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HERMAN BAVINCK (1854-1921)  
A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Herman Bavinck on Antirevolutionary Politics  
*by George Harinck*

# Herman Bavinck on Antirevolutionary Politics

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## Introduction

Though Herman Bavinck is well known as a theologian, he also played a substantial role in Dutch politics. He was a member of the Antirevolutionary Party, he served as manager and president of the Central Committee, the executive board of this party, and the last decade of his life he was a Senator, a member of the Dutch First Chamber or Senate. In his context, other theologians were also active in politics and served as representative in city councils, provincial or national political bodies: Abraham Kuyper in the first place, but also his former fellow student in Leiden, professor Gerrit Wildeboer, his Kampen colleague Maarten Noordtzijs, Rev. A. Syb Talma, and the Leiden professor Bernard D. Eerdmans, to name a few.

Bavinck played a larger political role than most of his contemporary theological colleagues. However, evaluating his activities in the political domain, obituaries and historical publications have not stressed his work as a politician, but only his reflections on politics. He was not called a politician, but a statesman, a role somewhat exalted above political wheeling and dealing. Bavinck himself distinguished between politics as an academic discipline, as an art, and as a praxis. The praxis is about the tact of a politician, to speak or to act in such a way that serves best the state's interest. The art of politics is the application of political science to the given situations and relationships.<sup>1</sup> He was not a lawmaker, not a keen debater or agile in making deals, not much involved in closing ranks, organizing a majority, or canvassing voters, nor was he busy with negotiating in the corridors of parliament. His distinctive contribution was somewhere in between the art and the praxis of politics, offering broader perspectives on topical political issues, and he was much appreciated for his well formulated and thorough speeches. As such, he was really at home in the *chambre de réflexion*, as the Senate is called.

This assessment fits in the popular picture we have of Bavinck as a reflective theologian, more specialized in giving overviews and perspectives, and less attracted by the day-to-day struggle in church or in politics. This is not the full story, however. Bavinck was not an academic living in an ivory tower. His worldview would not

1. Herman Bavinck, "Ethiek en Politiek," *Stemmen des Tijds* 5 (1916): 35.

allow this. He wrote about Calvin: he “in particular poured the luster of godly glory over the whole of earthly life, and he placed all of natural life in the ideal light of eternity.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin’s “new concept of the catholicity of religion . . . also displayed a social and political character.”<sup>3</sup> In the context of natural life, the political life was explicitly mentioned by Bavinck: “Also the civil and social and political dimensions of life are governed by the one law of God. Here we encounter an *inner catholicity*, a religion that encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, “The gospel is a joyful tiding not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation.”<sup>5</sup> To Bavinck, the praxis of politics was not a duty only, it was calling as well. And his personal fascination did not lead to avoiding politics either. He was interested in society and actively followed the political struggle and debate of his days. He often had a pronounced opinion about what happened at the Binnenhof in The Hague, the center of Dutch politics, and shared it with others.

In this contribution I leave the popular view of the detached theologian aside and analyze Bavinck’s opinions on political developments and issues within the Antirevolutionary Party, and along the way, the party and how its leaders operated. My leading question is what specific contribution Bavinck made to the party machine and politics of his days. This focus on politics and the party is rare in Bavinck research.<sup>6</sup> In order to restrict myself, I will not pay much attention to his more academic reflections on politics, or to international politics (e.g. the League of Nations), nor to his involvement in ecclesial debates to amend article 36 (on the civil government) of the Belgic confession, or his speeches and debates in the Senate.

### **Bavinck’s Interest in Politics**

It is not clear if Bavinck’s father Jan Bavinck was interested in politics or if the Bavincks talked about politics at home, but the first sign of Herman’s fascination for politics is from June 1873, when he, an eighteen-year-old student at Zwolle’s gymnasium, made a note in his diary on newly elected members of the Second Chamber. These were the years in which the antirevolutionary movement, in search for focus and organization, was being transformed from a movement into a party. This transformation included a change of leaders. Guillaume Groen van

2. Herman Bavinck, “John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of his 400th Birthday, July 10, 1509–1909,” trans. John Bolt, *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 84.

3. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church” [1888], *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 238.

4. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 222.

5. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 224.

6. An exception is R. H. Bremmer, “Herman Bavinck. Theoloog onder politici,” in *Personen en momenten uit de geschiedenis van de Anti-Revolutionaire Partij*, ed. C. Bremmer (Franeker: T. Wever, n.d.), 65–75.

Prinsterer (1801-1876) had led the antirevolutionary movement until the elections for the Second Chamber in 1871. In the early 1870s, his successor, Rev. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) entered the stage. In 1872 he founded an antirevolutionary daily newspaper, *De Standaard*, and the next year he decided to exchange the pulpit for the parliament. On 21 January 1874, he was elected to the Second Chamber and he was sworn in on 20 March.

As a student in Kampen and Leiden (1873-1880), Bavinck was captivated by this development. The first time he saw Kuyper was when the new member of parliament, 36 years of age, lectured in Kampen, on 24 March 1874. In these months Kuyper toured the country—Utrecht, Leiden, Amsterdam, Kampen, Gouda—with his published lecture on “Calvinism as the Origin and Stronghold of Constitutional Liberties,” which went into a second edition the same year. In this lecture, Kuyper presented himself as a *Christian* liberal and his main thesis was that Calvinism, not liberalism, had provided civil liberties. Law student Theo Heemskerck (1852-1932), a future prominent member of the Antirevolutionary Party, but at the time still a liberal, attended Kuyper’s lecture in Leiden on 4 March and discovered that Kuyper was not a reactionary politician, but “a radical democrat.”<sup>7</sup> Some weeks later Bavinck heard the same lecture in Kampen and shared in the sympathy of his fellow-students with Kuyper’s Calvinistic plea “for the principles of true freedom.”<sup>8</sup>

In Leiden, Kuyper’s lecture had been received by a large audience of professors and students as remarkable, and on 4 and 16 November 1874, he returned to Leiden on request to discuss his lecture. Bavinck had moved to Leiden that Summer and was present the first time (we do not know about 16 November), when one hundred and fifty people listened to a debate between Kuyper and Heemskerck. That evening, Bavinck wrote in his diary: “Oh, I enjoyed so much Kuyper’s . . . .”<sup>9</sup> Bavinck admired Kuyper, and in the Spring of 1875 he bought a photo of him to adorn the wall of his room in Leiden.<sup>10</sup> Together with the Leiden law student Christiaan Lucasse (1852-1926), like him a member of the Christian Reformed Church, he subscribed to *De Standaard*.<sup>11</sup> And he marked in his diary the day Groen van Prinsterer died, 19 May 1876. In 1878, he signed the famous People’s Petition in favor of Christian education, and so did his father. Politics was never far away in Bavinck’s student life, and when

7. Arno Bornebroek, *Een heer in een volkspartij. Theodoor Heemskerck (1852–1932), minister-president en minister van justitie* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2006), 42.

8. Report on Kuyper’s lecture in Kampen in *De Bazuin*, 27 March 1874, quoted in James Eglinton, *Bavinck. A Critical Biography* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2020), 64–65.

9. C. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1966), 32: “O, zoo’n genoeg genad in K’s” (translation by James Eglinton)—the sentence is incomplete. Bremmer is mistaken about the place where Bavinck heard Kuyper’s lecture: it was not in Leiden, but in Kampen. Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 79; Bornebroek, *Een heer in een volkspartij*, 43–44.

10. George Harinck, “‘Eén uur lang is het hier brandend licht en warm geweest.’ Bavinck en Kampen,” in *Ontmoetingen met Bavinck*, ed. George Harinck and Gerrit Neven (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006), 111.

11. Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1922), 34.

in 1879 the Antirevolutionary Party was founded, it soon became Bavinck's political home. As a tax-paying minister in Franeker in 1881, Bavinck got the right to vote.

In the 1880s Bavinck was not an active party member, but this changed in the 1890s. As representative of the antirevolutionary constituency of Kampen, he attended the meeting of deputies of 30 March 1894 in Utrecht, where the extension of suffrage was debated.<sup>12</sup> After a dramatic split on this issue in the Antirevolutionary Party, a complete new Central Committee had to be elected. On 29 April 1897, Bavinck was elected as one of the fifteen members of the Central Committee of the party at the meeting of the deputies in Utrecht. Out of almost seven hundred votes, Bavinck won 644. He was a popular candidate, for only four out of the fifteen elected members got more votes.<sup>13</sup> At the same meeting he was elected as assessor, again with an overwhelming majority; Kuyper was elected as president. As one of three members of the executive committee, he now became a key part of the political machinery of the Reformed, representing the democratic wing among them, and he remained a member of this paramount board of the party until the end of 1909 when he left the political arena, with the aim of focusing on his academic work.<sup>14</sup> However, when asked in 1911, he became antirevolutionary candidate for the Senate, was elected, and was a member until his death. Though urged by Kuyper in 1913 to revoke his withdrawal as member of the Central Committee, he did not give in. One of the reasons was his dislike of minister Talma's social legislation.<sup>15</sup>

## Joining a Party

Why was this party relevant to him? In the first place, Bavinck was positive about the formation within the Dutch political system of a party as such. This might seem obvious, but the need for this new phenomenon in Dutch politics—the Antirevolutionary Party was the first political party organization in the Netherlands—was disputed among orthodox Protestants. According to D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818-1874), one of the founders of the Ethical Theology or *Vermittlungstheologie* in the Netherlands, parties as such were objectionable constructs. Bavinck elaborated on his view in the book on his theology, which he published in 1884.<sup>16</sup> There is no absolute opposition between revolution and anti-revolution, Bavinck described De la Saussaye's position,

12. Minutes public deputy meeting, 30 March 1894. *Papers ARP Centraal Comité*. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

13. Minutes public deputy meeting, 29 April 1897. *Papers ARP Centraal Comité*.

14. This was the reason given in the newspapers, f.e. *Het Vaderland*, 24 December 1909. There were other reasons, he wrote in his diary, without being specific. Bremmer, *Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 232. See also Kuyper to Bavinck, 13 March 1913. *H. Bavinck Papers*. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. This letter of thanks on the occasion of his departure from the Central Committee refers to his resignation in 1909.

15. Bavinck to Kuyper, 26 December 1912. *A. Kuyper Papers*. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

16. Herman Bavinck, *De theologie van prof. dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye* (Leiden: Donner, 1884).

for the situation we live in is a mixed one, and one should not make a choice between its principles. The starting point for politics should not be choosing sides, but the freedom of the individual conscience in both church and state. From his viewpoint the French Revolution was both a liberation and a judgment. He did reject liberalism as a principle, but he appreciated its goal of true humanity. A party could never reach at such a nuanced view and would exclude the other instead. Bavinck summarized De la Saussaye's position in 1884 as follows:

Separation of our people in two parties: liberals and antirevolutionaries, is impossible and impermissible. Impossible, because liberalism can be strictly orthodox and high-church, and among orthodox Christians is much liberalism, among liberals much anti-liberalism; outside of the antirevolutionary party there are antirevolutionaries. Impermissible, because by joining the antirevolutionary party, the other is branded as non-Christian and revolutionary, and many don't want to do this.<sup>17</sup>

De la Saussaye did not want the political victory of an antirevolutionary party, but a moral victory of individual Christians. Groen's motto, "in isolation is our strength," was true as far the relation between man and God, but this motto should not be applied to those in society or politics who do not share the Christian faith. This position implied that De la Saussaye preferred not to choose sides in the political dispute about a Christian or a neutral public school, or between orthodox and liberal in the church. All antitheses should be resumed in a higher synthesis. He favored Christian education, but he wanted to reach this goal via the church and through faith, and not via politics, as was the route Groen chose in 1869.

De la Saussaye's ideological foundation for not joining the Antirevolutionary Party may not have been adopted by other Protestants, but his reluctance to join a Christian party found support and was widespread among orthodox Dutch Protestants, the so called ethical-irenic.<sup>18</sup> Their reservation was that politics or party organization was not the right means to reform society, or for that matter, the church. They were negative about the political domain, for reaching concrete results would involve give-and-take with others who might have different motives. Historian Annemarie Houkes describes it like this: "While liberals rejected the mixing of faith and politics, because faith would impure politics, [ethical-irenic] rejected the same mixing, for it tarnished faith."<sup>19</sup> Groen called these orthodox Protestants "politicophobes," but they

17. Bavinck, *Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 19: "Scheiding van ons volk in twee partijen: liberalen en antirevolutionairen, is onmogelijk en ongeoorloofd. Onmogelijk, want het liberalisme kan zelfs star-orthodox en hoog-kerkelijk zijn, onder de rechtzinnigen is veel liberalisme, onder de liberalen veel anti-liberalisme; veel antirevolutionairen is er ook buiten de antirevolutionaire partij. Ongeoorloofd, wijl men juist door aansluiting aan de antirevolutionaire partij de tegenpartij als onchristelijk en revolutionair brandmerken moet, wat velen niet willen doen."

18. Annemarie Houkes, *Christelijke vaderlanders. Godsdienst, burgerschap en de Nederlandse natie 1850–1900* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2009), 200–202.

19. Houkes, *Christelijke vaderlanders*, 203.

were with many: only a segment of the orthodox Protestants joined or voted for the Antirevolutionary Party.

In the second place, the position of De la Saussaye had something attractive to Bavinck. It implied no separation from others, but an ongoing conversation between different worldviews in earnest pursuit of truth, like he himself practiced and enjoyed in his correspondence with his friend Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) ever since his student days. However, looking back in 1894, Bavinck concluded robustly that the divide in orthodox-Protestant circles between ethical and antirevolutionaries had already surfaced in 1869, when Groen made the school struggle through a political issue.<sup>20</sup> At the time this had not yet been crystal clear to him. In 1879, Bavinck confessed to his liberal friend Snouck Hurgronje that his opinions were not yet fixed: “All sorts of issues entail that my sympathies are anything but on the side of one direction or party, and that for now at least, my conscience forbids me from joining myself to anything, and that I prefer to seek my spiritual food where I am certain that I will find earnestness.”<sup>21</sup> In 1881, however, after becoming a Reformed minister in Franeker and having edited the seventeenth-century orthodox Reformed *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, he concluded more firmly than he had done before, that any reconciliation or *Vermittlung* between Reformation and Revolution at any point, in principle and in method, in its view of God, man and world, was impossible.<sup>22</sup> He realized that this position might disturb Snouck Hurgronje and was not received well in the liberal circles at Leiden university. Bavinck’s professor of practical theology and New Testament, J. J. Prins, wrote him that he appreciated his analysis of De la Saussaye’s theology, but could not share Bavinck’s position. For Prins, this was a bad kind of separatism. The Christian should function in society as leaven, and Prins disqualified Bavinck’s position as “sectarian.”<sup>23</sup> Would his Leiden friend Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje think the same? He wrote him in December 1884 that he did not aim at a sectarian position, but that his personal experience after his Leiden days—what he called his “historical dip”<sup>24</sup>—had taught him that a *Vermittlung* of heterogenous principles and worldviews would not lead to anything. “One must choose or share, one says; I think, the only thing that applies here is

20. Herman Bavinck, “Theologische richtingen in Nederland,” *Tijdschrift voor Gereformeerde Theologie* 1 (1894): 186.

21. Herman Bavinck to C. Snouck Hurgronje, 4 August 1879, in *Een Leidse vriendschap. Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje over christendom, islam en westerse beschaving. Herziene editie*, ed. Jan de Bruijn and George Harinck (Hilversum, Verloren, 2021), 51. Translation by James Eglinton.

22. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 7 March 1882, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 89.

23. J. J. Prins to Bavinck, 2 October 1884, quoted in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 111.

24. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 23 December 1884, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 109.

choosing; there can be no talk of sharing.”<sup>25</sup> Bavinck’s nature might have made him hesitant on choosing sides, but his Reformed convictions made a choice unavoidable. He had to be antirevolutionary, whatever his reservations were.

Thirdly, this party was relevant to him because of the practical results of its antithetical position in the 1880s. In 1886, Bavinck wrote Snouck Hurgronje about the political debates in parliament on the nature of the public school, and defended the antirevolutionary position, arguing that a public school for all, propagated by the liberals, would only be possible if everyone would be indifferent on religion and would share the opinion that religion does not need to and should not have an influence on one’s life and worldview.<sup>26</sup> The opposition of his party led to a victory for the Roman Catholic and antirevolutionary parties, and to the first Christian coalition cabinet Mackay (1888-1891). This resulted in what Bavinck called “the pacification of 1889:”<sup>27</sup> a new law on education that recognized and facilitated Christian education—the first and principal legal step, leading to the plural educational system that was fully realized in 1917.

Bavinck’s principled support of the Antirevolutionary Party in the 1880s and of the educational struggle that was at the core of the party’s policy, did not mean he was uncritical about the way the party and its leader Abraham Kuyper operated. He kept his reservations, but the “barbs and vilifications” from liberal and ethical-irenic side strengthened his allegiance, so the party kept the sympathy of his heart.<sup>28</sup> In a private letter Bavinck estimated that it was the neutral principle of the liberals that raised the antipathy in society against orthodox Christianity.<sup>29</sup> But Bavinck did not always appreciate the way Kuyper polemicized in the press. In 1888, Bavinck admitted to Snouck Hurgronje this often hindered his appreciation. Where did isolation shade into rejection of the other? He gave as examples how Kuyper defended extensively in *De Standaard* an antirevolutionary member of parliament, one who had criticized a liberal politician in a rude way, and also how he abused his polemic power to object to the critical remarks of Bavinck’s friend Henry Dosker on the synod of the *dolerende* synod and humiliated him.<sup>30</sup>

25. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 23 December 1884, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 111. Translation by James Eglinton.

26. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 7 May 1886, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 116.

27. Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde. Rede ter inleiding van de deputatenvergadering, gehouden te Utrecht, op 13 april 1905* (Hilversum: Witzel & Klemker, 1905), 9.

28. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 1 January 1887, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 117. Translation by James Eglinton.

29. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 2 December 1888: “Obviously, I could be wrong and I hope so, but often I imagine that precisely because of its principle of neutrality, liberalism gives rise to, and feeds, antipathy towards Christianity as we view it. And that strengthens me, when I consult my own heart.” De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 122. Translation by James Eglinton.

30. Bavinck aan Snouck Hurgronje, 22 December 1888, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse*



## Independence

Religion and politics were not at odds in Bavinck's view, for religion was not too fair for politics, and politics was not too foul for religion. This was the foundation of his political commitment, and he repeated this opinion many times, but he only made it his own after having doubts about independence, isolation, *Vermittlung*, and cooperation. On several occasions later in his life, Bavinck looked back at the political history of his times and reflected on these themes. Compensation for his unsteadiness in his younger days can be detected in texts from the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s, in which he stressed the characteristics of the Antirevolutionary Party as independent and cooperative in a restricted way.

Looking back on the genesis of the Antirevolutionary Party, Bavinck noted in 1902 that Groen van Prinsterer broke the antirevolutionaries free from the conservatives and envisioned their potential future as an independent political tradition. To Bavinck this independency was vital. Groen's "work of purification" was continued in the 1870s by Kuiper, his successor: "Any merger of antirevolutionaries, Catholics and conservatives was combatted. Any unhealthy triple alliance policy, any false party formation based on general Protestantism or generic Christianity was condemned and rejected on strong principle."<sup>31</sup> It was like Bavinck corrected his own development in those years, which he will have condemned in retrospect as unsteady.

Kuiper's strategy was successful, as it turned out in 1878, when on his initiative the People's Petition was presented to the King, signed by more than 450,000 persons. Bavinck called this "a powerful testimony to the spirit that was aroused in the nation in favor of religious schools."<sup>32</sup> Even though Bavinck wrote these lines decades later, one can still sense his enthusiasm then about this development: independence was the way to go.

In the early years of independent political development there was no coherent set of antirevolutionary ideas at first. This only developed after 1872 when Kuiper started *De Standaard*, coordinated the activities of local election societies, founded a Central Committee, "drew up a program of principles which he fully elaborated and interpreted,"<sup>33</sup> and published as "*Ons program*" (Our Program). There was a longing for unity and cooperation, and tens of thousands attended the deputy meetings of the party beginning in 1879. We do not know if Bavinck was among them at the first meeting in 1879, but in 1915 he wrote as if he had been present: "There was no envy,

*vriendschap*, 121. See also: H. E. Dosker to Bavinck, 23 March 1889, in "*Men wil toch niet gaarne een masker dragen.*" *Brieven van Henry Dosker aan Herman Bavinck, 1873–1921*, ed. George Harinck en Wouter Kroese (Amsterdam: Historisch Documentatiecentrum, 2018), 97–98.

31. Herman Bavinck, *Samenwerking. Referaat gehouden op den 14en Bondsdag van den Nederlandschen Bond van Jongelingsverenigingen op Geref. Grondslag [9 mei 1902] te Amsterdam* (Ermelo: Vereniging De Gereformeerde Jongelingsbond, [1902]), 5.

32. Herman Bavinck, *A General View of the Netherlands, Number XVII. Mental, Religious and Social Forces in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Eduard Ydo, 1915), 36.

33. Bavinck, *A General View*, 34.

no one was at odds with other, but one *prayed together*. It was a delightful time. A time that attracted and invigorated. There was a warm connection of brothers, like had seemed impossible in our splitful Netherlands.”<sup>34</sup> Bavinck added that Kuyper still enjoyed looking back to these years, and it is clear from Bavinck’s writings he did as well.

Bavinck was careful not to glorify those years of independence and of organizing the party, or to look back melancholically. In 1915, Bavinck stressed that those former decades were no better than the days in the 1910s, the last decade of his life. In retrospect, he analyzed that in this decade the struggle for the Christian school was the primary source that unified the antirevolutionaries. For the people in the country this was the one political issue that moved their hearts, for here the connection between their religion and politics was obvious. Other issues did not interest them as much, nor did other issues unify them like the Christian school did, as Bavinck demonstrated by referring to the disputed founding of the *Vrije Universiteit* in 1880, the church split of the *Doleantie* in 1886, and the party rupture over extension of the suffrage in 1894.<sup>35</sup> This footnote to the image of unity should not only be applied to the party’s history, but also to Bavinck’s legacy, as we have seen.

## Cooperation

In retrospect, Bavinck also paid attention to the fact that the Antirevolutionary Party, though coherent and focused, represented only a segment of Dutch society. The number of antirevolutionary representatives in the Second Chamber grew in the 1880s from 11 out of 86 in 1879, to 27 out of 100 in 1888, but they were a minority party, and could never reach political goals without cooperating with other parties or groups in parliament. The party’s influence on Dutch politics “cannot be explained by its own growth in strength alone,” Bavinck wrote, “but was to a large extent due to the aid of the Roman Catholics.”<sup>36</sup>

After the independence of the party had been consolidated, cooperation was the way to go.<sup>37</sup> The unwitting alliance of the years before 1871 now made place for deliberate cooperation. It was the isolation of the party’s principles that made practical and realistic cooperation possible, Bavinck stressed. Practical and realistic reasons were championed: the reason for cooperation was a shared interest, so it should not develop into a calling, a duty, ethical impulse, or self-sacrificing love leading to institutional cooperation. Further, cooperation should not be determined by profit or perceived benefits. In 1902, Bavinck warned about the temptation of power, especially since the cooperation with the Roman Catholics, since 1888, had turned

34. A. Anema, H. Bavinck, P.A. Diepenhorst, Th. Heemskerck en S. de Vries Czn, *Leider en leiding* (Amsterdam: W. ten Have, 1915), 10.

35. Anema, *Leider en leiding*, 26, 27, 41–43.

36. Bavinck, *A General View*, 34.

37. Bavinck, *Samenwerking*, 5.

out to be politically successful: “Before we know it, we give up our independence, we start concealing, and then go on to renunciation of our principles, and we cannot turn back anymore, in fear for the discovery of the smallness of our power.”<sup>38</sup>

In this context Bavinck also pointed at a shadow side of the notion of common grace, which became popular in the 1890s, to defend the antirevolutionary cooperation in parliament with Catholics, liberals, and social-democrats alike: “The neutral zone, where cooperation is considered to be possible, increases in width, until interest goes over duty, success over right.”<sup>39</sup> In sum, Bavinck’s message was to be careful, and he offered this warning at the heyday of the Antirevolutionary Party and of cooperation with the Catholics in a coalition cabinet, at the time of the Kuyper cabinet (1901-1905). He had not advocated participation in the government in 1901 in the Central Committee of the party, but preferred the isolated and oppositional position of the party in parliament. On the contrary, Kuyper wanted the party to govern. “Despite his great gifts, it will be difficult for him to meet expectations with regard to education and social legislation,” Bavinck wrote his lifelong friend Snouck Hurgronje.<sup>40</sup>

## Freedom

Bavinck’s choice against *Vermittlung* and for an independent political party did not mean he was isolating himself from society. To the contrary, he wanted to convince his environment that his Christian position was not alien to humanity. Bavinck was not merely concerned with tolerating other viewpoints, for he sought an appreciation of the diversity of views: “May principle remain pure and unadulterated, but I wish to apply this to the whole of human life, in all the breadth it allows.”<sup>41</sup> Opponents of the Anti-revolutionary Party often feared this party aimed at a despotic, theocratic future, excluding dissidents. Bavinck often had to explain that his party not only did not aim at such a future, like he did in 1896. His practical objection to this fear was

A Calvinistic State, a favored Church, an extension of the Reformed religion to the whole nation, are out of the question. The situation has totally changed since the time when these things were possible. Church and State, religion and citizenship, have been separated forever. Unbelief has permeated all classes and alienated a great part of the people from Christianity. To the alarming fact that unbelief is increasing on all hands, the Reformed do not close their eyes.

38. Bavinck, *Samenwerking*, 11: “En eer wij het weten, geven wij onze zelfstandigheid prijs, komen wij tot verzwijging, straks tot verzaking van onze beginselen, en durven en kunnen niet meer terug, uit vreeze voor de ontdekking van de kleinheid onzer kracht.”

39. Bavinck, *Samenwerking*, 12: “De neutrale zône, waarop samenwerking mogelijk wordt geacht, neemt in breedte steeds toe. Totdat eindelijk het belang boven plicht, het succes boven recht gaat.”

40. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 21 March 1902, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 135. Translation by James Eglinton.

41. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 23 December 1884, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 112.

They do not wish to reestablish, and have no desire for the old conditions to return. They heartily accept the freedom of religion and conscience, the equality of all before the law.<sup>42</sup>

Alongside this practical argument he also provided an additional reason, based on the Reformed world- and life view:

(...) according to Reformed principles, God has accorded to state, home, and society the peculiar power and authority proper to each; beside them stands the church with its own government granted to it by Christ. Subjugation of the church by the state or of the state by the church are thus both condemned. They both need to respect one another and also to support and aid one another. Pressure from either one is excluded. The church may indeed desire that the government of the land be directed by Christian principles and profit from the revelation of God's grace, for state and society have also been damaged by sin and need God's word to guide and direct, but here too grace does not nullify nature.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to realize this latter statement from his Kampen 1894 lecture on common grace about the Reformed position was not a theoretical, or specific theological stance only. It was also a positioning amidst liberal and ethical-irenic political alternatives. To Bavinck there was a direct link between political practice and his theology, as theological diversity resulted in political diversity. He showed this in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, where he connected the perspicuity of Scripture to the freedom of the Christian, and called its clarity "the origin and guarantee of religious liberty as well as of our political freedoms."<sup>44</sup> Here he echoed the message of the political speech of Kuyper he attended in 1874, be it that Kuyper grounded the civil rights in the Calvinistic freedom of conscience, and Bavinck dogmatically in the perspicuity of Scripture. He called the freedom of religion and conscience, the equality of all before the law "the good things which God has given."<sup>45</sup> Bavinck lived in what historians labeled as "the Age of Liberalism" (1815-1914/1930s). These rights and this equality are usually seen as the fruits of liberalism. But Bavinck has a different take when it comes to the Dutch political context of the late nineteenth century. Like Kuyper, he blamed the liberals for not being liberal enough, and grounded civil freedom and equality in Reformed theology.

42. Herman Bavinck, "The Future of Calvinism," trans. Geerhardus Vos, *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5 (1894): 13.

43. Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace [1894]," trans. R. C. van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 63–64.

44. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 479.

45. Bavinck, "Future of Calvinism," 13.

## **Democratic and Social**

To Bavinck this was not a confessional issue only; it was antirevolutionary political practice. In his view the Antirevolutionary Party was at the head of the movement for civil rights, and radically so. This resulted in a conflict within the party between the conservative and democratic wings on the extension of suffrage, which led to a rupture in 1894. Bavinck sympathized strongly with the democratic wing. He knew his democratic tendency was seen as too radical by fellow-orthodox Protestants and others, and he was suspected of a secret alliance with Socialism.<sup>46</sup> And indeed, the first left wing radical that was elected in the Second Chamber in 1888, Fedinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, won his seat with support of antirevolutionary voters, who were hinted to support him by Kuyper in *De Standaard*: do not vote for a liberal candidate! He agreed with Kuyper that radicals of all sorts have the same civil rights as anyone else, but social issues were not at the core of Bavinck's political interests, and unlike Kuyper he did not expect much of social legislation and did not think it would be able to reform society.<sup>47</sup> He was worried that material needs would dominate the spiritual needs. The latter issue had his main attention, and this issue was addressed in educational laws.

Education was Bavinck's social issue *par excellence*. To him the growth of the Socialist movement in the Netherlands, starting in the 1890s, was an expression of the growing priority of society over the state, and not of the relevance of class struggle: "This socialism does not, therefore, affect one class, that of laborers, but *all* classes, those of farmers, the industries, merchants, teachers and clerks, and men, women, and children in all circles of society. It concerns not one party only, but all parties and tendencies."<sup>48</sup> To him, the fundamental error of Socialism was the undermining of religious, moral, and legal foundations.<sup>49</sup> While Kuyper is known for his "architectural critique" of the structure of society, formulated at the Social Congress of 1891,<sup>50</sup> organized by the Antirevolutionary Party among others, Bavinck at the same congress did not criticize the structure of society.<sup>51</sup> He was in favor of preventing poverty and averting accumulation of capital, but did not show awareness of the dramatic disruption of society caused by capitalism, and the corrective role the state could play through social legislation. To the contrary, he stressed that social

46. Bavinck, "Future of Calvinism," 13.

47. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 21 March 1902 and 20 November 1903, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 135, 139.

48. Bavinck, *A General View*, 49.

49. Herman Bavinck, *De opvoeding der rijpere jeugd* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1916), 97.

50. Abraham Kuyper, *Het sociale vraagstuk en de christelijke religie. Rede bij de opening van het Sociaal Congres*, op 9 November 1891 gehouden (Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1891), 16.

51. See on Bavinck and the Social Congress: Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 181.

relations were a matter of authority and obedience first, and legislation would not set aside social differences and inequalities.<sup>52</sup>

As to social relations in the economic sector, in 1902 he opposed party members like Syb Talma (1864-1916) who viewed employer and employee as equal parties, and stressed the biblical calling of submission.<sup>53</sup> Social inequality was a given, according to Bavinck at the Social Congress, and when Talma objected and asked if social conditions should not be changed, he denied by giving the example that a king would be deplorable if he had to eat rye bread, and that a laborer should not exceed himself with beef and wine.<sup>54</sup> Social issues were not his main interest. In contrast to those primarily concerned with material needs, during the Kuyper cabinet, Bavinck's conviction grew that in politics, and in culture in general, a "theistic collation"<sup>55</sup> had to be forged of Christians and of "everyone who appreciates religion and morality, who believes man does not live on bread alone."<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, in short, was conservative when it came to social politics.

But when it came to the extension of suffrage, Bavinck belonged to the democratic wing of the party. This became clear in the conflict between the democrats and the conservatives in 1894. This meant that he supported the antirevolutionary and Catholic organic idea of extending voting rights to all households as opposed to the individual voting rights the Socialists and some liberals advocated. It was in this context that he became active in the party. He had contacts with local electoral unions in the party to secure their support of extension of the suffrage, like in Harderwijk, Kampen, and Apeldoorn, and recommended Kuyper someone as Kampen's new mayor. He visited the antirevolutionaries in Nijkerk to convince them of the democratic course. Informing Kuyper about the opinions of the various local unions, he wrote: "Let me thank you with all my heart and bring you my sincere tribute for the excellent and powerful way you snatched the Antirevolutionary Party from the danger of conservatism."<sup>57</sup> Later that year Bavinck repeated his opinion to Kuyper: "The people, our people, are on your side. The future is without doubt to the

52. Herman Bavinck, "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891)," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 13, 2 (Fall 2010): 443.

53. Herman Bavinck, "Heeren en knechten," *De Bazuin*, 9 May 1902; Gerard van Krieken, *Syb Talma (1864-1916). Een biografie* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2013), 106-107.

54. Van Krieken, *Talma*, 52.

55. See: George Harinck, "The Religious Character of Modernism and the Modern Character of Religion: A Case Study of Herman Bavinck's Engagement with Modern Culture," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29:1 (Spring 2011), 74-76. Bavinck would expand on this theme extensively in *Modernisme en orthodoxie. Rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 oktober 1911* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1911).

56. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 32.

57. Herman Bavinck to Abraham Kuyper, 22 April 1894: "Laat me U ten slotte hartelijk mogen danken en U mijne oprechte hulde mogen bieden voor de uitnemende en krachtige wijze, waarop gij de Antirev. Partij aan het gevaar van het conservatisme hebt ontrukkt." *Kuyper Papers*.

Christian-democratic development of our program.”<sup>58</sup> In 1896 he called on Kuiper to make the paragraphs on education and the church in the party program more explicit. Education had his special attention, and in 1903 he longed for a final solution of this issue.<sup>59</sup> As to the church, Bavinck advised Kuiper to seize the moment, and to speak out in the election program for 1897 against any preference for the *Hervormde Kerk* and severing the financial ties between the state and this denomination. Now the party had to be reorganized after the conservatives had left: “The *Hervormde Kerk* is and stays the largest obstacle in the application and effectiveness of our principles.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Bavinck’s Maiden Speech as a Politician**

Bavinck’s Central Committee membership also implied that he had to promote and lead the party. One of his duties was addressing antirevolutionary electoral unions. On 14 April 1899 he gave a speech in Rotterdam to the provincial meeting of electoral unions in Zuid-Holland on “Antirevolutionary politics”—a speech he would also deliver in the next two years at provincial meetings in Middelburg, Haarlem, and Kampen. He was seconded by Talma, who addressed these meetings on social politics. In this maiden speech as a politician, covered extensively by the newspapers, he gave a sketch of what antirevolutionary politics entailed. Since the speech was never published, what follows is an extensive summary.

Bavinck, now addressing his audience in his new role of a politician, started with objections made by fellow orthodox-Protestants who distanced themselves from the Antirevolutionary Party. This subject was close to his personal development towards independence. Bavinck stressed that “politics as such is not a sinful business, in which confessors of the Lord should not be involved. Those who believe in God Almighty and in Jesus Christ, who has come, not to judge but to convert the world, and possesses all authority in heaven and on earth, cannot hate politics as Satan’s business.”<sup>61</sup> God’s providence is nothing but the godly act of governing, and since man has been created in His image, in a derived sense politics is the art of governing. This reveals the high authority of governments, serving God in revenging evil.

The government as God’s servant is key to the antirevolutionary view of politics, continued Bavinck. The art of governing is the prerogative of the state. Its authority

58. Bavinck to Kuiper, 1894: Het volk, ook ons volk, staat aan uwe zijde. En de toekomst behoort zonder twijfel aan de christelijk-democratische ontwikkeling van ons program.” *Kuiper Papers*.

59. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 20 November 1903, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 139.

60. Bavinck to Kuiper, 12 November 1896: “De Hervormde kerk is en blijft voor de doorwerking en toepassing onzer beginselen de grootste struikelblok. Er biedt zich in jaren wellicht geen geschikter gelegenheid aan, om deze kwestie in het program op te nemen, dan juist thans, nu vele nieuwe kiezers aankomen en de partij opnieuw moet georganiseerd worden.” *Kuiper Papers*.

61. Report in *De Standaard*, 15 October 1900. The text of Bavinck’s speech has not been preserved. My summary of his speech is based on reports in *Het Vaderland*, 15 April 1899, and *De Standaard*, 15 October 1900.

has often been abused by despotic and tyrannic rulers. The French Revolution denied this divine authority, rejecting God's rule. Antirevolutionary politics is a reaction to this revolution. It was not possible in the ages before 1789, Bavinck argued, and is in its essence fruit of the times, and modern in structure.

This modern character was an important accent in Bavinck's speech. The party's principles dated from paradise, he said, but its expression was up to date. It did not aim the restoration of a Protestant nation with a public church like in the days of the Dutch Republic, and did not oppose democracy, but it was favoring modern society. When the School law of 1857 had been adopted, which created a "neutral" stance of the state, respecting everyone's conviction but excluding religious confessions, Groen van Prinsterer opted for the neutral state. Not on principle, but if the orthodox-Protestant confession was averted, then the non-Christian likewise: "no sham-neutral state".<sup>62</sup> Bavinck used this argument and proposed to close theological departments at state universities (including the one in Leiden!), and a full separation of church and state. The Antirevolutionary Party demanded no interference with the spiritual interests of the nation from a state claiming neutrality. Such a state has no authority in religious matters and, according to Bavinck, has as its main task only to protect the civil liberties and equality for all its citizens. The state had to serve the free development of society.

This neutrality stance, which in practice meant choosing for a plural public domain, was opposed by orthodox Protestants. They complained that the party, which according to *Our Program* of 1879 promoted a Christian state, in fact accepted a neutral state. According to Bavinck this was a misunderstanding. The Antirevolutionary Party still rejected a neutral state, for neutrality is a false claim. The Dutch state at present is not neutral, explained Bavinck, but coerced unbelief. It was a pantheistic state in disguise. School, church, and university have become functions of the state, he argued. This state is opposed by the Antirevolutionary Party, and consequently, it is the only political party that defends the civil rights of the people. Similar to Roman Catholics joining the Reformed in their fight against Spain in the sixteenth century, so all who oppose the violent pantheistic state should support the party.

Bavinck illustrated his argument by referring to the proposed law on compulsory education. The party opposed this law, for "freedom is the characteristic of the antirevolutionary policy."<sup>63</sup> It desired freedom for the church, and therefore demanded separation of church and state, and it desired freedom for Christian primary education. He recounted the history of the struggle for this freedom, and how the compulsory education law was the most recent attempt to save the public

62. *De Standaard*, 15 October 1900.

63. Report in *Het Vaderland*, 15 April 1899.



school. He expected the moribund public school to disappear. “The free school for all,” was the party’s slogan, and some liberals already had started to support this goal. He warned the party not to stop this fight for freedom and said: history will show if we appreciated freedom more than equality and fraternity!

The fight for freedom did not stop at primary education. Freedom was also desired for secondary and higher education. A free Theological School in Kampen and a *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam already existed, but higher education as such was still dominated by the state. If the state claimed to be neutral, this freedom should be granted. Finally, freedom was desired for the Dutch people as whole, especially for the weak. And as the party of freedom, it even desires freedom for the communist, the socialist, and the anarchist, for above all, God reigns. Their press and public action should not be limited. The antirevolutionary policy is not a policy of coercion and force, but one of law and justice for all. In any respect, it is the party of freedom.

While the socialist newspaper *Het Volk* qualified Bavinck’s speech as “learned,” Kuyper in an editorial in *De Standaard* praised Bavinck’s first performance as antirevolutionary politician, together with Talma. Theirs was a new voice in the antirevolutionary choir, both progressive and national. He hoped their texts would be published and recommended to give these speeches in other provinces as well—the latter actually happened. What Kuyper appreciated was their message

that our party has a higher calling than promoting the interests of our own circle; the plea for our principles implies a calling for the fatherland as a whole. (...) We cannot be missed in the circle of national politicians, for we have a viewpoint that is promoted by no one else; but then the historic character of our position must be stressed, and at the same time it has to be shown that it creates a life form in the present. Because both speeches move in this direction, they are prelude to the fight that awaits us anew in the present future.<sup>64</sup>

So this much is clear, Bavinck had entered the political arena successfully. The independence and cooperation in the name of freedom, that were elementary to Bavinck’s view of antirevolutionary politics, had come together in his speech. It is interesting that he built this notion of freedom not on Kuyper, who was criticized by other orthodox Protestants, but on Groen, whose name was trusted in wider Protestant circles than the Antirevolutionary Party only. While Kuyper had argued in “*Ons program*,” contra the liberals, that the state should not be secular, but build on the natural knowledge of God,<sup>65</sup> Bavinck labeled the liberals as pantheists and required them, in line with Groen, not to interfere with religion in any way. Kuyper promised liberty in 1879, and Bavinck in 1899 could show that his was the party

64. *De Standaard*, 16 October 1900.

65. Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program. A Christian political Manifesto* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 57–74, esp. 66.

of freedom, based on the results of the Mackay-cabinet. Bavinck's use of the term neutrality was not very practical though, and in the history of the Antirevolutionary Party, Kuyper's argument that religion guaranteed freedom became dominant.

### **President of the Antirevolutionary Party**

Unlike Talma, Bavinck was never considered as a minister in a cabinet or a member of the Second Chamber. Bavinck had no ambition in this direction either, for he was too reflective for the heat and pace of day-to-day politics. The audience of his political speeches appreciated his thoughtful opinions and his warm sympathy for the party, and Kuyper was enthusiastic about the impulse he gave to antirevolutionary politics, but he would never become a demagogue or a sharp debater, though he did give it a try with his qualification of the Dutch state as "pantheistic" and the Antirevolutionary Party as the "party of freedom." But again, these qualifications were too high-brow to arouse the enthusiasm of the rank and file in the party.

Bavinck was not a politician in the first place, but he assumed political responsibilities when asked. After being installed as prime minister in 1901, Kuyper was reluctant to step down as president of the Central Committee of the Antirevolutionary Party, which was his leadership post of the antirevolutionary movement. He finally resigned in 1903, on a temporarily basis, and the oldest member of the Central Committee assumed Kuyper's duties. In November 1904 Kuyper asked Bavinck to give the speech at the meeting of deputies as the starting point of the election campaign in 1905.<sup>66</sup> In the next month it became clear that a more active president was needed as well. Kuyper and the members of the Central Committee knew only one acceptable substitute: Bavinck. He did not aspire to become the party's president, but after consulting several insiders, he accepted the position of acting president: "I am not looking forward to it at all and judge myself incapable for *this* position," he wrote Kuyper. Further, he continued, "I am placed in front of it by others, without me desiring it. Thus, it came to my mind, if in this way I was confronted with God's providence to which I had to give in. In any case, given this thought, I miss the courage to decline your request."<sup>67</sup> Kuyper and Central Committee members assisted him, but the next half year, until the elections in June, Bavinck was deeply involved in party business: selecting candidates, deciding on the party strategy, discussing with dissenting groups, etcetera. It is reasonable to suggest his professorship must have suffered in these months. Appeasement with *hervormde* groups and with more socialist inclined antirevolutionaries caused him a lot of trouble.<sup>68</sup> His leadership was

66. See: Kuyper to Bavinck, 25 November 1904. *Bavinck Papers*.

67. Bavinck to Kuyper, 29 December 1904. See: George Harinck, "'Als een schelm weggejaagd'? De ARP en de verkiezingen van 1905," in: D.Th. Kuiper and G.J. Schutte (red.), *Het kabinet-Kuyper (1901–1905)* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), 271–73.

68. See: George Harinck, Roel Kuiper and Peter Bak, eds., *De Antirevolutionaire Partij, 1829–1980* (Hilversum: Verloren 2001), 123–29.

mainly coordinative because he was not leading into battle, like Kuyper had done in election campaigns for thirty years. In this hard anti-Christian election campaign, the resilience the party sought was in fact was about only one issue: would Kuyper stay as prime minister, or would he have to step down?

The most important public event of his presidency was the speech he gave at the deputy meeting in Utrecht on 16 April 1905. In this speech, titled “Christian and Neutral Politics,” Bavinck evaluated the aims and results of the Kuyper cabinet. The program the cabinet presented had been moderate, but explicit in its aim to build on the Christian foundation of society. He stressed that this Christian coalition cabinet had functioned above party lines and served the nation’s interest. It was disappointing to him that the left (the Christian parties were called right, the liberal and social-democratic or socialist were left) had not acknowledged this.

What obstacles had the Kuyper cabinet met? The railway strike of 1903 was a severe threat to society. Bavinck qualified this strike in his speech, saying, “a revolution, an anarchy, a victory not of rights but of force, an unlawful relocation of authority.”<sup>69</sup> The strike, one of the largest civil disturbances in modern Dutch history, dissipated without any bloodshed, and laws were adopted to prevent a next serious threat to social-economic life.<sup>70</sup> The leftish parties were opposed to this reaction by the cabinet and held that the rights and the authority were with the people, who delegated part of it to the government. “The people have rights, the government has duties,” Bavinck quoted a liberal jurist, who commented on the role of the state in the days of the railway strike.<sup>71</sup> To the opposition, the government should have given way to the demands of the people. To Bavinck the authority of government – delegated by God, as we have seen – was at stake in this issue.

A similar obstacle was met by the cabinet in 1904 regarding the debate about a new law on higher education. The prospect that higher education would be free, and Christian universities would have the same rights as public universities was to the liberals “the demise of science and the extinction of public universities.”<sup>72</sup> In both the railway strike and the higher education debate an accommodation or agreement was not possible. The opposition was antithetical, even though no alternative had been presented. The left side was negative only.

For Bavinck, the Antirevolutionary Party met the demands of the new times, like the withdrawal of church and state in favor of society. His party promoted and facilitated this tendency. He called his party a *radikale Fortschrittspartei*—a party of radical progress.<sup>73</sup> Christians are always progressive, he said, if they understand their

69. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 9.

70. James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper. Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 309–311.

71. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 13.

72. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 15.

73. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 44.

confession in the right way. And then followed some raging sentences in his speech that are characteristic for Bavinck:

They go in the new situations in state and society, of philosophy and science, of literature and art, of profession and business; they investigate everything and preserve the good. They are no praise-singers of the past times and do not wail idly about the miseries of the present, but they intervene and reform according to the ideal they face. Even though they know that on earth things will never be set right before the second coming of Christ, and though this protects them from superficial optimism, they still work and do not get tired and never despair. No repristination, no maintaining of the status quo, but reformation is their motto.<sup>74</sup>

Like his lecture from the late 1890s on antirevolutionary politics, Bavinck assessed the neutrality of the state as an impossibility: “Neutrality has promoted the dominance of unbelief, the subversion of religious and ethical foundations in society. Maintaining of spiritual goods, the “spiritual powers,” and Christian principles is therefore the most important task that rest on the shoulders of the government today.”<sup>75</sup> The Antirevolutionary Party did not want to impose Christianity on society, it only wanted to prevent any enforcement of the neutral character of neutrality. Bavinck therefore called the distinction between state and society most relevant, arguing:

The state does not have the calling to take the work of society’s plate and accomplish what has been commanded to the family, the community, to church and school, to science and art. . . . But the state has to take care of the general interest, for the general welfare, for the ‘salus publico,’ and therefore has to create such conditions, that makes it possible to citizens, family and society, to science and art to fulfil its task and to flourish.<sup>76</sup>

74. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 30: Zij gaan in in de nieuwe toestanden van staat en maatschappij, van wijsbegeerte en wetenschap, van litteratuur en kunst, van beroep en bedrijf; zij onderzoeken alles en behouden het goede. Zij zijn geen lofzangers van verledene tijden en staan niet werkeloos te jammeren over de ellenden van het heden, maar zij grijpen in en hervormen naar het ideaal, dat hun voor ooggen staat. Zelfs al weten zij, dat het hier op aarde nooit in orde komt vóór de wederkomst van Christus en al worden zij daardoor voor een oppervlakkig optimisme behoed, zij werken toch en zitten nooit moedeloos bij de pakken ter neer. Geen repristinatie, geen handhaven van het status quo, maar reformatie is hun leus.

75. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 33: “(...) neutraliteit heeft de heerschappij van het ongeloof, de ondermijning van de godsdienstige en zedelijke grondslagen van ons volksleven in de hand gewerkt. Handhaven van de ideale goederen, van de „geestelijke machten”, van de christelijke beginselen is daarom de voornaamste taak, die heden ten dage in ons vaderland op de schouders der overheid rust.”

76. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 35–36: “Het is de roeping der overheid niet, om der maatschappij het werk uit de handen te nemen en de taak te volbrengen, die aan huisgezin en gemeente, aan kerk en school, -aan wetenschap en kunst is opgedragen. (...) Maar wel heeft hij te zorgen voor het algemeen belang, voor de algemeene welvaart, voor de „salus publica”, en dus zulke uitwendige verhoudingen en bestaansvoorwaarden te scheppen, waardoor het aan de burgers, aan huisgezin en

He ended his speech in praise of politics as “the high and delightful art to reign a people according to God’s will, in accordance with its character, history, and calling He granted.”<sup>77</sup>

Kuyper praised Bavinck’s leadership of the deputy meeting and his speech.<sup>78</sup> Though Bavinck was hopeful about the elections, the Antirevolutionary Party lost. The parties on the right side won the vote (343,000 over 280,000), but lost too many constituencies, winning only 48 out of 100 seats in parliament. The Catholics kept their 25 seats, but the Antirevolutionary Party lost 8 of its 23 seats, partly because the *hervormde* antirevolutionary minded people voted for parties that opposed the antirevolutionary separation of church and state from society, and the cooperation with Catholics.<sup>79</sup> The liberals now took on the government again, be it only for two and a half years.

## Leadership

Bavinck was disappointed about the result of the 1905 elections, but he did not blame his party or his leadership for the loss, only the dissenting socialist-minded antirevolutionaries and de *hervormden*.<sup>80</sup> Though he was hesitant in 1901 about the party joining the government, he now saw positive aspects in this loss as well. He wrote Snouck Hugronje in early 1906: “Although I clearly had not expected or hoped for the former cabinet’s defeat, I regard it as no especially great loss; it contains a wise lesson for our party, and I did indeed wish that they had gained more benefit from it. I refrain from joining in the endless criticism of the present situation, that has now become the order of the day.”<sup>81</sup> This quote reveals his distance to the general opinion within the party. Bavinck had become weary of the political hassle he had been in the last year. He admitted to Snouck Hurgronje that politics had a demoralising influence, but he did not want to attribute this to politics as such. The depraving side of politics had to do with the corrupted nature of man, according to Bavinck. This side may be more visible in politics than elsewhere, but it was present in trade,

maatschappij, aan wetenschap en kunst mogelijk is, om elk hun eigen taak te volbrengen en tot bloei te geraken.”

77. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 39–40: (...) de hooge, heerlijke kunst, om een volk te regeeren naar den wil van God, in overeenstemming met het karakter, de historie en de roeping, die Hij eraan schonk.”

78. Kuyper aan Bavinck, 15 April 1905. *Bavinck Papers*.

79. Jurn de Vries, “Hoedemakers rol bij de val van het kabinet-Kuyper,” *Tijdschrift voor Religie, Recht en Beleid* 11 (2020): 80; D.Th. Kuiper, *De voormannen. Een sociaal-wetenschappelijke studie over ideologie, konflikt en kerngroepvorming binnen de gereformeerde wereld in Nederland tussen 1820 en 1930* (Kampen: Kok, 1972), 163.

80. Anema, *Leider en leiding*, 13.

81. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 16 January 1906, in De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 148. Translation by James Eglinton.

industry, science, and art as well. Corruption is never a mark of a certain domains, but always originated in the human heart.

Instead of giving up on politics, Bavinck, despite his negative experiences in politics, kept on encouraging Snouck Hurgronje to participate. He claimed:

(...) if the best ones, whose eyes are open to the temptations of the political life, withdrew, [politically] speaking and acting would be left wholly to the rascals. I dare to speak more boldly because I know myself to be free of ambitions in the realm of politics, and in so far as I took part in it, it was only because of a sense of duty, not from inclination or desire.<sup>82</sup>

Bavinck had done his duty, and though some antirevolutionaries envisioned him as the successor of Kuyper<sup>83</sup> to lead the party into a new era, he knew he was not the enthusing leader and the organizer that was needed. At the deputy meeting of 17 October 1907 in Amsterdam, he handed over the party leadership to Kuyper again, who was re-elected as president of the Antirevolutionary Party with more than seven hundred votes; Bavinck, who did not want to continue as president, got twelve votes.<sup>84</sup> After handing over his presidential responsibilities he was re-elected as assessor with 536 out of 574 votes.<sup>85</sup> But he did not attend deputy meetings anymore and resigned after the parliamentary elections of June 1909.

At the celebration of the first quarter of a century of *De Standaard* in 1897, Bavinck had praised Kuyper as a journalist and politician who with his newspaper “did not find his strength in antipapist fierceness, in arousing of all sorts of basis, be it ecclesial, passions, but in principled opposition to ultra-montane politics.”<sup>86</sup> Bavinck believed Kuyper belonged to these “best ones” who were polemical for an ironical goal. This did not mean he agreed with all Kuyper said and did, and though he knew many who regarded him as a “bummer,”<sup>87</sup> he either sided with him or gave him the benefit of the doubt. But when Kuyper kept on qualifying the third Christian coalition cabinet Heemskerk (1908-1913)—Kuyper had expected to be invited to be part of it by a younger generation of anti-revolutionary politicians, but to his annoyance, he was not—in *De Standaard* as disastrous, a political abuse, and a rupture with the party’s position for long, Bavinck finally spoke out against Kuyper’s party leadership, that acerbated the atmosphere in the party. Five eminent antirevolutionary politicians objected to the view of the elderly statesman and party

82. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 147. For his view on politics as a high calling, see also: Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 39.

83. Harinck a.o., *De Antirevolutionaire Partij, 1829–1980*, 112.

84. Minutes deputy meeting, 17 October 1907. *Papers ARP Centraal Comité*.

85. Minutes deputy meeting, 17 October 1907. *Papers ARP Centraal Comité*.

86. Herman Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw. Rede bij gelegenheid van het vijf en twintig-jarig bestaan van de “Standaard”* (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1897), 17.

87. Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, 7 May 1886: “brekespel”. De Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 117.

president, that the party had flourished under his leadership only. In 1915 they published the pamphlet *Leider en leiding*, leader and leadership, and one of the five noted in his memoirs that it was Bavinck who actually wrote the pamphlet.<sup>88</sup> He was the politician a younger generation of antirevolutionaries looked up to for inspiration: “His universal knowledge and universal spirit made him a completely unique figure in our circles,” would his successor in the Senate write in 1922 to a leading anti-revolutionary politician.<sup>89</sup>

Like he had written before, he now again stressed that only the school struggle and a shared religious conviction had united the party, otherwise there had always been much dissent and opposition. The present situation was not worse compared to former days. What had changed, Bavinck explained, is the context in church, school, and politics. People received better education, and by founding the Vrije Universiteit, students were encouraged to see through their own eyes, which provided opportunities to view various issues with personal reflection. New problems had presented themselves, many of which proved difficult to solve, and lacking an answer, a neutral zone out of reach of the antirevolutionary principles developed, where these problems were resolved. And if a connection was made between the principles and the day-to-day political issues, difference of opinion surfaced. Uncertainty grew about what comprises antirevolutionary politics: “On many issues we don’t know what we are up to, what the capacity and reach of our principles is, and which way we have to go. There is no steady course in our political life, and too often our position is determined by our opponents.”<sup>90</sup> Bavinck’s and his fellow politicians’ solution to this problem was balanced and positive: they would not coerce or drill the rank and file of the party, but through closer connections and tighter internal cooperation, they would restore trust and strengthen their collective freedom. Thus, in unity there is strength.

## Shifting Opinions

One of the issues out of reach of principles was suffrage. In 1907, Bavinck let go of the antirevolutionary principle of household suffrage as unrealistic, and instead, he favored the individual, universal suffrage. On Kuypers’ insistence, the party remained committed to the organic view on suffrage until universal suffrage became the law in 1917. Confronted with this political fact, the latter suffrage was accepted by the Antirevolutionary Party.<sup>91</sup> The same scenario happened on the issue of extending the suffrage to women. The party, led by Kuypers, opposed to this extension. Bavinck,

88. P.A. Diepenhorst, *Herinneringen*, ed. by J. de Bruijn and R.E. van der Woude (Amsterdam: Historisch Documentatiecentrum, 2003), 84; Bremmer, *Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 236–39.

89. A. Anema to V.H. Rutgers, 1 February 1921: “(...) zijn universele kennis en universele geest maakten hem tot een geheel eenige figuur in onze kring.” *V.H. Rutgers Papers*. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

90. Anema, *Leider en leiding*, 45.

91. Bremmer, *Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 228.

however, was the most important antirevolutionary voice in favor of this right. In the Senate, Bavinck voted in favor of women's voting rights, deviating from the party line Kuiper defended in a 1914 book.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, in 1918 Bavinck published a book about the positive role and place of women in society.<sup>93</sup>

Giving up principled positions was not incidental. In 1905 he had admitted that the antirevolutionary principles did not exclude disagreements, but still defended them as indicators of the direction where the solution should be found.<sup>94</sup> But the next decade his doubt on this issue increased. As Bavinck explained in the 1915 pamphlet on party leadership, the principles often did not meet political reality. In notes for an unpublished pamphlet, Bavinck wrote in 1919 that antirevolutionaries should realize that none of the principles had stayed "intact, none of these had been resistant to the power of reality (...) Facts were stronger than principles."<sup>95</sup> As examples, Bavinck mentioned the principal opposition to state funded Christian education, to universal suffrage, to sabbath observance, to state pensions, and to women's voting rights. Time and again there was hope Christianity and culture could be reconciled, but time and again Bavinck faced the old problem of the relation of the gospel and this world. What hindered him among the Kuiperians was "their lack of appreciation, their all or nothing, their absoluteness, their lack of recognizing the relative."<sup>96</sup>

It seemed Bavinck's sensitivity of his younger days for the complaints on Christian parties resurfaced in his old age. In the early 1880s Bavinck had rejected De la Saussaye's and others' objections by joining and defending the Antirevolutionary Party, but now he realized the party structure implied rejection of other Christian opinions as morally flawed, while promoting the party's opinion without effect. He still did not appreciate the dualism in the *Vermittlungstheologie*, but he stressed the need to relate Christianity to the catholic, cosmic, and ethical-religious dimensions, and not lock it up in an organization. In 1919, the need for independence and the warning against cooperation stayed behind.

## Conclusion

Three issues stand out in this overview on Bavinck and the art and practice of politics. In the first place, Bavinck promoted politics as a domain where religion had to be applied. To do this effectively, an independent party was the best option. Bavinck's stress on an independent political position coincided with his personal development

92. Abraham Kuiper, *De eerepositie van de vrouw* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1914).

93. Herman Bavinck, *De vrouw in de hedendaagsche maatschappij* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1918); Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 278–80.

94. Bavinck, *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*, 35.

95. George Harinck, C. van der Kooi en J. Vree (red.), "*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*". *Aantekeningen van H. Bavinck over de zaak-Netelenbos, het Schriftgezag en de situatie van de Gereformeerde Kerken (november 1919)* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1994), 50.

96. Harinck a.o., "*Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende*," 66.



in the 1880s towards a more robust Reformed position in theology. Though we know Bavinck as a conversational person, one who always tried to appreciate the strong points in his antagonist, and Kuyper as the antithetical debater, one who would frame the position of his opponent negatively, it was Kuyper who forged coalitions, while Bavinck was reluctant to do so. The cooperation with the Catholics in a Christian coalition was not only beneficial, he contended. In 1901 he was not in favor of forming a coalition cabinet, and in 1906 he was positive about the oppositional role of the Antirevolutionary Party. He lacked Kuyper's agility, and did not have the authority to lead the party in a different direction. It seemed in the 1880s and 1890s he caught up with the solid Reformed theology of the *Synopsis* and with Kuyper's principal firmness and antithetical spirit. But later in his life, he realized that party formation could also lead to isolation and intellectual sterility.

Secondly, Bavinck in the late 1910s mirrors the Bavinck of about 1880, who at that point had not yet anchored in the Reformed tradition. Bavinck still felt attracted to De la Saussaye and ethical-irenicism, and he had not yet sided with Kuyper, who was "more than all of them the banner bearer of Calvinism," as Bavinck claimed in 1897.<sup>97</sup> This position of his younger days—and its flipside in later years: the sharp criticisms of orthodox Protestants who did not join the party—sheds light on the shaky position the Antirevolutionary Party often was in. With his role as internal mediator, and his name recognition as a theologian, Bavinck served to keep the party both coherent and focused, both in the 1880s and 1890s, when orthodox Protestants criticized and left the party, and in the 1910s, when the party was in need of a new leader. In 1905, some had hoped he would continue accepting leadership duties, but that was not his cup of tea.

Finally, Bavinck presented the Antirevolutionary Party as the vanguard of the new society to come, and in this way attracted a younger generation. Over and against the orthodox Protestants, socialists, and liberals, Bavinck defended the view that Christian politics was not about establishing a Christian state or submitting society to Christianity. Instead, it was about freedom for every conviction or worldview and about the acknowledgment that in the end, governing was not about material issues but about facilitating the spiritual well-being of citizens of all walks of life. He feared that the material would dominate politics, and therefore called for a "theistic coalition" to keep Dutch society on the right track.

From a political point of view, he analyzed what happened as a withdrawal of institutions like state and church in favor of society. In his opinion, the Antirevolutionary Party was the only one to promote and facilitate this process of liberating society. Kuyper welcomed this progressive view, but in practice the party under his post-Bavinck leadership took a conservative turn, opposing universal and women's suffrage, and joining Bavinck's conservative social policy. After Kuyper's (1920) and Bavinck's death (1921) the party became more conservative. In the 1950s

97. Bavinck, *Het vierde eener eeuw*, 38.

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and 1960s the notion of the Antirevolutionary Party as a progressive party surfaced again. It is no surprise that this revival coincided with a rediscovery of Bavinck's ideas and attitude.

