

Introduction

With the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, many people of renown made daring attempts to determine the character of the centennial era that had just ended.¹ Although providing only an approximation, they attempted to do so in order to offer their opinion regarding the direction that the current of life was flowing.² But this field they were to survey was so extensive and the phenomena that drew their attention were so diverse, important, and complex that no one has been successful in summarizing that rapidly advancing century under a single formula or in defining the direction of the future with some singular character trait. While one person was looking for *the* character of the previous century in the awakening of the historical or natural sciences, others gave attention to the development of commerce, to the

1. Bavinck's original address dates to 1904.—Ed.

2. For example, see H. S. Chamberlain, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (München: Bruckman, 1904); Theobald Ziegler, *Die geistigen und socialen Strömungen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Bondi, 1901); Ludwig Stein, *An der Wende des Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg: J. T. B. Mohr, 1899); Ernst Troeltsch, "Neunzehntes Jahrhundert," in *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1896–1913), 24:244–60.

significance of the creation of the machine, to the desire for emancipation, or to the development of democracy. And while some believed we were living in a time marked by neomysticism or neo-Romanticism, others decided that psychologism or relativism, autonomy or anarchy were better descriptions of the direction in which we were moving. Although truth may indeed be found in all these designations, none of them expresses the fullness of modern life.

This is so because, before all else, what strikes us in the modern age is the internal discord that consumes the self and the restless haste that drives it. The *fin de siècle* [“turn of the century”] is characterized as a period of dramatic change—although this is a designation that says little, because every time is a time of change. But the peculiarity of this moment is that everyone feels an epoch of change, when all people realize they cannot remain the same, and that some long for this moment to pass by more swiftly than others.³ There is a disharmony between our thinking and feeling, between our willing and acting. There is a discord between religion and culture, between science and life. A “unified” [*einheitliche*] world-and-life view is lacking, and therefore this word is the slogan of our day.⁴ The search for this concord is the work in which all who follow their era with interest participate.

3. Ziegler, *Die geistigen und sozialen Strömungen*, 561.

4. On the origin and meaning of the word, see James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Edinburgh: Elliott, 1893), 1, 415; Albert Maria Weisz, *Die religiöse Gefahr* (Freiburg: Herder, 1904), 106.

Now that the “period of Renan” (with its scientific materialism, its religious modernism, its moral utilitarianism, its aesthetic naturalism, and its political liberalism) is no longer the spirit of the age, a younger generation has arisen that, disappointed in expectations that were awakened but not fulfilled, has again become tormented by the mysteries of being. A new generation has come to the fore, which has exchanged the insight that we have moved forward so gloriously far, for the appreciation that the unknowable and unrecognizable surrounds us on all sides. Alongside the ongoing idolization of science and culture on the one hand, a return to mystical idealism, to a vague belief in things unseen, which is influential in every field of study, can be perceived on the other. If we choose to, we can perceive both a shameless employment of bare egoism and a dedication to the community, which, even in its deranged ascetic and communistic forms, fills us with respect. In literature and art, the flattest realism is exchanged with love for the mysterious in nature and history and with the honoring of the symbolic. Here patriotism degenerates into narrow-minded chauvinism and, as a result, is sacrificed to a “humanity without fatherland.” The place of the *milieu* theory and the notion of racial instinct⁵ is challenged by hero worship, the cult of genius,

5. Here Bavinck refers to deterministic theories advanced in nineteenth-century Europe by the likes of Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who argued that instinctual racial characteristics determined behavioral traits, and Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893), who argued that genius was the product of both race and environment (*milieu*).—Ed.

and the apotheosis of the *Übermensch*.⁶ Besides a historical sensibility, which glorifies all existence, we discover a revolutionary impulse that despises the historical. Repristination and emancipation wrestle with each other for the plunder. Marx and Nietzsche⁷ work together to curry the public's favor. Between socialism and individualism, between democracy and aristocracy, between classicism and Romanticism, between atheism and pantheism, between unbelief and superstition, civilized humanity swings back and forth.

Shared by both movements, nevertheless, is, undoubtedly, an aversion to the common Christian faith. While one modern movement is indeed different from another, what is clear is that historical Christianity has had its day. It no longer fits with our Copernican worldview, or with our knowledge of nature and her immutable laws, with our modern culture, with our "this-worldliness" [*Diesseitigkeit*] outlook on life, with our valuation of material goods. The thought world of Scripture is no longer embedded in our ways of thinking. The whole of Christianity, with its Trinity and incarnation, with its creation and fall, with guilt and atonement, with heaven and hell,

6. Bavinck is referring to the "cult of genius" typical of much German Romanticism. In contrast to the aforementioned deterministic theories of behavior, Romanticism celebrated the genius as one whose heroism was rooted in an ability to transcend and break with laws and conventions. This view was represented by Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), and the genius was celebrated as the "Superman" (*Übermensch*) in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).—Ed.

7. Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher and political theorist whose writings shaped much of later socialist thinking, and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a German philosopher who held significant influence over Western thought.—Ed.

belongs in an obsolete worldview and is, accordingly, gone for good. It no longer speaks to our generation and is separated by a deep chasm from our modern consciousness and life. The “shibboleths” [*Schlagwörter*] “God,” “soul,” and “immortality,” says Meyer-Benfey,⁸ have lost their meaning for us. Who still feels the need today to dispute about God’s existence? We no longer need God. There is no place for him in our world. Let the old hermit in the forest continue to worship God. We, the youth of Zarathustra, know that God is dead and will not be resurrected.⁹

The convergence of this rejection of Christianity and the inner discord that disturbs us in modern life gives occasion to the question whether the two phenomena exist in a causal relation. And this question is urgent when we see that at the demise of the Christian religion, no one can find comfort and everyone is fantasizing about the search for a new religion. Although there are thousands who confess with their mouths that not only Christianity but all religion is finished, the number of those who call for a new religion, a new dogma, and a new morality increases day by day. The age in which religion’s day was thought to have passed flies swiftly by our eyes. The expectation that science, virtue, or art would make religion superfluous is entertained by few. It is precisely the loss

8. Heinrich Meyer-Benfey (1869–1945) was a German literary scholar.—Ed.

9. Heinrich Meyer-Benfey, *Moderne Religion* (Leipzig: Diederichs, 1902), 130. [Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was a philosophical novel that sets out the death of God and the emergence of the *Übermensch*.—Ed.]

of religion that gives rise to the inventors of new religions everywhere—and in great numbers. They are built up from the strangest and wildest elements. One goes to the school of Darwin and Haeckel, to Nietzsche and Tolstoy, to Hegel and Spinoza.¹⁰ One sets off, on the basis of the histories of religious lands and peoples, in order to find what he wants in India and Arabia, in Persia and Egypt. One borrows elements from occultism and theosophy, from spiritism and magic. And everything is then made into an object of religious veneration, both world and humanity, heroes and geniuses, science and art, state and society, the world of spirits and the power of nature. Each has its own divinity. While it is not only [seen like] this, religion has become, for many, a private matter, which they arrange to their own liking. And yet they all hope to work toward a “betterment of religion” [*Weiterbildung der Religion*], toward a new religion yet to come, toward a “this-worldly religion” [*Diesseitsreligion*] and a “world religion” [*Weltreligion*] that can supersede and repair the supernatural and “other-worldly” [*jenseitige*] Christianity.¹¹

10. Bavinck is referring to English naturalist and evolutionist Charles Darwin (1809–1882), German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and Jewish-Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677).—Ed.

11. Weisz, *Die religiöse Gefahr*, 78–110; Engelbert Lorenz Fischer, *Die modernen Ersatzversuche für das aufgegebene Christentum* (Regensburg: Manz, 1902); E. Haach, *Die modernen Bemühungen um eine Zukunftsreligion* (Leipzig: Wallman, 1903); Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, “De godsdiensdienst der wetenschap,” *Onze Eeuw* (November 1904): 394–420; Theodor Simon, *Modern Surrogate für das Christentum* (Berlin: Hobbing, 1910); Pearson M’Adam Muir, *Modern Substitutes for Christianity*, Baird Lectures 1909 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909);

The Christian religion views this seeking and groping of a corrupt humanity not with indifference but rather with a sublime peace and even a joyful certainty. Christianity stands antithetically to all that is brought before the market today under the name *religion*. If we understand Christianity's warrant and maintain a desire to preserve her essence, then we can do nothing else but take a resolute position against the systems of the day and the worldviews of its own invention and fashioning. There can be no question of "mediation" [*Vermittlung*]. There can be no thought of reconciliation. The times are too grave to flirt with the spirit of the age. The deep, sharp contrast standing between the Christian faith and the modern person¹² must provide us with the insights that picking portions of each is not possible and that deciding between alternatives is a duty. However lovely peace would be, the conflict is upon us.¹³

But there is no reason for despondency. The adversary supplies us the weapons in hand to combat him. When the reconciliation that Christianity offers is rejected, the above division, which abides in the human heart, inevitably comes to the surface. All disharmony in our being has its origin therein. That is, although

David Balsillie, *Is a World-Religion Possible?* (London: Griffiths, 1909). One thinks further still to the religious movement of the *Monistenbond*, the Order of the Eastern Star; of the Church of the New Thought; of the world religion of Tokonami, deputy minister of domestic affairs in Japan; of Annie Besant; of 'Abdu'l Bahá; etc.

12. Bartholomäus von Carneri, *Der moderne Mensch* (Stuttgart: Strauss, [ca. 1910]).

13. Ernst Gustav Steude, "Auf zum Kampfe," *Beweis des Glaubens* 40 (January 1904): 3–23.

we, according to the testimony of our conscience, are removed from God by our sin, we cannot do without his fellowship.¹⁴ If we reject Christianity because it does not suit us, it instantly proves at the very same time that Christianity is indispensable for us. So when the world cries out, "Away with Christ," Christ shows precisely in his death that he alone gives life to the world. Christianity does not fit the deviant concepts that modern humanity forms about the world and life. It stands diametrically opposed to them. But there is a better fit between the world and life as they are in themselves. Whoever shakes off the idols of the day and knows to rise above the prevailing prejudices in science and the academy, who faces up to the things themselves, soberly and watchfully, and takes world and humanity, nature and religion as they truly are in themselves, presses on, evermore strengthening the conviction that Christianity is the only religion whose view of the world and life fits the world and life.¹⁵ The idea of Christianity and the meaning of reality belong together like lock and key: they make sense together. This much is made somewhat clear by three problems addressed from ancient times, the questions that formed a world-and-life view then.

14. Cf. Paul Tillich, *Mystik und Schuldbewusstsein in Schellings philosophischer Entwicklung* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1912).

15. That Christianity, although not in itself a science or philosophy but a religion, implies a defined view of both world and life is clearly demonstrated in Orr, *Christian View*, 3–36.

In ancient Greece, philosophy, as academic study was known generally, was divided into dialectics, physics, and ethics. (These names can be amended to an extent or be exchanged for others, such as logic [noetics] and natural and mental philosophies, but all frameworks eventually come back to this older trilogy).¹⁶ The problems that confront the human mind always return to these: What is the relation between thinking and being, between being and becoming, and between becoming and acting? What am I? What is the world, and what is my place and task within this world? Autonomous thinking finds no satisfactory answer to these questions—it oscillates between materialism and spiritualism, between atomism and dynamism, between nomism and antinomianism. But Christianity preserves the harmony [between them] and reveals to us a wisdom that reconciles the human being with God and, through this, with itself, with the world, and with life.

16. Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (Leipzig: Haacke, 1904), 3:18.

Thinking and Being



This reconciliation occurs first in the light of the problem of thinking [*denken*] and being [*zijn*]. From ancient times onward, humanity has pondered how the mind [*geest*]¹ in us can have consciousness of the things outside us and how the mind can know [*kennen*] them—in other words, what is the origin, the essence, and the limit of human knowledge [*kennis*]? The fact is certain that of ourselves and without coercion, we presume a world that exists outside us, that we seek to make it our mental property by way of perception and thinking [*denken*], and that acting thusly, we also suppose that we should obtain a

1. *Geest* has a wide semantic range and can refer to the mind, the spirit, or a ghost.—Ed.

certain and trustworthy knowledge of it. But on what grounds does this faith in a reality that is independent from our consciousness rest, and what guarantee is there that our consciousness—enriched through observation and thinking—corresponds to the world of being [*zijn*]?

For as long as the human being has occupied himself with this problem, he almost always ends up on one side or another, either sacrificing knowledge to being or being to knowledge. Empiricism trusts only sensible perceptions and believes that the processing of elementary perceptions into representations and concepts, into judgments and decisions, removes us further and further from reality and gives us only ideas [*denkbeelden*] that, though clean and subjectively indispensable, are merely “nominal” [*nomina*] and so are subjective representations, nothing but “the breath of a voice” [*flatus vocis*], bearing no sounds, only merely a “concept of the mind” [*conceptus mentis*]. Conversely, rationalism judges that sensible perceptions provide us with no true knowledge; they bring merely cursory and unstable phenomena into view, while not allowing us to see the essence of the things. Real, essential knowledge thus does not come out of sensible perceptions but comes forth from the thinking of the person’s own mind; through self-reflection we learn the essence of things, the existence of the world.

In both cases and in both directions, the harmony between subject and object, and between knowing and being, is broken. With the former [i.e., empiricism], the

world is nominalistically² divided into its parts; with the latter [i.e., rationalism], reality is hyper-realistically identified with the idea. In the former, the danger of sensualism and materialism threatens, and in the latter, that of idealism and monism. With both, the concept of truth, of “conformity of intellect and thing” [*conformitas intellectus et rei*], a correspondence between thinking and being, is lost. For in empiricism it falls together with the empirical, sensibly perceptible reality, and in rationalism it follows out on a correspondence between thoughts with themselves, on an internal clarity, on logical necessity. So in both directions the final question arises, whether there is truth, and [if so,] what it is.

Now, however, truth is the indispensable good for our cognition and thus the goal of all science [*wetenschap*]. If there is no truth, gone with that, too, is all knowledge and science. The Christian religion thus shows its wisdom primarily in this, that it knows and preserves truth as an objective reality, which exists independent of our consciousness and is displayed by God for us in his works of nature and grace. Accordingly, each person proceeds spontaneously on the basis of the conviction that the objective world exists outside him and that it exists as he has come to know it in clear perception. Doubt does not arise in him. Only when he later tries to give

2. “Nominalism,” as used by Bavinck, refers to the philosophical view that there are no universal essences or abstract concepts in reality. It is the view, rather, that these abstract concepts are reducible to linguistic aids that serve pragmatic purposes.—Ed.

an account of the reasons and grounds on which he can proceed in such a manner can doubt emerge concerning the justification of his action. For first, the distinction and the distance between physical reality and psychical sensation is so great that it seems there can be no talk of a correspondence and concurrence between them. And another issue is that a spontaneous act of faith underlies the acceptance of the reality of an external world and our trust on the truth of sense perception, a faith whose scientific credentials cannot be proved under the scrutiny of the sharpest reflection. Here whoever does not want to begin with faith but demands sufficient proofs bars himself from the way of science and has set his foot on the slippery slope of skepticism.

This misstep has already been taken with the claim that we know nothing immediately beyond our own sensations [*gewaarwordingen*] and representations [*voorstellingen*]. Whosoever speaks this way has already been caught in the snares of idealism and cannot free himself by any reasoning: the very same reasoning would apply to all the evidences one would want to bring forward for the reality of the outside world and for the trustworthiness of sense perception. No law of cause and effect can release the one who accepts the principle and starting point of idealism from the Circassian Circle [*tovercirkel*]³

3. The "Circassian Circle" was a folk dance wherein participants form a large circle through which they move, constantly changing partners throughout the progression of the dance.—Ed.

of his representations: out of one representation he can only deduce another, and he is never able to bridge the chasm between thinking and being by reasoning. Neither can voluntarism provide any service here. From the standpoint of idealism, the opposition that the will encounters turns the will itself into a representation. And will and opposition are then not two independent realities from my consciousness but two acts of consciousness [*bewustzijnsacten*] that stand in a certain relationship to each other. The idealism adopted in principle leaves no room for realism, even for critical and transcendental realism; no more proof is possible to show that the category of causality possesses transcendent validity, for such a category might well have strength in a world that exists but not in a world whose reality must first be proved.

None of this denies that the object can only become known by the subject and be known through thinking. No one can repudiate it, in the sense that a man cannot watch himself walk along a street and cannot stand up on his own shoulders. We know the external world only through our sensations and can never approach it from beyond them. The one who does not trust knowledge until he has been able to control that which is outside himself makes an impossible and absurd demand of knowing, precisely because knowing is always—and can never be other than—a relation between subject and object. As soon as one or both falls away, there is no more knowing.

But this acknowledgment, that knowledge of the object comes only through the subject, differs vastly from the idealistic assertion that the subject immediately knows only his own sensations and representations. Our sensations and representations first become the object, the immediate object of knowledge when we devote ourselves to psychological studies and reflect on our own soul life [*zieleleven*]. But psychology is something other than “epistemology” [*Erkenntnisstheorie*]. If we perceive the world outside ourselves, then the sensations and representations we receive by it are not the *object* of our knowledge but the knowledge itself, which we have directly obtained through perception of the outside world. In the sensations, we have knowledge not of those sensations, at least not in the first place and not immediately, but of that which is sensed [*gewaargewordene*]. And out of the sensations, we do not deduce, by syllogisms, a world beyond ourselves, which then might not exist or which might exist wholly differently from what we perceive. But in the sensations, the objective world is given to us, and this is recognized and accepted by us, just as we perceive it.⁴ Naturally, those sensations are often impure and imprecise; our senses are faulty, and our subjec-

4. Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, *Logische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1862), 2:476; Engelbert Lorenz Fischer, *Die Grundfragen der Erkenntnisstheorie* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1887), 240; Wilhelm Wundt, *Grundriss der Psychologie* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1897), 52; Georg Theodor Ziehen, *Leitfaden der physiologischen Psychologie* (Jena: Fischer, 1900), 30; Johannes Reinke, *Die Welt als That* (Berlin: Paetel, 1903), 25, 97; Rudolf Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1904), 1:269.

tivity also often exerts influence on perception. But this impurity and imprecision in our sensations, which can be remedied only through ever-repeated, rigorous perception, does not abrogate the conviction that in sensations and representations we possess a trustworthy knowledge of objective reality. Even the qualitative properties of things, such as colors and sounds, are, as currently again more commonly recognized, not to be explained merely out of an innate, specific energy of the senses but are also determined in part through the external stimuli on the nerves.⁵

This now is the fact that underpins all sensation and representation. He who denies it undermines all truth and science. He comes then with Nietzsche to the doctrine that subject and object are two absolutely different spheres, that in the act of knowing, the human person always gets in his own way and always veils things by his subjective sensations. The logical upshot is, then, to claim with the same philosopher that there is no world of being and no realm of truth; the apparent [*schijnbaar*] world is the only one, and the so-called “true” world is something that we make up. It is but a moral prejudice and an ascetic ideal that the truth has more worth than

5. James Orr, *David Hume and His Influence on Philosophy and Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903); Christoph Willems, *Die Erkenntnislehre des modernen Idealismus* (Trier: Paulinus, 1906); Richard Höningswald, *Ueber die Lehre Humes von der Realität der Aussendinge* (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1907). Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Wijsbegeerte der Openbaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1908), 61ff. [For a modern English translation of this work, see Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, ed. Cory Brock and Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), 61ff.—Ed.]

the appearance. The only word of worth in the New Testament is Pilate's skeptical question: What is truth?⁶

Knowledge of truth is possible only if we begin with the fact that subject and object, and knowing and being, correspond to each other. This fact stands firmly in the immediate awareness of all people and is accepted—consciously or unconsciously—by all who still believe in truth and science. It is science's task to explain this fact, but if it cannot do this, it will then, on pain of suicide, have to leave the matter untouched. And it will be capable of explanation only if it allows itself to be illumined by the wisdom of the divine word [*Goddelijk Woord*], which sets on our lips the confession of God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. This confession is not only the first article of our Christian faith but also the foundation and cornerstone of all knowledge and science. Only with this confession can one understand and uphold the harmony of subject and object, of thinking and being. The organs of our perception are thus connected to the elements, out of which the whole cosmos is composed, by virtue of a common origin, and so each of us knows

6. Friedrich Rittelmeier, *Friedrich Nietzsche und das Erkenntnisproblem* (Leipzig: Engelmann 1903), 6, 16, 33, 60–62. This is actually nothing other than the doctrine of the old Sophists, who called the human being the measure of all things. But recently this sophism has been renewed, though not in such a crass form as that of Nietzsche, mainly by the so-called pragmatism of William James, which is anti-intellectualist and seeks its mark of truth in the utility and productivity of knowledge. Joseph de Tonquédec, *La notion de vérité dans la Philosophie Nouvelle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1908); August Deneffe, "Relative Wahrheit," *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach* 78 (1910): 56–66; Bronislaus Switalski, *Der Wahrheitsbegriff der Pragmatismus nach William James* (Braunsberg: Bender, 1910); J. G. Ubbink, *Het Pragmatisme van William James* (Arnhem: Tamminga, 1912).

the world in a particular way and from a particular side. In each of these resides a specific energy that corresponds to the distinct works that the objective world confers to the senses.

Thus, all intellectual knowledge begins with sense perception. To acquire knowledge, Scripture refers man not to his own reason but to God's revelation in all his works. Lift up your eyes, and see the one who has created all things; [lift them up] to the teaching and the testimony; otherwise, they shall perish. Whoever rejects the word of the Lord cannot have wisdom. This is the truth of empiricism: being is a reality to which the sense perception of the subject corresponds.

The connection between subject and object receives an even greater weight when the human being elevates himself from sense perception to science by means of thinking. Observations, provided that they are taken in the general sense and not limited to visual perception, are indeed the basis and the material of our knowledge; without them, concepts are empty, just as observations without concepts remain blind. But as the human mind [*geist*] forms concepts from representations, and from these in turn forms judgments and determinations, it already appears as if he were leaving the terra firma of reality and were building castles in the sky.

One can do away with this serious difficulty by saying that such reasoning is an altogether unpractical and useless metaphysics, but this is not an answer worthy of