

The Missiological Vision of J. H. Bavinck: Religion, Reticence, and Contextual Theology

by H. L. Richard

Editor's note: This is an article-length book review of the new publication The J. H. Bavinck Reader, eds. John Bolt, James D. Pratt and Paul J. Visser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, pp. 417.

The translation and publication of the early Dutch writings of J. H. Bavinck (1895-1964) is cause for celebration in the English-speaking missiological world. Bavinck was a Dutch Reformed missionary to Indonesia who became an exceptional missiologist. He is introduced here in an insightful 92-page essay that segues into a selection of his works, primarily (translating the Dutch titles) *Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith* (1949) and *Christ and the Mysticism of the East* (1934). These are insightful studies with definite current relevance, but there is room also for criticism of Bavinck so this review article will both highlight strengths and point out problems.¹

Bavinck the Missionary

Bavinck's field experience was in Java, where he served through most of the 1930s. He became the first Reformed professor of missions in the Netherlands, and his outstanding inaugural lecture of 1939 is included in this volume. Bavinck is best known in the English-speaking world for his 1960 work *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (1954 in Dutch). His final work was posthumous, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions*. (1966).

Paul Visser, in his analysis of Bavinck, suggests that in his field experience in Java, "Bavinck's work was marked by four characteristic features" (13). This is clearly the foundation for Bavinck's later thought so these four points will be outlined here.

First of all, he showed real capacity for entering into the Javanese mind. His first priority was to immerse himself in the native culture as the initial stage of cross-cultural evangelism: "A person who carries the gospel to them will have to lean over toward them as far as possible in order to bring them into as close a contact as possible with the crux of the gospel."² (13)

The entry into culture for Bavinck included studying the Hindu and Buddhist roots of Javanese cultures as well as the Islamic element that later became dominant. He carefully observed the traditional *wayang* puppet performances

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and their cultural and spiritual significance. Quoting both Visser and Bavinck again, what would now be called a dialogue group became a vital part of Bavinck's field experience.

In 1931, a Cultural-Philosophical Study Group was set up in Solo to help the Javanese, Dutch, and Chinese to get to know each other. Bavinck counted participation in this group among the most wonderful experiences of his life. For him, the best moments came when "our conversation rose above all earthly things and turned to the divine world beyond us. Then we no longer thought of ourselves as Javanese, Chinese or Dutch; then, in a certain sense, we all became children standing in the presence of the ineffable greatness of the Eternal One. It was apparent that there were boundary lines. And yet, during these night-time discourses, we realized, deeply and intensely, how fruitful and wonderful it was that we could speak with one another about these things in such an atmosphere."³ (14)

Thus Bavinck engaged the living religiosity of Java, all for the purpose of effectively sharing the good news of Christ, which is Visser's second point. "Second, Bavinck showed a passion for explicating the gospel message better" (14). Visser considers the crown of this to be Bavinck's 1934 work on *Christ and the Mysticism of the East*, the heart of which is translated as the last section of this book. Greater analysis of this will follow, but Visser's summary statement is worth quoting at this point.

Because of his strong inner bond with Christ, the Final Answer, he felt free to openly absorb and savor Asian thought. He observed striking similarities between the gospel and Javanese mysticism, pinpointed elements in Asian thinking that led to a deeper understanding of the biblical message, and discovered aspects of Asian experience that provided a point of contact for the proclamation of the gospel. (15)

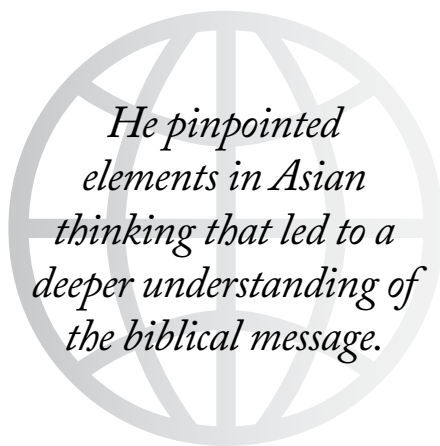
In a time when caution and fear seem to dominate in discussing non-Christian traditions, it is refreshing to read a commendation of "absorbing" and "savoring"

alien thought and culture. And that non-Christian cultures provide a context for deeper understanding of the Bible also needs to be highlighted.

Thirdly in Bavinck's experience in Java, he "showed a special concern for youth work" (15). This was especially in the context of Western scientific emphases that were undermining traditional ways, a point that will not be developed further here.

Finally, Bavinck showed sympathy for rising Indonesian nationalism and the cognate necessity of establishing the independence of the indigenous churches. (16)

This was J. H. Bavinck the cross-cultural worker, sensitive and supportive towards contextual concerns and trends.



If there is a weakness in Visser's survey of Bavinck's life and thought it lies in failing to adequately highlight the concept of *possessio* as Bavinck's fundamental perspective in contrast to indigenization or contextualization. Bavinck suggested that

The Christian life does not accommodate or adapt itself to heathen forms of life, but it takes the latter in possession and thereby makes them new.... Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated; he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction. Such is neither "adaptation," nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something

by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth. (1960:178–179)⁴

There is an inadequate mention of this concept of *possessio* on p. 82, but *possessio* is not mentioned in any of the writings translated in this book. Is that due to the nature of the contents, or is it possible that this concept was developed by Bavinck later in life after the writings translated here?⁵

The Gospel and Human Religiosity

The great theme of Bavinck's missiological writing, and of this collection of his writings, is the engagement of the gospel with other religious traditions. Visser again summarizes this well.

The question of the relationship between religious experience and God's revelation in Christ was *the* theme that governed the whole of Bavinck's missionary theology. This question goes to the essence of missions and governs the whole methodology of missionary work.⁶ (42; italics original)

This focus makes the study of Bavinck centrally relevant to missiological discussions at the present time. Debates about insider movements tend to involve assumptions about religion and religions, and the only hope for settling some of those disputes lies in greater clarity of conception and communication on the topic of the gospel and other religious traditions.

This analysis of Bavinck's teaching on this rich and important topic will begin with his profound exegetical insights into human religiosity. But then Bavinck's handling of the world religions will be analyzed as inadequate and erroneous in some key aspects. Finally, some other areas where Bavinck contributed insightful observations, such as contextual theology, self-critical missiology, and reticence will bring this paper to a close.

From a theological perspective the key doctrine in terms of Christian inter-religious understanding is the concept of general revelation (at one point defined

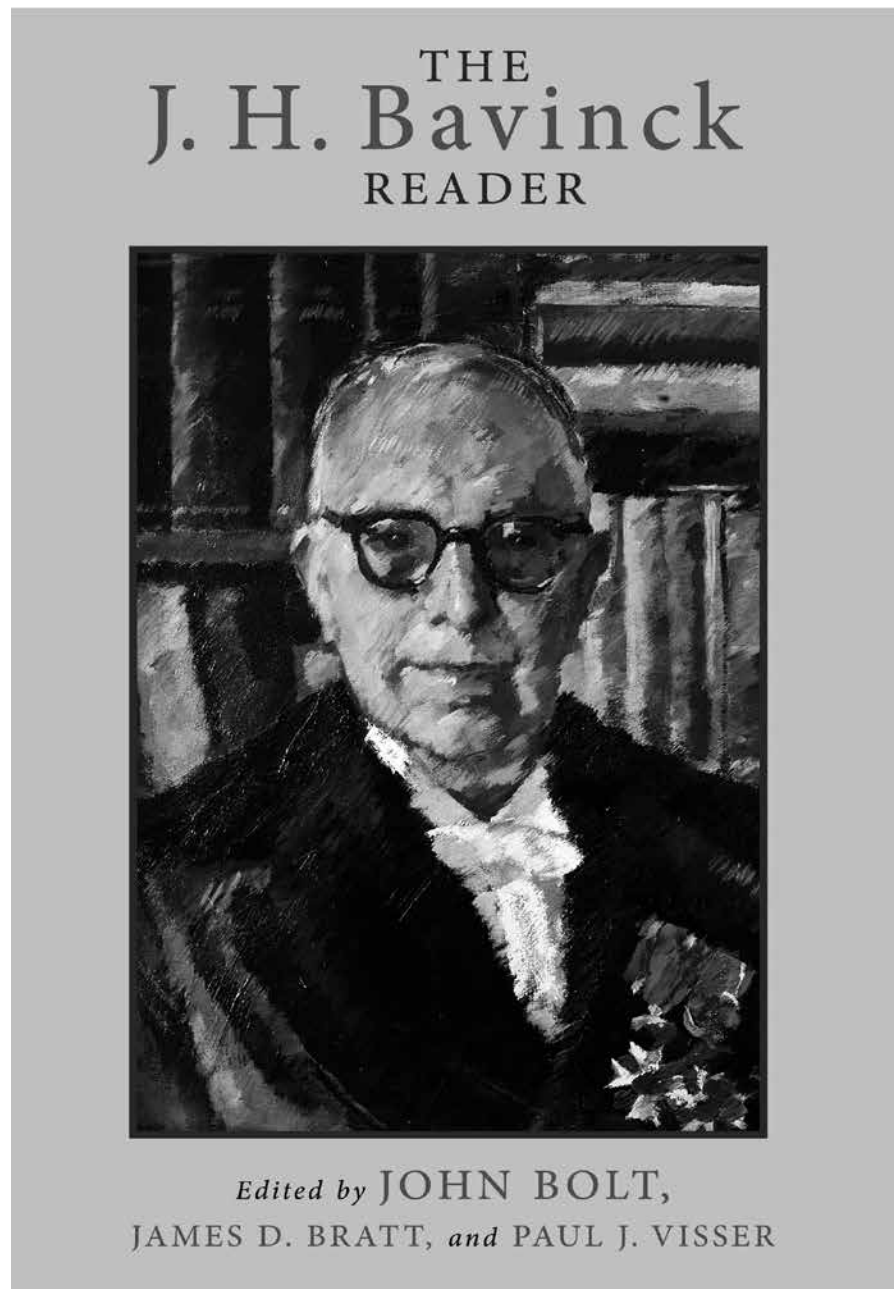
by Bavinck as “that objective voiceless speech with which God addresses people,” 283). The crucial biblical text for this doctrine is Romans 1, and Bavinck is deeply insightful in his analysis of this doctrine and this text. Heavy emphasis is placed on the statement in Romans 1: 21, which affirms a definite knowledge of God in all people. Bavinck rightly critiques an overly philosophical approach to this teaching, focusing on a genuine personal encounter with God;

In other words, that so-called general revelation is depicted for us in the Bible as a much more personal involvement of God with each person than we in our theology once understood it to be. We will have to rethink our theological concepts repeatedly in order to disentangle them from all their abstract philosophical accretions and to understand them again in terms of biblical reality. (238)

Bavinck is deep and thorough in his analysis, at times almost to the point of tediousness. Yet he coaxes some precious insights from his sources. Bavinck is critical, as hinted above, of traditional teaching on general revelation that suggests a rationalist bias. So he wrestles with the biblical text for an answer to the question of what it is in humanity that receives general revelation.

If general revelation is the father of religion, there must also be something in the human being that makes it possible for a person to receive that general revelation. But then I have to add immediately that Scripture regards that inner principle as so completely unimportant that it does not even mention it. (282)

Further on in this exposition Bavinck goes even further, stating that “I am convinced that it will defy the sharpest thought of ever discovering its true nature” (283). This is refreshing reticence, and this trait in Bavinck will be noted again later. The Bible does not address the topic in question, despite a long history of Christian assumptions to that effect, such as a particular bias towards the human intellect being able to discern truths about God. Bavinck suggests an



intentional silence in Scripture, to which the response must be an embraced agnosticism. One can question here whether a superior alternate approach might be to rebuke the framework of the question which assumes there can be a legitimate compartmentalization of the human being, and instead focus on the whole person being encountered by the being and person of God at every moment of existence.

This personal encounter of each person with the almighty God is of course

not the only point in Romans 1, and Bavinck equally focuses on the fact of human suppression of this general revelation of God (Rom. 1:18).

“Suppress.” This need not be understood as a conscious action. It can develop in total silence in the human heart. I am inclined to understand this in the sense of repression, as the concept of repression has been developed in recent psychology. As a rule, repression occurs unconsciously, but that makes it no less real. (242)

This suppression or repression of the truth of God which is manifest to the human being then immediately translates into an exchange of God's truth for human folly (Rom. 1:23).

"Exchanged." Here an active verb reappears. They have exchanged. Now the image of the immortal God slips through their fingers, and they fill the void that overwhelms their entire being, including their thinking, with all sorts of fantasies. In those fantasies, they drag God down to the creaturely level, pulling him down to the level of mortality. (245)

At this point Bavinck's exposition is very much in line with traditional Protestant understanding. His next paragraph, however, introduces an interesting nuance. Most likely it was Bavinck's dialogical experience and living relationships with believing practitioners of other faith traditions that provided his personal foundation for this understanding.

"Made to look." This is an extraordinarily cautious statement. The text [Rom. 1:23] does not read, "They have exchanged the glory for the images of mortal men, etc." But it reads, "images made to look like mortal human beings." Here account is taken of the fact that pagans also feel that the images that they make of their gods are not totally accurate representations of the gods themselves, but are only approximate expressions of the reality of those gods. (245)

The response on the human level to general revelation, however, is nothing positive, for "whenever the living reality of God manifests itself and displays its evidence to such a one, two processes begin working. The first is the process of repressing, the second that of replacing" (246). Further,

This occurs instantly, so that people actually never arrive at the point of knowing. They see, but they do not see. They never fully see. God definitely reveals himself, but people immediately push it away, repress it, suppress it. They are knowers who do not know, seers who do not see. Their juridical position is different from their actual reality. (285)

This human rejection of the light of God leads to the thrice repeated judgment of "God giving them over" that concludes Romans one (vs. 24, 26, 28). Bavinck's exposition here is not merely theological, but deeply personal as among those implicated are his friends and partners in dialogue.

...it cannot be denied that in this entire process something thoroughly tragic happens. "They are given up." "Their hearts become darkened." When this process begins to work, these people simply do not understand it and over against it they are powerless. They are the active agents who, by virtue of their immorality, wring moral norms out of their life on every side and repress and replace the truth. But, these people at the same



time are victims who at any given time can no longer resist, who no longer have any anchor, and who "lose themselves." They do something, but something is also done to them, overwhelms them, sweeps them along, washes away all their resistance. (247)

Bavinck caps this profound and compassionate exposition by drawing three very important practical conclusions. The first point is rather long-winded, but there are tones of compassionate concern that carry all the way through it and make it inadvisable to edit.

In the first place, we need to keep a sharp eye on the fact that there is something distorted in the human condition. People have been resisting, suppressing. They have done so

unconsciously. But they do so all the time, moment by moment, always unaware that they are doing so. But at the same time, there is always a definite unsettledness deep within them as a consequence of that suppression. This amounts to a definite dissatisfaction and tension. As a rule, the engine of this suppressing process runs noiselessly, but not so noiselessly that they never feel it running now and then and thereby realize that something is amiss in their lives. People play hide-and-seek with God. They are honest neither with themselves nor with life. They will never admit this, but it always hangs over them. Nevertheless, there are moments when they vaguely suspect something sour and distorted about their existence. Here it is impossible for me to get into this at any depth, so I will only say this. When people begin to be illumined by the light of the gospel, they sometimes suddenly become aware of the horror of this suppressing process and realize that they have always known but have never wanted to know. It strikes me that a great deal of the unsettledness, the primal fear, and the tension of which people give evidence at various times in their lives is connected with this basic phenomenon at the root of their existence; they do not live honestly in this world. (285)

Bavinck goes on in a second point to emphasize the diverse manifestations of this process in the complexity that is human life.

In the second place, we must not overlook the possibility of a variety of individual differences. There are people who appear to be so completely comfortable with the process of repressing that they take no notice of it....However, there are other cases where the suppression happens with much more difficulty and sometimes even seems to fail entirely....The history of religion as well as missionary experience teaches us that it makes no sense to paint all pagans with the same brush. We will have to observe with great care what has happened in every individual life. We need to be sensitive to the wounds inflicted in each person's struggle against God. Feeble human feet can never kick

aside God's presence with us without incurring a penalty. That very painful reality is played out in each human life in its own unique way. (285–6)

Finally Bavinck comes back to his first point again, the reality of the knowledge of God within each human person.

In the third place, I believe that we may never forget that what has been suppressed has, for that very reason, not been completely obliterated. It has not been destroyed or rubbed out, but it has only been suppressed—no more and no less than that. That can only mean that somewhere, deep within the hidden recesses of people's beings, that repressed and suppressed truth is still present. (286)

With this profound exposition of general revelation as it impacts the human race Bavinck has put the theological and missiological world in his debt. There is a great deal of insightful material passed over in this summary of Bavinck's position, and careful study of the volume, and Bavinck's other works, is advised. One further point is sufficiently intriguing to this reviewer to demand comment. Bavinck makes an interesting distinction between general revelation and the human religiosity that results from it.

No continuity exists between the gospel and human religious consciousness, although definite continuity does exist between the gospel and what lies behind human religious consciousness, namely God's general revelation. [297]

Bavinck applies this insight to every believer, suggesting that "In the Christian's struggles with life, that faith pushes back against the religious consciousness that is still a living and tenacious power even in him or her" [298]. Bavinck goes on to say that preaching the gospel

involves saying an emphatic "no" to all human religious consciousness—that of the Hindus, the Buddhists, and the Muslims. Those who are sent can say "no" to these religious notions with heartfelt conviction only

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when they have learned to reject heartily the religious consciousness in their own heart. [299]

Bavinck goes on to balance this by affirming that missions is much more than saying "no," it is saying "yes" to the suppressed voice of God that is general revelation. After weeks of reflection I am still in two minds on what to think about Bavinck's point here. "Religious consciousness" is not part of my normal vocabulary; I am aware of fighting the idolatry and paganism of my own heart, but I am not sure that exactly corresponds to what Bavinck is saying. Certainly people cannot attain to God without Christ and the Holy Spirit; is this just an emphatic way of making that point? Is this possibly a manifestation of Bavinck being too concerned about Kraemer's semi-Barthian approach to religion (see below)? Perhaps readers of this review and the book will find more clarity than I have.

The World Religions

Woven amidst many stimulating insights there is a deep problem in Bavinck's approach to the world's religions. A critique of this approach was already begun by the editors of this volume.

Knowledgeable readers will notice immediately that we have given the third major section of this volume, a translation of *Christus en de Mystiek van het Oosten*, the title "Christ and Asian Mysticism" rather than "Christ and the Mysticism of the East." To speak of "the East" in global terms in distinction from the West is misleading to contemporary readers for a number of reasons. First, its generality suggests a single monolithic worldview while the reality is remarkably diverse and complex. Second, it fails to clarify the importance of

geographically oriented streams of religious faiths such as those of South and Southeast Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia) in distinction from East Asia (China, Korea, Japan). Third, these changes are in keeping with Bavinck's own sensitivities. As the reader will discern, Bavinck is very aware of this diversity, and his treatment of the religious world of Indonesia in chapters 7–11 fully honors the diversity as well as the generalization. (x, italics original)

This is a helpful step in the right direction. But on another complex terminological issue, the editors felt constrained to retain Bavinck's terminology. In a note on the first page of the collection of his writings the editors state that

We are retaining the expressions "non-Christian religions" and "world religions" as they are used by Bavinck himself, even though there are solid arguments to be made against the use of "religions" in the plural as a general description. (95)

This note is appreciated, and it is probably true that editing out from Bavinck these kinds of expressions would involve too much tampering with his texts.

But the editors themselves are guilty of a serious faux pas when on page 305 they replace the false reification of "the East" with "the Hindu religion," suggesting that "the editorial change that specifies Hinduism is an editorial change warranted by the content of the paragraph and is provided for accuracy and clarity" (305). In reality, however, "Hinduism" suggests a single monolithic worldview while the reality is remarkably diverse and complex," and so one misleading reification has been replaced with another. (A simple solution to this problem would have been to reference "Hindu traditions"

in the plural rather than “the Hindu religion” or “Hinduism.”)

This is only the tip of an iceberg of problems. There are also numerous errors of fact related to Hindu traditions, alongside inadequate interpretations and applications also in relation to Indic traditions. But it is in presuppositions that the problem most deeply lies, so that needs to be central to this critique.

In what is generally a very insightful statement on the very topic presently under discussion, Bavinck reveals his fundamental presuppositional fallacy.

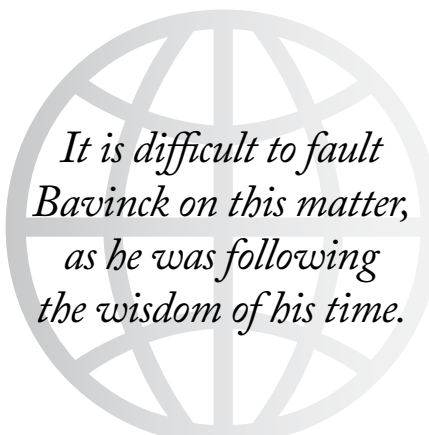
Time and again, it became apparent that the various religions of the human race are so endlessly diverse, so complex, so rich in ideas and experiences, that it is completely impossible to explain them satisfactorily in just a single word. Now, after many years of work in the science of comparative religions, we realize that we are only at the beginning of a long journey in determining what is most essential about religion. (150)

Were Bavinck with us today he would, no doubt, with his editors and the wider academic community, agree that what the long journey of religious studies has determined thus far is that it was a false assumption that there is an essence to religion and religious traditions, which in fact are complex conglomerations of beliefs and traditions that were wrongly labeled as single religions. The assumption about essences influenced Bavinck’s terminology about “the East,” and mars much of his further analysis of religious traditions.

In one sense it is difficult to fault Bavinck on this matter, as he was following the wisdom of his time. Visser in his introduction points out that Bavinck was deeply influenced by Hendrik Kraemer (36), best known for his work *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, prepared for the International Missionary Conference in Tambaram in 1938. In an introduction to a reprinting of this classic work, I suggested that

Kraemer’s understanding of Hinduism was woefully distorted in the direction of the classic Orientalist position which forced the complex data of Indian religiosity into the neat box of a Hindu religion based on sacred texts and pantheistic philosophy. Especially Kraemer’s dismissal of *bhakti* Hinduism is tragically misguided. (Richard 2009:xix)

Kraemer and Bavinck were both influenced by the prevailing thought of the time about the centrality of non-dualist philosophy to Hindu traditions. In one of a number of sections in this book where Bavinck is reading non-dualist assumptions into Hindu positions, he supports his case about essentials and fundamental principles by referencing the work of the German Indologist



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Paul Deussen (325). Richard King, among others, has shown how Deussen and other Western Indologists failed to keep their own preferences from influencing their academic work.

Heavily influenced by German idealism (especially Kant and Schopenhauer) as well as Romanticism, early Orientalists such as H.T. Colebrooke, Max Muller and Paul Deussen tended to locate the central core of Hindu thought in the Vedas, the Upanisads and the traditions of exegesis that developed from them....For Deussen, an avid disciple of Schopenhauer, the Vedanta philosophy of Sankara represented the culmination of Hindu thought, providing evidence that the

idealisms that were in vogue in nineteenth century European thought were already present at the “core” of the Hindu religion. In particular one finds an increasing tendency within Western scholarship not only to identify “Hinduism” with the Vedanta (thus establishing an archaic textual and canonical locus for the Hindu religion) but also a tendency to conflate Vedanta with Advaita Vedanta—the nondualistic tradition of Sankaracarya (c. eighth century CE). Advaita, with its monistic identification of Atman and Brahman, thereby came to represent the paradigmatic example of the mystical nature of the Hindu religion. (King 1999:128)

Errors related to this problem repeatedly appear in Bavinck’s work, so only a sampling will be presented here. It should be noted that this problem mars *The Church Between Temple and Mosque* as well, largely invalidating that as a reliable resource. The core problem, as suggested above, was the assumption there was an essential system in non-Christian faith traditions. Bavinck wrote that

closer study revealed that these religions were intricate systems in which great and comprehensive concepts of humans, the world, and God were articulated in various ways. Thus, the study of other religions led to several remarkable discoveries that forced scholars to face the question as to what value could be attached to these religious systems. (100)

Discussion of the systems is found again on p. 105 before a qualifying insight:

when dealing with the issue of general revelation and non-Christian religions it is necessary to distinguish between these religions as systems of thought and the personal religious experience and searching of each religion’s adherents. (106)

It is this kind of understanding, along with recognition of competing systems of thought, that has led to the deconstruction of the concept that there is an essential element to any of the world’s religions. But the time was not ripe for this recognition, and Bavinck

went on to take away with the left hand what he had given with the right.

Therefore, examination of revelation in other religions must be restricted to the religious systems themselves and not focus on the systems' particular adherents. (107)

The assumption of a system easily led to the assumption that the deepest truth of a faith tradition was to be found in sacred texts. As Richard King pointed out, "There is a clear literary bias within modern Western conceptions of religion" (1999:62). This appears in Bavinck when he states that

each of these religions recognizes a book or a collection of books, sometimes only a set of oral traditions that are regarded as revelation. The religion is then accountable to that revelation in its totality of convictions, sentiments, morals, and patterns of behavior that are passed down from generation to generation. (149)

This mindset leads to the oft-stated absurdity that the Rig Veda is the final scriptural authority for Hinduism, when in fact the RV is hardly acknowledged at all in living Hindu practice, and various authorities, some inscripturated and some not, are evident in the many vastly varying Hindu traditions.

Bavinck's self-imposed pressure to essentialize led to numerous dubious generalizations.

India has produced a mixture of religious and philosophical movements, but it is not too bold to say that this idea of the experience of totality has been the most controlling motif driving all thought and inquiry. (153)

In all of their thinking about God, the people of Asia could never escape the supposition that God is identical with the cosmos, that he is the summation of all cosmic forces and cosmic order. (386)

Particular teachings are also distorted under the essentializing influence.

One needs, once and for all, to be set free from the restrictive ties of *samsara* [the world/reincarnation] and be

A strange, perhaps heretical-type expression by an Asian Christian might be born from a genuine need to understand God's word.

exalted into the glorious deliverance of being absorbed into divinity. [188]

This is the error of reading Hindu traditions as if they are consistently advaitic, the error addressed by Richard King in the long quotation above. Another commonly-held error relates to karma. Bavinck suggests that

The Hindu religion has the concept of karma for designating that automatically activated connection between evil and punishment; punishment follows evils with ironclad necessity. [237]

But more recent scholarship has shattered the notion of "ironclad necessity" in karma; see Lipner 1994:232–239 for an exposition of the varying meanings of karma in different schools of thought.

These broad errors of interpretation run alongside quite a number of factual errors that will be noted as a service to readers and editors. On p. 126 there is an odd reference to Sri Krishna in "opposition" to Arjuna, referencing the Bhagavad Gita. This may be Bavinck's error and may be a translation error, but opposition is certainly not the right word for what is discussed in that context.

On pages 186–7 there is some confusion with *yoga* mistakenly printed for *yuga* in two places. Footnote 64 mistakenly says that Satya-yuga, which is in fact the first cosmic age, is identical with Kali-yuga, which is in fact the fourth cosmic age. The description in the text at this point suggesting that there is hope only in Vishnu should be identified as a distinctly Vaishnava belief.

The editors also confuse the complex semantic field related to *brahman*. Note 4 on page 306 mistakenly identifies a distinction between *Brahmá* and *Brâhma*; aside from the strangely creative orthography here, the proper explanation is a distinction between *brahmâ* and *brahma*; *brâhma* is not even a word.

The policy of avoiding diacritical marks compounds the problem as the note goes on to misleadingly distinguish *Brahman* and *Brahmin*; it is a quirk of older English transliteration that Sanskrit *brâhman* (the name of the highest caste) misleadingly became English Brahmin; more recently Brahmin is not in use, the more correct Brahman (*brâhman* when basic diacriticals are used) being employed for the caste name. A related spelling error occurs in note 35 on page 324 where Shatapatha Bramana appears; this should be *Brahmana*, and in fact is the identical word (*brâhman*) as the name for the highest caste, though it is conventional in English to drop the final "a" from the caste name and keep it when the reference is to the Vedic texts.

Note two on page 331 misprints the name of the mountain in Indonesia, which should be Maha-meru as in the text. Note 8 on page 354 mishandles the distinctly Indic term *dharma* by suggesting it refers to "one's religious obligations." In light of the editors' earlier qualifications about "religion," this is an odd error; *dharma* is holistic, covering every aspect of life and not only "religious" duties.

Affirming Contextual Theologies

Sprinkled through Bavinck's text are strong affirmations of the need for contextual theologies and clear pointers regarding the attitude necessary to foster such theologies.

A strange, perhaps heretical-sounding expression by an Asian Christian can be the symptom of earnest, independent searching and reflection. It might be born from a genuine need to understand God's Word and to reflect on it from a person's typically eastern spiritual approach. In that

case, it would be entirely wrong if we bluntly and insensitively objected to it. What is most important in such situations is that a genuine desire exists to be led by God's Word and to bow before the majesty of what that Word conveys to us. If that desire is present, I believe that we may endeavor to lead such people further down the road of true knowledge with complete confidence and discernment. And then we can also cherish the expectation that Christ's Spirit will gradually lead the churches of Asia more deeply into the truth of God's Word. At this time, then, I do not want first of all to assess the formulations of these eastern Christians critically or to weigh their orthodoxy for you. I will not trouble you by indicating whether they risk the danger of Patripassianism, Docetism, Nestorianism, or some other-ism. Our only concern this afternoon is to reckon with what grip these people have on the gospel and how they have been captivated by the adoration of Christ. [124]

The relevance of this comment to Insider Movement discussions should be obvious. Might it be possible that common ground among disputants could be found in this paragraph?

Directly speaking to the point of "indigenous theology" Bavinck stated that

We are always profoundly aware that an indigenous Christian theology needs to be developed, both in India and on Java, one that works through struggles with Islamic mysticism and Hinduism. The cultivation of such a theology, to be sure, is a task that will require not just years but centuries. But its seed must be sown already now, so that these kernels can germinate and bear fruit in God's time and with his blessing. [304]

The recognition of a need for indigenous theologies assumes the obvious but neglected point that the churches of the West have not fully explicated the unsearchable riches of Christ. The Christian messenger to the non-Christian world must be ready to learn not only local languages and cultures, but

new insights into Scripture based on alternate perspectives of other peoples.

First of all, let us acknowledge that Asian people in general have seen the delicate strands that connect humanity and the world to one another more precisely than we have. For that reason, we can learn all sorts of things on these matters from them. However, of greater importance for our investigation is that we can also better comprehend many things in the Bible that point us to the unity of microcosm and macrocosm. [340]

This stress on what the Western messenger can learn is often in Bavinck's teaching accompanied by a devastating



analysis of the Western world in general. This statement from the penultimate page of the book brings together the exhortation for patience in developing contextual theology with both great faith and bitter realism.

All of this is work that takes a long time. We cannot define ahead of time the lines along which specifically Asian thought about Christ will develop. Many factors exist that will determine that process. A great deal of hard thinking still needs to be devoted to it before people will be able to draw the clear, broad lines running from the gospel to all areas of life and spirituality. But of one thing we are certain, that Christ will increasingly receive and maintain a position of triumph in the world of Asia. We believe that not because the times are so propitious,

but because he is the Conqueror who will not falter but will bind the heart of Asia to the truth of God. At the moment, many factors resist the spread of the gospel in Asia. The example of western Christianity offers Asian people very little that would cause them to hold in high esteem the dominant religion of the West. [410]

At this point Bavinck is demonstrating a deeply self-critical missiology. Considering this comment about the Christianity of the 1930s, one wonders what words Bavinck might find regarding Western Christianity in the early twenty-first century. Similarly, a passing comment suggests that "In the modern world, people's spiritual condition is worse than those within the non-Christian religions" [108].

Bavinck is so profoundly on target in his reticent approach towards developing contextual theology that it seems tedious to quibble with some of his illustrations. Yet this reviewer sees Bavinck violating his own principles at a number of points, and considers it appropriate to draw attention to these points for the furthering of the cause Bavinck so splendidly espoused.

There is a tension this reviewer cannot resolve between Bavinck's apparent use of "guru" for Jesus on p. 389 (perhaps he is just reporting that Asians speak in this way?) and his clear renunciation of using "guru" terminology of Christ on p. 122. In my opinion, Bavinck's rejection of guru terminology is weak and needs itself to be rejected; this is the one blot in his wonderful inaugural address for the chair of missiology. Bavinck's main objection to referring to Jesus as guru is that thus

we place Jesus on a level with all the many gurus known from the days of the ancient Veda poets right up to our own time. [122]

But Bavinck had just insightfully expounded how the apostles shifted from a focus on Jesus as Christ to Jesus as Lord when the gospel moved from the Jewish to the Gentile world [114].

Yet it was axiomatic that there are many lords (1 Cor. 8:5), and Spirit-filled messengers will make obvious that they do not see Christ as just one among many.

Bavinck makes a second point, that “new Christians in [South and Southeast] Asian nations universally shrink back from proceeding on the basis of the guru idea” [122]. Bavinck is simply ill-informed here, as nothing is more natural in India than reference to Christ as guru. For just one example that Bavinck might have been expected to be familiar with, Narayan Vaman Tilak wrote thus of his encounter with Christ:

As a Hindu I had, and still have, a typical respect and love to my guru; and, when Jesus became my Guru, naturally I regarded and loved Him with all the fervour and intensity of a real disciple. I experienced a peculiar fellowship with Him. This much I know, that I could not be happy if I missed Him. (quoted in Winslow 1930[1923]:22)

Bavinck goes on to give a good explanation for why Christians rejected guru terminology;

It is certainly the case that in these churches only a very small beginning has as yet been made in developing indigenous theology. By the nature of the situation, they are still strongly influenced by the mission and the missionaries that preached the gospel to them. Yet, it is slowly becoming possible to investigate how the gospel is being appropriated within the younger churches....here and there we encounter typically eastern ways of thinking and speaking. The most striking examples of this are among those without theological training, that is, those who have not been educated by western theologians at one of the various theological seminaries. Precisely such people, who have not received training in dogmatics, can sometimes express the content of the gospel in their own unique way using thought-forms and images borrowed entirely from their own world. [123]

This is a constant problem in contextualization, that traditional churches

His approach to mission is dialogical: “missionary work is in practice always discussion and cannot be anything but discussion.”

want to hold to the old ways rather than adopt communication that resonates with non-Christian hearers. Bavinck’s rejection of Christ as guru is lamentable.

Bavinck also failed to demonstrate adequate sympathy in an area that he acknowledged as being very complex, which is (in traditional theological terms) the transcendence and immanence of God. In a passage where he is again guilty of reading Hindu traditions as advaitic, Bavinck goes on to say that

Admittedly, in the course of history there have certainly been voices that have proclaimed emphatically that we should worship God as Lord and that in no case should we ever regard him as identical with ourselves (Ramanuja). But in opposition to that position, a whole crowd of thinkers maintained that they had no desire to abandon the typical *hesitation* and *vacillation*. Yes, there were even those who emphatically asserted that God must not be seen as Lord over us, but must be felt as the depth of our own beings. *Atman* equals *Brahman*. This typical *wavering* has received not a little reinforcing on Java from Islam. [307, italics added]

The pejorative terms highlighted above seem unworthy of Bavinck, especially when he proceeds to express the biblical position as “not a simple matter.”

Thus, “we always especially face the problem of doing equal justice to the absoluteness and the personality of God, the incommunicable and the communicable attributes, God’s absolute sovereignty over, and his communion with the world.” Small wonder, then, that it is not a simple matter for us to view clearly the relationship of these matters to one another. Rather than succumbing to the vague, mystical meditation on the depths of Being-in-general that has hypnotized Asia to such a powerful degree, we want to stand on the solid, reassuring

foundation of Scripture that reflects both sides of this matter.⁷ [313]

Scripture does not solve the problem, merely shows both sides, and if we are to be self-critical we are often left wavering and vacillating. Bavinck’s analysis at this point is biased to his own position and unnecessarily harsh towards his opponents.

Reticent Theology

These, however, are rare aberrations in Bavinck’s treatment of other faith traditions. He calls for and demonstrates deep respect and appreciation for ideas and practices which he is unable to accept. His whole approach to mission is dialogical, as in this statement; “Missionary work is in practice always discussion and cannot be anything but discussion” [81].⁸

Bavinck as a rule is careful not to overstate what the gospel offers. For example, on the doctrine of God he grants that there is a “struggle that theology always has whenever it talks about God: on the one hand it may not remain silent about God; but on the other hand it can never adequately express in its own language what it would like to say about God” [312–3]. Talking about “God in the soul” (a sub-heading on p. 319) it gets even more difficult.

It is not easy to respond to all these observations, especially because we sense that, against our will, we are standing here before one of the greatest of all mysteries. Nothing is more difficult for a person to understand than the riddle of God dwelling in the creature, of the presence of eternity in time. In addition, the Bible always speaks of these things with extreme sobriety and care. Thus, only with great reservation and reverence do we endeavor to make a few comments. [319]

Moving to a doctrine that might be thought rather simple and clear, Bavinck has this to say about creation:

All of this is what Christian theology intends when in contrast with the doctrine of emanation it posits the conviction that the world has been created "out of nothing." To think that all puzzles have been solved by this would be foolhardy, for the concept of creation is extremely difficult to comprehend. [327]

This is reticent theology, acknowledging mystery and allowing room for contextual insights to develop. It is a humble theology that is ready to grant insights even where there are disagreements.

In the final instance, Asia experiences life as a reality to a much lesser degree than we do. It regards a person much more as a tiny speck in this world, one with whom the cosmic powers play their capricious game until the notes of the gamelan fade away and the game is over. In the depths of our being, we are only spectators of the world drama, as many eastern poets have reflected. We are really not players in this game, not partners, but we are only silent spectators, momentarily under the impression that we are being carried along on the stream of life until we awaken from the dream and see our true selves again. Now, I do not deny that a great deal of truth is contained in that whole eastern view of life. [384]

Conclusion

Paul Visser in his introduction suggests that "Bavinck's work presents a powerful and authoritative starting point in the cultivation of Reformed missiology" [91]. That is an unobjectionable opinion, but at the current time "Reformed missiology" can hardly be said to exist; maybe this volume will indeed contribute to a start. Yet Bavinck's insightful perspective needs to impact far beyond his own ecclesiastical tradition: his reticence is not distinctly Dutch or Reformed; his embrace of contextual theologies is relevant to other theological traditions; and his exegetical foundation

for thinking about human religiosity is valid for all who honor the Bible.

Bavinck views missiology on a grand scale which humbles the practitioner. His hope lies in God's work over generations, not in gimmicks and fads. He presents a holistic vision of cultures coming under the Lordship of Christ and surrendering their riches to him. This review closes giving Bavinck the last word in expressing that compelling vision.

Culture can only be won over by culture, not by overwhelming people with the fragmented science that we so frequently want to offer to oriental peoples. It is my firm belief that we can be a great blessing to the Asian world only when we are able to provide an alternative model to the fundamental framework out of which they have lived, one that just as completely encompasses all of life and thought as theirs does. This is why one of the greatest issues facing missions in our time is this: Are the Christian churches of our day capable of providing a worldview that is just as fruitful and effective in providing direction for Asian life as their ancient model has been? Mission is much more than simply bringing a few souls into contact with the gospel. It is both an enormous, inner struggle against an entire worldview and an attempt to give birth to a view of all things based on a new set of principles. To attempt to find in the short confines of this chapter something that we could posit as an alternative to the major cosmic scheme of Asia would be foolish. Such matters are far too complicated for that and by their very nature cannot be easily developed; they need to grow slowly. [362–3] *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ This reviewer self-identifies in the tradition of Bavinck, but with missiological knowledge and experience focused on issues in Hindu ministry.

² The quotation is from Bavinck, "Christendom en Cultuuruitingen" in *De Macedonier* 36, 1932:44.

³ The Bavinck quotation is from "De Cultuur-Wijsgerige Studiekring" in *Het*

Trivindoe-Gedenboek Mangkoe Nagoro, part 7, Surakarta, 1939:9–11.

⁴ I have highlighted this in the paper "All Things are Yours" in *Mission Frontiers* vol. 33 no. 3, May–June 2011, accessible at <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/all-things-are-yours> (Sept. 25, 2013).

⁵ The significance of Bavinck's concept of *possessio* was first brought home to me by Harvie Conn in a manuscript he was developing from class lectures on inter-religious engagement. Regretfully, I had to point out that the manuscript was fatally flawed due to dependence on Bavinck in the treatment of Hindu traditions (see further below in this paper), and my proposal to rewrite leaning on Roger H. Hooker's *Themes in Hinduism and Christianity* (itself a bit too deferential to the advaitic stream among Hindu traditions) never came to fruition.

⁶ Cf. Bavinck, "the momentous and dominating problem of the relation between Christian faith and the non-Christian religions" (*The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, p. 81; Visser provides his own translation of this in a footnote to the quotation above, suggesting the "ruling problem for missiology.")

⁷ The quotation here is from Bavinck's uncle, the noted Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, volume 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 117.

⁸ Visser quotes this in his introductory essay, from "Het Evangelie en de Andere Godsdiensten," *Het Zendingsblad* 39, 1941, p. 54.

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