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Religious Consciousness in a Post-Christian Culture: J.H. Bavinck's *Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith* (1949), Sixty Years Later

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Abstract

The Dutch missiologists J.H. Bavinck (1895-1954) has become well-known for his far-sighted view of human religious consciousness. Bavinck believed that the religious impulse of mankind would not disappear, not even with increasing secularity in the West. In this article it is asked to what extent Bavinck's view of religiosity is still of use in a missiological approach of the most secularized part of the world, Europe. Its conclusion is that Bavinck's essentially psychological view did not take the cultural nature of religion sufficiently into account, and therefore the possibility that it will disappear. Therefore, a more realistic view of religious consciousness than Bavinck's is needed in a missiology of Europe.

Keywords

J.H. Bavinck, religious consciousness, missiology, Europe, secularization

Introduction

The Dutch missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964) was one of the important contributors to Reformed missiology around the middle of the last century. His relative lack of fame, in contrast with contemporaries such as Hendrik Kraemer, may have been due to his embedding in the rather isolated Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. This led to his distant position with respect to the World Missionary Conferences and the World Council of Churches. Nevertheless, J.H. Bavinck was a wide-ranging and original missionary thinker, as for example Paul Visser has shown in his study of Bavinck's life and work.¹

¹ Paul J. Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

Recently some important works by Bavinck have been translated in English.² In this paper I will discuss some themes from his *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof* (*Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith*),³ a book that has been ranked among the “modern classics” by his successor Johannes Verkuyl.⁴ Bavinck wrote his essay some 60 years ago (1949). My prime interest, therefore, is the missiological *relevance* of his Reformed analysis of religious consciousness for our age of late modernity. I will focus on one issue that has kept my mind busy since I studied Bavinck’s book for the first time. Bavinck was convinced that *man is a religious being*. Is this really true in the light of what we see in the deeply secularized societies of Europe? I believe that this is an important question, with many interesting implications for mission in a secular or post-Christian⁵ culture.

Bavinck’s View of Religion

Let me first very briefly summarize Bavinck’s view of religious consciousness very briefly, before I present my case.

J.H. Bavinck had an *a priori* conviction that ‘man’ (as a man of his age Bavinck used gender-biased language) can never be thought ‘outside of God’. Bavinck says: “Man stands in an I-Thou relationship, a conversational relationship, and he can only live in this relationship” (168). Bavinck himself is not very careful to distinguish this from actual religiosity. However, I think that it is a bit confusing to use the word ‘religious’ here,⁶ since this can also refer to being member of a church or praying. Obviously, not every human is religious in this empirical sense. To me it seems more precise, and possibly closer to Bavinck’s intention, to say that humans are beings who are always ‘addressed’ by God

I quote from the Dutch version *Bemoeien en getuigenis: Het leven en de missionaire theologie van Johan H. Bavinck* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997, ²1999).

² John Bolt et al. (eds.), *The J.H. Bavinck Reader: Essays in Missiology and Religious Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

³ I quote from the Dutch version *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof* (Kampen: Kok, 1949, 1989 reprint). An English translation is in preparation. In order to reduce footnotes, I will place references to page numbers in this particular book in the main text, between brackets.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix. Hendrik Kraemer also mentioned it as a “very interesting study”—Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1956), 79.

⁵ For these terms, see Stefan Paas, ‘Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences’, *Mission Studies* 28 (2011), 3-25.

⁶ As does Visser, *Bemoeienis*, 148-149.

(cf. 187). Being addressed is not the same as being religious, even if it is a necessary condition for religiosity.⁷

Now, what about this religiosity? Bavinck claims that this is essentially a human *response* to God's self-manifestation. If I understand him right we must not take this as a chronological order, but as a theological or logical order. For J.H. Bavinck, divine self-revelation and the human religious response are not two independent moments of a process. They are dialectically related, however, not as equal partners (169-170, 187). In the perennial struggle of each individual with God, it is always God who has the initiative.

This human religious response is what Bavinck calls "*religious consciousness*". This consciousness is *everywhere*. He quotes Hendrik Kramer who talked about a "universal religious consciousness in man". It can be found in all concrete religions, and it remains as a residue when religions decline. It is a "miraculous glow", a "flame", a "tough substance", a hidden "force" behind all empirical religions (9). We might say that it is the 'soul' of religion, or, in more modern terms its 'DNA'. Even though it takes many forms, there is a general pattern in this stream of religious consciousness. It contains five "essential elements" (12). Bavinck mentions (12-69): (a) the sense of a cosmic relationship, (b) the sense of an external moral claim, (c) the sense of a higher power (the great Unknown in the background), (d) the thirst after redemption, and (e) the sense of life between activity and passivity.

Structure of This Article

So far Bavinck's morphology of religion. In the remainder of this article I will ask, first, whether this religious consciousness that Bavinck describes is indeed universal. Are human beings really always *religious* creatures (apart from being 'addressed' by God)? I will present a case study that shows, in my opinion, that Bavinck's claim is not true.

Secondly, I will discuss two ways in which we can somehow maintain the claim that 'man is a religious being'. This may help us to remain close to Bavinck's original intention, although not to his actual words.

And finally, I will look at Bavinck's quite negative assessment of this religious consciousness. I will argue that this verdict, even if very adequate in his age, may be not the approach we need now.

⁷ Cf. Visser, *Bemoeienis*, 141.

Are Humans Religious?

In the middle part of the 20th century most leading European theologians were convinced that Europe had become a mission field.⁸ Secular humanism had emerged as an opponent of Christianity. Churches began to lose members, even though the large majorities still remained loyal to institutional Christianity. In this context of the late 1940s Bavinck asks: are humans intrinsically religious? In other words, will religious consciousness remain a factor of influence in secularizing Europe?

Bavinck's theory of religion drives him towards a 'yes'. Modern humans, he says, have not changed "in their deepest being". Religious consciousness belongs to the "deeper layers" of humanity, and these deeper layers remain unaffected by modern developments (76). Even though Western culture wants to deny Christianity, it demonstrates "in unexpected moments, at every turn, signs of this indestructible religious consciousness, that appears to be so thoroughly human that it must be part of the structure of humanity somehow" (77).

However, Bavinck must admit that our culture "has become secularized to a large extent" (84). This means that problems that are essentially religious "have lost something of their religious tension". Something "irreparable" has broken in our thinking. Everything has become coarse, hard, and bitter. "But the problem has remained the same". This has been demonstrated in the 20th century parade of semi-religious movements, such as National Socialism, fascism, communism, and existentialism. All these movements contained a passion that must be termed 'religious' somehow.⁹ Even atheism, especially anti-Christian atheism, is essentially a *religious* response of rebellion against the "highest reality" (90).

Yet, Bavinck also concedes that there is one major difference between our culture and the cultures of the past or in other parts of the world. "What actually is lacking in our modern culture is this one moment, that we have called the core of the religious consciousness, namely the sense of a higher power" (90). And here Bavinck seems to consider the possibility that there will indeed emerge a *homo areligiosius* in the West. "A generation is growing up now, for which God is really not much more than a long-forgotten word from

⁸ Stefan Paas, 'The Making of a Mission Field: Paradigms of Evangelistic Mission in Europe', *Exchange* 41 (2012), 62-67.

⁹ Later in his career Bavinck noted that even these semi-religious idealistic movements were disappearing in Europe. Cf. Visser, *Bemoenens*, 148: "An impersonal, life of the masses emerges, without real responsibility, without real ideals. Existentialism and nihilism grow large: expressing themselves in hedonism and sensationalism without spiritual and moral values".

old scriptures, and has become one that does not feel any grief that it has lost him" (91). The lack of this divine "driving, ordering power" renders all remaining religious awareness "sterile, dull, and poor". We run full-speed towards a world, says Bavinck, "of creepy perversity, cold, calculating, efficient rationalization of all society, in which even the last spark of warm, spontaneous, instinctive life has been quenched" (91). But even then, there is hope that "something of the old glow of religious belief" will rise again in moments of national identity, war, or in ultimate resistance towards nihilism (92).

So, even if he is on the very edge of admitting that religious consciousness may disappear after all, in the end Bavinck maintains his view that humans are intrinsically religious (cf. 7-8). His guiding metaphor seems to be that there is an inner core of religiosity that may be repressed by external forces ('society'), but can never be destroyed.

We live more than 60 years after Bavinck's book was published. How must we assess his analysis with the knowledge we have now? The problem is that this knowledge is somewhat contradictory. The secularization narrative of the 1960s, claiming that religion would disappear altogether in the West, has been proven wrong. Today, most scholars of religion would say that religion has not disappeared, but that it has been transformed. It has become "invisible" (Luckmann), de-institutionalized, "subjectivized" (Taylor), and so on.¹⁰ Religious beliefs and behavior have definitely changed, but they are still present even in the most secular parts of Europe. Bavinck's emphatic statement that even modern people cannot deny the religious dimension of human existence has been at least partly confirmed in our days.

But that is not the whole story. If humans are indeed not just 'addressed' but also *religious* beings, as Bavinck claims, we should expect a universal passion in them, some sense of the absolute, some dedication to higher ideals, and probably some interest in matters of magic, religion, spirituality, and the like. Well, there are people in Europe today, who seem to have nothing of this. Take, for example, East Germany. Already at the end of the 19th century vast regions of Eastern Germany were considered a "spiritual graveyard".¹¹ Widespread religious indifference was the default mode. This has not improved after two World Wars and some decades of communist government. Today, East Germany is the heartland of the *homo areligiosus*.¹²

¹⁰ See for example Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

¹¹ Paas, 'Making', 59-61.

¹² Cf. Christel Gärtner et al. (eds.), *Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2003).

An a-religious person is not an atheist or an agnostic. Atheists and agnostics do have some relationship with religion: they deny its business or they declare it undecided. To some extent they *understand* what religion is about. But an a-religious person is simply not *interested*, just as some people are not interested in baseball or in music (Max Weber termed these people *religiös unmusikalisch*—religiously unmusical). It is not just that he or she gives different answers; an a-religious man or woman doesn't even understand the *questions* that trouble so many other people with a religious consciousness. Whereas in other European countries people who have left Christianity often embrace other religious ideas or groups, people in East-Germany will not even go to see the Dalai Lama when he is in the country, nor do they take a shamanic course.¹³ These people do not seem to have any religious consciousness. The whole tension between 'higher' and 'lower' life, between immanence and transcendence does not carry any meaning for them, not even in the sense that they want to *resist* it. This world is just all there is.¹⁴ Or, in the words of Charles Taylor, they live in a "closed immanent frame".¹⁵

Two Ways to Maintain Bavinck's Claim

1. *Anthropological or Empirical?*

So, it seems that, after all, there are human beings who do not share the universal religious awareness that J.H. Bavinck took for granted. However, there may be ways to maintain his claim even in today's world.

Take, for example the statement 'Humans are mortal'. If Socrates is human, it means that Socrates is mortal. If religious consciousness is somehow analogous to our being mortal, then Socrates (and every other human) *must* have this religious consciousness. Consequently, if people do not show any religious awareness at all, they must be less than human. This is a serious matter, because it shows that Bavinck's claim that all human beings are religious somehow may lead to the conclusion that so-called a-religious people are not really human at all. This is not a very helpful assumption when we do mission.

¹³ Eberhard Tiefensee, "Chancen und Grenzen von 'Mission': Im Hinblick auf die konfessionelle Situation in den neuen Bundesländern", in: Matthias Bartels, Martin Reppenhagen (eds.), *Gemeindepflanzung: Ein Modell für die Kirche der Zukunft?* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2006), 68-85.

¹⁴ Tiefensee, "Chancen", 79.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 539-566.

We might respond to this that the statement ‘mankind is endowed with religious consciousness’ does not mean that *each and every individual* has a religious consciousness. It is not an *empirical* statement, but a philosophical or a theological one. An individual is not ‘mankind’; he or she is a unique human being with his/her own biography and context. Take, for example, another statement: ‘Humans are rational beings’. As an anthropological statement this is true. But if we want to apply this in the empirical realm, it would mean that we are obliged to see unborn children, mentally handicapped people, coma patients, and seniors with Alzheimer as (at least) less than human.¹⁶

It is important to reason very carefully here. I would say, personally, that religious consciousness is indeed an anthropological *proprium*, just as being able to think or to speak or to produce art. All these things make us, as a species, different from animals. Anthropologically, the lack of any of these qualities means a deficient humanity. Yet, if we meet someone who cannot speak, or someone who is tone deaf, we should never consider this unique individual as a deficient human being, a person who is somehow less than human. “An embryo is not less human than Goethe or Einstein, and an ‘a-religious’ person is not less human than a Christian—he is just different” (Eberhard Tiefensee).¹⁷

As far as I can tell from Bavinck’s book, he seems to have thought of his claim as an empirical one. In other words, he could not really imagine people who are truly outside the “religious problematic” (76).¹⁸ Time and again he tells us how people everywhere and in all ages have developed religious ideas and feelings. Although he very briefly touches on the possibility of a generation that will really have forgotten all about God, he immediately returns to his foundational claim that the fire of religious consciousness will keep smoldering forever in the deeper layers of human beings. Contrary to Bavinck, I suggest that, if we want to retain the idea that mankind is a religious being, we should emphasize that this first and foremost is an *anthropological* (not an empirical) claim. It is a statement about mankind, not about each individual.

2. Are All People ‘Really’ Religious?

There is also another line of defense: we may deny that there is something like ‘a-religiosity’ at all. Of course, this depends on how we define ‘religion’.

¹⁶ Tiefensee, “Chancen”, 73-74.

¹⁷ Tiefensee, “Chancen”, 74.

¹⁸ Visser, *Bemoeienis*, 147, suggests that Bavinck’s lack of attention for the problem of secularization, may have been a matter of his own deeply religious temperament.

Generally, scholars of religion distinguish substantive and functional definitions of religion. According to substantive definitions religions have certain *contents* (usually the belief in extraordinary or 'supernatural' phenomena) making them unique. Religion is belief in God or in transcendent powers. Functional definitions describe certain *effects* that religion is supposed to have for individuals and/or society.¹⁹ This is for example how James Smith defines religious institutions: they are "institutions that command our allegiance, that vie for our passion, and that aim to capture our heart with a particular vision of the good life".²⁰ In this way, almost every occupation in life can become a substitute religion.

So, we might 'save' Bavinck's theory by adopting a functional definition of religion. After all, even Eastern Germans will have some ideals, some 'absolutes' that give structure to their lives. A specific Christian critique of culture or of idolatry may develop from a definition like this.²¹ However, genuinely a-religious people will not understand such a critique since it assumes that there is something 'higher' than this mundane life, an ideal or a norm that we are not making. In other words, this kind of preaching feeds on the presence of a religious consciousness, no matter how secularized this consciousness may be.²²

¹⁹ For a discussion of substantive and functional definitions, see Inger Furseth, Pål Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 2007), 16-22.

²⁰ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 90 (italics in the original). He continues to describe the shopping mall, the nation and the university as such religious institutions.

²¹ For example, Timothy J. Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

²² Cf. Taylor, *Secular Age*, who uses the moral category of "fullness", i.e. an awareness that our present lives may be "fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be" (p. 5). It is a "place (...) to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually" (p. 6). This may cause deep satisfaction and joy when we reach it (now and then), and a sense of absence or loss, when we don't. Of course, for believers "the account of the place of fullness requires reference to God" (transcendence), "where for unbelievers this is not the case; they rather will leave any account open, or understand fullness in terms of a potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically" (8). However, Taylor has been accused of 'smuggling in' a semi-religious version of transcendence with this concept of "fullness". It may be possible (and the East-Germany case seems to prove it) that there are people for whom this idea is not meaningful at all. Cf. for example Jonathan Sheehan, "What Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age", in: Michael Warner et al. (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 228-232, esp. 230: "[T]he concept of 'fullness' is *not* neutral in respect to belief (...). One could argue that the unbeliever makes very little use if the idea of fullness at all". However, see also Taylor's reply "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo", in: Warner, *Varieties*, esp. 315-318 (where he accuses Sheehan of a "hermeneutic of suspicion").

Nevertheless, this may be a way to maintain Bavinck's statement in the face of empirical reality. Yes, there *seem* to be people who have no religious awareness whatsoever, but 'actually' they *do* have religion. They 'worship' work, family, football, shopping, money, and so forth. Religion is not primarily about concepts and ideas, but it is about absolutes, passion, ultimate meaning and orientation. Again, a-religious people will probably not understand what we are talking about, but it may certainly be a way to look at a-religiosity in a theologically coherent way.

What would J.H. Bavinck think of this? It is hard to tell. On the one hand, it seems that Bavinck held to a substantive definition of religion. "The content of religious consciousness is radiated in its entirety from this one moment of relationship with a higher power. One could say, that only through this one moment it receives the actual characteristic of religion (...) From this one moment religion will become religion in the true meaning of the word" (75). Apparently, Bavinck thought that the meaningful core of religion is belief in a higher power, in transcendence. If that is true, we must say that today there are people who do not just *deny* this higher power (Bavinck would have known what to say to them), but for whom this higher power is an incomprehensible concept throughout.

In other words, according to Bavinck's own definition of religious consciousness there are indeed human beings *without* this awareness. Yet, on the other hand, Bavinck does speculate on the idea of a religious consciousness *without* an element of transcendence. According to him, this is an emasculated religiosity, dull and poor. It is a religiosity with norms that have no foundation, with a sense of cosmic belonging but with no sense of direction, a religiosity that is determined by fatalism, without any sense of salvation, and teeming with cynicism and nihilism. And actually, it is just the penultimate stage of a complete meltdown of society, a society where "spontaneous, instinctive life" has been killed (91).

Thus, perhaps J.H. Bavinck would have accepted the possibility of religiosity without the awareness of transcendence, but for him this is clearly an awful picture. He describes this completely immanent religious consciousness in such bleak terms, that we can hardly call it 'religious' at all. And perhaps, he is just being prophetic here. Those regions in Europe where a-religiosity (instead of religiosity, atheism and agnosticism) has really struck root, are not the areas that are famous for their cultural life in general. In fact, Eastern Germany is according to many people one of the most depressing places to live. It is one of the areas in Europe that suffer from a constant demographic drain.²³

²³ Cf. Nicholas Kulish, "In East Germany, a Decline as Stark as a Wall", *New York Times* 18 June 2009 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/world/europe/19germany.html>). As for the

There may be a correlation between the presence of 'religious consciousness' (perhaps, we would call it 'religious capital' today) and the flourishing of art, business, democracy, and other occupations that require hope and trust.

So, I would suggest that we take a-religiosity as seriously as Bavinck probably would have done. Functional approaches of religion, together with a critique of idolatry, may be helpful in cultures where religious consciousness is still present (in old or new shapes), but it might cover up a much harsher reality if we apply it to the *homo areligiosus*, especially where this type of human dominates whole societies. It may be that Eastern Germany is an example of the kind of society that is produced by a-religiosity.²⁴ Or, perhaps, this society has touched bottom somewhere in the 1980s, and is very slowly recovering now. Perhaps the presence of some vital communities of Christians (or agnostic artists) may introduce some sense of 'transcendence', and open at least some of their fellow citizens up for further exploration of Christianity. If this would happen, it would also accord with Bavinck's prophecies.

Religious Consciousness and the Gospel

1. "Nodes", "Magnetic Points", and "Essential Elements"

Let us turn to our third and final issue. I am not suggesting that Eastern Germany is the future for all European nations. This would mean, again, the adoption of the 'secularization master narrative' of the 1960s. Societies move through history along different pathways; secularization is not a unilinear process with uniform results. Having said that, I think it is important to reflect on the *reason* why this religious consciousness is absent in so many Eastern Germans. To answer this question we must ask how it presents itself in the first place.

Netherlands, it always strikes me how the Zaanstreek (the area between Amsterdam and Alkmaar) has historically very low levels of religiosity, but is also one of the areas that causes most concern to politicians and health experts. In this area one can find the highest rates of alcohol abuse, drugs addiction, and teenage suicide in the Netherlands.

²⁴ An interesting analysis of East-German 'mentality' from a missiological perspective can be found in Sabine Schröder, *Konfessionslose erreichen: Gemeindegründungen von freikirchlichen Initiativen seit der Wende 1989 in Ostdeutschland* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2007), 92-106.

We have seen that Bavinck claims that religious consciousness is essentially a human response to God's self-manifestation. My question here is where and how this happens. What is the location of this religious consciousness? Or, in other terms, what is the arena in which God's general revelation and human religiosity struggle with each other?

Bavinck is not very coherent here. Obviously, he hesitates to discuss the human response as if it were an autonomous movement (170-171), independent of God. As a consequence his treatment of this issue remains rather vague (cf. 105). A key passage, in my opinion, is where Bavinck says that God's general revelation is not primarily "an appeal to man's philosophical instinct", but "rather like a power that encounters man in all dimensions of his life (*levensbetrekkingen*). In other words, it must be understood in a more existential way" (165). These 'life-dimensions' are pre-structured, so to speak. Bavinck talks about "nodes" (*knooppunten*) or "magnetic points" (*magnetische punten*), "in which human religious thinking is compelled to move" (103). These nodes seem to correspond with the five 'essential elements' of religious consciousness, which were mentioned above. They are, so to speak, the walls of the arena in which human beings of all times and places develop their religious consciousness, in a bewildering variety of forms but with great inner consistency. But where does this framework of 'nodes' or 'magnetic points' come from? If we follow Bavinck's argument to its logical conclusion, we may conjecture that these 'magnetic points' are the means of God's general self-manifestation. It is the 'pattern' through which God reveals himself in his creation. The human response of religious consciousness would then in its universal five-fold structure reflect somehow the way God reveals himself to mankind, outside of the scriptures. The framework of God's general revelation pre-structures human religious consciousness so as to produce its universal five-fold structure.

However, this would imply that human religious consciousness, wherever it is found, contains at least some *indirect* awareness of God's general revelation. As for me, I would be quite happy to draw that conclusion. It does not mean at all that there is salvation in human religiosity, outside of Christ. But it does mean, in my opinion, that there is something to be *affirmed* in human religious consciousness. It creates room for what we may call an 'Augustinian' approach of religiosity, an approach that considers human longing as a reflection of God's search for us. This is for example how bishop N.T. Wright proceeds in his book *Simply Christian*. Our passion for justice, our search for spirituality, our hunger for relationships, and the joy we have in the experience of beauty are "echoes of a voice". The postmodern, post-Christian and increasingly post-secular

world cannot escape certain questions, strange signposts pointing beyond the landscape of our contemporary culture and out into the unknown. We hear a voice, says Wright, and lose it as a dream; but it echoes in our subconscious.²⁵ The religious quest of mankind is, essentially, a case of nostalgia; it is the sense of being cut off from the source of true 'joy' (C.S. Lewis). We know that we lack something, even if we do not know exactly what. This can also explain that people who become Christians often declare that they did not experience this as a complete break with their past. Rather, they see it as a 'homecoming', something that mysteriously connects with their own biography. They emphasize continuity rather than discontinuity.²⁶

As far as I can see, this is nothing but the logical next step in Bavinck's argument. If human religiosity is 'structured' by the 'magnetic points' of God's general revelation, there must be elements in it that will be affirmed by the Gospel, elements of longing, nostalgia, joy, and failure. But obviously, Bavinck does not want to take that step. That is because he basically adopts Kraemer's and Barth's massive view of human religion as 'unbelief', 'idolatry' and 'rebellion'. So, this is where he stops. To quote Bavinck: "We have approached the limit now (...). We cannot proceed any longer. We are standing before a wall (...). Where does this religious consciousness come from? From which sources does it spring in the depth of the human soul? Again: we stand before a wall (...). From now on we can only speak theologically" (109-110).

There is more than one reason why I don't find this very helpful. Of course, Bavinck's negative view of human religion is understandable in the light of what happened in the 1940s in Europe. He had seen what religious consciousness could do, when it became linked to blood and soil. Together with Barth and Kraemer, Bavinck emphasized that there is no continuity between our religious consciousness and the Gospel (188). It is tempting, perhaps, to say the same in our age of religious terrorism. We must always keep in mind that Jesus was crucified by the combined efforts of the most advanced political system *and* the most serious religious ideology of his age. There is an inherent cruciform criticism of religion *within* Christianity.

However, in our current missiological challenge in Europe it is not enough to state this and leave it there. I believe we need a more nuanced view of human

²⁵ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (London: SPCK, 2006), esp. part I.

²⁶ This is, in fact, the tenor of many conversion stories. See for example John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (Stonehill Green: Bible Society, 1992), who emphasizes that 'Timothy-conversions' are more common than 'Paul-conversions'.

religious consciousness. I will first make some empirical remarks, and then conclude with a theological suggestion.

2. *Psychology or Culture?*

Empirically, where can we find this religious consciousness? For J.H. Bavinck it is somewhat like an inner core. It is embedded in our “deeper layers”, it springs “from the depth of the human soul” or it is a “part of the structure of humanity”. Religious consciousness is hidden in the “mysterious depths of the human heart” (92).²⁷ In other words, he almost automatically refers to *psychological* vocabulary here (cf. 105-110). Now, as we have seen, this religious consciousness is not amorphous; it consists of five ‘essential elements’. So, what Bavinck seems to say, in almost Jungian terms, is this: this pattern of five elements, this religious consciousness, belongs to the essential, unchanging psychological structure of humanity wherever and whenever it may be found (cf. 76). Consequently, if people do not have this religious consciousness, like a-religious people in Eastern Germany, they must lack this deep psychological structure. And before we know it, we have dehumanized them again.

To be fair, there is some empirical truth in what Bavinck said. Recent research in the Cognitive Science of Religion has shown that children have, quite universally, something which we could call ‘a religious potential’. For example, they have the tendency to see meaningful patterns (‘design’) in apparently chaotic processes. They believe in invisible friends. They can think ‘magically’, and they tend to trust authorities.²⁸ Such features may not be called ‘religious’ yet, but they are certainly needed to develop a religious life. But even if there is a religious ‘potentiality’ in humans (just like there is a potentiality for language or music), this is still far away from the elaborate five-fold pattern of religious consciousness that Bavinck describes. And that is because a link is still missing.

²⁷ A question that may rise is whether Bavinck takes recourse here to a ‘God-of-the-gaps’-argument. By using words like ‘mysterious’, ‘depth’, etc. constantly, he seems to create a kind of ‘sacred inner space’ in human beings, inaccessible for analysis, where God manifests himself. See my ‘Een theologische kijk op de godsdienstwetenschappen’, in: Pieter Boersema, Stefan Paas (eds.), *Onder spanning: Een veelzijdige kijk op veranderingen in kerk en samenleving*, (Kampen: Kok, 2011), 269-309.

²⁸ Cf. for example Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004). For a survey of the Cognitive Science of Religion, see Justin L. Barrett, “Cognitive Science of Religion: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50.2 (2011), 229-239.

If I would try to draw this religious potential, I would not draw a box, because this implies that this potential has some substance already. Probably I would rather draw a horizontal line, like a field. A field is not a garden, but it has the potentiality to become one, if it is *cultivated*. That is where I would locate religious consciousness. It is a human product (here Bavinck is right), but it is not a product of individual psychology (that somehow miraculously resonates with the individually produced religious consciousnesses of other individuals). Rather, it is a product of collective culture. Or, more precisely, of *socialization*. The reason why so many people in the East of Germany are a-religious is not because they lack a mysterious psychological depth. It is because many of them have been raised in a completely a-religious environment. Their religious potentiality has not been cultivated, somewhat like a child that has never learnt to use its potentiality for language.

German practical theologians call this “inherited a-confessionality” (*ererbte Konfessionslosigkeit*).²⁹ Religious consciousness is something that is acquired like language. It is ‘taught’ and ‘caught’ in one’s upbringing. There is a wealth of research to sustain this. If religiosity, transcendence, the ‘higher life’ are no subjects of conversation at home, there will be no religious consciousness. It is as simple as that. To quote Hans-Jürgen Fraas: “In an environment that is determined by technique and the natural sciences, a child that asks ‘what for?’ (*wozu?*) will meet little willingness to answer on the part of its parents. Rather, the adult tends to give causal explanations in terms of a scientific worldview. In this way a child will unlearn the question of meaning. The corresponding attitude will be deconstructed, because it is not affirmed by the child’s environment, while a functional way of thinking will be reinforced”.³⁰

So, there is a potentiality in humans to ask for meaning, and the like, but this will only develop into a religious consciousness such as Bavinck describes, when this potentiality is fostered by significant others. Put in this way, a-religiosity is a result of the inability of parents and others to feed and sustain the religious potential in children. It is like a garden that has been weeded too much.³¹ It is also the result of the absence of religious ‘plausibility structures’,

²⁹ Jan Hermelink, Thorsten Latzel (eds.), *Kirche empirisch: Ein Werkbuch* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2008), 136.

³⁰ Quoted in Tiefensee, “Chancen”, 81-82.

³¹ Apparently, there is a pedagogical, or perhaps a moral, vision involved here. Every parent has to choose to some extent which potentiality in his/her children needs development. This choice is not made in splendid isolation. In every culture, there are strong moral ideals that direct parents in this choosing. What does it mean, in this specific culture, to be mature, adult, ‘good’? It seems that in the West a dominant ideal of *autonomy* is steering many parents to not foster

of affirmation in wider society. It is easy to imagine how this can happen, when secularity digs in deeper and deeper within the course of two or three generations.³² It is possible, indeed, to raise a whole generation without any sense of religious questions—let alone answers. Just as it is possible to raise children without any sense of art, especially if art is not very dominant in society throughout.

Even if the Eastern German experience is unique (because of almost forty years of atheistic policy), this means that something like a-religiosity may very well become a more common phenomenon in the Netherlands,³³ Canada, or perhaps even in the USA. Culture is in many ways dependent on the availability of language. If parents do not teach their children how to use words like ‘God’ or ‘prayer’, then God or prayer do not exist for them. They cannot deal with these concepts, because they lack the cultural instruments to do so. For example, when Bavinck speaks rather touchingly about the experience of “totality” or the “great Unknown” as a universal religious feature, we must consider that so-called religious experiences are always embedded in language.

religious instincts (too much) in their children. Until a certain age they may believe in God and Santa Claus, but it is expected that ‘adults’ will get rid of both in due time. Those who are ‘still’ religious when they have ‘grown up’, must somehow be infantile, weak, dependent, etc. In other words, one of the problems of Christianity (religion in general) in the West is that there is no widely appealing vision of ‘being a religious *adult*’. This is a dominant master narrative (or myth), of course, and probably a (Freudian / Feuerbachian?) mutation of the older Reform master narrative. It always strikes me how atheists in the West constantly emphasize that they are a small-but-courageous minority, facing a large, superstitious, infantile majority. Apparently, there is meaning and attractiveness in such a story. If only the very brave and very intelligent are able to escape ‘religion’ this is undoubtedly a flattering perspective for many. It may attract people (especially men) to be part of a heroic gang, that dares to face harsh, meaningless reality without religious anesthesia. But is this story true, empirically (is unbelief really a minority position in Europe?), and philosophically? To me it appears that we have to do with a meaning-giving myth here (an image of the good life), instead of a picture of reality as it is. Anyway, a huge missionary challenge for Christians in the secular West is to develop a picture of Christian maturity, incorporating ideals of heroism and strength. I believe the fascination of so many Europeans by movies about monks (like *Des hommes et des dieux*) or the person of John Paul II, and their increasing interest in pilgrimages may have to do with a desire to combine ‘spirituality’ with ‘strength’ or ‘adventure’. Becoming a small minority (as is increasingly the case) may contribute to this. Cf. Tiefensee, “Chancen”, 83, who suggests that adolescent rebellion in Eastern Germany may very well now take the shape of a *religious* quest, since ‘religion’ is so uncommon in this country. It would certainly mean a change if young people set out to investigate Christianity in order to cause concern to their parents!

³² Cf. Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

³³ Cf. Ellen Hijmans, *Je moet er het beste van maken: Een empirisch onderzoek naar hedendaagse zingevingssystemen* (Nijmegen: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociale Wetenschappen, 1994).

There is no such a thing as an experience that is outside of our cultural being-in-life. Persons who are raised in a completely a-religious climate will usually have no religious experiences. Whereas a Christian says: "I was suddenly overwhelmed by God's presence", and an agnostic: "Today I had this mysterious sense of happiness, of being *touched* somehow", an a-religious person might just say: "Today I was really happy. I don't know how. Must be hormones".

3. *The Necessity of Language*

With this in the back of our minds it is interesting to return to Bavinck's view of the relationship between the Gospel and religious consciousness. As we have seen, Bavinck claims that there is no continuity between the Gospel and religious consciousness. The Gospel is something "entirely different". This he applies on two levels: on a general level the Gospel will always confront the religions of the world. Religious consciousness is not a preparation of the Gospel, but it is idolatry. And on an individual level, the Christian must see that his/her own religious consciousness is also an enemy of the Gospel. "In the life-struggle of the Christian the Christian faith pushes itself against the religious consciousness, that represents a living and stubborn power within him" (189). Individual Christians and the Church as a whole must constantly struggle with paganism. "Christianity will more and more become faith, when it distantiates itself more and more from religious consciousness, and submits to the Gospel" (190). Let me highlight both levels briefly.

As for the general, collective level: if religious consciousness resides in culture rather than in psychology, we must ask what it means for people to respond to the Gospel. It is common sense among missiologists in our post-colonial age that humans can only respond to the Gospel in terms of their own culture. Theologically, we may say that the Incarnation of the Word requires a specific, local, concrete answer.³⁴ And reversely, missionaries in whatever culture need to use the cultural resources of the target population in order to bring the Gospel in that culture. There is no other way but to 'translate' the Gospel in terms and concepts that have meaning for the missionized people. Leslie Newbigin puts it like this: "[O]ne cannot begin to answer the question 'Who is Jesus?' without using a language—and therefore a structure of thought—that is shaped by the pre-Christian experience of the one who asks the question.

³⁴ Andrew F. Walls, "Culture and Conversion in Christian History", in: Idem, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, 2004), 43-54.

There is no way of avoiding this necessity".³⁵ What Bavinck called 'religious consciousness' is simply a specifically structured cultural reservoir of language and concepts through which a certain culture is able to be religious at all. Therefore it *must* be the cultural reservoir that we use—critically—to communicate the Gospel here. And it must be the cultural reservoir that these people use to respond to the Gospel in their own language. There is no way to communicate the Gospel without using a 'religious' language, at least to some extent.

4. *A Transformation Perspective*

Actually, although Bavinck emphatically and repeatedly denies it, I believe that he does draw thin lines between the human religious consciousness and the Gospel. In part III of his book (180-186), he presents the core issues of the Gospel (Jesus, the Kingdom, the law, salvation, etc.) *within* the categories of universal religious awareness. Regardless Bavinck's rhetoric of complete difference and opposition, this suggests at the very least that a conversation is *possible* between the Gospel and this awareness, a conversation that is more than just confrontation and judgment.³⁶ This can hardly be avoided, in my opinion. If the five 'essentials' are really so deeply embedded in universal human life, then the Gospel must have something to say to them. After all, the Gospel is an address to *humans*. And humans will not understand the Gospel if their cultural repertoire must be denied or suppressed from the outset. The relationship between religious consciousness and the Gospel may therefore be one of *transformation*, rather than mere confrontation.

What would this process of transformation look like in a post-Christian culture, like for example my own country—the Netherlands? As I said, it would entail, first, *affirmation* of what is valuable in the religious consciousness of post-Christians. This in itself may mean different things. A part of it means affirming that this religious consciousness contains deep questions that can only be answered by the Gospel, even if not straightaway. I have mentioned N.T. Wright as an example of this, and I could have mentioned C.S. Lewis as well. Another part of it entails that we affirm the truth in the rejection of Christianity that is elementary in much post-Christian religiosity. Many late moderns believe that human rights, equality, environmental care, and tolerance

³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, 1995 revised ed.), 20.

³⁶ In his later work, Bavinck is more explicit about this *structural* possibility of communication between the Gospel and human religiosity, even if he remains very critical about the theological *content* of non-Christian religions. Cf. Visser, *Bemoeienis*, 153-154.

need protection from strong religion. Charles Taylor puts it this way: we must “measure the humbling degree to which some of the most impressive extensions of a Gospel ethic depended on a breakaway from Christendom”.³⁷ Secularized Europe does not cherish warm memories of an age when Christians ran the show. We do not have to be sectarian Christendom-critics to see the truth in this. In a process of missionary transformation it is necessary to affirm this by showing how the Gospel criticizes Christianity as any other religion, and to live lives that witness to this. In this sense, Gospel transformation works both ways: “both the giver and the receiver are changed”.³⁸

In a post-Christian society the transformation of religious consciousness would also imply a better *articulation* of what is found there implicitly. For example, most of our political institutions, our styles of communication, our justice system, etcetera, are deeply embedded in the historical matrix of Christendom. Many studies have been written telling us how these institutions need legitimizing stories that articulate their logic, explaining and justifying them. And there is no question that these stories will have to be *Christian* stories. An important part of our missionary approach of Western culture is to keep telling these stories.³⁹

If we focus on post-Christian religious consciousness rather than politics and society, we see the same need for articulation. Morality is one example. Modernity, in its breaking away from Christendom, has developed an incomparably radical ethics of benevolence and justice. Today, we believe that these apply to everyone, regardless race, sex, orientation, class, and religion. We believe that no human being (and, increasingly, no higher animal) must be excluded from our respect, care and help. However, says Charles Taylor, “philanthropy and solidarity driven by a lofty humanism, just as that which was driven often by high religious ideals, has a Janus face”. If we raise the standards of morality, it is easier to become disappointed by human ignorance, stupidity, selfishness, their lack of progress despite all our efforts. Lofty humanism may easily turn into bitterness, contempt, or even hatred, and as a result a regime of benevolence turns into one of inhumane coercion. Modern history has shown

³⁷ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?”, in: Idem, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: HUP, 2011), 187.

³⁸ Martien E. Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor* (London: Equinox, 2009), 1. Brinkman calls this process a “double transformation”.

³⁹ For post-Christendom political elements like individual freedom, equality and human rights, and a justice system that is tempered by awareness of sin, cf. e.g. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); Stefan Paas, *Vrede stichten: Politieke meditaties* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007).

many examples of this paradox. The same is true for the modern quest for justice. It may be no coincidence that especially those individuals and parties that are most obsessed by a more just world are often filled with anger and hatred against all those who stand in the way of their noble cause. Taylor argues that this radical post-Christian ethical drive needs a better articulation in the language of Christian *agape*. Only when our love for fellow human beings is unconditional, and only when we are deeply aware of the remaining power of sin (in ourselves and others) can we hold high moral ideals without turning into people full of bitterness and contempt.⁴⁰

Articulation is also necessary in the light of the increasing 'speechlessness' (*Sprachlosigkeit*) of late modern religious consciousness. Post-Christian religiosity is often unarticulated, vague, elusive. People do believe in 'something', but they are reluctant to specify what. If, as I have argued, religious consciousness is highly dependent on the availability of language, it is very important to maintain a cultural repertoire that enables people to be religious at all. In the post-Christian West this is a missionary (hermeneutic) challenge for Christian churches. They must be institutes that produce and protect 'God-talk'. Here I see room for the discipline of 'spiritual direction' in a missionary perspective. Missionaries in Western culture need to be coaches, or spiritual directors, helping people to articulate what they feel, offering them language to express their experiences. In other words, they have to learn (again) the art of *mystagogy*: exploring people's lives in search of 'signs of God', help them to recognize these signs, and put them into words and symbols. For example, Henri Nouwen was such an expert in connecting life experiences of late modern people (often verbalized in therapeutic language) with the treasures of the Gospel tradition.

A third element of Gospel-transformation of religious consciousness is prophetic *critique* of what is held in rejection of the Gospel. As Bavinck himself has made clear, resistance against Christ and the cross usually rises only when we have done everything that we can to walk the second mile with him or her. Therefore, critique can never be an isolated moment. It must be connected with affirmation and articulation.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Taylor, "Catholic Modernity", 183-184.

⁴¹ Cf. Wim Dekker, *Marginaal en missionair: Kleine theologie voor een krimpende kerk* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2011), 61-71. New religious movements in the West, says Dekker, are essentially movements of self-divinization. Using J.H. Bavinck's analysis of religious consciousness, he underlines their rebellious nature. Nevertheless, Dekker states: "Religion must not exclusively be characterized as rebellion. There is also an element of searching present in it. In every encounter we must be eager to become a partner in this quest" (70).

Together, these three moments will hopefully lead to a *transformation* of the religious consciousness of the target culture, by remaking it into a Christ-witnessing consciousness. This will not happen as a natural process, or as the result of a human strategy. Lesslie Newbigin states that the introduction of the name of Jesus within a religious thought structure will place the structure “under a strain that it cannot bear without breaking”. In the end this ‘breaking’ is a gift from above. It is the work of the Spirit of God himself. Yet, this work will result, not in an outright rejection of religious consciousness, but in new expressions of Christ’s Lordship, in the language of a new culture.⁴² That is what I mean by ‘transformation’.

5. *Weeding the Garden Wisely*

As for the individual level, Bavinck states that the religious consciousness in the Christian heart is a *danger*. It is the remnant of paganism, and therefore hostile to the Gospel. Bavinck’s approach fits in with the widely shared view of popular religion by Christian theologians (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) since the Reformation. Charles Taylor calls this the “Reform Master Narrative”.⁴³ This reform effort entailed raising standards of belief and practice of whole populations to a level that formerly had been important only for religious elites. This set in motion a continuing purification of thought that would not only result in a greater commitment of some groups to a Christian life but also in antireligious attitudes of others. After all, when you push people to turn away from ‘religion’, and choose true Christianity, they may very well decide to forget all about any religion, including Christianity. The tirades of Richard Dawkins against all religion today are to a large extent copies from earlier tirades against popular religion and ‘Popism’ by Protestant theologians. Thus, the possibility of a fully secular society is an unanticipated and unintended result of these attempts to reform the masses of Europe, and to clean up religious beliefs and practices. In this respect we can say that a ‘secular’ society is truly (and ironically) a ‘post-Christian’ society.⁴⁴

Bavinck lived in a society that, despite beginning secularization, was still very religious. The existence of truly a-religious human beings was not something he could imagine yet, partly because he believed that religious consciousness was safely hidden somewhere deep in the human heart, as a force to be

⁴² Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 20.

⁴³ Cf. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25ff.

⁴⁴ Cf. Paas, ‘Post-Christian’, 10.

awakened and yet to be feared. That the continuing struggle against popular religion on the part of Christian leaders might result eventually in a *destruction* of this religious consciousness was not in his vision yet. But it is in ours. I wonder whether Bavinck would maintain his very critical attitude towards religious consciousness today, given the gradual disappearance of religious language in some areas of Europe, and against the background of post-colonial missiology. If I may recall just once more the garden metaphor: the presence of weeds may mean, at least, that this field has been cultivated. Also, we must never forget that what seems 'weed' to us may turn out to surprise us. Jesus himself reminds us of this in the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). And finally, some weeds may even serve to support the plants we want to grow, at least for a while.