

## The Context of Herman Bavinck's Stone Lectures: Culture and Politics in 1908

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This essay explores the historical context in which Herman Bavinck delivered his Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1908.<sup>1</sup> It takes off from a leading motif in the analysis that George Harinck made of Bavinck's *first* trip to North America in 1892. That tour, Harinck found, was the start of Bavinck's move "van buiten naar binnen," from without to within,<sup>2</sup> a move that would become increasingly characteristic of Bavinck's approach to biblical hermeneutics, to theological reflection, and to the cultural commentary which he built out of both. *The Philosophy of Revelation* lectures, delivered on his second trip sixteen years later, registers the maturation of that approach and documents its time in that "from without to within" was the trademark of a revolution in elite culture that was underway across the North Atlantic world in the first decade of the twentieth century. This essay, therefore, aims to sound the resonances between that cultural movement and the Bavinck of the Stone Lectures—the resonances and the discord between the personal and the institutional, the parochial and the international.

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<sup>1</sup> Bavinck's Stone Lectures were published simultaneously in Dutch, German, and English. For the English publication see Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909*, Princeton Theological Seminary (New York, London, Bombay, and Calcutta: Longman, Greens, and Co., 1909).

<sup>2</sup> Harinck lays out this analysis in his Introduction to a republication of Bavinck's *Mijne reis naar Amerika* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1998). See also George Harinck, "Land dat ons verwondert en ons betoovert': Bavinck en Amerika," in George Harinck & Gerrit Neven, eds., *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006).

The move “outside-in” for Bavinck first required a movement from “inside-out,” Harinck explains. That happened on the 1892 tour in two senses. It happened geographically as Bavinck found some release from the claustrophobic atmosphere at Kampen Theological Seminary in the open spaces of Canada and the USA. It happened theologically as well.



*Kampen Theological Seminary*

In the midst of writing a multivolume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* as an ecumenical theology from a Reformed point of view, Bavinck took the opportunity of this trip to explore some of the broader reaches of that holy catholic church. From these inside-out moves, Harinck argues, could proceed Bavinck's ensuing steps outside-in: the application of received theology to the experience of the reader, of inherited tradition to the felt issues of the heart.

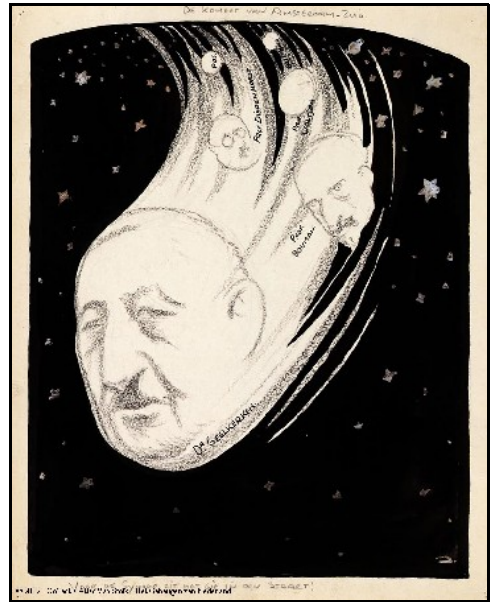
A similar two-way motion characterized Bavinck's 1908 trip. This time he sought an inside-out release not from the compression of church but of political affairs as he had experienced them in the Anti-Revolutionary Party over the previous dozen years. His hunger for open air matched an emerging new mood in the party and in Dutch neo-Calvinism more generally, a sense that old issues had been resolved and a new day stood at hand. All manner of contemporaries perceived that a “young generation” was on the rise, searching for its own voice and a fresh approach fit to the distinctive problems it faced. As it happened, a renovated Bavinck was there to show the way. The seminary professor who wrote theology had become a public intellectual writing on pedagogy, psychology, philosophy, ethics, and eventually the two hot issues of women's rights and war. Though now involved with the whole wide world, Bavinck was still making a procedural move from without to within, from text to psyche, appealing less to formal authority and more to existential need. *The Philosophy of Revelation* stands as a substan-

tial progress report along this new way and as an indication of why the rising generation took its author to heart.

The lectures have a still broader resonance, however. From without to within was the trademark of a broad cultural movement that was welling up across the North Atlantic world at just this time—the culture of modernism. The new Bavinck was a cautious participant of this trend, identifiably swimming in its current nonetheless. *The Philosophy of Revelation* thus gives an early indication of how a sympathetic neo-Calvinist would deal with what came to be the prevalent high culture of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The connection between the political and cultural in Bavinck underscores this linkage in that, at some of its key sites of emergence, the new modernism was precisely a movement from politics to culture, from the frustrations of the outside world to the shimmering possibilities of the world within. Bavinck shared in that impulse as well.

## BAVINCK AND THE CONTESTS OF NEO-CALVINISM

Bavinck's Stone Lectures fell exactly halfway between the two most painful episodes in his professional life. In 1920, twelve years *after* his Stone Lectures trip, Bavinck would pass through the ordeal of the Synod of Leeuwarden, where his denomination, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, having already summoned its members toward greater suspicion of their ambient culture, disciplined one of Bavinck's former students for excessive ecumenism in doc-



A Caricature of J. G. Geelkerken,  
“De komeet van Amsterdam-Zuid,” by  
L. J. Jordaen (Source: *De Groene Amsterdammer*)

trine and life.<sup>3</sup> This ordeal also set in motion a process that led six years later to the ouster from the GKN of the Rev. J. G. Geelkerken and the departure of some other of Bavinck's favorite past students—along with his widow—over charges of liberal biblical hermeneutics. The strain of the 1920 synod precipitated the heart attack from which Bavinck would die little more than a year later, in August 1921.

In 1896, twelve years *before* his Stone Lectures, Bavinck had fought a more successful, yet no less bruising double battle: one against the traditionalists at Kampen Seminary who rejected Abraham Kuyper's notions of theology and theological education, which Bavinck endorsed; the other against Kuyper's one-time prime collaborator and then prime target, Alexander F. de Savornin Lohman.<sup>4</sup>



*Caricature of Lohman (left)-Kuyper struggle in 1892*



*Alexander F. de  
Savornin Lohman  
(1837–1924)*

In the first phase of the Kuyper-Lohman battle, which concerned broadening the franchise in civil elections, Bavinck had largely cheered Kuyper's pro-democratic push from the sidelines. But no sooner was this round over than Kuyper started maneuvering behind the scenes to remove Lohman also from the faculty of the Vrije Universiteit, and here Bavinck served in a lead capacity. As chair of the association that controlled the

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn Tijdgenooten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), reviews these events briefly, 264–66. Substantial detail and analysis are supplied in D. Th. Kuiper, *De Voormannen: een social-wetenschappelijke studie...* (Kok: Kampen, 1972), 252–306.

<sup>4</sup> For greater detail beyond Harinck's able summary in Bavinck, *Mijne reis*, see Bremmer, *Bavinck en zijn Tijdgenooten*, 53–107.

VU, Bavinck plotted with Kuyper to bring before its 1895 annual meeting a motion to conduct an inquest into Lohman's teaching so as to determine whether it proceeded from clearly "Calvinistic principles." The motion being passed, the process and its outcome were virtually foreordained; Lohman was duly removed from his post in 1896.

Part of Bavinck's reward was to be named the featured speaker the next year at the great banquet celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kuyper's editorship at *De Standaard*, the central organ of the entire neo-Calvinist movement.<sup>5</sup> The event by all accounts marked the high point in that titanic figure's long, multi-faceted career. Bavinck rose to the occasion with an oration celebrating Kuyper's success at bringing Calvinism into fresh engagement with the times, restoring it to honor in national life. For the next several years Bavinck seemed to be emerging



*"Abraham the Terrible"*

as Kuyper's heir in the movement. After Kuyper left the *Vrije Universiteit* in 1901 to become prime minister, Bavinck was inducted into his chair as professor of theology. As the highly contested election of 1905 approached, Bavinck was persuaded—against his better judgment and via heavy pressure from Kuyper—to take over as chair of the Central Committee of the ARP since it would not be seemly for the prime minister to function as party chief. Kuyper

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<sup>5</sup> Details on the *Standaard's* 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary fête are given in Roel Kuiper, "Uit de dal omhoog," in George Harinck, et al., eds., *De Antirevolutionaire Partij, 1829–1980* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001), 102–04. The event is interpreted more skeptically in Johan Stellingwerff, *Kuyper en de VU* (Kampen: Kok, 1987), 218–20.

assured Bavinck that his longstanding operatives would handle all the details; Bavinck's job was to deliver a powerful keynote address at the convention and send the delegates off to the hustings at a high pitch of enthusiasm.<sup>6</sup>

Bavinck delivered on demand. Still, his rookie status and his conciliar temperament amid the most divisive election in Dutch history had a role in the confessional coalition's narrow defeat. Kuyper departed in a huff for a long trip around the Mediterranean Sea, which left some of the younger men (Kuyper turned 68 in 1905, Bavinck 51) to pick up the slack. These were then in position to take the reins of government in 1908 when the shaky Liberal Cabinet that had succeeded Kuyper's collapsed. Theo Heemskerk took over as prime minister in what Kuyper expected to be a caretaker role until the national elections in 1909; Heemskerk, Bavinck, and the other "young leaders" thought otherwise. In fact, Kuyper would not lead the Anti-Revolutionary ticket in 1909; Heemskerk and a Cabinet of lawyers and policy activists carried on instead for four more years in office and accomplished a fair bit of the party's agenda.<sup>7</sup> It was just as this silent coup was beginning to take shape that Bavinck quit his position on the Central Committee and put an ocean between himself and the wrath of the old master, which descended in 1908.



Theo Heemskerk  
(1852–1932)  
Prime Minister of the  
Netherlands,  
1908–1913

The instrument of Kuyper's attack was a series of *Standaard* articles that he subsequently published as a brochure, *Our Instinctive Life*.<sup>8</sup> The piece begins with Kuyper's own "fable of the bees,"

<sup>6</sup> George Harinck covers Bavinck's role in the 1905 election in "Als een schelm weggejaagd?" in D. Th. Kuiper and G. J. Schutte, *Het Kabinet Kuyper (1901–1905)* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), 270–73.

<sup>7</sup> See George Harinck, "De Antirevolutionaire Partij 1905–1918" in Harinck, et al., eds., *De Antirevolutionaire Partij*, 134–46.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Ons Instinctieve Leven* (Amsterdam: W. Kirchner, 1908). The bulk of the text is available in English translation as "Our Instinctive Life" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand

more accurately, of the spiders, for whom he shows a fascination comparable to that of Jonathan Edwards two hundred years before. Kuyper argued that the instinctive wisdom of the insects partakes of the wisdom of God; how much more so, he continued, does the practical intelligence of the common people. How much better is this sort of knowledge than that gained by mere “reflection.” Book learning is “artificial” and fleeting, concluded the founder of and long-time professor at a university; the “perfect” knowledge promised us in the next world by I Corinthians 13 will be “spontaneous, immediate, and completed at once”—quite like the practical intuition of the everyday.<sup>9</sup>

Kuyper’s target was clear. The rising leaders in the ARP were proposing to make party processes more collaborative via discussion clubs led by men from the middle ranks; further, to bring professional competence to bear on policy formation by replacing clergy pronouncements with the trained expertise of lawyers and social scientists. Kuyper retorted with some rough sociology. There are three kinds of people in the world, he announced: the large mass of folk who live by practical wisdom, a few genuine scholars of profound and original study, and a chattering class of “amphibians” who roam between these two levels, superficially learned but ignorant of the real life of the commoners whom they were inviting to the policy table. What “the non-learned public” wanted, Kuyper said, was not to take part in policy formation but to hear rival proposals and then “to use their own instinctive life as touchstone” for decision. “For the rest [they were glad] to rely on their leaders.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, that leadership was sealed not in discussion groups but by the powerful oratory that the party faithful loved to hear in election season. They flocked to the party convention from their separate villages to feel the power of a vibrant national movement. As they were swept up by “the *psychology of the crowd*,” the party’s paper statement of principles became their living conviction, and

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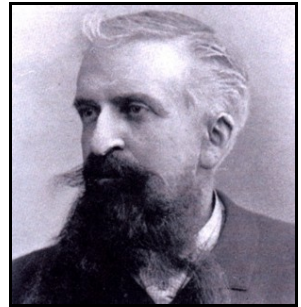
Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 255–77.

<sup>9</sup> Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 258.

<sup>10</sup> Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 267–69, 275–77; Quotations are from pp. 268, 267.

the campaign platform laid out before their eyes the staircase to a better tomorrow. "It is by virtue of the power and animation that radiates from these meetings that we have become who we are," Kuyper concluded. A fourth type of figure had thus come into play, transcending the earlier three of commoner, scholar, and derivative intellectual—"the *genius*" who weaves together academic studies, policy proposals, tactics, and political theory with the eloquence that accords precisely with the commoners "themselves instinctively felt in essence."<sup>11</sup> Given Kuyper's record of oratorical accomplishment, there is no doubt who he thought that genius was.

By invoking the psychology of the crowd Kuyper joined a lively current of social analysis. The phrase was the title of a pioneering work in social psychology recently published by French sociologist Gustav Le Bon that memorably defined how a crowd can become a being in itself, with a will and mind that swept up those of its individual members.



Gustave Le Bon  
(1841–1931)



Max Weber  
(1864–1920)

That process happened under the power of what the German pioneering sociologist, Max Weber, was defining in these years as charismatic leadership. Moreover, Kuyper's *Instinctive Life* appeared the same year that French syndicalist Georges Sorel published his *Reflections on Violence*, which combined Marxism and vitalist philosophy to establish the necessity for some "myth" to motivate the oppressed masses.<sup>12</sup> For Sorel it

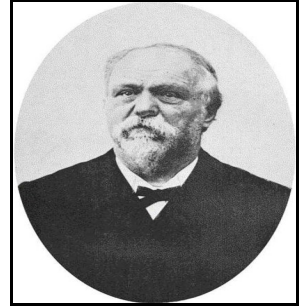
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<sup>11</sup> Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 276, 277, 260.

<sup>12</sup> Gustav Le Bon, *La psychologie des foules* (1895; E.T. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1896). Kuyper alludes to this explicitly, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 264–65. Weber's analysis of charismatic authority was posthumously published in 1922 in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* chapter 3, §10. It appeared in English as "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization," in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (1947). Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908; E.T. *Reflections on Violence*, 1914).



was the myth of the general strike; for Kuyper, the “organic bonds” between leader and people of Calvinistic “instinct.” All this theorizing addressed the future of politics “beyond reason”—that is, beyond the high property and education franchise restrictions that classic Liberals had enforced to keep the promise of Enlightened politics alive. Those barriers had been breached in the turn toward democratic rule that Kuyper had promoted. But democratic movements, in turn, experienced new problems of their own, and Kuyper, along with the more famous contribution of Weber, was addressing these as well: the problem of transition from charismatic to bureaucratic authority. Recognizing that transition to be inevitable, Kuyper intended to fight it as much and as long as he could.



*Georges Sorel*  
(1847–1922)



*Theodor Herzl*  
(1860–1904)

As both a witness and then something of a target of Kuyper’s efforts, Bavinck could appreciate Kuyper’s motives but also feared their consequences. He didn’t have to look into the future of Hitler and Göbbels to see why; he could read about the hysterical anti-Semitism of contemporary political oratory in Vienna or reflect on the wiles of Joseph Chamberlain in fomenting support for

the recent British war in South Africa.<sup>13</sup> “Jingoism” was of recent vintage; so was the new Zionism led by Theodore Herzl in Vienna. Bavinck still had a political future in 1908, but it would be service in the Dutch parliament’s Upper House where learning and calmer reflection were still expected and somewhat insulated from democratic passions. From that position,



*Joseph Chamberlain*  
(1836–1914)

<sup>13</sup> Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980), chapters 1, 4, and 6.

and his post at the VU, he helped write the 1915 brochure, "Leader and Leading in the ARP," which showed beyond all doubt that Kuyper's day was over.<sup>14</sup> But the new day that Kuyper's charismatic populism had helped inaugurate was here to stay, and it formed the political setting in which the new cultural modernism emerged. Many of the movement's great pioneers lived in Vienna, heirs to the bourgeois elite that had helped manage public affairs in the heyday of small electorates and classic Liberalism. The ugly side of the new politics drove the new generation to abandon the public activism of their fathers and seek a more genuine freedom (not to mention sanity) in cultural expressions of the inner self. Bavinck's turn from mass politics toward psychological themes partook of the same impulse.

## THE NEW CULTURAL MODERNISM

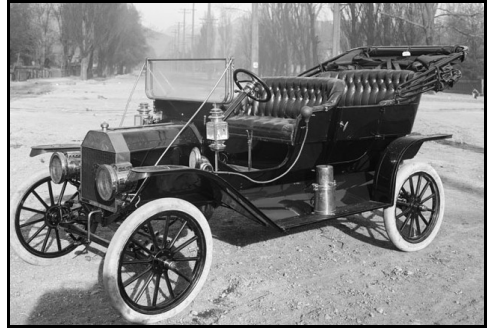
In analyzing the relationship of Bavinck to cultural modernism we need to be very clear about which "modernism" we are talking about.<sup>15</sup> This was *not* the classic theological Modernism that had

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<sup>14</sup> Herman Bavinck, et al., *Leider en leiding in de Anti-Revolutionaire Partij* (Amsterdam: ten Have, 1915).

<sup>15</sup> Secondary literature on Modernism and its emergence is vast. I have been particularly guided by Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, and T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). These two works build upon the following classic studies: H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Re-orientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930* (New York: Vintage, 1958); Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York: Knopf, 1959); and Gerhard Masur, *Prophets of Yesterday: Studies in European Culture, 1890–1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1961). More recent analyses include J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), and William Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). More summary and definitional treatments are available in Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Daniel J. Singal, ed., *Modernist Culture in America* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1991), 1–27; Norman F. Cantor, *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 44–51; and Douglas Tallack, *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (London: Longman, 1991), 147–

arisen in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. That Modernism was an adaptation to the worldview of positivist science and reason which the new cultural modernists now rejected. Nor are we talking about the socioeconomic process of “modernization,” defined as the logic of development that would make “everything predictable and calculable in service of maximum efficiency and the conscious pursuit of profit.” On his 1908 trip to America Bavinck could witness this sort of modernization first-hand in the debut that year of the Model T Ford and the founding of Ford’s great rival, General Motors. The product and the firm epitomized for a generation to come the plague of industrial rationaliza-



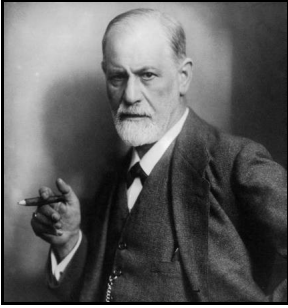
1910 Ford Model T

tion that the new cultural modernists would resist. Near its conclusion Bavinck’s *Philosophy of Revelation* cites Weber’s famous epigram on the type of personality the process wrought: “professionals without spirit, pleasure-seekers without heart; non-entities [who] pride themselves on having mounted to a previously unattained level of civilization.”<sup>16</sup> The new modernists’ perceived mission in life was to redeem and preserve the genuinely human against this modernization. Like the cultural movements of Romanticism, the Enlightenment, and the Renaissance that had preceded it, the new modernism was international and cross-disciplinary. It formed a part of, but a very specific phase in, the “modern” era understood most broadly as having dawned with the Renaissance, Reformation, and European voyages of exploration. The new cultural modernism can be said to have proceeded along the logic of this more generically “modern” trajectory, but at some sites (most recognizably in the arts) it clearly repudiated the early modern agenda. In painting it was defined by Picasso and Kandinsky, in lit-

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<sup>16</sup> Tallack, *Twentieth-Century America*, 11. Bavinck quotes Weber in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 348.

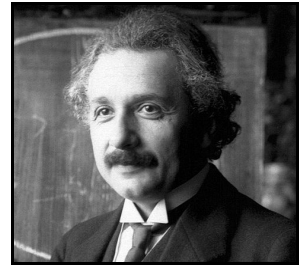


Sigmund Freud  
(1856–1939)

erature by Joyce and T. S. Eliot, in architecture by Gropius and Corbusier. It is *that* modernism which we have in view.

Lest it seem *prima facie* that Bavinck could not belong in this company, we should note that the new modernism, like the other great cultural movements before it, could be open as well as hostile to religious claims, just as it could land Left, Right, or Center on the political spectrum. We should also see that

Bavinck's Stone Lectures fall right in the middle of the brilliant fifteen-year passage in which this movement arrived. William Everdell in *The First Moderns* records its progress year by year. In 1900 the new century was inaugurated with the announcement of three invisibilities at the heart of life: the quantum, postulated by Max Planck, the gene by Hugo de Vries, and the unconscious by Sigmund Freud. In 1901 Bertrand Russell discovered an inescapable contradiction at the foundations of mathematical logic



Albert Einstein  
(1879–1955)

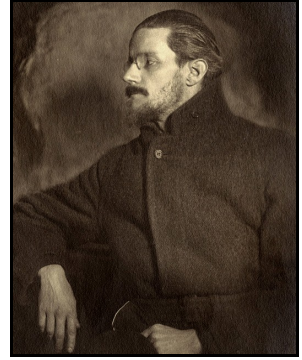


Pablo Picasso  
“*Les Femmes d'Alger*” (1906–07)

that doomed his project to kill metaphysics once and for all; simultaneously Edmund Husserl laid the foundation for a rebirth of Idealism from the necessary workings of subjective consciousness. In 1903 time was broken into sixteen parts per second by the debut of the first mass-released motion picture; in 1905 time was made relative to space by Einstein amid the five papers he published that year which revolutionized physics. The year before, 1904, Weber delivered his seminal

paper on the new sociology at the St. Louis World's Fair; the year after, 1906, Picasso began working on "The Last Supper" of modernism, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon."

In 1907 August Strindberg radically altered dramatic time in the theater of Dream Play; in 1908 Arnold Schoenberg pioneered atonality in music in his "Book of the Hanging Gardens"; in 1909 W. C. Handy moved to Memphis where he started composing the blues of that name upon a syncopated tempo, laying the foundations for a new American popular music. In 1910 James Joyce was at work with the stories that became *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, announcing a definitive turn in fiction. In 1911 Vassily Kandinsky published *On the*



James Joyce  
(1882–1941)



T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

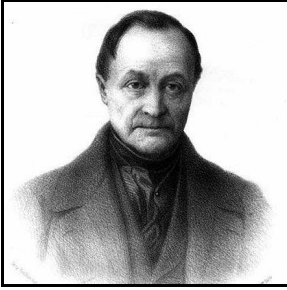
*Spiritual in Art* at the end of the road that had begun with the Impressionists and now got rid of the object in painting altogether. All these beginnings came together in 1913,

modernism's *annus mirabilis*: the Armory Show in New York City, the tempestuous debut of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, the publication of the first volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time (Remembrance of Things Past)*, of Kafka's *Amerika*, of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, of T. S. Eliot's "Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." To repeat, Bavinck's *Philosophy*



"Nude Descending a Staircase,  
No. 2" by Marcel Duchamp,  
Armory Show, New York City,  
1913



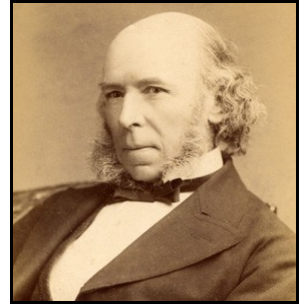


Auguste Comte  
(1798–1857)

of *Revelation* and Kuyper's *Our Instinctive Life* appeared at the midpoint of this process.

Mere coincidence in time might indicate little, however, so let's delve into the assumptions and aspirations of the new modernism to see what part Bavinck might have had in its company. One overriding commonality appears right away. The *bête noire* of Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation* is evolutionary monism—that is, the thesis that all of

life belongs without remainder to a single materialist flow driven by deterministic mechanisms that are decipherable by strictly empirical observation and logical extrapolations therefrom. The new cultural modernism shared his antipathy: it too scorned the monist, materialist, and utilitarian; the mechanistic, positivistic, and deterministic. The most commonly invoked renditions of this worldview had been postulated in the previous generation by Darwin and Marx in their grand narratives of natural and human history, respectively. If those two giants sometimes showed ambivalence toward what was proclaimed in their name, others stepped forward to proclaim the Science of one evolution or another as humanity's new religion. The best remembered of this company of prophets are August Comte and Herbert Spencer, and it was to such assertions as theirs that classic theological Modernism had responded by trimming the sails of Christian dogma so as to save place for Christian ethics. The last version of this cult (in the literal sense of the term) was announced for the new century by Ernst Haeckel in his modestly understated title of 1900: *The Riddle of the Universe at the End of the Nineteenth Century*. As it happened, Haeckel turned out to be the high priest of the past, partly by virtue of the work of the modernists who introduced themselves as prophets of "the new."



Herbert Spencer  
(1820–1903)

Measured not just by their common antipathy but by positive preferences, Bavinck sympathized with the modernists' esteem for the dynamic and the intuitive, for fresh air and the possibilities of freedom. "God is busy doing great things these days," Bavinck proclaimed in his 1911 essay titled none other than "Modernism and Orthodoxy," and one of the best was to have opened the twentieth century to a rebirth of the spiritual.<sup>17</sup> Bavinck would especially appreciate the divine irony at the root of this rebirth, which ultimately went back a generation to doubts that had welled up at the



*Ernst Mach (1838–1916)*

heart of science itself—in fact in the most esteemed of early-modern sciences, mathematics and physics.<sup>18</sup> As philosophers of mathematics discovered in the 1870s, this universal language of science turned out to rest on assumptions, not proof; a point is a postulation, not an objective observation, and number is a convention as much as a "fact." Probing into the heart of matter, physicists in the same decade found that the only way to talk about gases was in the idiom of statistical probability, not of fixed description. The

Viennese physicist Ernst Mach brought these two currents together in 1889, announcing, as an adamant positivist himself, that science's methods force us to conclude that science's fabric is a human contrivance which categorizes sensations according to useful conventions; it was thus incapable of bearing the authority that Comte or Haeckel assigned it. On the cutting edge of science, in sum, the nineteenth century closed with positivism undone by its own hand,

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), 123.

<sup>18</sup> Everdell, *First Moderns*, chapters 3 and 4.

monism fractured, and evolution, if such existed, was indeterminate, as much a function of human will as of natural environment.

### WAS BAVINCK THIS SORT OF MODERNIST?

We can conclude at this point that, the enemy of my enemy being my friend, Bavinck and the new cultural modernism were friends indeed. But did it go further than that? Could Bavinck give more than one cheer for modernism? The answer is nuanced and tentative and lands upon a negotiated middle ground—a characteristic place for Bavinck, of course, but also for modernists themselves. We can proceed by asking how modernists filled the space opened by the collapse of positivist monism and how Bavinck regarded these surrogates. One move they did not make was to revert to the systematic articulations characteristic of Romanticism. In this respect Bavinck had more patience with the new modernists than did the older Kuyper, who insisted on the grand inclusivity that Romanticism promised. As cultural historian Art Berman explains, the new modernism was premised on psychology much like Romanticism had been on philosophy; its German guru was Freud, not Schelling. Both movements privileged art and started the creative process from a turn deep within, but Romantics then tried to soar up to the transcendent to grasp an Absolute higher truth; Modernists gave up on the stars and sought to find a sufficient truth in the self. Romantics looked to artistic genius to mediate between humanity and heaven; Moderns hoped that artistic improvisation might create a spot of human survival on a technocratic earth.<sup>19</sup> Theirs was the consummate turn “outside-in.” To repeat, for Kuyper these reductions would not do at all; for Bavinck they inspired quiet curiosity. Within that framework the new cultural modernism—for all its variety—showed six consistent traits:

(1) It extrapolated *subjectivity* into a radical perspectivalism and (2) consequently endorsed *multiple perspectives* on any subject. (3) It extrapolated from the dissolution of monistic evolution into a *radical ontological discontinuity* and tried to overcome that

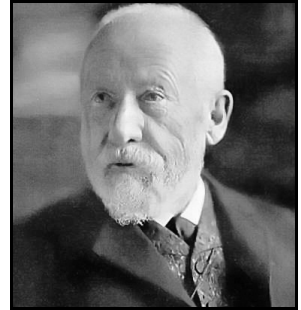
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<sup>19</sup> Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, 5–24.



discontinuity by (4) postulating *narrative* as a self-conscious, therefore limited and relative, view of life. (5) The characteristic tone of these narratives being *irony* (simultaneous multiple tones), the equivalent in fiction or self-understanding of cubist perspective in painting and relativity in physics, (6) tentativeness or *provisionality* emerged as its characteristic prescription for human conduct.<sup>20</sup>

Bavinck's response to this menu as gleaned from his Stone Lectures amounts to a yes-no judgment, "yes-for-awhile" but finally "not enough." Of the new modernist tenets Bavinck could most clearly endorse the first on the list, the inescapable role of perspective in framing human perception, reflection, knowledge, and behavior. Again and again across his later writing he demonstrates the necessary role and formative power of worldview in all we think and do. In this regard he is one with Kuyper and with Kuyper's contemporary Wilhelm Dilthey, the modernist formulator of this approach in the social sciences.<sup>21</sup> Notably, however, it is the systematic integration of perceptions within the worldview frame that Bavinck



Wilhelm Dilthey  
(1833–1911)



Abraham Kuyper  
(1837–1920)

most values; the point of a point of *view* is to give us an intelligible *world*. If Bavinck moves toward that coherence at a somewhat more leisurely pace than did Kuyper, he nonetheless has the final destination clearly in mind as motivating the journey. He is genuinely hospitable toward other points of view he meets along the way

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<sup>20</sup> These generalizations are based on the literature cited in note 15 above. Particularly succinct summaries include Cantor, *The American Century*, 44–51, and Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, 5–24.

<sup>21</sup> On Dilthey, see David Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 82–98; and Masur, *Prophets*, 160–71.

before asserting, typically in the later pages of an essay, a Christian perspective as the stronger option.

Again, the comparison with Kuyper is illuminating. To some extent their differences reflect contrasting temperaments. Kuyper suffered from an acute need for certainty; Bavinck—perhaps from his parents' Seceder piety—seems to have been more patient amid the struggles of faith. Kuyper's Romantic "wholeness hunger," moreover, manifested itself in a relative rush to judgment. His one-cheer for the enemy of an enemy tends to fall, as it were, in the dependent clause beginning a sentence, to be followed by the firm "nonetheless" of critique. Bavinck more typically uses that opening clause to show why he is reluctant to give a third or even a second cheer for a co-belligerent before going on in the main part of the sentence to show why the first cheer is well deserved. Besides personality and philosophy, audience also came into play. Even when he wrote as an academic, Kuyper always had in mind the undereducated rank-and-file of his movement who might not be able to deal with nuance or detail, who needed to be assured in their faith and motivated for political combat. Bavinck's typical cultural-modernist turn away from the masses toward peer professionals, fellow *cognoscenti*, gave him some margin for open exploration. But he would not stay open all the way. At the end, no matter how fragmented reality seemed to be, and how illuminating it could be to explore it as such in this vale of human relativity, Bavinck was sure that it all cohered in God's absolute unity—and that human life could proceed only under that assurance.

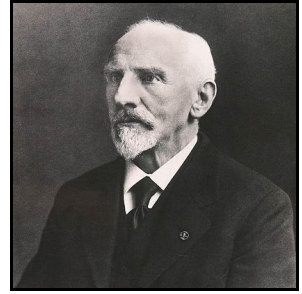
Bavinck's limits on modernist relativity are therefore twofold. First, he did not take its new cultural anthropology to heart. The Stone Lectures manifest a lingering Victorian, and therefore also imperial, confidence in the self-evident superiority of European to other civilizations.<sup>22</sup> Bavinck's narrative typically proceeds by a run from the Greeks through the Middle Ages to the Reformation to the

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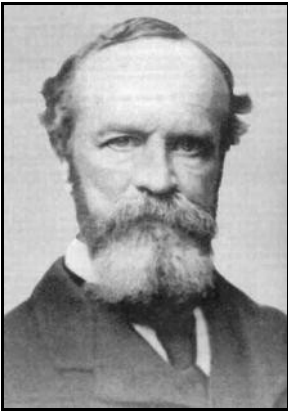
<sup>22</sup> A particularly thorough treatment of Victorianism as premised on a hierarchy of the "civilized" European over the "savage" others is Daniel J. Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

present, concluding that the errors of the day are nothing new under the sun but originated in classical antiquity and can be redressed (just as modernity's real gains can be appropriated) via a reapplication of Reformational insights. Despite his close, persistent friendship with the pioneering Islamicist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, there is in this Bavinck little genuine investigation of other world religions to demonstrate that their answers on the question at hand are really so insufficient

as he claims. Bavinck *asserts* this again and again in the Stone Lectures, but he does not *show* it to even the partial satisfaction of a student of world religions. That grappling would wait for his nephew, J. H. Bavinck. Secondly, Bavinck simply assumed that people cannot live provisionally, without final answers or bedrock assurances. But is this assumption true? William James, whom Bavinck quotes extensively in his later work, thought not; rather, James argued from human behavior that moderns indeed do operate by the provisional, whatever they tell themselves in a pinch and that in fact we can *only* live this way.<sup>23</sup> James's argument is not sociological (i.e., that living by absolutes generates lethal conflict among people of different absolutisms) but rather psychological. Had he known the details of James's life, Bavinck could have argued that it was, indeed, autobiographical.



Christiaan Snouck  
Hurgronje (1857–1936)



William James  
(1842–1910)

The specter of Herbert Spencer's block universe nearly drove James to suicide since it replicated on a scientific level what James' father had declaimed in his feckless journey

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<sup>23</sup> See James's mature essays: *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (1897), *Pragmatism* (1907), and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). Paul Jerome Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James, Volume I: Eclipse of Certainty, 1820–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

down the smorgasbord of pantheisms.<sup>24</sup> In his essay "Experience" (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson, a confrere of James' father, admitted that the Nature he had extolled in his great essay of 1836 had turned out to be an enigmatic surface upon which we bravely skate. All we can do, Emerson concluded in "Fate" (1851/60), is "build altars to the Beautiful Necessity."<sup>25</sup> James the younger voiced the new-modernist response to that classical Modernist judgment in regarding life instead as a billowing sea upon which, bless its murky waters, we are challenged to discover our powers and stretch toward the misty shore. Bavinck the Dutchman knew skating surfaces and billowing seas both, and knew better than these Americans how precious firm ground was beneath one's feet. But whether one needed the assurance of dry ground or only a rhetorical orientation to dry ground depends, finally, on one's worldview. The twentieth century would show that on the level of elite culture, people could indeed live provisionally, however much a Calvinist worldview might affirm that they could not.

We can briefly mention two other disparities between Bavinck and the cultural modernists before turning, in conclusion, to some of their deeper affinities. First, even more than with the Romantics, for the modernists art was religion in the sense of an ultimate commitment.<sup>26</sup> Art was the act by which empirical fact could be infused with human value, where fragmented reality could approach a tentative unity. It is notable then, that of all his later work, Bavinck's biographer R. H. Bremmer passes over his lectures on aesthetics in silence. Just as Weber analyzed religion as one confessedly tone-deaf to its sirens, Bavinck might have been dispositionally immune to the new modernism's sacred site. Secondly, over the long run the new movement's preeminent social and political thinkers vested the search for provisional truths in community, a community created by the energy of perennially searching selves who come upon a

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Feinstein, *Becoming William James* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: J. Munroe, 1844), 35; "Fate," *The Conduct of Life* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1860), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, 33.

middle range (not an ultimate set) of values adequate to the task at hand.<sup>27</sup> That sort of community for Bavinck would have been the church, and his Stone Lectures would have suggested a new ecclesiology. But in fact the church was increasingly a site of frustration for him and led finally to lethal conflict. Bavinck turned instead to revelation as the site of a perennial divine-human interaction that suspended the world in being—at least so long as one parsed the relationship of logos and scripture properly. Bavinck died before that bell tolled for him; his student Geelkerken lived to hear its knell.

We should not end on that note, however, for there is more that is creative and relevant in Bavinck, even for our postmodern times. Let us return to one mark of the new cultural modernism that we have not yet treated and label another one by a different name. First, the renaming mark: What is it to live provisionally other than to live by faith, by the better thing hoped for, the reality not seen in this world? Bavinck's wrestling with the new modernist relativity brought him to the title of what many regard as his best book, *The Certainty of Faith*.<sup>28</sup> The old monists would insist that faith is no certainty at all; James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* would happily grant that faith is a worthy venture for one who has been twice born. The prophecy of the at least twice-born Bavinck was well fulfilled in the fact that the promise of the twentieth century made it possible (and its realities, necessary) to live by faith again, call it what you will. Further, if we recognize that the Christian faith dwells among many in a pluralistic world, believers need not wind up in terminal irony, as if at alternate hours we regard ourselves with a different eye or live by another faith every other day. We can rather live by the old Christian virtue of charity, loving our neighbor, who is unlike ourselves, as ourselves. Perhaps in the process we can gain a new look at ourselves too as we walk on through the relativities of time and space under the aspect of eternity.

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<sup>27</sup>This is especially well articulated in James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–11, 340–94.

<sup>28</sup>Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: Kok, 1901); E.T. *The Certainty of Faith* (Ontario: St. Catharines, 1980).