


HERMAN BAVINCK



CHRISTIANITY
& SCIENCE



TRANSLATED & EDITED BY

N. Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton,
and Cory C. Brock



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AND SCIENCE

Crossway Books by Herman Bavinck

Christianity and Science

Christian Worldview

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Editors' Introduction

To what extent, if any, is Christianity directed toward the life of the mind? In the early twenty-first century, many popular antireligious tropes paint conversion to Christianity as a kind of deactivation of the thinking faculties. Christianity, we often hear, is a blue pill that confirms believers to lives of thoughtlessness and stupefaction. And, of course, it is true that much of evangelicalism is marked by a profound skepticism toward all things academic. For complex reasons, evangelicalism has a deep tendency to separate the life of the mind from the life of the heart. More starkly still, evangelical culture often pits these against each other, mistakenly starving the head in an effort to nurture the heart. A quarter century ago, Mark Noll memorably summarized this particular context in the quip that “the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”¹

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 3.

In the years since Noll's verdict, one point on the Protestant landscape—a branch of the Reformed tradition drawing inspiration from older Dutch neo-Calvinist sources—has been the scene of a notable renaissance in careful Christian thinking. At the forefront in that development stand the works of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), formerly professor of dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam, and author of the magisterial four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*—a text that is now available in multiple languages and widely regarded as a modern classic in the Christian literary canon. Bavinck's winsome combination of warm piety and intellectual depth has opened up a new vista for many current-day readers looking to move beyond the “heart versus head” impasse inherited from mainstream evangelical culture. In that context, in 2019, we published the first English translation of Bavinck's *Christian Worldview*; a short book originally published in 1904 as an argument for the importance of Christianity to the livability of life in the fractured modern age. Now, we have prepared the first English translation of its companion volume, *Christianity and Science*; a book written in the same year and intended as a kind of companion piece to *Christian Worldview*.

In *Christian Worldview*, Bavinck wrote that without Christianity, modern people are unable to hold together the essential shape of human life in the modern age: Christianity equips us with a view of life and the world that unites a sense of who we are, what the world is, and what

we are to do with our lives. Christianity yields holism. In *Christianity and Science*, we find Bavinck focusing the same set of ideas on the life of the mind.

That human beings exist to love the Lord with the entirety of heart, soul, and *mind* is uncontroversial: it is the explicit teaching of Jesus himself. In much conservative Christianity today, though, the question of what this looks like in practice is much more fraught with danger, particularly for those engaged in the perilous world of ideas that is higher education. Is it possible to inhabit that world to the glory of God? Bavinck wrote *Christianity and Science* for those whose calling in life was to cultivate the life of the mind in precisely that setting: the university and college students and professors who, in the language of his day, were engaged in the world of science.

It is important for the reader to know that the English term *science* functions differently in its Dutch counterpart. In Anglophone culture, science is restrictively tied to forms of knowledge based on the empirical method and occupies a distinctly privileged position within the academy: to most in that context, a scientist speaks with far greater authority than, for example, a professor of literature. In our world, English speakers imagine the term *science* in a way that is profoundly shaped by the history of positivist philosophy (as will be seen in this book). The equivalent Dutch term, *wetenschap*,² is

2. Bavinck's original Dutch title, *Christelijke wetenschap*, is most accurately translated "Christian Science." However, we have provided an alternative rendering,

broader in scope and encompasses all higher forms of reflective, critical knowledge. As such, it refers to all that English speakers view as scholarship, while challenging the common Anglophone tendency to devalue the “nonscientific” sections of the academic community.³ To Bavinck’s Dutch ear, the question of whether a scientist or a theologian speaks with greater authority would make little sense: to him theology *is* a science, belongs in the university of the sciences, and is practiced by scientists.

If *Christian Worldview* was meant to be a sketch of the positive contributions of the notion of a Christian worldview as a whole in contrast to the modern worldview, *Christianity and Science* was meant to explore the more particular ways Christian faith can be generative for the academic disciplines. The book was composed of brief sections—here formatted as chapters—that concisely explore these areas. It begins by defining what is meant by the idea of Christian science—exploring both positive and negative examples of its emergence in the history of Christian thought—before moving into a critique of positivism. It then dives into the natural sciences, the humanities, theological science and religious studies,

“Christianity and Science,” in order to avoid confusion with the heterodox Christian Science religion, which has no relation to Bavinck’s work or theological commitments.

3. Bavinck was critical of the English language use of *science* on this point. See, for example, Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), 71; James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), xix–xx.

the doctrine of revelation, and the benefits of Christianity for scholarship, before finally providing a sketch of what it means to develop a Christian university. In the original version, Bavinck covered all that in a brief 121 pages. Like *Christian Worldview, Christianity and Science* is a succinct text providing dense, but never turgid, reflection on an important subject.

Why do we think an English translation of this book is necessary? In his introduction, Bavinck himself offered four reasons that we believe continue to be resonant today. First, he argued that the impulse for the work went hand in hand with the construction of a new, modern, and explicitly Christian university: the Free University of Amsterdam, founded by his colleague Abraham Kuyper in 1880. Against those who claimed the modern age had killed any meaningful claim for Christianity as a religion at the cutting edge of human knowledge, Bavinck argued the opposite: modernity had set the stage for Christian scholarship to outshine its secularized rivals. The text is a kind of manifesto for this project that will continue to inform Christian educators in higher learning today—both Christian scholars in the mainstream academy and those who work in Christian higher education.

Second, Bavinck argued that Roman Catholicism had progressed much further in this area than its Reformed counterpart. “Logic and psychology, metaphysics and theology, history and literature, jurisprudence and

sociology are practiced in such a way by them that the opponent must reckon with their work.”⁴ Ever since Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 encyclical canonized a systematic philosophy for life based on the work of Thomas Aquinas, Roman Catholic higher learning had advanced with a united force that caused both admiration and trouble for Bavinck. In response, he argued that Protestants should learn from Catholicism’s confidence and labors and provide a Reformed education that constitutes both a dialogue partner and an alternative to its Roman Catholic counterparts. A century on, it seems little has changed: Roman Catholic higher education (and in many contexts, Roman Catholic primary and secondary schooling) continues to operate with an intellectual rigor and intentionality that few Protestants can match.

Third, Bavinck believed that empiricism and logical positivism were losing their ground, and that immaterialist views of science were making a comeback in the modern age. He saw this in the growing influence of idealism and pantheism, which were winning the day over atheism and materialism as the prevailing worldviews within which the natural sciences were to be explained. In his view, this was an opportunity to showcase Christianity’s insight on the “cause and essence of the things above,” over these immaterialist alternatives.⁵

4. See p. 45, below. In this editors’ introduction, quotations from Bavinck’s *Christianity and Science* are cited from within this volume.

5. See p. 46, below.

Finally, then, Bavinck reasoned that the modern age manifests the undying human need for metaphysics and theology, as was also seen in the growing presence of “Buddhism and Islam” within Western culture in his day.⁶ The previous century’s faith in pure humanitarian progress had given way to a faith in a more cosmic power. Consistent with the current narratives that challenge the secularization hypothesis, history has vindicated Bavinck on this point. The world is not becoming less religious but more. A century on, while many secularized Westerners continue to ponder the place of religion in a scientific world, Bavinck’s text challenges us to invert this perspective and learn, instead, to ponder the place of science in a religious world.

These four reasons—the challenge for Christianity to show its intellectual merits, the challenge set by Roman Catholicism’s own example of tradition-specific scholarship, the demise of materialism, and the persistence of religious faith in a secularizing age—provided Bavinck with a clear impetus to argue for the benefit of Christian faith for higher education. A century later, Bavinck’s cultural moment remains easily recognizable: Christians in the academy often hear that their faith is irrelevant to high-octane scholarship; Roman Catholicism continues to set an educational bar that Protestants struggle to clear; empiricism and positivism are a largely spent

6. See p. 47, below.

force, despite the presence of those who still cling to naive Dawkinsesque scientism; and both Islamic and Buddhist approaches to the life of the mind continue to make inroads in the West. For this reason, this text represents yet another first-generation neo-Calvinistic resource that continues to speak to Christians engaged in higher learning, and to those interested in exploring the benefits of Christian faith for all areas of life.

With the impetus for the work in view, we now turn to three observations that introduce the text: the *hope*, *definition*, and *necessity* of Christian science.

The Hope of Christian Science

Although many today would see the conditions of modernity as fundamentally unfavorable to a notion like Christian science, Bavinck's own vision of it was resolutely hopeful. He hinted at such in several remarks: "After the thirst for facts is initially quenched, hunger for the knowledge of the origin and goal, for the cause and essence of the things above, resurfaces."⁷ In contrast to the antisupernaturalist drive that marked much nineteenth-century intellectual culture, he noted that the twentieth-century person was returning to the childlike longing for things unseen, for life behind the curtain. This was seen, he thought, not in a return to childish immaturity but in a longing for a proper sense of wonder. In that light,

7. See p. 46, below.

Bavinck cited one common way of marking the maturation of the modern person in the nineteenth century: “Just as, according to sociological law, a human being is a theologian in infancy and a metaphysician in youth, and then a physicist in adulthood, so humanity has passed through these three periods in science.”⁸ But now, having abandoned the transcendent and the metaphysical en route to the truly scientific, he or she changes tack, climbing back up the ladder to the things above. For Bavinck, this ascent is necessary because a person is driven toward facts by an investigatory instinct and, as such, is always compelled by the desire for unification by way of causation and value.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Bavinck thought, believers were jolted from their intellectual slumbers by the extent of the power of positivism and the fundamental challenge it posed to their supernaturalistic faith. Once again, believers had begun to take their place in that which was formerly neglected: the cultivation of the life of the Christian mind. Why? Supremely, Bavinck’s “impression” was that “the banner of the gospel must also be displayed over the world of science.”⁹ What difference does the gospel make to the academic community? In both *Christian Worldview* and *Christianity and Science*, Bavinck portrays a human nature that is desperately thirsty for holism as a response to the sense of self fractured by empiricism. Again, there is a hunger after

8. See p. 71, below.

9. See p. 43, below.

knowledge of the origin and goal, after the essence of things. The childlike desire for unity of the self in a unified existence proves inescapable and even necessary.

If Immanuel Kant¹⁰ had undermined the nineteenth-century mind's confidence in the existence and knowledge of God, immortality, and the soul, while replacing knowledge of these with an existential label of *necessary illusion*, then “modern culture” and its science, wielded by the likes of Ernest Renan¹¹ and Charles Darwin,¹² abolished even the need for that illusion in the hopes of progressivism—whatever that might mean for the modern individual. In *Christian Worldview*, Bavinck argues that while scientific materialism enjoyed a moment of dominance, the “youth of Zarathustra”—a new generation of atheists in the shadow of Friedrich Nietzsche¹³—failed. Contrary to that generation's expectations, religion failed to die, and the desired revaluation of older Christian values was seemingly ignored by most. And yet, the nineteenth century bred confusion: “Before all else,” Bavinck notes, “what strikes us in the modern age is the internal discord that consumes the self.”¹⁴ The modern person was characterized by the denial (or perhaps more accurately still, the suppression) of the internal religious consciousness,

10. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a Prussian philosopher whose works animated the European Enlightenment.

11. Ernest Renan (1823–1892), a French materialist intellectual.

12. Charles Darwin (1809–1882), the English naturalist, geologist, and biologist.

13. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), the German atheist philosopher.

14. Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 22.

which Bavinck sees as a sickness of soul producing a “disharmony between our thinking and feeling, between our willing and acting. . . . between science and life.”¹⁵

Against that backdrop, “worldview” comes into focus as an inductive enterprise that describes the totality of the endeavor of the human consciousness to put philosophy and science within the boundaries of a map outlined by religion (with particular focus on epistemology and ethics). Alongside this, Bavinck’s vision of Christian science focuses in particular on the relation between religion and the empirical sciences, between facts and metaphysics, and issues a call for their partnership.

The most obvious hope of Christian science, then, is the existential satisfaction brought about in the unity of metaphysics and observed facts. For “the metaphysical need lies too deep in human nature to be silenced in the long run.”¹⁶ In the early twentieth century, the resurgence of old and new religions was proof enough of this fact. Bavinck noted the growing number of his contemporaries, former scientific materialists, who had converted to spiritism, theosophy, Buddhism, and Islam. Reflecting on this, he wrote that “humanity is tired of doubt and uncertainty.”¹⁷ How should Christians respond in that setting? The return to positive Christianity had already demonstrated a return to dogmatics and church, history

15. Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 22.

16. See p. 47, below.

17. See p. 47, below.

and liturgy. In that setting, Christian science had also arisen, Bavinck argued, so that the mind and heart could live together in peace, so that a foundation of truth could be established, and so that places like the university—so deeply fragmented by modernity—could be whole once again. In the emergence of the Christian religion and its love for science, he suggested: “Christianity was the true philosophy, and Christians were the real philosophers. They knew reality in truth, they knew who God was, and now, equipped with this knowledge, they also had a different and better insight into the essence of the world, of nature and history.”¹⁸

The Definition of Christian Science

In Bavinck’s view, positivism was marked by a naive belief that empirical science is somehow neutral, objective, and presuppositionless—for which reason, positivists saw their approach to science as uniquely authoritative. It had somehow been freed from the bias and subjectivity that clings to our humanness. In response, Bavinck offered an alternative presentation of science, one that neither rejects the centrality of the empirical nor makes light of the metaphysical assumptions with which all humans proceed into scientific research. Bavinck made this case by arguing that Christianity enables the scientist to hold the empirical and the metaphysical together: ergo, *Christian science*.

18. See p. 52, below.

What does the adjective *Christian* mean for the scientific pursuit of knowledge? In *Christianity and Science*, Bavinck first invites his reader to consider the basics of science, in its essence and goal. Science begins with “normal empirical knowing.”¹⁹ The foundation upon which all science stands is the assumption of the unity of subject and object in normal empirical knowing (which, he argues, positivism fails to reckon with). Within normal knowing, there are degrees of certainty. While we may refer to many different propositions as objects of knowledge, we also know the implicit differences in knowing, believing, and assuming, all of which Bavinck sees as aspects of knowledge. For example, “believing stands beneath knowing [*weten*] not in subjective assurance but in objective obviousness.”²⁰ Believing is so important, Bavinck argues, because most of what we know in life is not the product of objective obviousness. Rather, we receive much of our “knowledge” by way of trusted authority. When human beings arrive at a place where their daily needs are met, they desire to move beyond “normal empirical knowing” toward methodological knowing—a product of careful, controlled, systematic research and reflection on what is. This move from untested received knowledge toward a tested refinement of knowledge is the next move in the development of science. But again,

19. See p. 107, below.

20. See p. 109, below. The Dutch verbs *weten* and *kennen* deal, respectively, with more objective, reflective (*weten*) and subjective, personal (*kennen*) forms of knowledge.

humans are not satisfied with a systematic presentation of what is (only according to the senses). Such endeavors do require the uncovering of causes and natures, but a person also wants to know *why*. An exclusive diet of *what* answers leaves the stomach empty. While certain investigations might produce some immediate, obvious answers to the questions like *for what purpose?* empirical knowing remains ultimately inadequate in binding the truth to the realm of the ideal. It cannot posit final causes. It has no word to the ultimate, existential questions of *why*.

For this reason, Bavinck argues, science and philosophy are bound together as “physics” and “meta-physics.” From such desire and necessity, institutions like the university arise. Bavinck explains this relation in this lengthy yet helpful quote:

What now belongs under the rubric of scientific research and, as such, has a right to the name *science* is not decided by us a priori, but is rather provided in the passage of history [*historie*] and produced by its events [*geschiedenis*]. Slowly, investigation, the remit of science, the extent of the university, stretches out. Scientific thinking began in Greece with the question of the final ground of things, and from there, all the problems that present themselves to the human mind [*geest*] were developed in good order. The universities were not set up artificially in the Middle Ages,

according to a previously established schema but, rather, were first planted as a small sprig, from which they grew like a living organism. In the present day, the technical subjects are gradually elevating themselves to the highest point of the university's sciences, and these are constantly subject to a powerful evolution. In one word, there has been a development of science in the events of history [*geschiedenis*] that does not happen outside of human thinking and willing, but that also cannot be explained from these, and that points back to a driving idea, to an organized thought.²¹

Thus, while there is a difference between “normal” and “scientific” knowing, the two exist in the same continuum: “Empirical knowing [*weten*] knows [*kent*] the particular, independent phenomena, but scientific knowing [*weten*] seeks the universal, the law, that masters them all, the idea that animates them all.”²² And if science seeks the universal, the idea, then it is quite possible to speak of “Christian science.” What is Bavinck trying to accomplish by the use of this adjective? As he puts it, “The end goal of science can be none other than the knowledge of the truth—of the full, pure truth.”²³

If one has found the full, pure truth by faith, then it is impossible and even wrong, he supposes, for this ideal

21. See p. 113, below.

22. See p. 114, below.

23. See p. 127, below.

to be disallowed once that person steps into the arena of science. A Christian practitioner of science must not be expected to imagine he or she is some other sort of person simply by virtue of the scientific task. Indeed, an expectation that a believer will somehow ignore or deactivate his or her most basic world-and-life-view commitments has profound anthropological consequences: it is an expectation that denies the unity of human self-consciousness. Pushing against the agreement and organic unity that the soul and body constitute together, and within which the intellect, will, and feeling cooperate as the one person, it asks the Christian scientist to practice a form of cognitive dissonance. In Bavinck's view, the needs of the heart cannot be arbitrarily separated from the insights of the intellect. After all, the development of a world-and-life view means a person takes on philosophical and religious boundary-identifying ideas, which themselves become presuppositions—the very foundations of one's practice of life as a human. On account of this, it is neither just nor possible to shed such metaphysical commitments in the act of inductive investigation. As such, someone who is a Christian and a scientist must allow science the freedom it needs to discover without neglecting the authority of God's speech in God's world. This is the case "because all science is the translation of the thoughts that God has laid down in his works."²⁴ Although "pseudoscience

24. See p. 127, below.

can lead away from him, true science leads back to him. In him alone, who is the truth itself, do we find rest, as much for our understanding as for our heart.”²⁵ There are a number of ways of speaking about Christian science that follow.

First, Bavinck states that “science owes to this gospel . . . the reality of an eternal, incorruptible truth.”²⁶ Truth is not a mere subjective idea but rather is objective in God. Christianity supports science by rejecting skepticism in this regard. Further, it provides the presuppositions of both religion and science, namely, the creation of the world by the Godhead.

Second, Christian science, then, is a habitus of knowing that proceeds from the faith-knowledge of special revelation. It is science that “accepts special revelation”:²⁷ “If God has communicated knowledge of himself in a special way, then it goes without saying that science must reckon with that, and failing to do so, it is guilty of disobedience and error.”²⁸ The acceptance of special revelation is a question not of science but of religion, he argues. That means that Christian science proceeds on the basis of a world-and-life view whose boundaries are drawn by religion. For Bavinck, then, science either is biased against God or is for God, depending on its stance toward religion. And for a person who believes in the revelation

25. See p. 127, below.

26. See p. 186, below.

27. See p. 81, below.

28. See p. 81, below.

of God and in the creation by God's hand, it would be sinful to remove such faith from the judgments of scientific determination.

Third, science informed by Christianity understands that "religion and science . . . purity of heart and clarity of head . . . immoral life and ungodly doctrine are indubitably connected with one another."²⁹ The connection between religion and science is very close. For this reason, Christianity preserves both the religious and scientific personality of humanity and unifies the act of knowing.

Fourth, Bavinck argues, Christianity saves the sciences from positivism. It preserves the scientific nature of "literature, history, law, religion, and ethics, which together form the highest goods of humanity."³⁰ In this, the logic of the university is also preserved as a domain of organic knowledge.

Fifth, Christian science has the power both to make explicit that science proceeds on metaphysical assumption and to do so with precise claims about metaphysics itself.

Recall but once that all science, including that of nature, rests upon metaphysical presuppositions and proceeds from general, self-establishing truths; . . . the reliability of the senses, the objective existence of the world, the truth of the laws of thinking, and the logical, ideal content of perceptible phenomena.³¹

29. See p. 86, below.

30. See p. 194, below.

31. See p. 131, below.

Christianity and Science is a prime example of Bavinck's long-standing view that for the Christian, the Logos is the ground of certainty in any act of scientific research. This, in turn, provides a basis for understanding the sciences as a single organism, with each field of science occupying one part of the organism that cannot be separated from the whole.

Sixth, Christian science allows the humanities to speak in more than simply a descriptive sense. It enables humanities to be treated as sciences, with objects to know and a power to speak prescriptively: "Everyone expects of these sciences that they will say what should count as religion, ethics, and law, for every person."³² Positivism is a destructive force for ethics as a science, for example, necessarily reducing it to all manner of subjective constructs or a mere history without precept.

Finally, Christian science includes all the sciences and treats theology in particular as science. Bavinck's view is no less bold or provocative than this: Christianity is a blessing to science.³³ If science is defined exclusively by the empirical method, dogmatics is necessarily disallowed its scientific character. Yet, "a God who can in no sense be known is, in practical terms for us, the same as a God who does not exist."³⁴ If God cannot be known, then God cannot be served. Bavinck contends that those who

32. See p. 143, below.

33. See chap. 12, "The Blessing of Christianity for Science."

34. See p. 157, below.

have embraced the modernist (which is to say, empiricist) definition of science, and who treat religion and theology as merely historical or literary subjects, often assume that which they are disallowed to know: the existence of God. Further, as in his criticisms of positivism above, he argues that it is foolish for the modern scientist to suppose that theologians are dogmatic and proceed on the grounds of faith whereas science is scientific, open-ended, and proceeds on the ground of evidence. Both, he argues, are dogmatic and proceed from deeply ingrained intuitions. Bavinck makes an existential appeal on this front, that the religious person who says, “Whom have I in heaven but you?” cannot simply give up on faith because empiricist science declares God to be unknowable. “None who value religion and find their highest blessedness in fellowship with God can be neutral and objective regarding all that science is pleased to declare.”³⁵ Rather, Bavinck writes, “[In response to] the science that is fashionable today, I call upon the science that has endured through the ages.”³⁶ For Bavinck, then, Christian science assumes that the religious person who believes in the knowability of God must strive to unify head and heart, “faith and science.”

At this juncture, it is important to note that Bavinck distinguishes the possibility of Christian science from religious science in a generic sense. Christianity does not

35. See p. 159, below.

36. See p. 160, below.

view religions as mere gradations of the same revelation but claims to be independent of all other religions. It claims knowledge of the triune God; of Christ as God and man, the messianic hope of the world; of the resurrected Christ in space and time. And so the Christian religion stands and falls on the confession of this special revelation. This particularity draws some boundaries for knowing. "If each religion is accompanied by a certain view of the world and humanity, of nature and history—which it always is—then through this it *binds* the whole of a person's life and also, specifically, [his] science."³⁷ There can be no "double truth" for the believer. Science and religion cannot walk side by side without touching. All faith, positivism included, brings religious ideas to bear on scientific conclusions. For the Christian, it is *Christian* godliness that is profitable for all things.

The Necessity of Christian Science

Finally, because faith aims toward knowledge—or, we might state differently, because faith seeks understanding—the emergence of Christian science is not merely a novel response to modernist positivism. Rather, it is a historic Christian practice, and a necessity of life in a fallen world. Without sin, Christian science would be wholly unnecessary. There would be no breach in the consciousness between religion and knowledge apart from the

37. See p. 180, below.

rupture-induced act of denying the word of God in the egocentricity of becoming like God in knowing good and evil. Sin damaged the self to the extent that knowledge of a fact no longer coincides with knowledge of God. For this reason, Bavinck offers the reader both an argument for the necessity of faith in doing science and a narrative of the emergence of Christian science in Christian history.

With regard to the emergence of Christian science in Christian history, Bavinck makes the magisterial claim that the apostles of Christ “planted the banner of truth in that world of unbelief and superstition.”³⁸ He suggests that in the first century, skepticism and mysticism displaced the former highly ordered orientation toward systematic investigation (here he likely has Aristotle in view). Against that backdrop, in its unparalleled sweep of the Roman Empire, Christianity offered the world a religion of truth. While Christianity proved distinctively attractive because of the grace it offered (alongside its claim of a resurrected Messiah), Bavinck’s account also makes the striking point that Christianity is a religion of grace precisely because it is first a commitment to truth. If the one God is truth, and his revelation in Jesus Christ is the unveiling of the truth, then all God does and says is truth. Christianity seeks not only to unveil truth but to make the first-order claim that God defines all truths, because God is truth and the author of essences. Thus, by

38. See p. 50, below.

the Spirit, “whoever believably takes hold of this gospel is of the truth, is reborn through the truth, and is sanctified and freed [by it]. They are in the truth and the truth is in them.”³⁹

Bavinck’s historical narrative then turns to focus on how this approach to truth broke through a culture of superstition in the “world of the Gentiles.” The patristic fathers proved, as quoted above, that “Christianity was the true philosophy, and Christians were the real philosophers. They knew [*wisten*] reality in truth, they knew who God was, and now, equipped with this knowledge, they also had a different and better insight into the essence of the world, of nature and history.”⁴⁰ Eventually, a positive approach had to be found with respect to the knowledge produced by the schools of the time, one that eschewed both the extreme of Tertullian’s denial of the good of pagan philosophy and the Alexandrian exaltation of pagan philosophy. The temptation of Christians throughout history, Bavinck notes, has always been to one or the other: to separate faith from reason or to synthesize them in a syncretistic manner. It is the age-old tension between “world worship and world flight, culture idolatry and culture contempt, Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] and pietism.”⁴¹ Despite this perennial struggle, Bavinck argues, a clear wisdom emerged, which he promotes in

39. See p. 51, below.

40. See p. 52, below.

41. See p. 55, below.

Christianity and Science and throughout his wider corpus: neither wholesale rejection nor acceptance of pagan insight.

Bavinck's own effort to avoid either error is thoroughly Augustinian, reflecting Augustine's general insight that truth is made known by the coherence of authority and reason within a framework of faith. For "science [*wetenschap*] can thus teach only a little, and that little only to a few. It does not know the way to the truth, for it does not know Christ, and thus it often leads to dead ends."⁴² Although Bavinck certainly does regard Augustine's pairing of authority and reason to be at times dualistic, this Augustinian insight—that faith is a "gift of God" necessary for all knowledge, for all science—is valuable to him. Indeed, it leads to a further point regarding the necessity of the emergence of Christian science; namely, the logic of the necessity of faith as it relates to the possibility of knowledge. He explains this in the following remark:

Faith strives toward knowledge [*kennis*] and is a means for knowing [*weten*]. That is already the case in the regular sciences, which, like the whole of human society, are built on and must proceed from faith. But this applies in particular with regard to that science which has the knowledge of God as its content. For this, the ground rule is given in the word of the prophet: "Unless you believe, you will

42. See p. 57, below.

not understand” [Isa. 7:9]. We believe the truth of God precisely because we do not understand it, but by faith we are enabled to understand. Faith and science [*geloof en wetenschap*] thus stand next to one another in relationship like conception and birth, like tree and fruit, like work and wage; knowledge [*het weten*] is the fruit and wages of faith.⁴³

While faith is critical to theology as science, faith is a requirement even in regular sciences like history, whose “facts” are dependent upon belief in human testimony, which is then a domain of knowledge that positivism logically excludes. All claims of knowledge depend upon philosophical determinations of the nature of knowledge. Epistemological self-consciousness is necessary for thoughtful science, but “it is not even possible to provide an epistemology [*Erkenntnistheorie*] without metaphysics and philosophy.”⁴⁴ While positivism stands on the presupposition that all knowledge is nothing but the determinations of sense perception, it fails to provide a rationale for the reliability of the senses and “the objectivity of the perceivable world.” These assumptions, Bavinck argues, are not provable. “Here we merely point out that all scientific research assumes in advance and without proof the reliability of the senses and the objectivity of the perceivable world.”⁴⁵ He even argues that the “reality

43. See p. 57, below.

44. See p. 92, below.

45. See p. 93, below.

of the world outside us is fixed by and for faith.”⁴⁶ Those who doubt such things cannot be refuted by any arguments. When one faces them honestly, they can be driven either toward some form of skepticism or toward a faith position that all knowledge is preceded by trust in that which science cannot prove: perception, objectivity, and the possibility of knowledge itself. There is a necessity, Bavinck believes, in faith that precedes science because the outside world is a given by way of consciousness, not in itself. One cannot ever take a God’s-eye view and perceive the phenomenal apart from personal consciousness.

Further, all manner of metaphysical assumptions are made in the act of scientific investigation: “Concepts, such as thing, property, cause, effect, law, condition, time, space, truth, falsehood, and more”⁴⁷ are assumed as realities despite their invisibility. Thus, faith is required to maintain objectivity. At its best, he reasons, this faith takes form and shape in Christian reason—a claim that requires treatment elsewhere in texts such as *Christian Worldview*. Nevertheless, the assumption of objectivity includes faith in the deepest ground of truthfulness in God.

For this reason, in Bavinck’s view, it is appropriate to say that theology is both queen and servant of the sciences. As queen, theology offers the map of the terrain in which the sciences can move about freely. At the

46. See p. 93, below.

47. See p. 96, below.

same time, though, boundaries are necessary to protect the freedom of the other sciences from the overintrusion of theology. Theology can become guilty of the misuse of power and has been at various points in its history. The same is true of the other sciences. History is not short of examples of both theology and its fellow sciences overestimating their own distinctive reach and attempting to give answers for which they are not qualified.⁴⁸ Either implicitly or explicitly, this overreach sets distinctive sciences in competition—a historical backdrop that led to the dominance of empiricism in Bavinck's own context. His historical sketch portrays rationalism's own uneasy relationship to empiricism until the late nineteenth century surrendered thinking to radical empiricism, ignoring the basics of philosophical insight, not to mention theology. In his day, the elevation of empirical science into a de facto empiricism depended on a cultivated philosophical and theological naivete. It was possible, insofar as awareness of those sciences had been allowed to wither on the vine. In reply, Bavinck argued that every researcher brings all manner of "religious, moral, and philosophical convictions and is ruled by them to a greater or lesser degree."⁴⁹ This is even true of the radical positivists, whose conviction about the impossibility of metaphysical dogma is a dogmatic religious assertion in itself. Each party, in fact, proceeds on the implicit belief that the other party's prior

48. See p. 62, below.

49. See p. 83, below.

judgments are wrong. It is not that research simply carries on without such judgments.

Bavinck's claim is that every person must honestly deal with the assumed faith necessary even in the sensory and knowledge processes themselves. Facing this reality leads directly to the necessary relationship between metaphysics and science. One needs faith as a habitus, Bavinck supposed, because it is the means of disciplining reason, lest it fall by way of the pride of life. "Faith itself is an activity of the intellect, an act of thinking with consent, a deed of submission, of humility and lowliness, and as such it stands directly over against the pride and haughtiness of reason."⁵⁰ For this reason, Bavinck wrote that "on earth . . . we never rise above the standpoint of faith."⁵¹

Conclusion

In 1904, Bavinck saw the surfacing needs of the modern self, a fractured self, longing for an organic unity that arises in the consciousness of every human being. And so he issued a call and set forth an argument for the developing movement of "Christian science" in the European landscape to take shape all the more. All in all, he argued that the choice between science and religion is untenable. It is a false binary and, as such, is ill-suited to the realities of human life. Christian science is different. It allows the metaphysics of supernatural revelation to speak to the

50. See p. 57, below.

51. See p. 59, below.

causes and natures of things discovered as facts, and it makes no effort to disallow the freedom of the empirical sciences. Rather, it acknowledges the unity of the self in the activity of science and lets the holistic needs of human beings inform the boundaries and goal of the sciences. Christian science provides a ground for the objectivity of sense perception and for the reality of truth. It includes the claims of special revelation and reestablishes a place for theology as central in the organism of science, alongside and in service of the other disciplines.

Twelve decades on, some aspects of this text appear dated—most noticeably, for example, it was written in a historical context in which women had yet to gain admission to university education, as is reflected in this text's constant assumption that scientists are men;⁵² and in the fleeting glimpses of colonial-era geopolitical anxiety that show Bavinck as a child of his time. Nonetheless, Bavinck's argument remains thought-provoking. It makes a clear case that Christianity is key to cultivating an approach to the life of the mind that is truly livable: it embraces the physical and the metaphysical; the material and the spiritual; creation, creature, and Creator. Consequently, it is an approach to the life of the mind that is deeply problematic to much scholarship and science in the early twenty-first century—among both scientific

52. Alongside this, of course, it should be noted that in the following year, Bavinck supported the admission of the first female student at the Free University of Amsterdam, Segrina 't Hooft (1883–1921), and later became a prominent advocate of women's education. See Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 237–38.

antireligionists and those whose religion prompts a deep aversion to science.

Some books set out to make their mark simply by ruffling feathers. *Christianity and Science* is no such book. It is more than simply an awkward presence. Rather, its argument reframes the issue of Christianity vis-à-vis the life of the mind in the light of more basic theological and anthropological questions: Who and what is God? And following this, what and who are we as creatures? Bavinck's discussion of those questions embeds and organizes the sciences within a framework, a grand narrative, and a shared telos; and in so doing, it grants them the gift of neighborliness. It lifts the eyes of each science beyond itself and tells each one, "You are not your own." In this, it gives the sciences precisely what the thin narrative of secular modernity—which offers little beyond a struggle for dominance in an immanent frame—cannot.

A Note on the Text

We have endeavored to provide the reader with a translation that is clear, accessible, accurate, and readable. Toward that end, where necessary, we have added illuminative words in order for particular sentences to make sense in English translation. These are always indicated in brackets. The original text makes numerous references to other figures and texts, some of which remain well known, while some others have faded into obscurity, despite the importance of their contributions in their own

day. To open the text to contemporary readers, we have added references (including brief historical introductions) to these figures and technical terms in the footnotes, always indicating where a footnote is our own addition. Beyond that, we have retained Bavinck's own use of foreign language terms and quotes, providing English translations in each instance. Where knowledge of a particular Dutch term might help some readers appreciate the text with a greater degree of nuance, we have retained the original in brackets. Beyond that, our goal has been to have an otherwise inobtrusive role in bringing *Christianity and Science* to a non-Dutch readership. We acknowledge all mistakes and shortcomings as our own.

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Introduction



In recent years, an earnest and powerful striving to build science on the foundation of the Christian faith has been stirring. One can differ in appreciation of this fact, but its existence has risen far above all contradiction. The circle of those who are dissatisfied with the direction of leading contemporary science, in practice as in theory, is gradually increasing in size. There are many who desire something different, a different principle and a different method, for the practice of science.

There can also be no difference of opinion over the origin and character of this endeavor. For anyone who desires to see, it is clearly based on and directed by

religious motivations. In the name of religion, for the sake of Christian truth, in order to bridge the chasm between the academy and [everyday] life, in the interest of the confession of the church, the scientific investigation of our time is judged in its principle, method, and purpose. Those who praise contemporary science cannot simply close their eyes to the religious character of this movement. Recently, Prof. Groenewegen of Leiden¹ gave witness to this in a notable way:

The religious response has moved forward quietly, the public ecclesiastical-political response has followed. And now, finally, the scientific [community] must crown that effort, and, if possible, guard and confirm it. No one should underappreciate the original religious motivation of this powerful reactionary movement, which at times lends it a character worthy of praise.²

And so it is indeed. Christians, having gradually sunk into a deep sleep in the eighteenth century, suddenly experienced an awakening at the beginning of the [nineteenth] century, through which the Christian confessional and ecclesial consciousness was shaken out of its slumber. Looking around themselves, and discerning how much was neglected and taken for granted among them, the

1. Here Bavinck refers to Herman IJsbrand Groenewegen (1862–1930), professor of the philosophy of religion at the Remonstrant Seminary in Leiden.—Eds.

2. Herman Groenewegen, “Wetenschap of dogmatisme,” *Theologisch tijdschrift* 37 (1903): 393. [Unless otherwise indicated, translations are our own.—Eds.]

believers once again arose and set to work. In the circles of the *Réveil*,³ men devoted themselves mostly to evangelistic and philanthropic activities. The Secession⁴ took up the reformation of the church and restored it to the foundation of the confession. On political terrain, the battle was mostly focused on the [fight for] Christian primary and secondary schools [*Christelijke volksschool*]. And slowly, the impression that the banner of the gospel must also be displayed over the world of science began to spread. Under all manner of misunderstandings and scorn, Van Oosterzee⁵ took upon himself the defense of a science of faith. Chantepie de la Saussaye⁶ bravely and definitively set his ethical method against empiricism. From then on, the battle against unbelieving science has continued to occupy an ever-more-principled standpoint. The Reformed Churches [*Gereformeerde Kerken*]⁷ tasked the Theological School

3. The *Réveil* was a nineteenth-century Protestant revival movement that began in Switzerland and spread into France, Germany, and the Netherlands.—Eds.

4. Bavinck is referring to the Secession (*Afscheiding*) of 1834, in which a group of churches seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*). The denomination formed in this secession eventually became known as the Christian Reformed Church (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*) and was the denomination into which Bavinck was born.—Eds.

5. Johannes Jacobus van Oosterzee (1817–1882), a Dutch theologian, pastor, and poet, was professor of biblical and practical theology at the University of Utrecht when, in 1876, the newly passed Higher Education Act required academic theologians to discontinue teaching theology and instead begin teaching religious studies.—Eds.

6. [Daniel] Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874), a Dutch theologian and professor at the University of Groningen, is regarded as the father of the “ethical theology” movement.—Eds.

7. Here Bavinck refers to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*), a denomination formed in the Union of Churches (1892) that merged the Christian Reformed Church and the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dolerende)*, which had been led out of the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*) by Abraham Kuyper in 1886.—Eds.

in Kampen⁸ with the duty of forming future ministers of the word through the scientific study of theology and the practical preparation for sacred ministry. The Free University of Amsterdam set as its goal the practice of science and the [provision of] education for all manner of callings in life, in accordance with Reformed principles. We are already so far advanced in our homeland that a bill for the recognition of special professorial chairs⁹ and the degrees [awarded by] private universities¹⁰ was submitted to the House of Representatives, and was accepted with 56 votes for and 41 votes against. However weak it may be, a revival of Christian science can be seen, and that fills the heart with hope for the future.

This phenomenon in our homeland is all the more remarkable and is gaining significance because it is not an isolated occurrence. Elsewhere, too, signs of such a scientific movement can be perceived. Namely, among Roman Christians, especially after the encyclical by Pope Leo XIII on August 4, 1879, recommended the study of Thomas, a zeal to practice science in accordance with his

8. Bavinck refers to the Theologische School in Kampen (later the Theologische Universiteit Kampen), the seminary established by the Christian Reformed Churches in 1854.—Eds.

9. The “special professorial chairs” (*bijzondere leerstoelen*) are professorial positions at universities that are endowed by external organizations rather than paid for by the universities themselves, and with a remit for research and teaching that is set by the external funder. The *bijzondere leerstoel* role first became legal in the Netherlands in 1905 and was introduced by Abraham Kuyper.—Eds.

10. Bavinck has in view the distinction between “public” (*openbare*) and “private” (*bijzondere*) universities. Public universities were established by the state, whereas private universities were founded by private individuals or groups—the Free University of Amsterdam, established by Abraham Kuyper in 1880, was one such example. In that period, public universities were funded by the state, whereas private universities were not.—Eds.

principles was awakened, the depth of which should put believing Protestants to shame. There are hardly any scientific subjects that do not include his skilled exponents and representatives. In foundational scholarly works and narrow, detailed research, the Roman foundation is applied to the entire terrain of science. Logic and psychology, metaphysics and theology, history and literature, jurisprudence and sociology are practiced in such a way by them that the opponent must reckon with their work. And although the antithesis [between Protestant and Roman Catholic], which is so clearly again manifested in the work of Denifle on Luther,¹¹ should in no way be ignored or weakened, their [Catholics'] scientific studies can be consulted nevertheless with great profit by all who still stand on the foundation of the universal, indubitable Christian faith.

We may even go a step further and bring this resurgence of a Christian practice of science in connection with a succession of phenomena, all of which show that positivism's days are numbered. The slogan "back to Kant" has lost its charm for many. The philosophy of Hume and Comte increasingly gives way to that of Leibniz and Hegel. Everywhere, there is a perceptible return from empiricism to idealism. Following the supreme rule

11. Bavinck is alluding to the work of Heinrich Denifle (1844–1905), an Austrian Roman Catholic paleographer and historian who published works severely criticizing Martin Luther. See Heinrich Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung quellenmässig dargestellt* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1904); *Luther in rationalistischer und christlicher Beleuchtung* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1904).—Eds.

of understanding, feeling has retaken its rights, theory makes way for life, and rationalism stands aside for the romantic. The mystical makes its entry into art. In natural science we behold a turnaround that had seemed impossible for decades. At that time [during the zenith of the enlightenment], materialism was held to be the highest wisdom, and the mechanistic explanation of the world was deemed the only scientific one. Now, we witness how many of the most exceptional naturalists are returning from mechanism to dynamism, from materialism to the energetic [explanation of the world], from causality to teleology, from atheism to theism. After the thirst for facts is initially quenched, hunger for the knowledge of the origin and goal, for the cause and essence of the things above, resurfaces.¹²

Naturally, this remarkable reversal in science also benefits religion. The time is not far behind us when natural science, history, and philosophy all alike questioned their reason for existence. For a few years, Haeckel¹³ believed that he had put [this questioning] to death in his *The Riddle of the Universe*,¹⁴ and that he had cleared up the

12. Compare Ludwig Stein, *Der Sinn des Daseins: Streifzüge eines Optimisten durch die Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1904), 84; Willem van der Vlugt in the *Tweede Kamer*, February 26, 1904, *Proceedings*, 1391.

13. Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), a German naturalist, eugenicist, social Darwinist, and philosopher.—Eds.

14. Ernst Haeckel, *Die Welträthsel: Gemeinverständliche Studien über Monistische Philosophie* (Bonn: Strauss, 1899); English title: *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). In Haeckel's account, the "world riddle" concerned the search for a single answer to the questions What is the nature of the physical universe? and What is the nature of human thinking?—Eds.

dogmas of God, the soul, and immortality for good. But the reception of this work, which came from the scientific circles, shows that thought here had already turned in another direction. The metaphysical need lies too deep in human nature to be silenced in the long run. Not only is this recouplement—which people seek as religion in all manner of paths, in spiritism and theosophy, in humanitarianism and the idolization of culture, in Buddhism and Islam—a clear proof of the metaphysical's indispensability, but there is in broad circles a desire to detect a more or less positive Christian faith. Humanity is tired of doubt and uncertainty. Even among modern theologians, men who insist on a confession and dogmatics, on ecclesial organization and liturgical unity, arise.¹⁵ Faith in such a highly self-conscious modern culture has been shaken. Exact science has not delivered what men like Renan had expected from it in their youthful hubris. And so, one returns to the formerly scorned religion, by no means always in true repentance but nevertheless in despondent doubt.

An era that manifests such signs is not unfavorable for the practice of science in a Christian spirit. It is thus

15. A. Bruining, "Het aggressief karakter van het vrijzinnig godsdienstig," in *Religion and Liberty: Addresses and Papers at the Second International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers*, ed. P. H. Hugenholz Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 1904), 168–78; S. Cramer, "Does Liberal Christianity Want Organizing in Special Churches and Congregations?," in Hugenholz, *Religion and Liberty*, 227, 237; Bruining, "Over de methode van onze dogmatiek," *Teyler's theologisch tijdschrift* 1 (1903); also Prof. Groenewegen, Prof. Knappert, Dr. J. Van der Berg, Rev. Groot, Rev. Feenstra et al. in the gathering of modern theologians and in the weekly *De Hervorming*.

important, for oneself and others, for friend and foe, to give a clearer account of what should be meant by such a practice of science. It cannot be done with the clichés of reactionary dogmatism. Whoever has a sense of the power of religious convictions, whoever knows the driving power of principles that take root in life and, with this, knows to point out the signs of times, cannot be guilty of underestimating such an earnest and powerful movement, much less of taking an indifferent attitude toward it. Believing and unbelieving, Christian and positivistic views of science stand diametrically opposed to each other. Compromise is not possible here; rather [there is] a duty to make a definite choice. However, to that end, a clearer understanding of the unique features of both views is an indispensable requirement.