Bavinck as Public Theologian: Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics

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Abstract

As a result of the Enlightenment, the privatization of religion, and the dissociation of theology and the university, public theology has become a very pertinent topic. While public theology emerged as a discipline in the 1980s, the neo-Calvinist tradition, led by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, was engaged in public-theological reasoning long before. Although not using the expression *public theology*, Bavinck offers a public theology in multiple ways. For him, it is a theology for and of the church. His main contribution, however, lies in his philosophical works, where he brings theo-logic to bear on the questions facing the various publics. Addressing current events, he sought to give answers founded on the Triune God. His essay "Ethics and Politics," written during the Great War, is a primary example.

Keywords

Herman Bavinck, neo-Calvinism, public theology, philosophy, ethics, politics

In his 1998 article, "The Emptiness of Theology," Richard Dawkins drew a sharp dichotomy between theological gesture and scientific knowledge: "What has 'theology' ever said that is the smallest use to anybody? When has 'theology' ever said anything that is demonstrably true and not obvious? What makes you think 'theology' is a subject at all?"[1] Indeed, under such Kantian dichotomies in the modern West, is theology useful to anybody?

In the 1980s, to combat two centuries of the effects of *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment)—namely, the privatization of theological speech—the counter-discipline called public theology officially arose under the leadership of theologians such as David Tracy to address questions such as these.[2] Yet the legacy of modern reflection on religion and theology for social teaching precedes the development of the contemporary discipline of public theology by more than a century. Consider two 1891 publications: Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, written for the sake of the working class,[3] and Abraham Kuyper's *De Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie* (The Social Problem and the Christian Religion), wherein Kuyper called the Christian church to action in the face of the developing plight of the poor.[4]

The broad topic of this essay is Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) on public theology with particular attention to his 1916 essay "Ethics and Politics" (*Ethiek en politiek*). "Ethics and Politics" is a primary example of Bavinck's mature reflections on moral and social ignorance under the errors of modernism disciplined by attention to moral philosophy. Kuyper and Bavinck were the public leadership and theological voice of the first-generation neo-Calvinist movement in the Netherlands. What has now become known as the neo-Calvinist or Kuyperian tradition is perhaps most famous for its "public theology," an anachronism applied to a theological and confessional movement that did indeed bring the light of Christian dogmatics to bear on the possibility of the common good. Yet, asking the question of public theology while facing Bavinck's corpus gives rise to several problems.

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[1] Richard Dawkins, "The Emptiness of Theology," *Free Inquiry Magazine* 18.2 (1998).

[2] In the course of defining this discipline, David Tracy's reflections on public theology in *The Analogical Imagination* are a prominent monument along the way. Tracy argues for three distinct "publics" the theologian must speak to: society, academy, and church. For Tracy, because theology is a discipline that is intended to answer questions humans are asking, it must take up the questions of each of the domains of the human publics. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998).

[3] *Rerum Novarum: Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII on the Condition of Labor* (New York: Paulist, 1940).

[4] Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1998).

First, nowhere in Bavinck's (or Kuyper's) corpus can one locate a reference to the phrase *public theology* or the distinct discipline. Second, the Kuyperian tradition of public theology is largely a development of Kuyper's social teaching (and this is well documented in the history of the scholarship being advanced from Kuyper's works like *Ons Program* and *Pro Rege*).[5] Under Kuyper's legacy, a neo-Calvinist public theological concept has developed that one may define generally as the call for a public Christian witness among all the various publics of the *saeculum*. And while Bavinck is known for his public-theological concept of the organic church as "leaven," the mention of public theology gives rise to a question that can be applied to his broader corpus: did Bavinck do (or develop) a systematic public theology beyond the concept of the church as leaven?

Indeed, he did. His most significant contribution to this effort is that in his role as public theologian he offered to various publics a genealogy of the timeless. He taught wide audiences the origin and ground of its prized institutions and primordial desires: the being of the Triune God.

To develop this point, we shall first consider what the term *public* does to the discipline of theology, and particularly so under Bavinck's understanding of the nature and task of theology. Derivatively, this essay argues that the premiere example of Bavinck as public theologian is his work as a philosopher, which for him is an implication of the second task of dogmatics. Finally, we shall consider his essay "Ethics and Politics" as an example and case study of his public-theological method and reasoning.

I. *Theology and Public Theology*

Bavinck defined theology in a manner similar to that of the majority of the Christian theological tradition: theology is the science concerning God

[5] See, for example, Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005). Therein, Bacote connects the work of the Holy Spirit in the created order ("cosmic pneumatology") with Abraham Kuyper's "public theology." He argues that the fact of the Spirit's preserving presence in the created world ought to and must prompt human stewardship or a preserving presence in the public sphere. Since history is the horizon of human activity, culture and politics are "manifestations of stewardship of the biophysical creation." The cultural mandate suggests the earth is intended and prepared for the process of development in the form of human flourishing in a social order, in cultural expression, and political involvement (18). Also, the recent translation and publication of Kuyper's works by Lexham, *Collected Works in Public Theology*, features his works on common grace, science, scholarship, and art, as well as on Christ's Kingship and its implications (*Pro Rege*), on Islam, on justice, and the political (*Ons Program)*.

(*scientia de Deo*).[6] The focus of this definition is on God. God is the object of theology—the theologian seeks to know God through God's self-revelation or to "think God's thoughts after him."[7] The authority of dogmatic theological speech is not in the church or the theologian but in the fact that God has spoken, *Deus dixit*.[8] Bavinck's definition, written definitively in his 1890s *Dogmatics*, was intended to demarcate theologies of consciousness or philosophies of religion from the science of *theologia*, the knowledge of the Triune God and, subsequently, of all things related to God.[9]

If theology were instead a study of human consciousness, theology's object would be the people of God and their collective religious consciousness. Here, theology asks, What do the *people* believe concerning Jesus Christ of Nazareth today and in the light of history? If theology were a philosophy of religion, it would primarily include a study of religion in general, weighing both the consciousness of believers and the practices of religion—a sociology. Bavinck upheld the longstanding practice that dogmatic (or systematic) theology is faith seeking understanding where Spirit-wrought piety directs the heart and mind toward the meticulous and prayerful task of knowing the God who reveals God. In the face of modernist revisions, and as a reform movement, the first-generation neo-Calvinist theologians (Kuyper and Bavinck) presented and defended theology as science concerning God for a generation. In doing so, Bavinck was self-consciously a catholic theologian, having learned and followed the theological methods and reasoning of Augustine, Bonaventura, John Calvin, and Franciscus Junius foremost.

The wedding of "public" to "theology" is of relatively recent origins, constituting a phrase that would make little sense in the premodern West. It appears rarely before the mid-twentieth century and was not a common referent in the discipline of theology until the 1980s. The development of public theology as a discipline was "fueled by a common desire to counteract the cultural marginalization of contemporary theology," as Linell Cady put it in 1987.[10] And if the primary underlying condition for public theology

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[6] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:47 (hereafter, *RD*).

[7] Ibid., 1:44.

[8] Ibid., 1:30.

[9] While Bavinck defines theology and the more specific task of dogmatic theology with the majority Christian tradition, he does so as a *sed contra* to Friedrich Schleiermacher and the mediation-theological movement's sharp separation between philosophy and theology. Bavinck understood the opposing trajectory *in toto* to argue that philosophy is the science that provides the *principia* of theological speech—a move dependent on Kant's separation of knowledge and faith.

[10] Linell E. Cady, "A Model for Public Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 80.2 (1987): 193.

was its reciprocal privatization, then the terminology was merely past due. Kuyper and Bavinck both addressed, for example, the sidelining of theology as a discipline within the university and theology as a force for good within the public square. Further, both the leaders of the neo-Calvinist movement repeatedly expressed the facts of theology for the practical sake of what is commonly called social teaching.

For Bavinck, Christian renewal does not cease as one exits the refuge of the church door. Rather, the Spirit's work of renewal and the Christian's path of witness extend to the totality of society, its institutions, public spaces, and cultural practices. The "mother-idea" underlying neo-Calvinist theology of this first generation, as Kuyper suggested, was the fact of creation *coram Deo*—that every human being lives life under the eye of the Creator of heaven and earth.[11] Everything, Kuyper argued, matters to God. For Bavinck, all theological reasoning, including attempts to know the objects of creation as created, "whether they concern the universe, humanity, Christ, and so forth—are but the explication of the one central dogma of the knowledge of God."[12] Brian Mattson comments on this particular sentence in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*: "Created things are not self-generating or self-sustaining. Everything is utterly dependent upon God for its existence. The implication of this, upon reflection, is staggering: not only is God relevant to everything, he is of *highest relevance* to everything."[13] If theology is the science concerning God, or that discipline that seeks to know God, then public-theological reasoning includes knowing all things in relation to God, in whom they all relate absolutely. Every creature, Bavinck repeatedly suggests (borrowing Friedrich Schleiermacher's famous dictum), is in a relationship of absolute dependence upon God. All things relate to and matter to God. The public-theological work of first-generation neo-Calvinism aided the various publics in knowing *how* all things relate to God.

Throughout his career, Bavinck's books and essays did indeed display this conviction. In 1891, and in the same year that Leo XIII and Kuyper addressed poverty and the "social question," Bavinck participated in the first social congress in Amsterdam, giving a paper illustriously titled "According to the Holy Scriptures, What General Principles Govern the Solution of the

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[11] Christianity "does not seek God in the creature, as paganism; it does not isolate God from the creature, as Islamism; it posits no mediate communication between God and the creatures, as does Romanism; but proclaims the exalted thought that, although standing in high majesty above the creature, God enters into immediate fellowship with the creature, as God the Holy Spirit." Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered at Princeton University* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 12.

[12] *RD* 2:29.

[13] Brian Mattson, *What Is Public Theology?* (n.p.: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2011), 7.

Social Question, and What Pointers Are Provided for the Solution in the Concrete Application of These Principles that Is Given for the People of Israel in the Mosaic Law?"[14] Therein, he brought Scripture to bear upon the plight of the postindustrialized poor. One year later, in September of 1892, Bavinck gave the keynote address at the Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System titled "The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Conditions of Communities and Nations."[15] Bavinck's role in this tradition of social teaching is manifold. For example, at the end of his career, Bavinck, standing alongside his wife, was highly active in the fight for women's voting rights.[16]

Perhaps Bavinck's most famous theological treatment as public-theological reasoning is his work on the kingdom of God as "leaven." Kuyper elaborated his distinction between the church as institute and organism in 1870 in a sermon called "Rooted and Grounded," quoting Ephesians 3:17.[17] The people of God are both organized as an institution (contra pietist sects) and a living organism, a dispersed body (contra over-institutionalized Christendom). In the former, Kuyper imagines the marks of the church, and in the latter, the people of God branched out in the workplace. Kuyper built this distinction on the foundation of the Reformer's binary of a church that is both invisible and visible. Bavinck adds another binary: pearl and leaven. We ought to think of the church as invisible/visible, institution/organism, and also in possession of the gospel as the "pearl" of great price on the one hand and as a leavening agent on the other.[18] The people of God as an institution are called to proclaim the gospel as pearl, as the great treasure (Matt 13:45–46). The people of Christ, changed by the gospel from inside out, are to be "leavening" agents in temporal society—Bavinck's binary places Kuyper's binary within the bounds of biblical metaphor.

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[14] Herman Bavinck, "Welke algemeene beginselen beheerschen, volgens de H. Schrift, de oplossing der sociale quaestie, en welke vingerwijzing voor der oplossing ligt in de concrete toepassing, welke deze beginselen voor Israel in Mozaisch recht gevonden hebben?," in *Proces-verbaal van het Sociaal Congress, Amsterdam, November 9–12, 1891* (Amsterdam: Hoveker en Zoon, 1892), 149–57.

[15] See the *Proceedings of the Fifth General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System* (London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1892), 48–55.

[16] See James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 284, 286, 294.

[17] Abraham Kuyper, "Rooted and Grounded," in *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 46.

[18] Herman Bavinck, "Christian Principles and Social Relationships," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 141.

"The kingdom of heaven is not only a pearl; it is a leaven as well."[19] Herein, this neo-Calvinist public theology is a theology spoken for the people of God as the organism within public spheres. Bavinck's proclamation that the people of God as the visible kingdom go forth to be "leaven" is a specific type of public-theological reasoning.

One can then define Bavinck's work as public theologian in multiple ways. In this first level of public-theological discourse (his treatment of the pearl and leaven), Bavinck addresses the body of Christ, offering them a theology for going public. Herein, public theology is directed toward the church for the sake of the public and directs the organism of Christ's body in its calling and potential, helping Christians to understand how "the teaching of Scripture [addresses] societal relationships."[20] There is also a second aspect to Bavinck's public-theological discourse: on numerous occasions (as listed above) Bavinck takes the principles of Scripture and applies them to a particular issue as social teaching (like the Mosaic law and its implications for the social question). Yet there is also a third, and one that features prominently across his corpus: his philosophical work. Bavinck as philosopher is Bavinck as public apologist and prophet speaking to various publics all at once: the people of God, fellow academicians, and members of the society at large. Like his social teaching but without the direct method of applying the biblical text to the moment, his philosophical works stand as a polemic to the particular model of secularization that declares religion and consequently theology a private affair. The spirit of revolution attempted to banish theology from all public spheres, disallowing theology, or biblical reasoning, from informing the various domains of "public" life. For Bavinck, the majority of his works outside *Dogmatics* address general issues in contemporary society through the medium of philosophical reasoning, considering the moment in light of the timeless, which is for Bavinck always philosophical-theological. His two most significant works of philosophy are *Christian Worldview* and *Philosophy of Revelation*. The collected volume *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society* include several such as "Ethics and Politics."[21] As mentioned above, if theology is the science concerning God, or that discipline that seeks to know God, then public-theological reasoning includes knowing all things

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview,* trans. and ed. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019); *Philosophy of Revelation*, trans. and ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018; hereafter, *PoR*).

in relation to God, in whom they all relate absolutely. The public-theological work of first-generation neo-Calvinist philosophy aided the various publics in knowing *how* all things relate to God.

II. *Bavinck's Philosophy as Public Theology*

Since, for Bavinck, theology is the science concerning God, it is a top-down exercise of receiving the speech of God in the work of revelation and systematizing its content as "faith seeking understanding." Consider the outline of his dogmatic reflection in volumes 2–4 of *Reformed Dogmatics*. He first considers God as he is in himself. Then, the meta-outline of his work follows the economy of God according to the processions: the Father (volume 2), the Son (volume 3), and the Spirit (volume 4). The study of the economy of God is founded upon *theologia*. Reciprocally, he understands philosophy to methodically proceed from the ground up. Philosophy considers an aspect of creaturely existence, particularly some aspect of nature, and moves upward toward the first principles of existence, unveiling the unity of reality. The philosophy of any given—"history, art, and the rest—must take its start from its object."[22] He commends idealism, at least, because "it takes its start from reality."[23]

While philosophy proceeds from the order of the empirical experience of knowing and moves to being in itself (its origin and foundation), Bavinck's philosophical work is an implication of his own description of the second task of dogmatics: tracing the unity of creaturehood in the light of God. While he famously suggests, after Junius, that theology is "thinking God's thoughts after Him," Bavinck adds that the task also includes a secondary move: "tracing their unity" or setting forth how all things relate to God and each other in light of God as Creator.[24] In his philosophical works, he carries forth the second aspect of dogmatics as an implication for how to consider an object: he traces the particular to the one, and the thing to its essence and foundation in Being itself. "When [theology] turns its attention to creatures, it views them only in relation to God as they exist from him and through him and for him [Rom. 11:36]."[25] He specifically declares his task in *Philosophy of Revelation*: to "trace the idea of revelation [a dogmatic idea]

[22] *PoR*, 23.
[23] Ibid., 47.
[24] *RD* 1:44.
[25] Ibid., 2:29.

… and correlate it with the rest of our knowledge and life."[26] For Bavinck, his constructive philosophy is *philosophia christiana*.

Specifically, in his philosophical works, Bavinck offers to the public a genealogy of the realities that the twentieth-century world prizes and locates those realities in God himself. He takes, for example, a philosophy of history to what he considers a necessary conclusion: the revelation of Christ, which "itself gives us history, the true content and kernel of all history. Christianity is itself history; it makes history."[27] He argues that apart from the revelation of Christ, history cannot exist. And of "nature and history" he argues, "The confession of the unity of God is the foundation of the true [philosophy] of nature and history."[28] Bavinck plays the role of public apologist and prophet, grounding the metaphysical in the being of the Triune God. Bavinck's philosophy therefore is public-theological reasoning, with the people of God, fellow academicians, and a wider public in his view. He reasons about topics that are of particular importance for these varying publics to show how they lead to, find their origin and principle in, and are unveiled by God and his act of revealing. His public theology remains unified to the basic task of theology: the knowledge of God.

Consider Bavinck's argument in *Christian Worldview* that Christianity is the end of philosophy. If philosophy suggests or desires to find a world grounded in wisdom, with wisdom pervading its parts, then it must be in search of the organism, or the source of the unity of being and its ground. He argues,

> It is the same divine wisdom [*Goddelijke wijsheid*] that created the world organically into a connected whole and planted in us the urge for a "unified" [*einheitliche*] worldview. If this is possible, it can be explained only on the basis of the claim that the world is an organism and has first been thought of as such. Only then do philosophy and worldview have a right and ground of existence, as it is also on this high point of knowledge that subject and object harmonize, as the reason within us corresponds with the principia of all being and knowing. And what philosophy has demanded according to its essence is then guaranteed and explained for us by the testimony of God in his word. It is the same divine wisdom that gives things existence and our thought objective validity, that bestows intelligibility to things and the power of thinking [*denkkracht*] to our mind, that makes the things real and our thoughts [*denkbeelden*] true.[29]

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[26] *PoR*, 25.
[27] Ibid., 115.
[28] Ibid., 111.
[29] Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 51.

Creation and revelation are the facts upon which philosophy "[has] a right and ground of existence." Further, in another essay he argues that the "Calvinistic principle is too universal and accordingly too rich and fruitful." It gives rise to not only a theology but also a "specific view of the world and life as a whole; so to speak, a philosophy all its own."[30] In other words, Reformed dogmatics begets *philosophia christiana*. For this reason, Bavinck's philosophy is presented *after* his dogmatic works. This is true both in principle and in chronology. The most significant philosophical texts of his career were written after his *Dogmatics*. He argues that the fact of God's revelation is the hope of philosophical satisfaction.

> The world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation (*grondslag*), the secret (*geheim*) of all that exists in all its forms. The deeper science pushes its investigations, the more clearly will it discover that revelation underlies all created being. 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 beings, 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.[31]

For Bavinck, the foundation of philosophy (that which gives it the right to exist) is the same as that for theology just as the foundation of creation and redemption are the same: the revelation of God. Theology and philosophy both consider God, humanity, and the world. These are the three totalizing terms Bavinck used to describe the subject matter of the human sciences. The basic distinction is that theology as a discipline methodologically begins from God, from God's speech; philosophy in practice begins from below, from humanity and the world to the foundation of creaturehood. The humanities, he argues in one essay, must consider their object from a Christian point of view.

> The fact that these disciplines actually belong to the literary department makes no difference. After all, the gospel of Christ is a joyous message not just for some people in certain circumstances, but for *every* person and for the *whole* person, for the learned as well as the simple, and no more for the theologian than for the literary scholar, the historian, the philosopher. I therefore fail to see why a Christian treatment of these disciplines is not permitted or not possible.[32]

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[30] Herman Bavinck, "The Future of Calvinism," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5 (1894): 5.
[31] *PoR*, 24.
[32] Herman Bavinck, "Theology and Religious Studies," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 59.

Bavinck's philosophical reasoning urges the public to consider then that God is the final cause of all creaturehood. In his work *God and Knowledge*, Nathaniel Sutanto concludes,

> To be clear, Bavinck here is not only claiming that Christian theism provides the answers to philosophy's questions, or that it is the product of a truly consistent philosophical undertaking. Rather, on the next page, he is clear that Christian theism is the grounds on which philosophy depends. The Christian religion, for Bavinck, "makes known to us through her revelation the same theism that upon unprejudiced investigation appears to be the foundation [*grondslag*] of all science and philosophy."[33]

Bavinck put it simply and succinctly early in his career: Christianity can "fashion for herself" a philosophy.[34]

In review, one can then describe Bavinck's public-theological reasoning in multiple ways, including his theology of the church as "leaven," as well as his direct social teaching. In addition, the term "public" in this third aspect serves the role of the objective genitive, where philosophical-theological reflection is an activity for the sake of the common good, directing the public's attention toward the metaphysical. Public theology in this vein is primarily speech from Christians to the world regarding how God matters to all the domains of life. In this method, public theology as a discipline maintains God as the ultimate object of its reflection even if at first indirectly, looking at creation and answering questions regarding how "all things" are ordered unto God. Therefore, the term public adds to theology the burden that theology must be shown to be relevant to all of life.[35]

III. *The Public Theology of "Ethics and Politics"*

Bavinck's 1916 article "Ethics and Politics" provides an illustration of his philosophical endeavors. First, to reflect more acutely on method, Bavinck routinely chose his subject matter based upon current events. Consider "Of Beauty and Aesthetics" in 1914, two years prior. He wrote that essay to

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[33] Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2019), 53.

[34] Herman Bavinck "Theology of Albrecht Ritschl," trans. John Bolt, *The Bavinck Review* 3 (2012): 123.

[35] Kevin Vanhoozer argues that ministers are the most common and important public theologians in that they, as he put it, "work for, with, and on people—the gathered assembly of the faithful—and lead them to live to God, bearing witness as a public spire in the public square." "Pastors, Theologians, and other Public Figures," in *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision,* ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 21.

address the rise of a "philosophy of beauty" in the academy of the moment. Regarding "Ethics and Politics," he was driven along by the events of the Great War to examine the relationship between the state and the fact of the moral. For Bavinck, the relation between the "good" and the organized community was the key idea that contemporary governments and political philosophers had failed to understand, leading to failures of international justice in the time of war, though unnamed in any detail in this essay.

The absence of contemporary particulars leads to the second point regarding his method. While Bavinck often responded to the now, he did so in a manner that brought his audience back to the timeless—to the metaphysical. While directed by the moment, he took up the subjects that have always "been and remain timely" and discussed them "objectively" for the sake of "insight," to place his reader under the wisdom of the ages.[36] Third, his works regularly return to a settled list of burdens imposed upon his audience in the climate of the modern: (i) the demise of religious foundations within European communities; (ii) the failure of materialism and the simultaneous multiplication of religious options—pluralism; (iii) the privatization of religion; (iv) the dismissal of sacred theology from the university; and (v) the confusion regarding and disagreements about the moral order, its constitution, its existence, and its commands.

In the today of 1916, as he writes, "there is no agreement" regarding the four primary philosophical concepts that govern the study of ethics: its origin, foundation, method, and criteria. Each is addressed in the following questions:[37] From where does the moral come? In what ground does its being subsist? How does one come to know the good? As an agent, how does one determine the moral fitness of any action? Bavinck typically works in reverse order, from the ground up. He brings theo-logic to bear upon the philosophical object, moving from creature to the necessity of God and moving back down again. To put it succinctly, the Great War petitioned Bavinck to assist his reader in awakening the basics of classical philosophical and religious reflection and then provokes an essay that spans the political and moral philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli and Hobbes, and of Hegel and the Hebrew Bible.

In addition to method, "Ethics and Politics" returns to several of Bavinck's quintessential public-theological determinations. These principles serve as public service announcements in a number of his works—truths that would aid the repair work needed in both academy and society following the

[36] Herman Bavinck, "Ethics and Politics," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 261.
[37] Ibid.

mistakes of modern*ism*. The first is akin to an aspect of the method listed above: the failures of the present are the product of both the academy and various European publics being overly wed to current trends rather than steeped in the history of philosophy and religion. The second is perhaps the key determination of his famous work *Philosophy of Revelation* stated here in multiple forms: being precedes becoming; spirit precedes nature; the spiritual is logically prior to the material. He thus offers a metajustification of the universal phenomena that point toward a human "nature" including, here, the tendency toward the organization and governance of human society and well-being as politics. This point gives rise to the purpose of his philosophical work. Addressed to a number of publics including fellow academicians, churchmen, and any general reader who may open these pages, he largely writes for the purpose of justification: giving an ontological ground for the perpetual discoveries of nature. His metaphilosophical purpose here is to help the contemporary reader find agreement and satisfaction in the relationship between the intellectual and existential—between the "needs of the intellect" and the "needs of the heart."[38] Bavinck as public theologian offered a genealogy of the timeless. He taught the public the origin story of its institutions and desires.

The specific purpose of "Ethics and Politics" then is to establish that being precedes becoming and spirit precedes nature and that this metaphysical principle is apropos for discussing the relation between the ethical and political during the events of the Great War. Ultimately, Bavinck's essay surveys the concept of justice, and particularly the conditions of international justice. "The Christian principle," he concludes, "of the oneness of the human race in origin and essence, and the principle of the catholicity of God's Kingdom," are the two pillars of international justice and human rights. These realties are also desires rooted in natural law, with the natural law grounded in the eternal law. He argues then that international justice, especially in the time of war, will increase "to the degree that" its ethical basis "penetrates into the consciences of monarchs and nations." The biological and economic sciences offer no hope in finding the "kingdom of love and peace"; what remains is faith.

While this is the argument's conclusion, Bavinck takes three contemporary errors that have drifted from academia into the public square in varying degrees and turns these theses upside down to prophetically argue that the Christian God is the origin, foundation, and hope for the political. The first public error is the belief that the moral dimension of human experience is

[38] *PoR*, 69.

not an essential aspect of human nature but a movable construct. Bavinck chose to "proceed from the indisputable fact" that the moral is "an indestructible element of human nature," though he leaves open the question of its origin and foundation. As was common in his philosophical texts, he establishes his starting point on the basis of wider scholarship, citing Hugo de Vries among others to show that it is widely accepted that human nature includes a "moral element." Further, this moral element has specific, recognizable content. Gerhardus Heymans declares, "It is the same with ethics as with logic."[39] While the practitioners of the sciences often offer differing results about the moral as a construct of societies, Bavinck argues that they confess moral norms in their own practices, establishing themselves rigidly on the facts of truthhood and falsehood.

The second public error: "Nature has become the designation of the material world, with its material atoms and mechanical-chemical operations."[40] He was concerned that as far as some moral element is confessed to exist, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries had overturned the priority of the spirit to the priority of nature. The work of Ludwig Feuerbach, historical materialism, and Darwinism produced an intellectual culture where "'nature' has become the designation of the material world" from which "people understand life, soul, and spirit. Thus the relationship was completely turned around: matter did not come from spirit, but the spirit from the material."[41] Now, brains precede thinking. The economic precedes the communal. The state is a product of natural economic forces and social contracts. "There is no need for the a priori or metaphysical," but only facts and the sciences. If this is true, then politics and ethics are opposites and the operation of the state is only ever *realpolitik*. Bavinck argues, however, that according to contemporary sociology, "as one moves backwards in time," there is no encounter with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's basically barbaric man, but with the most basically religious and judicial human. The "psychic, religious, ritualistic, ethical, and judicial" are hallmarks of the earliest peoples.[42] Reaching into the past, into the deep study of a particular, leads to the universal and the consistent: that the communal and moral do not emerge from "nature" but from spirit. The elements of love, sympathy, and character are the hallmarks of the earliest humanity. Society does not contain an economic foundation with a "judicial

[39] Bavinck, "Ethics and Politics," 262.
[40] Ibid., 265.
[41] Ibid., 265–66.
[42] Ibid., 268.

superstructure" but a "religious, ritualistic, and ethical character" all the way to the bottom.[43]

The third error is the idea that the fundamental truth of all politics and the key to all of history is the close connection between power and rule.[44] Bavinck pointed out the error that positivism had created by making a sharp distinction between the moral and political. He also unveiled how the current intellectual climate made the same mistake made by the sophists, among many others throughout history. Because politics is concerned with the conditions that generate the "well-being" of a community and nation, ethics or the moral is the ground of the political. Politics is "the application of ethics to the free citizen."[45] Contra the sophists, Niccolò Machiavelli, Hugo Grotius, and Thomas Hobbes, the origin of the political body and its ethic is not "might makes right" or the "strong rule the weak" or a contracted expediency (social contract); in these theories, justice is the creation of the state. Rather, politics as a science (*scientia*), art (*ars*), and practice (*praxis*) concerns the well-being of a community, "safeguarding its independence and freedom … for fulfilling its calling in the history of humanity."[46] Its origin and ground is the universality of a moral and communal anthropological nature. Because spirit precedes and establishes nature, nature establishes the community. The state as a product of nature does not refer to the political as a product of the biological or economic but of the moral and spiritual. It is desire and deed that make the realm of the political.

This fact is expressed as a universal and primordial human desire—the "Tao" (as it has been put), or "natural law"—for just order where righteousness is established apart from coercion. Such hope is unshakably grounded in the metaphysical reality of the moral. As Emil Lack said of the philosophy of law, "It is the search for a transcendental order … the question of a frame of being in a worldview."[47] Hoping in the possibility of righteousness apart from coercion is a product of the spirit that precedes nature—"one must obey God more than men."[48] In all this, he concludes that neither the state nor reason is the foundation of justice. The law is not justice. It varies and is liable to fault. The law "can never completely fill the demands of justice."[49] Rather, the *sein soll*, "what must be," is inherent in justice.[50] The moral and

[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 267.
[45] Ibid., 269.
[46] Ibid., 264.
[47] Ibid., 272.
[48] Ibid., 274.
[49] Ibid., 271.
[50] Ibid.

the just are and have always been treated as two sides of the same coin, he argues. "Moral good is a just demand that the moral order of the world applies unconditionally in a categorical imperative to every person and the whole person; and justice (*jus*) is an application of the *justum* to certain forms of society." The close relationship "between morality" and seeking "justice," or "between ethics and politics" has its root in the "indivisible human nature" and "has been recognized at all times by all important people."[51] This "points out further that the idea of justice has a teleological character. … This urge is in man since birth, roots justice in morality, and creates an unbreakable bond between politics and ethics. Just order is grounded in moral order and possesses its strong, unshakeable permanence."[52]

To return to the conclusion, that spirit begets nature and the moral precedes the political, is necessary if there is to be anything called "international justice" and "human rights." If justice is merely a product of coercion, then the idea of international justice in the midst of a war is meaningless apart from an international army to internationally coerce. Further, without the justice of righteousness and the spiritual ground of the moral, then human rights are without reality and power apart from a temporal ruler. Bavinck pulls these reflections on moral and political philosophy into the domain of theo-logic. If any of these goods are the case, then the moral and just is an objective reality, founded in the eternal order, a creature of being itself. He suggests in the end that the primordial desire "from birth" for the kingdom of God and the fact of the unity of humanity as the image of God are the twin pillars of a "nature" that begets politics. There is hope for unity in diversity witnessed in the catholicity of the church, which bears testimony to both the unity of humanity and the eschatological kingdom. One can hear in these twin pillars the hope of a kingdom of righteousness without coercion and of true peace—the hope of the nations. For Bavinck, human nature includes the urge for justice, a product of the absolute dependence on God, a universal feeling, or simply put, religion. He writes elsewhere,

> Religion is more deeply rooted in the human heart than anything else. It is the immediate result of our being created in God's image and therefore radically integral to our nature. In religion, we regulate our relationship to God, the relationship that is central and foundational. Our relationship to our fellow humans and to all other creatures is the outflow of our relationship to God. Foundational to all issues is that of religion …. That which unites people in religion is stronger than material

[51] Ibid., 268.
[52] Ibid., 271.

> interests, natural love, or enthusiasm for science and art. People are prepared to sacrifice everything, even their own lives, for religion. For if they lose it, they lose their own selves, their own identities.[53]

Conclusion

Even in detailed considerations of moral and political philosophy, Bavinck reminds his readers that one's primordial desires, which reveal his human nature, are directed by the past and future facts of creation and re-creation. Therein, public theology includes the theologian speaking theologically for the good of the world. One of the crucial tasks of public theology, which Bavinck puts on display repeatedly, is that theology must tell the genealogy of the common institutions, values, and assumptions of the contemporary West. Bavinck aids his readers in understanding that a close look at the objects of existence, at the institutions that frame human life, will show that they are, as James Smith has put it, "awaiting the King."[54] To understand this truth is to help an agent act in accordance with the norms of flourishing even in the now.

[53] *RD* 4:276.

[54] James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).