift in het licht kwam, welke met de nieuwere onderzoekingen haar winste deed, op den grondslag eener wetenschappelijke exegese berustte en door een groep van bekwame en vrome mannen werd samengesteld" (3.6).

Bavinck, "Voorrede," in Kramer, *Het gebed*, 1-3: "Hun vroomheid stijgt niet hooger dan tot het 'gebed van den onwetende'" (3.1). "Losgemaakt van de regelen, waaraan God het gebonden heeft, dient het als een middel, om plotselingen genezing aan te brengen, om verloren goederen terug te vinden, om zich van het welslagen eener bedenkelijke onderneming te verzekeren, om zonder inspanning deelachtig te worden hetgeen het zondig hart begeert." "Een dier bidt niet, maar een mensch kan niet leven zonder gebed." "Voor hem is het niet maar een redmiddel uit den nood, doch eene vrucht der dankbaarheid; geen last maar een lust; geen gebod maar een voorrecht. Het gebed is de ademtocht van zijn leven, de polsslagen van zijn geestelijk bestaan, de innigste gemeenschapsoefening met God; zijn leven wordt een bidden zonder ophouden. Ook in het gebed zoekt hij zichzelf niet, maar de eere zijns Vaders" (2.6).

Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, 6-7, 11: "Het zwaartepunt is, naar het eigen beweren onzer tegenstanders, uit de antieke in de moderne levensbeschouwing verlegd. De Christenvolken laten zich niet meer beheerschen door Hem, naar wiens naam zij genoemd zijn." "... de stroom des tijds ..." "... hebben wij dan tegenover die Revolutie een dam op te werpen, of wij zelf en althans staande bleven en bewaarden, wat heiligs ons is overgeleverd." "... dien grootschen en indrukwekkenden bouw, dien wij nu reeds tot aan het dak zien rijzen" (2.8).

Bavinck, "De wetenschappelijke roeping onzer kerk," 104: "Het Gereformeerde is eene gansche wereld- en levensbeschouwing. Het stelt den mensch in eene bijzondere verhouding tot God, en dus ook in eene eigenaardige verhouding tot alle dingen, tot huisgezin, staat, maatschappij, kunst, wetenschap enz. Behalve dogmatische, zijn er dus ook zedelijke, staatkundige, maatschappelijke, wetenschappelijke en kunstbeschouwende beginselen. Niets is er, waarop de Geref. beginselen niet hun eigenaardigen stempel drukken" (3.2).

Bavinck, "Een woord vooraf," in Landwehr, *L. G. C. Ledeboer in zijn leven en arbeid geschetst*, vii: "[Ledeboer is] een sprekend type van de vroomheid, welke daar als hoogste en zuiverste geldt." "Hij bezit er al de eigenaardigheden van, de oorspronkelijkheid, de frischheid, de onmiddellijkheid, maar ook al de zonderlingheden, grilligheden, buitensporigheden, die er dikwijls mee gepaard gaan." "[Men kan leren] wat eenzijdigheid aan dezen vorm van godsvrucht kleeft, en wat onszelven ontbreekt." "En als wij dit alles in ons hebben opgenomen en door onze ziel hebben laten gaan, dan keeren wij gaarne tot de geloofstaal van den Heidelberger Christen en nog liever tot de geloofsgetuigenissen van de apostelen en de profeten terug. Wij herademen en leven weer op" (2.7).

Quotations from Other Literature

The following quotations have been alphabetized by author.

Algemeene Nederlandsche Zendingconferentie, *Vijf en twintigste Algemeene Nederlandsche Zendingconferentie*, 4 (quoting Bavinck): "Bij toenemend ongelooft in de Christenlanden plant de Zending de eene gemeente van Christus na de andere in de wereld der heidenen. Zending is wellicht tegenwoordig de krachtigste apologie van het Christelijk geloof. . . . De zending toont de macht van . . . Christus" (1.8).

Atheïstische Campagne (website): "Er is waarschijnlijk geen god | Durf zelf te denken | En geniet van dit leven!" (3.9).

C. B. Bavinck, "Voorwoord," in H. Bavinck, *Kennis en leven*, [v-vi]: "Was toen de tijd, dat zijn oog bewonderend openging voor den rijkdom en de heerlijkheid der Gereformeerde Religie en Theologie, de tijd als het ware van een nieuwe ontdekking, en dat is steeds een gelukkige tijd" (2.8).

J. Bavinck, *De Heidelbergse Catechismus in 60 leerredenen verklaard* 1:[vii-viii]: "In mijne jeugd scheen het, alsof de Gereformeerde belijdenis haar tijd had gehad, alsof zij verouderd was

en nabij de verdwijning. . . Maar door de ontferming van den Heere onzen God over ons is er toch eene kentering ten goede gekomen. Door zijne genade zijn er heden ten dage weer betrekkelijk velen, die naar de oude paden vragen en daarop willen wandelen. Is dit niet verblijdend? Geeft dit niet hoop voor de toekomst? En moeten wij . . . niet dankend het goede erkennen, dat God de Heere in de laatste halve eeuw aan zijn volk geschonken heeft?" (2.9).

Berkouwer, "Bavinck als dogmaticus," 9: "De polemiek van Bavinck met Rome behoort tot het meest waardevolle van de dogmahistorische partijen van Bavincks dogmatiek" (2.10).

Meesters, *Nieuw-gereformeerde en moderne theologie*, 20, 29–30: "Of het aanvaarden van de Schrift als historisch onfeilbaar, geïnspireerd boek van heelerharte gaat? Dat betwijfel ik. De befaamde sprekende ezel van Bileam staat op gespannen voet met de organische wereldbeschouwing. En aan te nemen dat het laatste vers van Ps. 137 'wel hem, die uwe kinderkens aangrijpt en te pletter slaat tegen de rots,' geïnspireerd is door den H. Geest, moet niet gemakkelijk vallen aan iemand, die het ruischen van den levenden Gods-geest heeft gespurd in de eigene ziel." "Het systeem van daden Gods dat Prof. Bavinck 'de bijzondere openbaring' noemt, kent hij uit den Bijbel. Houdt de Bijbel op historisch onfeilbaar te zijn en geïnspireerd, —houdt Prof. Bavinck op voor waar te houden dat de ezel van Bileam heeft gesproken en dat het laatste vers van Ps. 137 door Gods H. Geest is geïnspireerd, dan weet hij op zijn standpunt van het systeem van Gods daden niets zekers meer te zeggen en stort het gansche kunstig ineengezette gebouw in" (3.7).

Brakel, *Redelijke godsdienst* 1:50 (section 1.2.31) and 1:226 (section 1.8.14): "Al wat God, ook van natuurlijke dingen, zegt, is waarheid; God zegt, dat de wereld stil, onbeweeglijk staat, en dat de zon omloopt, zoo is dit dan eene vaste en ontgensprekelijke waarheid." "Dat deze en de sterren, of de zon alleen, onbeweeglijk zouden staan, en de aarde draaien, is het versiersel van menschen, die 't hoofd te veel draait" (6.4).

Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 251: "Zo ligt in dit werk voor ons de voldragen worsteling in Bavinck's eigen persoonlijk leven tussen het christelijk openbaringsgeloof en het evolutionistisch, positivistisch denken van de negentiende eeuw. Dat geeft aan het boek, zoals trouwens ook aan zijn andere geschriften vaak, een existentiële trek" (3.6).

Van den Brink, *Een publieke zaak*, back cover: "Theologie in de oorspronkelijke betekenis van 'spreken over God' heeft geen vanzelfsprekende plaats aan de hedendaagse openbare universiteit. Vanwege haar geloofsmatig uitgangspunt zou deze theologie niet voldoen aan de academische eisen van wetenschappelijkheid."

C. Buskes, *Evolutionair denken*, 286–88, 434: "De evolutietheorie is incompatibel met *theïsme*, de gedachte dat God alles heeft geschapen, zich heeft geopenbaard, en nog steeds in de wereld ingrijpt." "Dit komt tot uit in goddelijke interventies en wonderen." "Voor een deel gelijk aan fundamentalisme maar minder dogmatisch en intolerant." "Er is 'iets' hogers dat aan alles ten grondslag ligt en zich laat voelen in de verwondering over het bestaan." "Neigend naar religieuze vaagheid en eclecticisme" (5.8). "De vele implicaties van de evolutietheorie kunnen we op dit moment nog niet allemaal overzien omdat de revolutie onverminderd voortduurt. Wellicht zal het darwiniaanse paradigma in de loop van de eenentwintigste eeuw, de eeuw van de biologie, tot volle wasdom komen. Pas tegen die tijd kan een voorzichtige balans worden opgemaakt. Tegelijkertijd zal de evolutietheorie ook op verzet blijven stuiten omdat lang niet iedereen bereid is haar te omarmen en haar consequenties te aanvaarden. De religie, die haar hernieuwde opmars voortzet, zal steeds vaker, en feller, botsen met de inzichten uit de voortschrijdende wetenschap. De kloof tussen kennis en geloof zal steeds breder worden en de verschillen van mening bijkans onoverbrugbaar. Maar we moeten geen compromissen sluiten, want de darwiniaanse revolutie is onomkeerbaar, tenzij de zeloten het voor het zeggen krijgen en de wereld opnieuw in duisternis wordt gehuld" (5.4).

J. J. Buskes, *Hoera voor het leven*, 33 (quoted in Van Deursen, "Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit," 29–30): "Als Bavinck . . . college gaf, kon het gebeuren dat hij zelf zo vervuld werd van de heerlijkheid Gods, dat hij ons vergat en al sprekende door het raam naar buiten staarde in eindeloze verten, want Gods heerlijkheid is eindeloos, en wij zaten sprakeloos te luisteren en werden

ingeleid—voor ons gehele leven—in het heilgeheim van de Eeuwige en Almachtige, die in Jezus Christus onze genadige Vader is” (2.7).

Ferrari, “Bavinck in Italiaanse context,” 123: “Als we bijvoorbeeld denken aan zijn analyse van de Verlichting en de Franse revolutie, of aan zijn taxatie van wijsgeren als Plato, Aristoteles, Kant en Hegel, dan blijkt onmiddellijk dat zijn affiniteit met de Franse, Duitse of Italiaanse cultuur veel groter is dan die van de theologen uit de Angelsaksische wereld” (2.1).

Haitjema, “Abraham Kuyper en die Theologie des holländischen Neocalvinismus,” 353: “[Bavinck] hat eine große *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* in vier Bänden herausgegeben, welche zeigt, daß er primär Theologe und nicht Kulturphilosoph war. . . . [Die Übergang] aus der kirchlich-theologischen Sphäre in Kampen nach der Freien Universität . . . bedeutet das Ende Bavincks echttheologischer Wirksamkeit. Auch er ist nachher in den kulturphilosophischen Randgebieten wirksam, beschäftigt mit pädagogischen und psychologischen und politischen Problemen” (3.2).

Harinck, Van der Kooi, and Vree, “*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*,” [60] (page 17 of Bavinck’s manuscript that is presented in this work) and 77 n84 (quoting a statement that Bavinck defended among the professors of the Free University, February 2, 1917): “Gen 1-2, van menselijk standpunt uit. Zes tafereelen (Augustinus).” “Wijl de betrouwbare resultaten van de nieuwere natuur- en geschiedwetenschap onvereinigbaar zijn met de gewone exegese van het bijbelsch scheppingsverhaal, is het noodig, deze exegese inzonderheid ten opzichte van den tijd, den duur en de orde van het scheppingswerk te herzien” (3.7).

Heermann, “O Jesu Christe, wahres Licht” (hymn), stanzas 1, 2, and 5: “O Jesu Christe, wahres Licht, | Erleuchte, die dich kennen nicht, | Und bringe sie zu deiner Herd’, | Daß ihre Seel’ auch selig werd’! | Erfüll mit deinem Gnadenschein, | Die in Irrtum verführet sein, | Auch die, so heimlich fichtet an | In ihrem Sinn ein falscher Wahn! | Erleuchte, die da sind verblend’t, | Bring her, die sich von uns getrennt, | Versammle, die zerstreuet gehn, | Mach feste, die im Zweifel stehn!” (first essay).

Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 303 (quoting a letter from Johanna Adriana Bavinck-Schippers to her family): “[Ze zijn] onvermoeid om preeken te hooren, doch voor wetenschappelijke lezingen is geen publiek te vinden. Al doet men nog zoo zijn best om eenvoudig en helder te zijn, van geleerdheid of om wat moeite te doen iets in te denken zijn ze bang” (3.3).

Howitt-Botham, “Deez’ aard is uw, o Heer der heren!” (hymn), first and second stanzas: “Deez’ aard is uw, o Heer der heren! | Uw is haar wond’re hemelbaan, | uw zijn haar bergen, dalen, meren, | haar stromen en haar oceaen. | Uw is de dag, uw is de nacht: | ’t leeft alles slechts door uwe kracht. | Uw is deez’ aarde, lieflijk stralend, | als zonnegloed haar ijs ontdooit. | Uw is z’, in lenteschoonheid pralend, | met bloesems als een bruid getooid. | Uw is z’, als ’t wuivend korenveld | een rijken, schonen oogstdag spelt” (6.4).

Van der Kooi, “Inleiding,” 12–13: “Bavincks meest principiële tractaat over publieke theologie.” “Of kortweg, het christelijk geloof omvat heel het menselijk leven.”

Kromsig, review of *Modernisme en orthodoxie*, 214: “Er zijn, naar mijn bescheiden meening, zoowel onder modernen als orthodoxen in Nederland, slechts zeer weinige menschen, die met zóó klaren blik de stroomingen van dezen tijd overzien als Dr. Bavinck. Wie zijne *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring*, die in onze ‘cultuurkringen’ nog veel te weinig bekend is, gelezen en bestudeerd heeft, weet dit” (3.6).

H. H. Kuyper, *Evolutie of revelatie*, 47: “En een zoon van het oude Israel en een belijder van den Koran.” “De afwijking van den grondslag . . . te duidelijk was” (4.10).

Landwehr, *In memoriam Prof. Dr H. Bavinck*, 22 (quoting *Friesch Kerkblad*, August 19, 1921): “De hospita van den dominee liet mij in de voorkamer. De dominee was zóó klaar, ik moest maar even wachten. Ik zette mij, maar hoorde meteen spreken in de kamer naast me. . . . [Ik] hoorde Bavinck bidden. Bidden, smeeken, worstelen om wijsheid, om een zegen over den arbeid, dien hij stond te verrichten. Ik stond als aan den grond genageld, en was verbaasd . . . dat hij zich tot het volbrengen van dezen arbeid zoo klein en onmachtig gevoelde, dat daarom als het ware de troon der genade geweld moest worden aangedaan. Maar ik heb mij dien avond nogmaals verbaasd; en toen over het machtige, ontzaglijke woord door den dominee op de consciëntie der

hoorders gelegd. Het was het getuigenis van allen: Nog nooit hebben we Bavinck zóó gehoord!” (2.6).

Multatuli, “Het gebed van den onwetende”: “Ik weet niet of we zyn geschapen met 'n doel, | Of maar by toeval daar zyn.” “Antwoord, Vader, als Ge daar zyt, antwoord! | Laat niet Uw kind vertwyflen, Vader! Blyf niet stom | Op 't bloedig afgeperst *lama sabacthan!* | Zo kermt de onwetende aan z'n zelfgekozen kruis, | En krimpt van pyn, en jammert dat hem dorst.” “De vader zwygt....o God, er is geen God!” (3.1).

Multatuli, *Ideen* 1, idee 345: “—Zie eens, myn zoon, hoe wys de Voorzienigheid alles gemaakt heeft. Die vogel legt zyne eieren in deszelfs nest. De jongen zullen uitkomen tegen den tyd dat er wormpjes en vliegjes zyn om dezelve te voeden. Dan zingen zy een loflied ter-eere van den Schepper die Deszelfs schepselen overlaadt met weldaden... | —Zingen die wurmen mee, papa? *) || *) Het vragend zootje wacht nog altyd op antwoord” (5.7).

Van Ruler, “God en de chaos,” 44: “Het diepste over God en de chaos is daarom pas dan gezegd, wanneer men de moed heeft, in de chaos méér dan uiting van de twist van God en méér dan baring van Gods rijk te zien. Het diepste is dit, dat de chaos spel van God is. Hij heeft de Leviathan gemaakt om ermee te spelen. . . . Wij zijn het spel van God. Alles komt aan, niet slechts op de moed tot het zijn, maar nog veel meer op de bereidheid tot het spel. Mag ik een dans van u? vraagt God aan ons, en de kern van ons bestaan hangt aan de vraag, of wij bereid zijn daarop in te gaan” (5.7).

Van der Vaart Smit, “De Dogmatische beteekenis van Dr H. Bavinck,” 43: “Het waren zeer eenvoudige woorden, waarin dit gebed voor God werd opgedragen, maar ging er niet een diepe ontroering door de gansche kerk heen? Dàt was bidden. Daar bad een vader, die zelf voor zijn eigen kind bad en nu dat onbekende ourderpaar dat een ziek kind had en zijn voorbede vroeg, daar liefhad als zichzelf. Dat was waarachtige naastenliefde. We beleefden het” (2.6). “Wat werd het stil, muisstil, oecumenisch en universeel stil in die groote kerk. Daar was majesteit in de vergadering gekomen, de majesteit der grootheid van de openbaring Gods.” “Hij deed veel meer dan doceren. Hij wist als Christen de wijdte en de heerlijke der openbaring Gods in Christus te doen gevoelen, de grenzen van het tijdelijke tegenover het eeuwige te doen beseffen, uit het kennen ten deele te doen uitzien naar den dag der volle oplossing van het mysterie. Hij sleepte mede om te knielen voor den troon des Lams” (2.7).

C. Veenhof, “Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6,” 123–25 (quoting a report of a speech by Bavinck): “Of Bavinck gelukkig is geweest in Amsterdam? Zijn vriend, Dr Nieuwhuis, verzekerde mij eens pertinent, dat dit niet het geval is geweest” (3.2). “Ik ben een kind der scheiding en dat hoop ik te blijven. . . . Het beste wat ik heb, heb ik aan de scheiding te danken. Mijn vader en moeder waren beiden uit de afgescheidene kringen afkomstig. En de Geref. Belijdenis heb ik niet te danken aan Dr Kuyper, maar wel aan mijn vader en moeder. . . . Mijn vader . . . is een eenvoudig man, maar toch van alle enghartigheid, van alle separatisme is hij vreemd geweest en dat was nog meer het geval met mijne allereenvoudigste, en toch door en door gezonde moeder.” “In der tijd leefde in die kerk [de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk] de gedachte, we moeten de wereld maar overlaten aan haar eigen lot, en juist omdat ik gekomen ben uit den kring, waaruit ik gekomen ben, gevoelde ik mij genoopt om aan eene Universiteit mijne opleiding te zoeken. Want die kerk liep groot gevaar om terwille der heiligheid des levens de catholiciteit der kerk uit het oog te verliezen” (2.2). “Wij krijgen op politiek, op sociaal en wetenschappelijk gebied en vooral op historisch-critisch terrein quaestien . . . We hebben tenslotte den strijd tegen de geestelijke boosheden in de lucht, en die werken door; dat merken we hier niet aan de Theol. School, die buiten het leven is blijven staan. . . . En toch, onder dat alles moeten we jagen naar dat machtige, heerlijke, rijke ideaal, de wereld te kerstenen door het indragen onzer Geref. Belijdenis op alle terreinen” (3.2).

J. Veenhof, “Bavinck and Guardini,” 12 (quoting a line of the Dutch poet De Genestet from the 1916 students' almanac of the Free University that used it to characterize Bavinck): “In raadselen wandelt de mens op aard” (3.6).

VISOR, "Symposium: Leer in discredit? De plaats en functie van de dogmatiek" (invitation to a symposium): "Bij alle toegenomen aandacht voor religie bestaat er rondom het vak dogmatiek academisch eerder terughoudendheid. Bij een breed publiek staat dogmatiek gelijk met onbuigzaamheid en opgelegd gezag. Binnen de universiteit speelt het verschil tussen empirische en normatieve wetenschap een grote rol. . . . Bovendien is er sprake van een voortgaande differentiering van vakken, accenten en benamingen binnen de theologische faculteit. . . . Het gezicht van het vak dogmatiek vertoont daardoor een zeer divers en verbrokken beeld. . . . Welke functie kent u de dogmatiek of dogmatische theologie feitelijk toe? Kent het vak een aantal erkende methoden en welke criteria worden door u zelf gehanteerd? Wat is het geëigende literaire genre?" (fourth essay).

De Wachter, "Dr. H. Bavinck over Amerika," 4: "Tot hun eigen schade hebben zij zich niet in den breeden Amerikaanschen levensstroom geworpen, maar zijn meer bij elkander blijven huzen." "Ik vind dat wij in Nederland, in ons Christelijk Nederland, in de Gereformeerde Kerken, wel eens behoefte hebben aan zulk een opwekking." "Moeten we ons als eenlingen in den stroom werpen dan is het spoedig met ons gedaan, de machtige stroom van methodisme en materialisme voert ons mee en assimileert ons ten volle. En—Prof. Bavinck neme het ons niet kwalijk—daarvoor is ons volk in 't algemeen nog te gereformeerd om zich aldus te laten assimileeren." "Dat echter Prof. Bavinck een Amerikaansche opwekking begeert in de Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland, waarlijk, dat spant de kroon. Zijn de kerken in Nederland dan in zoodanig verval dat hij zulke buitengewone middelen noodzakelijk acht? Waarlijk het raakt hier een beginsel. Een geref. Kerk die revival meetings invoert kan gerust haar naam prijsgeven. Van nabij weten we welke verkeerde vruchten de revival meeting afwerpt in een gereformeerde gemeente" (2.10).

Wit, "479," 1100: "Een loflied op het aardse leven voor zover het gezien wordt in hemels licht" (6.5).

Bibliography

Bible, Classics, Bavinck, and Other Works

This bibliography has been divided into four sections: “Bible, “Classics” (Christian classics and world literature, written before 1800), “Bavinck” (works by Herman Bavinck), and “Other Works.” As for the alphabetical order within the sections, particles such as “De” and “Van de” have been ignored in alphabetizing Dutch family names. For example, “Van den *Brink*” comes before “*Bulhof*.” The English articles “A(n)” and “The” and the Dutch articles “De,” “Een(e),” and “Het” at the beginning of titles have been ignored in alphabetizing more works of the same author. For example, Bavinck’s article “The *Future* of Calvinism” comes before his article “*Geloof en liefde*.” Weblinks of works that had been consulted at an earlier stage were checked for validity June 2011.

“H. Bavinck Archives, HDC, folder ...” in bibliography entries refers to H. Bavinck Archives, Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism (1800 to the present day), University Library, VU University Amsterdam, collection 346. When two folder numbers are given, there is a difference in numeration between Seijlhouwer, “(Voorlopige) Inventaris van het archief van H. Bavinck” and Seijlhouwer, “Inventaris van het archief van H. Bavinck, 1870–1954.” I possess a hard copy of the latter, whereas the former is available online and has been included in English translation in Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck*.

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ON THE WAY TO THE LIVING GOD

A CATHARTIC READING OF HERMAN BAVINCK AND AN INVITATION TO OVERCOME THE PLAUSIBILITY CRISIS OF CHRISTIANITY

Post-Christian Amsterdam is a place where life seems to be good without God, where Jesus is seen as a figure of a distant past, and where only a few people still go to church. However, it is also a context from which a deeply reflected invitation springs to face and overcome the plausibility crisis of Christianity.

By telling the story of the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) and his struggle to remain standing as a Christian over against the modern worldview of his day, this study offers interested readers all over the world a mirror in which to face their own struggle.

Moreover, in a world explained without God and marked by evil, it extends the invitation to adopt a binocular worldview and to live with open eyes on the way to the living God, even if this implies dying with Christ.



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