

JBTS

VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 2

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES



HERMAN BAVINCK (1854-1921)
A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Planting Tulips in the Rainforest: Herman and
Johan Bavinck on Christianity in East and West
by James Eglinton

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Introduction

In my earlier *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*,¹ I argued that the development of Herman Bavinck’s life and thought is best understood in two distinct phases: the two decades spent as a professor at the Theological School in Kampen (in the 1880s-90s), in which he wrote the first edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*;² and in the following two decades at the Free University of Amsterdam (from 1902 until 1921), in which he revised the *Dogmatics* extensively, and was engaged in a multipronged effort to promote the importance of Christianity to the viability of a dechristianising Western culture.³ These phases can be described in various ways. Bavinck himself spoke of the first phase as corresponding to the “age of Renan,” to which I have added a follow-on “age of Nietzsche” descriptor. These windows of time were lived in the shadow, respectively, of the all-too-easy materialism of the French philosopher Ernest Renan, and the Jesus-despising philosophy of domination pioneered by the German atheist Friedrich Nietzsche. In a more directly biographical sense, however, we might simply talk about these phases in terms of a “young Bavinck” and a “mature Bavinck.”

Talk of “young” and “mature” phases in his personal and intellectual development is hard to deny: in these respective periods, Bavinck lived in markedly different social and intellectual contexts, and developed accordingly within them. As is described in *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, in the Netherlands at least, the opening decades of the twentieth century were very different to the closing decades

1. James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

2. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 133–218; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4 vols., 1st ed. (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1892-1901).

3. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 219–92; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Kampen: 1906-11). The English translation, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-8) is based on the second Dutch edition.

of the nineteenth. Within that context, Bavinck's thought changed in some respects: primarily in response to the sudden death of Renanesque moralistic materialistic atheism, and the unexpected resurrection of Nietzsche's anti-Christian atheism, the mature Bavinck moved from his earlier primary task as a defender of Calvinism, to become a public apologist for Christianity in general, alongside his commitment to Calvinism in particular.⁴ The mature Bavinck distanced himself from the brand of predictive deductive thinking that marked his young thought, and instead came to see the outworking of sin and fallen starting points as chaotic and unpredictable.⁵ In the "mature" phase, he was certainly more audibly committed to evangelism at home and abroad than he had been in the Kampen years.⁶ The notion of worldview gained a greater degree of prominence in his mature writings.⁷ Most notably, Bavinck's views on the role of women in society became markedly different towards the end of his life.⁸

In observing these changes, it should be noted, we do not find the mature Bavinck coming into his own by making a radical about turn in a similar style, for example, to the rupture seen between the younger and more mature Karl Barth on either side of his famous *Römerbrief*.⁹ In general, the mature Bavinck's developments are best seen as further refinements—rather than wholesale rejections—of his early thought. Bruce Pass' recent work, *The Heart of Dogmatics*, charts an important example of this, following Bavinck's attempts to organise his dogmatics around a distinct (but shifting) centre point.¹⁰ In the Amsterdam years, then, we find Bavinck hard at work in perceiving and resolving tensions set out in his earlier thought.

When considering his mature phase in that light, one area of tension seems to open up and—unlike the previous examples—go unresolved: namely, the awkward tension between his views on the global export of Western culture and religion (i.e. Christianity) on the one hand, and his public willingness to affirm the (global) catholicity of the Christian faith, and the consequent non-universal character of local Western forms of Christianity, on the other. In his mature thought, the relationship of Western Christianity to the notions of "local" and "universal" is untidy and unresolved. The mature Bavinck argued that non-Western cultures needed Christianity, but however much he admitted that Western Christianity was local rather than universal, he struggled to explain how Christianity might grow indigenously in non-Western cultures. While he argued against the export of Dutch

4. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 226–27.

5. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 230–31.

6. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 255–59.

7. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 227.

8. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 277–80.

9. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Sir Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

10. See, for example, Bruce Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Göttingen: Vandenoek & Ruprecht, 2020), in which Pass explores Bavinck's attempts to reorganise the centre of the dogmatic system.

Christianity to America (precisely on account of its Dutchness and foreignness within American culture), Bavinck nonetheless supported the export of Western Christianity in general to the non-Western world—despite its Westernness and foreignness in non-Western culture.)

This article will explore that tension, setting out the sense in which Herman Bavinck argued for both the global export *and* the provisionality of Western Christianity, and will demonstrate that this particular topic represents a notably unresolved problem in his mature thought. Biographically, it will locate this lack of resolution in his call for greater Western involvement in the development of missiology as a discrete theological discipline. Stated differently, it appears that Herman Bavinck was aware of his own shortcomings in resolving this particular difficulty. This interpretation will then be used to explain the attempt made by his nephew, the celebrated missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964), to resolve this clash via a distinct return to Augustine, who served as an African hinge between the indigenous forms of Christianity found in the East and the West.

Herman Bavinck on Catholicity and Locality

From early in his career, Herman Bavinck held to a distinctive and detailed account of the catholicity of the Christian faith. His 1885 lecture, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,”¹¹ argued that while the Protestant Reformation gave rise to sectarianism and the fragmentation of the church, it was nonetheless based on a rediscovery of the true nature of catholicity. This rediscovery entailed the rejection of (what Bavinck saw as) a dualistic Roman Catholic view of nature and grace whereby, “According to Rome, Christianity is exclusively church. Everything depends on this. Outside the church is the sphere of the unholy.”¹²

In rejecting the view that the church’s catholicity pertains to the church—which is to say, to the ranks of the ordained—but not the world, he argued that Protestants acquired a new perspective on the world and life within it. Protestantism drew sin and grace into a sharper opposition than its Roman Catholic antecedent had. By doing this, Protestant theology posited afresh that sin had a pervasive and corrosive spread across the entirety of human life, and accordingly, that the Christian faith presented God’s solution to the problem of sin in every part of human life. In this sense, Bavinck claimed, Protestant theology articulates Christianity as a faith for all of life in the world (and for the entirety of that life) in a distinctively Protestant way. This is the nature of Protestant catholicity:

11. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220–51.

12. Bavinck, “Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 230.

The gospel is a joyful tidings, 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.¹³

As such, catholicity is recast in universal tones: its scope encompasses the created realm, and not simply the church, in its entirety. In Bavinck's view, this was a profound departure from Roman Catholicism: "Rome thus maintains the catholicity of the Christian faith in the sense that it seeks to bring the entire world under the submission of the church. But it denies catholicity in the sense that the Christian faith itself must be a leavening agent in everything."¹⁴ This change towards a culturally universalist sense of catholicity, though, is not anti-ecclesial. Rather, the insistence that Christianity is catholic with regard to the totality of human cultures and historical periods goes in tandem with a distinct view of the catholicity of the church itself:

It is impossible to express the thoroughgoing universalism of the Christian faith in words more powerful and beautiful than these. Christianity knows no boundaries beyond those which God himself has in his good pleasure established; no boundaries of race or age, class, or status, nationality, or language.... A Gospel so rich created a people of God that could no longer be contained within the boundaries of one nation and country.... The cross of Christ reconciles all things—God and humanity, heaven and earth, Jew and Gentile, Barbarian and Scythian, man and woman, slave and free. On Pentecost, the New Testament church is born as an independent community.¹⁵

On these terms, catholicity requires the church to have no ethnic, geographical, or cultural centre point on earth. Rather, it subjects the church to a radical geographical decentralisation. On these Protestant terms, catholicity prevents any single cultural expression of Christianity from receiving normative privilege.¹⁶ In his later *Reformed Dogmatics*, the arguments first rehearsed in "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church" were developed into a claim that the idea of 'Roman Catholic' was itself oxymoronic: these words, he wrote, are "mutually contradictory."

The Roman Catholic Church makes the faith and salvation of humans dependent on a specific place and on a specific person and thereby fails to do justice to the catholicity of Christianity. The name "Roman" or "papal church" therefore expresses its nature much more accurately than "Catholic."¹⁷

13. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 224.

14. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 231.

15. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 224.

16. For a further elaboration of Bavinck's views on Calvinism as catholic along cosmopolitan and organicist lines, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Confessional, International, and Cosmopolitan: Herman Bavinck's Neo-Calvinistic and Protestant Understanding of the Catholicity of the Church," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018), 22–39.

17. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 323.

The Roman Catholic Church, of course, is a truly global institution—a fact recognised by Bavinck. However, the sense in which it privileges a particular human culture in the midst of all the cultures of the world marks it out, in Bavinck’s view at least, as insufficiently catholic. Protestantism, he believed, fights sin in the natural order more strenuously than Catholicism, precisely because Protestants see the good in natural order: every square inch of human life is worth fighting (against sin) for. To borrow the language of viticulture, wherever the catholic faith is found, it will have a distinct *terroir* reflecting its local growth habitat. It depends on this difference just as viticulture needs the difference between Chilean Syrah and Spanish Rioja—a culture that is worlds apart from the homogenising global export model of, for example, Coca Cola, the flavour of which is more or less the same regardless of location. “The kingdom of heaven may be a treasure and a pearl of great price,” he wrote, “but it is also a mustard seed and a leaven.”¹⁸ Every cultural thing, and every square inch of cultural soil, matters to God, and is targeted, and distinctively redeemed, by the gospel of grace.

Even in Bavinck’s earliest writings, then, we find an account of the heart of Protestant theology that sees catholicity as radically geographically decentralised,¹⁹ and that, in theory at least, is able to see the common grace of God as present (albeit in non-uniform ways) in all of human culture. Because it is catholic, Christianity is able to take root in, blossom within, and reform, every distinct human culture: it is emphatically not only a faith for the West or those who inhabit Western culture.

Bavinck was clearly aware that the Western world itself contained many distinct cultural histories. We could expect nothing less from a figure so deeply influenced by German Romanticism—a movement that promoted a keen sense of distinctive national traits. In that light, Bavinck was cognisant of the locality of his own Dutch Reformed tradition against a broader backdrop of Western cultures. This awareness of local Christian tradition was all the more striking given his contrast with his colleague Abraham Kuyper, whose geopolitical thought saw Dutch Calvinism as destined to exert great influence on other nations (above all, the United States). In response to Kuyper’s grand international ambitions, we find Bavinck writing in an article on “The Future of Calvinism” that,

18. Bavinck, “Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 236.

19. In this regard, Bavinck’s view of catholicity closely resembles Abraham Kuyper’s arguments in the *Lectures on Calvinism* that in Protestantism, the church’s spatial centre point is in celestial, where Christ is physically present, in contrast to Roman Catholicism’s centre point being earthly: “the Church had more and more lost sight of this celestial character,—she had become worldly in her nature. The Sanctuary was again brought back to earth, the altar was rebuilt of stone, and a priestly hierarchy had reconstituted itself for the ministrations of the altar. Next of course it was necessary to renew the tangible sacrifice on earth, and this at last brought the church to create the unbloody offering of the Mass.” Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 60.

Calvinism wishes no cessation of progress and promotes multiformity. It . . . honors every gift and different calling of the Churches. It does not demand for itself the same development in America and England which it has found in Holland. This only must be insisted upon, that in each country and in every Reformed Church it should develop itself in accordance with its own nature and should not permit itself to be supplanted or corrupted by foreign ideas.²⁰

For that reason, he argued that while Calvinism is “a specific and the richest and most beautiful form of Christianity,” it is “not coextensive with Christianity.” Although he believed strongly that the Netherlands needed Calvinism, his views on his local tradition’s international prospects flatly contradicted those of Kuypers: “Nobody,” he wrote, “can tell whether Dutch Calvinism is still destined to exert influence on the future of Calvinism in other countries.”²¹

These sentiments shed important light on one of Bavinck’s most memorable claims. In speeches held across the Netherlands following his return from a journey to North America in 1892, Bavinck argued that rather than exporting their Dutch Calvinism to America, the Dutch should encourage America to develop its own distinctive form of Christianity. Each of these speeches closed with the (locally controversial) claim that, “after all, Calvinism is not the only truth.”²² As a melting pot fed, amongst other things, by a range of distinct Western cultural histories (and forms of Christianity), he believed, America needed a Christianity that was conditioned by the norms of Scandinavian Lutherans, English Puritans and Methodists, Scottish Presbyterians, and so on. To project Dutchness on the development of its Christianity would be wrong, precisely because it would be a foreign imposition. (When critiquing forms of secularism and atheism in Dutch culture, Bavinck’s own organicist thought often drew on the image of the invasive non-native species, and a careful attentiveness to the flowers that natively grow in one’s own terrain. The same idea exerts influence on his reluctance to plant Dutch Christianity elsewhere in the West.)²³

Herman Bavinck on the Export of Western Christianity and Culture

In what we might term the ‘young’ phase of Bavinck’s development, we find relatively little attention to the specifics of how Christianity might spread in the non-Western world—although from early on, he had laid the conceptual foundation for this truly catholic faith to bloom in whichever cultural soil its seed is planted. Those questions only become prominent in Bavinck’s thought in the “mature” phase, and that for two

20. Herman Bavinck, “Future of Calvinism,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5, no. 17 (1894): 23.

21. Bavinck, “Future of Calvinism,” 24.

22. Cited in Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 314.

23. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 207.

reasons. First, during a trip to North America in 1908, he encountered first-hand the fervour of the global evangelisation movement and was deeply marked by it. In response to this, he became a prominent advocate for the development of missiology amongst the Dutch Reformed, developed personal contact with missionaries working outside the Western world, and encouraged young Dutch Christians to move into the mission field.²⁴ Secondly, in 1911, to his own great surprise, Bavinck was elected as a Member of Parliament—a role assumed just as the Dutch colonial project was wrestling with questions prompted by secularisation. Should the Dutch export Western culture without also sharing the Dutch religion, or should its colonial project aim at the spread of both?²⁵

In two notable parliamentary speeches, Bavinck argued for the likely disastrous effects of the secularised export of Western culture. His claim was that to teach indigenes a Western view of culture, economics and science, without also sharing Christianity, was necessarily to strike a death blow to their ancestral religion, whilst also refusing to give them a new faith to take its place. It was to create a gaping God-shaped hole, whilst wilfully leaving that hole as an empty space. In this line of reasoning, he thought, to teach modern Western biological science to a follower of an animistic religion inherently undermines that person's animistic religion. To disabuse a non-Western person of the foundations of their native religion, whilst also deliberately keeping silent on Christianity as the religion that gave rise to Western culture and science, is an impoverishing form of cultural expansion. The longer-term effect of this sleight of hand, Bavinck believed, would be that non-Western people would later regroup around their traditional religions, which would then take on a powerful anti-Western focus. In short, he feared a future disrupted by global, religiously-fuelled (and anti-Western) warfare—for which reason, his speeches argued passionately that the West should export both its culture *and* its religion to the non-Western world.²⁶

Concretely, in the mature Herman Bavinck's thought, the best outcome for Dutch colonial subjects was conversion to Western culture and religion—both of which, he believed, were more highly developed (thanks to the leavening influence of Christianity) than the cultural and religious offerings of the non-Western world. In one parliamentary speech on this topic, for example, he spoke with paternalistic pride of a Javan who now worshipped Christ, *and* revered the Dutch queen.²⁷ The best thing for a Javan, he thought, was to become a Christian and a quasi-Dutchman.

24. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 255–58.

25. For a historical study of Dutch Reformed (*gereformeerde*) approaches to this question, see Herman Smit, *Gezag is gezag: kanttekeningen bij de houding van de gereformeerden in de Indonesische kwestie* (Amsterdam: Verloren, 2006).

26. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 267–69.

27. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 268.

Tension left Unresolved: The Call for a Missiologist

In exploring the mature Bavinck's views on the spread of Christianity from West to East, it is hard to avoid the palpable tension between his fundamental doctrinal commitments regarding catholicity (which deal so explicitly with Christianity's potential for native reformation in every human culture) and his struggle to imagine an indigenous form of Christianity that might grow beyond the Western world. If it was insufficiently catholic for Roman Catholicism to expect non-Roman believers to adopt the trappings of Roman culture, was it somehow different to expect Javan converts to take on the trappings of Dutch culture? For all his insistence that "Calvinism is not the only truth," Herman Bavinck could only ever imagine planting tulips in the rainforests of Java. In all likelihood, of course, this lack of constructive vision for indigenous Christianity outside of the West is primarily the product of Bavinck's views on the cultural superiority of "civilised" (*beschaafde*) Western culture *vis-à-vis* non-Western cultures: amongst Europeans of his era, it was widely accepted that Western culture had been uniquely penetrated by the true religion for millennia, to the benefit of its art, science, and society. While a poorly defined, moralistic judgment of Herman Bavinck as "colonial" is of little use historically or theologically, particularly given his own critiques of (what he saw as) exploitative colonialism, it remains true that he was profoundly shaped by the superior sense of 'civilisation' that marked Western Europe in his era (in Bavinck's eyes, a superiority of culture, though not of race).²⁸ It would perhaps be more surprising to find Western European theologians who came of age in the late nineteenth century who bucked that trend, and strove instead to perceive the different complexity and value in non-Western cultures.

Despite this, the reasons to look appreciatively at non-Western cultures, and to pursue indigenous Christianity there, can clearly be seen in Bavinck's writings. And as such, the lack of a constructive sense of how to connect his commitments to catholicity as pertaining to culture, and the need for every culture to be redeemed by Christianity, is a striking one: surely the former requires a vision of the latter that allows for Christianity to grow locally outside of the West, and that does not require Javan believers to become pseudo-Europeans in order to follow Jesus? Indeed, we might subvert a line from his critique of Roman Catholicism in his early article on catholicity to say that in this case, "the motive is clear even if the system is not yet fully developed."²⁹ (Building on Sutanto's work, which highlights that Calvinism recognises the inevitability of diversity, I argue that this recognition of inevitability exceeds Herman Bavinck's own final written corpus.)³⁰

28. See, for example, George Harinck, "'Wipe Out Lines of Division (Not Distinctions)': Bennie Keet, Neo-Calvinism and the Struggle against Apartheid," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11 (2017): 81–85.

29. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 229.

30. Sutanto, "Confessional, International, and Cosmopolitan: Herman Bavinck's Neo-Calvinistic

When considering this tension biographically, however, it does seem the case that Herman Bavinck was well aware of his shortcomings on this particular issue. Although he had travelled around Europe and had visited North America twice, he had no personal experience of the non-Western world (which was mediated to him most deeply by his friend, the orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, who travelled extensively in the Middle East, and in Indonesia).³¹ While Bavinck promoted missiology as a much-needed theological discipline in the early twentieth century, he was also aware that he himself was no missiologist. (When Bavinck began to agitate for more resources to be devoted to missiology at the Free University of Amsterdam, around 1910, missiology was taught as a subject within practical theology, which was the responsibility of the New Testament scholar Petrus Biesterveld. Bavinck's argument was that it should be separated from New Testament and practical theology and receive the exclusive attention of a newly appointed professor missiology.)³²

It is certainly quite possible that Herman Bavinck's efforts to promote more focused missiological reflection were motivated by his own apparent struggle to connect his notion of catholicity to the growth of Christianity beyond the West. At the very least, we can say with confidence that he knew he was not a missiologist, and certainly never presented his arguments on colonial missions as the last word on that subject. His insistence on the true nature of catholicity, by contrast, is stated repeatedly across his corpus, and in both "early" and "mature" life phases. It was perhaps the case that his search for a devoted Reformed missiologist was itself a search for someone who could exceed his own limitations and pursue the outworking of catholicity to a greater degree.

Johan Herman Bavinck

Bavinck's search for a missiologist colleague was first met by the appointment of Petrus Sillevius Smitt (1867-1918). That appointment, however, failed to meet his expectations. Sillevius Smitt was a practical theologian primarily concerned with training Dutch pastors, and had no experience of missiology or the non-Western world. After his appointment, missiology remained a subject handled in passing during lectures under the broader heading of practical theology. Furthermore, Sillevius Smitt was plagued by poor health, and died six years after his appointment. Herman Bavinck's call for "a man who lives solely for mission" remained unmet for some time. Remarkably, however, it was fulfilled in some style by his nephew, the missionary and missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964), who was later

and Protestant Understanding of the Catholicity of the Church," 35–36.

31. Jan de Bruijn and George Harinck, eds., *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875-1921* (Baarn: TenHave, 1999).

32. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 257–58.

appointed to teach missiology at both the Theological School in Kampen, and at the Free University of Amsterdam.³³

Johan Herman, a son of Herman's brother Coenraad Bernardus ("Bernard"), a Christian Reformed pastor, studied under his uncle at the Free University of Amsterdam (1912-18), where he became a member of the university's Union for East Indies Members (Vereniging van Indisch Oud-leden). There, in early life, he became acquainted with the noted missiologist Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965). Following his years in Amsterdam, he pursued doctoral studies in Germany at the University of Erlangen (1918-19), where he wrote a dissertation on psychology and mysticism in the medieval German Dominican Henry Suso. (In describing his early motivation to study this particular topic, Holtrop's biography of J.H. Bavinck portrays him as having been inspired by the combination of his uncle's interest in religious psychology, and Augustine's dictum, "I wish only to know God and the soul.")³⁴ Following this, he moved to Indonesia, where he served as the assistant pastor of a Dutch-speaking congregation composed of Dutch colonists, and Dutch-speaking Asians, in Medan (1920-21), and then worked as pastor to a Dutch congregation in Bandung (1921-26). At the close of his first period in Indonesia, he published the book *Inleiding in de zielkunde* (Introduction to Psychology), a work that attempts to bridge Augustine's *Confessions* and the insights of modern psychology.³⁵ In the same year, he returned to the Netherlands to pastor in Heemstede (1926-29), where he published another profoundly Augustinian work in Christian psychology: *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing* (Personality and Worldview), in which he argued that all worldview-building is paradoxically an attempt to ascend towards, and also to evade, God.³⁶ In 1930, he returned to Indonesia, albeit in an altogether different context and mindset: rather than ministering to Western expats and locals who had moved towards Western culture, he became a missionary to locals in Surakarta (1930-33), and then served as a teacher of indigenous pastors in Jogjakarta (1935-39). In these years, he pursued deep immersion in Eastern culture and close contact with Eastern religions, and he attempted to articulate the sense in which the catholicity of the faith requires its indigenous expression in the East. In that context, his first Javanese-language book appeared under the title *Soeksma Soepana* (The Depth of the Soul, 1932), written under the pseudonym Kjai Martawahana. That pseudonymous work

33. Paul J. Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist, Johan Herman Bavinck, 1895-1964* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003); John Bolt, James Bratt, and Paul Visser, eds., *The J. H. Bavinck Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

34. P. N. Holtrop, "Bavinck, Johan Herman," in C. Houtman, et al, eds., *Biografisch lexicon voor het Nederlands protestantisme*, vol. 6 (2006), 27.

35. Johan Herman Bavinck, *Inleiding in de zielkunde* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1926), III, 26.

36. Johan Herman Bavinck, *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1927), 165.

served as a prelude to his longer book *Christus en de mystiek van het oosten* (Christ and the Mysticism of the East, 1934)—a work that provides Johan Herman’s clearest presentation of Augustine as the theological architect of Western civilisation, and that presents the East’s great need as indigenous engagement with Augustine, rather than with the Western civilisation to which his life and thought gave rise.³⁷ Van den Berg has described how in this particular work, “Bavinck confronted Javanese thinking, influenced as it is by Hindu and Muslim mysticism, with the thought world of Augustine who, in his own day, had coped with the problems posed by Neoplatonic mysticism.”³⁸ The most basic missiological rationale in that particular book is that Augustine himself is the ideal Christian missionary to the peoples of the East.

The Augustinian Bridge

In contrast to his uncle’s unshakable sense of being Western, Johan Herman Bavinck once memorably described himself as “having been born with an Eastern soul.”³⁹ (During his second period in Indonesia, he also gained the nickname “the white Javanese.”)⁴⁰ As has been noted, Johan Herman even published theological literature in Javanese, under a Javanese *nom de plume*. In contrast to the pseudo-Dutch Javan celebrated by Herman, Johan Herman attempted to embed himself in non-Western culture, even to the point of becoming Kjai Martawahana.

In noting this difference, I argue that Johan Herman’s move to promote the indigenous non-Western growth of Christianity should not be seen as a rejection *simpliciter* of his uncle’s thought: he was not simply a crude post-colonial reaction to his famous colonial-era uncle. Rather, Johan Herman attempted to resolve the tension in Herman’s approach to catholicity and culture by grounding those issues in the life and work of his long-term muse, Augustine of Hippo, who provides a fourth century African bridge between the twentieth century East and West. If, as Holtrop has claimed, Johan Herman’s principal influences were his uncle and Augustine, it seems that Johan Herman used the latter to ease some of the former’s theological tensions.⁴¹

Herman Bavinck’s own thought, of course, was also profoundly influenced by Augustine, who was the most cited theologian across the four volumes of his *Reformed*

37. Johan Herman Bavinck, *Christus en de mystiek van het oosten* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1934), 9, 112–15. Five chapters of this work have been published in English translation, see “Christ and Asian Mysticism,” in *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 303–411.

38. J. van den Berg, “Legacy of Johan Herman Bavinck,” *International Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (October 1983): 174.

39. Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 442.

40. van den Berg, “Legacy of Johan Herman Bavinck,” 172.

41. A more fully-orbed account of Johan Herman’s influences—Augustine, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Otto, Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Barth, Brunner, and Kraemer—is found in Paul J. Visser, “Introduction: The Life and Thought of Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964),” *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 33–36.

*Dogmatics*⁴²—a fact that resonates with his eventual successor at the Theological School in Kampen, Anthonie Honig, noting that the study of Augustine in particular had occupied Herman's early years there.⁴³ Herman's brother, and Johan Herman's father, the pastor Bernard Bavinck, was also a noted Augustine enthusiast. In 1930, for example, he spoke on "Augustine's Doctrine of Predestination" at the Union of Pastors in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Vereniging van Predikanten van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland).⁴⁴ (Beyond this, however, little is known of Bernard Bavinck's views on Augustine.) Clearly, as Bernard's son and Herman's nephew and one-time student, Johan Herman had abundant opportunity to encounter Augustine—an influence that he seems to have channelled to a distinctive end.

In comparison to the use of Augustine seen in Herman's writings, Johan Herman utilised Augustine in two distinct ways: in the first place, the notion of *paradox* (derived from the *Confessions*) played a governing role across Johan Herman's works.⁴⁵ This is the existential *motif* running through Augustine's autobiography that that all human life—his own included—is a simultaneous looking for, and a fleeing from, God. This psychological insight serves as the lens used by Johan Herman in his sympathetic and critical reading of religious philosophers in the West (Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel), and in the East (Laozi, and Confucius).⁴⁶ While there is a well-established Western view of Augustine as a 'universal man' whose story compels Western people because it is existentially relatable to subsequent generations of Westerners,⁴⁷ Johan Herman viewed Augustine's universal existential appeal as truly global: it is no less relevant to the peoples of the East, whose lives are also simultaneously drawn towards and driven away from God. In comparison to this reliance on existential, psychological factors in accounting for universal human cultural and religious strivings, Herman relied on the interrelated theological notions of common grace and general revelation, alongside the doctrine of sin, to account for the particulars of human religiosity.⁴⁸ Viewed in that light, it becomes clear that in Johan Herman's

42. Brock wisely notes that, "While quantity does not guarantee influence, [Bavinck] does cite Augustine nearly eight hundred times in the *RD*, which is substantially more than his use of Calvin." Cory Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2020), 45.

43. A. G. Honig, "Ter nagedachtenis aan Prof. Bavinck," *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 6 (October 1921): 182.

44. *De Bazuin*, April 4, 1930; H. Faber, "Kroniek," *Vox Theologica: Interacademiaal Theologisch Tijdschrift* 2 (1930): 48.

45. His book *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing*, for example, is essentially an exposition of Augustine's paradox as an exercise in worldview cultivation.

46. Bavinck, *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing*, 18.

47. For example, Stewart Pernowe, *The End of the Roman World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), 143. "Augustine is one of the universal men."

48. This is not to say, of course, that Johan Herman deployed the Augustinian paradox as a rejection of the categories of general and special revelation (see Johan Herman Bavinck, "General Revelation and the Non-Christian Religions," *The J.H. Bavinck Reader*). However, Visser has argued that later in his life, Johan Herman's account of divine self-revelation moved away from a

work, the Augustinian paradox is utilised differently than in Herman's writings. It is certainly the case that Herman's work on psychology—in particular, on the unconscious life and personality, as seen in his “Foundations of Psychology” and *Philosophy of Revelation*—was developed in the shadow of Augustine.⁴⁹ However, in comparison to this, Augustine's psychological paradox is nonetheless given a distinctive central role in Johan Herman's thinking, in particular as a Christian entry point into non-Western cultures, and as an entry point into Christianity for non-Western people. It is in this sense that Augustine functions prominently as Johan Herman's “bridge.” Rather than begin with an effort to convince Eastern people of the basic structures of Abrahamic monotheism—that there is a God who discloses himself generally, who is the giver of their cultural goods and virtues, against whom all have sinned, and so on—as starting point from which to explain their religion and culture to them, Johan Herman seems to have preferred a first point of contact in a universal psychological paradox.

Secondly, Johan Herman's writings show specific readiness to attribute the development of Western civilisation to a single figure (Augustine), in contrast to Herman's attribution of Western civilisation in more general terms to the impact of Christianity as a religion. While Herman's parliamentary speeches claim that modern Western culture is the fruit of Christianity, Johan Herman personalises this claim in something akin to a “butterfly effect” view of Western history: while the twentieth century West is inexplicable without Christianity, its long and slow Christianisation was a specific consequence of Augustine's life and work. In Johan Herman's estimations, the *Confessions* and *De Trinitate* changed everything: the *Confessions* signals a profound new awareness of human psychology in the striving to move from the self towards God (a process understood by Johan Herman as the cultivation of a worldview), just as *De Trinitate* advanced an understanding of the reality of divine self-revelation as the basis of human knowledge of the divine. With these, Augustine gave birth to a new world. In Johan Herman's works, he is *the* seminal figure whose own existential, cultural, and intellectual conversion to Christianity was singularly important in the shaping of what later emerged as Christianised “Western” culture. In *Christus en de mystiek van het oosten*, he argues that Augustine reshaped the world around the Mediterranean from its pre-Christian *cosmological* world-order into the novel *theological* world-order that followed.⁵⁰ Having perceived that God's self-revelation is the source of our knowledge of the divine, Augustine set about

recognisably neo-Calvinist account of revelation along general and special lines, and instead came to resemble a Barthian account of revelation as Christocentric. See Visser, “Introduction: The Life and Thought of Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964),” 35.

49. Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), chapters 3 and 7; “Foundations of Psychology,” *The Bavinck Review* 9 (2018): 8, 173, 183, 209.

50. Johan Herman Bavinck, *Christus en de mystiek van het oosten*, 113–34.

rereading the world as the locus of that self-disclosure. His world looked different in the light of its triune Creator.

As such, Johan Herman saw Augustine as the progenitor of Western culture, rather than a figure formed within it: in this reading, while all subsequent Western culture is deeply indebted to Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo nonetheless retains a primordial non-Western point of origin. As a figure who grew up wrestling with the Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures and religions that predated Christianity, his immediate interlocutors—pagan Romans, Greek philosophers, and Manichaeans—were no less alien to twentieth century Westerners than the Hindus and Buddhists with whom Johan Herman interacted on Java. It was precisely by overcoming them that Augustine gave rise to what then emerges as “the West.” Alongside Herman Bavinck’s Protestant insistence that “Augustine does not belong exclusively to Rome,”⁵¹ we find in Johan Herman’s writings an implicit argument that Augustine does not belong exclusively to the West. Subtly, Johan Herman invests the kind of universal capital in Augustine’s story that Herman had stored in the notion of “catholicity.” In these, respectively, each man believed he had found something for everyone.

Planting Augustine in the East

From this, we see an ability to distinguish between Augustine as the Christianising *root* of Western culture (in terms close to Peter Brown’s description of him as “the first modern man”),⁵² and later Western civilisation as the local Christianised *fruit* that slowly grew from it. In contrast to Herman’s belief in the West’s calling to export both the root (seen by him generally as Christianity) and its local fruit (Western civilisation), Johan Herman eschewed crudely exporting the fruit, whilst arguing *for* the missiological necessity of planting the same root: Eastern people needed to meet Augustine for themselves, and discover that his strivings with his own pre-Christian neighbours were recognisable within their own religious and cultural setting. And from that indigenous interaction with the Western world’s African architect, Christianity would set to work transforming the East. To Johan Herman, there was simply no need to plant tulips in the rainforest. One need only plant the story of Augustine, and leave its world-reordering power to take effect. (Behind the encounter with Augustine, of course, lies a direct encounter with Scripture, as the text that overturned Augustine’s pre-Christian life and world.)

While *Persoonlijkheid en wereldbeschouwing* and *Christus en de mystiek van het oosten* set out both an architectonic (theoretical) view of Western culture and its Christianity as springing up from Augustine’s root, and present the East’s great need as a direct encounter with him, it is important to note that in his second phase in

51. Herman Bavinck, “Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 9–10.

52. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 504.

Indonesia, Johan Herman set about putting this theoretical approach into practice. In the early 1930s for example, we find him in full flow, engaging both Dutch colonists and locals with the message of Augustine. In February 1932, the newspaper *De Nederlander* carried a report on a Youth Leaders Conference held in late December 1931 in Merapi—a conference attended by, “Forty-five people . . . Bataks, Javans, Chinese, people from the Moluccas were amongst those who had come from very different backgrounds.”⁵³ The paper’s extended report detailed that Hendrik Kraemer was originally scheduled to speak, but was unable to do so on account of family circumstances: “He was replaced by Dr. Bavinck, who gave an improvised talk on the life of Augustine.”⁵⁴ Later that year, in October, he also gave lecture on, “Augustine, the seeker of the light,” to a Dutch society (Sociëteit de Eendracht) in Magelang.⁵⁵ In addressing both audiences, the priority of Augustine is clear: the Bishop of Hippo, author of the *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*, was the key to spreading the catholic faith in the East. From that root, Johan Herman attempted to tend and water some early local shoots, from the *Balé Sudda Sadana* youth centre—a house in which Javan social hierarchy and family boundaries were subverted by the use of Low Javanese language, and through an insistence that all present were brothers and sisters—to the *pantja saudara* (“circles of five”) Bible-study groups intended by Johan Herman as a means both to teach Scripture to locals, whilst also learning their culture better from them.⁵⁶ This was an effort to grow Christianity with a recognisably Asian *terroir*.

Conclusion

In this initial attempt to tease out a significant and unresolved tension in Herman Bavinck’s thought, centred on the apparent clash between his views on common grace, human culture, and catholicity, Johan Herman Bavinck has been posited as a neo-Calvinist theologian who brought his uncle’s tradition from the colonial early twentieth century into the post-colonial mid-century that followed. It has done so by suggesting that the key to this advance lies in the central place played by Augustine’s own life and theology—and the psychological paradox central to both—in Johan Herman’s efforts to ease his uncle’s tensions. Despite the common recognition of Johan Herman’s great love for Augustine in scholarship on his writings, the sense in which Augustine enables him to resolve a knotty tension in his uncle’s thought seems more significant than has previously been acknowledged. This claim is made tentatively, of course, recognising that Johan Herman’s own life and thought were particularly complex, and subject to further development following his return to the

53. *De Nederlander*, Feb. 25, 1932.

54. *De Nederlander*, Feb. 25, 1932.

55. *Algemeen handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, Oct. 19, 1932.

56. Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist, Johan Herman Bavinck, 1895-1964*, 34–35.

Netherlands in 1939.⁵⁷ It certainly merits further attention in conversations on the place of Reformed, and specifically neo-Calvinistic, Christianity in the globalised twenty-first century, within which Herman's thought remains jarringly bound to the nineteenth century in some regards. And as such, it holds some promise in continuing Sutanto's earlier conversation around the "inevitability" towards diversity seen, although perhaps not sufficiently developed enough, in Herman's own lifetime.⁵⁸

In noting this aspect of development between Herman and Johan Herman, it is perhaps fitting to conclude with the admission that the lives of both Bavincks demonstrate distinctive polymathic qualities. My own earlier work has charted Herman's polymathic tendencies at length, arguing that he was driven to become a polymath because of his views on Calvinistic Christianity as a truly catholic faith.⁵⁹ Van den Berg has described the same impulse in Johan Herman, albeit without using that polymath label, but with an important difference: Johan Herman's broad and insatiable intellectual and cultural curiosity came about as an extension of his fundamentally Augustinian concerns. "[Johan Herman] Bavinck's writings," van den Berg claims, "cover a wide, almost overwhelming and confusing, variety of subjects. Yet an element of continuity is clearly evident: his fascination with the problem of God and the human soul."⁶⁰

To a fairly consistent degree, it appears that Johan Herman tried to refocus his uncle's theological trajectory by drawing Augustine—an ever-present figure in Herman's works—to the fore. Why might this be? One possibility is that he was trying not simply to answer his uncle's call for a devoted missiologist. It might also be true that he was fulfilling Herman's plea that, "dogmatics must become more psychological"—an ambition that draws our eye to Herman's own deep Augustinian roots.⁶¹ At the heart of that striving lies a desire to bring the *Confessions* and *De Trinitate* to bear on one another, because together, they acquaint us with who we truly are, as those who are always simultaneously looking for and looking away from God, and with who God shows himself to be: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God eternally in three persons. Strikingly, it seems that his plea was heard and fulfilled, to a degree at least, in the realm of missiology, rather than in dogmatics proper.

57. Visser, "Introduction" 33–36.

58. Sutanto, "Confessional, International, and Cosmopolitan: Herman Bavinck's Neo-Calvinistic and Protestant Understanding of the Catholicity of the Church," 35–36.

59. Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 204–5.

60. Van den Berg, "Legacy of Johan Herman Bavinck," 173.

61. Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 168.