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# THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF MODERNISM AND THE MODERN CHARACTER OF RELIGION: A CASE STUDY OF HERMAN BAVINCK'S ENGAGEMENT WITH MODERN CULTURE

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## INTRODUCTION: MODERNISM AND RELIGION

The theology of Herman Bavinck is usually considered as a unity, built up coherently and well balanced in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. There have been discussions about the central importance of the theological discipline in his Amsterdam years, when he published more on pedagogy and psychology, and there are several dogmatic topics he took up again after having finished his *Dogmatics*, because he was not satisfied with the results of his thinking. In this regard his ideas did not change much. Rather, in his later years he became more careful in making final judgments on topics like Scripture or the ethical theology.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever has read crisscross in Bavinck's works will get the impression that Bavinck could hardly have done his dogmatics in another way than coherent and balanced. His publications show a remarkable poise and present an equilibrium, and time and again in his books and articles he points at the disunity and lack of balance in the thinking of his contemporaries. To Bavinck dualism and inconsistency together formed a key feature of the modern culture in which he lived. His response to it was clear: he proposed a world- and life-view that would overcome these weaknesses and represent unity. Christianity represented this unity and was the answer to the problems of modern culture, and his *Reformed Dogmatics* may be read as a specimen of this all encompassing and balanced view.

Presented in this way, Bavinck's world- and life-view and his theology resemble the image of a spaceship with a crew of aliens (alias Christians) entering this rotten world, and witnessing there a fresh, balanced way of living, very different, and yet within reach. This image is not as strange as

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<sup>1</sup> According to V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921), pp. 325-6.

it may seem, for many sympathisers with Bavinck's ideas, especially those from his own Seceder background, have looked at his work and deeds in this way. They were critical of modern culture, to say the least, and expected Bavinck's work to support and nurture an antithetical attitude. They appreciated the Herman Bavinck who opposed Christian politics to neutral politics,<sup>2</sup> who opened his inaugural address with a characterisation of modern theology as leading to the secularisation of God and religion (that is to the death of theology)<sup>3</sup> and who called upon his ethical colleague de la Saussaye not to seek for reconciliation of Christianity and culture in a higher synthesis, but instead to strive after the isolation and purity of Christian principles.<sup>4</sup>

This was not just the view of the common Reformed people in Bavinck's days, but this antithetical way of looking to him and his work, and to neo-Calvinism in general, has been dominant in the historiography on this movement as well. As far as Bavinck was more open towards culture than other neo-Calvinists, he was (according to the church historians) deviating from the main line.<sup>5</sup> In the history of the Dutch church, religion, politics and culture, neo-Calvinism has been depicted as a closed system, opposing and challenging other opinions or worldviews.

However well-known this view of neo-Calvinism and of Bavinck's theology as a self-sufficient system may have been, qualified by its unity, coherence and balance on the one side, and antithesis, exclusiveness and refutation on the other side, this was not what Bavinck had in mind. If anything, Bavinck deplored the dichotomy of Christianity and culture, and appreciated the endeavours of Modernist and Ethical theologians to bridge this gap. He was very much interested in the international cultural developments of his age. He not only read theological literature, but also discussed the most recent novels with his Kampen students,<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>2</sup> H. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde. Rede ter inleiding van de deputatenvergadering gehouden te Utrecht op 13 april 1905* (Hilversum: Witzel & Klemkerk, [1905]).

<sup>3</sup> H. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid. Rede ter aanvaarding van het leeraarsambt aan de Theologische School te Kampen, uitgesproken den 10 jan. 1883* (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1883), pp. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> H. Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye. Bijdrage tot de kennis der ethische theologie* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1884), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> O. de Jong, *Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis*, 3rd edn (Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach, 1972), p. 377; A. Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk vanaf 1795. Haar geschiedenis en theologie in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, 2nd edn (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1981), pp. 197-8.

<sup>6</sup> I. Van Dellen, *In God's Crucible: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), pp. 39-40.

read and reviewed publications of modern scientists and philosophers. More importantly, he digested the ideas presented in his publications and reflections on Christianity and culture. Not many of the scientists, novelists or philosophers he discussed in his publications ever reacted to his publications, but he (from his side) was constantly trying to connect to the world around him.

In this article I will propose a different view of Herman Bavinck and modern culture than we are used to. I will not depict him as a well-balanced opposition leader against aggressive modern culture, but in the first place as a participant of modern culture. In his thinking he was part and parcel of modern culture and contributed to its character and direction. I believe we will get a more proper understanding of who Bavinck was and what neo-Calvinism was, when we overcome antitheses that historiography and tradition have presented us, like those between neo-Calvinism and modern theology, or between Christianity and culture.

In order to do this we first have to make some remarks on modern culture or modernism. Modern is in the first place a historical term, the definition of Western culture since the French revolution. Modern then refers to practices: the introduction of freedom, democracy, development and progress. Defined in this way, everyone agrees that neo-Calvinism was a modern movement: it proclaimed a free church in a free state, it was democratic, made use of the new and faster printing techniques, profited from the development of a railway network and promoted education. However, there is a disadvantage in this definition. According to this definition of modernism as practice, both the pope and the ultraorthodox Calvinists can be called modern. As such, there is no anti-modernism and this makes the definition empty.

The techniques and infrastructure of modern culture were indeed adopted by Christianity, sometimes Christians were even pioneers in this regard, like Thomas Chalmers with his parish system in Glasgow or Abraham Kuyper with the founding of the first political party in the Netherlands. It seems clear, though, these modern means were used to oppose or adjust the program of modernism. It was anti-modernism with modern means. The modernism Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck are said to have rejected does not concern the practice but the program of some of the modernists: the emancipation from the pre-modern worldview and the implementation of the worldview of the French revolution, with at its core the rejection not just of the church, but of God and religion.

This definition would mean that modernism is incompatible with religion *per se*. As a historian, I have some problems with this view. This incompatibility may be true in theological or philosophical constructions, but it has hardly ever been true in history. Recent historical research has

pointed to the irrational and religious elements in modernism.<sup>7</sup> Neither modernism was monolithic. There was anti-religion, but there were also other attitudes towards religion and to some modernism was the new face of religion. If we exclude religion from the definition of modernism, we would take its aim for the result and mutilate the history of modernism, and overlook its complexities in favour of a simple dichotomy. Peter Gay is aware of the complex character of modernism and limits his description of modernism to two characteristics: a preference for non-convention, and a rigid introspection.<sup>8</sup> It was modernism that created the possibility to develop and realize the classic idea of the catholicity of Christendom.<sup>9</sup>

As regards religion, this had to be anti-modernist by definition in this simple view of modernism. However, Christianity was part and parcel of all Western cultural developments until the French revolution positioned Christianity on the wrong side of history. In the popular view, Christianity since then seen as was out and rigid, and modernism was in, and was perceived to be dynamic. This view may have been the aim of the Jacobins in Paris, but as a matter of fact this never happened. Christianity adapted to the modern situation as it had always done to cultural changes and as such, it deeply influenced modernism by adding notions like conversion and femininity to Western modern culture.<sup>10</sup> Within Christianity there have been many different attitudes towards modernism. True, many church historians consider orthodoxy in the nineteenth and twentieth century as having missed the boat of modern culture, while modern adaptations of Christianity are hailed as the indispensable adjustments without which Christianity would have lost its credibility. Such a view, however, is biased. It is dominated by confessional preferences and not by historical facts about the relationship of Christianity and modern culture.

<sup>7</sup> Bavinck's modernist professor L. W. E. Rauwenhoff did not give up his anti-supranaturalism, but qualified modernism in 1880 disappointedly as 'idealism without an ideal', see: P. Slis, L.W.E. Rauwenhoff (1828-1889). *Apologet van het modernisme. Predikant, kerkhistoricus en godsdienstfilosoof* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), pp. 169-73, 296.

<sup>8</sup> P. Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy, from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton 2008), pp. 3-4; cf. C. Wilk, 'What was modernism?', in *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914-1939*, ed. by C. Wilk (London: V&A Publications, 2006), pp. 11-21.

<sup>9</sup> Gay, *Modernism*, pp. 27-30, mentions the presence of religion in modern culture, but his attention moves away too soon from Christianity to sectarian religious groups and expressions.

<sup>10</sup> C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2009), chapters 3 and 4.

I prefer a dealing with modernism that is more historical in character, that includes religion and that does not oppose Christianity and Enlightenment as if Europe ever made such a clear cut choice. In this article I take Bavinck as a case study to show how Christianity was part of the make-up of modernism.

#### THE STARTING POINT: AMBIGUITY

Bavinck's starting point as a theologian was at Leiden University, the centre of modern theology. In his family and church he had been warned against this theology not so much because it was a worse alternative to reformed theology, but because he might lose his faith. The opposition in Seceder circles against modern theology was existential: modern theology was darkness and death. While Bavinck lived and worked with the modern theologians in Leiden, he developed a more nuanced view on the antithesis between modern and reformed theology, but when he started his career as a professor at Kampen Theological Seminary in 1883, he did confirm the dichotomy: according to modern theology, he said, all theology should be secularised, in line with the revolutionary principle that aimed at a world without God or Christ. Over against this view he positioned his own Kampen seminary: 'We should realise as deeply as possible, that he who believes in Jesus Christ does not just have some opinions that differ from the world, but really is another, a new man, that the congregation of Christ has a life and a conscience of its own, its own language and science. If this is true, and who among us would deny this, then reconciliation, transaction or 'Vermittlung' between church and world, reformation and revolution, the old and the modern worldview is impossible.'<sup>11</sup>

Modernism was described by Bavinck programmatically as a breach forged by the French Revolution between the Christian and the human conscience.<sup>12</sup> Following this, his inaugural address took a different note: these are modern times in which Christianity is excluded, he said. That was the negative activity. There is also a positive one: anyone who wants to obey Scripture was now able to separate himself from the common ways of thinking, is able to step out of the common structures and show clearly and distinctively what Christianity is about. Before modernism this was a nonexistent possibility. The effect of the profound character of the French Revolution was that a totally new era had started, in which everything

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<sup>11</sup> Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Bavinck, *De theologie van Chantepie de la Saussaye*, p. 8.

had to be re-orientated and re-defined, including Christianity. Kampen Seminary and the VU University owe their existence to this new era.<sup>13</sup>

Kampen Seminary, he said, was founded to preserve and present Christian religion in this new age as it truly is: not as just another opinion, but as a force bringing about a new humanity. This was not a message the Reformed community was used to hearing: the Revolutionary age was a threat, yes, but also an opportunity. This new era had created space for an explicit Christian position, independent of the state, independent of whatever authorities. The Reformed people who had founded Kampen Seminary in 1854 should no longer be hiding from a revolutionary storm, but should rather use their freedom and claim a place for Christianity in modern times. By rejecting Christianity, modernism in fact invited Christianity to be independent and self-conscious. Bavinck did not give up modern culture because it was the result of the French Revolution or because Christianity had been excluded on principle by this culture, but he accepted the challenge modernism offered to provide a theology as a fruit of the times, but in the form and in front of the present times.

By simultaneously qualifying modernism negatively as an anti-religious program and positively as an opportunity to develop an independent Christianity in all domains of life, some ambiguity crept into Bavinck's thinking on modernism. The recognition of this ambiguity is essential for understanding his cultural position. To Bavinck the antireligious character of modernism was an assault to Western culture and time and again he critiqued the state of modern culture in order to calculate the danger and sense the depth of its anti-religiousness. He was a respected watcher of modern culture and well informed about changes in the anti-supranatural character of modernism and about the weaknesses in its position and reasoning, as many of his publications show. This is the one side of his ambiguity. The other side is that because of this alertness he was also aware of the weaknesses of the Christian position, and he often had to encourage his fellow believers to look more intently, to think with greater rigour and to make better arguments. It was both the program of modernism and the program of Christianity that interactively had to change for the better. Bavinck's reflection oscillated between these two aims and this ambiguity resulted in dynamic intellectual positions regarding both Christianity and modern culture over the years.

The tension between Christianity and culture was described by Bavinck as a painful conflict, manifesting itself as a tension between religion and theology, life and knowledge, the common and the learned people. This situation was untenable. Something had to be done to overcome these

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<sup>13</sup> Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid*, p. 7.

false antitheses.<sup>14</sup> But how? He agreed with the ethical or mediating theologians of his day that reconciliation should be the aim, because the culture of the nineteenth century had something to say that should be digested by theology.<sup>15</sup> He was, however, disappointed when in matters of politics and education, the Ethicals supported the modernist anti-supranatural program and opposed an orthodox development of Christianity in the public domain<sup>16</sup> (thus helping to create the image of Christianity being something sectarian<sup>17</sup> and to hardening the face of modernism). Bavinck used strong words to describe this intolerant modernism:

Secularisation was the cry of the century. The ties that bound men to eternity had to be broken; and here on earth a paradise for man should be created. The supranatural character of God and religion were the enemies of the human race. *Le supernatural serait le surdivin*. Nature was God. Art, science and industry were the gods that had to be honoured. Culture abolished cult. Hygiene took the place of morality. The playhouse replaced the church.<sup>18</sup>

The reason that Bavinck appreciated the Seceders and Abraham Kuyper so much was that they had not been impressed by this intolerant fury and had a more independent attitude towards this modernist program. They had indeed made use of the freedom modernism offered, not to give up their convictions, but to develop them as building stones for a modern society. In 1897, when the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kuyper's daily *De Standaard* was celebrated, Bavinck stressed that Kuyper had dared to make use of the freedom modernism presented to society, more so than the modernists themselves. In politics and society, the modernist liberals had claimed their principle was the only road to happiness, but it was Kuyper who had walked that road, and had pressed the intolerant liberals to accept the consequence of their idea of freedom of external author-

<sup>14</sup> H. Bavinck, *Godsdienst en godgeleerdheid. Rede gehouden bij de aanvaarding van het hoogleeraarsambt in de theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op woensdag 17 december 1902* (Wageningen: Vada, 1902), pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *Theologie van Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> H. Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw. Rede bij gelegenheid van het vijf en twintigjarig bestaan van de 'Standaard'* (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1897), pp. 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> H. Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk. Rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 december 1888* (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1888), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> H. Bavinck, *De algemeene genade. Rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 6 december 1894* (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1894), p. 34.



ity, and grant open access to the public domain, which the liberals had reserved for themselves:

She [De Standaard] does not lag behind, but she looks forward and walks ahead. Leaning on the Bible has she in our country dared to accept the freedom, like no Catholic or liberal, no conservative or irenic had dared to write in his program or dared to practice in life. She asks nothing but justice, justice for all, justice also for ourselves. She does not ask support from the state, or a privilege for the church, no preference for any religious conviction. What she asks is freedom alone; freedom in society to combat the revolution on principle with no other moral weapons than the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

By nullifying the exclusive liberal claim on modernism neo-Calvinism stepped in as partaker of modernism. Modern society had to be a project shared by orthodox and modernists alike. The ambiguity almost disappeared in Bavinck's enthusiastic speech at this celebration. This is hardly surprising, because the results of the struggle the orthodox protestants had waged in politics and society were impressive.

This was not the only front that had defended and expanded their position. They had been successful in abolishing the dictatorship of anti-supranatural modernism in politics and society, but in science and higher culture the conflict was more complicated. For modernism itself had become stuck in its anti-religious fury. Its own descendants started to deny that modernism would create the happy world it promised: 'The great expectations built on culture were dashed to the ground. Hope turned into despair. Optimism changed into pessimism',<sup>20</sup> Bavinck concluded in 1894. He referred to Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>21</sup> and Henrik Ibsen, and to the Dutch poet Willem Kloos as examples of those who rejected the positivistic kind of modernism as superficial. Its shallow worldview and deadening uniformity cried for passion, enthusiasm and inspiration:

Far stronger than the protests which Da Costa dared to express in 1823, are the attacks on the revolution by its own children at the end of the nineteenth century. All opinions on religion and morality, on science and art, that have ruled for more than half a century with almost unrestricted power, are subjected to a criticism that does not spare the most critical. All the gods the civil people burnt their incense for, like: freedom, equality, brotherhood;

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Bavinck, *De algemeene genade*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck's first reference to Nietzsche is in the first volume of *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (1895) where he refers to his book *Der Antichrist* (1888).

enlightenment, civilisation, tolerance; reason, education, objectivity: one by one they are taken from their base and broken to pieces.<sup>22</sup>

For Bavinck the question now was: what does this shift in appreciation for the revolution and its result mean for the Christian view of culture?

### THE CATHOLICITY OF CHRISTENDOM

But first: what had been Bavinck's own answer to the anti-religiousness of modernism? In his analysis of modernism the main target of his critique was the exclusion of religion from culture. To Bavinck this exclusion was a weakness. He presented Christianity as including all aspects of life, and without inner contradictions. His worldview, he stressed, was an all-encompassing unity. Secondly, he held that excluding religion was a critical mistake, since history showed that culture was rooted in religion.<sup>23</sup> It was the oxygen of culture. Excluding religion was taking the soul out of the culture. Bavinck disqualified the heyday of this modernism, which was marked by scientific materialism, moral utilism, aesthetic naturalism and political liberalism, as the 'age of Renan'.<sup>24</sup> There is anger in this qualification, but Bavinck understood very well that a strong critique would not be sufficient. He would have to claim modernism for himself.

A first step towards claiming modernism was choosing the opposite position. While anti-supranatural modernism downplayed Christian religion as something sectarian, Bavinck expanded on the broadness of the Christian religion, for example in his rectoral addresses of 1888 and 1894, on the catholicity of the church and on common grace.<sup>25</sup> At first this may seem a reaction that defended the classic, pre-modern position of Christianity, but the themes of these addresses were the result of a new, modernist approach of Christianity. Since Christianity at the end of antiquity and the early Middle Ages had become the religion of the West the church had embodied the public order. The public sphere was Christian, and there had been no need to choose for Christianity, or to claim room for Christianity. There simply was no choice, and there simply had been no need for defending the broadness of Christianity. It was not restricted by

<sup>22</sup> H. Bavinck, *Hedendaagsche moraal* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1902), p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Godsdienst en godgeleerdheid*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> H. Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing. Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op 20 oktober 1904* (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1904), p. 6; H. Bavinck, *Het christendom*, *Groote godsdiensten*, II/7 (Baarn: Hollandia-drukkerij, 1912), p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*; Bavinck, *De algemeene genade*.

anything. This changed in the eighteenth century, and by and by Christianity as the warp and woof of the public sphere made way for a public of Christians.<sup>26</sup> The structure of society could no longer be qualified as Christian, and Christians had to realise they were just a segment of society, a group amidst of other groups. Differently from the United States or Great Britain, in the Netherlands this resulted in a public sphere that excluded orthodoxy. According to modernism, this old fashioned Christianity should be excluded from science, politics and public life.

In his rectoral addresses, Bavinck made the modern claim that in an era where the public sphere was not Christian, Christianity had a public face, and also an agenda for the public sphere, and aimed at keeping the public sphere strong and vibrant. So, instead of giving up the public sphere, as the Ethicals did, Bavinck claimed access to the public sphere as a logical result of his orthodoxy. This was a modern act of Bavinck. By this position he showed the liberals that modernism meant more than just a change of regimes. According to many modernists reason had taken the place of religion, belief in humanity had replaced the belief in God, and secular aims had changed position with the focus on the eternal. The public sphere was no longer Christian but liberal.

However, modernism (according to Bavinck) meant something else, something more profound: the public sphere had not just changed in terms of ownership, but had itself changed in character. The public sphere was no longer uniform in character, that is either Christian or non-religious, but plural, that is: the domain of both theists and atheists, of orthodox Christians and modern Christians alike. The public sphere was free, open, non-defined, the arena of the battle of principles.<sup>27</sup> Modernism meant more than a changing of ideologies in the public sphere: 'We are facing a totally new state of affairs'—Christians were also modern in that they had a more positive evaluation of earthly life, a higher appreciation of earthly goods, laid a stronger accent on material goods and in general on the quality of life.<sup>28</sup> In this context the time had come no longer to concentrate on saving individual souls, but to realise the full program of the Reformation: 'a methodical, organic reformation of the whole, of the cosmos, of the land and of the people'.<sup>29</sup> This realisation of this sixteenth century ambition was now possible thanks to modernism. It was modern-

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the concise characterisation of this change by P. van Rooden, 'Bilderrijk en het moderne onderzoek naar godsdienst', *Het Bilderdijk-Museum*, 18 (2001), 7-11.

<sup>27</sup> Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw*, p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*, p. 44.

ism that created the possibility to develop and realise the classic idea of the catholicity of Christendom. The struggle in the contested public sphere was not about just regaining this domain and getting the modern influences out. No, we are part and parcel of modernism, Bavinck claimed, and that is why we aim at transforming the public sphere into a sphere in which truths were tested and questioned, a sphere that was not the property of just one worldview:<sup>30</sup> 'If the right and the freedom is given, then she [*De Standaard*] dares to enter the battle. Then she neither fears Romanism nor liberalism. She believes in the victory of the Reformation, in the history and future of our people, in the power of our principle, in the authority of God's Word.'<sup>31</sup>

The impact for the Christian worldview was huge. The battle was no longer about how to prepare for heaven, but how to live on the Christian life on this earth. Bavinck's rectoral addresses functioned in this context. They are moves in a public battle, and the fact that Bavinck was effectively engaged in this battle meant that he had adopted a more modern worldview. He knew that he was entering new ground. In the 1888 lecture on the catholicity of church and Christendom, he measured the distance between his position and traditional Christianity. He considered his new position as an important step forward from a more or less ascetic and pietistic worldview, in which the saving of souls out of this wicked world was dominant, to a more systematic and organic reformation of total reality. Bavinck told his audience that there was no principal difference with the pre-modern Christian worldview, but at the same time he admitted that 'things present themselves in a very different light'.<sup>32</sup> It was the task of theology to bridge the gap between church and culture.<sup>33</sup>

A second step underlined that modernism and Christianity were not two entities, but that Christianity was by nature intertwined with modern culture. This aspect was introduced by Bavinck after having made room for religion in culture. He already had stressed the more worldly oriented attitude of Christian religion as an aspect of modernism, but now he expanded on the nature of this worldview as being organic. He qualified anti-supranatural modernism in 1904 as mechanical, unable to bear the yoke of its 'levelled worldview and its deadening uniformity'.<sup>34</sup> Now that Christianity was more strongly oriented in this world, it had to account for the variety of created reality, in a way that would leave room for the

<sup>30</sup> H. Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1904), p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw*, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *Godsdienst en godgeleerdheid*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *Hedendaagsche moraal*, p. 55.

free acts of humans as well as for freedom of God to operate within this world.<sup>35</sup> This idea was caught in the notion of the organic.

I will not expand on this notion, but rather will close this section with two conclusions. First, Bavinck claimed that religion was an intrinsic aspect of human nature and thus of culture, and that modernism was not about excluding religion from culture, but about including creation (science, man, art, culture and society) more consistently in world- and life-views. Secondly, he applied the word 'mechanical' not only to the pre-modern view of Scripture, but also to anti-supranatural modernism. The variety of this reality, the plurality of worldviews was acknowledged for in the freedom guaranteeing notion of the organic.

### IS THERE STILL ANY AUTHORITY AND LAW?

Bavinck presented a modern Christian worldview of which the catchword may be labelled as 'catholicity', but was his worldview also consequently organic in the sense that he had fully accepted plurality as a characteristic of modernism? I think Bavinck at about 1890 still had the expectation that these battles, this conflict of principles with liberalism would ultimately be won by one of these, and that this would result in the end of plurality and a new equilibrium. Even in his Stone lectures he still believed that the Christian worldview would never disappear, because modernism, materialism or pantheism would never meet the needs of the heart.<sup>36</sup> The plural character of modernism seemed to him a kind of interregnum, a period in between two reigns. In 1894 he complained about modernism as a time of unrest, disharmony<sup>37</sup> and time and again stressed the unity of the Christian worldview as if he was addressing a pre-modern audience. However, modernism and modern man were no longer particularly interested in unity.

A second phase in Bavinck's understanding of modernism started around 1890, when the modernism in its mechanical, anti-supranatural make-up was collapsing and the 'age of Renan' came to an end. This was a change Bavinck was sensitive to and dealt with extensively in his publications. In his rectoral address on common grace of 1894 he for the first time expanded on the cultural change that according to him had started in recent years. The optimism of positivism had disappeared and pessimism was now the dominant mood. This was what James Bratt called

<sup>35</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> H. Bavinck, *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring. Stone-lezingen voor het jaar 1908 gehouden te Princeton N.J.* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1908), p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *De algemeene genade*, p. 36.

'the new modernism'.<sup>38</sup> The world was a rotten place, not the creation of a god, but the outcome of some blind will. Science had not produced freedom, human knowledge was restricted to the visible things only. Life is not about facts and thoughts, but moods. Among those who had happily abandoned supranatural Christianity and had welcomed positivism, suddenly there was attention for the supranatural again, Bavinck noted: 'The victory of rationalism was not complete, or mysticism was already claiming a position.'<sup>39</sup> In 1901 he concluded that the anti-supranatural modern worldview was totally bankrupt, morally and spiritually.<sup>40</sup> Three years later he detected the resonance of this change nationally in the rise of his own neo-Calvinist movement in the church, then in politics and science. Internationally he placed the rise of neo-Thomism in the Roman Catholic Church in the broader context of the preference in philosophy of Leibniz and Hegel over Hume and Comte: 'Everywhere a return from empiricism to idealism is discernible', he wrote. 'Now we witness how many of the most excellent scientists return from atheism to theism, from mechanism to dynamism, from materialism to the energetic, from causality to teleology.'<sup>41</sup>

Also in this phase Bavinck was ambiguous towards modernism. He was relatively mild on the demoralised generation of the *fin de siècle*, because he viewed them as victims of the positivistic worldview of their predecessors<sup>42</sup> and as the heralds of the return of theism. He appreciated the fact that they had effectively ended the modernistic phase in which religion had been rejected right out. Even when he criticized Nietzsche, 'the genial-foolish interpreter'<sup>43</sup> of this shift, for blaming Christianity as the cause of the optimistic celebration of rationality in the culture of the nineteenth century, he showed some sympathy. To a large extent Christianity agrees with the complaints of Schopenhauer, Von Hartmann, Nietzsche and Ibsen about 'revolutionary uniformity', he wrote: 'It is really not Scripture alone that judges hard on man.'<sup>44</sup>

Bavinck welcomed their aesthetically-based criticism and the return of the spiritual, but he did not really engage with them. He correctly analysed that sympathisers of Nietzsche, who rejected justice and law in the

<sup>38</sup> J. Bratt, 'The Context of Herman Bavinck's Stone Lectures: Culture and Politics in 1908', *The Bavinck Review*, 1 (2010), 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*, p. 36. Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> H. Bavinck, *Schepping of ontwikkeling* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1901), p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, p. 7; Bratt, 'The context', pp. 15-16, gives examples that illuminate this cultural change.

<sup>42</sup> Bavinck, *Hedendaagsche moraal*, pp. 54-5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-4.

name of the will to dominate and subjugate, were not interested in grace either, and that Christianity was nothing but a religion of grace.<sup>45</sup> Bavinck had rightly seen that the early modernism had wanted to replace this religion of grace by a religion of reason. The modernism of the age of Renan and its ideal of replacement still had been a kind of mimicry of Christianity: the exchange one uniform worldview for another. More than anyone else, Nietzsche saw the consequences of this replacement: chaos. Outlawing God meant a departure of any coherent worldview, a departure also of the moral aims of religion and anti-supranatural modernism alike. With Nietzsche, Bavinck wrote, 'the whole idea of nature has gone. The world is a chaos to him, without order, without law, without idea.'<sup>46</sup> On this point, Bavinck fully agreed with Nietzsche.<sup>47</sup>

Bavinck, however, was not very sensitive to the consequences of the Nietzschean view, because in the end he believed that humans would always return to the metaphysical.<sup>48</sup> There had to be a supranatural standard, otherwise there would be no nature, no history.<sup>49</sup> He considered the ideas of Nietzsche and others as a first step in the right direction: 'In wide circles a longing can be discerned to a more or less positive Christian faith. One is tired of doubt and uncertainty.'<sup>50</sup> He followed the new modernism in its shift of premises from philosophy to psychology, but only half way. While the new modernism explored life in its provisional and fragmented character, he did not give up on religion and worldview.<sup>51</sup> He turned away from the fact that the new modernism did not bridge the gap between the modernists and his Christian position in any way, but as a matter of fact was only widening it.

Bavinck did not engage himself with the consequences of the Nietzschean position 'beyond good and evil'. To him this was a dead ally. Bavinck never engaged with the new modernism as he had with positivistic modernism. He departed from his ambiguous position towards modernism and took the new cultural shift mainly as a possibility to unite Christians of all kinds on the common denominator of the objectivity of God's Word and law: 'The question at stake is, formulated as principal as

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, p. 105.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. H. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 260; Gordon Graham, 'Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation*', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 45 (2010), 47.

<sup>48</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, pp. 7, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, pp. 132-3.

<sup>50</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> See on Bavinck's relation to the new modernism also: Bratt, 'The context', pp. 19-24.

possible, if there still is any authority and any law, to which man is bound. This is the “*Umwertung*” we are all witnessing.<sup>52</sup> In the ‘age of Nietzsche’ he did not search for inner strengths or weaknesses of the new cultural stand and did not challenge its claims, as he had done in the ‘age of Renan’, but just took it as a fact, or better, as a justification for his stress on the need for religion and for a Christian university. This meant that he in fact accepted the new atheism as part of modern culture he could not reach anymore. He had started by accepting the plural character of modernism until the time the battle of principles would finish, but for the moment he accepted there would also be a more or less permanent coexistence of different principles, principles that did not cross roads anymore.

It was here, with Nietzsche, that Bavinck’s neo-Calvinistic project started to falter. He had presumed that all the principles he had to combat shared the same goal: they wanted to liberate and bring light, civilisation, progress, freedom and truth. Darwinism still matched with these presumptions: it was a mix of religious and positivistic ingredients, just like early anti-supranatural modernism. Nietzsche, however, rejected the religion-like ideals of early modernism. For Nietzsche life was not about the moral progress of the modernists, or about Darwin’s survival of the fittest, it was about sheer domination. At the turn of the century these Nietzschean ideas became *en vogue* among the European elites, who had never admired the modernist project and would rise to power in the ‘thirty years war’ of the twentieth century (1914-1945).<sup>53</sup> Bavinck had encountered several modernist cultural trends, but this one was beyond his scope. He missed the tools—the language, but also conceptions to deal with Nietzsche—and let him go. Earlier on Bavinck had blamed the pietists and Anabaptists for giving up culture as alien territory, but now it was Bavinck’s turn to admit that at least the Nietzschean ideals were out of his reach. He had to leave that part of modern culture to itself and concentrated instead on uniting Christians.

## A THEISTIC COALITION

Bavinck considered Nietzschean ideals as impotent and did only focus on the trends Christianity could address (to religion or its substitutes).

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 91; Graham, ‘Bavinck’s *Philosophy of Revelation*’, p. 50, describes Bavinck’s Christian engagement with Nietzsche rightly as a ‘place to begin’. Bavinck himself never made a next step.

<sup>53</sup> A. Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytic Framework* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) and W. Martynkewicz, *Salon Deutschland. Geist und Macht 1900-1945* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2009).



This was his major misjudgement, but the return of the spiritual into the discourse of modern culture was more important to him than the rise of a brutal, destructive atheism. Bavinck was not alone in his misjudgement, the project of Enlightenment had embarked on the idea liberation and progress and also been shipwrecked on the Nietzschean rock.

Though Christian supranaturalism had been rejected by the positivists and the new idealists alike, some common ground between modern culture and religion seemed to have been created, now that the strong positivistic impulse of modernism had been weakened. So, while Bavinck agreed that the religious and moral foundations had been undermined, and European culture actually was running towards an abyss, he was positive, and expected a lot of a Christian impulse to the development of Western culture: 'God is busy doing great things in these days.'<sup>54</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century Bavinck paid a lot of attention to the position of those who were disappointed in the anti-supranatural character of modernism and were returning to Christian religion in one way or the other. It irritated him that their attitude towards orthodoxy did not change. Did not they see that, if Nietzsche claimed that without God there was no moral code, no truth or virtue, then all who adhered to religion and metaphysics had something in common to defend?<sup>55</sup> In the end there were only two worldviews: the atheistic or the theistic, it was about the priority of deed or word.<sup>56</sup> It was the Nietzschean alternative that had opened his eyes for this choice and made him reach out to modern theologians.

But modern Christians who agreed on paper that all religions had a common structure and common features, in practice kept on opposing orthodoxy.<sup>57</sup> Bavinck required from his modernist colleagues that they would be consistent like he was and express that formally spoken there was no difference between modernism and orthodoxy. He expanded on this issue most prominently in his rectoral address of 1911 at the VU University on *Modernism and Orthodoxy*.

In order to create this theistic coalition<sup>58</sup> Bavinck was searching for words and constructions to express what Christianity in all its diversity

<sup>54</sup> H. Bavinck, *Modernisme en orthodoxie. Rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 oktober 1911* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, [1911]), p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> C. van Driel, *Dienaar van twee heren. Het strijdbaar leven van theoloog-politicus B.D. Eerdmans (1868-1948)* (Kampen: Kok, 2005), pp. 310-25.

<sup>58</sup> Bavinck, *Het christendom*, pp. 61-2.

had in common.<sup>59</sup> He tried to find a formula on which all Christians could unite, starting with the belief that there exists a personal God, who revealed Himself and could be known by humans.<sup>60</sup> The Bible could not serve as a starting point, for 'the world of ideas of Scripture is not compatible anymore with our thoughts... All of Christianity...does not speak anymore to the present generation and is separated from the modern conscience by a deep abyss.'<sup>61</sup> That is why he turned to philosophy as a new common ground. There he could argue with arguments formulated in common language, accessible for all kind of Christians, that modern culture presupposed religion and was sustained by it. This common ground also might serve as meeting point of atheists and theists. A synthesis of religion and culture was still attainable, he wrote in 1912: 'If truly God has come to us in Jesus Christ and he also in this century is the maintainer and governor of things, is it [a synthesis between Christianity and culture] not only possible, but also necessary and will she be uncovered timely.'<sup>62</sup>

This reaching out to modern theology was an important sign for his students at the VU University, who sensed that the historical context in which neo-Calvinism had been developed was vanishing and were worried about the growing distance between their tradition and culture. These students would not succeed in executing Bavinck's program of reconciling modern and orthodox theology, but he did teach them that faith and culture had to be related.

However, Bavinck failed in creating a theistic coalition, and religion in general became a side track in modern culture. Bavinck himself realised at the end of his life that his enterprise to relate Christianity (as a unified, organic worldview) to modern culture had to be adapted anew. He knew that the dynamics of modernism had washed away the neo-Calvinist principles and that it either had to withdraw from modern culture and join the pietists, or had to become more modern, that is accepting the consequences of an organic worldview by giving up the unity of the Christian worldview and keep on adapting to the times.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, pp. 77-9.

<sup>61</sup> Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Bavinck, *Het christendom*, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> G. Harinck, 'Twin sisters with a changing character. How neo-Calvinists dealt with the modern discrepancy between Bible and natural sciences', in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Vol. 2. 1700-Present*, ed. by J. van der Meer and S. Mandelbrote (Leiden/Boston: E. J. Brill, 2008), pp. 317-70.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back on what we found we have to conclude there were different phases in Bavinck's engagement with modern culture: an early phase in which he criticised modernism for its anti-supranatural character, and transformed the Christian worldview into an all-encompassing worldview oriented on this world and organic in character. This phase turned out to be successful when anti-supranatural modernism vanished, even sooner than Bavinck had expected. However, while Bavinck concentrated on new openings for a modernism with a religious character, he lost track with the Nietzschean development in modern culture that turned away from the dichotomy of religion or its substitutes, and stressed the provisional character of life and reality. Bavinck's engagement with modern culture after the turn of the century concentrated on uniting all Christians in a theistic coalition, an enterprise that failed. Bavinck's reorientation in his last years and his questioning of the relevance of neo-Calvinist principles seem to reveal that he wanted to re-orientate once more. If modernism included religion, religion should include modernism, but he had not yet figured out how when he died in 1921.

Bavinck has often been praised for his engagement with modern culture. Seen from the angle of this article the first phase in which he adapted the Christian worldview to modernism, seems to have been most fruitful. Neo-Calvinism should indeed be qualified as modern. In relation to Bavinck's drive to engage with modern culture, we should consider this adaptation as a phase of preparation for the engagement with the new modernism. This engagement, however, never happened in his life time.