

Theology Not Religious Studies: Neo-Calvinism's Defence of the Queen of Sciences' Apparent Subjectivity

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Introduction

The “Queen of Sciences” of the medieval university has fallen to the bottom of the modern research university’s totem pole. As theology departments close left and right, many voices are skeptical of an academic discipline seemingly based on subjective assumptions. Popular atheist Richard Dawkins charges that while “university departments of theology house many excellent scholars of history, linguistics, literature,” and so on, he questions whether theology has “any real content at all”—comparing it with the “study of leprechauns.”¹ To philosopher Richard Rorty, theology should be kept out of the public square as it is a coercive attempt “to make one’s own private way of giving meaning to one’s own life . . . obligatory for the general public.”² And to philosopher Donald Weibe, theology could only be “academic” if it was a scientific enterprise that “aims at public knowledge of public facts.”³ Indeed, it seems that theology cannot be academic as it is inherently dependent on the subjectivity of its religious adherents’ private assumptions.

It was against similar charges of theology’s seemingly problematic subjectivity that the Dutch Neo-Calvinist theologians Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) defended theology’s role as the “Queen of Sciences.” This essay will explore the two Neo-Calvinists’ defenses of theology’s place in the modern university by presenting the Modernists’ challenge, the Neo-Calvinists’ responses, before concluding with the implications of Neo-Calvinist principles to contemporary discussions.

Challenges

Like secularists today, nineteenth-century Dutch modernists charged theology for being unscientific in light of its subjective point of departure.⁴ Dutch state universities at that time followed the University of Berlin in embracing *Wissenschaft* (Dutch *wetenschap*; English “science”)—an orderly inquiry of objective knowledge using critical methods which remove any pre-conceived influences from the subject.⁵ In this view, theology cannot be counted as a science as the discipline presupposes the existence of God and the reliability of his revelation for further study. In this vein, the modernists posited that theology may only be counted as scientific by defining the object of study as an indisputable and unanimous fact—namely the religion observed by society.⁶ This challenge led to the Dutch parliament’s Higher Education Act of 1876 which mandated that state university theology departments teach religious studies instead of theology.⁷

¹ Richard Dawkins, ‘Letters: Theology has no place in a university,’ Monday, October 1, 2007, *The Independent*, as cited in James Eglinton and Michael Bräutigam, “Scientific Theology? Herman Bavinck and Adolf Schlatter on the Place of Theology in the University,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7, no. 1 (2013): 28.

² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, (New York, NY: Penguin, 1999), 157, as cited in Paul A. Macdonald Jr., “Studying Christian Theology in the Secular University,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, No. 4, (2010): 993.

³ Donald Weibe, “‘Why the Academic Study of Religion?’ Motive and Method in the Study of Religion,” *Religious Studies* 24, No. 4, (1988): 407, 410, 412, as cited in Macdonald, “Studying Christian Theology in the Secular University,” 994.

⁴ “Science” hereafter refers to German “*wissenschaft*” or Dutch “*wetenschap*,”

⁵ David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, 12; Willem Drees, *What are the Humanities For?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 75.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, edited by John Bolt, translated by John Vriend, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 36.

⁷ Herman Bavinck, “Theology and Religious Studies,” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, edited by John Bolt, translated by Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 283.

Neo-Calvinism's Response

In response to the renouncement of subjectivity in academia, the Neo-Calvinists defended the scientific nature of theology through three key arguments:

First, the Neo-Calvinists argued that all academic disciplines *necessarily* require metaphysical presuppositions and hence theology's non-neutrality cannot disqualify it from being considered scientific. Bavinck disputes the absolute neutrality of science with the following theoretical and practical accounts. Theoretically, any scientist requires at least two presuppositions to approach an object of study, that: (1) the object's existence can be verified through empirical observation, and (2) the object is worthy of study.⁸ Without assuming the former, there will be no identifiable object to study; without the latter, the object would not be studied in the first place. Yet both presuppositions require a spectrum of metaphysical premises that cannot be reached by empirical science itself: presupposition (1) requires belief in a real object that is bound to natural law consistent across space and time, while presupposition (2) requires a hierarchy of value in evaluating the object's "worthiness" of study (such as utilitarianism). Indeed, as Kuyper added, historical monotheism and the corresponding belief in predestination galvanized the Western world to pursue science with the confidence in the stable nature of a universe governed by natural law.⁹ Practically, Bavinck argued that it was impossible for a scientist to abandon all presuppositions, as "a chemist does not cease to eat like an ordinary human being, though as a scientific man he analyzes food chemically and has very different thoughts about it than the unlearned person."¹⁰ In other words, the beliefs a scientist holds at home does not suddenly disappear in the lab. Hence, in demanding that theology preclude all presuppositions, modernists fail to acknowledge the inherent presuppositions in all of science itself.

Second, against the charge of subjectivism, the Neo-Calvinists identify the object of theology not with the individual's subjective faith, nor as an untestable practical reason as Immanuel Kant posits, but rather God's ectypal revelation. Accepting the charge that objects of science must be known via the public knowledge of public facts, Kuyper elaborates that ectypal revelation is knowledge of God that "does not lie *outside* of, but *in* the cosmos, and never presents itself to us in any but its cosmical form."¹¹ Such revelation does not go beyond the world, being masked by the Creator-creature distinction, but is made clear to the public via natural mediums. Yet, this ectypal revelation is not bound to natural theology, but encompasses all forms of revelation about God both general and special. Scripture and church tradition, for instance, are mediums observable by all.

Emphasising revelation's existence within the cosmos as a basis for theology's objectivity, Kuyper highlights the significance this plays in science. As God rationally created the world through the Logos, "all creation in its origin, existence, and course is a rich, coherent revelation of what God has thought in eternity and determined in His Decree."¹² All observation of the cosmos is therefore an unpacking of God's reason: humanity, having "received holiness, justice, and *wisdom*" as the image of God, have the responsibility of "unwrap[ing] the thoughts of God that lie embodied in creation."¹³ This is the basis of science, for which "man engages that ability to rethink God's thoughts from creation."¹⁴ Furthermore, "If the subject of science . . . lies in the consciousness of humanity, the *object* of science must be *all existing things*, as far as they have discovered their existence to our human consciousness, and will hereafter discover it."¹⁵ Therefore, as the object of *all* science is

⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.50-51.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, (Grand Rapid, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 114.

¹⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.50-51.

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, translated by J. Hendrik de Vries, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), 219.

¹² Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace in Science," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, edited by James D. Bratt, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 442-444.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 445.

¹⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 65; Dylan Pahman, "Like Bright Stars: Abraham Kuyper on the Nature and Vocation of the Scholarly Sphere," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 23, No 2, (2020): 393.

ultimately a form of God's revelation in nature, Kuyper demonstrates that this ectypal knowledge of God does not lie in the subject, but rather has been clearly revealed through all sciences.¹⁶ Hence, theology, the most direct engagement of God's thoughts, is *the* science. As Kuyper famously writes, "no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"¹⁷

Third, theology's alternative, secular religious studies, is an incoherent discipline that lacks any real object of study. While modernists may argue that the object of religious studies are the "religions" practiced by groups, Bavinck points out that the objectivity of "religion" depends on theistic assumptions that nullify the discipline's neutrality. He argues, "religion assumes two facts: the existence and knowability of God . . . Whoever denies God's existence and revelation completely can discern only a pathological phenomenon of the human spirit in religion."¹⁸ Without assuming a religion based on real ectypal revelation, the "religion" studied becomes a mere collection of subjective beliefs with no external bases. In other words, studying "religion" can only be subsumed under the disciplines of anthropology or history, rather than being studied in and of themselves.¹⁹ Truly "objective" religious studies thus becomes a motley jumble which merely records disunified subjective claims based on each distinct religion's theological premises. Religious studies, as a discipline distinct from anthropology or history, faces difficulty in defining a subject clearly observable by public knowledge. Theology, on the other hand, affirms that outside the subject is an object that is the basis of their beliefs—an object that is accessible by all.

Conclusion: Theology as the Queen of Sciences

Seeing that (1) all science is metaphysically biased, (2) theology's objective revelation is available to all, and (3) the alternative religious studies is incoherent, the Neo-Calvinists highlight the incoherence of contemporary challenges to theology. Where Dawkins doubts that theology has "any real content at all," Christians treat revelation as the ultimate empirical content of science. Where Rorty assumes theology to be the imposition of one's private life to the public, all scientists impose their private presuppositions into the public square as human beings who share the same thinking faculties in home and the laboratory. And where Wiebe argues that theology cannot be dependent on the subjectivity of private revelations, the Neo-Calvinists highlight that his alternative—religious studies—is ultimately subjective as well.

So as the object of all science is ultimately a reflection of God's thinking, the role of theology as the "Queen of Sciences" is to undergird the sciences. And as modern university departments become more compartmentalized, theology's role in grounding them with a common worldview unites the university into a coherent body striving to deepen their knowledge in the same truth. For Bavinck concludes, "All the special objects of the various sciences originate in God, who sustains them all, preserving them in their diversity yet also binding them together as a cosmos . . . theology is thus an *Universalwissenschaft* (universal science)."²⁰

¹⁶ Pahman, "Like Bright Stars," 393.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, edited by James D. Bratt, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 488.

¹⁸ Bavinck, "Theology and Religious Studies," 287.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁰ Herman Bavinck, "The Science of Theology," in *On Theology: Herman Bavinck's Academic Orations*, edited and translated by Bruce R. Pass, (Leiden: BRILL, 2020), 49-50.

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