

THE TRINITY AT THE CENTER OF THOUGHT AND LIFE: HERMAN BAVINCK'S ORGANIC APOLOGETIC

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Introduction

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY is the architectonic principle of the whole theological and apologetic enterprise of Herman Bavinck.¹ In contrast to those who would deemphasize the Trinity as a matter of secondary importance, Bavinck was self-consciously committed to the triune God of Scripture as the alpha and omega point of his thought.² In his chapter on the Holy Trinity in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, he concludes with a useful section entitled, "The Importance of Trinitarian Dogma," in which he provides a global comment that warrants this claim:

The thinking mind situates the doctrine of the Trinity squarely amid the full-orbed life of nature and humanity. A Christian's confession is not an island in the ocean but a high mountaintop from which the whole creation can be surveyed. And it is the task of Christian theologians to present clearly the connectedness of God's revelation with, and its significance for, all of life. *The Christian mind remains unsatisfied until all of existence is referred back to the triune God, and until the confession of God's Trinity functions at the center of our thought and life.*³

1. In *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1956), 156, Bavinck speaks of the Trinity as "foundational" and "the peculiar essence of Christianity." James Eglinton observes that the macro-structure of Bavinck's theology takes a trinitarian shape in step with the progression of the Apostles' Creed: "Volume Two, *God and Creation* is overwhelmingly concerned with God the Father. Volume Three, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* emphasizes the redemptive work of God the Son. The onus of Volume Four, *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, is God the Spirit, who applies everything accomplished by the Son" (*Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2012], 89-90; see also pp. 103-4).

2. See Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 81.

3. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:330, emphasis mine. From now on *RD*. He echoes this in *Our Reasonable Faith*, "The confession of the trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor the sanctification can be purely maintained" (161).

This approach avoids the dualism that has plagued medieval scholasticism with a nature/grace divide that permits no real unity and the monism of secular philosophy that seeks a common, unifying element at the expense of all diversity.⁴ Both will come directly into the crosshairs of Bavinck's apologetic for their failure to uphold both the unity and diversity of the world. The epistemological grounds for this apologetic is the self-revelation of the triune God in whom unity and diversity are equally absolute. Bavinck writes, "In God ... there is unity in diversity, diversity in unity. Indeed, this order and this harmony is present in him absolutely.... [I]n God both are present: absolute unity as well as absolute diversity."⁵ The point is that the ontology of the creation finds its archetype in its triune Creator-God, in whom absolute unity and absolute diversity are perfectly and eternally harmonized. The creation, understood according to the basic Creator/creature distinction in Scripture, possesses a relative unity and relative diversity, with neither destroying nor canceling out the other.

This agrees with what James Eglinton has labeled Bavinck's "organic motif": "Trinity *ad intra* leads to organism *ad extra*."⁶ He explains, "God as the archetypal (triune) unity-in-diversity is the basis for all subsequent (triniform) ectypal cosmic unity-in-diversity."⁷ The organic motif enables Bavinck to communicate a distinctly trinitarian worldview. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto writes, "Creation displays an organic ontology of diversities in unity precisely because in God there is an archetypal unity and diversity."⁸ More concisely, Eglinton states, "Theological organicism is the creation's triune shape."⁹

For this reason, any study of nature and history must expect to encounter and be able to harmonize its ectypal unity and diversity in keeping with its very nature. Herein is the force of Bavinck's apologetic: it is *only* by a revelatory epistemology that begins with the triune God, as he has revealed himself in Scripture, that *any* adequate knowledge of the creation¹⁰ can be arrived at without sacrificing its unity for its diversity or its diversity for its unity.

The goal of this brief study is to explicate the theological foundation that supports Bavinck's apologetic. It will be argued that *Herman Bavinck's organic ontology, which holds that the archetypal unity-in-diversity of the triune God of Scripture*

4. We will primarily consider Bavinck's interaction with monism in his lectures *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979). From now on *PR*. For a competent study of Bavinck's polemic against dualism see Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), especially chapter one, "Metaphysical Foundations."

5. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:331, 332.

6. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 80.

7. *Ibid.*, 54.

8. *Ibid.*

9. James Eglinton, "Bavinck's Organic Motif: Questions Seeking Answers," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 66.

10. "[A]ll the works of God *ad extra* are only *adequately known* when their trinitarian existence is recognized" (Bavinck, *RD*, 2:333).

*necessitates an ectypal unity-in-diversity in the creation, provides the theological foundation for his apologetic.*¹¹ Because the creation is not amorphous, conforming to the subjective and variegated philosophies of man, but has an objective ontology analogous to the Trinity, both monism and dualism are unable to account for the full-orbed life of the world and humanity. The former destroys all diversity at the expense of unity and the latter posits a diversity that never arrives at a unity—neither of which can satisfy both the heart and the mind.

The first section will develop Bavinck’s doctrine of the Trinity, particularly how he understands unity (of essence) and diversity (of persons) to be equally absolute in God. Bavinck will go on to make the case that the *absolute* unity-in-diversity in the Godhead provides the ontological archetype for the pluriform shape of creation, which manifests a *relative* unity-in-diversity (section 2). This particular organic ontology of creation, as well as Bavinck’s commitment to the triune God’s self-revelation as the sole *principium* of all human knowledge, will together give rise to his trinitarian worldview. This worldview will function apologetically against the worldview of monism as demonstrated in his 1908-1909 Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, entitled, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (section 3).

1. The Triune God: Unity and Diversity are Equally Absolute

Bavinck, in step with God’s self-revelation in Scripture, understood that “the great challenge facing us with this dogma is to see to it that the unity of the divine essence does not cancel out the Trinity of the persons or, conversely, that the Trinity of persons does not abolish the unity of the divine essence.”¹² For to allow one to negate the other is to fall either into the error Sabellianism or Arianism—both of which try to secure the oneness of God at the cost of his threeness—or that of tritheism—which tries to secure the threeness of God at the cost of his oneness. These errors “have persisted in the Christian church throughout the centuries.”¹³

Always and again the church and each one of its members must be on guard against doing injustice on the one hand to the oneness of the Divine Being, and on the other to the three Persons within that Being. *The oneness may not be sacrificed to the diversity, nor the diversity to the oneness.* To maintain

11. The phrase “organic ontology” was taken from Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18 (2016): 174. Also, the language of “necessitates” is derived from Eglinton, who writes, “Bavinck’s theology of Creator as Trinity *necessitates* the conceptualization of creation as organism: Trinity *ad intra* leads to organism *ad extra*” (*Trinity and Organism*, 81, emphasis mine).

12. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:288-89.

13. See Bavinck, *RD*, 2:290-96

both in their inseparable connection and in their pure relationship, not only theoretically but also in practical life, is the calling of all believers.¹⁴

With this guard firmly in place, Bavinck asks three questions that penetrate to the heart of trinitarian dogma: “What is the meaning of the word ‘essence’? What is meant by the word ‘person’? And what is the relation between ‘essence’ and ‘person’ and between the persons among themselves?”¹⁵ We will briefly consider his answers in turn. Before proceeding, however, it is worth noting at the outset that Bavinck is explicit at every point of his intention to expound a unity that has a rich internal diversity and a diversity that exists in perfect unity. That is, while he is answering the first two questions, he keeps his eyes on the third.

First, as to the meaning of the word “essence,” Bavinck conceives of it as “the divine nature as it is common to all three persons.” It is numerically singular and simple, and so it is “essentially distinct from all creaturely existence.” Yet, Bavinck speaks of this “one simple divine essence” as *possessing* all of the attributes he previously discussed. In other words, it is not an abstract, bare, or empty essence, but one that is concrete, richly diverse, and infinitely full. These attributes are not separate from the divine essence but identical with it (e.g., God *is* love, God *is* holy, etc.). Therefore, the essence of God is not arrived at by way of subtraction, stripping it of everything until you arrive at a bare essence, but by way of addition, attributing to it all the perfections of God until you arrive at an infinitely full essence.¹⁶ In addition, the concreteness of this numerically singular essence is seen in that it “exists *in* the divine persons and is totally and quantitatively the same in each person.”¹⁷ Thus, the divine nature is not a mere name that has no real existence (nominalism), nor is it some “subsistent thing” behind or above the persons (excessive realism).

While Bavinck notes a faint analogy with human nature, the divine nature excludes all separation and division, whether in time or space, because it possesses the divine attributes. Bavinck argues, “The divine attributes of eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, goodness, and so on, by their very nature exclude all separation and division.”¹⁸ So while the persons, in whom the divine essence subsists, are distinct, they are not divided. The persons are “the same in essence, one in essence, and the same being.”¹⁹ So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, and still there is only one God.

The simplicity of the divine essence means that it exists without separation or division in each person *individually*, but also that it exists in all of them *collectively*.

14. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 157, emphasis mine.

15. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:298-99.

16. “The diversity of attributes does not clash with God’s simplicity. For that simplicity does not describe God as an abstract and general kind of being; on the contrary, it speaks of him as the absolute fullness of life” (Bavinck, *RD*, 2:127).

17 *Ibid.*, 2:300.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

However, the collective sense is not greater than the individual persons. “Consequently, there is in God but one eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient being, having one mind, one will, and one power.”²⁰ The distinctions, then, “may not and cannot diminish the unity of the divine nature. For in God that unity is not deficient and limited, but perfect and absolute.... God is *absolute* unity and simplicity, without composition or division; and that unity itself is not ethical or contractual in nature, as it is among humans, but *absolute*; nor is it accidental, but it is *essential* to the divine being.”²¹

When we come, secondly, to the meaning of the word “person,” Bavinck has put us in a position to find an absolute diversity of persons within the absolute unity of the divine essence.

The glory of the confession of the Trinity consists above all in the fact that that unity, however absolute, does not exclude but *includes diversity*. God’s being is not an abstract unity or concept, but a fullness of being, an infinite abundance of life, whose diversity, so far from diminishing the unity, unfolds it to its fullest extent.

These distinctions within the essence are called “persons.” Bavinck avoids Boethius’ definition of person as “an individual substance possessing a rational nature,” which he sees more fitting for Christology, and instead follows Calvin’s simpler definition of a “subsistence in God’s essence.” He writes, “In the dogma of the Trinity the word ‘person’ simply means that the three persons in the divine being are not ‘modes’ but have a distinct existence of their own.”²² This avoids the complications of having to unite three separate centers of rationality as Boethius’ definition would require.

The excise of elements of rationality and self-consciousness from the definition “follows naturally,” according to Bavinck, “from the fact that all *three* persons have the *same* being and attributes and hence the *same* knowledge and wisdom.”²³ Here Bavinck grounds the ultimate harmony of God’s unity (*same* being, attributes, knowledge, wisdom) and diversity (*three* persons) in the essentially *tripersonal* being of God.²⁴

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22. Ibid., 2:302.

23. Ibid.

24. Bavinck’s formulation avoids two mistakes in understanding God’s personality. First, the personality of the Trinity is not the unification of three diverse personalities or three centers of self-consciousness around an otherwise non-personal essence. To state it more generally, personality is not only intrinsic to the diversity of persons and not also to the unity of essence. It is not as if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit subsist one and the same unconscious essence. Second, the personality of the Trinity is not the diversification of one divine personality or one center of self-consciousness into three otherwise unconscious and non-personal subsistences. This would conceive of the three persons as mere revelational modes of the one divine

If the unity and diversity of God are to be maintained as equally absolute, without either being sacrificed to the other, then absolute diversity must also be *essential* to the Godhead just as is absolute unity. Bavinck will go on to make this exact point: “[T]he divine being *is* tripersonal, precisely because it is the absolute divine personality.”²⁵ The Trinity of persons are not accidental but essential to the divine being; it is not subordinated to the unity, but both are absolute. It belongs to God’s very essence to be triune, that is, to be both absolute unity and absolute diversity; he has never existed otherwise, nor can he exist otherwise. “Personhood,” says Bavinck, “is identical with God’s being itself.”²⁶

In summary, the architectonic principle of Bavinck’s theology and apologetic is the doctrine of the Trinity which reveals to us not an empty or abstract being, but the absolutely personal God who is the fullness of being. In him “there is unity in diversity, diversity in unity. Indeed, this order and this harmony is present in him *absolutely*.”²⁷ In other words, in the triune God of Scripture there is present both absolute unity and absolute diversity without either swallowing up the other. Eglinton comments, “Bavinck’s most rudimentary characterization of God is as a being of immense diversity and profound unity. This fact exerts a controlling influence on Bavinck’s understanding and appropriation of all created reality.”²⁸

2. Organic Ontology: The Triune Shape of Creation

In keeping with our point that the doctrine of the Trinity is the architectonic principle of Bavinck’s theology and apologetic, he writes, “[T]he doctrine of the Trinity is of the greatest importance for the doctrine of creation. The latter can be maintained only on the basis of a confession of a triune God.”²⁹ Even more explicitly he writes:

The two dogmas [Trinity and creation] stand and fall together. The confession of the essential oneness of the three persons has as its corollary that all the

personality. Personality is not intrinsic only to the essence of God and not also to the diversity of persons. Bavinck neither moves from a non-personal diversity to a personal unity, nor from a non-personal unity to a personal diversity. Instead, he writes, “The divine being is tripersonal, precisely because it is the absolute divine personality” (*RD*, 2:302). The personality of God is essentially tripersonal so that “the unity of the divine being opens itself up in a threefold existence” (*Ibid.*).

25. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:302, emphasis mine.

26. *Ibid.*, 2:303-4.

27. *Ibid.*, 2:331, emphasis mine.

28. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 104.

29. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:332. As a point of contrast, Geerhardus Vos only makes mention of the Trinity under a single question in his chapter on Creation in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014). However, under this question he teaches that the act of creation is attributable to the triune God, as all *ad extra* acts are (see 1:131) and that the revelation of nature does not lead to Unitarianism, but Trinitarianism (see 1:177).

outward works of God (*opera ad extra*) are common and indivisible (*communia et indivisa*). Conversely, all opposition to the trinitarian work of creation is proof of deviation in the doctrine of the Trinity.³⁰

Bavinck integrates these two doctrines by proposing an *analogical* relationship between the triune Creator and his creation, maintaining their basic ontological distinction. “There is in his creatures an *analogy* to what is present in God himself.”³¹ The heavens do not declare the glory of Plato’s Idea or Aristotle’s Immovable Mover, arrived at by reason apart from special revelation, but the triune God of Scripture.

The Trinity reveals God to us as the fullness of being... In God, too, there is unity in diversity, diversity in unity. Indeed, this order and this harmony is present in him absolutely. In the case of creatures we see only a faint *analogy* of it.³²

So the creation will display a *relative* unity in diversity that is *analogous* to the *absolute* unity in diversity in the triune God of Scripture. The latter is the archetype for the former.

There are at least three implications of this organic view of creation. First, this will inform Bavinck’s renewal of the *vestigia trinitatis* within the Reformed tradition (of which we will say more below). Second, the triune shape of creation will be seen as correlative with the triune shape of revelation. “*Creation is the initial act and foundation of all divine revelation* and therefore the foundation of all religious and ethical life as well.”³³ Third, this particular view of creation, rooted in the Trinity, gives rise to “a very particular worldview.”³⁴ This worldview, in turn, will give rise to his apologetic since it is only the Christian worldview that begins with the self-revelation of the triune God, who has created all things, that the unity of the creation can be upheld without sacrificing its diversity—this will be at the heart of his Stone Lectures.³⁵

30. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:422. We can already see the apologetic force of the doctrine of the Trinity come out in the last line of this quote. Because these two doctrines are so connected, to attack one is inevitably to attack the other and to deviate in one is to deviate in the other.

31. *Ibid.*, 2:127.

32. *Ibid.*, 2:331.

33. *Ibid.*, 2:407, emphasis mine. “The beginning of the carrying out of this counsel of the Lord was the creation of the world” (Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 164). “The doctrine of creation forms the basis of the doctrine of revelation” (Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:159).

34. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:435.

35. John Bolt notes that it was Abraham Kuyper who introduced into the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition the idea of a worldview, which functioned for them as a comprehensive interpretive key. As such it was inherently apologetic: “Worldview ... is an *antithetical* notion; it posits one set of ideas over against another comprehensive complex. This conflict is fundamentally religious in nature; the deepest questions of life’s meaning are at stake” (Bavinck *on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015], 122).

2.1. The Creator, the Creature, and their Christological Connection

Bavinck defines creation as “that act of God through which, by his sovereign will, he brought the entire world out of nonbeing into a being that is distinct from his own being.”³⁶ From this act arises the basic Creator/creature distinction, which, for Bavinck, avoids the errors of pantheism and materialism, both of which confuse physics and metaphysics and are manifestations of a monistic worldview.³⁷ Pantheism arrives at a false unity at the cost of all diversity, while materialism arrives at a non-unified diversity.

While pantheism pictures the universe as proceeding from one ultimate principle and therefore preferably presents itself today as monism, materialism assumes a multiplicity of ‘principles.’ But according to materialism, these ultimate ‘principles’ of all things are nothing other than indivisible particles of matter.³⁸

The Creator/creature distinction allows for the full-orbed life of the world to be accounted for since ultimate unity and diversity is not found in the creation, but in the Creator. There is a real distinction of essence between God, who is independent and immutable *being*, and the world, which is in a temporal and mutable state of *becoming*.³⁹ Eglinton remarks, “Bavinck handles being and becoming as separate, mutually exclusive ontological categories.... His starting point is that to become is creaturely, but to be is divine.”⁴⁰

Taking a step back, we see that Bavinck’s worldview includes three distinct ontological realities: God, man, and the world.⁴¹ He comments in his Stone Lectures, “God, the world and man are the three realities with which all science and all philosophy occupy themselves. The conception which we form of them, and the relationship in which we place them to one another, determine the character of our view of the world and of life, the content of our religion, science and morality.”⁴²

36. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:416.

37. Cf. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 166; *RD*, 2:412.

38. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:413-14.

39. See Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 179-80. The development of creation is contrary to mechanical views that allow for movement, but no development, since the machine operates as it always has (there are no software or firmware updates). “*Contra* Scholten [who held to a mechanical view of the world rooted in a monistic view of God], Bavinck claims that the cosmos is not a completed, monistic machine driven by a single force of endless cause and effect. Rather, it is unfinished, growing and developing to a point of foreordained eschatological climax. History is the tale of mutability moving into eschatology” (Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 119).

40. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 117; cf. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:158, 417.

41. Cf. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 114.

42. Bavinck, *PR*, 83.

Bavinck will go on to attribute “being” to God, “becoming” to the world and “being *and* becoming” to humanity and the incarnate Christ.⁴³

A pressing question that Bavinck will seek to answer is how do these ontologically distinct realities—Creator and creature—relate to one another? How can the gulf between “the Infinite and finite, between eternity and time, between being and becoming, between the All and the nothing” be bridged? Bavinck will locate this bridge in humanity as the image of God and the incarnation of the Son who is the eternal image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). The name “image of God” can be applied to humans “by way of analogy ... but in an absolute sense it belongs to Christ.”⁴⁴ In both humanity and the incarnate Son there is being *and* becoming. While “being” is proper of God alone so that the Son possesses it absolutely, humanity as a whole displays a relative “being” as it is able to transcend the moment.⁴⁵ “[Christ] would not have been like us in all things had he not subjected himself to time and space, to the law of becoming.... The incarnation is the unity of being (*ego eimi*, John 8:58) and becoming (*sarks egeneto*, John 1:14).”⁴⁶

This will become important for understanding Bavinck’s method in *The Philosophy of Revelation*. For while Bavinck makes no explicit mention of the Trinity in his lectures, his trinitarian worldview, by which he discerns the objective organic

43. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 115.

44. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:276.

45. It would seem that Bavinck sees an analogy in human nature of the simplicity of the divine essence. As we noted earlier, the simplicity of the divine essence means that it exists without separation or division in each person *individually*, but also that it exists in all of them *collectively*. Bavinck might say that while this is *absolute* in God, there is a *relative* simplicity in humanity made in the image of God. On this analogical basis, we can speak of human nature existing in *individual* humans, but also in humanity as a whole in a relative *collective* sense. As relative it does not experience the absolute oneness unique to the triune God alone, but it does experience a relative oneness and so can be properly spoken of in a collective sense. This relative collective sense, then, allows humanity to possess a relative “being” analogous to God’s absolute “being.” To put it another way, the simplicity of the divine essence is the archetype for the ectypal simplicity of human nature. It is also worth noting that according to Bavinck God’s absolute collective sense results in one mind (*RD*, 2:300) and the relative collective sense of humanity results in knowledge as “the collective property of all humanity” (Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 123). This seems as further evidence of this relationship. Overall, this analogical scheme is consistent with Bavinck’s intention of maintaining the Creator/creature distinction and avoids any deification of humanity or the confusing of the Infinite and the finite, the Eternal and the temporal. We might also add that there is a parallel of humanity transcending the moment with Bavinck’s understanding of the covenant. He writes, “[T]he covenant of grace is also eternal in this sense, that in history it proceeds from generation to generation and is never interrupted” (Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, trans. John Dolfin [Grand Rapids: Louis Kregel, 1922], 21-22). While the covenant of grace is not outside of time in its administration, it does transcend the moment, with various administrations in history, while remaining one in essence. In that way it possesses both “being” and “becoming.” The same might be said of humanity as a whole.

46. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:380.

ontology of the creation, is reflected in his critique of the various applications of monism. Constructively, he will posit Christ as the necessary center that unifies the rich diversity in nature and history, general revelation and special revelation. This unity found in Christ alone prevents the balkanization of nature and history.

2.2. The Trinitarian Archetype for the Work of Creation

According to Bavinck, the triune shape of creation, that is, its organic ontology, is founded upon the fact that it is “an act of the *triune* God.”⁴⁷ As such, the work of creation may be understood organically: the Father, Son, and Spirit work in concert with one another but without any division of labor. Creation is not the composition of three separate acts, one by the Father, one by the Son, and one by the Holy Spirit, but is the one act of the triune God. *Opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*. Nevertheless, economically it can be principally ascribed to the Father, just as redemption is ascribed to the Son and sanctification to the Spirit.⁴⁸ We see, then, in the act of creation itself both unity in diversity, diversity in unity. In fact, all of the outward works of God (*opera ad extra*) are common and indivisible to the three persons (diversity) because of the essential unity of the Godhead. In Bavinck’s words,

The doctrine of the Trinity provides the true light here. Just as God is *one* in essence and *distinct* in persons, so also the work of creation is *one* and *undivided*, while in its unity it is still rich in *diversity*. It is *one* God who creates all things, and for that reason the world is a *unity*, just as the unity of the world demonstrates the unity of God. But in that one divine being there are three persons, each of whom performs a task of his own in that one work of creation. ... While there is cooperation, there is no division of labor. All things originate *simultaneously* from the Father through the Son in the Spirit.⁴⁹

The final point is important, for it avoids positing the Son and Spirit as secondary or subordinate forces or subordinate creators to the Father. Instead they are “independent agents or ‘principles’ (*principia*), as authors (*auctores*) who with the Father carry out the work of creation, as with him they also constitute the one true God.”⁵⁰ The triune work of creation is undivided and simultaneously the work of all three Persons equally. At the basis of the divine work *ad extra* is unity in diversity, diversity in unity.

Bavinck, however, will penetrate deeper into the act of creation by finding its archetype and source of possibility in the immanent relations of the Trinity:

47. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 168.

48. Cf. John Bolt, “The Trinity as a Unifying Theme in Reformed Thought: A Response to Dr. George Vandervelde,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 22 (1987): 96-99.

49. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:422-23; cf. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:177.

50. *Ibid.*, 2:421.

By generation, from all eternity, the full image of God is communicated to the Son; by creation only a weak and pale image of God is communicated to the creature. Still, the two are connected. *Without generation, creation would not be possible.* If, in an *absolute* sense, God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a *relative* sense, to communicate himself to his creature. *If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.*⁵¹

He also writes:

These immanent relations of the three persons in the divine being also manifest themselves outwardly (*ad extra*) in their revelations and works. Granted, all God's outward works (*opera ad extra*) are common to the three persons.... It is always one and the same God who acts both in creation and in re-creation.... All of the works of God *ad extra* have one single Author (*principium*), namely, God. But they come into being through the cooperation of the three persons, each of whom plays a special role and fulfills a special task, both in the works of creation and in those of redemption and sanctification.... All the works *ad extra*: creation, providence, rule, incarnation, satisfaction (atonement), renewal, sanctification, and so on, are works of the Trinity as a whole.⁵²

The basic point is that if God could not communicate himself absolutely *ad intra*, then he could not communicate himself relatively *ad extra*. Bavinck qualifies as to not identify the eternal processions with creation, but sees an analogical relation with the processions functioning as the archetype for the revelations and works *ad extra*. The internal processions are absolute, necessary and eternal, while the act of creation and his revelations *ad extra* are relative, free, and voluntary acts of his will. The generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit “are essentially distinct from the work of creation: the former are immanent relations, while the latter is work *ad extra*.”⁵³

In summary, the work of creation manifests the unity in diversity, diversity in unity found in God in that it is a single act of God in which the Father, Son and Spirit work distinctly, yet inseparably. The possibility of this work *ad extra* is founded on the fact that God can communicate himself internally, which he has in the eternal generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit.⁵⁴ Therefore, a proper understanding

51. *Ibid.*, 2:420, emphasis mine.

52. *Ibid.*, 2:318, 319, 320.

53. *Ibid.*, 2:332.

54. “The dogma of the Trinity, by contrast, tells us that God *can* reveal himself in an absolute sense to the Son and the Spirit, and hence, in a relative sense also to the world. For, as Augustine teaches us, the self-communication that takes place within the divine being is archetypal for God's work in creation” (*Ibid.*, 2:333). “Generation and procession in the divine being are the

of the creation requires a proper understanding of the Creator as triune. “This ... explains why all the works of God *ad extra* are only adequately known when their trinitarian existence is recognized.”⁵⁵ This is why Gnosticism and Arianism result in a false metaphysic. Gnosticism holds that the creation is an uncreated emanation of God, while Arianism posits a created world in which God is mundane since it knows nothing of emanation. “But Scripture, and therefore Christian theology,” writes Bavinck,

knows both emanation and creation, a twofold communication of God—one within and the other outside the divine being; one to the Son who was in the beginning with God and was himself God, and another to creatures who originated in time; one from the being and another by the will of God.⁵⁶

Having seen the organic nature of the *work* of creation, we come next to the *product* of this act in which we find an organic ontology.

2.3. The Trinitarian Archetype and the Organic Ontology of Creation

As we noted earlier, Bavinck understood that “there is in his creatures an analogy to what is present in God himself.”⁵⁷ For this reason the world will bear the marks of its triune Creator.⁵⁸

Bavinck sought triformity macrocosmically: if nature and history are the general revelation of the Trinity, it must, as an ‘organism’, bear the hallmarks of its divine Creator. Thus, his categories for ‘triformity’ deemphasized the previous fixation with ‘threeness’ and instead focused on the cosmos-wide reality of unity-in-diversity.⁵⁹

There is for Bavinck an ontological relationship between the triune Creator and his creation. The ontological Trinity provides the archetype for the pluriform shape of creation in which we find unity in diversity, diversity in unity in a relative sense. “For Bavinck, cosmic unity-in-diversity, rather than a limited, dubitable repertoire of ‘three-in-one’ analogies, is the source of all true *vestigia trinitatis*.”⁶⁰ Bavinck writes,

immanent acts of God, which make possible the outward works of creation and revelation” (Ibid.). Cf. Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 87.

55. Ibid., 2:333.

56. Ibid., 2:420.

57. Ibid., 2:127.

58. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 101.

59. Ibid., 110.

60. Ibid., 113.

The unity and diversity in the works of God proceeds from and returns to the unity and diversity which exist in the Divine Being. That Being is one being, single and simple. At the same time that being is threefold in His person, in His revelation, and in his influence. The entire work of God is unbroken whole, and nevertheless comprises the richest variety and change. The confession of the church comprehends the whole of world history. In that confession are included the moments of the creation and the fall, reconciliation and forgiveness, and of renewal and restoration. It is a confession which proceeds from the triune God and which leads everything back to him.⁶¹

[T]he world is a unit, a coherent whole, but one which in its unity nevertheless exhibits an unmistakably rich differentiation. From the very beginning at which it was created and formed, the world comprised of heaven and earth, visible and invisible things, angels and men, plants and animals, the animate and the inanimate and the spiritual and non-spiritual beings. ... They exist *after* each other not only in the sense that they were created, the one after the other, and continue to exist now in their higher or lower order, but they also exist *next* to each other and it is so that the continue to be themselves up to the present day. Creation is not uniform but is pluriform in character, and both in its entirety and in its parts, the richest and most beautiful of varieties.⁶²

The absolute unity and absolute diversity in the Godhead provides the ontological archetype for the triune shape of creation and redemption, both of which display a relative unity in diversity. The creation, therefore, displays *vestigia trinitatis* not in the Medieval sense of numerically specific and speculative triads, but by way of “the non-numerical paradigm of unity-in-diversity ... as the norm in terms of triform hallmarks.”⁶³ So “the Trinity is wholly unlike anything else, but everything else is like the Trinity.”⁶⁴ This is why our confession of the Trinity is the mountaintop from which the whole creation can be surveyed.⁶⁵

61. *Our Reasonable Faith*, 144-45.

62. *Ibid.*, 174. The point with regard to the things of creation existing both *after* and *next* to each other will come up repeatedly in Bavinck’s critiques of non-revelatory methodologies in *The Philosophy of Revelation*.

63. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 86.

64. *Ibid.*, 89.

65. Vos makes a statement that is striking in its similarity to Bavinck: “In the creation of the universe by the triune God lies the guarantee that nature also, as far as it extends, provides a trustworthy revelation of the being of God. It is not as if the natural revelation must lead to Unitarian results and then suddenly, in a totally unprepared fashion, the idea of the Trinity appears before us on the basis of God’s supernatural revelation. The more and better we get to know nature, the more will we be brought face to face with the triune God” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:177). The last two sentences seem to also echo Bavinck’s teaching on the organic connection between special and general revelation.

2.4. Christian Worldview: Trinitarian and Organic

The particular worldview⁶⁶ of Bavinck arises from his doctrine of creation, which is given its shape by his doctrine of the Trinity. It should come as no surprise that Bavinck's worldview can be described as *Trinitarian* and *organic*.⁶⁷ "The thinking mind situates the doctrine of the Trinity squarely amid the full-orbed life of nature and humanity."⁶⁸ At the heart of Bavinck's worldview is the belief that stamped upon the whole of creation, whether in man himself or in the external world about him, are imprints of the Trinity. These imprints are not seen in numerically specific triads (e.g., heart, mind, and will), though they may exist, but in "the non-numerically oriented paradigm of 'unity-in-diversity.'"⁶⁹ "All creatures," writes Bavinck,

are embodiments of divine thoughts, and *all of them display the footsteps or vestiges of God*. But all *these vestiges*, distributed side by side in the spiritual as well as in the material world, are recapitulated in man and so organically connected and highly enhanced that they clearly constitutes the image and likeness of God."⁷⁰

It is only the Christian worldview that begins with the perfect harmony of absolute unity and absolute diversity in the triune God of Scripture that the full-orbed life of the world can be maintained. It is *only* a worldview grounded in the Trinity that the unity of creation can be sought without sacrificing its diversity and vice versa.

Because a worldview is concerned with the most basic questions of life, it is inherently "an *antithetical* notion."⁷¹ Bavinck's apologetic then will engage at this

66. A worldview, according to Bavinck, answers three basic questions: "What is the relation between thinking and being? Between being and becoming? Between becoming and acting? Put more simply: Who am I? What is the world? What is my place and task within this world?" (Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 138, citing Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 2d ed [Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1913], 14). "And as every world-view moves between the three poles of God, the world, and man, and seeks to determine their reciprocal relations, it follows that in principle only three types of world-view are distinguishable,—the theistic (religious, theological), the naturalistic (either in its pantheistic or materialistic form), and the humanistic" (Bavinck, *PR*, 33). Theism prioritizes God; naturalism prioritizes the world; humanism prioritizes man.

67. Cf. Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 141.

68. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:330. "The confession of the trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor the sanctification can be purely maintained" (Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 161).

69. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 88.

70. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:562, cited by Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 88-89. In *Our Reasonable Faith*, 169, Bavinck writes, "It is God's good pleasure to bring the excellences of His *triune* being into manifestation in His creatures, and so to prepare glory and honor for Himself in those creatures."

71. Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 122.

most basic worldview level. This is seen, for example, in his contention with monism, which he understood as a worldview opposed to theism.

Evolutionary monism was of particular concern for Bavinck since he viewed it as the age's dominant heresy.⁷² It would be the *bête noire* of Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation*. James Bratt helpfully defines it as "the thesis that all of life belongs without remainder to a single materialist flow driven by deterministic mechanisms that are decipherable by strictly empirical observation and logical extrapolations therefrom."⁷³

It could take the form of either pantheism or materialism and "strives to reduce all the forces, materials, and laws perceptible in nature to a single force, material, and law."⁷⁴ Materialism seeks unity of matter and physical laws, so that it transforms all sciences into natural science. Pantheism seeks unity of mind, so that it transforms all sciences into the science of the mind. Both dissolve all distinctions "in a bath of deadly uniformity."

Pantheism attempts to explain the world dynamically; materialism attempts to do so mechanically. But both strive to see the whole as governed by a single principle. In pantheism the world may be a living organism, of which God is the soul; in materialism it is a mechanism that is brought about by the union and separation of atoms. But in both systems an unconscious blind fate is elevated to the throne of the universe. Both fail to appreciate the richness

72. Cf. Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 141. Bavinck's apologetic against monism frequently appears throughout his corpus, including his *Reformed Dogmatics* and *Philosophy of Revelation*. See Bavinck's essay, "Christianity and Natural Science," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, gen. ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 101-4, in which he argues against the materialistic monism of Ernst Haeckel, which "undermine[s] all notions of religion, morality, and justice" (102). See also his essay, "Evolution," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 110ff., in which he raises objections to mechanical monism.

73. James D. Bratt, "The Context of Herman Bavinck's Stone Lectures: Culture and Politics in 1908," *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 17. While Bratt may be correct in observing that Bavinck shared the same antipathy to monism as the new modernism, it does not warrant his claim that they were "friends" (19). Bavinck's eclecticism should not be confused with a naïve syncretism. Bavinck's so-called "limits on modernist relativity" (21) or "disparities" with cultural modernists (23) are not really so, but reflect his entirely distinct methodology and *principium*. See Vos, "Book Review—*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*—Vol. 1" in *The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos: Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 476. Bratt makes a keen observation though with respect to Bavinck's view of other world religions: "Despite his close, persistent friendship with the pioneering Islamicist Christian, Snouck Hurgronje, there is in this Bavinck little genuine investigation of other world religions to demonstrate that their answers on the question at hand are really so insufficient as he claims. Bavinck asserts this again and again in the Stone Lectures, but he does not show it to even the partial satisfaction of a student of world religions" (22).

74. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:367.

and diversity of the world; erase the boundaries between heaven and earth, matter and spirit, soul and body, man and animal, intellect and will, time and eternity, Creator and creature, being and nonbeing; and dissolve all distinctions in a bath of deadly uniformity. Both deny the existence of a conscious purpose and cannot point to a cause or a destiny for the existence of the world and its history.⁷⁵

Theism, on the other hand, is the worldview of Scripture and Christian theology. While monism is naturalistic, theism is supernaturalistic.⁷⁶ Its aim is to maintain the full-orbed nature of the world with its unity and diversity. This harmony is unique to theism:

According to this theistic worldview, there is a multiplicity of substances, forces, materials, and laws. It does not strive to erase the distinctions between God and the world, between spirit (mind) and matter, between psychological and physical, ethical and religious phenomena. It seeks rather to discover the harmony that holds all things together and unites them and that is the consequence of the *creative thought of God*. Not identity or uniformity but unity in diversity is what it aims at.⁷⁷

According to the theistic worldview, in the creation there is “the most profuse diversity and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity.”⁷⁸ Bavinck explicitly locates the foundation of this diversity and unity in the triune God.⁷⁹ The world has its beginning in God’s act of creation, its continuation in his governing power and finds its eschatological consummation in him as its ultimate goal.

Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches. In virtue of this unity the world can, metaphorically, be called an organism, in which all the parts are connected with each other and influence each other reciprocally. Heaven and earth, man and animal, soul and body, truth and life, art and science, religion and morality, state and church, family and society, and so on, though they are all distinct, are not separated. There

75. *Ibid.*, 2:435. “God is one, and there His words and works can never contradict each other. All things have their relation and system in His consciousness, in His will, in His counsel. They all exist together in the Son, who is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creatures, through whom and unto whom they are all created” (Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 76).

76. “The religious supra-naturalistic world-view has universally prevailed among all peoples and in all ages down to our own day, and only in the last hundred and fifty years has given way in some circles to the empirico-scientific” (Bavinck, *PR*, 1).

77. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:368.

78. *Ibid.*, 2:435-36.

79. *Ibid.*, 2:436.

is a wide range of connections between them; an organic, or if your will, an ethical bond holds them all together.⁸⁰

Bavinck avoids the error of monism in locating the unifying factor within the creation and instead finds that unity properly in the plan of God. “In [God], in his plan and also in his rule, originates the unity or harmony that holds together and unity all things over the entire range of their diversity and leads them to a single goal.”⁸¹

3. The Philosophy of Revelation

Noting again the inherently apologetic nature of the worldview concept, we turn now to explore Bavinck’s apologetic method in *The Philosophy of Revelation*.⁸² In these lectures, Bavinck argues for the necessity of supernatural revelation for all disciplines of study, both in its special and general form. Philosophy, nature, history, religion, culture and the future are all “rooted in revelation” and require it for any adequate explanation.⁸³ This proves from the impossibility of the contrary that the sole *principium* of human knowledge is the triune God’s revelation.⁸⁴ Adequate human knowledge at every level is impossible without revelation. Therefore, any system of thought that begins with a supposed human autonomy will inevitably impose a false uniformity upon the creation. We see Bavinck’s commitment to revelation clearly in the following quote:

The dogmatician remains bound to revelation from beginning to end and cannot bring forth new truth; in his activity as thinker he can only reproduce the truth God has granted. And because revelation is of such a nature that it can only be truly accepted and appropriated by a saving faith, it is absolutely imperative that the dogmatician be active as a believer not only in the beginning but also in the continuation and at the end of his work.⁸⁵

John Bolt observes, “Bavinck’s 1908-09 Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary are titled ‘The Philosophy of Revelation’ rather than ‘The Theology of Revelation’ because he wants to explore the reality of revelation in general and not just the particular revelation in the Bible.”⁸⁶ However, Bavinck is not attempting to provide a

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 1:370.

82. For more on the context surrounding these lectures see Bratt, “The Context of Herman Bavinck’s Stone Lectures,” 4-24.

83. Bavinck, *PR*, 142.

84. See Brian G. Mattson, “Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008): 114.

85. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:42.

86. Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 135; see also idem, “An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24

study of general revelation in isolation from the Bible, for he is explicit that “special revelation should never be separated from its *organic* connection to history, the world, and humanity.”⁸⁷ At the end of his first lecture he says, “General revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general.”⁸⁸ He sees the discipline of the philosophy of revelation as existing alongside of the other branches of theology, which has special revelation as its “starting-point and foundation-stone.”⁸⁹

(2013): 82-84; 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* 4 (2013): 9-31. Van den Belt understands Bavinck’s most mature thought on the relationship between revelation and religion to come in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, which he defines as “an apologetic defense of the Christian faith” (23). I would, however, take contention with his claim that “Bavinck ... combines Schleiermacher’s concept of religion with Kant’s concept of human autonomy” (24). Bavinck’s worldview is explicitly opposed to Kant’s autonomy and while he speaks of man’s dependence in the form of self-consciousness, he has something in mind that is fundamentally different from Liberalism.

87. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:353, emphasis mine. This is reflected in the relationship Bavinck posits between the covenant God established with Noah and the covenant of grace. See Anthony Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant*, 133-34. Hoekema, reflecting on Bavinck’s thought, writes, “The covenant of grace was therefore from the beginning of its revelation surrounded and supported by the covenant of nature, which God made with all creatures. And this is still the case today. Special grace is to be clearly distinguished from common grace, but nevertheless stands in close relationship with it” (134).

88. Bavinck, *PR*, 28.

89. *Ibid.*, 23-24. It is worth recognizing here the various accusations that have been levied against Bavinck, which seem to be refuted by his basic commitment to revelation as his sole *principium*. Page limitations do not allow for further engagement, but we can note that Bavinck has been accused of being inconsistent on this point. See for example Cornelius Van Til, “Bavinck the Theologian: A Review Article” *Westminster Theological Journal* 24 (1961): 48-64; *idem.*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (2nd ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 89-98; *The Defense of the Faith* (4th ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 374-79. However, Brian G. Mattson has persuasively shown that Van Til’s accusation is unfounded upon a closer reading of Bavinck’s work. He demonstrates how Van Til’s critique is more owing to a question of style than of content. See his article, “Van Til on Bavinck: An Assessment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008): 111-27. It is unfortunate that K. Scott Oliphint does not interact with Mattson’s argument in his article “Bavinck’s Realism, The Logos Principle and *Sola Scriptura*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010): 359-90. Coinciding with the accusation of realism, Bavinck has also been linked with Neo-Thomism. See for example, Sydney Jacob Hielema, *Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption* (Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell, 1999) and David S. Sytsma, “Herman Bavinck’s Thomist Epistemology: The Argument and Sources of his *Principia* of Science,” in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, ed. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 1-56; Arvin Vos, “Knowledge according to Bavinck and Aquinas,” *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 9-36; *idem.*, “Knowledge according to Bavinck and Aquinas,” *The Bavinck Review* 7 (2016): 8-62. However, Mattson in his book *Restored to our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics*, demonstrates that his theology is rooted in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy, as

In the final endnote of his first lecture, which can easily be overlooked due to format, Bavinck provides a critical key for reading his lectures. He writes,

For the conception of revelation which it was impossible to unfold in these lectures reference may be made to the author's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2d ed., I, pp. 291 ff. The present lectures elaborate in detail the fundamental ideas expressed by the author in an address on *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*, 1904.

In *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing* (address on the occasion of receiving the Rectorate of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, October 20, 1904), Bavinck is explicit of the trinitarian contours of his worldview and how the doctrine of God is foundational to it.⁹⁰ This is evident when he comments on the Enlightenment's abandonment of this worldview: "Heel het Christendom met zijn triniteit en incarnatie, met zijn schepping en val, met zijn schuld en verzoening, met zijn hemel en hel, behoort in eene verouderde wereldbeschouwing thuis en is met deze voorgoed voorbij gegaan."⁹¹ Our discussion of Trinity, creation and the worldview idea leading up to our analysis of his Stone Lectures was, therefore, vital for a proper understanding of them. So while he does not make explicit mention of the Trinity in these lectures,⁹² this doctrine still functions as the architectonic principle upon which he builds and applies his apologetic.

Bavinck's opening concern in his first lecture is that of worldview, particularly how the Enlightenment worldview, which is founded on autonomous human reason, has led to the wrongful dismissal of even the possibility of supernatural revelation. Bavinck will demonstrate that the idea of revelation cannot be construed *a priori*, which means it also cannot be rejected *a priori*.⁹³ Its rejection reveals a deeper

that orthodoxy was articulated by the Reformed scholastics. In agreement with Richard Muller, scholasticism is not necessarily Thomistic. See esp. pp. 9-18. For a refutation of the "two Bavincks" hypothesis see Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 27-50. On the close theological and apologetic ties between Bavinck and Van Til, see Laurence R. O'Donnell III, "Neither 'Copernican' nor 'Van Tilian': Re-Reading Cornelius Van Til's Reformed Apologetics in light of Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics," *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 71-95.

90. See Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 129.

91. "All of Christendom, with its Trinity and incarnation, with its creation and fall, with its guilt and atonement, with its heaven and hell, belongs to an antiquated worldview and has passed away along with it."

92. He does, however, mention Augustine finding a reflection of the triune being of God in man's *memoria*, *intellectus*, and *voluntas* (*PR*, 64).

93. Bavinck exposes the presuppositions of modern views of nature and history: "[History] is just as much dominated by a *preconceived* idea as the ideological treatment of Hegel, and this idea is in both cases that of evolution, conceived in a mechanical or in a dynamic sense. It is silently *presupposed* that, in the last analysis, one and the same causality originates all events and causes them to succeed each other according to the law of progressive development, in a

worldview commitment. He will contend against this worldview with his own Christian worldview, which opposes anarchy and autonomy with all its might.⁹⁴

Bavinck begins tracing the application of the Enlightenment worldview with its defining principle of human autonomy in its various forms from revolution to evolution to idealism in the twentieth century. In its revolutionary form, revelation was not necessarily rejected, but rendered obsolete. In its evolutionary form, the possibility of revelation was rejected entirely in favor of a purely naturalistic worldview. In its idealist form, however, there is the “triumphal” return of revelation in philosophy and natural science, but in identifying God and the world it was no real supernatural revelation. It is only the Christian worldview in which we find a supernatural revelation grounded on the basic Creator/creature distinction, which Bavinck will demonstrate is necessary for any adequate knowledge.

Bavinck argues that humanity as a whole, in all lands and in all ages, is religious. By this he means that humanity has always sought what is invisible and beyond the observable world, the supernatural. Religion is not a mere phenomena alongside of family, state and society, but their *source*. It is not opposed to these institutions, but *organically* related to them.

The religious supra-naturalistic world-view has universally prevailed among all peoples and in all ages down to our own day, and only in the last hundred and fifty years has given way in some circles to the empirico-scientific. Humanity as a whole has been at all times supra-naturalistic to the core.⁹⁵

The turning point one hundred and fifty years ago was not the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. For while it “brought a change in so far as it endeavored to transform the mechanical relation between nature and grace of Rome into a dynamical and ethical one,” it made “no assault ... upon the system of the old religious world-view.”⁹⁶ This defense is necessary because of the anti-supernaturalistic worldview of Liberalism that was prevalent in his day. This type of Protestantism was not the heir of the Reformation, but of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, not the Reformation, was the turning point away from a supernatural worldview to a purely naturalistic one. “Kant, with his epistemological and moral autonomy, was not the exponent of the Reformation, but the philosopher of Rationalism.”⁹⁷ While revelation functioned for the Reformers as the sole *principium* of knowledge, the Enlightenment excluded it altogether.

straight, upward line. Monism and evolution are the principia of the modern view of history, just as in the last lecture they proved to be such in the investigation of nature” (*PR*, 117).

94. He writes in *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*, “Het is tegen deze autonomie en anarchie, dat de Christelijke, wereldbeschouwing met alle kracht zich verzet.”

95. Bavinck, *PR*, 1.

96. *Ibid.*, 3.

97. *Ibid.*, 4.

In point of fact, before the eighteenth century the existence of a supernatural world, and the necessity, possibility, and reality of a special revelation, had never been seriously called into question. But Deism, springing up in England, emancipated the world from God, reason from revelation, the will from grace.⁹⁸

While revelation was not yet denied by the first proponents of the Enlightenment, they still (1) subjected it to reason and (2) reduced its content to what reason can arrive at. Revelation contains nothing that reason could not eventually discover on its own. The goal was “to give the world an independent existence” and dispense with any need for God; it was to raise man to a place of autonomy by closing him within the bounds of the natural world. And the hounds of rationalism were trained to guard against the entrance of any supernatural elements entering in.

Supernatural revelation was no longer needed for the world, in fact, it was no longer even considered a possibility. “The one true revelation is nature itself,” that is, it is purely naturalistic and does not enter the world from without.⁹⁹ The last enemy was thought to have been conquered: the conception of another world. Evolution has been commandeered to “explain the entire world, including man and religion and morality, without the aid of any supernatural factor, purely from immanent forces, and according to unvarying laws of nature.”¹⁰⁰

The twentieth century, however, witnessed a move toward an idealistic worldview that incorporated Darwinism while rejecting the idea that all phenomena can be explained by “mechanico-chemical causes.”¹⁰¹ “The mechanical conception of nature has been once more replaced by the dynamical; materialism has reverted to pantheism; evolution has become again the unfolding, the revealing of absolute spirit.”¹⁰² After the Enlightenment had sidelined revelation in favor of reason and eventually cut it from the team entirely, idealism would again welcome it back into the stadium of the natural world.¹⁰³

However, it identified revelation with evolution, making it co-extensive with all that exists in nature and history, and emphasized the immanence of God instead of his transcendence. Under this scheme, “everything is a manifestation of God.”¹⁰⁴ The finite is thus confused with the infinite, for it *is* the infinite as become finite in the creature. The infinite has reached its current high point in man, but there is still “before

98. *Ibid.*, 7.

99. *Ibid.*, 13.

100. *Ibid.*

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*, 14.

103. Geerhardus Vos concisely summarizes Hegel’s pantheistic distortion of the doctrine of the Trinity: “The Father is God in His eternal idea of Himself and for Himself; the Son is the eternal idea of God in its otherness, the world as objectified out of God; the Spirit is the idea returned again to itself in the element of community” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:50).

104. Bavinck, *PR*, 15.

him an endless vista of development.... He was an animal, he became a man, and after humanizing comes deifying.”¹⁰⁵

The New Theology latched on to this and posited Christ, in whom humanity and divinity are one, as the ideal to which man is progressing. While this takes on the name *New Theology*, Bavinck rightly sees it as a tired rehash of the older pantheistic worldview and so *essentially* different from the Christian supra-naturalistic worldview. “It must be contrary to the plain intent of Scripture to identify revelation and development, divine law and human conduct, or to consider these as two sides of one and the same process. ... [R]evelation and religion are not two manifestations of the same thing, but differ as God differs from man, the Creator from the creature.”¹⁰⁶ This means not every thought of man is revelatory of God, but only in so far as he correctly thinks God’s thoughts *after* him.¹⁰⁷ So while we can rejoice in the renewed interest in metaphysics and philosophy and the recognition of the revelation of God in religion, this “should not blind us to the danger to which its exposes us.”¹⁰⁸ Bavinck continues,

The religious craving at present asserting itself bears a pronouncedly egoistic character; it reveals a longing rather for self-satisfaction than for knowledge and service of the living God; it seeks God not above but in the world, and regards his essence as identical with that of the creature. All of which goes to show that the world-view, which formerly offered itself under the name of “the scientific,” has not essentially changed, but has simply, owing to various influences, assumed now a religious form, and taken up its position as a new faith over against the old faith.¹⁰⁹

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*, 19.

107. Bavinck argues this in contrast to those who, like Hegel, would identify God’s thoughts and man’s thought so that every development of religion is at the same time a revelation of God—all religion is revelation. This view is deadly for true religion because it deprives it of its necessary supernatural character, never permitting it to rise above the natural, finite limits of man’s mind. In this scheme, both God and man are bound as co-members within the world. Bavinck, however, maintains that God’s thoughts and man’s thoughts are qualitatively different as the Creator differs from the creature. God’s thought alone is archetypal and independent, while man’s thought is ectypal and dependent. Therefore, “[n]ot every thought of man ... echoes God’s thought,” but only true thought that corresponds to God’s thought (*ibid.*). Accordingly, “religions can be viewed as divine revelations only so far as they are true,” that is, only so far as they echo God’s thought (*ibid.*). For Bavinck, the revelation of the mind of God, not of man, is the foundation of true religion. This maintains its supernatural character since the revelation of God is not identified with man’s mind and the naturalistic order, but intervenes from above and without. “With the reality of revelation, therefore, Christianity stands or falls” (*ibid.*, 20).

108. *Ibid.*, 16.

109. *Ibid.*, 16.

Now no longer content in simply rejecting the religious domain of Christianity, this worldview has pressed its troops in to conquer it. Monism is unsatisfied with only the scientific sphere and so has laid claim also to the religious.¹¹⁰ This worldview conflict is at bottom a religious one. Monism as a religion, though, is unsatisfying since true religion must not shut us up within this world system in which we have nothing to overcome it, but lifts us above it: “in the midst of time it must impart to us eternity; in the midst of death give us life; the midst of the stream of change place us on the immovable rock of salvation. This is the reason why transcendence, supranaturalism, revelation, are essential to all religion.”¹¹¹ This is also the reason why the old theistic worldview continues to exert its influence today. “[A]ll our modern civilization, art, society, literature, ethics, jurisprudence, society, state, politics, are leavened by religious, Christian, supranaturalistic elements, and still rest on the foundation of the old world-view.”¹¹²

According to Bavinck, Christianity stands or falls with the reality of revelation. Yet, he is humble to recognize that while revelation is always true, our understanding and application of it can admit of clarification and refinement. For example, while God’s transcendence has been understood as a withdrawal from creation so that we have no communication with him, this cannot be the case for he must also at the same time be immanent. Although God is immanent 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.¹¹³ Thus, the Scriptural sense of God’s transcendence and immanence must take into account the basic ontological difference between the Creator and the creature. “The moment we step outside the domain of this special revelation in Scripture, we find that in all religious and philosophical systems the unity of the personality and absoluteness of God is broken.”¹¹⁴

Bavinck next makes an important move from this proper conception of God’s transcendence and immanence to the nature of revelation. His doctrine of God impacts his doctrine of revelation. He writes,

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.’ Not only is special revelation founded on general revelation, but it has taken over numerous elements from it.¹¹⁵

110. Cf. Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 141.

111. Bavinck, *PR*, 17.

112. *Ibid.*, 18.

113. *Ibid.*, 22.

114. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:34.

115. Bavinck, *PR*, 22.

Revelation, then, is both transcendent and immanent, it is “both spoken from above and yet brought to us along the pathway of history.”¹¹⁶ Special revelation is organically connected to nature and history (general revelation). “Belief in such a special revelation is the starting-point and the foundation-stone of Christian theology.”¹¹⁷ Theology, as the science of the knowledge of God, rests on the reality of his revelation. “If God does not exist, or if he has not revealed himself, and hence is unknowable, then all religion is an illusion and all theology a phantasm.”¹¹⁸ This brings us full circle: the possibility of self-communication of God *ad extra* by way of revelation is founded in his triune existence. And the organic relationship between special and general revelation finds its archetype in the absolute unity and absolute diversity in God.

While theology exegetes, seeks to unify, defends and commends the content of revelation, alongside these branches is room for a *philosophy of revelation*, which will “trace the idea of revelation, both in its form and in its content, and correlate it with the rest of our knowledge and life.”¹¹⁹ This is essentially what Bavinck will aim to do in the lectures that follow: “to trace on all sides the lines of connection *established by God himself* between revelation and the several spheres of the created universe.”¹²⁰ He does not set his task in opposition to theology, but sees it instead as its “felt need.” Therefore, at no point does Bavinck leave special revelation, for, as he just said, it is the starting-point and foundation-stone of Christian theology. We might say that if the science of the philosophy of revelation exists alongside of the other branches of theology, as Bavinck states, then it too has special revelation as its starting-point and foundation-stone. “The philosophy of revelation, just like that of history, art, and the rest, must take its start from its object, from revelation.”¹²¹ This is evident throughout his lectures in that he considers the Christ of Scripture the unifying center of all nature and history.

In contrast, “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.”¹²² The starting point, instead, must be revelation.¹²³

116. Ibid. 23.

117. Ibid., 23-24.

118. Ibid., 24.

119. Ibid.

120. Ibid., emphasis mine.

121. Ibid., 26.

122. Ibid., 25.

123. Gordon Graham, in his article, “Bavinck’s *Philosophy of Revelation*,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 44-50, argues that the implicit intellectual context for Bavinck’s lectures is Friedrich Nietzsche, which is why his arguments bear a striking relevance to contemporary concerns. He contends that Bavinck and Nietzsche perceive the same modern problem of the rejection of the supernatural for understanding nature and history, but offer radically different answers. “Because there is no longer any God to reveal the true, the good, and the beautiful, humanity must undertake a ‘revaluation of all values,’ for itself. Thus reasons Nietzsche. A revaluation of all values is impossible; therefore, humanity must reaffirm the

This revelation discloses content that is not in conflict with reason, but transcends it. “If revelation did not furnish such a content, and comprised nothing but what reason itself could sooner or later have discovered, it would not be worthy of its name.”¹²⁴ So Bavinck will define revelation as a disclosure of the mystery of God. It would seem he particularly has special revelation in mind.

What neither nature nor history, neither mind nor heart, neither science nor art can teach us, it makes known to us,—the fixed, unalterable *will* of God to rescue the world and save sinners, a will at variance with well-nigh the whole appearance of things. This will is the secret of revelation. In creation God manifests the power of his mind; in revelation, which has redemption for its centre, he discloses to us the greatness of his heart.¹²⁵

The philosophy of revelation starts with its object: revelation. It does not fit the content of revelation into its system, but broadens itself to embrace the content. “And doing this, it brings to light the divine wisdom which lies concealed in it.”¹²⁶ This wisdom is the cross of Christ. For while it is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks, it is in itself the power and wisdom of God.

Special revelation is the starting-point for Bavinck’s philosophy of revelation. He writes, “In the next place this philosophy of revelation seeks to correlate the wisdom which it finds in revelation [special] with that which is furnished by the world at large [general].”¹²⁷ Special revelation and general revelation are organically connected. For this reason, recent trends in abandoning the world to modern science “is in direct opposition to the idea of special revelation.” Bavinck goes on,

Revelation, while having its centre in the Person of Christ, in its periphery extends to the uttermost ends of creation. It does not stand isolated in nature and history, does not resemble an island in the ocean, nor a drop of oil upon water. With the whole of nature, with the whole of history, with the whole of humanity, with family and society, with science and art it is intimately connected.¹²⁸

Therefore, while special revelation and general revelation are distinguished, they are never to be separated. In the same way the heart and mind of God can be distinguished,

necessity of God’s revelation. Thus reasons Bavinck” (47-48). Because Nietzsche is unable to locate a standard for reevaluation, the notion of history is impossible. “The question continues to clamor for an answer, where the standard is to be found which can be used in judging historical facts and personages” (Bavinck, *PR*, 133).

124. Bavinck, *PR*, 25.

125. *Ibid.*, 26.

126. *Ibid.*

127. *Ibid.*

128. *Ibid.*, 27.

but not separated from his person, so special revelation, which discloses the greatness of his heart, and general revelation, which discloses the power of his mind, also can be distinguished, but not separated.

The presupposition of the special revelation that comes to us in the person of Christ is that the world rests on revelation. The foundation of general revelation and special revelation, of creation and redemption is the same and the “Logos who became flesh is the same by whom all things were made. The first-born from the dead is also the first-born of every creature. The Son, whom the Father made heir of all things, is the same by whom he also made the worlds.” For to sever them from their organic connection with Christ at the center is to inevitably distort them.¹²⁹ “General revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and intelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom which God has displayed in creation and redemption.”¹³⁰

In summary, we can attempt to trace the logic of Bavinck’s thought. First, the source of family, state and society is religion. Second, religion, has revelation as its foundation. “Revelation is the foundation of all religion, the presupposition of all its conceptions, emotions, and actions.”¹³¹ Third, revelation is the object of the science of the philosophy of revelation, which exists alongside the other branches of theology. Fourth, theology itself has special revelation as its starting-point and foundation-stone. So general revelation and special revelation call for each other and in isolation are imperfect and unintelligible. Fifth, revelation is correlative with the relative unity in diversity, diversity in unity of the creation. Sixth, the organic ontology of the creation has as its archetype the absolute unity and diversity in the triune God of Scripture.

Conclusion

In *The Philosophy of Revelation* Bavinck elaborated on the explicitly trinitarian worldview he expounded in *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*. In this way, the doctrine of the Trinity, which belongs to special revelation, becomes the mountaintop vantage point from which the general revelation of God in creation, which stands before us as

129. Steven J. Duby, “Working with the Grain of Nature: Epistemic Underpinnings for Christian Witness in the Theology of Herman Bavinck,” *The Bavinck Review* 3 (2012): 60-84, seems to miss the organic relationship between general and special revelation in Bavinck’s thought. “All persons are dependent on and cognizant of the external world and are bound by God through nature to view that world according to certain rational principles.... With the help of Bavinck’s conception of natural certainty, we may, with greater confidence and resolve, call unbelievers to face the reality of sin and death and call them to trust in the objective action of God through Christ in the Spirit in history” (68). The scope of this brief study does not allow for a critique of Duby’s claim of Bavinck’s natural realism.

130. Bavinck, *PR*, 28.

131. *Ibid.*, 165.

a most elegant book, is properly read and interpreted.¹³² They are neither isolated from, nor set in opposition to one another, but complement each other in an organic manner, the one requiring the other. “Special revelation should never be separated from its *organic* connection to history, the world, and humanity.”¹³³ It is “in the light of Scripture we know it is the *Father* who by his *Word* and *Spirit* also reveals himself in the works of *nature and history*.”¹³⁴ With the glasses of Scripture on, the believer is able to discern the “creation’s triune shape.”¹³⁵

In this short study we have considered three major facets of Bavinck’s theology that undergirded his apologetic, namely, the Trinity, creation and worldview. Their relationship should be evident at this point: the doctrine of the Trinity gives rise to a particular doctrine of creation, which, in turn, gives rise to a particular worldview. The archetypal and absolute unity-in-diversity of the triune God necessitates an ectypal and relative unity-in-diversity in the creation. And because the creation does not cater to the autonomous fancies of man by reconstituting its own ontology to his variegated philosophies, any worldview that does not begin with the triune God of Scripture can be critiqued insofar as it sacrifices the diversity of creation for a false unity or vice versa. A non-revelatory starting point will inevitably force the creation into a Procrustean Bed in which significant parts are lopped off. It is only the confession of the triune God at the center of our thought and life that can account for the full-orbed nature of the world and humanity, satisfying both the heart and the mind.

132. Belgic Confession art. 2 notes the two means by which God is made known to us, which are typically denoted as general and special revelation. With regard to the latter, it reads in part, “First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a *most elegant book*.”

133. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:353, emphasis mine; see *PR*, 28.

134. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:340.

135. Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God,” 174.