

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Ontology and revelation in Bavinck's Stone Lectures

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## Abstract

This essay examines Herman Bavinck's Stone Lectures (1908), published as *Philosophy of Revelation*, for indications of a noteworthy conception of the relation between ontology and revelation. One discovers in the lectures that in responding constructively to various challenges to the Christian faith, Bavinck pushes in a direction documented in recent studies of his work: toward doctrinal organicism. What emerges in terms of ontology and revelation is Bavinck's belief that Christianity is distinguished primarily by confession of a real divine relational initiative, understood in terms of the incarnation, which serves as the ontological precondition of divine revelation and thus as vindication of creaturely naming of God.

**Keywords:** Herman Bavinck; Neo-Calvinism; revelation

The following essay investigates whether in his Stone Lectures of 1908, published with the title *Philosophy of Revelation*, Herman Bavinck had in mind any distinctive conceptions of divine and creaturely ontology, or of the Creator/creature relation, or whether he conceived of divine revelation in a way that suggests a noteworthy conception of Creator/creature ontology and relation.<sup>1</sup>

The first edition of Bavinck's *Prolegomena* was published in 1895, and a second expanded edition appeared in 1906. Thus, as the editors of the recently republished lectures note, 'PoR constitutes the mature Bavinck on issues pertaining to revelation, philosophy, epistemology, and ontology'.<sup>2</sup> Bavinck's aim in the lectures appears to be twofold. First, his primary task is apologetic. The lectures come across as an extended vindication of the Christian faith as a world and life view with triune divine self-giving – that is, revelation – at its centre. In the Stone Lectures, Bavinck generally utilises an 'impossibility of the contrary' or *reductio* argumentative strategy. He seeks to demonstrate a universal acknowledgement, indeed an anthropological awareness, of the

<sup>1</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition* (hereafter *PoR*), ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018). According to the editors, Bavinck delivered at Princeton only six of the ten lectures he had written. All ten were published in English, translated by Geerhardus Vos and others, in 1909. 'Introduction to the Annotated Edition', p. xxx.

<sup>2</sup>Brock and Sutanto, 'Preface to the Annotated Edition', in Bavinck, *PoR*, p. xiii. For historical and biographical background, see James D. Bratt, 'The Context of Herman Bavinck's Stone Lectures: Culture and Politics in 1908', *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010), pp. 4–24.

existence of a transcendent God and the need for divine revelation, but also that without corrective Christian revelation that awareness gives way only to incoherence and confusion. In the opening lecture Bavinck explains that modern thought has returned with renewed interest to the ideas of revelation and religious experience, but with its heavy subjectivism proves incapable of confessing divine transcendence, and thus true theism. ‘The philosophy of revelation ... must take its start from its object, from revelation’, and ‘cannot be construed *a priori*’.<sup>3</sup> Thus only Christ himself, the ‘center’, even the ‘heart’ of revelation, can satisfy that religious undercurrent of human culture.<sup>4</sup>

Reading the Stone Lectures as an apologetic for Christianity as such coheres nicely with George Harinck’s study of developments in Bavinck’s engagement with modernism. In a second stage of that engagement, dating from 1890 or so, Bavinck heralded the demise of modernist anti-supernaturalism and, noting a renewed interest in religion, ‘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’, on ‘the belief that there exists a personal God, who revealed Himself and could be known by humans’.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Bavinck challenges unsatisfactory conceptions of revelation and scripture found within the church. These polemical but constructive doctrinal concerns are secondary but conspicuous. Two emphases hold steady throughout the lectures in this regard, tracking with the notions of the history and the order of salvation. Bavinck labours to theologise, against the backdrop of higher criticism, the historical context in which scripture took form; and he argues tirelessly for a constructive theological appreciation of those universal, philosophical and religious, indications of the knowledge of God and of revelation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, pp. 24, 241. Bavinck says that the problem of evil is the only noteworthy challenge to the Christian worldview: ‘Against this organic worldview . . . only one argument is advanced. But it is an argument which is of very great weight, for it is drawn from the awful misery of the world. And this misery viewed both as sin and suffering is a touching and heartbreaking fact. The whole creation is in travail. Anguish is the fundamental trait of all living things. Vanity, change, and death are written on all existing things. Humanity walks by the margin of an abyss of guilt. It perishes under the anger of God and is troubled by his wrath. How can such a world be reconciled with the wisdom, the goodness, the omnipotence of God?’ *PoR*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>George Harinck, ‘The Religious Character of Modernism and the Modern Character of Religion: A Case Study of Herman Bavinck’s Engagement with Modern Culture’, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29 (2011), pp. 73, 76. According to Harinck, Bavinck concentrated his hope for catholicity on a defence of orthodoxy: ‘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-supernaturalistic 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. . . In the end there were only two worldviews: the atheistic or the theistic’ (pp. 75–6). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the relevance of Harinck’s article. Also noteworthy: Bavinck’s vision of Calvinism as providing the principles for Christian unity in diversity is explored in Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, ‘Confessional, International, and Cosmopolitan: Herman Bavinck’s Neo-Calvinistic and Protestant Vision of the Catholicity of the Church’, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018), pp. 22–39.

<sup>6</sup>Bavinck construed the clash between modernist anti-supernaturalism and Christian orthodoxy, as well as that between the older conceptions of revelation and the newer, as the ‘mechanical’ versus the ‘organic’. ‘Secondly, he applied the word “mechanical” not only to the pre-modern view of Scripture, but also to anti-supernatural modernism.’ Harinck, ‘Religious Character of Modernism’, p. 71.

John Bolt takes this latter aim, in his view a kind of pre-dogmatic anthropology, to be the central one. He argues that in general subsequent Dutch neo-Calvinism failed to capitalise on Bavinck's call for serious reflection on 'the reality of concrete religion and the anthropological-epistemological grounds for the possibility of revelation', 'an anthropologically sensitive metaphysics of religion'.<sup>7</sup> Bolt acknowledges one possible exception: Bavinck's nephew, missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck.<sup>8</sup> Bolt argues that, in light of Bavinck's *PoR*, 'Reformed systematic theology today has two tasks'.<sup>9</sup> These are 'to affirm a modest natural theology that is anthropologically attuned to the concrete religious experience of people in the twenty-first century', and 'a revived realist metaphysics'.<sup>10</sup>

Bavinck returns in each and every lecture to the indispensability of Christ-centred special revelation. He argues that divine transcendence and divine revelation are everywhere acknowledged in religion and philosophy; but such acknowledgements outside the circle of special revelation come invariably in idolatrous, pantheistic form and end in scientific incoherence. One example, from the lecture on religion:

First, it [religion] always includes faith in a divine power, which is distinct from the world, far above it, and can govern and guide it according to its own will; and, secondly, it puts man himself personally into connection with the divine power, so that he sees in the affairs of God his own affairs, and allied with God can defy the power of the whole world, even unto death. But this idea of religion has only come to its true and full embodiment of Christianity. For all religions which exist without special revelation in Christ, and equally all confessions and worldviews which differ from it, are characterized by this common peculiarity: that they identify God and the world, the natural and the ethical, being and evil, creation and fall, and therefore mix up religion with superstition and magic. There is only one religion which moves on pure lines and is conceived altogether as religion, and that is Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

'Bavinck's *PoR*; therefore natural theology' is a startling non-sequitur.<sup>12</sup> So, in the interest of preserving the tenor of Bavinck's lectures, one might take Bolt's 'natural theology'

<sup>7</sup>John Bolt, 'An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24 (2013), pp. 86, 94. Without question this is a significant theme in the lectures, but reading the lectures one never gets the impression that Bavinck has the Reformed theologian in mind in that sense. Additionally, at key points an apologetic or even evangelistic focus dominates. The conclusion of the final lecture (pp. 239–45) is an important example. Henk van den Belt describes the lectures as 'an apologetic defense of the Christian faith' in which 'Bavinck . . . maintains the presupposition of Christian faith' and 'seeks a way to demonstrate why Christianity is the only plausible answer to the epistemological and existential challenges of modernity'. Henk van den Belt, 'Religion as Revelation? The Development of Herman Bavinck's View from a Reformed Orthodox to a Neo-Calvinist Approach', *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2013), pp. 23, 25.

<sup>8</sup>More recently, Daniel Strange's work is certainly relevant here: 'For Their Rock is Not as Our Rock: The Gospel as the "Subversive Fulfillment" of the Religious Other', *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 56 (2013), pp. 379–95; *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>Bolt, 'An Opportunity', p. 95.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 240. Of this lecture van den Belt says: 'The whole chapter can be read as a defense of the importance of the former distinction between true and false religion'. 'Religion as Revelation?', p. 26.

<sup>12</sup>Bolt calls for 'modifying our view of revelation' ('An Opportunity', p. 83). Uncharitably read, his recommendations are met in something like Karl Rahner's *Hearers of the Word*.

to mean a theology of nature, or of the nature of the human creature and context, or a biblical anthropology,<sup>13</sup> and 'metaphysics' to indicate something in the realm of prolegomena or general revelation, a revelatory appreciation of 'what there is'. What is needed, in other words, is a relationally robust account of the human situation in anticipation of special revelation, a doctrine of the Creator/creature relation hospitable to special revelation as we find it. One must at least in part reason from special revelation as effect to its cause and possibility. Accordingly, Bavinck's first lecture concludes with a brief discussion of general and special revelation, their distinction and interdependence.<sup>14</sup> Somewhere between the doctrine of God and the fact of Holy Scripture, in other words, one may expect to find a theology of the possibility of Creator/creature intercourse which unfolds within the sphere of human experience. Indications of a natural knowledge of God is not the whole of Bavinck's theology of the human situation.

As I intend to demonstrate here, Bavinck's *PoR* holds untapped resources for productive reflection on precisely that issue, dialogue between revelation and ontology. In other words, I find convincing Bolt's claim that there is more to learn from these lectures, but I suspect that Bavinck's lead points in a different direction than that which Bolt suggests: toward increased doctrinal organicism. Indeed Bavinck saw the 'reasonableness' of Christian faith in precisely such terms:

Now, it is the difficult but nonetheless glorious task of dogmatics to prove to the mind that the confession of the church is reasonable in the highest sense of the word. But then the primary requirement for our thinking mind is that the church's dogmas do not stand disconnected alongside one another, but they must be contained within one another; that together they constitute an unbreakable whole, an organic unity, a true and complete system. If the confession of the church is not merely a fruit of the imagination and a mythological 'gimmick' (*Spielerei*), but a description of real acts of God, of a unique life, and if dogmatics still deserves to be called a science, then that strict requirement cannot be avoided. A dogmatic system is the requirement that science places upon theology, and it is the proof of the reasonableness, of the genuinely scientific nature, of Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

One indication of such promise is Bavinck's auspicious if undeveloped excursions, scattered throughout the lectures, into biblical theology and the historical organism of revelation and redemption.<sup>16</sup> One need only observe the fruit borne in the work of Geerhardus Vos, who translated the first English edition of the lectures, to appreciate

<sup>13</sup>Such as Johan Herman Bavinck, 'Human Religion in God's Eyes: A Study of Romans 1:18–32', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994), pp. 44–52; and, again, Strange, *Their Rock*.

<sup>14</sup>General revelation leads to special revelation, and special revelation points back to general revelation. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom which God has displayed in creation and redemption.' *PoR*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup>Herman Bavinck, 'The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System', trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014), p. 95.

<sup>16</sup>E.g. the latter portion of lecture 7, 'Revelation and Christianity', pp. 155–61. The latter half of this lecture is an extended treatment of the place of special revelation in history. The point of departure is the tendency of history of religions to favour a Babylonian origin of Hebrew religion. Bavinck does not deny continuity. He even appreciates selectively the cultural legacy of Babylon, but defends the uniqueness of Israel as well by highlighting various points of contrast introduced by special revelation. He argues that the special revelation given to Israel was, first of all, a restoration of special revelation which had been originally, since Gen 3, the possession of all peoples, and which is in fact the proper completion of general

the constructive value of Bavinck's resistance to higher criticism, on the one hand, and to narrow conceptions of revelation in the church on the other.

Bavinck wrote: 'The old theology construed revelation, after a quite external and mechanical fashion, and too readily identified it with Scripture. Our eyes are nowadays being more and more opened to the fact that revelation in many ways is historically and psychologically "mediated".'<sup>17</sup> Vos' approach to biblical theology, similarly, serves to 'fill in the gap' between the doctrines of the will and work of God and the doctrines of revelation and redemption by conceiving of history as their coalescence. He says: 'The inward hidden content of God's mind can become the possession of man only through a voluntary disclosure on God's part. God must come to us before we can go to Him.'<sup>18</sup> Vos' is not a literary approach to biblical theology, which takes for granted more or less settled doctrines of revelation. Instead he focuses on the acts or the actualities of historical, redemptive self-giving: 'the study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space which lie back of even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document, and which for a long time continued to run alongside of the inscription of revealed material ... is called the study of *Biblical Theology*'.<sup>19</sup> 'Biblical theology deals with revelation as a divine activity.'<sup>20</sup>

In the closing minutes of his Stone Lectures Bavinck declared that 'between this whole universe and the will of God as it is made known to us in the gospel, there exists a spiritually and historically indissoluble unity', and that 'revelation in nature and revelation in Scripture form, in alliance (*verband*) with each other, a harmonious unity which satisfies the requirements of the intellect and the needs of the heart alike'.<sup>21</sup> Vos writes that the 'Biblical and Shemitic idea' of knowledge is 'to have the reality of something practically interwoven with the inner experience of life', so that "to know" can stand in the Biblical idiom for "to love", "to single out in love".<sup>22</sup> 'Because God desires to be *known* after this fashion, He has caused His revelation to take place in the milieu of the historical life of a people.'<sup>23</sup>

Bavinck scholarship has not yet produced much of a statement on the relationship between revelation and ontology, but a few of the basic ingredients have been identified. In addition to these biblical theological themes, one notes especially Bavinck's organic motif, which he explains as follows:

Whenever we come into contact with an organism, we see at work a force, a principle, a *vis vitalis* or whatever people may term it ... That mysterious, hidden power is exactly what comprises the organic ... Within inorganic nature, everything is aggregate, with things appended to each other from the outside; so there is no real whole, no genuine unity, and thus no diversity. But within organisms, each small part is governed, formed, and predisposed by the whole. Thus, the whole precedes the parts, and supplies each part with its own function within the

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revelation. He then argues that special revelation corrected, indeed reversed, Babylonian religion and theology. The principal distinction of Hebrew revelation is not ethical monotheism but the gospel.

<sup>17</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1975), pp. 3–4.

<sup>19</sup>Vos, *BT*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 242.

<sup>22</sup>Vos, *BT*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

whole. Within the organic for the first time we encounter a whole in terms of its parts, unity in diversity, principle within the system.<sup>24</sup>

As scholars have noted, the organic motif holds sway in Bavinck's reflections on Trinity and anthropology and, noteworthy presently, also history, redemption and revelation.<sup>25</sup> Bavinck notes in several places that revelation is an organism whose genetic unity is the redemptive mission of the Son, and that the bedrock of history is none other than the plan of God, and Bavinck defends an 'organic' view of the inspiration of scripture.<sup>26</sup> Again, confirmation of what Bavinck has in mind might be found in Vos, who argued from both doctrinal and exegetical angles – deductively from the doctrine of God; inductively from the data of scripture – for the same organic coherence of history, redemption and revelation. If soteric unity of revelation, then covenant, eschatological unity of canonical history (which begins with creation); and if so then in all likelihood history and historic revelation indicate a Creator/creature relation, not merely allowing for such organicism but likely requiring it – history and relation distinguishable but inseparable from the beginning. This would mean that from the covenant of works through to Revelation 21:3 a single relational ontology is in view.<sup>27</sup> Notice also that thus far readers of Bavinck have not come away with the impression that he wished to contend head-on with classical theism. He defends classical essence and attributes and Trinity, and in so doing borrows freely from the Cappadocians, Boethius, Augustine and Aquinas.

Drawing these two threads together – organicism in the doctrines of history and revelation and no concerted demurral from classical theism – suggests that neo-Calvinism, or Bavinck in particular, may have something noteworthy to offer on the question of the Creator/creature relation, not only for the sake of a richer account of the organism of revelation and scripture but also in productive acknowledgement of the concerns of process thought and historical criticism.

Needless to say, as that triad – history, redemption and revelation – indicates, a conclusive statement of Bavinck's views would require treatment of a large portion of the primary sources, including the doctrines of God, creation, providence, covenant and so on. The more modest aim of the present essay is an examination of key passages from Bavinck's Stone Lectures with these questions in mind.

## Lecture 1: The idea of a philosophy of revelation

In a context in which modern notions of immanence and subjectivism dominated theological thought, Bavinck responds not with a rehearsal of classical attributes,

<sup>24</sup>Bavinck, 'Pros and Cons', p. 91.

<sup>25</sup>James P. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2014); Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, 'Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18/2 (2016), pp. 174–90.

<sup>26</sup>On the latter, see Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 435–48; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *God's Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic, 2008), pp. 47–103; Tiago Machado Silva, 'Scripture as Revelation in Herman Bavinck's Theology', *Puritan Reformed Journal* 10/1 (2018), pp. 154–71.

<sup>27</sup>See Bolt's ('An Opportunity', pp. 88–94) critical review of both Berkhouwer's 'correlation' and Kuitert's 'covenant divine ontology'.

transcendence or asymmetrical relation, but with a biblical reworking of divine immanence.<sup>28</sup> He argues that deism, in conceiving of 'God's dwelling place' as 'somewhere far away, outside the world', and of 'his transcendence' as indicating 'that he has withdrawn from creation and now stands outside the actuality of this world', must acknowledge that thereby 'we lose him and are unable to maintain communication with him'.<sup>29</sup> Bavinck recommends a better balance: 'His existence cannot become truly real to us unless we are permitted to conceive of him as not only above the world, but in his very self in the world and thus as indwelling in all his works.'<sup>30</sup>

He indicates here that transcendence and immanence are mutually informative notions (not to say complementary realities), and that the doctrine of God implies the structure of Christian religious experience.<sup>31</sup> In the case of deism, untenable iterations of immanence, apparently incompatible with secondary causes, meet a corrective in the form of a speculative, depersonalised notion of transcendence. The heavens are indeed high above the earth. Bavinck responds exegetically:

The transcendence which is inseparable from the being of God is not meant in a spatial or a quantitative sense. It is true Scripture distinguishes between heaven and earth and repeatedly affirms that God has heaven especially for his dwelling place and specifically reveals there his perfections in glory. But Scripture itself teaches that heaven is part of the created universe. When, therefore, God is represented as dwelling in heaven, he is not thereby placed outside the world but in the world and is not removed by a spatial transcendence from his creatures.<sup>32</sup>

Bavinck does not here deny 'removal' by transcendence; he rejects spatial or quantitative construals of transcendence. That is, scripture affirms a lively divine immanence as the foundation for creaturely fruition of God and 'real communication with him'. Bavinck sees in scripture a rich divine immanence, which, he says, poses no threat to genuine, qualitative transcendence but does serve to expose counterfeits, and forces a fuller appreciation of the divine attributes:

His exaltation above all that is finite, temporal, and subject to space limitation is upheld. Although God is imminent in every part and sphere of creation with all his perfections and all his being, nevertheless even in that most intimate union he remains transcendent. His being is of a different and higher kind than that of the world. As little as eternity and time, omnipresence and space, infinite and finiteness, can be reduced to one or conceived as reversed sides of the same reality, can God and the world, the Creator and the creature, be identified qualitatively and essentially?<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup>In lecture 2, 'Revelation and Philosophy', he writes: 'A philosophy which, neglecting the real world takes its start from reason, will necessarily do violence to the reality of life and resolve nature and history into a network of abstractions. This also applies to the philosophy of the Christian religion. If one be unwilling to take revelation as it offers itself, then one will detach revelation from history and end by retaining nothing but a dry skeleton of abstract ideas'. *PoR*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>'Whosoever within the world tries to reduce unity to uniformity, being to becoming, spirit to matter, man to nature, or the reverse, always plays false with the other half of the distinction'. *Ibid.*, p. 88

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20–1. He later writes: 'Eternity and time, immensity and space, do not differ quantitatively but qualitatively. And since the words *absolute*, *eternal*, *immense*, and *infinite* are predicates and, when

The absoluteness of God, in other words, being qualitatively distinguished from all else, stands in no danger of ‘immanentization’ or ontological reduction by force of biblical realism or ‘intimate union’ and immanence. Rather the reverse; the immanence of God simply impresses upon us the mystery of God self-revealed and self-given. The metaphysics of the Creator/creature relation on display in biblical revelation, as Bavinck puts things here, must acknowledge a measure of mystery in order to affirm the absolute personality of God and the fullness of divine immanence. Bavinck indicates, in other words, a metaphysics of the Creator/creature relation which claims to balance qualitatively ‘other’ divine ontology with unqualified immanence, and he draws indications of this impossible cooperation from the doctrine of God, from religious experience, from the data of scripture, and here from a doctrine of special revelation:

Even as Christ the Son of God is from above, and yet his birth from Mary was in preparation for centuries, so every word of God in special revelation is both spoken from above and yet brought to us along the pathway of history. Scripture gives succinct expression to this double fact when it describes the divine word as  $\rho\eta\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \acute{\upsilon}\pi\omicron\tau\omicron\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\ \delta\iota\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \pi\rho\omicron\phi\eta\tau\omicron\upsilon\upsilon$ .<sup>34</sup>

The ‘word of God through the prophets’, special revelation, is ‘divine word’. Just as Christ is neither the Son of God alone nor only born of Mary but both – the Son of God born of Mary – so special revelation is neither divine word alone nor merely creaturely but the word of God through the prophets. Bavinck is not discussing the doctrine of scripture here in his opening lecture on ‘The Idea of a Philosophy of Revelation’. He is indicating the revelational payout of a corrected notion of transcendence and a coordinate, intrepid doctrine of immanence. He draws tighter the organism of general-special revelational cooperation<sup>35</sup> by virtue, principally, of the fullness of the being of God. Drawing the first lecture to a close, Bavinck declares:

The world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation ... the secret ... of all that exists in all its forms. ... In every moment of time beats the pulse of eternity; every point in space is filled with the omnipresence of God; the finite is supported by the infinite, all becoming is rooted in being. Together with all created things, that special revelation which comes to us in the Person of Christ is built on these presuppositions. The foundations of creation and redemption are the same.<sup>36</sup>

One detects various components of a christological conception of the organism of the Christian religion. The self-expression of God in the Son is the presupposition of revelation in history, and Christ himself, ‘in his person and work’, is the organism of special revelation specifically. The triune God is self-expressed, ‘in his very being present’, in creation and in redemption, especially in Christ the Son. The foundation of Bavinck’s triune-theistic worldview, its difference in unity, is given in Christ as

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substantivized, form only empty abstractions, they presuppose a transcendent subject differentiated from the world to whom they belong’. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup>See note 14 above.

<sup>36</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 24.

well.<sup>37</sup> The creature is always to be understood in-reference-to-God-in-the-Son because the creature truly is always in-reference-to-God-in-the-Son. The image-bearer and the realm of his experience display a non-necessary but real self-giving of the triune God in the Son.

### Lecture 8: Revelation and religious experience

Lecture 8 addresses the psychology of religion and religious experience, and here too we find a christological conception of both the context and the nature of revelation. In this lecture as in the others Bavinck's aim is to demonstrate and defend the uniqueness of Christianity. He argues that modern thought, despite its showing some interest in religious psychology and experience, is incompatible with Christianity, and that to subject the data of the Christian faith to the structures of Baconian science or Kantian rationalism is to undermine its uniqueness. Bavinck argues that true religion should exercise a right to its own method: 'After the criticism of "pure reason" ... and after the criticism of "historical reason" ... a "criticism of the religious reason" ... is still necessary'.<sup>38</sup> His point is that modern approaches to these topics are basically hostile to Christianity because their structures disallow Christianity's claim to distinction, and that the content of revelation ought to determine the method of religious self-understanding – which is, Bavinck indicates, no more than what modern science has claimed for itself, the right of methodological self-definition. 'Each science must borrow its form from the object which it investigates, for method is determined by the object.'<sup>39</sup>

So 'if theology possesses a reason for and a right to existence, it brings with it, as an independent science, its own method also'.<sup>40</sup> Christianity, Bavinck declares, 'can never produce any other method than that which is given by its own object'.<sup>41</sup> Therefore: 'The plan of salvation in the Christian religion determines the method of Christian theology.'<sup>42</sup> Bavinck identifies two components comprising the Christian plan of salvation which are impressed upon us in revelation: the immutability of God and his purposes, and the ongoing historical liveliness of redemptive communion with God. He says that the 'Christian religion ... by means of revelation seeks to bring us into fellowship with that God who manifests his truth in that he is always the same, in the past and in the present'.<sup>43</sup> For Bavinck this is the content of Christian religion: revelation is the means

<sup>37</sup>This is confirmed toward the end of lecture 7: 'The special revelation which comes to us in Christ not only gives us the confirmation of certain suppositions, from which history proceeds and must proceed, but itself gives us history, the kernel and the true content of all history ... Furthermore, revelation gives us a division of history. There is no history without division of time, without periods, without progress and development. But now take Christ away. The thing is impossible, for he has lived and died, has risen from the dead, and lives to all eternity; and these facts cannot be eliminated – they belong to history, they are the heart of history ... revelation teaches that God is the Lord of the ages and that Christ is the turning point of the ages. And thus it brings into history unity and plan, progress and aim.' *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.* Elsewhere he warns: 'A system as system, including a dogmatic system, has no cons, but only pros. It obtains a shadowy side, occasionally even a very dark side, only when and to the extent that it corresponds decreasingly to its unique idea, and thereby is less of a system.' Bavinck, 'Pros and Cons', p. 96.

<sup>40</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 178.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.* That is, not salvation, not its structure, but its antecedent plan, its conception or one might say the theological reality of its possibility, determines Christian theological method.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 180–1.

by which the immutable God draws people into redemptive fellowship with himself within the actual circumstances of creaturely experience.<sup>44</sup> Bavinck then distinguishes two essential components of the historical realisation of the plan of salvation: what are sometimes called the accomplishment or the *historia* of salvation, and its *ordo* or application. Both are essential. Revelation allows neglect of neither 'history (*historie*) and revelation in nature and history (*gescheidenis*) – that is to say ... Christ', nor the real and actual realisation of fellowship with God: 'the will of God to save the world ... which goes on from day to day'.<sup>45</sup> As Bavinck explains in subsequent pages, it is this latter, the *ordo salutis*, which serves as the soteric foundation for Christian religious psychology and experience; while the *ordo* itself signifies refracted application of the singular historical accomplishment. Thus in Christian experience continuity is identifiable with the mediation of Christ, and difference, personal experience, with the benefits of the same mediation applied variously to sinners in the actual realm of their experience.

The immutability of God and his purposes is given in revelation inseparably along with the historic realisation of those purposes in terms of both the *historia* and *ordo* aspects of redemption, and the sum of this juxtaposition Bavinck sees in Christ himself: 'The peculiarity of the Christian religion, then, as has been so often shown and acknowledged even by opponents, is in the person of Christ.'<sup>46</sup> Bavinck does not say that Christianity's peculiarity is Christ himself, but that its peculiarity is in Christ and given or revealed in him. Christ does not reveal only himself but himself as the substance of all things. Jesus 'is not the subject but the object of religion'.<sup>47</sup> 'Christianity is not the religion of Jesus . . . but Christ-religion.'<sup>48</sup>

Bavinck's primary interest is to establish the unique structure of Christian thought with regard to religious psychology and experience. He makes the methodological point that Christian revelation presents to us an immutable God who himself works out salvation in history. Bavinck highlights the objective and historical component of revealed redemption, and then develops the subjective application of it, which unfolds in all the personal non-regularities of individual experiences of grace and conversion. 'We have on the one side to maintain the dependence of religious experience on historical Christianity, and on the other side equally to recognize its independence and liberty.'<sup>49</sup> Throughout, Bavinck emphasises the theological character of soteric realities, arguing that even inquiries as subjectively focused as psychology and experience must be understood in terms of God and the active realisation of his will: 'For all the steps in the way of salvation are God's work, the effect and fulfillment of his will; but because they take place in man and are realized in his consciousness and will, they may all be considered and described also from an anthropological point of view.'<sup>50</sup> This is not a concession to secular human science but an affirmation of the authority and scientific scope of revelation and of the christological structure of Christian self-understanding. Christ is the content of Christian revelation, and thus

<sup>44</sup>The whole person is taken into fellowship with that one true God; not only his feelings, but also his mind and will, his heart and all his affections, his soul and his body'. *Ibid.*, p. 178. Much like Vos's rationale for covenant, noted above.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 181, 182.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 182.

also the structure of revelation, and then, too, the ‘incarnation’ of Christian theological method. He says in lecture 10 that Christ ‘is Christianity itself, in its preparation, fulfilment, and consummation’.<sup>51</sup>

‘There is only one religion’, Bavinck says, ‘which in principle condemns and prohibits all this superstition and magic, and that is Christianity’.<sup>52</sup> ‘Christianity is the absolutely spiritual religion . . . the idea of religion is completely fulfilled in it’, and all of which religion must consist ‘comes to true and total fulfillment in Christianity’.<sup>53</sup> That distinction between true and false religion does in fact stand or fall with method. When her defenders ‘have abandoned the self-sufficiency of the Christian religion, they cannot hold to a theology with a method of its own’.<sup>54</sup> If ‘theology acknowledges no other method than that which is usually taken in the sciences of nature and history, the religious man is not only totally dependent on the clericalism of science but religion itself is robbed of its independence and freedom’.<sup>55</sup> Turning to the Christian theologian, Bavinck says: ‘we have on the one side to maintain the dependence of religious experience on historical Christianity, and on the other side equally to recognize its independence and liberty’.<sup>56</sup> Here both the apologetic and the in-house polemical avenues coalesce, and Bavinck’s dogmatic position is clear: in distinction from all religions and all competing accounts of religious experience, Christianity holds the true confession of the dwelling of God with man, presently, actually and eschatologically.

### Summary and evaluation

The classical understanding of the Creator/creature relation, attributable to Thomas Aquinas, puts the asymmetry of the Creator/creature relation in terms of real and rational relations. God’s relation to creation is rational, not real; it is not real for God because it does not perfect or augment or change in any way the divine being. The creature’s relation to God is real (for the creature) because it signifies real change in the creature. The substance of this claim, ontological asymmetry and essential attributes, Bavinck never questions; he surely affirms it. What we have observed from the Stone Lectures, however, indicates that the revelational and hermeneutic implications of the classical account of the Creator/creature relation clash with Bavinck’s understanding of revelation. And if differences are identifiable regarding revelation, then differences are likely to be found with regard to Creator/creature relation.

Take for example Richard Muller’s defence of classical theism.<sup>57</sup> Muller believes that a decisive issue between classical theists and revisionists in the end comes down not to metaphysics but to interpretation of scripture:

The issue concerns the logical and theological priority of one set of statements over another. Do we read statements concerning divine repentance as dependent for their meaning upon logically prior statements concerning the absence of change

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>57</sup>Richard A. Muller, ‘Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism’, *Westminster Theological Journal* 45/1 (1983), pp. 22–40.

in God, or ought we to read statements concerning the divine constancy as meaningful only when qualified by a doctrine of actual divine repentance?<sup>58</sup>

Muller here notes tension in the biblical text between two sets or kinds of theological predicates, exemplified for example by Genesis 6:6 and Malachi 3:6, and so he raises a question of hermeneutical or theological logic: which sort of statements should receive interpretive priority, those affirming changelessness or those indicating change?

Muller's hermeneutical dilemma assumes that there are such sets of theological predicates in scripture, one comprised of statements affirming self-existence and classical theism and another of statements arising relationally; that the sets are self-evident; that each suggests a distinguishable metaphysic; and that they are metaphysically incompatible and therefore hermeneutically unequal. By contrast, Bavinck's Stone Lectures are an extended defence of the uniqueness of Christianity in specific terms, and thus a rejection of this dilemma. Bavinck is no Hegelian,<sup>59</sup> but he appears willing to release God and the text of scripture from the modal strictures of essentialist logic at a precise and specific point, that of relational reality. Bavinck reminds us that a metaphysical hermeneutic which could not acknowledge the hypostatic union is a methodology strange to the data, structure and context of Christian revelation. In the person of Christ, Muller's polarised predicates are united, unmixed, in a single divine person, and the incarnation is for Bavinck the revelation of the substance of revealed truth because deity self-given is the primary truth of created existence: 'Creation', he says, 'was the first revelation, the principle and foundation of all revelation'.<sup>60</sup> 'The special revelation which comes to us in Christ not only gives us the confirmation of certain suppositions, from which history proceeds and must proceed, but itself gives us history, the kernel and the true content of all history.'<sup>61</sup>

Defenders of a high view of scripture, in wrestling with the epistemological fallout of revelation of an infinite God to a finite creature, as a general rule hold that tension in the text is only apparent. If scripture is the Word of God, then objectively there are discrepancies only from the finite creature's point of view, according to our necessarily limited and fallible capacities and suppressive self-interest. Similarly, Muller's construal of the relational/hermeneutical problem demonstrates tension not within the text, as he suggests, but rather with the text, between scripture and the finite reader armed with a classical theological hermeneutic.

Malachi 3:6, for example, since it also is an example of non-necessary, redemptive revelation of God, applies considerable pressure to the terms of Muller's hermeneutic. Although Malachi 3:6 affirms changelessness, it does so within the context of historical religious relation. In fact, the changelessness affirmed there is given as the rationale for the restraint of divine judgement against the unfaithfulness of Israel. Notice that the

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>59</sup>E.g.: 'When Hegel says of the infinite and the finite: "The truth is the inseparable union of both" ... we recognize in this not the *primum verum* (first truth) but the *πρῶτον ψεῦδος* (first lie) of his philosophy'. PoR, p. 18. Eglinton argues that Veenhof's hasty identification of the organic motif in Bavinck with that of German Idealism and a largely generic history of organic thought led to a disjointed reading of Bavinck's theology. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, pp. 53–4, 56, 59, 64–71. Eglinton highlights 'the major difference between organicism according to Idealism and the neo-Calvinists, between Hegel and Bavinck', as that between pantheism and Bavinck's 'rigid separateness between God and the cosmos' (p. 70). See also Shao Kai Tseng, *G. W. F. Hegel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), pp. 72–7.

<sup>60</sup>Bavinck, *PoR*, p. 210

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

contrast is between ample occasion for divine judgement of transgression (implicitly coupled with expectation of judgement as inferred from the moral perfection of God), on the one hand, and merciful self-restraint on the other. Although in Genesis 6 and the account of the flood the balance is tipped somewhat in the other direction, that narrative is comprised of negotiation between precisely the same terms. It would appear, then, that conceptual strain is to be found not between self-evidently distinct sets of biblical predicates but within the metaphysics of the covenant relation itself. The text in that sense resists Muller's dichotomy and thus exposes something of the dis-joint between his theology of relation and the reality of divine revelation as such.

In Bavinck's view, the uniqueness of the Christian doctrine of God is the juxtaposition of absoluteness and personality which is displayed in the reality of revealed religion. The relational self-giving of absolute personality is, in other words, the ontological background of divine revelation as such. Bavinck therefore argues that a transcendent/immanent dialectic such as Muller's is symptomatic of Christ-less metaphysics, one that by obscuring the relation which sustains the intelligibility and trustworthiness – the realism, in effect – of divine revelation, indicates methodological renunciation of the God-man.

Bavinck's view of revelation, special revelation in particular, as a singular, organic testimony to redemption in the Son, produces a different result. 'I and the Father are one' and 'Jesus wept' are both true of the person of the Son of God, the former according to the divine nature and the latter according to the human nature. Both statements are accorded equal hermeneutical value because they are ontologically unequal, the one upholding the other. Bavinck writes in his *Reformed Dogmatics* that 'the whole revelation of God is concentrated in the Logos, who became "flesh" and is, as it were, one single act of self-humanization, the incarnation of God'.<sup>62</sup> The hypostatic union, two natures unmixed and unconfused united in one divine person, serves as the logic of biblical interpretation and by extension of theological predication. In this sense, as Bavinck insists, revelation sets its own terms and provides its own internal logic. Bavinck's Christo-organic view of revelation implies, upstream, a Christo-organic revelatory will of God, a relational initiative of the triune God terminating in the Son, and downstream a Christo-organic hermeneutic capable of preserving such tensions in the biblical text, whether the reference be to the Son, the Father or the Spirit, or to the Godhead non-specifically. As revelation is incorporated into the organism of history and redemption, the triune work of redemption terminating in the Son sets the basic logic for biblical interpretation and the classical relational hermeneutical dilemma disappears.

This seems to me consistent overall with Bavinck's understanding of revelation as he delivered it at Princeton in 1908, and as it is found in the first two volumes of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bavinck says there that all revelation is mediated and that creation is not only the first but the prototypical self-revelation of God.<sup>63</sup> In that sense, he says, all of revelation, including scripture, is anthropomorphic, a 'humanization' of God.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup>Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 100.

<sup>63</sup>The creation is the first revelation of God, the beginning and foundation of all subsequent revelation. The biblical concept of revelation is rooted in that of creation. 'In a strict sense there is no immediate revelation either in nature or in grace. God always uses a means ... by which he reveals himself to human beings.' Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, pp. 307, 309.

<sup>64</sup>'All revelation is anthropomorphic, a kind of humanization of God.' Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, p. 310. 'Scripture does not just contain a few scattered anthropomorphisms but is anthropomorphic through and through.' *God and Creation*, p. 99.

The anthropomorphism of scripture as such, as a subset of anthropomorphic revelation, is indicated by the anthropomorphic linguistics of inscripturation. Bavinck surveys the anthropomorphic language of scripture demonstrating the facts that ‘all that pertains to human and even to creatures in general is . . . attributed to God’, that ‘the entire creation, all of nature . . . but especially the human world, is mined in Scripture’, that in the end ‘almost no limit is set to the use of anthropomorphic language’. Without the use of anthropomorphism, ‘dogmatics, specifically the doctrine of God, shrinks by the day’, and ‘theology is no longer able to speak of God because it no longer speaks from him and through him’.<sup>65</sup> In that sense, while the anthropomorphic language of scripture indicates the ontology of divine self-giving, it is that self-expression of God which vindicates the language utilised. A voluntary theological reality precedes the language of scripture.

Bavinck affirms, accordingly, what his view of revelation suggests, that a real created relation vindicates anthropomorphic revelation and subsequent creaturely naming of God. ‘In his names’, God ‘descends to the level of the finite and becomes like his creatures’.<sup>66</sup> ‘Here lies the reason why we can and may speak of God in creaturely language. We have the right to use anthropomorphic language because God himself came down to the level of his creatures and revealed his name in and through his creatures.’<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Bavinck, *God and Creation*, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*