

Herman Bavinck: An Interpreter of Modernity

By James Eglinton

This year marks the centenary of the death of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), the great neo-Calvinist dogmatician, whose intellectual efforts were central to his movement's attempt to draw on the resources of historic, orthodox Calvinism in addressing the new intellectual and social questions of the late modern age. One hundred years ago, he died a household name in his native Netherlands. His declining health had been followed in the national press for some months, a period in which he learned of the first of many schools to be named in his honour.¹ Shortly after this, Bavinck—a member of the Order of the Lion of the Netherlands, and of the Royal Academy of Sciences—died, and received a state funeral.² In the years that would follow, streets would be named in his honour in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Kampen, and Hoogeveen. Indeed, his impact on his native culture is well illustrated by the fact that his eponymous street in Rotterdam, *Herman Bavinckstraat*, did not receive that name until 1983, sixty-two years after his death.³ Clearly, he did not leave Dutch culture unchanged.

Particularly in the final two decades of his life, Bavinck's reach also extended across both the North Sea, and the Atlantic: he became well known amongst Presbyterians in both in the United Kingdom and in North America. In his own lifetime, of course, the extent of that international impact was certainly limited by linguistic factors: while his 1909 Stone Lectures, given in Princeton and later published as *Philosophy of Revelation*,⁴ gave the English-speaking world a powerful introduction to his clear, carefully-reasoned, and culturally-engaging theological voice, the overwhelming majority of his *oeuvre* remained untranslated for most of the twentieth century. As such, in that period, the kind of non-Dutch figures who invoked his name often did so as part of a plea for more of Bavinck's writings to be made available in translation.⁵

In the early twenty first century, of course, those lonely pleas have been heard: Bavinck's *magnum opus*, the four volume *Reformed Dogmatics*,⁶ has been available in English for over a decade, and has become a firm favourite amongst Reformed and evangelical pastors, theologians, and seminarians. This is to say nothing of the impact of the Korean, Portuguese, and Chinese translations of the same work in their respective contexts. Indeed, while Bavinck still enjoys a faint degree of name recognition in mainstream Dutch society—earlier this year, for example, the nation's most popular weekly news magazine, *Elsevier Weekblad*,⁷ carried a story on his life to mark the centenary of his death—it is certainly the case that he is now vastly more influential outside of the Netherlands than he is there. The question of why, a century on from his death, Bavinck

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1. James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), pp. 288–90.
2. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, p. 290.
3. "Vroegere wethouders krijgen straatnaam," *Het vrije volk: democratisch-socialistisch dagblad*, 3 Feb. 1983.
4. Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, eds. Cory Brock and Gray Sutanto (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2018).
5. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, p. 243.
6. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8).
7. Gerry van der Lijs, "Theoloog met grote invloed op het protestantse denken," *Elsevier Weekblad*, April 30, 2021.

has become so popular overseas is itself a fascinating one. Clearly, Bavinck belongs amongst the first rank of theologians in the history of the church. It is widely recognised that he excelled in a kind of dogmatic theology that handled the thought of the ages with great agility, speaking the truth to his own age, whilst always grounding those dogmatic claims in Scriptural exegesis. And through all of this, the distinctively irenic nature of his personality also coloured his writings: Bavinck avoided straw men, for which reason his own theologising was all the more deeply compelling.

However, it is also true that Bavinck is not the only confessionally Reformed theologian in whom we can find a measured sense of gravitas, a profound commitment to the authority of Scripture, a healthy respect for the theological legacy left by the saints of ages past, or a keen sense of theology speaking into the questions of his own day. While Bavinck's account of the Christian faith is superbly fluent, it is not in essence novel. (Rather, as I have argued in an earlier work, the contours and content of the *Reformed Dogmatics* were written as a massively extended exposition of the Apostles' Creed.)⁸ Much the same could be said, for example, of John Calvin, or the great *Nadere Reformatie* theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), or the outstanding early modern Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623–87). For all their worth, none of these figures has found a ready international audience—both popular and scholarly—in the early twenty first century in the way that Bavinck has. The same might also be said of a number of outstanding late modern Reformed thinkers. Like Bavinck, the Old Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield died in 1921. While Warfield's influence has certainly been felt in the twentieth century legacy of the Old Princeton school, he has yet to capture the imagination of a broad sweep of Reformed and evangelical pastors and theologians—across cultures and languages—as Bavinck has in the twenty first century.

Perhaps the most curious question to arise in this Bavinck centenary year is quite simple: why Bavinck? This question might be elaborated along the following lines: why has the historical terrain of the early twenty

first century been so exceptionally fertile for his theology? Why has he been received with such enthusiasm in the present day?

Clearly, it lies far beyond the scope of a single article to aim at a grand argument encompassing the entire constellation of previous confessionally Reformed theologians, from Calvin to Cunningham, in order to explore Bavinck *vis-à-vis* the particularities of their historical reception. Accordingly, such will not be attempted here. It may well also exceed the scope of one article to aim at the same simply for Herman Bavinck. Like all historical phenomena, the reasons for his posthumous popularity are no doubt manifold and complexly interwoven. To commandeer a line from his nephew, the missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895–1964), such historical phenomena “are not easily given to [facile] explanations. We can gather all sorts of material to make clear how they developed, but there always remains mystery in them.”⁹ While there are certainly many reasons for Herman Bavinck's current day influence, any effort to explain them must retain an intentional degree of modesty. It must know its limits.

Despite this caveat regarding its answer, the question itself remains pressing. As has been noted, the rich texture of the answer will certainly elude any article-length account. However, the nature of scholarship is such that important historical-theological questions often do lead to multiple articles that begin to map out the answer. This current article is a contribution to that larger effort, which has already begun—most notably—in Joseph Minich's insightful review article, “A Man for our Time.”¹⁰

Minich presents an argument for Bavinck's importance to confessionally Reformed theology today: in short, it frames Bavinck as precisely *the* theologian needed by our age. In Minich's words, Bavinck should be embraced as “the man for our time.” Of course, the particular nature of such an argument is not identical to a historical account of why Bavinck seems to have become “the man for our time.” Despite their subtle difference, however, the arguments turn on the same hinge. This is identified memorably by Minich: “Bavinck is the Reformed movement's original interpreter of modernity... that very rare guide through the morass of modernity.”¹¹

The striking holism that marked Bavinck's life is no closely-guarded secret. A recent development in Bavinck scholarship has been the growing awareness that his life and work, and personality, are best described those of a polymath. Bavinck was not simply a dogmatician. He also worked as a journalist (as a columnist, and national newspaper editor), a politician (both as a Member of

8. James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 89–94.

9. Johan Herman Bavinck, *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: Kok, 1928), p. 73. “Trouwens, dergelijke machtige verschuivingen laten zich niet verklaren, wij kunnen wel allerlei material bijeenzoeken om het duidelijk te maken hoe het zich kon ontwikkelen, maar ook dan nog blijft er altijd iets van het mysterie in.”

10. Joseph Minich, “A Man for our Time,” *Ad Fontes* 5.2 (Winter 2020): 14–16.

11. Minich, “A Man for our Time,” pp. 15–16.

Parliament, and as a party leader), a biographer, a literary critic, a travel writer, an ethicist, a pedagogue, and a pioneer in Christian psychology.¹² While the polymath label is perhaps new, the all-of-life brand of Calvinism embodied by Bavinck has long been an attractive and well-known feature to many: Bavinck draws readers because he could connect theology to psychology, education, journalism, art, and science. In our own fragmented age, within which Christian faith is often reduced to a mere private concern, that holism has a distinctive allure. In this sense, as Minich has described, he offers Reformed readers a united Christian “guide” through a modern age marked by fragmentation and disorder.

The sense in which Bavinck does so, however, needs careful investigation. For the most part, the urgent social and scientific questions posed by Bavinck’s late modern world now appear antiquated. To highlight two examples from the final years of Bavinck’s life—one social, and the other scientific—Bavinck’s later writings acknowledge that both the domestic washing machine¹³ and Einstein’s theory of general relativity¹⁴ had the potential to change the world (albeit in quite different ways). Although Bavinck was generally a far-sighted thinker, he did not set himself up as *the* theologian to guide the peoples of the twentieth century through those particular modern uncertainties. Rather, Bavinck’s general tenor was to see his theologising as an effort to meet the needs of his own age,¹⁵ and to call for Christians in later generations to do the same in their own eras. With that in mind, the question of why his late nineteenth and early twentieth century life has nonetheless become a compelling and widely-sought guide in the morass that is the early twenty first century becomes all the more interesting.

Why choose a guide to modernity whose own energies were so heavily bound up in very Dutch debates on funding for schools, questions of whether voting rights should be granted to families or individuals, or the insights of late nineteenth century psychology? To what extent can a long dead Dutchman serve as a guide in a world now riven by issues—particularly the reimagining of society around a reimagined concept of the authentic self—that were barely imaginable to many a few short decades ago? Once again, the answer to this is found in seed form in Minich’s recognition of Bavinck not simply as a *guide to*, but more significantly as an *interpreter* of modernity.

The phenomena of modernity come and go—a fact recognised by Bavinck himself. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that Bavinck’s own view of modernity closely resembles Shmuel Noah Eisenstad’s view of “multiple

modernities” (which is to say, rather than being monolithic, modernity is better understood as a process of negotiation within which modern people constantly reconstruct new versions of their modern cultures).¹⁶ Despite the ever-changing phenomena of modernity, its basic essence remains more or less constant. Because a skilled interpreter of modernity is able to move between these points—understanding both the rapidly changing surface conditions, and the plate tectonics slowly playing out far beneath them—the presentation of some new iteration of modernity is not itself a great problem. That interpreter will go on interpreting, for which reason Bavinck’s promise to the current day reader loses little shine despite his specific local contributions to school funding or voting rights or psychology now appearing old and foreign. Rather, these are the applications of a particular Reformed interpretation of modernity—a skill that outlasts whichever debate has flared up today, and will likely be gone tomorrow. As has been noted, Bavinck was the first great Reformed thinker to interpret modernity for those within his confessional tradition. It seems hard to deny that this contribution now plays a major role in his current day reception.

This, of course, is certainly not the only reason for Bavinck’s sudden recent popularity. Lucid expositors of the faith tend to draw a crowd—a rule to which Bavinck is no exception. It may also be that many of those drawn to Bavinck would themselves struggle to articulate the sense in which he attracts them specifically as a Reformed interpreter of modernity. However, it is also true that a need’s existence does not depend on a person’s ability to describe it with great nuance. In 2021, lucid interpreters of modernity also tend to draw a crowd: the rise of Jordan Peterson, Tom Holland, Douglas Murray, and Niall Ferguson bears witness to this fact. That these figures are not theologians or pastors, or speaking in any kind of ecclesial voice, does not seem to have dampened their appeal to a broad Christian audience. To their ranks, we might also add Carl Trueman, a figure who does write from an explicit set of Christian faith commitments, and whose recent book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*¹⁷ has been particularly well received precisely because it provides Christians with an

12. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, pp. xvii–xviii.

13. Herman Bavinck, *De vrouw in de hedendaagsche maatschappij* (Kampen: Kok, 1918), p. 111.

14. Herman Bavinck, *Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*, ed. George Harinck, Cornelis van der Kooij, and Jasper Vree (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1994), p. 62.

15. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, pp. 169–216.

16. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, p. xxi.

17. Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural*

interpretation of modernity that sets out an account of how our current iteration of modern society—divided as it is on issues around sexuality, gender, biology, psychology, and society—came to be.

Amongst the current day interpreters of modernity, Trueman's distinctive contribution has been in highlighting the seminal insights of the Jewish sociologist Philip Rieff (1922–2006)—himself perhaps the twentieth century's most insightful, but certainly underappreciated, interpreter of modernity.

In Rieff's analysis, the history of the West is the history of three worlds. The *first* of these was an earlier pre-Christian phase of Western cultural history in which the world itself was supernaturally charged and governed by the caprice of fate. That ancient world gave way to a thoroughgoing revolution brought about by Jewish and Christian thought. A new world grounded itself on faith, rather than fate. This *second* world was thoroughly theologised—which is to say, it was recast as a creation given definition and norms by its relationship to its Creator. This enabled the development of a new social order, a new thirst for knowledge of a world ordered by God (which itself gave rise to the scientific enterprise), that looked to expand its knowledge on the basis of the insights of previous generations, and that was most fundamentally oriented to an ultimate authority beyond itself: namely, God. For Rieff, this second world was marked by a "sacred order" which was itself rooted in divine transcendence. Norms within the created realm were ultimately justified by a reality outside of it. Sacred order was translated into social order. The world's status as a creation, before its Creator, deeply shapes how the inhabitants of that second world view themselves, their bodies, their social institutions, and their environment—all of which are marked by "sacred order."

Much more recently, this second world has been shaken to its roots by a *third* world. Whereas the second world was tethered to something beyond itself, the third world denies any notion of transcendence or sacred order. Rather, it only seeks to justify itself from within itself. "Every world, until our third," Rieff writes, "has been a form of address to some ultimate

authority."¹⁸ Amongst the most fascinating aspects of Rieff's analysis of this third world is his description of it as an "anti-culture": it exists purely to put to death all that existed in the second world. Everything that older world deemed sacred—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual—must be cast into that great bonfire. Crucially, in his view, this third world does not strive to live without rules. It is not pure anarchy. Different to the second world, however, is the reality that its rules are derived solely from within the world, for which reason, the third world is beholden to flux and instability. It is not that,

absolutely everything is permitted in the third culture. Of course, there are rules. But rules are not interdicts in the manner of divinely commanded and prohibitive truths, as in the second culture.... The third culture believes it can live by infinitely changeable rules.¹⁹

The striking quality of Rieff's analysis lies in its ability to make sense of the modern world in which we now live. In a certain sense, he argued, all three worlds co-exist: we interact with them all, albeit in different and complex ways.²⁰ In real terms, the first world is long gone. However, we continue to encounter it in the imaginings of third world people who fantasise about some fictional and glorious pre-Christian past. (Indeed, as Rieff shows, the third world relies on "recycled" first world tales in order to negate the weight of the second world's sacred order.) In that sense, our modern Western experience with the first world is in this rehashed presentation of the West's pagan past as somehow better than the second world that would follow. More directly, though, we experience both the second and third worlds as present, overlapping, co-existing realities: our period in modernity is starkly divided by those who wish to retain the sacred order of the second world, and those who join the third world's efforts to create an "unmastered world." Some of us cast the world in relation to an ultimate authority that transcends it, and others, in an entirely imminent way, which is to, the world is its own only norm. While—to borrow Nietzsche's term—the third world seeks to "unchain the earth from the sun," in Rieff's view it has a parasitic relationship to the second world. Like Oedipus, it is obsessed with the thing that it exists to negate. In the same way, the third world's *raison d'être* is its undoing of the world by which it was preceded.

In his distinctive idiom and almost unbearably clear logic, Rieff has laid out the mechanics of modernity. He shows that we do not simply inhabit some petty

Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

18. Philip Rieff, *My Life Amongst the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 5.

19. Rieff, *My Life Amongst the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, p. 68.

20. Rieff, *My Life Amongst the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, p. 129.

“culture war.” Rather, we stand on the fault line that separates two *worlds*. The success of Trueman’s work has been to render Rieff’s interpretation of modernity (memorably described by James Davison Hunter as “difficult, intentionally so”)²¹ in an idiom, and in a historical schema, that is not “intentionally difficult.” And like all lucid interpreters of modernity, Trueman has also drawn a crowd.

What, however, does this have to do with Herman Bavinck, and his sudden popularity in the age that experiences this Rieffian “clash of worlds”? As I have shown in *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, his life (and theological development) took place as the third world was beginning to make its presence felt in Dutch culture. Indeed, this Rieffian lens is entirely appropriate in making sense of the two major periods of Bavinck’s theological maturation: the two decades spent teaching at the Theological School in Kampen, and writing the first edition of his *Dogmatics* during the 1880s–90s (which we might title the work of the “young” Bavinck); and the subsequent two decades spent teaching at the Free University of Amsterdam, and revising the *Dogmatics* considerably, from the early 1900s until his death in 1921 (which we might call the work of the “mature” Bavinck).

Why talk of “young” and “mature” phases in Bavinck’s life? Most importantly, in the “young” phase, Bavinck saw himself as inhabiting what Rieff would call the “second” world: his efforts were framed entirely in that context. In the “mature” phase, Bavinck suddenly realised that a revolution was underway: the world he had known was now challenged by something unforeseen and unknown. The mature Bavinck inhabited, wrote within, and responded to the clash of worlds so familiar to us—albeit at an earlier stage of its emergence.

In the 1880s–90s, the young Bavinck served first as a Christian Reformed pastor in Franeker, a small town in Friesland, before his appointment to teach at the Theological School in Kampen. In those decades, he prepared and then published the first edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*,²² became deeply involved in the modern Calvinistic renewal movement led by Abraham Kuyper (later known as “neo-Calvinism”), and served as an apologist for that articulation of the Reformed faith, over against rival (and less conservative) visions of Christianity in the modern world. In Rieffian terms, his intellectual efforts in those decades were very much concerned with in-house “second world” debates. The ideas and key conversation partners from this young phase of life—liberal Protestants, fellow confessionally Reformed theologians, Roman Catholics, and nineteenth

century political liberals (whose moral imagination was steeped in Christianity)—were all drawn from this “second” world.

We might even say that in the 1880s–90s, Bavinck entirely failed to see the “third world” on the horizon. For example, in those decades, he engaged with Dutch atheists who argued that atheism meant no great change for human morality or social order.²³ Their brand of atheism was profoundly moralistic, and—God aside—was utterly, albeit naively, committed to the basic stability of Western culture (particularly with regard to its moral framework). In his interaction with them, Bavinck had little trouble in perceiving that their efforts were to maintain the structure and the norms of (what we might call) the “second world,” albeit without reference to God—and rightly, Bavinck saw that their project would soon run out of steam. The world that they wished to maintain was necessarily tethered to a transcendent ultimate authority. Given time, they would see that the order they sought to maintain was itself sacred, and could not be sustained on exclusively secularised terms.

In the 1890s, Bavinck thought such an effort was doomed to fail, following which he sincerely believed that the Dutch people’s future would soon involve a popular and widespread return to Calvinism. Only Calvinism, he believed, could safeguard the stability of life in the modern (i.e. the “second”) world. It was no surprise to him, therefore, when a number of high-profile Dutch atheists became theists (of one sort or another) as that decade drew to a close, or that Kuyper was elected as the first neo-Calvinistic Prime Minister of the Netherlands in 1901.²⁴ Until that point, we can see some evidence that Bavinck postulated something like Rieff’s “third world”—a strange and chaotic place glimpsed fleetingly in the madness of the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)—although it seems clear that Bavinck could not imagine such upheaval gaining any kind of traction from the masses. The reality on the ground seemed to show that the various challenges posed to Western Christendom in the post-Enlightenment period had actually served to reinforce Western culture’s need of Christianity—a fact that the young Bavinck thought was being confirmed in the historical circumstances of the late 1890s and

21. James Davison Hunter, “Introduction,” in Rieff, *My Life Amongst the Deathworks*, p. xvi.

22. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1st ed., 4 vols. (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1898–1901).

23. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, p. 225.

24. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, p. 211.

early 1900s.²⁵ The fourth and final volume of the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* was also completed at the close of this “young” period. Writing in *De Bazuin*, the Reformed newspaper that he served as editor, Bavinck described his finished work as “the theology needed by our age.”²⁶

However, the ink had barely dried on those words before Bavinck realised that something profound had changed in Western culture. The age (or in Rieffian terms, the “second” world) that he thought safe was suddenly subject to a new and (for Bavinck) almost entirely unanticipated challenger: a new world reimagined on the basis of Nietzsche’s novel brand of atheism. Unlike the moralistic, materialist atheists of the 1890s, whose denial of God was sheepishly intended to strengthen the moral norms of the Western world, Nietzsche’s atheism aimed at the death not only of God, but of everything grounded in theism (and above all, influenced by Christ himself). On those terms, if God has been removed, every norm must be called into question, and every value revalued. In Rieff’s analysis, Nietzsche is perhaps the purest exponent—or stated better, the “prophet”—of the “third” world.²⁷

During Nietzsche’s own lifetime, he was certainly no prophet amongst the Dutch, for whom he was an almost

entirely obscure figure.²⁸ From this period, for example, it appears that Bavinck’s knowledge of Nietzsche was limited to book titles (in particular, *The Gay Science*),²⁹ which seems to have led the young Bavinck to misunderstand Nietzsche’s atheism as fundamentally eudaemonistic, rather than as a philosophy of domination.³⁰

To Bavinck’s great surprise, though, following Nietzsche’s death in 1900, he became posthumously famous, and suddenly so, amongst the Dutch. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* ideal—that of the ideal human as the one who dominates, rather than who is dominated—captured part of the public imagination. It quickly became more acceptable to despise Jesus, and to view his influence on the world—particularly with regard to the weak and the poor—as negative. Nietzsche’s philosophy was popularised and Dutchified by the novelist Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932).³¹ A veritable Dutch cult of Nietzsche sprang up, leading Bavinck to write (in 1902), that, “in his moral philosophy, Nietzsche has only given voice to what lived unconsciously in many hearts.”³² This particular statement marks a turning point in Bavinck’s theological development: in it, we see his recognition that the world shaped by sacred order—the world for which he had written in the 1880s–90s—was much less secure than he had previously assumed; that Western people were far more profoundly estranged from Christianity than he had thought; and that the twentieth century would be riven by hitherto unimaginable divisions.

Writing pre-Rieff, of course, Bavinck did not speak the language of “second” and “third” worlds. Conceptually, however, he saw what Rieff later would: Nietzsche and Christ now stood side by side, in direct competition, as their rival worlds also awkwardly tried to inhabit the same cultural space, one constructively and the other deconstructively. The “age of Nietzsche” had begun.³³

Early in the 1900s, Bavinck articulated clearly that a new chasm had opened up, dividing the worlds in question along the lines of theism and atheism. “In reality,” he wrote in 1904, “there are only two worldviews, the theistic and the atheistic.”³⁴ The world, its norms, and order, can only be tethered to something beyond itself—a transcendent, ultimate authority, from which it gains its basic stability—or exist as wholly untethered, serving as its own norm, and thus in constant moral flux.

From this point on, we clearly see the emergence of the “mature” Bavinck—a thinker changed by a sudden early twentieth century realisation that the nineteenth century had instantly become a far-off place indeed. The sense in which the “mature” Bavinck was a different kind of theologian to his younger self requires further elaboration than can be offered within an article on a

25. The same view that the challenge of the Enlightenment had set the stage for Christianity to emerge in a strengthened form, and save Western culture in the process, was shared by Abraham Kuyper. See James Eglinton, “The Reception of Aquinas in Kuyper’s *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 463.

26. Herman Bavinck, “Dogmatiek,” *De Bazuin*, April 16, 1901. “Dan is zij meteen de theologie, die ons tijd behoeft.”

27. Rieff, *My Life Amongst the Deathworks*, pp. 70–79.

28. For a survey of Nietzsche’s reception amongst Dutch theologians in the 1880s–90s, see James Eglinton, “Dominion and Vulnerability: Herman Bavinck and posthumanism in the shadow of Friedrich Nietzsche,” in *The Ethics of Generating Posthumans: Philosophical and Theological Reflections on Bringing New Persons into Existence*, ed. Calum MacKellar and Trevor Stammers (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 129–31.

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. Thomas Common (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006).

30. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde ethiek*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2019), p. 941.

31. Frederik van Eeden, *De kleine Johannes*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1979).

32. Herman Bavinck, *Hedendaagsche moraal* (Kampen: Kok, 1902). “Inderdaad heeft een man als Nietzsche in zijne zedelijke wijsbegeerte slechts uiting gegeven aan wat onbewust leefde in veler harten.”

33. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, pp. 219–54.

34. Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1904), p. 51. English translation: Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, ed. and trans. James Eglinton, Cory Brock, and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), p. 73.

different topic. (It might be said, however, that the goal of *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* is precisely to chart this development decade by decade.)

Briefly, the “mature” Bavinck changed in two key ways. First, he spent the best part of a decade rewriting and expanding his *Dogmatics* to meet the new needs of a new age. The first edition of the *Dogmatics*, written in the 1880s–90s, is now a largely forgotten text. While it was critically acclaimed in its own time, in its conversation partners and concerns it is very much a theological work for the nineteenth century. The revised edition—approximately 800 pages longer, and revised at many points—is a different beast: it is theology for the church that faces the aforementioned Rieffian clash of worlds. (Had Bavinck never produced a second edition, it is hard to imagine the first attracting sufficient interest to warrant multiple translations in the twenty-first century.)

Secondly, the mature Bavinck developed a general apologetic for Christianity (*contra* unbelief) in addition to his lifelong apologetic for Calvinism (*contra* other articulations of Christianity). His various early twentieth-century publications presented as *Christian* rather than specifically *Reformed* were written in this context: *Christian Worldview*,³⁵ *Christian Scholarship*,³⁶ *What is Christianity?*³⁷ This development was a change by addition, rather than subtraction. The mature Bavinck remained a Calvinist to the last, although he recognised that this new world required an apologetic that functioned at a general Christian level, as well as at a tradition-specific Reformed level. With this, we also see a different strategy in triaging potential interlocutors: whereas the “young” Bavinck busied himself in debate with rival schools of theological interpretation (in essence, fellow inhabitants of the “second” world), at various points the “mature” Bavinck seems to have treated these with less urgency than his conversation partners who had set up camp in the “third” world.³⁸

A century on from Bavinck’s death, of course, the work found in his younger phase is less well known. The bulk of his published and translated works were produced in the “mature” phase (with the recent exception of his *Reformed Ethics*, an unfinished early manuscript that has now been published.)³⁹ The revised *Reformed Dogmatics* now known and beloved by many, as well as texts like *Philosophy of Revelation* and *Christian Worldview*, are products of a phase of life profoundly marked by a vision highly similar to that of Philip Rieff.

In a certain sense, the younger Bavinck was a skilful interpreter of (late) modernity. In his critiques of liberal Protestantism, and of the sort of moralistic atheism that actually depends on Christian metaphysics,

his intuitions about the “second” world were correct. However, the “mature” Bavinck interpreted culture in a more capacious and complex way. His interpretative skills extended far further.

Writing (post-Bavinck) on the complex nature of life at the uneasy overlap of worlds that exist, respectively, to express and to exterminate sacred order, Rieff has argued that, “there are three cultures in which we live simultaneously and individually; therefore not equally. The third culture is predominant.”⁴⁰ And with that, he has summarised the complex and difficult terrain upon which Christians now stand: rival worlds long to ground our lives in transcendent firmness, or imminent flux. In its efforts to exist as an “anti-culture,” Rieff argues, the “third” world functions in a top-down, elite-led manner, and as such, it exerts dominance over the “second” world that it seeks to dismantle. If he is correct—to borrow some of Nietzsche’s own imagery—those who wish to continue to orient life *vertically* (towards a transcendent ultimate authority) rather than *horizontally* (moving “backward, sideward, forward in all directions” because there is no more “up and down”)⁴¹ should expect an exhausting existence as a minority subject to the elite majority’s relentless Oedipal attention.

Being pushed and pulled into, and by, different overlapping worlds is hard, both in understanding how such a thing works, or in articulating what exactly is happening. It is little wonder, then, that lucid interpreters of modernity draw a crowd. While they do not make the experience less jarring, they do make it more comprehensible. In the mature Bavinck, we find the Reformed tradition’s first great interpreter of modernity—a Christian whose holistic (polymathic) life, contextually-attuned theologising, and bold faith bespeak a profound skill in navigating the crosscurrents of our modern age. While this is certainly not the only reason for his significance a century on from his death, it is without doubt one of the most important. ■

35. Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*.

36. Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1904). English edition: *Christian Scholarship*, trans. and ed. James Eglinton, Cory Brock, Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023).

37. Herman Bavinck, *What is Christianity?* trans. Gregory Parker (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2022).

38. See, for example, Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, pp. 147–50.

39. For a critique of *Reformed Ethics* that pays careful attention to the relative immaturity of Bavinck’s thought in drafting the manuscript, see Bruce Pass, “Reading Bavinck’s Ethics,” *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 27.4 (2020): 452–63.

40. Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks*, p. 129.

41. Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks*, p. 79; Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181.