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## Scientific Theology? Herman Bavinck and Adolf Schlatter on the Place of Theology in the University

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### Abstract

This article, primarily historical in focus, explores the contributions of Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938) to discussion on the place of theology within the university. Schlatter's belief that theology is a science belonging within the academy is explored via his debate with Paul Jäger on the possibility of 'atheistic theology'. Bavinck's similar convictions, it is seen, were formed in response to the Higher Education Act (1876), a piece of legislation which sought to marginalise theology in a Dutch academic context. The article concludes by tentatively encouraging twenty-first century theology to see itself as a necessary subject (on the grounds of its divine object and power to bring coherence among the sciences) within the contemporary university.

### Keywords

theology, science, university, Bavinck, Schlatter

### Introduction: Public Debate

The place of theology within the university has thrust itself to the forefront of much public debate in recent times. What position, if any, should a theological faculty take in what is otherwise a secular, pluralistic, multi-faith, post-modern educational institution? The announced 2013 closure of Bangor University's theology and religious studies department prompted a response in the *Guardian* claiming that 'theology is a crucial academic subject.'<sup>1</sup> Considerably less

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<sup>1</sup> Sophia Deboick, 'Comment is free: Theology is a crucial academic subject,' Friday, August 13, 2010, *The Guardian* (accessed online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/aug/13/theology-crucial-academic-subject>).

supportive opinions have also been aired in the recent past. In a 2012 column written in the *Varagids*, the Dutch television host Paul Witteman denies that theology is a science and casts considerable doubt on the legitimacy of its place within the academy.<sup>2</sup> In a 2007 letter to the *Independent*, celebrity atheist Richard Dawkins compares theology to ‘the study of leprechauns’ and claims that while a theological faculty might contain gifted historians, linguists, sociologists and so on, theology itself is not in itself a valid academic subject. As such, he demands that the theology school be disbanded and its members relocated to different, scientifically credible faculties.<sup>3</sup>

Such criticism, however, is far from novel. Even in the medieval world, where scholastic sentiment was that theology sat in the academy as queen of the sciences (*regina scientiarum*), Duns Scotus claimed that theology was a practical discipline rather than a strict science.<sup>4</sup> Following this era, one finds Enlightenment intellectuals continuing this rejection of theology as a science.<sup>5</sup> In his *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), Immanuel Kant challenged theology’s pre-eminent position.<sup>6</sup> If theology was to remain at the university, it would have to pursue its task within the limits of pure reason. Across nineteenth century Europe, one sees this development carry on. In France, the Napoleonic *université impériale* brought French higher education in-line with the ideals of the Revolution. In nineteenth century Germany, theology was exposed to further challenges when the Prussian state, with its ideal of a secular *Wissenschaftsstaat*, gained influence over the theological faculties.<sup>7</sup> In the Netherlands, the Higher Education Act (1876) legally required Dutch universities to replace theology with religious studies (whilst retaining the title *theology*). The success and progress of the natural sciences that followed, especially in the latter half of the

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<sup>2</sup> See, ‘Paul Witteman: Theologie is geen wetenschap,’ Wednesday, January 2, 2013, *Reformatorisch Dagblad* (accessed online: [http://www.refdag.nl/kerkplein/kerknieuws/paul\\_witteman\\_theologie\\_is\\_geen\\_wetenschap\\_1\\_703590](http://www.refdag.nl/kerkplein/kerknieuws/paul_witteman_theologie_is_geen_wetenschap_1_703590)).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, ‘Letters: Theology has no place in a university,’ Monday, October 1, 2007, *The Independent* (accessed online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letters-recycling-395649.html>).

<sup>4</sup> Anton Vos, Henri Veldhuis, Eef Dekker, Nico den Bok and A. J. Beck, eds., *Duns Scotus on Divine Love* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 24-36.

<sup>5</sup> Avihu Zakai, ‘The Rise of Modern Science and the Decline of Theology as “Queen of the Sciences” in the Early Modern Era,’ *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 9.2 (2007), 125-151.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas A. Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the German University* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 212-66. Howard makes the case that the events between 1789 and 1815 paved the way for a transformation of the university into a secularised research environment as one finds it today, which necessarily had implications for theology’s role in the academy.

nineteenth century, contributed to a gradual marginalisation of theological departments across Europe. Following the tradition set by Carl Gauss, the present day regularly sees the title of *regina scientiarum* applied to mathematics, rather than theology.<sup>8</sup>

Although the co-authors of this article find Dawkins' dismissive attitude towards theology to be superficial and ill founded, they nonetheless find themselves in agreement with the closing call of his letter: 'a positive case now needs to be made that [theology] has any real content at all, and that it has any place in today's universities.'

With that in mind, they propose to contribute to this debate an historical-theological exploration of the concept of *theology as science in the university* in the works of two nineteenth century Continental Protestant theologians: the Dutch neo-Calvinist dogmatician Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) and the Swiss Reformed theologian Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938).<sup>9</sup> As European Protestants, Bavinck and Schlatter provide an interesting alternative to perhaps the most prominent nineteenth century Roman Catholic defence of theology within the university: *The Idea of a University* by Cardinal John Henry Newman.<sup>10</sup> Although some work has more recently been done to probe the place of theology within the university,<sup>11</sup> these studies have largely handled religious studies and theology together, and that from a variety of viewpoints.<sup>12</sup> This study proposes something different: it highlights the work of those who attempt to let theology

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Atiyah, 'Mathematics: Queen and Servant of the Sciences,' *Michael Atiyah: Collected Works Vol. 6* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 523-31; Eric Temple Bell, *Mathematics: Queen and Servant of Science* (The Mathematical Association of America, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> At the outset, it is necessary to clarify central terminology. Schlatter and Bavinck, respectively, use the German term *Wissenschaft* and the Dutch expression *wetenschap*. The continental concept of *Wissenschaft/wetenschap* differs from the Anglo-Saxon 'science.' Etymologically, the continental terms denote the creation and composition of knowledge in a broad sense. Today, 'science' (going back to Latin *scientia*, meaning 'knowledge') is most commonly understood in a narrow sense, referring mainly to 'natural sciences' (*Naturwissenschaften*). However, in this essay, the authors intend to use 'science' in the broad sense of *Wissenschaft* as both Schlatter and Bavinck understood it (including the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities). Wilfried Härle notes that '*Wissenschaft's* function is to expand knowledge in a revisable manner.' Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 4. In this sense, it will be argued, theology can count itself among the sciences as both Schlatter and Bavinck point out.

<sup>10</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University defined and illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899).

<sup>11</sup> Linell E. Cady, Delwin Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Martien Brinkman, Nico Schreurs, Hendrik Vroom and Conrad Wethmar, eds., *Theology between Church, University and Society* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2003).

speak for itself. This is to say that the co-authors wish to explore Schlatter and Bavinck on Christian theology's own account of itself (as distinct from religious studies) as an academic discipline within the university context, and which may appropriately be described as a science in its own right.<sup>13</sup>

As such, Bavinck and Schlatter, both of whom wrote in the midst of nineteenth century Europe's assault on the theology faculty (and who shared the conviction that theology is a scientific endeavour which should take place in the university) are poised to make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

In addition to their rejection of a dualistic separation of theology and science, both of these theologians claimed that theology was necessary within the academy precisely to prevent the fragmentation of its various faculties and departments. Their common assertion is that theology alone is able to serve as an integrative force among the academic disciplines, as only theology provides a coherent framework that enables them to function properly and collaborate in harmony. They foresaw the university as becoming a cacophony of arbitrarily associated faculties when deprived of theology. Bearing in mind that the theme of academic fragmentation (whereby one ponders what, for example, the biology department has to do with the English literature class) has become a prominent feature in discussion on the current academy,<sup>14</sup> it seems that one must at least consider their claims.

This article sees its place in this discussion as one of providing a contribution based on what can be learned from history. Although its conclusion tentatively encourages modern day theological practitioners to strive for scientific standards in academic theology, this paper's primary goal is to serve future conversations on 'theology as science' by asking why two significant nineteenth century theologians argued so resolutely for the scientific character of theology as a university discipline. In what follows, we shall first examine Schlatter's position (A.), moving subsequently to Bavinck's understanding of theology as science (B.).

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, drawing on Karl Barth, points out that 'religion' is concerned with human consciousness and behaviour, and as such is a human creation. 'Theology,' however, is a unique science in that it is 'devoted to knowledge of God, differing from other sciences by the uniqueness of its object which can be apprehended only on its own terms.' Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 281. It is with in this sense that this article uses the term 'theology', and as such, this usage corresponds with the accounts of Bavinck and Schlatter.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Joseph A. Burke, *Fixing the Fragmented University: Decentralization with Direction* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 2006).

## A. Adolf Schlatter

Theology, to Schlatter's mind, has its rightful place among the sciences in the university. To understand how Schlatter arrived at this conclusion, it is necessary first to portray his individual biography against the backdrop of the *Zeitgeist* in his day. To establish his view in more detail, it is useful to trace the 'theology versus science' debate between Schlatter and one of his contemporaries, Paul Jäger. On this basis, one will be able to probe Schlatter's perspective on the place of theology in the academy.

### I. *The Scientification of Theology in Schlatter's Context*

Adolf Schlatter was born 1852 into a long-established St. Gallen family with a strongly Reformed heritage. At school, in philosophy and religious education classes, he was confronted with the then liberal tendencies in the Reformed Church. His later theological and philosophical critical works are rooted in these early classroom encounters. Having finished school, Schlatter decided to study theology, not primarily with the aim of becoming a minister or a theological scholar, but rather in order to clarify and corroborate his own faith.<sup>15</sup>

Schlatter proceeded to study in Basle (1871-73) and Tübingen (1873-74).<sup>16</sup> In this context, his first reaction was to protect his faith from the influx of critical 'scientific' theology.<sup>17</sup> This early separation of faith and science stands in stark contrast to his later empirical theology of observation in which he explicitly conceptualises theology as science. In 1875, Schlatter was ordained as a minister in the Swiss Reformed State Church. After five years as a pastor in Switzerland, he accepted an offer from the pietistic circles in Bern to work as a *Privatdozent* at the University in order to counterbalance the predominant liberal forces in the Bern theological department at that time. From the very beginning of his career onwards, Schlatter found himself in the line of fire between the positive and liberal camps. Amongst his liberal colleagues, Schlatter was too conservative and non-conformist in his theological approach to gain status. Amongst the conservative Swiss and German Pietist circles

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<sup>15</sup> Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1996), 53.

<sup>16</sup> To be precise, Schlatter studied in Basle from the spring of 1871 until the spring of 1873, and then, after three semesters in Tübingen, again in the winter of 1874-75.

<sup>17</sup> As expressed in an early essay about Augustine's *De utilitate credendi* (cf. Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 55).

however, he was too scientific in his epistemology and theological methodology to be wholeheartedly approved.

In the Bern faculty, he was continually isolated by his liberal colleagues and had to overcome several obstacles on his way towards *Habilitation*. Schlatter consistently emphasised the relationship of theology and church to science, exposing the weaknesses of the liberal movement which in his view would result in the dissolution of the church.<sup>18</sup> Schlatter was convinced that theology, as a science, belonged in the university. This perhaps explains why Schlatter, in spite of opposition, did not leave the university for an independent bible college, but rather continued at the universities of Greifswald (1888-93), Berlin (1893-98) and finally Tübingen (1898-1922/30).<sup>19</sup>

In order to understand the tensions Schlatter would face during his decade of teaching in Prussia, one has to consider the political milieu of the late nineteenth century German Empire. From the outset, Prussia's aim was to develop a culture state (*Kulturstaat*) that would gain influence over the theological departments in order to implement its concept of a scientific standard in theology, according to Prussia's own goal of modernisation and scientific progress.<sup>20</sup> In the course of the so-called struggle over the Apostles' Creed (*Apostolikum*), the Prussian *Kultusministerium* established in 1893 a new chair for systematic theology at the University of Berlin in order to counterbalance the predominantly liberal faculty, represented by Adolf von Harnack.<sup>21</sup> The call was issued to Schlatter who was representative of a more conservative theology. Schlatter accepted the call and consequently found himself as the sole conservative theologian among the likes of von Harnack, Weiss and Dillmann. In contrast to

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<sup>18</sup> See for example his essay *Über das Princip des Protestantismus* and his speech *Über Licht und Schatten unserer kirchlichen Lage*, both 1881 (cf. Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 161-2).

<sup>19</sup> Schlatter officially retired in 1922, but continued to give lectures until 1930. He furthermore penned large exegetical commentaries as well as a devotional work until shortly before his death in 1938.

<sup>20</sup> See Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the German University*, 24-28.

<sup>21</sup> With his critical stance towards the *Apostolikum*, Harnack had manoeuvred himself into a precarious situation in that he now faced disciplinary action. This happened as a result of complaints from the Evangelical-Lutheran Conference of the 20th of September, 1892, on whose basis emperor Wilhelm II asked for an immediate report (*Immediatbericht*) on Harnack. Prussian Culture minister Julius R. Bosse (1832-1901) was able to aid Harnack in this predicament and, in order to appease the ecclesial camp, suggested the installation of a chair for systematic theology at the University of Berlin that would support the church position. This suggestion was endorsed by Wilhelm II as the so-called punitive professorship (*Strafprofessur*) against von Harnack which was finally awarded to Schlatter. For a summary on the *Apostolikumsstreit* see Karl Neufeld, *Adolf Harnacks Konflikt mit der Kirche: Weg-Stationen zum 'Wesen des Christentums'* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1979), 114-132.

Schlatter, his liberal colleagues were mostly caught up in the process of theology's scientification as propagated by the Prussian state ideal.<sup>22</sup>

Thomas A. Howard observes that, 'by the late nineteenth century, in fact, Protestant theologians, like much of the rest of the university professoriate, understood themselves as dutiful servants of the new national state and avant-garde practitioners of modern science who should be taken seriously by their peers in more secular fields.'<sup>23</sup>

## II. "Atheistic Theology"? *The Debate between Adolf Schlatter and Paul Jäger*

One of the representatives of this scientific enthusiasm was Paul Jäger, a minister from Baden, whose concept of 'atheistic theology' prompted a response from Schlatter. This response took the form of a thought-provoking defence of theology as an independent science that serves as an integrative factor within the academy.

In 1905, Jäger published an essay entitled 'Atheistic thinking' in recent theology' (*Das 'atheistische Denken' der neueren Theologie*), demanding that scientific theology pursue 'the atheistic method.'<sup>24</sup> For the sake of pure, authentic scientific observation, the theologian, as every other scientist, has to perform his research under the presupposition that God did not exist (*etsi deus non daretur*). The goal is to explain reality through empirically observable reality alone, excluding the idea of God in the process. Only in this way, Jäger argues, will theology be taken seriously by the other sciences. Interestingly, he followed this by claiming that such a practice should in no way distress the pious theologian, who ignores God only in his role of a scientific theologian. After completing the scientific process, he again assumes the role of the religious individual, where the idea of God still continues to be in effect.

In his answer to Jäger, Schlatter, at this point Professor of New Testament in Tübingen, discards the intrusion of 'Atheistic methods in theology with an essay of that title: *'Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie'*. In responding to

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<sup>22</sup> August Dillmann modestly tries to establish reasons why theology still belonged to the university (in his 1875 speech at the University of Berlin, *'Ueber die Theologie als Universitätswissenschaft'*). Adolf von Harnack expressed his vision to free scientific theology from the church's patronage and advocated the state's regulation of the theological department in order to ensure exact theological research. See his 'Bedeutung der theologischen Fakultäten,' *Preussische Jahrbücher* 175, 1919: 363-74; cf. his earlier speech at the University of Berlin (in 1901) 'Die Aufgabe der theologischen Fakultäten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte,' in *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 2 (Gießen: J. Riecker'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1904), 159-178.

<sup>23</sup> Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the German University*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Jäger, 'Das "atheistische Denken,"' *Die Christliche Welt* 19 (1905), 578.



Jäger's arguments, Schlatter delineates his concept of theology as science and as regulative factor in the university.

### 1. *Theology is Science*

Schlatter first of all rejects the dissociation between science and theology, between the so-called 'exact' scientist and the 'speculative' theologian:

This is the old sharply drawn dualism that we have come to know from Kant, Jacobi, Schleiermacher, Fries, etc.: The heathen head and the pious heart, the atheistic science and the religious feeling.<sup>25</sup>

Behind Jäger's call for an 'atheistic' methodology, Schlatter saw the prejudice that only the natural sciences are scientific in an exact sense and theology is not. Jäger's view reflects the positivistic belief at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in the progress of natural science and its ability to explain all of reality.<sup>26</sup> Against this background, Jäger's demand for 'atheistic methods' seems only consequential at that time. Indeed, the latter half of the nineteenth century showed a remarkable development of the natural sciences in the Western world. The innovative empirically-grounded 'science of nature' (*Naturwissenschaft*) challenged the previous Hegelian philosophy of nature. Any idealistic approaches appeared redundant in light of the concrete, empirical and verifiable knowledge deriving from natural sciences. It was, among others, Albrecht Ritschl, who grew disillusioned with Hegel's absolute idealism and speculative metaphysics in general. As Ritschl's student, Jäger would take over his teacher's criticism and develop a 'liberated' theology with an 'atheistic' *modus operandi* in order to be on a par with the natural sciences. The scientific bias of the late nineteenth century *Bildungsprotestantismus* proved very influential: decades later, the Lutheran theologian and sociologist Peter Berger suggested a 'methodological atheism' as the presupposition with which one should work in religious studies.<sup>27</sup> The resemblance to Jäger is obvious.

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<sup>25</sup> Adolf Schlatter, 'Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie,' *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 9, no. 5 (1905), 230.

<sup>26</sup> It is an irony of history that the basis for the new empirical science lay in the theological gains of the Reformation. Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, 59-76.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 100.

Schlatter, however, turns the tables and points out that this positivist *Wissenschaftsideal* is misguided. The atheistic-neutralistic, secular outlook—he argues—is rather an idiosyncratic presupposition that leads to inexact science. Schlatter questions the credo of *Voraussetzungslosigkeit* ('presuppositionlessness') in science. He maintains that every researcher, be that a natural scientist or a scientific theologian, carries his own indelible presuppositions. *Contra* Jäger et al., he argues that this is not a hindrance to performing good, exact science. For Schlatter it is in fact essential that the 'presuppositioned' scientist acts (being conscious of having his own similarly hidden presuppositions) as an individual, as a person with a characteristic history and passion for the subject he studies.

'We are always called to the thinking-act, in which our own personality forms its judgment,'<sup>28</sup> says Schlatter. A neutral, disinterested scientist on the other hand is an unrealistic distortion, as he does not experience unity and balance in his 'life-act.'<sup>29</sup> The true scientist, as well as the scientific theologian, must pursue a holistic perspective, combining intellect with personality. Schlatter rightly points out that theologians, like scientists in general, approach their subjects as persons of faith with special personal commitment.<sup>30</sup> For the theologian, this means that his faith must not be, as Jäger demands, excluded as unscientific from the scientific process but is *de facto* a central part of his profession.<sup>31</sup> Only as a coherent individual, with his *Lebensakt* intact, can the theologian, like the natural scientist, work properly. This does not, of course, imply a neglect of exact, empirical studies.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the theologian is called to observe with the same strenuousness as the natural scientist:

We, as members of the *universitas litterarum*, are therefore called, in the scope of the work appointed to us, to see, to observe with chastity and cleanness . . . This is the

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<sup>28</sup> Schlatter, 'Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie', 235.

<sup>29</sup> *Lebensakt*, a term of central importance in Schlatter's theology.

<sup>30</sup> This is echoed by Stanley Grenz, who, drawing upon Michael Polanyi's concept, notes, 'Scientists are theologians, then, in that personal stance affects, even directs, their research . . . Like theologians, scientists engage in their discipline as persons of faith. They bring a certain type of personal commitment—that is, faith—to their work.' Stanley Grenz, 'Why do Theologians need to be Scientists?', *Zygon* 35, no. 2 (2000), 348.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Frame of Mind* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 75.

<sup>32</sup> Schlatter notes that 'the subject of our task makes it theology, not its form.' Adolf Schlatter, 'Die Bedeutung der Methode für die theologische Arbeit,' *Theologischer Literaturbericht* 31 (1908), 6.

*ceterum censeo* for every labour within the university. Science is first seeing, and secondly seeing, and thirdly seeing and again and again seeing.<sup>33</sup>

Taken together, Jäger's 'atheistic method' is rendered absurd as a *contradictio in adjecto*. Every science that rebels, as it were, against its inherent subject annihilates itself. Schlatter makes it plain that Jäger's atheistic maxim is not rooted in actual observation or exact scientific work but in speculative assertions of a science-positivist *weltanschauung* that, with its method of 'pure science,' ironically obstructs proper scientific research.

## 2. Science as Theistic Science

Furthermore, Schlatter maintains that the 'atheistic method' in theology is uncalled for as it neglects truth. The problem arises when the 'atheistic' theologian has completed the allegedly neutral, scientific task (e.g. investigating the historical background of the New Testament) and then assumes his role of a theistic theologian who interprets the results as a pious person. The dilemma is obvious: on which basis can the theologian formulate valid truth claims when the giver of truth is excluded in the first place?

No science performing research with an atheistic presupposition, he contends, can claim to be real science precisely because it neglects the truth: namely, God. 'When one rejects the idea of God, the notion of truth collapses; that is why every science that becomes atheistic destroys itself.'<sup>34</sup> The *argumentum e contrario* to Schlatter's important assertion would proceed as follows: science is possible only as 'theistic science.' According to Schlatter, science in general can only claim to be true science when it includes the notion of God. Theology, as well as any other science, therefore has to be essentially 'theistic science' if it aims to be successful in its quest for truth.

Taken together in his answer to Jäger, Schlatter emphasises the similarities between theology and the natural sciences and thereby attempts to establish theology's place in the university. Theology is a science and every science by definition needs to be theistic in its outlook in order to pursue its quest for truth successfully. Moreover, Schlatter not only defends theology as science among others but proposes that theology complements the other sciences and serves as an integrative authority within the scientific community.

<sup>33</sup> Schlatter, 'Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie,' 239-40.

<sup>34</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Das Christliche Dogma* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1923), 98.

### 3. *Theology as Regulative Principle for the Sciences*

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Schlatter had a realistic appraisal of natural science's capabilities and was therefore able to formulate a self-confident framework for theology as complementary and regulative principle among the sciences. Against the current of pre-First World War scientific optimism he very much doubted the perfect comprehensibility of nature and its full explicability through science.

In retrospect, he proved to be ahead of the times. In the very year that Schlatter published his essay, Albert Einstein revolutionised (and also somewhat mystified) physics by providing experimental evidence for the existence of the atom *via* his theory of special relativity (*On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies*). Einstein had thus opened the door to a new, exciting and puzzling world of physics (which would become even more bewildering some twenty years later with the appearance of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle). Step by step, faith in 'pure' science diminished. What Einstein and Heisenberg did for physics, Karl Popper did for the philosophy of general science in the 1930s. A scientific theory, Popper argued, can never be verified but can only be accepted as working hypothesis provided it is not falsified or a better alternative hypothesis is found. Somewhat presciently, Schlatter had a realistic view of the limited explanatory power of the natural sciences, of its fallibility and of the provisional character of scientific theories *per se*. What is more, he strongly reacted against any notions of theology as a gap-filler for inexplicable scientific phenomena.<sup>35</sup>

To the contrary, theology, argues Schlatter, refines and completes the natural sciences. After a careful scientific examination, the intelligibility of nature requires a theological interpretation.<sup>36</sup> Theology seeks interpretations of reality beyond the explanations provided by the natural sciences. Schlatter scholar Werner Neuer comments that Schlatter sought theological interpretations of reality that are '*beyond* the nature-immanent explanations that the natural sciences are confined to.'<sup>37</sup> Theology therefore has a broader scope as it is directed to the 'whole of reality' (*Richtung auf das Ganze*).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Schlatter distances himself from the notion that 'only when the natural sciences fail, a room for theology arises.' *Die Philosophische Arbeit seit Descartes* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1959), 229.

<sup>36</sup> See Schlatter, *Das Christliche Dogma*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Werner Neuer, *Der Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter: Eine Untersuchung zur Grundlegung christlicher Ethik* (Gießen/Basel: Brunnen, 1986), 130. Emphasis original.

<sup>38</sup> Schlatter, *Das Christliche Dogma*, 13.

## B. Herman Bavinck

Bavinck's position on theology as a science within the academy developed while an undergraduate student at the modernist<sup>39</sup> University of Leiden (1874-80), and as a theology professor in a church seminary at Kampen (1882-1902) and at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1902-1921). In his student years, various educational reforms were advanced in the Netherlands (culminating in the Higher Education Act of 1876) under the leadership of Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, the leading framer of the new Dutch Constitution.<sup>40</sup> Thorbecke's influence led to the attempted exclusion of theology from the university, a move strenuously resisted by Bavinck.

### I. Bavinck's Life Context

Born on December 13th, 1854, Herman Bavinck was the son of Jan Bavinck, a German Reformed pastor in the conservative, separatist Dutch *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*.<sup>41</sup> As a young man, Bavinck enrolled at the Theological School in Kampen, where his father was a pastor. After one year there, however, he made the daring decision to transfer to the modernist theological faculty at Leiden. This choice was made in search of a 'more scientific' theological training than could be offered at Kampen at that time.<sup>42</sup>

Between 1874 and 1880, Bavinck studied under the likes of Johannes Scholten, Abraham Kuenen and Lodewijk Rauwenhoff at Leiden. There, he admired the rigorous scholarship of his professors, though he often found himself in deep disagreement with their presuppositions and doctrinal conclusions. At this time, he also came under the influence of Abraham Kuyper, the rising star of a new wave of Dutch Calvinism. While at Leiden, Bavinck wrote a doctoral thesis on the ethics of Ulrich Zwingli,<sup>43</sup> following which he sought ordination in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*. In 1881, he became a pastor in Franeker.

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<sup>39</sup> The term 'modernist,' in a Dutch theological context, dates from 1858, when it first appeared in Daniel Théodore Huet's *Wenken opzigtelijk de Moderne theologie* ('s-Gravenhage: J. M. van 't Haaff, 1858) which applied the epithet to the movement begun by Johannes Scholten's *De leer der Hervormde Kerk* (Leiden: P. Engels, 1848-50) and Cornelis Opzoomer's *De weg der wetenschap* (Amsterdam: J. H. Gebhard, 1849).

<sup>40</sup> Bernard O'Sullivan and Denis Linehan, 'Regionalism in the Netherlands,' *Regionalism in the European Union*, ed. Peter Wagstaff (Bristol: Intellect Books, 1999), 88-9.

<sup>41</sup> John Bolt, 'Editor's Introduction,' in Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 10.

<sup>42</sup> R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn Tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 20.

<sup>43</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De Ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman, 1880).

One year later, Bavinck was called to teach theology at Kampen, where he worked from 1882 to 1902. There, his *magnum opus* was written: *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.<sup>44</sup> A decade after the Union of the Reformed Churches in 1892, he accepted the post of Theology Professor at the newly founded Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. This period in his life was marked by a broad and thorough engagement in the fields of politics, philosophy, pedagogy and education. He died on July 29th, 1921.

## II. *The Exclusion of Theology from the Academy in Bavinck's Lifetime*

### 1. *Bavinck's Student Years: The Higher Education Act (1876)*

In 1848, the Utrecht philosopher Cornelis Opzoomer advised the Dutch Government to remove the theological faculties from its universities.<sup>45</sup> Although this counsel was not immediately followed, it nonetheless sets the backdrop against which Bavinck would emerge.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Europe was in engulfed in revolution. Although there was no revolution in the Netherlands, the events in neighbouring countries considerably affected Dutch national life. Fearing that his kingdom would be plunged into anti-monarchist violence, the Dutch King William II ordered Johan Rudolph Thorbecke to revise the national constitution. The effect of this revision was the maintenance of William's status and the considerable reduction of his powers. Parliamentary democracy was introduced and suffrage enlarged.

As the principal framer of the new constitution, Thorbecke significantly influenced it to reflect his own political leanings. He was promoted to Minister of Internal Affairs in 1849, and thus became, in effect, the first Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Thorbecke's time in office consistently brought debate on revolutionary values to the forefront of Dutch national life. A central aspect of this conflict was how one ought to relate education to the new constitution's principles. Through his input, secondary education was brought in-line with the constitution. Although Thorbecke died in 1866, the momentum he

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<sup>44</sup> This work is now available in a standardised English translation in four volumes: Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 4: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). All volumes: ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend.

<sup>45</sup> Herman Bavinck, 'Theology and Religious Studies: Appendix B,' *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, tr. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 281.

generated carried on beyond his lifetime. Bavinck entered the sphere of higher education just as the secularisation of the academy came into full force.

In 1868, Prime Minister Heemskerk argued that due to the new constitution's principles of a separated church and state, the training of ministers belonged in the church seminary, rather than in the university. However, his successor Cornelis Fock stated the following year that theology remained a legitimate academic discipline. By 1874, Prime Minister Geertsema had formally established the Netherlands' first department of religious studies. Shortly after this, Geertsema was replaced by Heemskerk, who was reappointed Prime Minister. Heemskerk wasted little time in resuming his earlier drive to abolish the Dutch theological faculties, arguing that they should be closed and replaced by religious studies classes under the authority of literature faculties.

Heemskerk's proposition provoked a variety of responses. While extreme camps formed supporting the total abolition and wholehearted support of theology, a middle majority emerged who thought it inappropriate to transform theology into a sub-group of the literary department. A mediating position was thus sought, which led to the creation of the religious studies department. Thus in 1876, when Bavinck was an undergraduate student at Leiden University, the Higher Education Act was passed. The Act strongly reflected the general lack of agreement between the State and the Netherlands Reformed Church as to the place of theology in the academy and in the church. At the behest of the moderate Liberal Party politician Albertus van Naamen van Eemnes, it was decided that the newly created Religious Studies department was nonetheless to retain its former title: the Faculty of Theology.

Bavinck's later response to this middle way was highly cynical: 'The Chamber had retained the faculty of theology in name but had in effect introduced a department of religious studies. In this way a strange department came into existence in the state universities: a faculty that is *called* theology but is actually a department of religious studies. In this way theology is maimed and robbed of its heart and life. The subjects incorporated in this marvellous department are a motley jumble.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, 'Theology and Religious Studies: Appendix B,' 283. Similarly to Bavinck in the Netherlands, German church historian Adolf von Harnack rejected the suggestion that the 'Faculty of Christian Theology' be renamed the 'Faculty of the General Science of Religion and History of Religion' in his 1901 speech at the University of Berlin on 'The Task of the Theological Faculties and the general History of Religion.' See Harnack, 'Die Aufgabe der theologischen Fakultäten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte', 159-178.

This view, expressed by Bavinck in 1892, reflects the more immediate response of Barthold van Jutphaas<sup>47</sup> and the later critique of Abraham Kuyper. (It should be acknowledged, of course, that Bavinck's views on the place of theology in the university were strongly Kuyperian.)<sup>48</sup>

Bavinck's 'motley jumble' jibe seems founded on his experience of undergraduate and doctoral studies at Leiden. Although the Leiden theological faculty was strongly insistent on its need for metamorphosis into a religious studies department, Bavinck's memories were of an awkward collection of principles and methods: 'The result was a strange mixture of incompatibles lacking all integration and unity of conception. Some of the subjects taught remind one of the old theology programs; others clearly belong to the field of religious studies. This unfortunate development also places the professors who must lecture in these departments in a difficult situation.'<sup>49</sup>

His primary example of such a professor is Johannes Hermanus Gunning. Appointed to a chair at Leiden in 1889, Gunning initially regarded himself as a 'believing' theologian who could also teach the philosophy of religion from an openly Christian perspective.<sup>50</sup> Gunning's position soon changed: he no longer believed it possible to participate in the religious studies classes as a 'believing' professor. Gunning's religion classes were taken over by Cornelis Petrus Tiele, whilst Gunning moved to teach historical theology.

Bavinck became a student at the climax of this struggle. In 1876, midway through his Leiden years, the Higher Education Act came into force.

## 2. *Bavinck's Professorial Years: Kampen and Amsterdam*

Bavinck, like Schlatter, displays a strong aversion to the 'head for science, heart for theology' dualism so commonplace in his day. However, his experience was not simply of this dualism as the work of secular liberals. Rather, he also encountered it in his own church, as is seen in the aftermath of the Union of the Reformed Churches in 1892.

In this Union, Bavinck's denomination, the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*, merged with Kuyper's *Doleantie* group to form the *Gereformeerde Kerken in*

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<sup>47</sup> Barthold Jacob Lintelo baron de Geer van Jutphaas, *De wet op het hooger onderwijs* (Utrecht: Bijleveld, 1877), 147.

<sup>48</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Onnauwkeurig?* (Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1889), 9.

<sup>49</sup> Herman Bavinck, 'Theology and Religious Studies,' *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, tr. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 53.

<sup>50</sup> Johannes Hermanus Gunning, *De wijsbegeerte van den godsdienst uit het beginsel van het geloof der gemeente* (Utrecht: Briejer, 1889), and *Het geloof der gemeente als theologische maatstaf des oordeels in de wijsbegeerte van den godsdienst*, parts I-II (Utrecht: Breijer, 1890).



*Nederland*. This new denomination was thus obliged to reconsider the nature and relationship of its pre-existing theological faculties: the Theological School at Kampen and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.<sup>51</sup> In this context, Bavinck published a great deal of material on educational reform.<sup>52</sup> His own fear was that Amsterdam and Kampen would be polarised and that consequently, one would become pietistic and unscientific, while the other would simply collapse theology into religious studies. (It should be noted that such a hypothetical outcome would be a noted departure from the original vision of the Vrije Universiteit's founding leaders, which favoured theological over religious studies.) In *The Theological School and the Free University*, Bavinck argued for an 'organic union' of the two institutions. The Synod (perhaps reflecting the established characters of both institutions, with Kampen already an ecclesiastically committed institution training Reformed ministers, and the Vrije Universiteit a university founded on Reformed principles, but without a formal connection to the church and producing students unable to be called as ministers) disagreed and instead designated Kampen the site of 'practical' ministry training and Amsterdam the locus of 'scientific' theology.<sup>53</sup>

In an almost prescient fashion, Bavinck marked the Union of the Reformed Churches by highlighting their need to break from the dualistic heart of the Higher Education Act (1876). He alleged that the Act, in annexing the heart to the pietists and the head to the modernists, had rendered theological education a shambolic experience for both sides.<sup>54</sup> Unsurprisingly, he was left dismayed by the post-Union rejection of his *The Theological School and the Free University* in favour of adherence to the Higher Education Act. Evidently, Bavinck's insistence on the place of theology in the university was counter-cultural even within his own church.

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<sup>51</sup> Herman Bavinck, 'The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands,' *Princeton Theological Review* 8 (1910); Hendrik Bouma, *Secession, Doleantie and Union: 1834-1892*, tr. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> See Herman Bavinck, *Education and Theology (Opleiding en theologie, 1896)*; *The Office of "Doctor" [in the Church] (Het doctorenambt, 1899)*; *Erudition and Scholarship (Geleerdheid en wetenschap, 1899)*; *The Authority of the Church and the Freedom of Science (Het recht der kerken en de vrijheid der wetenschap, 1899)* and *The Theological School and the Free University (Theologische School en Vrije Universiteit, 1899)*.

<sup>53</sup> For Bavinck's assessment, see 'The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands,' 457-8. It should be noted that Bavinck's sentiments in *The Theological School and the Free University* are highly consonant with his earlier paper *Theology and Religious Studies (Godgeleerdheid en godsdienstwetenschap)* which was published at the time of the Union.

<sup>54</sup> Bavinck, 'Theology and Religious Studies,' 53.

### III. Bavinck's Reassertion of *Theology as a Science*

#### 1. *Presuppositions and Science*

Interestingly, Bavinck's reassertion of theology as a scientific discipline begins by interacting with the likes of Paul Lagarde and Franz Overbeck: germanophone intellectuals whose influence was also felt by Schlatter.<sup>55</sup> Bavinck notes their impact on both Germany and the Netherlands in 1870s:

As early as 1876 [the year of the Higher Education Act in the Netherlands] Lagarde advocated a completely free science of religion practiced at the university and, alongside of it, an ecclesiastical theology taught at the seminary. Overbeck considered science and religion, Christianity and culture, completely incompatible, regarded the idea of a Christian theology as impossible and thought that science and the church would be able to live peacefully side by side if in the lives of students and pastors a sharp distinction was made between their personal and their official, their private and public, convictions.<sup>56</sup>

Bavinck's response to the exclusion of theology from the academy is twofold: initially, he outlines the impossible nature of this dualism by its obligations on students and professors alike; following which, he gives various theoretical objections.

In terms of practical problems, Bavinck understood the theology-religious studies dichotomy to require 'double-entry bookkeeping' of its students and professors. In this context, he uses the unusual analogy of a chemist who, despite his scientific analysis of food, continues to eat as a normal human being. Here, he approvingly refers to Julius Kaftan:<sup>57</sup> 'While eating and chemically analysing food are not disparate functions in relation to the same object and can very well go together, it is impossible to believably represent God as personal and as philosopher to say that such a representation is incorrect and that God is impersonal.'<sup>58</sup> No doubt Bavinck felt a degree of sympathy for Johannes Gunning at this point.

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<sup>55</sup> Schlatter studied under Overbeck in 1874-75 in Basle and was disappointed by the experience. 'How could one be so rich in knowledge and yet so unfruitful at the same time! . . . Overbeck, in that he chained himself to Nietzsche, rendered his glorious knowledge dead.' Adolf Schlatter, *Rückblick auf meine Lebensarbeit* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1977), 50.

<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Julius Kaftan, whom Bavinck quotes regularly in his discussion of theology as a science, was Schlatter's colleague at the University of Berlin from 1893-98.

<sup>58</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 50-1.

By way of theoretical objections, his argument reads much like that of Schlatter, culminating in the assertion that no scientist—the physicist or the theologian—is presuppositionless or neutral. This is, of course, a strongly Kuyperian influence in Bavinck's thought.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Bavinck highlights that modern science, which was built on that recognition, has essentially been hijacked by those who insist that positivism is the 'only true conception of science.' One could almost say that positivism becomes, as it were, an *Ersatzreligion* for the scientist who disregards metaphysics.

This hypothesis, however, is premature, for what thinker in the past ever believed in the possibility that, the moment he stepped into his study, a scholar like himself could silence his deepest religious, moral and philosophical convictions? It is also diametrically in conflict with the theory of those who launched it, for the recognition that positivism represents the true understanding of science is a presupposition that in advance robs scientific investigation of its claim to be presuppositionless.<sup>60</sup>

As such, the exclusion of theology from the academy (on the grounds that its practitioners are unfairly biased by their presuppositions, whereas the other sciences are practiced in total neutrality) is, according to Bavinck (and Schlatter), wholly unjustified.

## 2. *The Science of God*

Although Bavinck insists that theology is a science, he—like Schlatter—differs from Charles Hodge, who saw theology as a science like any other,<sup>61</sup> and Karl Barth, who would go on to maintain a position on scientific theology as *Sonderweg*.<sup>62</sup> For Bavinck, theology is a positive science. Indeed, it is nothing less than the 'science of God.'<sup>63</sup> However, its unique object means that its methodology will differ somewhat from the natural sciences.<sup>64</sup> This is so as unlike the natural sciences, where one must go and investigate (with knowledge as the goal of the scientific process), theology's object speaks for himself:

<sup>59</sup> For Bavinck's interaction with Kuyper on the relationship of neutrality and university education, see Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke Wetenschap* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1904), 108.

<sup>60</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Karl Barth defends the prominent position of theology as science and speaks of the 'Sonderexistenz der Theologie' in the academic context. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 1/1, 2nd ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1935), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Bavinck's position here is carried over by Berkhof. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 48.

God practices self-disclosure. He chooses to share from the endless resources of his self-knowledge.<sup>65</sup> In theology, the investigation comes to the investigator.

Insofar as its epistemological foundation is essentially metaphysical (and as such both accommodates and necessitates revelation as an epistemological source), scientific theology is understood by Bavinck to be considerably different from the natural sciences. The biologist's conceptual apparatus is not suited to analyse metaphysical life; the theologian's, however, is. 'Like every other departmental discipline, theology too has its own object and principle, method and aim.'<sup>66</sup> If metaphysics is denied, theology becomes impossible as its only source of knowledge is silenced. Should metaphysics be considered, however, Bavinck believes theology then becomes essential in the pursuit of truth.

Bavinck also moves to emphasise that there is also a commonality between scientific theology and the natural sciences.

For although the faith-knowledge of God—and therefore also the whole domain of dogmatics and theology—bears a distinct character, in this respect it is absolutely not alone in the world of the sciences. Like every other departmental discipline, theology too has its own object and principle, method and aim. At the same time, theology also possesses a range of characteristics in common with the other sciences.<sup>67</sup>

These similarities, he writes, include that the sciences in general are based on facts that are not universally accepted: different faculties use different methodologies to study different objects and reach different conclusions. (Bavinck cites mathematics as the likely exception to this rule.)<sup>68</sup> The process of science is one of discovery and growth in knowledge, and that often by error. He emphasises that the empirical scientist, like the theological scientist, brings a world of subjectivity to his enterprise. In reality, Bavinck believes, theology and the natural sciences inhabit similar realities: they dare to speak and know, but are both humbled by their human capacity to err and misunderstand. 'In that sense one can speak with complete justice of dogmatics as a science about

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<sup>65</sup> In this context Bavinck is critical of H. Y. Groenewegen, who asserted that the knowledge of God is the goal, rather than the object, of theology. See H. Y. Groenewegen, 'De Theologie aan de Universiteit,' *De Theologie en hare Wijsbegeerte* (Amsterdam: Rogge, 1904), 196. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 41-2.

<sup>66</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 43.

<sup>68</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 43.

God, and there is no objection whatever to gathering this knowledge into a system.<sup>69</sup>

### 3. *A New 'Present-day Concept of Science'*

Bavinck, like Schlatter, was aware that those who deny theology to be a scientific discipline do so because their positivist paradigm does not allow it. Accordingly, Bavinck also challenged the positivist definition of science. His approach, however, was quite different to that of Schlatter. Whereas the latter more directly claimed that science, including the natural sciences, can only be true science insofar as it becomes theistic,<sup>70</sup> Bavinck's argument is directed at the impossibility of knowledge without metaphysics.<sup>71</sup> The particular accent placed by Bavinck on metaphysics rather than theism gives his *apologia* for scientific theology a distinct voice. His idea, it seems, is to meet anti-theological scientists on their own terms and highlight that their worldview nonetheless depends on that which they deny: metaphysics.

In so doing, Bavinck is not engaging in natural theology. This is, after all, an argument from reason for *metaphysics* rather than *God*. Having claimed that the universe cannot be coherently viewed without metaphysics, Bavinck would have the reader then turn to the self-revelation of the Triune God. In calling for the inclusion of metaphysics within the scientific epistemology, Bavinck asks for 'a fundamental revision of the present-day concept of science.'

A choice has to be made: either there is room in science for metaphysics and then positivism is in principle false, or positivism is the true view of science and metaphysics must be radically banished from its entire domain. One who specifically devotes his energies to the restoration of metaphysics in the science of religion has in principle broken with the basic idea from which the science of religion took its rise and is, again in principle, returning to the old view of theology.<sup>72</sup>

Bavinck calls for the natural and theological sciences to operate with a constant awareness of their ability to err and as such, his 'new concept of science' is characterised not simply by a change in substance (i.e. the inclusion of metaphysics) but also by a transformation in character: it is marked by modesty.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Schlatter's position is closer to that of Bavinck's colleague Abraham Kuyper. See Abraham Kuyper, *Sacred Theology* (Lafayette: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 51-61.

<sup>71</sup> See also Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909).

<sup>72</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 45.

#### 4. *A Renewed Concept of Theology*

It should be noted, however, that Bavinck also calls for a change in the present-day concept of theology. Noting that theology, like the natural sciences, should speak with humility, he reminds theologians that the unique object of their science (the self-revelation of God) gives them an appropriately favourable position 'by comparison with the other practitioners of science . . . [The theologian] may and can . . . to some extent speak in an absolute tone of voice.'<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, Bavinck charges much theology with forgetting its uniqueness and, consequently, for encouraging its own increasing academic irrelevance. He moves to deny theology an arbitrary sense of authority in the academy, and instead believes that theology deserves its place as a credible science only insofar as it appeals to *Deus dixit*.<sup>75</sup> However, where theologians become unwilling to speak on the basis that God has spoken, Bavinck foresaw no bright future for theology in the university.

Precisely as a science, and in order to regain its honour as a science, dogmatics cannot do better than again become what it ought to be. It must again become a normative science, bravely and boldly avow the authority principle, and speak in an absolute tone of voice. Provided this tone of voice is solely derived from the content of the revelation that it is the dogmatician's aim to interpret and is struck only insofar as he explicates this content, it is not in conflict with the demands for modesty. For both the absolute tone of voice and the modesty find their unity in the faith that must guide and animate the dogmatician from beginning to end in all his labour.<sup>76</sup>

### C. Conclusion

Although, as has been noted, Schlatter and Bavinck do not speak univocally on all aspects of the nature of theology as a science within the university, their thoughts nonetheless evince similarity. In the face of theology's increasingly marginalised place, both men took a bullish tone in reasserting (albeit with slightly different emphases) theology as science. Their critique of the positivist culture which necessarily sidelines theology is substantially the same: God has spoken, the theologian thus dares to follow suit. While much in their respective responses is more or less directly applicable to theology's current day

<sup>74</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Although the *Deus dixit* axiom is closely associated with the writings of Karl Barth, it should be acknowledged that Barth borrowed this emphasis from Bavinck. See, Karl Barth, 'Gesamtausgabe,' *Chr. Dogmatik im Entwurf*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Sauter (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), 65.

<sup>76</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 46.

struggle for survival, it nonetheless remains that Bavinck and Schlatter were primarily participants in theology's equivalent struggle in a nineteenth century Continental milieu.

Viewed within their own contexts, Schlatter and Bavinck defended theology's place in the university within cultures that were generally regarded as 'Christian'. In Schlatter-era Germany, church and state had a particularly close relationship, with the Prussian king sitting as *Summepiskopat*. By Bavinck's time, the Netherlands had already gone through the process of ecclesiastical disestablishment. However, he nonetheless regarded Dutch culture, and indeed Western European culture in general, as broadly 'Christian'.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Bavinck's arguments were made in a cultural context where Abraham Kuyper had demonstrated that theology could find a place a modern university without ties to an established church.

Although both theologians participated in debates on the place of theology in the university, they did so against a cultural backdrop that afforded Christianity a degree of cultural capital arguably far greater than that found in most current Western secular cultures. In that light, one thus remembers that theirs are voices carried forward into the twenty-first century and that as such, their contribution becomes limited. No doubt both would agree that twenty-first century theologians, particularly those writing in the secular Western world, must defend the place of theology in their own context.

As such, it is interesting to observe that various aspects of their thought resonate in the works of modern day theologians. In addition to the twentieth century contribution of Thomas F. Torrance,<sup>78</sup> various theologians active in the twenty-first century have also engaged with this topic. Stanley Grenz observed that 'several prominent theologians have returned to . . . the idea that theology brings the sciences together into a unified whole.'<sup>79</sup> The likes of Polkinghorne and Wentzel van Huyssteen echo Schlatter in arguing for theology as the great integrative discipline.<sup>80</sup> The recent studies earlier referred to also

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<sup>77</sup> Herman Bavinck, 'De Navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven,' in *Kennis en Leven* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 137-139. This is an emphasis also found in Kuyper's thought. See Abraham Kuyper, 'Common Grace' in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 200.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science*.

<sup>79</sup> Grenz, 'Why do Theologians need to be Scientists?,' 342.

<sup>80</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Scientists as Theologians: A Comparison of the Writings of Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne* (London: SPCK, 1996), 1; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel? Theology and Science in a Postmodern World* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 21-2.

highlight a growing sensitivity towards this debate.<sup>81</sup> However, if theology is to survive in the university context (particularly in relation to economic pressures on the financially less lucrative arts and humanities in the Western academic context), such studies must become far more numerous. The discipline must, as Dawkins charges, provide an ongoing, positive account of its content and place in the university.

In doing so, theology has little to fear. Indeed, as an integrative force it has much to offer the current university environment. The modern university is conscious of the problems posed by increasing fragmentation. Evidently, a mediating voice is required within the academy. The likes of Bavinck and Schlatter would no doubt suggest that this regulative force can only be theology with its *Richtung auf das Ganze*. Theology not only provides ethical norms as a binding framework but moreover, and most importantly, serves as bearer of the notion of truth.

Theology and dogmatics do not belong in a church seminary—by the grace of a positivistic science—but in the university of the sciences (*universitas scientiarum*). Furthermore, in the circle of the sciences, theology is entitled to the place of honour, not because of the persons who pursue this science, but in virtue of the object it pursues; it is and remains—provided this expression is correctly understood—the queen of the sciences.<sup>82</sup>

## Postscript

The landscape of theological education has changed dramatically since the days of Schlatter and Bavinck. The institutional affiliations of this article's co-authors (a theological faculty within an ancient Scottish university, and a self-standing theological university in the Netherlands) serve as a case in point. While both carry out their work as theologians in university contexts, these contexts are different in many respects. Furthermore, it is inevitable that many theologians committed to the scientific nature of their discipline will, by virtue of their personal circumstances, find themselves further removed from the university context. Hard questions must be asked of how, in practical terms,

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<sup>81</sup> Cady and Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*; Brinkman, Schreurs, Vroom and Wethmar, eds., *Theology between Church, University and Society*.

<sup>82</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 54. Bavinck's qualification of the term *regina scientiarum* portrays theology as a 'servant queen', rather than as an arbitrary, domineering ruler. Cf. Torrance, *Theological Science*, 283.



one can maintain the principle of theology as science whilst working in, for example, a bible college or seminary. Those in this context have no formal relationship to other disciplinary faculties in the way that a university-based theological department does. (Such a formal university-based relationship, of course, does not lead to automatic engagement between theologians and their non-theological colleagues...). However, one must state that, whatever the context is in which a theologian finds him- or herself, a theologian's calling is nonetheless to work at a '*wetenschappelijk*' (*scientific*) level. Whether non-theologians will take note of this self-awareness among scientific theologians is a separate issue. However, such striving for scientific standards in theology means, at the very least, that the failure of non-theologians to reciprocate this engagement cannot be justified on the grounds that theology is no more credible than 'the study of leprechauns'.