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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
HERMAN BAVINCK AND WOLFHART PANNENBERG ON THE
DOCTRINE OF REVELATION**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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This dissertation entitled

**FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HERMAN
BAVINCK AND WOLFHART PANNENBERG ON THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION**

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abbreviations

<i>BQT</i>	Basic Questions in Theology
<i>GD</i>	Gereformeerde Dogmatiek
<i>PoR</i>	Philosophy of Revelation
<i>RasH</i>	Revelation as History
<i>RD</i>	Reformed Dogmatics
<i>ST</i>	Systematic Theology

Abstract

This dissertation builds upon John Bolt's suggestion that Wolfhart Pannenberg's work can be utilized to extend and further elaborate upon Herman Bavinck's efforts in outlining the fundamental contours of a philosophy of revelation. It focuses on various themes related to the doctrine of revelation to examine the theological and metaphysical frameworks of Bavinck and Pannenberg. Through a comparative analysis of their theoretical approaches, this study aims to offer a fresh, comprehensive perspective on the doctrine of revelation, highlighting their shared metaphysical foundations and the synthesis of orthodox and modern thought.

In this research, I explore the motifs and frameworks of understanding revelation, natural theology, history, Trinity, and epistemology, as perceived by Bavinck and Pannenberg. The investigation into these themes supports the argument that their respective concepts, such as Bavinck's organic motif and Pannenberg's notion of totality, exhibit notable similarities and a shared metaphysical foundation. These common theological motifs and foundations, coupled with their analogous framework in Trinitarian theology, demonstrate their mutual inclination towards integrating and revising classical Christian thought with modern ideas. This is particularly evident in their absorption of German idealism within Christian doctrine.

Both Bavinck and Pannenberg exhibit numerous parallels in their theological and metaphysical frameworks, drawing from a rich reservoir of orthodox and modern intellectual traditions. This dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of their shared perspectives and the broader implications of their work in contemporary theological discourse.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Theme and Issues

In the contemporary intellectual climate, science is commonly perceived as a body of knowledge that entails universal laws governing the natural world, distinguished by its empirical and all-encompassing character. This perception has led to the marginalization of theology as a science. With the advancement of historical criticism and naturalism, theology struggles to maintain its legitimacy by resorting to the invocation of religious experiences and consequently diminishing itself to subjectivism or by being classified as a form of purely speculative philosophy restricted to particular circles. Within this context, questions regarding the doctrine of revelation emerge. Firstly, what provides the metaphysical foundation for a theology that is both ecumenical and grounded in scientific inquiry? Moreover, from an epistemological standpoint, how can one receive revelation and determine that it conveys knowledge of God instead of mere illusion? What constitutes the basis and rationale for knowledge of God? According to Herman Bavinck, modern theology must not only address the traditional question that older theology posed concerning the content of revelation, but also investigate and provide explanations for the process by which revelation occurs.¹

Numerous modern theologians have grappled with these profound questions. Notably, Karl Barth played a pivotal role in reigniting the vigorous debate within

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2018), 21.

theological circles, focusing on the inquiry into the doctrine of God and revelation during the early twentieth century.²

Heinz Zahrnt attests to this, stating,

Whoever attempts to give an account of Protestant theology in the twentieth century need not look long for a starting-point. It is identified with the name of Karl Barth. In the history of theology Barth dominates the beginning of the twentieth century as Schleiermacher dominated the beginning of the nineteenth century. From him we date a new era in the history of Protestant theology: the theology of the twentieth century began with Karl Barth.³

Undoubtedly, Barth holds a prominent position as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. However, his towering presence has, to some extent, overshadowed numerous other significant theologians who have not received the attention they deserve, particularly in the realm of doctrine of revelation.⁴ This situation is primarily attributable to language barriers, and the English-speaking world has given less attention to theologies outside of German theology, such as Dutch theology.

This was exemplified in the case of Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and the dissemination of his ideas within the English-speaking world. Although Bavinck delivered his “The Philosophy of Revelation” (1908) at the Princeton Stone Lectures, and some of his works were translated from Dutch into English in the twentieth century, his influence was generally limited to Reformed churches and Reformed

² Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1966), 15-21 and 84-122.

³ Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, 15.

⁴ John Bolt, “Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg” in *Weergaloze kennis: Opstellen over Jezus Christus, Openbaring en Schrift, Katholiciteit en Kerk aangeboden aan prof. dr. Barend Kamphuis (Amazing Knowledge: Essays on Jesus Christ, revelation and Scripture, catholicity and church, honoring prof. dr. Barend Kamphuis)* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2015), 103-14.

theological circles. According to John Bolt, by the time he completed his doctoral dissertation on Bavinck in 1982, which included studies in Dutch, “sixty years after Bavinck’s death, mine was only the fifth doctoral dissertation devoted to Bavinck’s theology; there was no ‘community’ of Bavinck scholars.”⁵ It was not until the recent translation of Bavinck’s magnum opus, *Reformed Dogmatics* (2003-2008) and *Reformed Ethics* (2019-ongoing), from Dutch into English that Bavinck’s theology began to gain recognition and appreciation in North America. This has given rise to a growing number of publications, doctoral dissertations, and an emerging community of Bavinck scholars.⁶

In contrast to Bavinck, German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014) enjoyed a more significant influence on English theological circles from the 1960s onwards, through the publication of English-language translations and scholarly exchanges.⁷ According to Stanley J. Grenz, until 1988, “aspects of his [Pannenberg’s] theology have been the focal point of some 200 articles in scholarly journals, and his name is mentioned in nearly every book on theology published in recent years.”⁸

The growing corpus of literature on Bavinck’s thought has begun to coalesce into a scholarly community similar to Pannenberg studies, fostering a deeper understanding and assimilation of Bavinck’s and even Dutch theology in the English-speaking world.

However, this phenomenon also indicates a prevailing concentration of Bavinck’s

⁵ John Bolt, “Editor’s Preface,” in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics vol.1 : Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, edited by John Bolt et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), x-xi.

⁶ Bolt, “Editor’s Preface,” in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics vol.1*, xxxv-xliii.

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, “The Appraisal of Pannenberg: A Survey of the Literature,” *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 19-52.

⁸ Grenz, “The Appraisal of Pannenberg: A Survey of the Literature,” 19.

Reformed background, and the beginning of scholarly discussions and interactions with various denominational and theological approaches is still in the early stages.⁹ This also implies that engaging Bavinck in dialogue with the theological of traditions of others, such as Pannenberg's theology, not only allows for a deeper understanding the ecumenical dimensions of Bavinck and Pannenberg, but also broadens the horizon of theology itself.

In my dissertation, I will select two theologians—Bavinck and Pannenberg—to engage in a dialogue and comparison. This study will focus on their respective doctrines of revelation, which exemplify two of the most incisive and insightful theological responses of the twentieth century, beside Karl Barth.¹⁰ The primary objective of this dissertation is to examine the commonalities and divergences in their perspectives, aiming to uncover a catholic theology that is both pertinent to our current scientific time and situated with the broader context of global religious traditions.

In this dissertation, by comparing Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg's theoretical approaches, I hope to offer a new comprehensive perspective on the doctrine of revelation. This comparison will reveal their shared metaphysical foundations and synthesizing elements from orthodox and modern thought. This approach contributes to constructing a theology as a science grounded in revelation that holds potential relevance for the secular modern age and world religions.

⁹ I will discuss the related literature in more detail in the following sections.

¹⁰ Due to constraints of space, this discussion is limited to a few selected themes within the doctrine of revelation.

Although Bavinck and Pannenberg's approaches to understanding revelation are nuanced, I will demonstrate that their respective concepts, such as Bavinck's organic motif and Pannenberg's totality, share certain similarities and a common metaphysical foundation. These shared theological motifs and foundations, along with the analogous framework of Trinitarian theology, reveal their mutual roots in the integration and revision of classic Christian thought with modern ideas, particularly absorbing German idealism within Christian doctrine. Consequently, the commonalities between Bavinck and Pannenberg suggest that they do not strictly adhere to the binary of "orthodox" or "modern," and so forth. Instead, they critically and comprehensively employ classic and modern sources to construct their theologies. By examining their doctrines of revelation, Bavinck and Pannenberg contribute to a shared understanding of theology as a science. Their consensus and commonalities regarding the understanding of revelation (chap. 2), natural theology (chap. 3), historical perspective (chap. 4), Trinitarianism (chap. 5), and epistemology (chap. 6) are evident, despite differences in specific details and terminology. Moreover, this analysis allows for a more profound understanding of the richness and diversity of Bavinck's thought, transcending the binary of the heated "two-Bavincks" debate. Bavinck, akin to Pannenberg, is not confined to the categories of "orthodoxy" or "modernity." Both theologians demonstrate a synthesis of orthodox and modern thought while maintaining a balanced, critical stance.

Similarly, Pannenberg's image is not confined to the stereotype of a modern Hegelian follower; the many commonalities with Bavinck expose elements of Pannenberg's "orthodoxy." Like Bavinck, Pannenberg is also dedicated to establishing a scientific approach to theology that is rooted in revelation, focusing on creating a

comprehensive theological framework. Although their nomenclature differs, with one terming it “organicism” and the other “totality,”¹¹ the approaches of the two figures provide a significant point for understanding the doctrine of revelation. I think that the rectifying doctrine of revelation in Pannenberg’s thought, especially regarding modern science and hermeneutics as well as the concept of universal history, can be seen as complementary for Bavinck’s formulation on revelation. This reconstructive approach is likely to provide the foundation of theology for the secular, modern age as well as the meaning of revelation to world religions.

1.2 Bavinck and Pannenberg: A Concise Examination of Their Lives and Intellectual Contexts

Before embarking on a discussion of the reasons behind engaging Bavinck and Pannenberg’s intellectual contributions in a comparative dialogue within my dissertation, it is essential to delineate the biographical contours of these two distinguished theologians. Gaining insight into their respective life experiences and historical contexts not only enables a more profound comprehension of the external factors that contributed to the formation and evolution of their thought, but also reveals a set of intriguing commonalities that underlie their scholarly journeys.

¹¹ In the research literature on the theme of organicism, especially in the study of Bavinck’s organicism, scholars often use the terms “organism” and “organicism” interchangeably. To avoid confusion, except when quoting directly from the original texts, I consistently use the term “organicism.”

1.2.1 Bavinck's Life and Intellectual Journey

Herman Bavinck was born in 1854 into a conservative, devout German-Dutch Reformed family. His father, Jan Bavinck (1826-1909), hailed from the small German village of Bentheim, near the Dutch border. Jan later became a minister of the Christian Reformed Church, a denomination that separated from the National Dutch Reformed Church in 1834 due to disputes over doctrinal orthodoxy and modes of worship. In the same year as Bavinck's birth, the Christian Reformed Church established its own theological seminary in Kampen, and Jan was nominated as a professor there.¹²

Although Herman Bavinck's upbringing was steeped in the conservative atmosphere of his denomination, his family's faith was not characterized by narrow-mindedness but by an openness to the external world. When Bavinck decided to attend the modernist University of Leiden in 1874 rather than his denomination's seminary in Kampen, his parents supported his choice eventually. Bavinck's decision was driven by his desire to gain firsthand exposure to modern theological thought and acquire a more scientific education than that offered by traditional seminaries.¹³ This outlook, however, generated tensions between Bavinck and his denomination, as the Christian Reformed Church was predominantly hostile toward secular culture at the time. This separatist inclination was a historically ingrained characteristic, as noted by Bolt, who observed that "the secession was not a unique or brand-new phenomenon in the Dutch Reformed Church but shared important commitments with a long history of pious ecclesiastical

¹² Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 2-13; John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 22-25; James Eglinton, *Bavinck: a Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 1-104.

¹³ John Bolt, "Editor's Introduction," in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volumes 1-4. Translated by John Vriend, edited by John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003-2008), 1:13.

dissent.”¹⁴ Thus, Bavinck’s enrollment at Leiden reflected the tensions between his community and the broader society, with Bavinck striving to understand and respond to modern society and culture while his community largely retreated from it.

Upon entering Leiden in 1874, Bavinck studied under dogmatic theologian Johannes Henricus Scholten (1811-1885), Old Testament scholar Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891), religious studies expert Cornelis P. Tiele (1830-1902), and philosophers Lodewijk W.E. Rauwenhoff (1828-1902) and Jan P. N. Land (1834-1897). These modernist scholars broadened Bavinck’s intellectual horizons and provided rigorous academic training, particularly influencing his theological methodology. As Bavinck himself admitted, Leiden taught him “to attempt to understand the opponent.”¹⁵ However, his modernist theological education also created tensions between his newfound perspectives and his pious upbringing. Upon graduating from Leiden, Bavinck candidly acknowledged his struggle, stating, “Leiden has benefitted me in many ways: I hope always to acknowledge that gratefully. But it has also greatly impoverished me, robbed me, not only of much ballast (for which I am happy), but also much that I recently, especially when I preach, recognize as vital for my own spiritual life.”¹⁶ Bavinck’s diary entries further reveal his perplexity, as he wrote, “Shall I remain standing [in the faith]? May God grant it.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 27.

¹⁵ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 33.

¹⁶ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 33.

¹⁷ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 27.

These influences profoundly shaped Bavinck's character and spurred his lifelong reflection on the relationship between "orthodoxy" and "modernity" modes of theology. His colleague at the Free University, A. Anema, described Bavinck's defining trait as the duality of his intellectual orientation, a reflection of the tensions throughout his life. He says,

That was a striking characteristic. In that duality is found Bavinck's significance. That duality is also a reflection of the tension—at times the crisis—in Bavinck's life. In many respects it is a simple matter to be a preacher in the Secession church, and, in a certain sense, it is also not that difficult to be a modern person. But in no way is it a simple matter to be the one as well as the other.¹⁸

Anema noted that while it might be relatively simple to be either a preacher in the Secession church or a modern person, being both was a far more complex endeavor.

Although Kuyper and Bavinck are often mentioned together, it was not until twenty years after Kuyper founded the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880 that Bavinck accepted Kuyper's invitation to succeed him in his position. During those two decades, Bavinck taught at the theological school in Kampen. Bolt astutely summarized the tensions between the two institutions: "Kuyper and his followers wanted a 'scientific' theological education provided at a Christian university such as the Free University of Amsterdam..." whereas the theological school in Kampen "regarded theological education as the responsibility of the church."¹⁹ In other words, Bavinck faced a challenge in balancing his own theological reflection, grappling with whether theology should be limited to the church or should be considered a science, which "must be related

¹⁸ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 31-32; cf. Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie. De Openbarings- en Schriftbeschouwing van Herman Bavinck in vergelijking met die van de ethische theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 108.

¹⁹ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 37.

to other areas of human knowledge and that a university is thus a fitting place for a theological faculty.”²⁰ Eventually, the motivation to approach theology as a public, scientific endeavor led Bavinck to accept a professorship at the Free University in 1892.

Between 1895 and 1901, Bavinck published his magnum opus, the four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*. During his visit to the United States in 1908-09, he delivered a series of lectures at the Princeton Stone Lectures, titled “The Philosophy of Revelation.” Regrettably, Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*, which he began working on in the early 1880s, remained unfinished and unpublished during his lifetime.²¹ In part due to Kuyper’s influence, Bavinck also engaged in Dutch parliamentary politics during this period, which can be seen as an attempt to counter the privatization of faith through active engagement in public life. Regrettably, however, Bavinck passed away in 1921 due to heart disease and other health issues.

1.2.2 Pannenberg’s Life and Intellectual Journey

Contrasting Bavinck’s upbringing, Pannenberg did not originate from a Christian family. Although he was baptized as an infant, his parents soon abandoned the church, resulting in a lack of religious life and education through his formative years. Amidst World War II and the subsequent post-war era, Pannenberg considered himself an atheist heavily influenced by Nietzsche. In early 1945, he had a religious vision-like experience and, in 1947, encountered the testimony of his teacher Dr. Armin Lange, which not only

²⁰ Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 37.

²¹ Dirk van Keulen and John Bolt, “Introduction to Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” in *Reformed Ethics vol. I*, xxi-xlii.

led him to become a Christian but also inspired his pursuit of theology. Another difference from Bavinck is that Bavinck passed away before World War II, while Pannenberg experienced the impact of the war as a teenager and became a prisoner of war of the Allies, spending over a year in a POW camp.

Pannenberg began his academic journey at the University of Berlin in 1946, delving into the works of Nicolai Hartmann and Karl Marx, and then transferred to the University of Göttingen in 1948. In 1949, he received a scholarship from the World Council of Churches to study philosophy with Karl Jaspers and theology with Karl Barth at Basel, joining Barth's theology seminar. However, Pannenberg complained that Barth's thought lacked philosophical rigor and disliked Barth's aversion to student criticism. Consequently, Pannenberg transferred again to Heidelberg in the fall of 1950. There, he was influenced by Gerhard von Rad's Old Testament research and participated in discussions led by patristics and New Testament scholar Hans von Campenhausen. These engagements not only ignited his passion for biblical studies but also led him to recognize the interconnectedness of faith and reason. Lutheran systematic theologian Edmund Schlink encouraged Pannenberg to pursue systematic theology research and engage in dialogue with natural sciences and other disciplines. At the same time, Pannenberg studied with Karl Löwith, exploring the profound relationship between history and theology.

According to Pannenberg, the intellectual contributions of these scholars collectively stimulated fervent discussions among Heidelberg University students, specifically on forging stronger connections between exegesis and doctrine. These discussions laid the groundwork for the publication of *Revelation as History* (1961).

While the book initially aimed to provide a more solid biblical foundation for the crucial theological concept of revelation, it inadvertently sparked a revolutionary challenge to Barth and Bultmann's idea of revelation in the Word of God and became the center of controversy.²² Later, Pannenberg asserted that the views in *Revelation as History* challenged the prevailing "Dialectical" Theology of the time, "since it seemed to call into question the basic function of the Word of God for theology, and thereby the common basis of every form of Dialectical Theology."²³

By synthesizing these diverse influences, Pannenberg developed an innovative understanding of revelation, asserting that God's revelation is primarily conveyed through His actions in history, rather than exclusively through His Word. This perspective not only distanced Pannenberg from the theological stances of Barth and Bultmann but also contributed to a more comprehensive, nuanced approach to theology. Diverging from the perspectives of Barth and Bultmann, Pannenberg's thesis in *Revelation as History* asserts that the biblical writings convey that "it is not the word of God that is considered to reveal God as he is, but the actions of God in history, though the divine word of promise and proclamation certainly contributes to that revelatory history."²⁴ And Pannenberg clarified that his appreciation for Hegel's thought only

²² Wolfhart Pannenberg, "An Intellectual Pilgrimage," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 45(2), 184-91. Also see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "An Autobiographical Sketch," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 11-18.

²³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*. Three vols. translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991-1998), 1:228.

²⁴ Pannenberg, "An Intellectual Pilgrimage," 189.

emerged when he commenced teaching at Heidelberg University. Elaborating on his relationship with Hegel's ideas, he states,

I never became a Hegelian, but I decided that theology has to be developed on at least the same level of sophistication as Hegel's philosophy and for that purpose I studied his writings carefully and repeatedly. Because my publications also gave evidence of this, the tenacious prejudice of my alleged Hegelianism developed, and it effectively conceals the more important philosophical roots of my thought.²⁵

Pannenberg explicitly identified the guiding idea that persisted throughout his theological career as "the God of the coming kingdom, the power of the future, that will bring about the completion of everything."²⁶ He concurred with Australian theologian Christiaan Mostert's summary of his theological thought in 2002, noting that "the trinitarian theology of my later years was not a diversion from my earlier pronouncements on God as the power of the future, but represents the full development of that idea in classical theological language."²⁷

These insights, as articulated by Pannenberg himself, provide a comprehensive understanding of the development and key features of his theological system. They illuminate the underlying roots and guiding principles of Pannenberg's thought.

For Pannenberg, theology not only deals with the concept of God and His Word but also seeks to connect God with His creation in order to better understand the concept of God. Thus, talking about God more rationally, theology needs a broader perspective to

²⁵ Pannenberg, "An Autobiographical Sketch," 16.

²⁶ Pannenberg, "An Intellectual Pilgrimage," 189.

²⁷ Pannenberg, "An Intellectual Pilgrimage," 189.

explore knowledge from various fields. Pannenberg elaborates on the mission of theology:

It took me a long time to come to terms with the requirements of dealing reasonably with a doctrine of God. It can only be done in the form of a systematic theology, i.e. a coherent account of how the world and especially human nature and history is related to God as creative source and ultimate destination of all things. A Christian systematic theology has to deal with this task in the form of a history of the world and of the human race, a history that accomplishes the intrinsic aim of the act of creation and overcomes the failures and shortcomings of the creatures in order to fully realize the kingdom of the creator in the world of his creatures. The task of such a comprehensive and systematic theology occupied me for many years.²⁸

In the concise overviews of Bavinck and Pannenberg's lives and work, we can discern some intriguing parallels between them, despite their distinct backgrounds and ages. Their intellectual journeys resemble the oscillation of a pendulum, as they move from atheism and a staunchly, secessionist conservative religious milieu toward a modest faith that is both public and open while maintaining its core identity. Their unwavering dedication to establishing theology as a rigorous science and their fervent engagement in cross-disciplinary dialogues suggest that they share numerous insights and areas of agreement. Unlike Barth's approach of safeguarding theology within the bounds of the church, Bavinck's and Pannenberg's experiences and reflections offer a compelling alternate model for faith and theology in addressing the challenges of contemporary society. Their perspectives on the doctrine of revelation serve as a prime example of this, and constitute one of the key reasons for selecting their thoughts as the focus of this discussion. Alongside this central motivation, there are several additional factors that

²⁸ Pannenberg, "An Intellectual Pilgrimage," 190.

further underpin the relevance and value of exploring their intellectual contributions for the doctrine of revelation.

1.3 Why Bavinck? Why Pannenberg?

Beyond the reasons previously discussed, I have opted to compare the thoughts of Bavinck and Pannenberg on revelation for the following reasons:

First, within the realm of contemporary English-speaking theological research, there is a notable dearth of literature that compares the works of Bavinck and Pannenberg. Furthermore, as Bolt stated, the study of Bavinck's theology has coalesced into a scholarly community only in the past two decades.²⁹ As alluded to earlier, the obstacles encountered in theological research stem not only from language barriers but also from the impact of denominational gulfs. While Bavinck scholars emphasize the catholicity of his theology, their background is predominantly rooted in the Reformed tradition, which makes it difficult to assert that Bavinck's influence extends beyond interdenominational boundaries.

For instance, in Avery Dulles's *Models of Revelation*, Bavinck's name appears a mere two times, mentioned in conjunction with Kuyper as a member of the conservative Evangelicals.³⁰ Similarly, in the influential work *Modern Christian Thought*, Bavinck is indirectly acknowledged only through the introduction of theologian Gerrit Cornelius Berkouwer (1903-1996), who drew upon Bavinck's ideas. It comes as no surprise that

²⁹ At present, only two English articles have been published, Bolt, "Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg" and Jin Li, "Meaning, Objectivity and Universality: Bavinck and Pannenberg on History and Revelation," *Journal of Chinese Theology* 8, 2 (2022): 220-49 (see also chap. 4).

³⁰ Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Image Books, 1985), 252.

Bavinck's name frequently appears alongside Kuyper as "Kuyper and Bavinck," without an in-depth exploration of Bavinck's own thoughts.³¹ In this context, fostering an interdenominational dialogue between Bavinck and Pannenberg, especially by underscoring their shared perspectives on the doctrine of revelation, serves to further emphasize the catholicity and ecumenicity of their theology, transcending denominational preconceptions.

Second, the distinct periods in which Bavinck and Pannenberg lived also make a compelling case for juxtaposing their thoughts for comparison and dialogue. If we regard the emergence of Barth's theology as a historical marker, Bavinck's theological formation predates Barth, while Pannenberg's was influenced by Barth. As previously mentioned, Barth's luminary status has drawn much attention, somewhat overshadowing the efforts of theologians outside the English and German-speaking circles in responding to the crisis of modern theology. Moreover, Bavinck's theology was largely formed before the world wars, unlike Barth's theology, which was profoundly impacted by them.³² Pannenberg, on the other hand, is one of the most important theologians of the postwar generation. By initiating a dialogue between Bavinck and Pannenberg, we can shed light on the common crises that theology faced in the modern era, both pre- and postwar, and explore how these two theologians addressed these crises and issues.

³¹ James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza with Sarah Coakley and James H. Evans, *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century Second Edition*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 393-96.

³² While Bavinck published "The Problem of War" in 1914 amidst World War I, his theological system did not significantly change or delve into discussions surrounding these themes. Furthermore, there has been scant research and descriptions regarding this aspect of his work. For the most recent reference to Bavinck's work during World War I, see Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, 275.

Indeed, both Bavinck and Pannenberg engage with the crisis of modernity in theology, which significantly influenced their theological formulations. Since the Enlightenment, the task of theology has expanded beyond merely demonstrating the content of revelation. It has evolved to question the epistemological justification of revelation and the origin of its authority.³³ According to Pannenberg, it was Kant who, by interpreting religion as a practical matter, opened the door for the whole of human experience and theoretical knowledge to be established on human beings' own certainty without the revelation about God as the presupposition.³⁴ In this context, both Bavinck and Pannenberg deviate from the traditional and Kantian modern dualisms in understanding revelation. They emphasize a Trinitarian epistemology within a Trinitarian framework. Furthermore, both theologians strive to overcome modern dualism in epistemology. Hence, rather than subscribing to the object-subject dualism prevalent in modern epistemology, they uphold Trinitarian principles.

Third, Bavinck and Pannenberg, both being systematic theologians, share numerous commonalities in their theologies, particularly concerning doctrines related to revelation. Both uphold a trinitarian theology, emphasizing the interconnectedness of God, the world, and humanity. This highlights not only the common intellectual roots in their theologies but also their critical engagement with traditional Christian ideas. They trace and reflect on these concepts and doctrines, which they then critically incorporate into their own theological systems. Simultaneously, they show substantial influences

³³ Carl E. Braaten, "History and Hermeneutics," in *New Directions in Theology Today* vol. II (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 12.

³⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie: Ihr Verhältnis im Lichte ihrer gemeinsamen Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 203-15.

from modern philosophy and science, specifically German idealism. However, both theologians avoid a strict dichotomy of adhering to tradition or pursuing modernity; instead, they critically assimilate thoughts from these diverse sources. These shared features indicate their pursuit of theology that transcends faith's privatization and sectionalism, striving for a more catholic theological understanding. Moreover, even in areas of divergence, their respective theologies can provide mutual enrichment and extension, deepening our understanding of the doctrine of revelation.

Fourth, engaging Bavinck and Pannenberg in a comparative dialogue broadens the horizon of revelation studies and enhances the depth of understanding of their individual thoughts.³⁵ Both theologians occupy a crucial place in the broader landscape of theological thought and serve as significant representatives of theological models of revelation.³⁶ However, the existing literature is sparse in terms of direct comparative studies involving these two theologians. Many Bavinck studies are confined primarily within a narrow Reformed sphere, while others interpret Bavinck's epistemology as being overly embedded in a modern context.³⁷ Even in comparative studies, except for

³⁵ E.g. in Dutch theological circles, G. C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, trans. by Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 11-37, 139-78, and Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 108-14; 211-20.

³⁶ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 64-66; 224-97.

³⁷ Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*. Also see Henk Van Den Belt, "Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the Autopistia of Scripture," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 32-43; Bruce R. Pass, "Herman Bavinck and the Cogito," *Reformed Theological Review* 74 :1 (April, 2015) :15-33; Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Christian Scholars Review* 11, no. 3 (1982). For some critiques, see Eduardo J. Echeverria, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Response to Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* (2010): 87-116. Further epistemological studying also see, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Herman Bavinck—Proto Reformed Epistemologist," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45(2010): 133-46; Nathaniel Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck and Thomas Reid on Perception and Knowing God," *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 1 (2018): 115-134; And Bruce R. Pass, "Upholding Sola Scriptura Today: Some Unturned Stones in Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of Inspiration," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 4 (2018): 517-36; Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation: A Dogmatic Sketch," *International Journal of*

comparing Bavinck with Thomas or Schleiermacher,³⁸ many scholars usually consider Bavinck along with Reformed theologians such as Kuyper, Barth, and others.³⁹ Conversely, Pannenberg scholars appear to be preoccupied with defending a theological tradition within the Lutheran and post-evangelical field. Although some literatures show the relationship between Pannenberg and Reformed theologians like Barth,⁴⁰ there has been a regrettable gap preventing a comparative dialogue between Bavinck and Pannenberg.

Recently, John Bolt broke this impasse, proposing that Pannenberg's project extends and elaborates on Bavinck's thought on revelation.⁴¹ Bolt further suggests that these two theologians can provide a metaphysical grounding for a scientific and catholic

Systematic Theology 20, no. 4 (2018): 495-516.

³⁸ David Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology: The Argument and Sources of his Principia of Science," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, ed. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2011), 1-56; Cory Brock, "Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Appropriation of Schleiermacher" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017).

³⁹ Eugene Paul Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1959); Cornelius van der Kooi, "Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth on Christian Faith and Culture." *Calvin Theological Journal* (2010): 72-78; and Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck's Reformed Eclecticism: On Catholicity, Consciousness and Theological Epistemology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2017): 310-32. Also see James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012); Bruce Pass, "Herman Bavinck and the Problem of New Wine in Old Wineskins," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol.17 (2015): 432-49.

⁴⁰ The representative work is Carl Braaten and Philip Clayton eds. *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*. Also see Theodore James Whapham, *The Unity of Theology: The Contribution of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Timothy Bradshaw, *Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005); Avery Dulles, *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 128-31; Braaten, "History and Hermeneutics"; and comparing Barth and Pannenberg, see Timothy Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology: A Comparative Study of the Theologies of Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Lewiston: Rutherford House/ Edinburgh, 1988).

⁴¹ Bolt, "Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg," 103-14.

theology.⁴² He presents a tentative theological hypothesis, positing that studying Bavinck and Pannenberg could offer a potential pathway to circumvent the pitfall of Barthian and Kerygmatic theology.⁴³ Bolt views Pannenberg's theology as potentially an extension and elaboration of Bavinck's latter attempts to understand revelation. In essence, the works of these two theologians are complementary.

However, Bolt's hypothesis lacks full development, and his comparison is restricted to two sources: Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation* and Pannenberg's *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*. In my dissertation, I expand upon Bolt's proposed theme by undertaking a comprehensive examination of these theologians' major works, further exploring and elaborating on their comparative study.

Last but certainly not least, the comparison and dialogue between Bavinck and Pannenberg on the doctrine of revelation will illustrate their significant similarities in theological frameworks, principles, and intellectual origins. In particular, both theologians embody the characteristics of "modern" thought, owing to influences from German idealism and the intellectual currents of their respective eras. This does not imply that they are synonymous with "modern" theologians. Both utilize the foundation of orthodox doctrine to critically refine and assimilate these intellectual trends into their theological systems. This approach is aptly reflected in Pannenberg's attitude toward Hegel, where he stated, "I never became a Hegelian, but I decided that theology has to be developed on at least the same level of sophistication as Hegel's philosophy and for that

⁴² Bolt, "Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg," 103-14.

⁴³ John Bolt, "An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (2013): 95.

purpose I studied his writings carefully and repeatedly.”⁴⁴ This dialogue in itself expands the current horizon of Bavinck studies.

In the present field of Bavinck studies, a persistent debate centers on whether Bavinck’s thought embodies a tension between “orthodox” and “modern.”⁴⁵ From early Bavinck studies, as articulated by Jan Veenhof, who underscored the assimilation of more modern trends in Bavinck’s *oeuvre*, notably elements of German idealism.⁴⁶ The discourse has evolved. Scholars such as Brian G. Mattson and James Eglinton have since pivoted to highlight the inherent “orthodox” within Bavinck’s thought, refuting the influences of German idealism.⁴⁷ Presently, this contention remains unresolved with Bruce Pass’s discussion once again revisiting the affinity between Bavinck’s intellectual framework and German idealism.⁴⁸ However, both sides of the debate have not provided clear standards to delineate “orthodox” and “modern.” In fact, it is impractical to quantify the amount of “orthodox” and “modern” elements in Bavinck’s thought. Through a dialogue and comparison with Pannenberg, if my argument holds--namely, that Bavinck and Pannenberg share substantial similarities and commonalities in the essence of the doctrine of revelation, theological motifs, and methodologies--then it at least suggests that Bavinck’s theology, much like Pannenberg’s, integrates the “orthodox” and the

⁴⁴ Pannenberg, “An Autobiographical Sketch,” 16.

⁴⁵ I will elaborate on this hypothesis and conduct a comprehensive literature review in chap. 2.

⁴⁶ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 252-54.

⁴⁷ Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 51; and Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 49-50.

⁴⁸ Bruce Pass, “Trinity or German idealism? Reconsidering the Origins of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2023): 56-70.

“modern” to establish a scientific theological system. This system transcends the traditional boundaries of the Reformed theological sphere while maintaining an orthodox stance. This perspective adds a new dimension to the ongoing debate of Bavinck’s thought, suggesting that Bavinck’s theology might well be a blend of orthodoxy and modernity to build a theology as science, thus broadening our understanding of his work.

1.4 The Structure and Main Themes

The overall structure of my dissertation is as follows:

Chapter 1: In this introductory chapter, I provide a brief biography of Bavinck and Pannenberg, and outline the reasons for selecting their ideas on the doctrine of revelation for examination and dialogue. I argue that the commonalities in their thoughts on revelation stem from their critical transformation of the resources of German idealism using traditional Christian doctrines. Bavinck and Pannenberg offer a perspective on revelation different from that of Barth, and their ideas can supplement each other, helping us understand the doctrine of revelation and its relationship to faith and knowledge in modern society.

Chapter 2: This chapter focuses on the sources and relation to German idealism of the views of revelation held by Bavinck and Pannenberg. Like Pannenberg, the origins of Bavinck’s organicism cannot be reduced to a mere dichotomy of either orthodoxy or modernism. Instead, both Bavinck’s thought and Pannenberg’s represent a nuanced synthesis, integrating diverse intellectual legacies. Within the debate, juxtaposing orthodoxy against modernism, there’s an underlying common assumption that German idealism and traditional Christian thought are intrinsically antithetical and incompatible.

Such an assumption neglects the intertwined lineage and inherent affinity between Christian tradition and German idealism. I argue that Bavinck's organicism and Pannenberg's formulation of totality are similar in some respects, not only advancing the traditional doctrine of revelation but also drawing inspiration from modern thought, especially German idealism.

Chapter 3: I discuss Bavinck and Pannenberg's respective views on natural theology. While many scholars treat them as opponents of natural theology like Barth's stance, I argue that Bavinck and Pannenberg distinguish between different definitions of "nature." They do not oppose all natural theologies but reject the kind that opposes nature and revelation completely. On the contrary, they both support a form of natural theology based on revelation. Their natural theologies, instead of opposing revelation theology, offer an organic, holistic theology that overcomes various dualisms.

Chapter 4: This chapter discusses the theme of history, which has been somewhat overlooked by Bavinck scholars. Despite Bavinck's emphasis on history in the mode of revelation, this theme has been largely ignored. On the other hand, the concept of "history" in Pannenberg's system is a major focus of Pannenberg scholars. In this chapter, I compare and contrast Bavinck's and Pannenberg's views on history. On the one hand, I point out that Bavinck's universal history is largely a product of modern thought rather than a simple continuation of traditional Reformed theology. On the other hand, both Bavinck and Pannenberg opposed the tendency since the Enlightenment for theology to try to depart from historical research and become a subjective belief. Instead, they advocated for an objective faith based on objective historical events. And they did not fully accept the positivist historical-critical method but reflected and critiqued it.

Compared to Bavinck, Pannenberg recognizes the relationship between historical compilation and hermeneutics and the problems encountered when the concept of universal history is extended to the scope of world history. He provides some supplements and corrections to Bavinck's historical view. Finally, I present a critique of their historical concepts. I argue that although Bavinck's and Pannenberg's concepts of history and universal history have considered the expansion issues of world history and contemporary knowledge and culture, they still, to some extent, embody a Western-centric self-understanding, lacking openness and dialogue.

Chapter 5: I examine the Trinitarian doctrines of Bavinck and Pannenberg. My argument is that despite their differing theological backgrounds and traditions, Bavinck and Pannenberg's Trinitarianisms share considerable commonality and similarity. Especially, Bavinck's Trinitarianism utilizes many concepts and terms from German idealism, such as "self-distinction." These offer a more open path to understanding the Trinity than does the Barthian system. Furthermore, Bavinck and Pannenberg show great similarity within the framework of the Trinity. They demonstrate the catholicity and openness inherent in their theology; in fact, the assertion of Bavinck's Trinitarianism as a distinctive marker against the influence of German idealism for Bavinck, ignoring the role of German idealism and focusing attention only on Bavinck's continuity with the broader catholic Christian tradition, ignores the way in which German idealism shows some of the same continuities.

Chapter 6: I examine Bavinck and Pannenberg's epistemologies in this chapter, especially their understanding of the relationship between faith and reason (or knowledge), as well as the certainty of faith. As I discuss in chapter 2, Bavinck's

“organicism” and Pannenberg’s “totality” theological framework overcome the dualistic understanding in tradition when dealing with the relationship between faith and reason. They were both influenced by German idealism and modern thought. They both recognized that the formation of human epistemology and faith goes beyond the dichotomy of faith and reason. Bavinck and Pannenberg used ideas like subject-object and other modern intellectual resources to develop traditional doctrines’ understanding of faith and the certainty of faith.

In the final, concluding section, I draw together the threads of this dissertation, which comprises a thorough exploration of the respective revelations of Bavinck and Pannenberg. This journey begins with an examination of the unique, yet surprisingly convergent, theological perspectives offered by Bavinck and Pannenberg. This revealed that, despite their divergent backgrounds and contexts, both theologians built systems of revelation, which demonstrate shared metaphysical foundations and a synthesis of elements from orthodox and modern elements. These characteristics have been shown to contribute to the construction of a theology that can be considered a science grounded in revelation, demonstrating potential relevance for a secular, modern age, and even for understanding world religions.

In sum, this dissertation argues that the philosophical perspectives of both Bavinck and Pannenberg reflect a nuanced interplay of traditional doctrines and modern thought, like German idealism. This observation not only underscores the complex nature of their theologies but also highlights the potential for further research in this area.

Chapter 2

Organic and Totality: Revelation as a New Issue

in the Modern Age

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider Bavinck's and Pannenberg's ideas of revelation and the sources of their thoughts. My argument is that despite differences in detail, the ideas of revelation held by both theologians have many similarities and commonalities due to their shared influence by German idealism in response to the challenges posed by modern thought to the older Protestant doctrines of revelation. I will demonstrate in this chapter that like Pannenberg, Bavinck's idea of revelation was profoundly shaped by modern thought, particularly German idealism, and underwent significant changes throughout his intellectual journey.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I will demonstrate Bavinck's doctrine of revelation. Next, I will discuss Pannenberg's doctrine of revelation, and engage in a comparison and dialogue between Pannenberg's and Bavinck's ideas of revelation, demonstrating their extensive similarities. As the doctrine of revelation touches on the entire theological scheme, I will mainly concentrate on their understanding and categorization of the concept of revelation, as well as the intellectual sources of their ideas.

2.2 Bavinck's Idea of Revelation

2.2.1 Literature Review: Sources of Bavinck's Organicism

A number of Bavinck scholars have observed that his thought was shaped by various currents in Dutch theology and philosophy during the mid-nineteenth century, leading to his inhabiting a tension between tradition and modernity.¹ Jan Veenhof was one of the earliest to propose this view, further highlighting the use of the term “organic” as a *Schagwort* (catchword) in both Bavinck's and Kuyper's work, which played a significant role in their respective view of revelation and Scripture.² Veenhof traced the evolution of “organicism” as a philosophical concept from its origins in Aristotle's teleology to its post-Kantian formulations in German idealism, which arose as a response to the mechanistic worldview prevalent in the nineteenth century.³ The notion of organicism was developed by Schelling, providing the philosophical basis for Romanticism and theology through the principle of the organic.⁴

According to Veenhof, who emphasized the role of German idealism on Bavinck's notion of the “organic,” even Bavinck's contemporaries recognized this role. For example, P. J. Kromsigt (1866-1941) conducted a meticulous investigation into the

¹ See, R. H. Bremmer, “Herman Bavinck: Theoloog-in-aanvechting,” *Wapenveld: Over geloof en culture* (1968):100–105 (<https://wapenveldonline.nl/artikel/575/herman-bavinck/>); also see, Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*; John Bolt, “Grand Rapids between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck's Reception and Influence in North America,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (2003): 263–80.

² Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 250.

³ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 252-54. Veenhof mainly refers to and cites these references works which Bavinck frequently cited (more than ten times) in *Philosophy of Revelation*, such as the works of Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926) and Rudolf Eisler (1873-1926), who were representatives of Idealism and organicism at the time. Veenhof also refers to Jan Ridderbos's lecture entitled “*Gereformeerde Schriftbodyouwing en organische opvatting*,” which was delivered in June 1926 at the Free University in Amsterdam. This lecture offers a valuable reference for Veenhof's exploration of Bavinck's organicism.

⁴ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 253.

origins of Bavinck's and Kuyper's organicism as early as 1911.⁵ He further emphasized that the nineteenth-century intellectual changes involved a shift from a naturalistic, mechanistic worldview to a more vitalistic, organic one, exemplified by the increasing replacement of the term "law" with "organic," and the widespread use of terms such as "evolution," "process," and so on. The naturalistic mechanistic worldview of the past was built upon a complete system of causal-mechanical worldview, while the term "organic" conveyed a more cautious, universal, and scientific meaning. Given its departure from the naturalism, both Reformed orthodox and modernist camps were able to accept it. In this context, Kromsigt not only highlights the contrast between organicism and mechanical naturalism, but also draws attention to the contrast with the modes of thought prevalent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These modes of thought prioritized being over becoming and lacking historical awareness, being dogmatically rather than psychologically oriented.⁶ Veenhof argues that:

1. The organic concept as applied by Bavinck bears a clear imprint of idealism, especially that of Schelling. Bavinck adopted Schelling's organic concept in his own theological approach.
2. Bavinck's use of the term "organic" encompasses the biological connotations of the term and reflects the intellectual milieu of his time. He was a child of his time.

⁵ In his 1921 book review, Kromsigt praised Bavinck for his profound understanding of his era, and lamented the lack of proper attention given to Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation*. see, "Review of *Modernisme en orthodoxie*, by Herman Bavinck," *Stemmen des Tijds* 1 (1911): 214–16, also see *Oud en Nieuw-Calvinisme*, in *Stemmen des Tijds* no. 1 (1912): 528-542, which cite in *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 255.

⁶ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 255-256.

3. The organic motif was employed by Bavinck as a means of liberating the view of revelation and Scripture from the rigidity of post-Reformation orthodoxy. In contrast to the mechanical concept of revelation held by Hodge, the organic approach served as a response to modern historical criticism, enabling Bavinck to maintain the unity and inner harmony of revelation in face of the unrestrained analysis of modern literary biblical criticism.

4. Bavinck uses the terms “organic” and “organicism” in the sense that was commonly accepted at the time. One of the hallmarks of the organic idea is that it views the whole as an inner unity and does not reduce it to its constituent parts, while still recognizing the diversity and complexity of those parts. This stands in contrast to the mechanical view, which consider the whole as an aggregate of individual parts, with the parts preceding and giving rise to the whole.⁷

R. H. Bremmer view Bavinck as a theologian whose thoughts evolved and struggled, presenting various tensions in his doctrine of revelation. He also acknowledges some of tensions and contradictions within Bavinck’s thought, as pointed out by Veenhof. Bremmer argues that Bavinck’s position is that he sometimes comes very close to the original Reformation position and assaults spiritualism with powerful weapons from there, while simultaneously allowing spiritualism to play into the hands of Reformed.⁸ For example, on the one hand, Bavinck strongly clings to the self-witness of Scripture, while on the other hand, he acknowledges that historical criticism challenges

⁷ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 267-68.

⁸ Bremmer, “Herman Bavinck,” 100–105; and also cited in Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 505.

the authenticity and credibility of revelation and Scripture's *autopistos*, and that ignoring or pretending these challenges do not exist is futile. Like Veenhof, Bremmer concludes that, when it comes to understanding revelation, Bavinck not only opposes the rigid theology of Reformed orthodoxy but also critically absorbs contemporary intellectual trends. Bremmer claims that although Bavinck uses terms such as "organic" to address these tensions, Bavinck realized that with this organic motif, not all questions were solved and admitted that "no one will claim that an appropriate solution has been found."⁹ Furthermore, Bavinck extensively uses the term "organic" primarily to oppose the mechanical view of the old dogmatists. According to Bremmer, Bavinck did not clearly define this term, which has led to some criticisms among the Dutch Reformed. Despite the tensions in Bavinck's thought, Bremmer still believes that Bavinck is a Protestant Scriptural theologian who "strongly held that we can only know revelation through Scripture."¹⁰

In short, Veenhof and Bremmer have highlighted that Bavinck's theology, influenced by the nineteenth-century currents, navigated a tension between tradition and modernity, emphasizing Bavinck's attempt to modernize views on revelation while acknowledging the inherent challenges and limitations.

⁹ Bremmer, "Herman Bavinck," 100–105.

¹⁰ Bremmer, "Herman Bavinck," 100–105. Dutch original: "Tegelijk hield Bavinck met kracht vast, dat wij de openbaring alleen kennen door de Schrift."

2.2.2 The Controversy: Offspring of the Time vs. Guardian of Tradition

For nearly half a century, the supposition that Bavinck's theological framework concurrently embodies tensions amid orthodoxy and modernity among Bavinck scholars.¹¹ Although John Bolt concedes that he inaccurately translated G. C. Berkouwer's assertion that "Bavinck's theology contains so many *onweersprekelijke motieven*" as "irreconcilable themes" rather than "undeniable themes," he acknowledges that this misinterpretation does not impede the presence of tension-riddled themes within Bavinck's thought.¹² That is why some Bavinck scholars insist that Bavinck's system is not dualistic; he synthesizes elements of traditional Reformed thought and modern notions.¹³

In the referenced scholarship concerning Bavinck's intellectual trajectory, the majority of the literature does not deny the incorporation of modern elements within Bavinck's theological framework. The pivotal discourse revolves around the degree to which Bavinck's theology was influenced by these modern thoughts and how profoundly they shaped Bavinck's thought. At the heart of the debate is whether "orthodoxy" and

¹¹ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 131-44, 177-89; Syd. Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," (Unpublished Th.D. Dissertation, Toronto: Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, 1998), 108-10; Malcolm B. Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 49-59; John Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi: Between Pietism and Modernism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), and "Grand Rapids between Kampen and Amsterdam," 263-80.

¹² John Bolt, "Herman Bavinck on Natural Law and Two Kingdoms: Some Further Reflections." *The Bavinck Review* no. 4 (2013): 77.

¹³ Nelson D. Kloosterman, "A Response to 'The Kingdom of God is Twofold': Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms in the Thought of Herman Bavinck by David VanDrunen," *Calvin Theological Journal* no. 45 (2010):165-176; George Harinck, "'Something that must remain, if the truth is to be sweet and precious to us': the Reformed spirituality of Herman Bavinck." *Calvin Theological Journal* no. 38 (2003), 248-262 and "Why Was Bavinck in Need of a Philosophy of Revelation?" *The Kuyper Center Review*, vol. 2, *Revelation and Common Grace*, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 27-40.

“modernity” in Bavinck’s thought reconcile in a tolerable tension or manifest as a more profound epistemological schism.

Nevertheless, recent Bavinck scholarship has seen the emergence of voices, represented by Brian G. Mattson and James Eglinton, who attempted to purify Bavinck’s thought from any traits potentially associated with “modernity,” including the influence of German idealism. This varied perspective enriches this discourse, as it offers an additional lens through which Bavinck’s thought can be examined. They seek to transform these traits into a legacy left by “orthodoxy,” thereby molding Bavinck as a guardian who surpasses contemporary thought, specifically in relation to his organic motif. For example, Mattson posits that the origins of Bavinck’s thought are rooted “not in 19th German philosophy, but in historic Reformed orthodoxy.”¹⁴ Eglinton not only concurs with and references this view, but further insinuates that this view is inherently a “dualistic hermeneutic,” which Bavinck repudiates as “the duality of faith and culture.”¹⁵

In their scholarly contributions, Mattson and Eglinton rearticulate the connection between Bavinck’s organicism and Christian orthodoxy, believing that Veenhof’s interpretation was mistaken, advocating for an “inversion of Veenhof’s methodology.”¹⁶ Specifically, Eglinton points out that Bavinck’s use of “organicism” diverges from the

¹⁴ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 51.

¹⁵ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 49-50. Eglinton does not offer a coherent explanation for the logical relationship between interpreting tensions within Bavinck’s thought and Bavinck’s opposition to dualism. Not only can we deduce such a conclusion, but throughout intellectual history, numerous thinkers have altered their positions or harbored inconsistencies and tensions within their system during their lifetime. If Eglinton’s argument were to hold, then equally absurd conclusions could be applied to the critique of Kuyper or even Schelling, as researchers have delved into their intellectual changes and tensions in their thoughts as interpretive clues, consequently becoming engulfed in dualistic thinking. Moreover, Chapter 6 will demonstrate that Bavinck does not reject all forms of dualism. Specifically on the theme of faith, he explicitly acknowledges the existence of a dualism between faith and practice in terms of tension.

¹⁶ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 205.

terminology of his era, suggesting that “Bavinck loaded the term with trinitarian meaning. In doing so, he anchored himself in the Reformed tradition rather than in German idealism.”¹⁷

In the exploration surrounding Bavinck’s intellectual engagement with German idealism, distinctive interpretative paradigms emerge among scholars such as Veenhof and Eglinton. Part of this divergence arises from their distinct research perspectives when addressing the nexus between Bavinck and the intricate tapestry of German idealism. German idealism itself, as an intellectual tradition, is replete with complex, multifaceted domain, with towering figures such as Hegel and Schelling both presenting convergent and divergent philosophical systems. Furthermore, these thinkers often engaged in in-depth critiques and reflections vis-à-vis the philosophical systems of their contemporaries, even for their own works. Veenhof’s work is especially salient in illuminating the profound influence of Schelling’s organicism on Bavinck’s thought. In contrast, Mattson and Eglinton focus more on the connection between Bavinck and Hegel rather than Bavinck and Schelling. Eglinton devotes some attention to contrasting Bavinck and Hegel, summarizing four guiding principles that distinguish Bavinck’s organicism from German idealism:

1. The created order is marked by simultaneous unity and diversity;
2. Unity precedes diversity;
3. Organicism’s shared life is orchestrated by a common idea;
4. Organicism has a drive towards its goal.¹⁸

¹⁷ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 205.

¹⁸ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 67-69.

Thus, in Eglinton's perspective, these characteristics are instrumental in differentiating Bavinck's organicism from the organicism inherent in German idealism.

However, these "unique" features of Bavinck's organicism are also shared by German idealism. Rachel Zuckert specifically points out that, for German idealism, even beginning with Kant, organicism has been utilized as the same principle when addressing the relationship between the whole and its parts. Moreover, organicism not only opposes mechanistic perspectives by viewing nature and the universe as a living system but also plays a role in epistemology, where it "has a comprehensive grasp of all characteristics of an object, understand it as a whole, rather than putting together a comprehension of it from isolated discursive 'marks'."¹⁹ Therefore, the consensus within German idealism's organicism is that the whole determines the parts, as opposed to the mechanistic view where parts constitute the whole. This perspective shifts the universe from being perceived as a mechanical pendulum to being seen as an organic life with teleological foundations, according to Zuckert, "the universal (species, type) determines the particular not only abstractly, and with respect to some aspects. But with respect to its many, diverse, particular characteristics in systematic interrelation with one another."²⁰

Additionally, when Eglinton delves into Hegel's organicism and system, there appears to be room for further elucidation and nuanced discourse. Predominantly drawing from Frederick Beiser's contributions to the study of Hegel, from which Eglinton infers a monistic interpretation of Hegel's organicism.²¹ But Beiser's own research does not

¹⁹ Rachel Zuckert, "Organism and System in German Idealism," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, edited by Karl Ameriks, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 274.

²⁰ Zuckert, "Organism and System in German Idealism," 276.

²¹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 65-66.

support this conclusion. Beiser delineates an intimate interconnectedness between Hegel's organic motif and Trinitarian theology. First, according to Beiser, Hegel's organicism is a triadic schema, a "unity, difference, and unity-in-difference" process,²² which is not the same as the process Eglinton claims for idealism, especially Hegel's organicism. On the contrary, this characteristic of Hegel's thought is precisely what Eglinton claims to be unique to Bavinck's concept of organicism. Second, Eglinton maintains a stark distinction between Hegel's and Bavinck's organicism, as Bavinck's organicism intertwines with the doctrine of Trinitarian, while Hegel subscribes to monism (this topic I will revisit in Chapter 5). Eglinton then states, "one may say that Hegel's organicism also develops out of a theological concern. In the *Spirit of Christianity*, his motivation for organic thinking appears to be John 1:1-4....The bare of theocentric intentions, however, does not by itself render Bavinck use of the organic as therefore Hegelian....Bavinck's theocentric starting point is Trinitarian, whereas Hegel's is monistic."²³ Eglinton offers a footnote referencing one of Hegel's works.²⁴ However, this view originates also from the same chapter on Hegel's organicism in Beiser's

²² Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 81.

²³ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68.

²⁴ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68, n72. Eglinton substitutes the German reference Werke I in Beiser's *Hegel* (319n7) with an English version, but the German edition Eglinton cites (Herman Nohl, *Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften*) may have been erroneously written with English version page numbers due to a formatting error. A similar issue occurs on page 69 of *Trinity and Organism*, where Eglinton writes in the footnote to the statement "The notion that, within an *organism*, the whole precedes the parts is also found in Idealist organicism," citing G.W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1989), without page number. However, this view is also derive from page 81 of Beiser's *Hegel*, "The purpose of Hegel's Science of Logic is indeed to develop a logic of life, a way of thinking to understand life... a living being is an indivisible unity, a *totum* where the whole precedes its parts..." However, Eglinton does not provide any indication to readers that he has referred to Beiser's views in his discussion.

discussion of *Classical and Christian Origins* that Eglinton cites. Beiser's original writing follows:

Although all these sources were important in determining the context of Hegel's thinking, the immediate origin of his organic concept seems to have been more religious than philosophical. When he introduces his concept in *The Spirit of Christianity* he does so in the context of discussing the infinite or divine life. His source of inspiration seems to have been the gospel of John, especially the passage he cites from John 1 (1–4)...²⁵

According to Beiser's view, Hegel's organicism is not only derived from "Classical and Christian origins," but also further emphasizes that it is intended to explain the Trinity.²⁶

Beiser continues,

Hegel seems to have latched on to the organic concept for at least two reasons. First, it provided him with an explanation for the trinity: just as the parts of an organicism are organicisms themselves, so each person of the trinity is a distinct person. Second, it overcame the alienation between individual and nature: if the universe is an organicism, the individual is inseparable from it just as it is inseparable from the individual.²⁷

Here has clearly demonstrated the relationship between Hegel's organicism and the Trinity.

In his discourse on Hegel, Eglinton's analysis appears to somewhat circumscribed, heavily leaning on Beiser's seminal work *Hegel*. But Eglinton may have sidestepped Beiser's nuanced emphasis on the intricate relationship between Hegel's organicism and the Trinitarian theology. This oversight is significant, particularly when Eglinton suggests that the organicism of German idealism, especially Hegel's version, contrasts with the Trinitarian framework inherent in Bavinck's organicism. Eglinton's

²⁵ Beiser, *Hegel*, 88.

²⁶ Beiser, *Hegel*, 88.

²⁷ Beiser, *Hegel*, 88.

manner of referencing Beiser's work might inadvertently convey to readers that Beiser's interpretation of Hegel lends authoritative backing to Eglinton's perspective. However, a closer examination reveals a divergence between Beiser's insights and Eglinton's interpretation. This contention appears to demand more rigorous justification, especially given the depth of Beiser's elucidations on the subject.

Moreover, the unique traits of Bavinck's organicism, as identified by Eglinton, are not exclusive to Bavinck's organic system. These characteristics are also present in the organicism of numerous thinkers within German idealism, particularly in the philosophy of Schelling. Although Veenhof previously pointed out a closer affinity between Bavinck's organicism and Schelling's thought than with Hegel's, Mattson and Eglinton have largely overlooked Veenhof's research on Schelling. Recently, Bruce Pass reemphasized Schelling's influence on Bavinck's organic motif again, arguing that "the claim that Bavinck's organic motif does not derive from German Idealism is mistaken and misconstrues the type of synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity that Bavinck strove to achieve."²⁸

Contrary to Eglinton and others' characterization of idealism as neglecting the theme of God and argue that idealism does not "posit rigid separateness between God and the cosmos." Moreover, Eglinton claims that Bavinck "invokes the organic motif to explain the sense in which the archetypal (Trinitarian) unity of the Godhead as the foundation for all consequent ectypal (triniform) unity in the action."²⁹ These characteristics of Bavinck's thought are also discernible within German idealism,

²⁸ Bruce Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism?," 69-70.

²⁹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 79.

particularly in Schelling's works. In fact, Schelling expressed such a view early on.³⁰ In 1798, Schelling dealt with the relationship between unity and diversity in organicism, explicitly stating the same meaning later expressed by Bavinck that the world is the image of the eternal and infinite self-will of the Absolute, and as an organicism, it is diverse yet unified.³¹

Besides, Veenhof's work does not contest these characteristics of Bavinck's organicism as delineated by Eglinton.³² Veenhof has suggested that the term "organic" is a motif in Bavinck's thought.³³ But recent studies on Bavinck have overshadowed this insightful contribution by Veenhof, attributing it instead to Eglinton's pioneering contribution of adopting the motif of organicism for Bavinck. For instance, Nathaniel Gray Sutanto states that his research is based on Mattson and Eglinton, "introducing the reader to the comprehensive scope of Bavinck's organic worldview...."³⁴ In fact, the nuanced distinction between Veenhof and Eglinton emerges in their assessment of the origin and exclusivity of these traits. The pivotal debate hinges on whether these

³⁰ Schelling says, "the unity and inner relationship of all organizations, descended from one archetype, whose objective alone is variable while the subjective is unchangeable... because the archetype remains the same in itself, what is used to express it can only be variable in form..." [die Idee von der Einheit und inneren Verwandtschaft aller Organisationen, der Abstammung von Einem Urbild, dessen Objektives allein veränderlich, das Subjektive aber unveränderlich ist... daß, weil das Urbild an sich immer dasselbige bleibt, auch das, wodurch es ausgedrückt wird...] See, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, "Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studium," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Hrsg. von K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart und Augsburg: Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1856-1861), vol.V, 343.

³¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Von der Weltseele: eine Hypothese der höhern Physik zur Erklärung des allgemeinen us* (Berlin: BoD-Books on Demand, 2016), 18-19; also see *Sämtliche Werke*, II, 362-63.

³² Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 255-68.

³³ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 250.

³⁴ Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 13.

characteristics are the exclusive preserve of Bavinck and stem solely from the Reformed tradition, or if they also resonate as quintessential hallmarks with the broader landscape of nineteenth and twenty century German idealism. Eglinton believes that Bavinck's organicism is shaped by the paradigmatic relationship between God and the cosmos, emphasizing "the absolute distinction that exists between the creator and creation."³⁵ He posits that Bavinck's motif is influenced by gulfs such as "the divine and the human, the limitless and the limited, the eternal and the temporal, that which is and which becomes...."³⁶ These issues also have been addressed by Schelling in the past. Schelling's later work emphasized the distinction between Being and beings, as well as the distinction between the Absolute and the world. For Schelling, "the world is the being of God, but God is not the world, because God is as nonexistent beyond being, out of which inexistence he can put himself to being at all."³⁷ Understanding and grasping the gulfs (*Abgrund*) between the infinite and finite, the eternal God and temporality, is not only a concern of Schelling's later work but also a central issue debated in German idealism.³⁸ It

³⁵ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 116.

³⁶ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 116.

³⁷ Walter Schulz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, (Stuttgart and Köln: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1955), 237. [Die Welt ist das Sein Gottes, aber Gott ist nicht die Welt, den Gott ist ja als inexistenten jenseits des Seins, aus welcher Inexistenz heraus er sich überhaupt erst zum Sein setzen kann.]

³⁸ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 322-23; Schulz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, 42-61. Pannenberg points out that precisely because of the gulf between the Absolute and the creation, Barth's theology, which starts from the subjectivity of God, was actually influenced by the speculative theology of Schelling and, in particular, Hegel. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Problemggeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland: Von Schleiermacher bis zu Barth und Tillich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 248-49.

is essential to consider Schelling's influence on Bavinck's organic motif and the broader context of German idealism to more accurately understand Bavinck's idea of revelation.³⁹

The arguments put forth by Mattson and Eglinton against the influence of German idealism on Bavinck's organicism rest on two speculative premises: Bavinck's occasional criticism of Hegel and other idealists indicate a fundamental difference between his thought and theirs;⁴⁰ and that organicism "is not a uniform process moving through a chain of historical events...there can be no single cross-disciplinary definition of organicism."⁴¹ However, these premises are not tenable upon closer examination.

First, the mere fact that Bavinck criticizes certain aspects of the thought of Hegel, Schelling, etc., does not necessarily imply that he did not draw inspiration from their ideas. For example, the development of German idealism itself is rooted in the critique of Kant's philosophy, and fierce debates and disagreements among thinkers such as Hegel and Schelling are well-documented. Thus, inferring that Bavinck's organicism was "in the Reformed tradition rather than in German idealism,"⁴² based solely on his criticism of specific philosophers is overly simplistic and hasty.

Second, while Eglinton cites van Eck's assertion that there is no single, continuous lineage or unified terminology for organicism, it is important note that Eck's discussion never refers Bavinck's case. On the contrary, Bavinck himself outlines a genealogy of organicism, tracing it back to Aristotle, and says, "this idea of development

³⁹ In the subsequent section, I will delve further into Schelling's influence on Bavinck to further elucidate the points of divergence between Veenhof and Eglinton.

⁴⁰ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 45; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 58-62.

⁴¹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 58.

⁴² Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 205.

aroused no objection whatever in Christian theology and philosophy...For the essence of it, it appears also in modern philosophy, in Lessing, Herder and Goethe, Schelling and Hegel...[they] might employ to designate the core and essence of things, they never regarded nature as a dead mechanism but as an eternally formative power, a creative artist.”⁴³ According to Mattson and Eglinton’s principle that “the best placed person to define Bavinck is, invariably, Bavinck himself,”⁴⁴ it is evident that Bavinck placed himself within the genealogy of organicism. Eglinton and Mattson contend that, in discussing Bavinck’s organicism, “one does not explain the meaning of words by tracing historical origins.”⁴⁵ Bavinck himself does not shy away from undertaking such an historical exploration. He traces the development of the concept of organicism, discerning its universal characteristic both in Christian theology and philosophy. Bavinck does not bifurcate it into two distinct types: one rooted in Reformed and the other stemming from Aristotle through to German idealism. On the contrary, Bavinck’s exposition suggests that the notion of organicism has consistently emerged throughout history, particularly as conceptual counterpoint to “a dead mechanism.” This perspective seems to diverge from the positions advanced by Mattson and Eglinton.

Furthermore, as Veenhof has noted, Kromsigt pointed out the idealism sources of Bavinck and Kuyper’s organicism as early as 1910s. Given that Bavinck was familiar with Kromsigt’s work,⁴⁶ and had ample opportunity to respond or distinguish his

⁴³ Bavinck, *PoR*, 10.

⁴⁴ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 43; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 65.

⁴⁵ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 55.

⁴⁶ Bavinck cited various works by Kromsigt in his *Dogmatics*, e.g., in *RD* 4, 57n35; 202n94 and 539n112.

organicism from idealism, it is reasonable to question why he never addressed these connections or clarifications.

In the subsequent section, I will delve into Bavinck's idea of revelation, highlighting the interwoven characteristics of both "orthodoxy" and "modernity" present within his perspective. This exploration aims to demonstrate that, despite the arguments made by like Mattson and Eglinton, Bavinck's thought indeed exhibits a rich and nuanced synthesis and tension of both traditional and modern elements.

2.2.3 The Roots of Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation*

Bavinck's thought of revelation bears the imprint of his time. Although there has been no consensus on the relationship between theology and philosophy since early Christianity, the Enlightenment brought about a struggle between the two disciplines. The general idea was that they had different epistemological foundation, with theology being based on revelation and philosophy on reason. Bavinck himself faced the same issue of whether theology could be a science within the university setting. One significant marker of the tension and transformation in Bavinck's thought is *Philosophy of Revelation* (1908).

Contrary to the image of Bavinck portrayed by some Bavinck scholars, which suggests that Bavinck's views were both orthodox and consistently maintained, there were significant differences and shifts in Bavinck's views on revelation between *RD* vol. I (1895) and *Philosophy of Revelation*. In *RD* vol.1, Bavinck clearly stated that revelation "is not a philosophical but a religious category."⁴⁷ However, in *Philosophy of Revelation*,

⁴⁷ *RD*, 1:299.

Bavinck revised his earlier position, adopting a more expansive perspective on the concept of revelation. This shift reflected a deeper and more inclusive understanding of how revelation occurs and its implications.⁴⁸

Bolt draws our attention to the title of the book in question, stating that, “it is not a theology of *revelation* but a *philosophy* of revelation. And Bavinck does not begin with biblical revelation, with a discussion of the various modes of revelation...but rather with the ‘idea’ of revelation...the idea of a philosophy of revelation.”⁴⁹ Bolt observes Bavinck’s attempt to renegotiate the relationship between philosophy and revelation within a modern context, noting that, “Bavinck wrestles with the mutuality and tension between revelation and philosophy and concludes that the fact of human self-consciousness is a demonstration that God reveal himself.”⁵⁰

This shift also marks Bavinck’s opposition to some paradigms in traditional theology, as he states that, “the old theology constructed revelation after a quite external and mechanical fashion, and too readily identified it with Scripture. Our eyes are nowadays being more and more opened to the fact that revelation in many ways is historically and psychologically ‘mediated’.”⁵¹ In this sentence, Bavinck diverges from critiquing theologies such as Catholicism and Lutheranism, and also includes the need for the Reformed tradition’s own paradigm to be revised and expanded to encompass contemporary historical and psychological research.

⁴⁸ *PoR*, 21. The specific details will be discussed in section 2.4.

⁴⁹ Bolt, “An Opportunity Lost and Regained,” 82. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Bolt, “An Opportunity Lost and Regained,” 83.

⁵¹ *PoR*, 21.

According to Bolt, this significant shift in Bavinck's thought. First, Bavinck extends the discussion of revelation and epistemology beyond the scope of traditional theology; second, Bavinck incorporates terms such as "self-consciousness" into his scheme. Moreover, George Harinck attributes Bavinck's ideas to the influence of Lodewijk W. E. Rauwenhoff (1828-89)'s *Wijsbegeerte van den godsdienst (Philosophy of Religion)*, which aimed to address "how to implement the supernatural worldview in modern culture."⁵² However, as I previously argued in rejecting Mattson and Eglinton, Bavinck's perspective is also influenced by idealism, particularly Schelling's philosophy of revelation. Furthermore, Bolt highlights the two features of Bavinck's thought that are characteristic of Schelling and German idealism.

First, continuing the comparison between Bavinck and Schelling, it is worth noting that Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation* demonstrates an intellectual affinity and engagement with Schelling's idea, and it can even be argued that this theme originates from Schelling. It is not a case of cherry-picking similarities between the two in order to prove Schelling's influence on Bavinck. Instead, substantial evidence supports this connection. While religious philosophy books were widespread in the 18th and 19th centuries,⁵³ Schelling was the first to deliver a series of lectures titled "*Philosophy der Offenbarung*" in 1842-44.⁵⁴ Bavinck not only adopted Schelling's lecture title and format but also referred to and cited Schelling's book as supporting source for his own

⁵² Harinck, "Why Was Bavinck in Need of a Philosophy of Revelation?," 40.

⁵³ Like Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1821-1831).

⁵⁴ Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 326.

arguments.⁵⁵ Following Schelling's pioneering use of the title *Philosophy of Revelation*, almost no one except Bavinck continued to use this title. Even during Bavinck's day, revelation and philosophy were commonly regarded as mutually exclusive fields within the European intellectual context. Schelling addressed this situation, noting, "In modern times, most people understand philosophy as a pure reason or purely rational science purely rational.... The philosophy of revelation, as most understand it, is an attempt to reduce revealed religion to pure reason truths.... In fact, the opposite is true,... without revelation, people would be in entire ignorance."⁵⁶ Bavinck not only primarily references Schelling's book in his first lecture "The Idea of Philosophy of Revelation," but also directly uses Schelling's perspectives to interpret the concept of revelation, "it makes known to us—the fixed, unalterable will of God to rescue the world and save sinners... this will is the secret of revelation. In creation, God manifests the power of his mind; in revelation, which has redemption for its center, he discloses to us the greatness of his heart."⁵⁷ Even without referencing any other theologians or philosophers, Bavinck not only cites Schelling's interpretation of the concept of revelation from *Philosophy der Offenbarung* as his own definition of revelation, but also writes in the same footnote, "For the conception of revelation, which it is impossible to unfold in these lectures, reference may be made to the author's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd ed., I, 291ff...." Bavinck's agreement with Schelling's interpretation of revelation is evident. By only

⁵⁵ *PoR*, 9n18; 22n60; 23n61; 230n45; It is important to note that the English edition of *PoR* (2018) erroneously cites *Sämtliche Werke* vol. XIII and XIV as *Sämtliche Werke*, vol.II. This error should be corrected to accurately reflect the appropriate source material from Schelling's work.

⁵⁶ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 4.

⁵⁷ *PoR*, 23.

citing Schelling's words and the concept from his own *Reformed Dogmatics* within the limited space, Bavinck further emphasizes the significant influence of Schelling on his concept of revelation.

Bavinck mentions Schelling's view on revelation in other parts of *Philosophy of Revelation* and even has passages strikingly similar to Schelling's without referencing Schelling's name. In addition to the examples already discussed, there are several others. For example, Bavinck's examination of the relationship between various religions and Christianity aligns with Schelling's perspective.⁵⁸ After critiquing older theology, Bavinck asserts that the meaning of revelation, including special revelation, must be understood within the context of universal human history, particularly among different religions. Unlike Barth, Bavinck no longer regards other religions as false religions opposed to Christianity and does not consider all religions to be illusory. Rather, religion represents the revelation of God's knowability, and it "is necessary because of the peculiarity of human nature; and it is universal, as is apparent from the history of the human race and all the peoples."⁵⁹ Regarding the origin of religion, Bavinck concurs with Schelling's view that history cannot enable us to trace the origin of religion, because "all beginnings, said Schelling, are from darkness to light."⁶⁰

In fact, Bavinck's discussion on religion and Christianity draw heavily from Schelling's book of the same title. In his later work, when Schelling addresses Christianity (philosophy of revelation) and various religions (philosophy of mythology),

⁵⁸ In the subsequent section, I will give some examples, see footnote 60, 61-62, etc.

⁵⁹ *PoR*, 133.

⁶⁰ *PoR*, 131. As in other parts, no specific references are provided when discussing Schelling, but we can find this view in Schelling's *Philosophie der Offenbarung* in *Sämtliche Werke* XIII, 187.

he argues that Christianity is the true religion and that other religions are not diametrically opposed, and that they all contain supernatural elements. Various religions are not entirely incorrect, but some elements are inverted. The concept of “revelation” unveils the initially concealed state, and God reveals himself.⁶¹ Bavinck refers to this when he states that religions is the revelation of God’s knowableness.⁶² And he follows Schelling’s view that if the reality of other religions is not recognized, then the reality of Christianity itself cannot be ensured.⁶³ When Schelling argues, “without revelation, people know nothing of the object of revelation.”⁶⁴ Bavinck not only repeats this point but, like Schelling, indicates that revelation was present among all humanity in natural religion before Abraham.⁶⁵ In *RD* vol. 1, Bavinck also cites Schelling’s *Philosophie der Mythologie* to support his argument, that is, “Revelation is religion’s external principle of knowing” and religion is “essentially a part of human nature.”⁶⁶

Second, Schelling’s influence on Bavinck’s idea of revelation is evident throughout his work. In Bavinck’s *Philosophy of Revelation*, alongside themes directly derived from Schelling’s work of the same title, even in certain passages where explicit citations are absent, one can discern traces of Schelling’s influence. Due to space constraints, I will only list a few examples.

⁶¹ *Sämtliche Werke* XIII, 181-88.

⁶² *PoR*, 131.

⁶³ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV,20; and *PoR*, 133.

⁶⁴ *PoR*, 136; *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 4-5.

⁶⁵ *PoR*, 155; also see *Sämtliche Werke* vol.XIII,184-97.

⁶⁶ *RD*, 1:277-78.

When Schelling discusses the gradual process of revelation from mythology and natural religion, he points out the essential content of Christianity is fundamentally the person of Christ. The primary and most important theme of the philosophy of revelation is to grasp the person of Christ, “Christ is not, as people commonly say, a teacher, nor the founder of Christianity; Christ is the content of Christianity itself.”⁶⁷ Bavinck makes a similar statement at the end of his *Philosophy of Revelation*, “Christ is not the founder of Christianity, nor the first confessor of it, nor the first Christian. But he is Christianity itself, in its preparation, fulfilment, and consummation.”⁶⁸

Another example is that Schelling, in discussing that God is the content and the real subject of revelation, states that “the central premise of the philosophy of revelation is not merely an pure idea, which based on a rational, mediated God-human relationship, but rather a real God-human fellowship.”⁶⁹ Bavinck also employs a similar view: “God is the content and the subject, the beginning and the end.... Christianity is religion alone, and therefore the pure religion, the full and complete, indissoluble and eternal, fellowship of God and man.”⁷⁰

Moreover, the later Schelling rejects both speculative-rationalism and mysticism as ways to understand historical revelation and Christianity.⁷¹ Instead, he emphasizes the

⁶⁷ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 35. English version is “A philosophy of revelation is solely about explaining the person of Christ. He is not the teacher or founder but the content of Christianity. His significance is greater than any common historical one.” F. W. J Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation (1841–42) and Related Texts*, trans. by Klaus Ottmann (Washington, DC: Spring Publications, 2020), 300.

⁶⁸ *PoR*, 241.

⁶⁹ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 28. Translated by the author.

⁷⁰ *PoR*, 177-78.

⁷¹ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 33-34.

unique trinitarian and diversity-unity of Christianity,⁷² revealing a truly living God in history through divine economy rather than mechanical understanding of Scripture.⁷³ Schelling himself summarizes this as not a pure theism held by a theist and rationalist; humans do not live in an abstract and universal world but a concrete reality, and thus they come to know a living God through the revelation of divine economy in history. These points already reflect Bavinck's work.⁷⁴

The contention between Veenhof and Eglinton fundamentally hinges on German idealism's imprint on Bavinck's thought. However, both Veenhof's study and Pass's recent research have thoroughly discussed Schelling's influence on Bavinck's thought,⁷⁵ particularly on organicism. In the above discussion, I have further supplemented this by showing that in Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation*, he not only imitates Schelling in title but also cites Schelling's views as support for his own. Based on my reading of Bavinck's works above, Bavinck's texts suggest a discernible influence from German idealism, particularly Schelling. The origin of Bavinck's thought, especially his organicism, aren't mutually exclusive, or a binary origin. The diverse facets highlighted by both sides in Bavinck's oeuvre attest to Bavinck's thought's integrative complexity. This nuanced synthesis becomes even more illustrated in his doctrine of revelation, as will be elaborated in the ensuing discussion.

⁷² *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 66-70.

⁷³ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 101-02.

⁷⁴ *PoR*, 177-78.

⁷⁵ Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism? Reconsidering the Origins of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif," 56-70.

In the following sections, I will further elaborate on Bavinck's idea of revelation. I argue that the emphasis on the organicism of Bavinck's idea of revelation shares with Pannenberg's totality of revelation, which are still part of rooted in German idealism. This connection highlights the enduring influence of German idealism on Bavinck's work and serves as a reminder of the complex interplay between philosophical movements and theological thought in the development of Bavinck's doctrine of revelation.

2.2.4 General and Special Revelation

In *RD* vol.1, Bavinck contends that if revelation discloses God's action and the divine Word, then all revelation is supernatural, and mediate.⁷⁶ This point of convergence in their views is shared by Bavinck and Pannenberg. Bavinck argues that, in the strict sense, due to the finite cannot comprehend the infinite (*finitum non est capax infiniti*), all revelation is God's self-revelation, requiring some mediate means to be understood by humans. He says, "no creature can see or understand God as he is and as he speaks in himself. Revelation therefore is always an act of grace....All revelation is anthropomorphic, a kind of humanization of God. It always occurs in certain forms, in specific modes."⁷⁷

Although Bavinck remains cautious, he still follows the conventional categorization in his *RD* vol.1, distinguishing between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is God's common grace, manifesting God's attributes to all people through nature and history. However, this category of revelation is insufficient, as

⁷⁶ *RD*, 1:302-07.

⁷⁷ *RD*, 1:310.

it does not fully reveal God's grace, and the message it discloses about God may be uncertain or even erroneous.⁷⁸ Although general revelation primarily unveils God's law,⁷⁹ this does not deny the presence of elements of truth and goodness in non-Christian religions. Rather, these elements serves as points of contact between Christians and non-Christians. In Bavinck's view, "they have a common basis with non-Christians...in general revelation they have a point of contact with all those who bear the name 'human'."⁸⁰

Despite adhering to the dogmatic convention of initially discussing the theme of general revelation, Bavinck's real emphasis is on the notion that "general revelation can be understood only in the light of special revelation."⁸¹ According to Bavinck, the distinction between general and special revelation does not lie in their supernatural characteristics but rather in their relationship with special grace, which is "salvific revelation and consequently casts the subject and the means, the content and the purpose of revelation, into another form."⁸² While general revelation indicates the deity of the same God, however, only special revelation unveils the Triune God "who ever more clearly makes himself known in his personal distinctions."⁸³

⁷⁸ *RD*, 1:313.

⁷⁹ *RD*, 1:350.

⁸⁰ *RD*, 1:321.

⁸¹ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 132.

⁸² *RD*, 1:342.

⁸³ *RD*, 1:342.

Both general and special revelation are actions of God's free will, but Bavinck highlights the soteriological character of special revelation. This revelation uses special means, such as theophany, prophecy, and miracle, ultimately pointing to Christ and revealing more of God's grace. It aims to enable individuals to "accept the grace of God by faith in Christ, or, in case of impenitence, receive a more severe judgment."⁸⁴

Moreover, it is worth noting that Bavinck opposes the mode in older Reformed dogmatics of equating special revelation solely with the Scripture. He does not separate revelation from the Scripture; instead, he contends that "divine inspiration is an element *in* revelation," which addresses the relationship between human subjectivity and revelation. This new perspective prompts him to reevaluate the concept of revelation from an epistemological standpoint.⁸⁵

2.2.5 Subjective and Objective Revelations

Bavinck not only continues the orthodox dogmatics of dividing revelation into general and special revelation but is also influenced by post-Kantian philosophy and theology. Instead of adhering to traditional (Bavinck calls "older") doctrine of revelation, he differentiates revelation into objective and subjective categories.⁸⁶ Then Bavinck points out a theological trend under the influence of modern thought, which focuses more on "*how* revelation has come about, than in the question *what* the content of revelation

⁸⁴ *RD*, 1:350.

⁸⁵ *RD*, 1:382.

⁸⁶ This central theme underscores at least some subtle differences in Bavinck's thought from older theology (or the older Reformed tradition). But this aspect is notably absent in the studies of Eglinton and Mattson, who more emphasize Bavinck's alignment with the Reformed heritage, when discussing Bavinck's idea of revelation.

is.”⁸⁷ Bavinck acknowledges that both questions must be considered when understanding revelation and believes that, compared to the older theology, more attention should be paid to historical and psychological mediation. The later psychological perspective implies the subjective revelation in Bavinck’s idea.

In nature and history, the manifestation of God’s actions is objective revelation, including God’s words and deeds. Objective revelation is external and objective, and it is the external principle knowledge of religion (*principium cognoscendi externum*). Objective revelation is not only manifested in events of nature and history but also in words and communication of truth. Bavinck critiques that “the earlier view, which held that revelation consisted only in the communication of doctrine, was one sided; but no less one-sided is the view that says that it consists only in the communication of power and life.”⁸⁸ Thus, Bavinck distinguishes between objective and subjective revelation to correct the older theology’s simplistic emphasis on objective revelation and reduction to Scripture. This point also shows that Bavinck is not merely adhering to old theological tradition but integrating new perspectives and traditions to better understand the idea of revelation.

Subjective revelation, according to Bavinck, is an internal and subjective aspect, which he refers to as internal principle of that knowledge (*principium cognoscendi externum*). He uses a metaphor to emphasize the inseparability of subjective and objective revelations: “the two principles are most intimately related, as light is to the

⁸⁷ *PoR*, 21. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁸ *RD*, 1:345.

human eye and as intelligent design in the world is to human reason.”⁸⁹ It implies that objective revelation, manifested by God in nature and history, is not a ready-made system, and it “must be completed in subjective illumination, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁰ Subjective revelation serves as a complement to objective revelation, and both are indispensable. According to Bavinck, “an objective revelation in Christ is not sufficient, but there needs to be added a working of the Spirit in order that human beings may acknowledge and accept that revelation of God and thereby become the image of the Son.”⁹¹ He is evidently influenced by Kantian and post-Kantian epistemology of subject-objective, asserting that “just as in the sciences the subject must correspond to the object, and in religion subjective religion must answer to objective religion, so external and objective revelation demands an internal revelation in the subject.”⁹²

Bavinck emphasizes the third means of revelation, namely the subjective aspect of human consciousness, which diverges from traditional doctrine of revelation that previously emphasized only two ways: nature and history. Bavinck claims that the Holy Spirit’s work “is subjectively necessary in human beings to bring them to saving faith in Christ, can in a broad sense also be called a revelation.”⁹³ Moreover, Bavinck categorizes the “prophetic and apostolic inspiration by the Holy Spirit” in the Scripture as objective revelation, while subjective revelation embodies “a new light had dawned in the heart of

⁸⁹ *RD*, 1:279.

⁹⁰ *RD*, 1:60.

⁹¹ *RD*, 1:347.

⁹² *RD*, 1:347-48.

⁹³ *RD*, 1:348.

the believer about himself and about Christ, about God and the world...,” but subjective revelation “is not a revelation in the sense that it adds a new element to objective revelation.”⁹⁴

As E. P. Heideman argues that Bavinck reinterprets the notion of revelation through the lens of subject-object epistemology after Kant.⁹⁵ In this context, Bavinck identifies general revelation and special revelation as objective phenomena that encompass both objective and subjective revelations. General and special revelation are “primarily objective” encompassing “the revelation that occurs in the consciousness of prophets and apostles by addressive and interior speech....”⁹⁶ General and special revelation also embody “a subjective revelation, which in a broad sense can be called revelation but for the sake of clarity can be better described as illumination.”⁹⁷ In general revelation, subjective revelation is operation by the Logos or the Spirit of God, and “is that conscious and free act of God by which, by means of nature and history...he makes himself known...to fallen human beings...in order that they should turn to him....”⁹⁸; in special revelation, the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ illuminates individuals’ intellect, conscience, heart and mind, allowing them to apprehend grace and the gospel.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ *RD*, 1:348.

⁹⁵ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 146-47.

⁹⁶ *RD*, 1:350.

⁹⁷ *RD*, 1:350.

⁹⁸ *RD*, 1:350.

⁹⁹ *RD*, 1:350-51.

Significantly, Bavinck considers the consciousness of inspiration in the Scripture as the objective event rather than subjective consciousness, thus it is an objective revelation. Rather, believer's comprehension of revelation serves as a subjective response, namely, an subjective revelation. He views the subjective revelation as a receptive organ for God's external and objective revelation.¹⁰⁰ As a result, Bavinck differentiates between these two consciousness, which resembles Pannenberg's perspective to be discussed later.

In contrast to the mechanistic perspective on revelation in the "older" theology in Bavinck's sense, Bavinck's distinction between subjective and objective revelations is a step forward in emphasizing the revelation is not a one-time and completed event but rather a progressing and ongoing process until now. Although general revelation still operates today, and objective special revelation occurred in the past, "it is and remains present to all in Scripture."¹⁰¹ Bavinck says,

objective and subjective revelation, in a general as well as a special sense, are carried forward by the witness of the Spirit throughout the centuries until in the final manifestation of Christ they will have attained their end. The objective special revelation was completed with the first coming of Christ; at his second coming, its full effect in the history of humankind will be completed.¹⁰²

In this statement, Bavinck emphasized that the subjective revelation is the condition of the enduring revelation event, that is, the Holy Spirit continues to influence on human consciousness. Revelation as events and words are not solely confined to historical occurrences but also encompasses God's ongoing work of illuminating the mind. Thus, "it was not only 'God-breathed' at the time it was written; it is 'God-breathing'."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ *RD*, 1:342-44.

¹⁰¹ *RD*, 1:351.

¹⁰² *RD*, 1:351.

¹⁰³ *RD*, 1:385.

Meanwhile, Bavinck refrains from serving subjective and objective revelations, instead understanding them as an inseparable organic unity between subject and object.

2.2.6 Bavinck on the Organic Unity and Totality of Revelation

According to Bavinck, if revelation discloses the knowledge of God from God's self-manifestation, it must not be contradictory; therefore, revelation must constitute an organic unity.¹⁰⁴ To reconcile general and special revelation, along with subjective and objective revelation, Bavinck proposes an organic and holistic framework, which opposes the mechanistic view prevalent in the old theology.

In Bavinck's view, the organic nature of revelation implies its totality. Primarily, due to the universality of revelation, God's self-revelation is "in all the works of his hands, in all of nature, in all of history, in the totality of the universe." Bavinck further clarifies that "this view does not deny that there are a variety of differences in the revelation of these all-encompassing works of God; the unity includes great and rich diversity."¹⁰⁵ As Bavinck later elaborates in *Philosophy of Revelation*, the division of revelation into general and special revelation, as found in the old theology, has generated numerous issues, including neglecting the close relationship between the two and producing an incomplete understanding of revelation. He says, "in former time Christian theology drew the distinction between special and general revelation. But it never wholly thought through this distinction, nor fully made clear its rich significance for the whole of

¹⁰⁴ *RD*, 1:44.

¹⁰⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, edited by John Bolt, translated by Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 30.

human life.”¹⁰⁶ Bavinck asserts that the two aspects of revelation are inseparable: “general revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible.”¹⁰⁷

Second, similar to Pannenberg’s idea of revelation I will discuss, Bavinck proposes a holistic approach to counter mechanistic interpretations of revelation, arguing that revelation must be comprehended within an organic and totality scheme. He states, “The whole cannot be explained in an atomistic manner by a combination of its parts; but on the contrary the parts must be conceived in an organic way by unfolding the totality. Behind the particular lies the general, and the whole precedes the parts.”¹⁰⁸ According to Zuckert, this depiction of the relationship between the whole and its parts is a hallmark of German idealism, and the whole “determines the particular not only abstractly...but with respect to its many, diverse, particular characteristic in systematic interrelation with one another.”¹⁰⁹

Lastly, given the organic totality of revelation and the epistemic limitations of humans as recipients of subjective revelation, a criterion for discerning genuine revelation becomes indispensable. Bavinck, in his quest to identify authentic revelation, does not adopt a fideistic approach. While he believes that scientific and positivist methods are incapable of verifying revelation, he does outline conditions for validating revelation, stating that revelation “must furnish us the concept and indicate to us the

¹⁰⁶ *PoR*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ *PoR*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ *PoR*, 174.

¹⁰⁹ Zuckert, “Organism and System in German Idealism,” 276.

criterion we have to apply in our study of religions and revelation.”¹¹⁰ In other words, only revelation can be used as the criterion of verifying revelation. Bavinck presents a method resembling Pannenberg’s approach to examining revelation:

This method which proceeds from the premise of faith and is actually applied by everyone, at once affords those who take their position in the Christian faith the immense advantage that they do not a priori establish by their own thinking what revelation is. Instead they seek the answer to that question in the words and facts that in Christianity present themselves as constituents of revelation and are recorded in Holy Scripture. They proceed to do their work positively, not speculatively. They do not dictate to God whether and how he may reveal himself but listen to what God himself has to say on that matter.¹¹¹

This passage demonstrates how Bavinck closely connects object revelation and subject revelation with faith. Bavinck’s organic revelation encompasses not only the content and process of revelation but also the subjective cognition and consciousness of individual as an integral part of the whole. But this cognition has an aspect of objective reality rather than the individual speculative reasoning. By integrating both objective and subjective aspects of revelation, Bavinck presents a comprehensive and holistic understanding of how God reveals Himself to humanity and how humans perceive and respond to that revelation through their subjective consciousness.

In the previous discussion of Bavinck’s views, I initially compared Veenhof’s interpretation with those of Mattson and Eglinton regarding Bavinck’s organicism. While Veenhof underscored the influence of German idealism on Bavinck, both Eglinton and Mattson predominantly situated Bavinck within the Reformed tradition. On one side, Mattson and Eglinton’s emphasis on “orthodoxy” offsets the claims that accentuate

¹¹⁰ *RD*, 1:229.

¹¹¹ *RD*, 1:300.

Bavinck's irreconcilable "modernity." On the other side, Mattson and Eglinton perhaps overemphasize the disparities between their own perspective and that of Veenhof, overlooking the fact that Veenhof's work does not categorically deny the traditional origins of Bavinck's organicism. Instead, Veenhof merely contends that this is not the sole source of Bavinck's thought. Meanwhile, Mattson and Eglinton may underestimate certain divergences in Bavinck's motif, especially in the doctrine of revelation when compared to the older theological traditions. They seem to underestimate elements that Bavinck could have imbibed from German idealism, especially from Schelling. I am inclined to argue that Bavinck's thought embodies both the markings of his traditional features and clear imprints of his era, especially the influence of German idealism. Moreover, Bavinck's concept of revelation was not only influenced by Idealism, but he also altered the category of his concept of revelation from *RD* vol.1 to *Philosophy of Revelation*.

2.3 Pannenberg on Revelation

In this section, I will discuss Pannenberg's idea of revelation and compare it to Bavinck's views. The numerous similarities and shared ideas between Pannenberg and Bavinck in their ideas of revelation further demonstrate that, like Pannenberg, Bavinck was also shaped by the context of idealism and the challenges posed by modernity.

2.3.1 Literature Review

Pannenberg's idea of revelation is considered by scholars to provide an appropriate perspective for understanding in the modern context. According to Theodore

James Whapham, Pannenberg opposes the notion of viewing revelation primarily as an inner experience, or the feeling of absolute dependence, which has been prevalent since Schleiermacher. These retreats from rationality to subjectivism were deemed unsuccessful in modern society.¹¹² Frank Tupper also points out that Pannenberg's emphasis on God's self-revelation was influenced by Hegelian and Barth's thoughts, linking Hegel's philosophy of history and Barth's theology of revelation as a context for understanding Pannenberg's concept of revelation.¹¹³

While Pannenberg scholars harbor certain critiques of his theology of revelation, they unanimously recognize the profound significance within Pannenberg's theological framework. For example, even Avery Dulles criticizes Pannenberg's concept of revelation for not providing clear terminology and definitions in distinguishing between direct and indirect revelation; he still considers Pannenberg's theology of revelation to be "described as a prophetic against certain aberrations that have appeared in modern Protestantism..."¹¹⁴ and described it as "original, challenging, coherent, and profound."¹¹⁵

While most Pannenberg scholars generally recognized the totality characteristic of Pannenberg's revelation, Timothy Bradshaw noted that Pannenberg's concept of totality

¹¹² Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 16.

¹¹³ Frank Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 81-82.

¹¹⁴ Avery Dulles, "Pannenberg on Revelation and Faith," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 169.

¹¹⁵ Dulles, "Pannenberg on Revelation and Faith," 176.

is organically linked to his Trinitarian theology.¹¹⁶ This characteristic bears striking resemblances to Bavinck's organicism and his theology. According to Bradshaw, Pannenberg "seeks to reground the Trinity, to reintegrate it into an organic connection with finite reality."¹¹⁷ It is precisely because of Pannenberg's organicism that he corrects the cold, abstract, and philosophical exteriority of God to the world, and reveals a living, organic, and holistic revelation.¹¹⁸

Apart from Bolt's observation that Bavinck's *Philosophy of Revelation* and Pannenberg's philosophical theology share a certain common ground and can serve as a basis for dialogue,¹¹⁹ no research has explored their potential shared intellectual origins. In discussing Pannenberg's idea of revelation, I will expand on Bradshaw's insight that Pannenberg understands revelation through a lens of totality and organicity. This will also demonstrate that Bavinck and Pannenberg share some certain metaphysical foundations in their ideas on revelation, as conjectured by Bolt.

2.3.2 The Historical Context of Pannenberg's Idea of Revelation

Pannenberg's idea of revelation is primarily based on a critical reflection of modern theological doctrine of revelation. From Pannenberg's characterization of the theological development from ancient age to the nineteenth century, we can also find Bavinck's view of revelation bearing the marks of his era.

¹¹⁶ Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 138.

¹¹⁷ Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 157.

¹¹⁸ Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 187.

¹¹⁹ Bolt, "Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg," 103-14.

First, both Pannenberg and the later Bavinck place Christianity as a religion among many, understanding the uniqueness of Christianity within the context multiple religions. They no longer regard various religions as false, opposing Christianity. Instead, within the plurality of religions, the idea of revelation “has become a description of the result of the self-demonstration of God in the process of historical experience.”¹²⁰ Therefore, Pannenberg opposes view like Barth’s, which set Christianity and other religions, as well as revelation and religion, in opposition.

Second, Pannenberg explains how the concept of revelation is constructed and developed in history. Because the biblical ideas of revelation is the multiplicity, the concept of revelation often lacks clear definition in the history of theological thought. According to Pannenberg, “the concept of revelation never had for the fathers any basic function in the systematic presentation of Christian doctrine.”¹²¹ It was not until the Middle Ages and the Reformation that “the concept of revelation acquired a basic theological function in close connection with the authority of scripture.”¹²²

Due to the Enlightenment’s critique of Scripture and the church doctrines, contemplating revelation could no longer “freely to use them as authorities for divine revelation as medieval theology and the older Protestant theology did, and in their historical situation could rightly do.”¹²³ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestant theology delved more deeply into the concept of revelation, which

¹²⁰ *ST*, 1:171.

¹²¹ *ST*, 1:218.

¹²² *ST*, 1:219.

¹²³ *ST*, 1:26.

involved “the differentiating and interrelating of an out revelation, of a public manifestation of God in the events of history, and of inspiration as the effect and interpretation of these events in the subjectivity of the biblical witness.”¹²⁴ Here, Pannenberg considers that the understanding of revelation as an external objective revelation and an internal subjective revelation, like Bavinck’s categories of revelation, only became a perspective and terminology for understanding revelation after the nineteenth century under the influence of Kant, Fichte and other idealists. During that time, revelation was thus understood as both an external and historical revelation and an internal inspiration. In revelation, God is not only the subject, “but also as its exclusive content and theme.”¹²⁵ Pannenberg argues that for the concept of God’s self-revelation, while its origins could be traced back to Philo in the intellectual history, this motif’s trajectory spans from patristic theology to Reformation, the specific term “self-revelation of God” during these periods, was “never in the exclusive sense that God himself is the only theme of the act of revelation.”¹²⁶

Pannenberg points out “only in the philosophy of German idealism do we first find the thought of the self-revelation of God in the sense of the strict identity of subject and content.”¹²⁷ From the early Schelling (1800), the idea emerged that “the revelation of the Absolute which can only reveal itself everywhere,” which was further clarified in Hegel’s system. In Pannenberg’s view, these thoughts, influenced by Philipp Marheineke

¹²⁴ *ST*, 1:221.

¹²⁵ *ST*, 1:222.

¹²⁶ *ST*, 1:222.

¹²⁷ *ST*, 1:222-23.

(1780-1846), were adopted by Karl Barth, who “took over this linking of the thought of God’s self-revelation with that of its uniqueness,” using it to oppose “all ideas of a second source of the knowledge of God.”¹²⁸ If Pannenberg’s claim is correct, that the term “self-revelation of God” finds its origins in German idealism, it indirectly substantiates a point raised in discussions about Bavinck, namely, that Bavinck’s frequent usage of the concept “self-revelation of God” is, at least in part, influenced or derived from German idealism.

For Pannenberg, two factors contributed to the self-revelation as the central issue in theology and the idealistic philosophy of religion since the nineteenth century: first, the decay of the authority of Scripture in the older Protestant doctrine, which considers revelation as divine inspiration; and second, “the decay of the natural theology of the Enlightenment.”¹²⁹ Pannenberg comments,

Verification of the reality of God could thus come only in two ways, or in a combination of the two, namely, by self-originating metaphysical reflection which deals with the totality of human experience in the process of history, including human alienation from assurance of God, or by independent religious experience that points to God as its basis. Either way the concept of God’s revelation as his self-revelation had to be the basis of the assertion of his reality.¹³⁰

Here, Pannenberg provides the context of intellectual history that revelation as God’s self-revelation in the modern time, as well as the reason Pannenberg’s proposal of revelation as history. For modern theology, when addressing religious experience as the means of verifying God’s existence, it must avoid reducing such experience to “merely a

¹²⁸ *ST*, 1:223.

¹²⁹ *ST*, 1:224.

¹³⁰ *ST*, 1:224.

matter of human subjectivity.” Consequently, the appeal must be to God’s external and public manifestation as historical events.¹³¹

Similar to Bavinck, Pannenberg also points out that understanding revelation as history does not mean positing an opposition between the Word of God and history, but rather integrating the two organically. Furthermore, Pannenberg differentiates his theological approach from idealistic Hegelianism by asserting that “in such a way that the idealistic view of history undergoes decisive correction by the thought of the anticipation of the totality of history in the light of its end as we find this in the eschatological thrust of the teaching and work of Jesus.”¹³²

2.3.3 Indirect and Direct Revelation

Pannenberg, when revisiting his early propositions on revelation as history, presented seven theses as a challenge to the prevalent *dialectical* Theology. He criticized Barth and Bultmann, etc., for their disregard for God’s activity in the events of history,¹³³ arguing that such an oversight seemed “to call into question the basic function of the Word of God for theology, and there with the common basis of every form of Dialectical Theology.”¹³⁴

¹³¹ *ST*, 1:224.

¹³² *ST*, 1:229.

¹³³ Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 7.

¹³⁴ *ST*, 1:228.

In the first three of these theses, Pannenberg underscores the characteristics of God's self-revelation as indirect, totality and universal.¹³⁵ These attributes set his theory apart from the school of redemptive history represented by scholars such as Oscar Cullman and Paul Althaus. Pannenberg contends that their approach embodies a dualism that failed to show revelation and history are connected. As Carl E. Braaten articulates in "Revelation as History," the term "*as*" conveys "the ontology of historical revelation....Revelation comes not merely *in* or through history but as history. Revelation does not exist above history, entering it from the outside as a suprahistorical substance."¹³⁶

Both Pannenberg and Bavinck concur that from human beings' side, the self-revelation of God is indirect. According to Pannenberg, "Self-revelation in the strict sense is only present where the medium through which God makes himself known is not something alien to himself, brings with it no dimming of the divine light."¹³⁷ As previously analyzed, Bavinck argues that due to humanity's finitude and inability to grasp the infinitude of God, there is an inherent need for God's self-revelation to serve as an mediate entity. Pannenberg concurs with Bavinck on this point. In both his early and later works, Pannenberg consistently underscores that the specific term "self-revelation of

¹³⁵ These are: 1. The self-revelation of God in the biblical witnesses is not of a direct type in the sense of a theophany, but is indirect and brought about by means of the historical acts of God; 2. Revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revelation history; 3. In distinction from special manifestations of the deity, the historical revelation is open to anyone who has eyes to see. It has a universal character. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed. *Revelation as History*, translated by David Granskou (London: Collier Macmillan, 1968), 125-35.

¹³⁶ Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 27. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus-God and Man*, trans. by Lewi L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 129-30.

God” has its roots in idealism. In his early work, he says, “the idea of an indirect self-revelation of God through the history in which God is active is not new. It has its source in German idealism, as does the exclusive conception of revelation as self-revelation.”¹³⁸

According to Pannenberg, human recognition of God’s self-revelation cannot exist without any mediation. In other words, “the self-revelation of God in the biblical witnesses is not of a direct type in the sense of a theophany, but is indirect and brought about by means of the history acts of God.”¹³⁹ This viewpoint has been a subject of criticism, particularly for the perceived lack of clarity in delineating between the concepts of “direct” and “indirect” revelation.¹⁴⁰ However, from Pannenberg’s perspective, humanity’s understanding that God’s self-revelation is not a once and for all accomplishment but progresses through the whole of history. Given human finitude, God manifests Himself through events in the whole of history, reminiscent of the doctrine of accommodation. To elucidate this, Pannenberg differentiates between the concepts of direct and indirect revelation. For the concept of direct revelation, the content is the revealer, namely, God Himself. Instead, in indirect revelation, “the content first reveals its actual meaning by being considered from another perspective...it always has direct communication as its basis, but takes this into a new perspective.”¹⁴¹ Contrary to Bavinck’s explanation of models of revelation, Pannenberg contends that the distinction between direct and indirect revelation, is not “dependent on whether the communication

¹³⁸ *RasH*, 19.

¹³⁹ *RasH*, 125.

¹⁴⁰ Dulles, “Pannenberg on Revelation and Faith,” 176.

¹⁴¹ *RasH*, 14.

requires a mediator or not.”¹⁴² Rather, Pannenberg differentiates these revelation types from the limitation of the recipients. While God is the originator of all revelation, each singular event “is taken to be God’s activity illuminates the being of God only in a partial way.”¹⁴³ Thus, the concept of indirect revelation suggests that finite humans come to recognize God through a process of reflective activity for various historical events. The deeper implication is that God’s revelation is not yet finalized; instead, it will only be full unveiled at the end of the world, presenting the complete essence of God’s revelation.

Diverging from Bavinck, Pannenberg further grounds his comprehension in the multiplied meanings of the Word of God in the Scripture. He argues that,

When we think of God’s self-revelation we have to think of it as mediated by his action, for that is always the content of biblical ideas of the Word of God, whether it be God’s action in creation, his historical action as it was intimated in the prophetic word, or the action in Jesus of Nazareth to which the primitive Christian kerygma made reference.¹⁴⁴

In other words, human beings understand God’s self-revelation through God’s actions and events in history, which unveil his divinity. The indirectness of God’s self-revelation crucial for integrating the diverse experiences of revelation and preventing rivalry among them. Moreover, these revelations do not directly expose God himself; rather, these historical events and actions are invariable associated with humanity and the world, not directly but indirectly revealing God’s attributes.

¹⁴² *RasH*, 15.

¹⁴³ *RasH*, 16.

¹⁴⁴ *ST*, 1:243.

Pannenberg also emphasizes another reason for the indirect revelation, stating that “there is knowledge of God only in retrospect of his past action in history.”¹⁴⁵ Similar to the limitation of each revelatory event mentioned above, the basic knowledge of God “does not rest on a single divine action but on a series of divine communication...the knowledge of God that is thereby imparted can stand only at the end of a sequence of revelatory events.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, for Pannenberg, the emphasis on the indirectness of revelation implies not only the knowledge of God needs to be manifested through nature and history. It also suggests that a single event of revelation does not fully unveil God’s self-revelation. Instead, revelation should be perceived as a whole to truly reveal God’s self-revelation, which further connects to the characteristic of revelation as a totality.

2.3.4 Pannenberg on the Universality and Objectivity of Revelation

Pannenberg breaks away from the traditional theological approach that distinguishes revelation as general and special, instead proposing that revelation as history and as Word of God is universal. However, Pannenberg’s thesis 3 of revelation’s universality has been subject to controversy.¹⁴⁷ He acknowledges that “one of the most hotly debated” for his theses is the thesis 3, that is, the historical revelation is objective and universal for all people, and “does not need any supplementary inspired

¹⁴⁵ *ST*, 1:244.

¹⁴⁶ *ST*, 1:244-45.

¹⁴⁷ Dulles, “Pannenberg on Revelation and Faith,” 179-84.

interpretation.”¹⁴⁸ Revelation is entirely public and universal.¹⁴⁹ This implies that Pannenberg rejects the classification of general and special revelation. In his view, once people regard the knowledge of revelation as esoteric, they risk falling into Gnosticism.¹⁵⁰ If the knowledge of revelation is objective, it should not be concealed from some people and disclosed to others, as Barth’s position suggests.

Pannenberg’s emphasis on the objectivity and universality of revelation does not imply that subjective consciousness plays no role in the process of revelation. Although Pannenberg refrains from using the concept of subjective revelation as Bavinck does, his demonstration of the recipients of revelation and his understanding of the revelatory meaning are strikingly similar to Bavinck’s conception of subjective revelation.

Pannenberg contends that in history and nature, the knowledge of revelation is objective and universal. This differs from Bavinck, who considers all of revelation to be supernatural.¹⁵¹ However, Pannenberg does not agree that one can recognize this knowledge simply by reason. He explicitly states, “the knowledge of God’s revelation in the history demonstrating his deity must also be the basis of faith...only the knowledge of God’s revelation can be the foundation of faith...the resulting faith in God that secures participation in salvation.”¹⁵² To counter Schleiermacher and others who view revelation as a subjective religious experience, Pannenberg avoids using the term “subjective

¹⁴⁸ *ST*, 1:249.

¹⁴⁹ *RasH*, 139.

¹⁵⁰ *RasH*, 135.

¹⁵¹ *RasH*, 137.

¹⁵² *RasH*, 138-39.

revelation.” Nevertheless, Pannenberg’s emphasis on understanding revelatory events through faith, particularly the unique revelatory event of Jesus’s resurrection, bears significant resemblance to Bavinck’s use of subjective revelation.¹⁵³

2.3.5 Pannenberg on the Organicity and Totality of Revelation

Pannenberg, in contrast to Bavinck, employs the term “organic” less frequently, which can be attributed to the historical context in which he lived. Bavinck’s frequent use of “organic” was mainly to counter prevailing mechanistic worldview of the nineteenth century.¹⁵⁴ However, for Pannenberg’s time, the mechanistic worldview formed by figures such as Copernicus and Descartes had already crumbled with the development of modern science, particularly quantum physics and relativity theory, which replaced Newton’s physical system.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, Pannenberg often used the term “totality (the whole)” to express the same meaning as “organic,” without the need to emphasize organicism explicitly. Moreover, Pannenberg traces the idea of “history as a totality is God’s revelation,” back to German idealism, particularly Schleiermacher, Schelling, and Hegel.¹⁵⁶

Pannenberg’s totality of revelation explains his emphasis on the indirect nature of revelation, stating that “the one and only God can be revealed in his deity, but only

¹⁵³ Regarding to faith and knowledge, this topic will be further explored in chapter 6.

¹⁵⁴ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 267-68.

¹⁵⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith*, ed. by Ted Peters (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster & John Knox Press, 1993), 51-56.

¹⁵⁶ *RasH*, 7-16.

indirectly out of a totality of all event.”¹⁵⁷ According to Pannenberg, if each of God’s singular and individual actions were understood as revelation, “then there are as many revelations as there are divine acts and occurrences in nature and history.”¹⁵⁸ But this contradicts the strict sense of God’s self-revelation, as self-revelation “is no longer permissible to think of a medium of revelation that is distinct from God himself.”¹⁵⁹ The only way to resolve this contradiction is to understand revelation as the totality of God’s action: “if God is one then that means everything that happens-as his revelation.”¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, if the totality of reality were understood as a static, unchanging relationship as God’s indirect revelation, it would result in a Greek philosophical idea of God and natural theology, according to Pannenberg. In contrast, he concurs with the perspective of German idealism, stating that “the totality of reality in its temporal development is thought of as history and as the self-communication of God.”¹⁶¹

Both “totality” and “organic” can be traced to German idealism, which is indeed the framework through which idealism understands revelation and self-reflection. As motifs representing the relationship between the whole and its parts, these two notions share the same meaning and can be considered as two sides of the same coin. As Bavinck’s organic motif,¹⁶² Pannenberg’s “totality” theme permeates his whole

¹⁵⁷ *RasH*, 141.

¹⁵⁸ *RasH*, 16.

¹⁵⁹ *RasH*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ *RasH*, 16.

¹⁶¹ *RasH*, 16.

¹⁶² The characteristics of Bavinck’s organic motif are discussed in detail in sections 2.1 and 2.2; and Eglinton summarizes the features of this motif as follows: 1. The created order is marked by simultaneous unity and diversity; 2. Unity precedes diversity; 3. The organicism’s shared life is orchestrated by a common idea; 4. The organicism has a drive towards its goal; see footnote 18.

theological system, and shares similar characteristics with Bavinck's "organicism" in addressing the relationship between the whole and the part, as well as unity and diversity.

In discussing the relationship between the whole and its parts, Pannenberg articulates a view very similar to Bavinck's thought:

But neither can the whole be absolute, and therefore it cannot be God—at least not if it, as the whole of its parts, not only itself constitutes the being-as-part of its parts, but conversely is also dependent on the parts whose whole it is. This means that the whole cannot be conceptualized as self-constitutive. As the whole of its parts, it is a unified unity that presupposes some ground of itself as *unifying unity*.¹⁶³

Like Bavinck, Pannenberg also emphasizes that the relationship between the whole and its parts is not a simple mechanical combination but an organic unity characterized by diversity. Pannenberg further points out that it is not enough to simply understand God and the world as a unified whole, which would lead to pantheism.

Rather, he further proposes:

The relationship of God to the world can only be conceived as its creative source under the further condition that the structure of the totality of the world as the whole of its parts is again grounded in God. This structure must be based upon a difference within God, one which typifies the relationship of part and whole but which is not identical with it, for otherwise the life within God would only be a mirror image of the unity of the whole of the world in its parts.¹⁶⁴

In this passage above, it's evident that the exclusive characteristics Eglinton attributes to Bavinck's organicism are also prevalent in Pannenberg's theme of "totality." However, Pannenberg traces the origins of this idea back to German idealism. Moreover, Pannenberg addresses two key aspects in his thought. On the one hand, he highlights the

¹⁶³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, translated by Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 143. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁴ Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, 143-44.

connection between God and the world as the foundation of revelation. It is only through this relationship that the world can become a medium of God's self-revelation; on the other hand, Pannenberg emphasized the notion of "distinction" in his thought, asserting that the world and God are not entirely identical. In fact, Pannenberg already is aware that merely emphasizing the divine transcendence and the difference between God and the world does not fully resolve this issue. Since, Pannenberg introduces the motif of "openness," which serves as corrective to the abstract concept of the totality. According to Pannenberg, "the abstractness of every concept of the whole or of the totality, an abstractness that results from the anticipatory nature of all knowledge of the whole in a world which has not yet been completed and reconciled to the whole."¹⁶⁵ Therefore, revelation as history is a totality. But history remains open and oriented toward the future, with the full manifestation of God's self-revelation only occurring at the end of history. For Pannenberg, the event of revelation as a whole represents an anticipatory fulfillment of God's plan and the complete manifestation of God's revelation in the end of history, "this event, and it alone, can be called the Word of God in the full sense."¹⁶⁶

Pannenberg revises the German idealistic perspective on divine revelation by his motifs of "totality" and "openness," as well as incorporating biblical eschatology, which helped differentiate his views from Hegelianism. He argues that

The reshaping of the idealistic view of universal history by relating it to biblical eschatology, to the end of history as the condition of its totality, made it possible to abandon the restriction of the historical self-demonstration of God to exceptional miraculous events. In the same way it became possible to overcome the antithesis between revelation as manifestation and a supplementary inspiration insofar as the dawning of eschatological reality in the coming and work of Jesus

¹⁶⁵ Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, 152.

¹⁶⁶ *ST*, 1: 257.

implies that the expectation of the final revelation of the deity of God to the whole world that is bound up with the eschatological future of history is already fulfilled in Jesus, although only by way of anticipation.¹⁶⁷

For Hegelian idealists, totality signifies a closed and completed system. In contrast, Pannenberg argues that, while the comprehensive meaning of the future and revelation is manifested in Jesus's life and proclamation, the understanding of revelation in history remains open-ended for those who perceive it. Consequently, revelation warrants anticipation and necessitates rational, reflective verification, which also includes retrospective contemplation of the revelatory events.

According to Pannenberg, in the modern pluralistic world, the challenge for the philosophy of religion and systematic theology lies in discerning a self-manifestation of divine reality. In the face of competing religious claims, doubt arises about whether these deities can be regarded as God's self-revelation. Thus, revelation needs to be examined within historical contexts. However, Pannenberg opposes an empiricist approach, maintaining that authority relies not only on external verification but also on the demands of Christian faith itself.¹⁶⁸ Regarding this issue of whether revelation needs to be verified, Pannenberg and Bavinck indeed reach a consensus again.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the views on revelation of Bavinck and Pannenberg, comparing their respective theological systems. Here are some conclusions:

¹⁶⁷ *ST*, 1: 229.

¹⁶⁸ *ST*, 1: 231.

First, in the section pertaining to Bavinck within this chapter, two divergent viewpoints are expounded upon. On the one hand, Veenhof emphasizes the presence of “modern” facets inherent within Bavinck’s ideas. On the other hand, scholars such as Mattson and Eglinton perceive Bavinck’s intellectual trajectory as a revitalization of reformed tradition, and deny the influence of German idealism. Both perspectives effectively emphasize different aspects of Bavinck’s oeuvre. However, the disparity in the two interpretations of Bavinck’s organicism is not as significant as is suggested by Mattson and Eglinton. A significant divergence between their position and Veenhof’s pertains to the question of whether the distinctive features of Bavinck’s organicism are exclusive to him or if they resonate with elements present in German idealism. I argue that Bavinck’s incorporation and perpetuation of some of elements from the Reformed tradition in his organicism and doctrine of revelation, such continuity does not stick to tradition, unchanging. On the contrary, Bavinck’s thought is imprinted with the prevailing intellectual and cultural climate of his day. As some Bavinck scholars such as Veenhof and Pass claim, Bavinck has assimilated significant elements from German idealism, specifically drawing inspiration from Schelling’s philosophy, thereby infusing novel attributes into his organic motif and doctrine of revelation. Moreover, it is important to note that Bavinck’s understanding of revelation was not fixed or unchanging over the course of his life like Mattson and Eglinton suggest. Rather, it underwent a process of development, gradually broadening its scope from a narrow theological perspective in *RD* vol.1 to encompass philosophical realms in *Philosophy of Revelation*.

Second, upon comparing Bavinck’s organicism with Pannenberg’s theme of “totality,” similar features of Bavinck’s organicism can be discerned in Pannenberg’s

motif. I argue that the aforementioned convergence can be partially ascribed to the reciprocal intellectual indebtedness that both parties have towards the organicism of German idealism.

Third, in the subsequent chapters, I will elucidate the disparities between Bavinck's and Pannenberg's perspectives about the doctrine of revelation. However, in this chapter, I primarily aim to focus on showcase their similarities and consensus. They both emphasize that revelation is the self-revelation of God, indirect revelation, and revelation as a whole and so on. Bavinck's organicism and Pannenberg's motif of totality share similarities in expressing the relationship between the whole and the part, unity and diversity etc. To some extent, these two terms have the same meaning. These similarities and consensus reflect their attempts to consider about theology in response to the challenge of modernity and their common influence from German idealism. However, both Bavinck and Pannenberg have made critical revisions to the legacy of German idealism.

Last but not least, by comparing the views of Bavinck and Pannenberg on revelation, we observe their endeavors to surpass denominational boundaries and pursue a comprehensive, catholic and open theological framework. The commonalities and terminologies within Pannenberg's and Bavinck's ideas differentiate their dogmatics from the "old" theology they contested.

In the next chapter, an investigation will be conducted on the subject of revelation, with a specific focus on the comparative analysis of the theme of natural theology as espoused by Bavinck and Pannenberg.

Chapter 3

Natural Theology

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, a comparison was made between the theoretical frameworks of Bavinck and Pannenberg on their respective doctrines of revelation and theological motifs. However, a comprehensive analysis of the intricate details inherent in the doctrine of revelation was not undertaken. The objective of this chapter is to examine and contrast the perspectives of Bavinck and Pannenberg on the theme of natural theology. This analysis aims to challenge the prevailing stereotype, which posits that both scholars stand in opposition to natural theology. My argument is that these theologians do not categorically reject natural theology. Rather, they clarify the conditions and contexts under which natural theology may be embraced or rejected.

3.1.1 Natural Theology in the Modern Context

In the 1930s, a debate about natural theology between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner became one of the most important theological discussions of the twentieth century. Barth pitted natural theology and a theology of revelation against each other. Positing that there is no touch point between the Word of God and nature, Barth also attributed natural theology to be a root cause for the crisis of modernity, especially as a theological foundation for German churches which had succumbed to the Nazi regime. Karl Barth's arguments brought natural theology into the modern social context. This

debate not only divided Barth and Brunner, but also evolved later in theological literature into a pro or con contest with regard to natural theology.¹ Discussions touched upon issues like nature and grace, natural and revelation theology, common and special revelation, theology and science, and more.²

This has led to the fact that today when scholars support or oppose natural theology, their writings often already contain an assumption of opposing and distinguishing natural theology from a theology of revelation. For example, the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines “natural theology” as “the attempt to establish rational theistic claims through observation of nature and the use of human reason, without recourse to purported special revelation.”³ Another definition is: “Natural theology is a branch of theology that examines the existence and attributes of God... without reliance on special revelation.”⁴ Even among natural-theology-affirming

¹ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

² James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza with Sarah Coakley and James H. Evans, Jr., *Modern Christian Thought*, 79-80; Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 84-85; John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1980* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1981), 281-92, 322-25. Apart from the above literature in the history of ideas, other comprehensive literature on natural theology include: Russell Re Manning, John Hedley Brooke, and Fraser Watts, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For discussions on twentieth-century natural theology, see Charles Taliaferro, “The Project of Natural Theology” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1-21; James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1-20. For the interaction between natural theology, epistemology and cognitive science, see Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

³ Ian A. McFarland et al, eds., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 335.

⁴ De Cruz and De Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology*, 5.

theologians, most of them also include it within the scope of common revelation, as opposed to special revelation.

3.1.2 Why Bavinck and Pannenberg?

Within this context, we are forced to reconsider two foundational issues about natural theology, that is, what is the meaning of “natural theology” and does natural theology still make sense for modern people? In order to answer these questions, I compare how Bavinck and Pannenberg engage with the issues of natural theology. There are several reasons for selecting these two theologians for such a comparative study. First, past research has discussed their respective writings on the topic of natural theology, and some compare their views with other important theologians such as Karl Barth,⁵ but so far no study in directly compares Bavinck and Pannenberg on this issue *per se*.

Second, although Bavinck passed away before the twentieth-century debate on natural theology, his views remain important to the scholarship in this area. For example,

⁵ For recent literature on Bavinck’s views of natural theology, see Richard A. Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” *Bavinck Review* no. 10 (2019): 5-35. In this article, Muller provides a bibliography of literature on Bavinck’s natural theology, especially see pages 6-7. Also see Ximian Xu, “Herman Bavinck’s ‘Yes’ and Karl Barth’s ‘No’: Constructing a Dialectic-in-Organic Approach to the Theology of General Revelation,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 2 (2019): 323-51. Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. by Albert M. Wolters (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2006); Steven J. Duby, “Working with the Grain of Nature: Epistemic Underpinnings for Christian Witness in the Theology of Herman Bavinck,” *Bavinck Review* no. 2 (2012): 60–84; Eduardo J. Echeverria, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: a Catholic Response to Herman Bavinck,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1(2010): 87-116. For research on Pannenberg, see Louis Dupré, “The Dissolution of the Union of Nature and Grace at the Dawn of the Modern Age”, in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques, with an Autobiographical Essay and Response*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 95-121; Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 179-80, 257-58; Rodney D. Holder, “Natural Theology in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, 125-28. It is worth noting that although there is an abundance of literature on Pannenberg, his views on natural theology are scant.

Richard Muller recently claimed that Bavinck’s views on natural theology are different from Ritschl or the neo-orthodox camp, especially that of Karl Barth.⁶ Pannenberg also picks the same target of his critique as the Ritschlian School,⁷ although Pannenberg mainly critiques the view of Karl Barth in this theme.⁸ Just as Rodney D. Holder points out, Pannenberg “represents a stark contrast to Barth and offers considerable scope for natural theology.”⁹

Third, both Bavinck and Pannenberg realize that one important issue has been ignored in the modern-day study of natural theology—whether for or against, scholars have put natural theology and a theology of revelation on opposing ends, while ignoring the fact that the “nature” in “natural theology” has been given different meanings in varying social-historical contexts. One implication is that few scholars engage with how the modern development of science has influenced natural theology.¹⁰ Consequently, their understanding of natural theology has been confused, leading to unnecessary divisions. Not only did Bavinck and Pannenberg realize this problem, but they placed the discussion of natural theology in the history of theological ideas.¹¹

⁶ Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 5-35.

⁷ Gunther Wenz, *Introduction to Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Systematic Theology*, trans. Philip Stewart (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 45.

⁸ Pannenberg, *Problemggeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland*, 13-45; and *Theologie und Philosophie*, 26-36, 106-28.

⁹ Holder, “Natural Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 124.

¹⁰ R. J. Snell and Steve F. McGuire, *Concepts of Nature: Ancient and Modern* (New York and London: Lexington Books, 2016).

¹¹ In Pannenberg’s two lecture notes (footnote 8 above), natural theology is one of the key issues from his discussions of theology and philosophy.

Moreover, the deliberations of both Bavinck and Pannenberg provide a discerning response to the prevailing discourses of their respective time periods. The oversight of scientific breakthroughs and the comprehension of other religions were sometimes disregarded by their contemporary theologians in their examination of matters pertaining to natural theology. In contrast, both Bavinck and Pannenberg have included these issues in their respective views. This unique viewpoint distinguishes them from theologians such as Barth, who adheres to the presupposition that, in matters concerning the comprehension of nature, theology and science should remain discrete entities. Concurrently, both Bavinck and Pannenberg venture to extend the scope of theological discourse to encompass natural sciences and diverse religions.

In this chapter, it is argued that the prevailing stereotype held by many scholars of Bavinck and Pannenberg, which posits them as adversaries of natural theology, is not entirely accurate. The contention put forth is that both Bavinck and Pannenberg do not outrightly dismiss the concept of “natural theology.” Instead, they carefully delineate the varied meanings that terms like “natural theology” and “nature” acquire in distinct historical context, so determining their endorsement or dismissal of “natural theology” is based on its particular semantic implications.

Indeed, the perspectives Bavinck and Pannenberg present demonstrate ecumenical characteristics, objectivity, and integrality. It is imperative for contemporary theological scholars to acknowledge and appreciate the comprehensive framework described, as it possesses the capacity to enrich conversations pertaining to the intersection of faith and nature. Both Bavinck and Pannenberg espouse the endorsement of a certain of natural theology anchored in revelation. The conceptualizations of natural theology held by these

individuals are harmonious with their respective theologies of revelation. Their paradigms, by transcending dualism, offer organic, holistic theological perspectives. Grounded in revelation rather than pure reason, their natural theologies are a reflective theoretical exercise with regard to religious experiences.

Next, I will introduce how Bavinck understands natural theology. Then, by introducing Pannenberg's views, I compare his theology with that of Bavinck's views. Lastly, I offer a critique of both theologians and integrate a revised synthesis of natural theology.

3.2 Bavinck on Natural Theology

3.2.1 Literature Review

Within the realm of scholarly discourse pertaining to Bavinck, a discernible dichotomy of perspectives has arisen with regards to his position on natural theology. While some scholars have solidified the perception that Bavinck is fundamentally opposed to natural theology,¹² others contend that Bavinck's stance does not amount to an absolute rejection.¹³ The discrepancy in scholarly opinion largely stems from differing interpretations of the definition and scope of the terms of "natural theology" and "nature."

¹² G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 40 and *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 82; Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49-62; Echeverria, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 87-116.

¹³ Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*; Duby, "Working with the Grain of Nature," 60-84; Arvin Vos, "Knowledge According to Bavinck and Aquinas," *Bavinck Review* no. 6 (2015): 9-36; Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (London: Routledge, 2016), 138-39, 154, 169; Muller, "Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology," 5-35; Ximian Xu, "Herman Bavinck's 'Yes' and Karl Barth's 'No'," 323-51.

For example, Alvin Plantinga defines natural theology as “the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God.”¹⁴ In this regard, Plantinga argues that Bavinck’s stance is contrary to natural theology insofar as “a Christian’s belief in the existence of God is not based upon proofs or arguments.”¹⁵ Plantinga posits an equivalence between natural theology with classical foundationalism, while asserting that Bavinck has an opposing stance towards this particular theological foundationalism.

Similarly, Eduardo J. Echeverria argues that Bavinck is opposed to the Roman Catholic concept of natural theology. In Echeverria’s critique, he believes that Bavinck’s perspective on the subject of natural theology is a perceived lack of coherence. According to Echeverria, on the one hand, Bavinck concedes that unbelievers, after the fall, still maintain some knowledge of God, although such knowledge may be distorted and incomplete. On the other hand, Bavinck refutes the idea that human beings may understand God’s revelation in creation through natural light of reason alone. Besides, Echeverria also points out that according to Bavinck’s views, as long as human beings fail to obtain knowledge of God through the light of reason, then their condemnation because of unbelief becomes an injustice.¹⁶ Echeverria suggests that Bavinck’s critique of the Roman Catholic concept of natural theology might be attributed, in part, to a misperception that it relies solely on rationalism.¹⁷

¹⁴ Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 49.

¹⁵ Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 50.

¹⁶ Echeverria, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 87-116.

¹⁷ Echeverria, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 113-14.

In the camp advocating that Bavinck is receptive to nature theology, scholars also vary in their interpretations regarding precise term of “natural theology.” Nicolaas H. Gootjes suggests that Bavinck espouses a variant of natural theology, asserting that “there is not only a so-called natural revelation, there is also supernatural revelation among the Gentiles.”¹⁸ Gootjes maintains that Bavinck consistently asserts that “general revelation reveals God.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Gootjes emphasizes that in Bavinck’s discourse on “natural revelation,” the scope extends beyond rationality alone, encompassing the view that “all religions, including false religions, are the result of some sort of revelation.”²⁰

Like Gootjes, Richard Muller argues that Bavinck “did not devote a separate section of his dogmatics to natural theology but rather subsumed it under the more fundamental issue of innate or implanted and acquired ideas of God in human beings.”²¹ Muller discerns a consistent thread of Bavinck’s natural theology throughout the Reformed orthodox tradition, while also acknowledging its incorporation of the Romantic “organic” perspective of nineteenth-century German philosophy. He highlights the significance of Bavinck’s formulation to natural theology as it “opposed the direction inspired by Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack... and taken by neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth and Otto Weber.”²² Furthermore, Muller underscores that

¹⁸ Nicolaas H. Gootjes, “General Revelation and Science: Reflections on a Remark in Report 28,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, no. 1 (1995): 102-03.

¹⁹ Gootjes, “General Revelation and Science,” 103.

²⁰ Gootjes, “General Revelation and Science,” 102.

²¹ Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 19.

²² Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 33.

Bavinck, “like the church fathers, identified elements of truth in ancient pagan religion and philosophy.”²³

The academic discussion surrounding Bavinck’s natural theology demonstrates considerable heterogeneity. The existence of diverse perspective can be attributed to variations in the definition of concepts of “natural theology” and “nature,” as well as the numerous interpretive lenses through which Bavinck’s work is examined. In the above cited divergences, it appears that natural theology encompasses at least two facets. First, it relates to rationality, specifically, the question of whether reason in and of itself is capable of comprehending the knowledge of God or generates this knowledge intrinsically; second, it involves other religions, questioning whether they can be recipients of divine revelation. According to John Bolt, Bavinck’s perspective on natural theology encompasses not just reason, or the currently narrower concept of scientific theory, but also divine revelation in creation, natural knowledge and religions.²⁴

Hence, in the subsequent examination of Bavinck’s natural theology, I will further expound upon Bavinck’s conceptualizations of natural theology and “nature” as multifaceted. This will entail an examination of how these complexities in Bavinck’s thought provide a richer understanding of the discourse on natural theology, serving as a framework for exploring its multidimensional implications.

²³ Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 35.

²⁴ John Bolt, “Getting the ‘Two Books’ Straight: With a Little Help from Herman Bavinck and John Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 46, no. 2 (2011): 315-332.

3.2.2 A History of Natural Theology according to Bavinck

Bavinck's understanding of nature is rooted in Christian tradition, which opposes modern empiricism and naturalism that categorizes "nature" into the physical realm. Thus he considers nature as including invisible realities such as soul and spirit.²⁵ Bavinck thinks that the Bible defines nature as the entirety of creation, with God as the *natura summa* (the sum of nature). With the emergence of modern natural sciences, a mechanic worldview of modern society has transformed our understanding of nature and knowledge.²⁶

Although Bavinck emphasizes that all knowledge and cultures are due to the revelation of God, he nevertheless distinguishes between the knowledge about God and the knowledge of created beings. This is because God and nature, as the Creator and created beings, are qualitatively different. Therefore, Bavinck points out, when people talk about the knowledge of nature, they do not refer to revelation as the source of that knowledge, despite the fact that "the moment creatures are related to God and considered *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity), they assume the character of a revelation to us and to some greater or lesser degree make God known to us."²⁷

Accordingly, on the one hand, Bavinck considers natural theology to be related to natural knowledge. Although natural knowledge is founded on revelation, people usually do not classify such knowledge as part of revelation or natural theology. On the other

²⁵ *RD*, 1:357 and *PoR*, 72-73. Also see Herman Bavinck, "Christianity and Natural Science" in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 90.

²⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, trans. and ed. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto et al (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 66-69.

²⁷ *RD*, 1:341.

hand, Bavinck also emphasizes that the concept of revelation has been limited to the religious realm, and thus becomes a religious concept. It is by revelation that God becomes knowable.²⁸

Based on these views, Bavinck discusses the relationship between the concept of “nature” and that of “revelation.” In the history of theological ideas, how people understood these two concepts determined their attitudes toward natural theology. Bavinck does not think that the early church thinkers divided revelation into “natural” versus “supernatural,” with the former allowing God to make himself known to people, and the latter enabling human beings to know God through the special revelation in the Bible. Bavinck considers this view as leading to the bifurcation of grace and nature, a dualism and sacred-secular antithesis.²⁹ Instead, he proposes that revelation in itself entails the supernatural, as “creation revelation is no less supernatural than Scripture.”³⁰

The failure to intellectually reconcile nature and grace has caused divisions among different denominations with regard to their understandings of “natural theology.” For example, Bavinck points out that with the spread of rationalism and empiricism, people have considered natural theology as a foundation, and it has been understood “to be derived from philosophy and by reason apart from revelation.”³¹ According to

²⁸ *RD*, 1:341-42.

²⁹ Here Bavinck points to a continuation of Roman Catholic ideas. But Echeverria quotes Gilson to claim that Catholic understanding of natural theology was not dualistic; like Bavinck, it also claims that grace restores nature. Rome considered faith as the basis for natural theology, not pure reason, and natural theology is not a cognitive prelude for the human being. Natural theology and a theology of revelation are inseparable, all based on God’s self-revelation. See Echeverria, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” 87-116.

³⁰ *RD*, 1:301.

³¹ *RD*, 1:61.

Bavinck, during the Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholicism overemphasized the role of nature in knowledge, while Anabaptism and Socinianism rejected natural theology for overemphasizing the supernatural, leading to the emergence of rationalism. Although Lutherans and some Calvinists emphasized reason alongside faith, they nurtured German naturalists and British deists to develop their own revelation-denying natural theology.³²

According to Bavinck, theological trends in the eighteenth century separated faith from reason, claiming that from reason itself may spring forth truths of natural theology. Bavinck thinks that it was defined “as the preamble faith became antecedent to revealed theology, and reason was emancipated from faith and revelation.”³³ This kind of natural theology was considered as providing a purely scientific basis for faith.³⁴ To Bavinck, another implication of this trend was that natural theology was treated as a real, empirical science, or “rational theology” as termed by Bavinck, whereas revealed theology became marginalized. Since then and with the development of modern natural science, Kantian philosophy, people consider natural theology as based on practical rationality. And this rational-natural theological stance did not maintain its rigor.³⁵

3.2.3 Bavinck’s Understanding of Natural Theology

By examining how natural theology has developed, Bavinck emphasizes that it has never been a static stance or system; rather, with the shifting historical context and

³² *RD*, 1:301.

³³ *RD*, 1:105.

³⁴ *RD*, 1:105.

³⁵ *RD*, 2:78.

people's changing conceptualization about "nature," natural theology has also been in flux. Therefore, one cannot simply say whether Bavinck gives a "yea" or "nay" to natural theology. One needs to understand the context of this term when Bavinck uses it. In other words, in order to understand Bavinck's view on natural theology, we need to explore what kind of natural theology he supports, and what kind he opposes.

Although Bavinck points out that natural theology takes on different meanings in different historical contexts, it has always engaged with some common themes.

First, natural theology involves whether and how God can be known by human beings—the means of revelation. He insists that revelation and nature are two inseparable sides of the same coin. Natural theology is possible only because it is based on God's self-revelation. From a human perspective, the knowledge of God has a trait of incomprehensibility. But it is because of God's active self-revelation that human beings may obtain some knowledge about Him. "By nature, in virtue of his nature, every man believes in God."³⁶ God reveals Himself to everyone.

Second, the knowledge of God is neither completely unknowable for the human being nor attainable solely through human faculties. Bavinck opposes the gnostic view which considers "God as absolutely unknowable and ineffable, the eternal silent abyss."³⁷ This gives fruit to the gnostic understanding that there is no such thing as natural theology.³⁸ In Bavinck's mind, natural theology has a most important presupposition "that *God* reveals himself in his handiwork. It is not humans who seek God but God who

³⁶ *PoR*, 66.

³⁷ *RD*, 2:27.

³⁸ *RD*, 2:36.

seeks humans, also by means of his works in nature.”³⁹ This means “that it is not humans who, by the natural light of reason, understand and know this revelation of God.”⁴⁰

Therefore, Bavinck considers it erroneous to drift away from this assumption. He argues,

Although all pagan religions are positive [concrete], what is needed on the human side is a mind that has been sanctified and eyes that have been opened in order to be able to see God, the true and living God, in his creatures. And even this is not enough. Even Christian believers would not be able to understand God’s revelation in nature and reproduce it accurately had not God himself described in his Word how he revealed himself and what he revealed of himself in the universe as a whole. The natural knowledge of God is incorporated and set forth at length in Scripture itself.⁴¹

In this discussion, on the one hand, Bavinck acknowledges that it is possible for natural religions to know God, but that is insufficient. On the other hand, Christians’ natural theology is based on God’s special revelation, that is through Scripture and the illumination of the Spirit. Christians would be committing an error if they ignore these presuppositions. In other words, here Bavinck in fact implies two very different kinds of natural theologies—the one that exists among non-Christian religions on the basis that general revelation offers an ambiguous knowledge of God; the other Christian natural theology that is based on special revelation may help obtain the knowledge of God in a deeper appreciation of general revelation. It is because of the different role of special revelation that people have qualitatively different knowledge of God through nature.

To Bavinck, nature is a medium of revelation. The knowledge of God for God Himself is different from our obtained knowledge of God, just as an archetype

³⁹ *RD*, 2:74.

⁴⁰ *RD*, 2:74.

⁴¹ *RD*, 2:74.

(*archetypes*) is different from an ectype (*ektypos*). Therefore, human knowledge of God is all mediated, or *analogia entis*. Moreover, natural revelation and supernatural revelation, two terms Bavinck continues to use, have an organic, inseparable relationship. Human knowledge about God is conveyed through an anthropomorphic mode, or a way of humanization. Bavinck thinks that natural revelation to God should be understood as “his divine and eternal thoughts have been deposited in creatures in a creaturely way so that they could be understood by human thought processes. And in supernatural revelation he binds himself to space and time, adopts human language and speech, and makes use of creaturely means.”⁴² Although revelation must be supernatural, and nature serves as a medium to convey the knowledge of God, from a human epistemological perspective, revelation can still be distinguished as natural and supernatural. Thus, Bavinck considers this different from the dualism constructed by Catholicism by setting grace and nature against each other. He explains,

by these means human beings understand God just as well and just as clearly as the devout person now perceives the speech of God in all of nature. Just as little as the revelation of God in nature and history is impossible and deceptive to the believer, so also is the supernatural revelation in the course of which God uses extraordinary means but to which he also opens people’s eyes in a special way. Hence, in the state of integrity, according to the teaching of Scripture, natural and supernatural revelation go together. They are not opposites but complementary. Both are mediate and bound to certain forms. Both are based on the idea that God in his grace condescends to human beings and conforms himself to them. And the modes of both are that God makes his presence felt, his voice heard, and his works seen. From the beginning, by theophanies, word, and deed, God made himself known to people.⁴³

⁴² *RD*, 1:310.

⁴³ *RD*, 1:310.

This argument above shows that Bavinck emphasizes the organic trait and integrity of revelation, as a way to refute a dualism. According to Bavinck, natural and supernatural revelation are complementary. This implies that one form of revelation fills in the gaps of the other, providing a fuller picture of divine reality. Both forms of revelation are conveyed through specific mediums and are therefore subject to the limitations of those mediums. Bavinck argues that this complementary understanding of natural and supernatural revelation has been consistent throughout both nature and history, manifested through divine appearance, words, and actions.

Moreover, Bavinck points to two methods natural theology relies on in engaging objectivity and general revelation: nature and history, which “are the book of God’s omnipotence and wisdom, his goodness and justice. All people have to a certain extent recognized this revelation.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the knowledge of general revelation is not only natural, but also supernatural. Bavinck points to the insufficiency of general revelation, which does not mean the insufficiency of the external revelation itself, but human cognitive limits. As Bavinck explains, “it is evident from the fact that this revelation at most supplies us with knowledge of God’s existence and of some of his attributes such as goodness and justice, but it leaves us absolutely unfamiliar with the person of Christ, who alone is the way to the Father.”⁴⁵ Such insufficiency also results in the fallible and uncertain knowledge of God obtained by humans from nature. Bavinck admits that Thomas Aquinas is absolutely correct “that even in those truths that general revelation makes known to us, [special] revelation and authority are needed because that

⁴⁴ *RD*, 1:310.

⁴⁵ *RD*, 1:313.

knowledge is suited only to the few, would take too much time to study, and even then remained incomplete and uncertain.”⁴⁶

Bavinck appreciates the contribution of the Reformation to natural theology in not taking revelation as some supernatural phenomena that are contrary to nature. Instead, revelation shows God through creation, nature, and history.⁴⁷ The organic integration of revelation and nature means that God’s revelation is not independent of nature and history. Rather, we should “receive and understand the revelation of God in nature and history.”⁴⁸ Although Reformation theology still distinguishes between natural and supernatural revelation, he thinks that what these terms mean have already become different from the lexicon of Roman Catholicism. The latter means that although God’s revelation exists in nature, the fall disabled human beings from obtaining such knowledge from nature alone. Therefore, Bavinck spells out two layers of meanings from this kind of natural theology: first, truth about God in special revelation can be obtained from nature; second, in order to obtain such knowledge of God from nature, one needs to be illuminated by the Spirit.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Bavinck’s comprehension of revelation encompasses facets derived from the Reformed tradition, alongside some new interpretations, especially from a modern philosophical lens. Bavinck particularly categorizes revelation into subjective and objective classifications. In a similar vein, Bavinck continues this approach in his understanding of natural theology. Bavinck is

⁴⁶ *RD*, 1:314. Bavinck admits that he shares some common views about natural theology with Aquinas.

⁴⁷ *RD*, 1:360-61.

⁴⁸ *RD*, 1:341.

conceptualizing Reformation natural theology from a modern philosophical epistemology, which discusses the relationship between the subject and the object.⁴⁹ He even quotes John Calvin's metaphor of spectacles: "Objectively needed by human beings to understand the general revelation of God in nature was the special revelation of God in Holy Scripture, which, accordingly, was compared by Calvin to glasses. Subjectively needed by human beings was the eye of faith to see God also in the works of his hands."⁵⁰ In this respect, Bavinck is close to Barth in emphasizing that natural theology does not mean rational autonomy; it cannot be separated from the Christian faith, the sole basis of special revelation which guarantees real, sufficient knowledge of God.

On the epistemological level, with regard to subject-object relationship, Bavinck's natural theology clearly treats nature as one means of revelation for Spirit-illuminated people to obtain objective knowledge of God. For Bavinck, nature is not self-existing: "nature does not for a moment exist independently of God but lives and moves in him."⁵¹ Thus Bavinck agrees with the Belgic Confession (art. 2) which lists nature and Scripture as two sources of divine knowledge. He thinks that this created world is the external foundation (*principium cognoscendi externum*) of human knowledge, a gift from God. He thinks that "the light of reason enables us to discover and recognize the logos in things."⁵² This again makes it clear that he agrees with a non-independent, non-self-existing system, but an organic whole.⁵³ Furthermore, he objects to the rational theology after the

⁴⁹ Muller, "Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology," 31-33.

⁵⁰ *RD*, 1:304.

⁵¹ *RD*, 1:371.

⁵² *RD*, 1:208.

⁵³ *RD*, 1:87.

Enlightenment by positing that natural theology is not the foundation of revelation theology. The latter requires reasoning and proof “to mount to the higher level of faith.”⁵⁴ Thereby he refutes using pure reason as the foundation of natural theology, which has become independent in areas such as science and philosophy.⁵⁵ As a result, whenever people try to understand the concept of “natural theology,” they immediately treat it as independent of faith as a foundation. Besides, the later trend of rationalistic naturalism also strikes Bavinck as over reliant on reason at the expense of ignoring human cognitive limitations after the fall.⁵⁶

Bavinck emphasizes that revelation cannot be detached from nature. For the organic feature of nature and revelation may help us obtain a deeper knowledge of God “from the very outset the dogmatician took a stand on the ground of faith and, as a Christian and believer, now also looked at nature.”⁵⁷ As Bavinck claims, revelation “is not an individual act of God in time, isolated from nature as a whole.”⁵⁸ Accordingly, natural theology and revelation theology are interwoven. Nature and Scripture together provide objectivity and subjectivity to attain a knowledge of God. Bavinck also writes, “speaking objectively, nature did not stand on its own as an independent principle alongside of Holy Scripture, each of them supplying a set of truths of their own. Rather,

⁵⁴ *RD*, 1:87.

⁵⁵ *RD*, 1:304-6.

⁵⁶ *RD*, 1:364-65.

⁵⁷ *RD*, 1:87.

⁵⁸ *RD*, 1:375.

nature was viewed in the light of Scripture, and Scripture not only contained revealed truth (in the strict sense) but also the truths that a believer can discover in nature.”⁵⁹

Hence, Bavinck distinguishes between two different kinds of natural theology: one form is intertwined with special revelation, providing a more lucid explication of divine revelation. Conversely, the other variant is universally applicable across all nations and religions, yet remains nebulous. So Bavinck agrees with Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638): “acknowledge the existence of a natural theology in the unregenerate, but a confused and obscure natural theology. By contrast, for the believer the principles and conclusions of natural theology are replicated clearly and distinctly in Scripture.”⁶⁰ Here we also see two kinds of natural theologies from his use of this term. One is limited within a Christian epistemology, and the other can be expanded to other religions.

3.2.4 Bavinck on Natural Religions

Bavinck does not dismiss the significance of religions. He considers nature to be the source of human knowledge, and religion the product of revelation. Bavinck likes to equate natural religions with natural theology when he talks about natural theologies related to other common religions.⁶¹ Under the section title of General Revelation, Bavinck continues to oppose rationalism’s proposal to use reason as a foundation—such an abstract kind of natural theology simply does not exist. He argues that natural theology still needs special revelation and the light of Scripture.⁶² Meanwhile, Bavinck also

⁵⁹ *RD*, 1:87.

⁶⁰ *RD*, 1:87-88.

⁶¹ *RD*, 1:209.

⁶² *RD*, 1:209.

stresses that general revelation is the foundation of all religions. Bavinck considers all religions inseparable from revelation.⁶³ All natural religions point to the existence of a transcendental God.⁶⁴ And because religions not only assume God's existence, they also acknowledge that God reveals Himself to people, making divine knowledge possible, then "revelation is the necessary correlative of religion."⁶⁵

Bavinck distinguishes his theory not only from Ludwig Feuerbach's religious criticism, but also from Barth's later understanding which equates non-Christian religions with illusions. Although people's understanding of revelation might be diverse or even sometimes mistaken, to Bavinck, revelation is still the foundation of *principium cognoscendi externum*. He agrees with F.W. Schelling that a divine knowledge has long existed in the original human being, as part of human nature and corresponding to the objectivity of revelation. God has also endowed human beings with the faculty or natural aptitude to understand such divine revelation.⁶⁶ Therefore, in this sense, beyond the scope of Christianity, Bavinck affirms natural religions or natural theology as meaningful. He also considers common revelation as natural revelation.⁶⁷ Thus, natural theology according to Bavinck is no longer the kind of natural theology founded on common rationality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather, it integrates general revelation and grace, as well as natural religions and theology.⁶⁸

⁶³ *RD*, 1:248.

⁶⁴ *RD*, 1:285.

⁶⁵ *RD*, 1:276.

⁶⁶ *RD*, 1:277-78.

⁶⁷ *RD*, 1:283.

⁶⁸ *RD*, 1:320.

Bavinck acknowledges the important role that natural religions play in human history and communities. But he also points out its limitations. Bavinck is aware of the insufficiency of such natural revelation, as he points to the fact that “not a single people has been content with so-called natural religion.”⁶⁹ Bavinck objects to Barth’s claim that paganism is all illusion; rather he argues that common revelation is also the source for other religions.⁷⁰ And because of such common grace, there are elements of truth in other religions, even though they are not sufficient. Here Bavinck writes,

By it they were protected, on the one hand, from the Pelagian error, which taught the sufficiency of natural theology and linked salvation to the sufficiency of natural theology, but could, on the other hand, recognize all the truth, beauty, and goodness that is present also in the pagan world. Science, art, moral, domestic, and societal life, etc., were derived from that common grace and acknowledged and commended with gratitude.⁷¹

So Bavinck affirms the value of natural theology while pointing out its defects and insufficiency.

According to Bavinck, it is human nature to be religious, for “it points directly back to revelation.”⁷² The existence of religions shows that the comprehensibility of God is supernatural, not an illusion. As he puts it, “all religion is supernatural in the sense that it is based on faith in a personal God, who is transcendently exalted above the world, and nevertheless is active in the world and thereby makes himself known and communicates himself to man.”⁷³

⁶⁹ *RD*, 1:314.

⁷⁰ *RD*, 1:314-18.

⁷¹ *RD*, 1:319.

⁷² *PoR*, 133.

⁷³ *PoR*, 135.

Yet Bavinck still insists that natural theology or religions are, by themselves, insufficient. They cannot operate apart from general revelation. If it is human nature to be religious, then general revelation also prepares other religions for special revelation, and for general revelation, it “preserves humankind in order that it can be found and healed by Christ and until it is. To that extent natural theology used to be correctly denominated a ‘preamble faith,’ a divine preparation and education for Christianity.”⁷⁴ This restates Bavinck’s stance that no one can achieve autonomy apart from general revelation and common grace. In fact, a natural theology that is founded on pure reason is nonexistent. Besides, natural theology also prepares for revelation theology. This further shows the organic nature of Bavinck’s thoughts, as best captured in his saying: “Nature precedes grace; grace perfects nature.”⁷⁵

Bavinck does not completely reject the value and significance of natural religions; instead, he understands their meaning from the perspective of general revelation and common grace. He affirms the positive value of natural religions. Although he insists that special revelation is the true internal foundation of natural theology, Bavinck still reckons that other religions also have God’s common grace. As John Bolt argues, Bavinck differs from Barth in “considering Christianity as a religion that on a formal level shares characteristics with all religions.”⁷⁶ Bavinck also argues that Reformed theology has not yet fully developed John Calvin’s “seed of religion” thesis. Even though it considers natural religions as innate and acquired, Reformed theology also erroneously holds that

⁷⁴ *RD*, 1:322.

⁷⁵ *RD*, 1:322. Also see Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 280-321.

⁷⁶ John Bolt, “Editor’s Introduction” in Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 9.

such religions “were traced to deception or demonic influences.”⁷⁷ Bavinck argues otherwise. He says,

The various religions, however mixed with error they may have been, to some extent met people’s religious needs and brought consolation amidst the pain and sorrow of life. What comes to us from the pagan world are not just cries of despair but also expressions of confidence, hope, resignation, peace, submission, patience, etc. All the elements and forms that are essential to religion (a concept of God, a sense of guilt, a desire for redemption, sacrifice, priesthood, temple, cult, prayer, etc.), though corrupted, nevertheless do also occur in pagan religions. Here and there even unconscious predictions and striking expectations of a better and purer religion are voiced. Hence Christianity is not only positioned antithetically toward paganism; it is also paganism’s fulfillment. Christianity is the true religion, therefore also the highest and purest; it is the truth of all religions.⁷⁸

Here, Bavinck acknowledges that natural religions, like Christianity, contain some of the essential elements of religion and simultaneously provide comfort and answers to life’s inquiries. Christianity is not in opposition to natural religions, and it does not adhere to binary perspective where Christianity is unequivocally correct while all others are utterly incorrect and useless. Instead, by using a Hegelian outlook, Bavinck considers Christianity to be the fulfillment of all religions. He overcomes the simple dichotomy and dualism, which ignores the common foundation between Christianity and other religions. Rather, he provides a more objective framework to reconsider the relationship of Christianity with other religions.

⁷⁷ *RD*, 1:319.

⁷⁸ *RD*, 1:319-20.

3.2.5 The Epistemological Foundations of Bavinck's Natural Theology

As previously clarified in the preceding sections, the divergence of opinions among Bavinck scholars regarding whether Bavinck supports or opposes natural theology largely stems from a lack of awareness that Bavinck distinguishes between different kinds of natural theology. Current discussions of Bavinck's natural theology tend to focus on whether Bavinck thinks natural theology has legitimacy within Christianity. Very little research has been done on distinguishing Bavinck's typology of two kinds of natural theology: one within Christianity, and one pertaining to other religions. Through revisiting John Calvin's concepts such as "a *sensus divinitatis*" or "a *semen religionis*," I examine Bavinck's conceptual distinction and show that the key lies in how to treat human beings as the subject or beings with innate ideas, rather than focusing on whether nature may lead them to know God. As Bavinck puts it,

It is this capacity that Calvin called a *sensus divinitatis* and a *semen religionis*. The Reformed confessions and theologians consistently affirmed a "natural theology" of this sort while at the same time rejecting the notion of "innate ideas." The danger of this theory is twofold: rationalism and mysticism. If human beings at birth came fully endowed with clear and distinct knowledge of God, being, or all ideas, they would be completely autonomous and self-sufficient, needing neither God, the world, nor revelation. The logical conclusion of this kind of thinking is idealism, which considers reality itself to be a creation of immanent human thought processes.⁷⁹

In this paragraph, Bavinck continues John Calvin's view of natural theology. Its epistemology rejects innate ideas within human beings as the source of divine knowledge, because this eventually traces to human beings' own autonomy, not God's revelation. Nature also loses its significance as a means of revelation and source of

⁷⁹ *RD*, 2:54.

knowledge. Bavinck points out that human beings' divine knowledge is indirect and has an analogical character. Therefore nature plays an important role for them to obtain divine knowledge. Muller also notices that in *Reformed Dogmatics* I, Bavinck does not discuss natural theology under a separate section; instead he situates it epistemologically— [he] “subsumed it under the more fundamental issue of innate or implanted and acquired idea of God in human beings.”⁸⁰

In order to refute the view of innate ideas, Bavinck redefines two kinds of knowledge: implanted knowledge of God, and acquired knowledge of God. The former is God's revelation working in human consciousness, including impression and intuition for creaturely beings. The latter refers to how human beings need the illumination by the Spirit to reflect on God's revelation. Through rational exploration and confirmation, such knowledge surpasses impression and intuition and elevates to the height of ideas. Through this distinction, Bavinck categorizes natural theology into the former kind and revelation theology into the latter. He also emphasizes that such a distinction does not mean that natural theology and revelation theology are opposites of each other; rather they make one organic whole. The Christian belief considers it possible for human beings to know God to a certain extent even without special revelation. Such a natural theology is valid. But if someone thinks that natural theology can be detached from special revelation and finds that sufficient, Bavinck thinks this is irrational and impious.⁸¹ He stresses that all knowledge enters the human mind from the outside, and implanted knowledge means that human beings have the capacity to obtain such knowledge. And

⁸⁰ Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 19.

⁸¹ *RD*, 2:54.

this is only possible when God's actions and the impact of the world work internally and externally. In other words, such implanted knowledge is something human beings are born with, but it is also an action towards external objects. Both roles are indispensable.⁸²

Bavinck integrates such knowledge with natural theology. Because human beings are made in God's image, to some extent, they have implanted knowledge about God. But such knowledge is insufficient, which makes the acquired knowledge of reflecting on revelation a necessary step. In fact, Bavinck points out that "there is no such thing as a separate natural theology that could be obtained apart from any revelation solely on the basis of a reflective consideration of the universe. The knowledge of God that is gathered up in so-called natural theology is not the product of human reason."⁸³ So it remains an epistemological problem concerning whether natural theology may be derived from human rationality independently. In this respect, Bavinck returns to his usual stance in arguing that there is no such natural theology from pure human rationality. This shows in how Bavinck discusses God's existence. As he argues, the ontological claim that God exists has an epistemological foundation. The early church, in order to defend Christianity, attempted to use nature and reason to prove Christian dogmas, but even this kind of rational argumentation was based on the *priori* of God's existence, and thus a form of obtaining divine knowledge.⁸⁴

⁸² *RD*, 2:73.

⁸³ *RD*, 2:74.

⁸⁴ *RD*, 1:303.

3.2.6 Summary of Bavinck's Natural Theology

In discussing this segment on Bavinck, my argument is that Bavinck's concept of natural theology is nuanced, encompassing different definitions and scopes of application rather than a simplistic rejection or acceptance. Moreover, Bavinck's approach to natural theology is both an inheritance from Reformed orthodoxy and an infusion of new, contemporary elements and perspectives. Given the extent of this chapter and for clarity when comparing with the forthcoming discussion on Pannenberg, it is prudent to commence by providing a concise overview of the main points discussed above.

First, Bavinck objects to putting natural theology and revelation theology on opposing sides. He also disagrees with how rationalism treats reason as the foundation of an abstract natural theology. He admits that reason has validity in proving God's existence, but it is not the source of divine knowledge and faith. Pure, abstract arguments do not grant divine knowledge. As Alvin Plantinga points out, Bavinck's rebuttal of this kind of natural theology is in fact a stance against classic foundationalism.⁸⁵

Second, Bavinck also notices how some concepts related to natural theology, such as nature, have changed their meanings in history. He further distinguishes two kinds of natural theology, one within Christianity, the other relating to non-Christian religions. Both of these two "presupposes the revelation of God."⁸⁶ While affirming these two kinds of natural theology, Bavinck also argues that non-Christian natural theology, though benefiting from special revelation just like Christian natural theology, is insufficient.

⁸⁵ Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," 49-51.

⁸⁶ Muller, "Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology," 32.

Non-Christian natural theology is not at the opposite end of revelation theology; rather it prepares for the latter.

Third, from an epistemological perspective, Bavinck classifies natural theology as the implanted knowledge of God. It is a capacity humans obtain internally, but also an action done to human beings externally. On one hand, this view affirms the benefit of natural theology, for human beings may obtain divine knowledge through nature. On the other hand, it opposes the view that having innate knowledge makes human beings the source of that knowledge.

3.3 Pannenberg on Natural Theology and the Theology of Nature

3.3.1 Literature Review

Despite the considerable corpus of monographs and articles on Pannenberg, a discernible dearth exists in terms of serious scholarly investigation into Pannenberg's perspective on natural theology. Pannenberg scholars studying the works of Pannenberg typically provide only cursory treatment of his views on natural theology, allocating limited attention and concise sections to this topic within the broader framework of their analysis. Just as with scholars engaged in the study of Bavinck, there exists a significant divergence among Pannenberg scholars, namely about his stance on the acceptance of natural theology.⁸⁷ In theological research on Pannenberg, some scholars consider him a rejector of natural theology,⁸⁸ while others think Pannenberg holds a purely rational or

⁸⁷ See Dupré, "The Dissolution of the Union of Nature and Grace at the Dawn of the Modern Age," 95-121; Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 179-80, 257-58; Holder, "Natural Theology in the Twentieth Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, 125-28.

⁸⁸ Wenz, *Introduction to Wolfhart Pannenberg's Systematic Theology*, 45; Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 85.

overly Hegelian approach to accept natural theology.⁸⁹ For example, Theodore Whapham thinks that “Pannenberg joins Barth in rejecting natural theology and the analogy of being.”⁹⁰ According to Jacqui A. Stewart, Pannenberg “is resolutely opposed to any hint of supernaturalism, but he repudiates natural theology.”⁹¹ Rather, Rodney Holder claims that because Pannenberg reckons “there is some knowledge of God available to all simply on the basis of being human,” he must uphold a traditional view about natural theology.⁹² According to Timothy Bradshaw, Pannenberg rejects the dualism of traditional natural theology, which places philosophical monotheism against revelational trinitarianism while adopting a synthetic and anti-dualistic stance. Bradshaw calls this a new style of natural theology “which blends idealism and existentialism.”⁹³ The perspectives about Pannenberg’s position on natural theology are evidently characterized by significant disagreement and contradictions. One possible explanation for this disparity in viewpoints might be attributed to the fact that, similar to Bavinck, Pannenberg likewise discerns different types of natural theology and concepts of nature. However, this nuanced and complex view has often been overlooked by Pannenberg scholars.

⁸⁹ Carl E. Braaten, “The Current Controversy on Revelation: Pannenberg and His Critics,” *The Journal of Religion* 45, no. 3 (1965): 225-37; Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Review of Systematic Theology, vol. 1, by Wolfhart Pannenberg,” *Pro Ecclesia* no. 2 (1993): 231-39; Rory A. A. Hinton, “Pannenberg on the Truth of Christian Discourse: A Logical Response,” *Calvin Theological Journal* no. 27 (1992): 312-18; James H. Olthuis, “God as True Infinite: Concerns about Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Systematic Theology, Vol 1,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1992): 320.

⁹⁰ Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 85.

⁹¹ Jacqui A. Stewart, *Reconstructing Science and Theology in Postmodernity: Pannenberg, Ethics and the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 23.

⁹² Holder, “Natural Theology in the Twentieth Century,” 127.

⁹³ Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 179-80, 257-58.

In fact, Pannenberg does distinguish different natural theologies in varying contexts. He rejects the possibility of natural theology emerging out of pure reason. Although Bradshaw is right in arguing that Pannenberg opposes the kind of dualistic natural theology, it is not a new style either. On the contrary, the continuity and modern orientation of Pannenberg's views are similar to Bavinck. Here I first review Pannenberg's conceptualization of natural theology in the history of theological ideas. Changes in this concept reached a climax in modern times when Barth entered into this debate.⁹⁴ So it is necessary to place Pannenberg's discussion within a theological context after Barth. In other words, through his natural theology ideas, Pannenberg has been involved in the same debate, but unlike Barth, he did not reject natural theology as a whole. Instead, Pannenberg encourages interdisciplinary dialogues, and that is one contribution his theology makes, especially with natural sciences. He has expanded natural theology to the theology of nature, demonstrating a contemporary relevance in the relationships between natural theology and natural religions, as well as natural theology and sciences.

3.3.2 The Concepts of Natural Theology and the History of Ideas according to

Pannenberg

Just as Bavinck approaches natural theology from its historical context, Pannenberg points out that the two concepts of "nature" and "natural theology" have taken on different meanings in different historical periods. Pannenberg thinks that one of the reasons contemporary theologians are divided on the issue is due to the fact that many

⁹⁴ Zahrnt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 55-68.

confuse natural human knowledge with the phenomenon of natural theology. The former refers to how humans as creatures obtain the knowledge of God (*cognitio insita*), while the latter belongs to one kind of acquired knowledge of God (*cognitio acquisita*), which is a philosophical reflection on the former.⁹⁵

To Pannenberg, natural theology preceded the birth of Christianity, and was already present in early Greek thought. Moreover, this form of natural theology is not based on pure reason but involves a reflection on religious experience. Just as Bavinck disagrees with Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Harnack about natural theology, Pannenberg stands opposed to Harnack, who considers the Hellenization of Christian dogmas a negative influence. Pannenberg further points out that this idea has, through Ritschl, influenced Barth's critique against natural theology. These thinkers are wrong in thinking that faith and metaphysics are irreconcilable.⁹⁶

Pannenberg provides a concise overview of the historical course of natural theology, delineating its evolution from ancient Greece to the modern era.

According to Pannenberg, early Greek philosophers' discussions of natural theology are like later Christian debates in the way that they are reflecting upon their own religious traditions. To them, there was no one kind of natural theology founded on pure reason.⁹⁷ Such a view is clearly different from what critics of Pannenberg often hold.⁹⁸ I

⁹⁵ *ST*, 1:75.

⁹⁶ *BQT*, 2:119-21.

⁹⁷ *ST*, 1:94-95.

⁹⁸ See footnote 76.

think Pannenberg and Bavinck share a certain kind of understanding about natural theology in opposing pure reason as its foundation. As Pannenberg clearly writes,

the impossibility of a theology that is based on pure reason does not answer the question as to the possibility and actuality of a natural knowledge of God in the sense of a factual knowledge of the God whom the Christian message proclaims. In the language of the older Protestant dogmatics, what is at issue here is a *cognition Dei naturalis insita* as distinction from a *cogitio Dei naturalis acquisita* such as that of the natural theology of antiquity or of the natural theology and religion of the Enlightenment.⁹⁹

He claims that Greek natural theology does not prove God's existence through reason. On the contrary, it assumes divine existence and approaches the nature of divine through nature. As Pannenberg puts it, "The early Greek philosophy intended to be 'natural theology' in the sense of a discipline that inquired into the God who by nature, by virtue of his essence [*phusei*], is God, in contrast to the deities of popular belief who are esteemed as gods only on the strength of human consensus and convention [*thesei*]."¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Pannenberg thinks that since the Greek tradition, a natural theology from among philosophers emerged from reflections on the particular religion, that is, "the understanding of God in Greek religion lived on in philosophy."¹⁰¹ According to Pannenberg, philosophy is not the opposite side of theology, but a tool to check God-talk and knowledge of truth.¹⁰² Early Christian theology used these conceptual philosophical tools to reflect and know God's nature. Their philosophical function was to defer the

⁹⁹ *ST*, 1:107.

¹⁰⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*. Vols. 1-2, translated by George H. Kelm. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1970-71), 2:125.

¹⁰¹ *BQT*, 2: 134.

¹⁰² Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 11-15.

unknown from what people already know about God, not to prove the existence of the divine, but to disclose “the essential character of the deity.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, Pannenberg also argues that early Christianity used it not for defending the faith or for debate, but to show that truth is “in the biblical witness of God as the universal God, pertinent not only to Israel but to all peoples.”¹⁰⁴

Like Bavinck, Pannenberg also notices that Christianity’s views on natural theology have shifted as people’s understanding of the concept “nature” changed in history. This gave way to different kinds of natural theology. He claims that in the ancient and mediaeval world, there existed an old natural theology which was based on the knowledge of the world, “going on to deduce a supreme reason as the origin of order and all motion in the World.”¹⁰⁵ Up until St. Augustine’s time, natural theology had not been thought of a preparatory stage for Christian theology, for it means “theology commensurate with the nature of God.”¹⁰⁶

However, unlike how Bavinck considers Thomas’s dualism on nature and grace, Pannenberg points out that Thomas himself held a different view from the later Thomism, Baroque Scholasticism, and Neo-Scholasticism. According to Pannenberg, Thomas does not distinguish between natural and supernatural knowledge, for nature itself is one means of revelation. In Pannenberg’s understanding of Thomas Aquinas, the latter does not use “natural theology” to mean the rational doctrine of God, but rather it continues a

¹⁰³ *BQT*, 2:158

¹⁰⁴ *BQT*, 2:134.

¹⁰⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles’ Creed in the Light of Today’s Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1972), 21.

¹⁰⁶ *ST*, 1:81.

kind of Aristotelian empiricism, thinking human beings may obtain some divine knowledge through experiencing this world, and some form of divine knowledge has always been part of human nature. Contrary to this understanding, Pannenberg argues that it is not until baroque scholasticism and older Protestant theology when natural theology and revelatory theology became opposing concepts, a framework which Pannenberg argues against.¹⁰⁷ As he points out, this change was due to the fact that in modern society, the term “natural” has shifted from meaning “in accordance with the nature of God” to “in accordance with human nature.” Thus natural theology has been transformed into this question—how can human beings, with their limited rationality, face and understand God’s supernatural reality—and consequently the thesis which “could commend a form of knowledge of God that is compatible with us and our human nature.”¹⁰⁸

Pannenberg argues that old Protestant theology in the past has not distinguished between God’s natural knowledge and natural theology, especially when it concerns the interpretation of Romans 1:18-20 and 2:14. Consequently, the old question about divine knowledge in natural theology has been changed into another question—whether a knowledge about God is sufficient for redemption. Lutherans do not consider purely natural knowledge of God can provide a correct way for worship and redemption.¹⁰⁹ But after the Enlightenment, discussions about natural theology became entangled with issues about natural religions. Pannenberg thinks that the transitioning point happened when

¹⁰⁷ *ST*, 1:72-82.

¹⁰⁸ *ST*, 1:81-82.

¹⁰⁹ *ST*, 1:76-95.

David Hume in his book *Natural History of Religion* (1757) proposed a view about natural religions progressing from polytheism to monotheism. This has greatly influenced people's outlook on natural religions and natural theology. Pannenberg points out that it was due to Hume's theme of positive religions that Schleiermacher, in *Speeches on Religion* (1799), associates the evolution of natural religions with positive religions. Then this view passes on to Ritschl who equates the natural knowledge of God with natural theology. Ritschl not only critiques ideas about natural religions and natural theology during the Enlightenment, he also traces back to patristic theology by arguing that it was an Hellenistic metaphysics which led to natural theology and distorted the doctrines about God.¹¹⁰

Hence, according to Pannenberg, a comprehensive understanding of the term "nature" in its historical context is required in order to fully apprehend the essence of natural theology itself. These terms are not static but have evolved and acquired diverse interpretations contingent upon the historical context in which they are positioned.

3.3.3 Pannenberg's Critiques against the Ritschlian School and Karl Barth

The preceding discussion shows that Pannenberg shares much in common with Bavinck in the concept of natural theology. Besides, a point of potential agreement between Pannenberg and Bavinck lies in their shared criticism of the Ritschlian school's confused concept of natural theology.¹¹¹ In Pannenberg's view, the impact of this misunderstanding of natural theology has permeated Barth's theology as well. He says

¹¹⁰ *ST*, 1:95-96.

¹¹¹ *ST*, 1:99.

Karl Barth, “who as a student of Herrmann came from Ritschl’s school, adopted and continued Ritschl’s attack on natural theology above all others.”¹¹²

Within the discourse around natural theology, Pannenberg directs his critical attention towards the Ritschlian School and Karl Barth as the principal subjects of his scrutiny. Pannenberg overtly expresses his objection to Barth’s approach of sharply contrasting natural theology with the theology of revelation.¹¹³ This assertion effectively counters the opinion, as proposed by Whapham, that Pannenberg aligns with Barth in his dismissal of natural theology.¹¹⁴ Pannenberg traces Barth’s critique against natural theology to two influences: First, as Wilhelm Herrmann’s student, Barth has also been influenced by the Ritschlian School. Second, Barth has taken in Feuerbach’s religious psychology in claiming that natural theology is by human nature and therefore human beings’ self-preservation and self-affirmation. In other words, for Barth, religion is the sign of human revolt against God, and its foundation bases on the anthropology. But Christianity is founded on God’s Word.¹¹⁵

In his critique of Barth, Pannenberg first points out that Barth did not realize the different meanings of natural theology in ancient and modern contexts. Neither was Barth aware of the significance of natural theology outside of ancient Christianity in the quest for God, which shows that the God of Christianity is a universal deity.

¹¹² *ST*, 1:101.

¹¹³ *ST*, 1:101.

¹¹⁴ Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 85.

¹¹⁵ *ST*, 1:100-102.

Second, according to Pannenberg, the natural theology Barth critiques is essentially rational theology from old Protestant theology and the Enlightenment.¹¹⁶ Once people accept Barth's stance on Feuerbach's religious psychology, they risk excluding all natural religions and natural theology outside of Christianity as human-invented illusions. But because human illusions are unrelated to God's reality, then they are only objecting to their own illusions. Here Barth's argument does not stand either. As Pannenberg argues, "For this would cut the ground from under the truth claim of all talk about God, including that of Christian proclamation."¹¹⁷ Barth's stance on natural theology not only fails to defend Christianity, but it also disrupts the universality of a Christian God and thus the conceptualization of a true God. Therefore, even in the context of positive religions after the Enlightenment, natural theology still insists on what Christianity claims to be the universality of God. Unfortunately, Pannenberg says, Barth "has little to offer in this regard but rhetoric."¹¹⁸

Pannenberg emphasizes the historical variability of the concept of natural theology and "nature" when challenging Barth's position. Moreover, in contrast to Barth's stance of opposition against natural theology, Pannenberg, similar to Bavinck, expands the scope of natural theology to encompass discussions about science and natural religions.

¹¹⁶ *ST*, 1:100-105.

¹¹⁷ *ST*, 1:105-6.

¹¹⁸ *ST*, 1:105.

3.3.4 Pannenberg on the Proof of God's Existence, Science and Natural Religions

Pannenberg is acutely aware of how the advancements in modern science have significantly influenced people's understanding of and attitudes towards natural theology. According to Pannenberg, when natural theology is discussing divine knowledge, it in fact touches on deeper issues regarding the proof of divine existence because that is the presumption for whether human beings can acquire divine knowledge. In modern days, God's existence is no longer a self-evident issue, which makes proving God's existence even more important.¹¹⁹ Although both Pannenberg and Bavinck point out that, in a strict sense, there is no effective proof for God's existence, they reckon the significance of this question in "helping to clarify the concept of God in relation to the world, and so helping to develop a critical, purifying function for theology."¹²⁰

Compared to Bavinck, Pannenberg prefers discussing these issues further in a modern social and scientific background. He also realizes the external influence natural science theories have on these proofs. Thus Pannenberg tries to build a theological bridge between science and natural theology. To him, the history of philosophy and science have challenged the proof for God's existence. Cosmology and physics have also influenced these proofs. For example, Pannenberg discusses the prime cause from a cosmological view, stating that William of Occam had long realized the invalidity of such an analogy because in human procreation, the first generation may have died out, followed by a later generation. This does not guarantee God being the prime cause to become an immortal maxim. After Descartes introduced the concept of the principle of inertia, and after a

¹¹⁹ *ST*, 1:82.

¹²⁰ Bradshaw, *Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 56.

Newtonian refinement, human beings have a mechanic view of the world which does not need a cosmological argument as its presumption.¹²¹ Therefore, Pannenberg realizes that all these entail that the concept of God has been transformed from a cosmological basis to an anthropological basis. Consequently, in a strict sense, proofs about God from a transcendental perspective are not valid, “because the existence of God would have to be proved in relation not only to us but above all to the reality of the world.”¹²² This argument falls in line with Pannenberg’s and Bavinck’s (and even Barth’s) propositions about revelation, that is, “God can only be known through God himself.”¹²³ Pannenberg emphasizes that these proofs are significant in the fact that they essentially “show only that man must inquire beyond the world and himself if he is to find a ground capable of supporting the being and meaning of his existence.... They retain their significance as elaboration of the questionableness of finite being which drive man beyond the whole compass of finite reality.”¹²⁴

Like Bavinck, Pannenberg also argues, natural theology is no longer an internal issue for Christianity or a philosophical issue, but rather an objective question that involves universality in the human quest for God. To Pannenberg, the question of natural theology is no longer about how modern times perceive the abstract rational divine knowledge. He traces it to limited human experience and reflection of an infinite God. This leads to our understanding of the relationship between natural theology and natural

¹²¹ *ST*, 1:88-94.

¹²² *ST*, 1:93-94.

¹²³ *ST*, 1:94.

¹²⁴ *BQT*, 2:223-24.

religions.¹²⁵ Such a quest for God does not happen only within Christianity, but in all religions. To Pannenberg, “all religions stem from particular happenings of the reality inquired after in the question of human existence.”¹²⁶ From a Christian perspective, although these religions offer limited or even twisted answers, there are still elements of truth in them.¹²⁷ He thereby agrees with Hegel, who thinks of “all the traditional proofs of the existence of God as being the expression of man’s elevation beyond the finite world to the idea of the infinite.”¹²⁸

Like Bavinck, Pannenberg does not rely on pure reason as the basis for natural theology. And he underscores that natural religions are not illusions, as Barth has suggested. Instead, Pannenberg argues that natural religions retain certain aspects of God’s self-revelation, thereby serving as a means to acquire divine knowledge. Nevertheless, a notable contrast between Pannenberg and Bavinck, as expounded upon in Chapter 2, is that Pannenberg stresses that this revelation as history demonstrates universality and objectivity, then God’s gospel is accessible to everyone by nature. This is also his interpretation of Romans 1:19-20. He did not arrive at this conclusion by way of natural theology, but by the attributes of God’s revelation itself.¹²⁹ Furthermore, Pannenberg also reviews different interpretations of Romans 1:19-20 and 2:15 through a historical theological lens. He thus concludes:

¹²⁵ *BQT*, 2:226.

¹²⁶ *BQT*, 2:226.

¹²⁷ *BQT*, 2:226.

¹²⁸ Pannenberg, *The Apostles’ Creed in the Light of Today’s Questions*, 23.

¹²⁹ *ST*, 1:107-8.

We refer Paul's statement about the knowledge of God from the works of creation to the religions we cannot conclude that they are all from the root up no more than idolatry. In them there is knowledge of the true God from creation, though again and again, of course, there is also the exchanging of the incorruptible God for creaturely things (Rom. 1:23, 25). The one-sided exposition of Rom. 1:19-20 solely in terms of the natural theology of the philosophers has contributed to a one-sidedly negative assessment of non-Christian religions in the history of Christian theology. Today we have to correct this false development and arrive at a more nuanced judgment on the world of the religions.¹³⁰

This statement effectively demonstrates Pannenberg's positive perspective on natural theology and global religions, in contrast to an explicit dismissal of natural theology or a perception of other religions as mere idolatry. The perspective expressed bears a striking resemblance to that of Bavinck. This reflects Pannenberg's broader perspective that theology should be dialogical and engage with the natural religions, rather than being solely based on philosophical arguments or Christian doctrines. In this way, Pannenberg advocates for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of natural theology and its relationship to the world religions.

Similar to Bavinck, Pannenberg also discusses two kinds of divine knowledge: the innate (or implanted) knowledge of God, and the acquired knowledge of God. Pannenberg points out that Philip Melanchthon, in his *Commentary on Romans* (1532), has taken inborn knowledge (*notitia innata*) as the basis of knowledge. But later Protestantism considers this knowledge as having one disposition, and natural instinct as the basis of acquired knowledge, two inseparable sides of one truth.¹³¹ This argument is the same as Bavinck's point. But Pannenberg further expands Bavinck's view by placing

¹³⁰ *ST*, 1:117-18.

¹³¹ *ST*, 1:108-10.

the cognitive process of these two kinds of knowledge in the framework of a modern knowledge of the phenomenon. He emphasizes that an awareness of natural theology must be placed in a trinitarian epistemological framework. Human cognition is a totality, showing interconnections among the self, the world, and God. Pannenberg points out that there is a transcendent mystery about human cognition—human beings not only have an intuition of an indefinite infinite, but also differentiate the self, the world, and God in his or her own cognitive development. To Pannenberg, this seems like a nonthematic knowledge of God, which is not a purely rationally obtained natural theology, nor abstract reflection, but rather one part of human beings’ original situation.¹³²

Pannenberg significantly emphasizes that acquiring knowledge of God arises from religious experiences, namely unthematic knowledge of God, rather than from pure reason. According to Gunther Wenz, Pannenberg does not equate this “unthematic knowledge of God with being religious *a priori*, nor does he limit it within the moral realm of the conscience, or a questioning of human existence—it is simply perceived after the fact.”¹³³ Instead, Pannenberg argues that “in this process of experience, and the awareness of God that it brings, we do not have primarily the natural theology of the philosophers. What we have is the religious experience of God by means of a sense of the working and being of God in creation. There has not been a philosophical natural theology from the beginning of creation.”¹³⁴ Pannenberg claims that the two most important forms of reflection for such unthematic knowledge of God or awareness of

¹³² *ST*, 1:114-17.

¹³³ Wenz, *Introduction to Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Systematic Theology*, 45.

¹³⁴ *ST*, 1:117.

God to come from nature are religion and philosophy. Both contain the knowledge of God, but the religion experience cannot be fully replaced by pure reason in the discourse of natural theology.

Both Pannenberg and Bavinck converge in their emphasis on the theme of creation in natural theology. Pannenberg believes that the development of modern science has significantly shaped people's understanding of creation and nature. He contends that theology has either neglected or intentionally evaded grappling with the challenges posed by modern science, contributing to misunderstanding about natural theology. Pannenberg was facing a more modern society where science occupies a status of authority. He considers modernity to have one characteristic—as natural sciences develop, especially evolution theories and historical criticism which shook the theological foundations of Christianity, theology itself has gradually distanced from or ignored the scientific discussions on creation. As a result, the gap between theology and nature widens. According to Pannenberg, Barth's dogmatics followed this trend. Religious philosophers and theologians place God-related discussions within human subjectivity. Such is the context of today's natural theology discussions.¹³⁵

Pannenberg is also aware that people's understanding of "nature" as a concept has been redefined by modern natural sciences. The concept of God is no longer the one about natural origins and divine perfection, either. These concepts no longer command the power to define the whole reality. But he insists that natural theology ought to reject these erroneous concepts: "It has to think of God as the power that determines not only human history but also nature. This demand results in addition from the observation that

¹³⁵ Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith*, 32-50.

in human history itself events proceed only naturally; so either history and nature together or neither one has anything to do with God.”¹³⁶

Pannenberg’s emphasis on the universality and objectivity of divine revelation is in consonance with his advocacy for what he terms as “the theology of nature.” On the doctrine of God, Pannenberg insists that the concept of God must be the foundation of our understanding of the created world. Natural sciences cannot become a self-existing truth system without metaphysics and the concept of God. Because theology, in describing God as the Creator, ignores how science discusses nature, its concept of God risks becoming empty.¹³⁷ Pannenberg argues that if God is the universal Creator, then He is the Lord of nature. This means that theology has a mission to explore nature. He calls this a theology of nature, [which] “would have to address nature in its entire process and in its present circumstance, including its beginning history.”¹³⁸ According to Pannenberg, the theology of nature “would have to relate all of nature to the reality that is the true theme of theology—the reality of God. In this sense, the term ‘creation’ would have to be defined anew if it is to be suitable as the main concept for the subject of a theology of nature.”¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature*, 75.

¹³⁷ Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature*, 32.

¹³⁸ Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature*, 73.

¹³⁹ Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature*, 73.

3.4 Conclusion

Does Christian theology reject natural theology? Karl Barth says “Yes!” But how about Bavinck and Pannenberg? In this chapter, my argument is that neither Bavinck nor Pannenberg opposes natural theology in the way that some scholars have claimed. On the contrary, both theologians affirm the significant importance of some form of natural theology. Moreover, they extend the scope of natural theology to engage with discussions on modern science and natural religions.

First of all, both Bavinck and Pannenberg demonstrate the possibility of natural theology, which are not only deeply rooted in the historical traditions of Christianity, but also incorporate insights offered by modern science and thoughts. They synthesize these elements into their own comprehensive perspectives on natural theology. This balanced approach makes their contributions to natural theology relevant and meaningful in both religious and scientific contexts. Like Barth, both Bavinck and Pannenberg emphasize that the self-revelation of God is the foundation of theology. However, in contrast to Barth, who builds up a Great Wall for Christian theology by limiting theology to Christian circles and rejecting natural theology, Bavinck’s and Pannenberg’s commitment to theology is more meaningful dialogue with modern science and religions from various social backgrounds, thus broadening the horizon of theology. For them, natural theology has the trait of catholicity—it is not only a topic for the Christian church but for the world. Given how Bavinck and Pannenberg treat theology as a science, natural theology must be open to both believers and non-believers. It is by no means an accident that both Bavinck and Pannenberg answer “Yes” to support a certain kind of natural theology.

Secondly, with the development of modern natural science and modern theology, especially the influence of Schleiermacher and the Ritschlian School, the word “nature” is taken for granted as a constant and invariant concept. Meanwhile, the concept of “nature” in theology already implies a layer of meaning that is the opposite of “revelation.” As I show above, both Bavinck and Pannenberg are aware of the changing concept of “nature” given its historical background. Different social contexts endow different meanings to terms like “nature” and “natural theology.” Therefore, they investigate the development of these terms against the background of theological thoughts. Then they distinguish among different meanings of natural theology in various categories. In fact, even for the most pro-natural theology views, they still warn of the danger of dualism by putting natural theology and revelation theology on opposing ends. As I discuss above, both Bavinck and Pannenberg provide the third way, a different approach from Barth or this dualistic version of natural theology. They significantly develop the theme of natural theology as one with organic integrality. It is based on the revelation of God, and thus overcomes dualism. Although they present different frameworks of epistemology when referring to natural theology, both Bavinck and Pannenberg clearly distinguish two kinds of knowledge in the theme of natural theology: the innate knowledge of God and the acquired knowledge of God. These two kinds of knowledge are interwoven and cannot be separated from each other. This also shows the same emphasis on organic and totality in Bavinck’s and Pannenberg’s theological motifs.

Thirdly, Bavinck and Pannenberg reject the possibility of natural theology being derived or abstracted from pure reason. And both Bavinck and Pannenberg consider religious experiences as the nonthematic knowledge of God which is always prior to

human theological and philosophical reflection. Therefore, it cannot be equal to religious experience.

Last and not least in modern times, both Bavinck and Pannenberg are aware of the significance of contextualization. Today, globalization and modernization extend and challenge the horizon of Christian theology. With this background, natural theology is no longer limited in Christian circles like Barth claims in his discussion about the relationship between nature and grace, general revelation and special revelation, and so on. Natural theology cannot avoid these significant problems, such as how to understand the relationship between Christianity and other religions, and how to deal with the religions which pre-existed before Christianity, like Greek natural theology. Besides, when Christianity's proclamation of truth is no longer as self-evident, how can theology dialogue with atheism and other religions? For example, how should theology respond to the religious critique by Feuerbach who sees religions as human illusion? How does theology face the modern world which holds a different cosmology from the ancient time?

Bavinck has already made contributions to these topics. But where Bavinck remains limited by his own time, Pannenberg's insights become supplemental. He integrates modern scientific thought to construct his theology, attempting to expand natural theology to the theology of nature. Both these two theologians hope that theology may enlighten modern people by becoming a science, a body of truths. In today's fragmented academic world, this interdisciplinary work is valuable but faces many challenges. Pannenberg's ambition, for example, may encounter setbacks when engaging

every subfield of natural sciences.¹⁴⁰ Even a philosophy of science cannot supply authority, and this becomes more difficult for theology. But at least Bavinck and Pannenberg have shown the relevance and value of modern theology to natural science.

This chapter discusses the natural theology of Bavinck and Pannenberg, delving into respective understanding of the relation between revelation and nature. In the following chapter, a thorough investigation will be conducted on the issue of revelation and history, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the differences and similarities in their respective theology of revelation.

¹⁴⁰ John Polkinghorne, "Fields and theology: A response to Wolfhart Pannenberg," *Zygon* 36, no. 4 (2001): 795-97.

Chapter 4

History and Revelation

In the preceding chapter, an investigation was conducted on the perspectives of natural theology as presented by Bavinck and Pannenberg. This chapter will proceed to look at and compare the views of these two theologians about another way of revelation: history. My main argument is that Bavinck's and Pannenberg's views on history diverge significantly from the traditional Christian "historical view," hence embodying a more contemporary comprehension and reflection about history. Both theologians use the idea of "universal history" as a means of supplanting conventional understanding of "redemptive history" or "sacred history." Moreover, both employ the motifs of organism and totality in their analysis of history, aiming to transcend the inherent "dualisms" present in the traditional Christian perspective on history as well as in contemporary historicism. Furthermore, despite the presence of certain shortcomings, in the theological perspectives on history put out by Bavinck and Pannenberg, their contributions have still broadened the horizons of comprehending revelation in a modern context.

4.1 Introduction

Historical studies have become a double-edged sword for theology in modern times. On the one hand, traditional Christianity sees itself as a historical religion, basing its doctrine on real historical events, and thus distinguishing itself from other religions' mythological stories. On the other hand, with the rise of natural science and positivism,

historical criticism became one of the most powerful sources of opposition to theological assertions.¹

Around the time of the Enlightenment, historical research started to detach itself from theology, no longer working as a servant for Christian faith, as it had done in the past to defend the latter. Instead, it began challenging Christianity's validity. Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when historical research underwent a revolution, the study of history has become a new discipline that no longer views past events as God's providence and the outcome of God's supernatural involvement. Rather, these theological explanations are often considered as a barrier to historical research's goal of objectivity and science as value-free.² Historical research remained connected with the transcendent idea until the early nineteenth century, but most historians in the twentieth century agreed that history is a process of comprehending past events via archives and relics, then recounting them. Thus, historical knowledge is guaranteed to remain fractured, and scholars only conjecture about what occurred based on the resources available. As a result, many contemporary historians, especially those adhering to historical positivism, regard theology with skepticism, often questioning its validity and legitimacy within the domain of historical studies, perceiving it as an obsolete ideology.³

¹ Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought*, 9-12.

² Gotthold Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, translated and ed. by Henry Chadwick (California: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53; Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 202-89; Van Austin Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966); Leonard Krieger, "Elements of Early Historicism: Experience, Theory, and History in Ranke," *History and Theory* 14, no. 4 (1975): 1-14. Zahrt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in The Twentieth Century*, 204-5.

³ Carl Lotus Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers (Second Edition)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 18; Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore- Rinvolucris (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 15-30.

Theology and history, on the other hand, were not wholly separate, but these two were nonetheless interconnected and impacted by one another. Despite the growth of historicism in Germany throughout the nineteenth century, as exemplified by Ranke, who stresses positivism and argues “that the nature of a thing lies in its history,”⁴ historical studies did not relinquish the concept of universal history or the quest for the meaning of history.⁵ Many scholars have discovered that so-called “objective” historical studies is ultimately not value-free at all, since it must still address problems such as what history means. According to Löwith, the contemporary Western concept of history “originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfilment and ends with the secularization of its eschatology pattern.”⁶ Löwith distinguishes the uniqueness of the historical view in Christianity from the cyclical view of history in other ancient civilizations. Modern interpretations of history, according to Löwith, are just variations on these two paradigms.

⁴ Frank R. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1.

⁵ The one of most representative figures is Leopold von Ranke, and his work, *Universal History: The Oldest Historical Group of Nations and the Greeks* (New York: Haper & Brothers, 1885). For a background on the conflict between theology and history arising from Ranke’s concept of universal history, see Eberhard Kessel, “Rankes Idee der Universalhistorie.” *Historische Zeitschrift* 178, no. 1 (1954): 269-308; Georg G. Iggers, “Historicism: the History and Meaning of the Term.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 1 (1995): 129-152. Reinhart Koselleck, “Wozu noch Historie?,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 212, no. 1 (1971): 1-18; Koselleck identifies three processes of modern historical study that were conceptualized in the West, especially in Germany: the formation and emergence of natural history (*historia naturalis*); the integration of sacred history into the universal history; and the concept of world history gradually replaced the traditional concept of universal history. See Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. by Todd Samuel Presner etc., (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1-37, 154-69, 218-35; David Christian, “The Return of Universal History,” *History and Theory* 49, no. 4 (2010): 6-27.

⁶ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 2.

In contrast to Löwith's Euro-Christian-centric conception of history, Jaspers rejects Ranke's notion by stating that "World history was the history of the West."⁷ For Jaspers, history should be an objective reality that can be accepted not just by Western Christianity but also the rest of the world. He introduces the notion of an "axis" of world history, expanding the scope of history to non-Western regions such as China and India, and emphasizing that an axis of world history can only be discovered by empirical investigation of the structure of world history.⁸

In this context, the link between history and faith has clearly been one of most prominent subjects since the Enlightenment. The following section will engage in this long-running debate by bringing Bavinck and Pannenberg into conversation as well as their respective perspectives on the subject. Because of the limited space available, I will concentrate on three issues. First, how did both theologians understand the relationship between the historical research methodology and revelation? Second, what is the meaning of history to Bavinck and Pannenberg? Lastly, how did they approach the question of universal history? My main argument is that, notwithstanding the differences in the socio-historical and theological context in which Bavinck and Pannenberg lived, they both seek the concept of universal history involving revelation to overcome the dualism that has dichotomized history and faith since the Enlightenment. History is one of the most important themes in both their theologies, there is a surprising degree of similarity

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), xiv.

⁸ Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 1-2. Notably, both Löwith and Jaspers were Pannenberg's teachers, in his book *Theologie und Philosophie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), which Pannenberg dedicates to them and to Nicolai Hartmann.

in their historical view, which reflects the fact they share a common debt to the varieties of modern thoughts.

Both Bavinck and Pannenberg oppose the idea that to avoid the challenges of modern historical studies and science, theology abandons its own objectivity and resorts solely to subjective faith. Instead, they claim an objective faith based on historical events, and they incorporate some of the contemporary historical discipline's advancement with reflecting and criticizing into their theologies. They are also aware of the connection between the concept of universal history and historical meaning. However, when Bavinck attempts to transform the concept of redemptive history into universal history, he creates contradictions and inconsistencies in his own system of thought; i.e., on the one hand, he emphasizes a multilinear historical process, and on the other hand, he forces the elimination of the multilinear view of history with an exclusively redemptive history. Pannenberg, unlike Bavinck, is cognizant of the link between history and hermeneutics, as well as of the problems encountered in the concept of redemptive history and in the extension of the concept of universal history to the scope of world history. Pannenberg's insights may be able to rectify some of Bavinck's view of history. Finally, my critique is that although Bavinck and Pannenberg's historical perspectives have taken into consideration the extension of global history as well as contemporary knowledge and culture, they remain, to some extent, a "Western-centric" understanding of "universal history" that requires more openness and reflection.

4.2 Bavinck on History and Revelation

In this section, I will first discuss how Bavinck understands the relationship between history and revelation.

4.2.1 Literature Review

According to previous research in the subfield of Bavinck studies, especially in relation to the theme of revelation, Bavinck highlights the importance of history as a form of revelation.⁹ But some significant disputes persist among Bavinck scholars. These disagreements center on several issues, including what Bavinck's concept of history means, how Bavinck views the relationship between history and revelation, and whether Bavinck's understanding of history is impacted and shaped by modern thoughts. Jan Veenhof is one of the first to concentrate on and explore in detail the theme of history, observing that Bavinck is well aware that the relationship between revelation and history is a hot topic discussed in modern theological disputes.¹⁰ Veenhof argues that Bavinck's understanding of history has been influenced by a variety of nineteenth century ideas. First, Bavinck rejects a mechanical-evolutionary view of history in favor of an integrated, organic and progressive conception of history. For Veenhof, Bavinck rediscovers the dimension of history in special revelation, avoiding the ahistorical rationalistic perspective of revelation. Second, Bavinck's focus on history set him apart from the experiential theology, which places too much stress on subjectivity.¹¹ Veenhof

⁹ Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 327-42; Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 62; Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 62-64.

¹⁰ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 327.

¹¹ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 333.

particularly emphasizes that Bavinck does not just accept modern thoughts like Lessing's and Hegel's theories without critique; rather, Bavinck challenges Hegel's dualism and speculative rationalism, which separates idea from fact in history. Bavinck sees that this dualism of idea and fact is unachievable in practice, since history is necessarily a combination of both.¹² In Veenhof's view, Bavinck's organic view of history merges temporal and eternal meanings, fact and word. And this view also shapes Bavinck's understanding of covenant theology as a progressive unification of God's work in the course of history, and salvation history takes on the meaning of universal history. As a result, Christianity is both historical and "*Gegenwartsreligion*."¹³

Veenhof has added a crucial component to our understanding of Bavinck's idea of revelation, particularly the relationship between the meaning of history and revelation. Similarly, Hielema claims, "the category of history is central to Bavinck's doctrine of revelation,"¹⁴ and he also realizes that Bavinck's idea of the organic and history are inseparable, so he concludes that for Bavinck, "creaturely existence is historical, developing through time from its beginning to its divinely appointed end. This history of redemption is appropriately described through progressive revelation."¹⁵ Unlike Veenhof, however, Hielema describes Bavinck's concept of history as essentially equivalent to redemptive history as presented by progressive revelation, but Hielema does not mention

¹² Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 333-35.

¹³ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 338-42.

¹⁴ Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 62.

¹⁵ Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 101.

any concept of universal history. It implies that he directly equates Bavinck's concept of history with salvation history.¹⁶

Other scholars have the opposite view to Veenhof's, frequently using the term "history" directly without delving into Bavinck's meaning of history and historical method. This position touches on a more contentious aspect of Bavinck's research: whether there is a tension in Bavinck's thought between "orthodoxy" and "modernity." This approach suggests that they consider Bavinck's usage of the term history is a continuation of traditional Christian, and especially Reformed, theological terminology, uncontaminated by modern thought. Thus, they would question the legitimacy of Veenhof's arguments and place Bavinck in radical opposition to the development of German idealism and other trends since the eighteenth century. For example, Brian G. Mattson attacks Veenhof's perspective that "grace restores nature." And Mattson argues that Veenhof overlooks "the conceptual architecture of this creational theology" in understanding Bavinck's covenant theology.¹⁷ Mattson, however, ignores that Veenhof's discussion of Bavinck's covenant theology is not discussed within an ontological metaphysics, but rather within the themes of the relationship of general revelation and history.¹⁸ Mattson merely simplifies Bavinck's view of history to a salvation history with an eschatological teleology, oblivious to the complexity and change in Bavinck's thought, especially the part of Bavinck's view of historical method.¹⁹ Mattson portrays

¹⁶ Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 199-210.

¹⁷ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 240.

¹⁸ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 330-32.

¹⁹ Although Mattson claims that in Veenhof's secondary literature discussing Bavinck's organic language, Veenhof ignores the influence of Geerhardus Vos on Bavinck, asserting that "there is no reference to Vos in Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*," (Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 52n143.) This is

Bavinck, along with Kuyper, as genuinely German philosophical antagonists, who “were speaking to the critical issues of their day out of resources internal to their own historical-theological tradition.”²⁰ Likewise, based on Mattson’s perspective, Eglinton also places Bavinck apart from European modern philosophy, especially the trend of German organicism without demonstrating any pertaining theme of history in Bavinck’s thought.²¹ In short, scholars such as Mattson and Eglinton assert that Bavinck was a theologian who sought resources from orthodoxy to address modern issues and challenges, rather than a theologian who absorbed and drew upon the intellectual achievements of the nineteenth century. To put it in Eglinton’s own words, “this is not say that nineteenth century philosophical preoccupation with teleological concepts of history play roles; it likely provided them the motivation to draw on these internal resources to provide a biblical and Reformed answer to what they viewed as the pantheistic and evolutionary thought-forms of their day.”²²

One of the significant contrasts between the two opposing views stated above is whether Bavinck’s thought is consistent and continuous, whether there are core ideas in Bavinck’s thought are drawn from the modern thought and distinct from the traditional. Specifically on the aspect of history and historical method, Veenhof emphasizes

untrue because in Veenhof’s discussion of Bavinck’s thought on the relationship between revelation and history, Veenhof cites Vos to prove the organic-fact of revelation and asserts that revelation “is not events that took place once and have now lost that took place once and have now lost their significance,” but rather that revelation occurs progressively in history to reveal its significance, especially in Christ, see, Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 338.

²⁰ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 49-50.

²¹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68.

²² Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 61.

Bavinck's modernity that is given little or no attention in the opposite position advocated by Mattson and Eglinton. In the following section, I will describe that the concept and method of history, as well as the relationship to revelation, are significant components of Bavinck's thought. I will demonstrate that, to some extent, Bavinck's historical view has a modern flavor rather than a continuation of the traditional view.²³ My argument is that Bavinck's view of history and historical meaning demonstrate that he was affected, not just by the circumstances of his period, but also by a conflict and contradiction in his thinking.

4.2.2 Bavinck on Historical Research and Historical Criticism

First, let us consider the historical view in Bavinck's texts, which clearly demonstrate that Bavinck is well aware of the significant changes that the historical studies and concepts have undergone in modern times. Bavinck has realized the distinction between ancient and modern historical horizons: with the advancement of natural science and society in modern time, the term of "history" is interpreted differently than it was in ancient time. Since the fifteenth century, with the expansion of geographic discovery and global travel, Westerners have broadened their horizons to include non-Western cultures, resulting in a Western view of history that seeks a universal, unified notion of history to understand different races and religions.²⁴ The development of the natural sciences also influenced historical studies. According to Bavinck, the paradigm

²³ Also see John Bolt, "Grand Rapids between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck's reception and influence in North America," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (2003): 263-280.

²⁴ *PoR*, 95.

established by the natural sciences through the use of the inductive method has been prevalent since the eighteenth century, and the experimental and reproducible characteristics of natural science were seen as a more reliable objectivity. Thus, it was also thought that historical research could be called science.²⁵ It was the influence of rationalism that has led to the historical approach of Ernst Troeltsch in theology, which stressed a scientific, objective theology, aiming to examine history as a mathematical-mechanical, nature scientific style.²⁶

Bavinck, on the contrary, emphasizes that history involves both fact and meaning, and that there are still major disparities between the historical study and natural science. First, for historiography, not everything that occurs in human society constitutes a historical record. Contrarily, the recorded historical events themselves already entail people's subjective value judgments. Indeed, for Bavinck, historiography "makes selection and treats only that which in a definite sense is important and possesses a real value."²⁷ In Bavinck's view, the historian "must proceed from the belief that there are universal value."²⁸ Therefore, history cannot be a neutral, value-free science like natural science.²⁹ History relies on the historical consciousness of human beings to understand its meaning. Furthermore, Bavinck underlines that natural science and historical studies also differ in their treatment of the relationship between the universal and the particular.

²⁵ *PoR*, 92.

²⁶ *RD*, 1:69-70.

²⁷ *PoR*, 105.

²⁸ *PoR*, 105.

²⁹ Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 118.

Bavinck distinguishes between historical and natural scientific approaches. For natural science, the presupposition is that of the universal law, which seeks the general law of things, without considering the particular in nature. Nature science is characterized by repetition and experimentation because of this premise of universality. History, on the other hand, does not “make us acquainted with laws.”³⁰ In Bavinck’s view, historical studies must be concerned with particularity, the meaning offered by those concrete historical events; nevertheless, historiography also enquires into the universality of history, since “history aims at the knowledge of the idea, of the sense of history. Bare facts (*naakte feiten*) do not satisfy us; we want to see behind the facts the idea which combines and governs them.”³¹ In other words, history involves both objectivity and subjectivity.

While theologians have attempted to respond to this onslaught of theological validity by natural scientific methods through the historical criticism and comparative religion study, Bavinck believes that the relationship between Christianity and history has not been properly grasped. First, Bavinck argues that these approaches to historical criticism are not as objective as they claim to be, but rather imply a number of assumptions that historical events must follow certain natural laws, assumptions that have ruled out the possibility of God intervening in history, as well as miracles.³² Second, Bavinck contends that when theology relies too much on comparative religious methods, it misses the essence of Christianity. Bavinck admits that in comparative religious-

³⁰ *PoR*, 107.

³¹ *PoR*, 108.

³² Bavinck, “The Essence of Christianity” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 39.

historical studies carry certain advantages for Christianity, but its inductive method would result in “an abstract formula, a formula that would completely lack any understanding of the fullness and richness of life.”³³ Bavinck, similar to Pannenberg’s argument that will be discussed later, maintains that Christianity is a positive religion that must be understood in history via revelation, rather than a philosophy that can be abstractly reduced to its essence.³⁴ And Bavinck advocates an open approach to historical inquiry that allows for the possibility of miracles and states that historical research still needs to be faith-based, “leads to the conviction that Jesus, according to his own words and the faith of the church from the beginning, was the Christ.”³⁵

4.2.3 Bavinck on Periodization and the Meaning of History

Today, historical studies have attempted to use different historical views to understand the meaning and development of history, such as Marx’s materialism. The issue of historical periodization has become an essential features of the modern historical studies.³⁶ However, Bavinck scholars like Mattson and Eglinton have virtually ignored these related themes in which Bavinck was engaged, leading to a propensity to comprehend Bavinck’s perspective of history in an abstract way. I argue that the question of historical periodization represents not only Bavinck’s organic view of history and historical method, but also Bavinck’s “modernity” that seeks a dialogue across various

³³ Bavinck, “The Essence of Christianity,” 39.

³⁴ Bavinck, “The Essence of Christianity,” 39.

³⁵ Bavinck, “The Essence of Christianity,” 46.

³⁶ Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History Into Periods?* trans. M. B. DeBevoise (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1-4.

disciplines. In other words, Bavinck's organic view of history contains many modern features.

First, based on his organic view of history, Bavinck opposes the monistic-evolutionary study of a single historical periodization. Bavinck argues that these monistic-evolutionary views of history, despite their resorting to various causes, such as mechanistic, psychological, religious, biological, social or economic development and so on, all use a single and vague formula in explaining the development of human history while ignoring the diversity and complexity of historical reality. Consequently, they all eventually accept some ideology as a law in order to comprehend the historical process. However, in Bavinck's view, these various interpretations of history "have only succeeded in making evident the richness of life and the complication of conditions."³⁷

Bavinck rejects the use of an abstract term to summarize the characteristics of a historical epoch in its entirety. Although he often uses terms like *ancient*, *medieval*, and *modern* to distinguish between different periods, or to use terms like *Reformation* or *Enlightenment* to characterize a period (even Bavinck uses these in his writings), Bavinck still reflects and reminds people of the fact that "we do not comprehend the totality of such a period, by any means, in such a formula."³⁸ For example, Bavinck uses the historical term "Reformation" as an example that does not adequately describe the overall circumstances of the time since the Renaissance, the rise of global trade and international communication, and a period of philosophical and natural science revival at the same time. These exemplify the limitations of a single linear historical periodization. In any

³⁷ *PoR*, 99.

³⁸ *PoR*, 100.

era, “no one of these names answers to the fullness of the reality.”³⁹ As a result, an artificial, abstract historical creation has taken the place of reality: only a small band of peoples is considered, excluding all others; and events and situations that occurred side by side are purposely placed in sequence.⁴⁰ Bavinck argues that these historical divisions based on the evolutionary hypothesis can be readily falsified by historical facts. For example, in ancient periods, Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and Greece were highly civilized, while numerous primitive tribes still exist today. These counterexamples contradict a single-linear view of historical course. Bavinck refers to this as a positive treatment of history, in which historical events were manipulated to meet its own theory of history. Actually, history is not a singular, progressive line, but diverse and complex, and Bavinck agrees with historian von Ranke, and says, “even if a period is older in history, it is very possible that it may have something which it alone possesses and by which it excels all others.”⁴¹

Secondly, Bavinck recognizes that history is marked by diversity: it is both universal and particular, subjective and objective, transcendent and immanent. Despite his rejection of the monistic-evolutionary notion of periodization, Bavinck avoids the quicksand of historicism and relativism which reject the existence of the reign of law in human history. He claims that in order to comprehend history, one must have “universally valid values,” both in terms of its periodization and meaning.

³⁹ *PoR*, 101.

⁴⁰ *PoR*, 95. Emphasis in the original.

⁴¹ *PoR*, 101.

For Bavinck, the search for the laws and patterns of history reflects the human desire for meaning, “in our innermost soul (*gemoed*) we all believe in such a course and such an aim in history.”⁴² In Bavinck’s opinion, positivism was incapable of providing historical meaning. He regards religion and philosophy as the sole sources of meaning for history. If this is the case, the field of historical studies must eventually evolve into a philosophy of history, since “the essence and development of history cannot be understood without metaphysics.”⁴³ Furthermore, the meaning of history cannot be merely immanent, but has a transcendental dimension. Bavinck adds, “we cannot know this from the facts in themselves but we borrow this conviction from philosophy, for our view of life and of the world—that is to say, from our faith. Just as there is no physics without metaphysics, there is no history without philosophy, without religion and ethics.”⁴⁴

Lastly, although the transcendental component is necessary for the meaning of history, Bavinck does not think that all of philosophy’s abstract conceptions of transcendence can provide the foundation for authentic historical meaning. He specifically criticizes Heinrich Rickert’s historical philosophy, arguing that, although Rickert stresses that historical meaning has an absolute transcendent value, this still continues the view of German idealism and rests immanently in the nature of the world.⁴⁵ For Bavinck, the ground for the transcendental dimension of historical meaning cannot be

⁴² *PoR*, 102.

⁴³ *PoR*, 103.

⁴⁴ *PoR*, 109.

⁴⁵ German idealism is not just an assertion of historical immanence as Bavinck misunderstands. For an example of the thought of later Schelling, see Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 317-32.

achieved by postulating abstractions like freedom. For these abstract concepts are not real, but personal attributes; “they are no transcendent powers or forces which realize themselves and can break down all opposition, but they are conceptions (*denkbeelden*) which we have derived from reality and have disassociated from it by our thinking.”⁴⁶ Therefore, historical meaning must be transcendently based on the existence of God. Bavinck asserts that the idea of “meaning” cannot be abstract, but must be generated from reality. Bavinck asserts, “If history is to remain what it is and must be, it presupposes the existence and activity of an all-wise and omnipotent God, who works out his own counsels in the course of the world.”⁴⁷

4.2.4 Bavinck on the Relationship of Revelation and History

As a whole, history and revelation are inseparable. According to Bavinck’s organic view of revelation, revelation cannot exist without the world and nature. Revelation unfolds gradually in history, giving history its true meaning while it reveals its own laws in history. Bavinck emphasizes, “the confession of the unity of God is the foundation of the true view of nature and also of history.”⁴⁸ Only in this unity does the universal meaning of history gradually present itself through the self-revelation of God. Bavinck contends that even the assumption of the unity of man is accepted in evolutionary theory, implicitly presupposing that the nature of man is unchanging. However, Bavinck points out that this premise is based on revelation rather than

⁴⁶ *PoR*, 110.

⁴⁷ *PoR*, 110-11.

⁴⁸ *PoR*, 111.

science.⁴⁹ Like Troeltsch, Bavinck believes that knowledge of history can only be meaningful if individuals from various eras are homogeneous and understand each other, allowing historians to pass on these knowledge and conceptions to future generations.⁵⁰

For Bavinck, in contrast to nature, history is a higher and richer measure, in which “the indispensability and significance of revelation appears.”⁵¹ Moreover, history and the Word of God are inextricably intertwined. History “is itself the realization of God’s thoughts, the expression of his divine plan.”⁵² Instead of reason, it is the universality and truthfulness of revelation that causes it to unfold in history as an eternal, universal event. The organicism of revelation suggests that it is characterized by both objectivity and subjectivity. Because revelation is knowledge of God and possesses the objectivity of truth, it is objective and universal for all ages; but, it is subjective and restricted because it is received progressively in history via experience by human awareness.⁵³

Bavinck opposes the trending of divorcing biblical revelation from historical events.⁵⁴ Because both general revelation and special revelation in Scripture occur in specific historical processes, they must be understood in conjunction with the historical context. The Scripture is not “a legal document, the articles of which only need to be looked up for a person to find out what its view is in a given case.”⁵⁵ Thus, it is

⁴⁹ *PoR*, 113.

⁵⁰ *PoR*, 113.

⁵¹ *RD*, 1:343 and *PoR*, 92.

⁵² *RD*, 1:354.

⁵³ *RD*, 1:91-93.

⁵⁴ *RD*, 1:354-55.

⁵⁵ *RD*, 1:83.

impossible to understand the faith solely in terms of Scripture by separating it from the history of Christianity as a whole and its doctrine. This position not only distinguishes Bavinck from the conservative biblicism, which confines special revelation to the Scriptures; it also demonstrates that Bavinck is very different from Barthian and Bultmannian approaches to biblical interpretation, but similar to Pannenberg's view of revelation as history, which attempts to speak of the unity of God's Word and historical events.

Bavinck outlines the process of interaction between revelation and history in a Hegelian-like way of understanding historical development. He emphasizes that all peoples may learn about the general revelation of God through nature and history. Thus, general revelation itself reveals the meaning of history to some degree. However, in Bavinck's opinion, such meanings are not ultimate and comprehensive historical meanings. Rather, they are only supposed to reveal the ultimate, higher meaning under special revelation. As a result, Bavinck portrays Christianity as the exclusive religion that contains God's special revelation, which "lie the roots of a higher valuation of history and of temporal life in general...Christianity is itself the central content of this great history."⁵⁶ In contrast to other religions, Bavinck believes that Christianity provides the most accurate explanation of the meaning of history when he says,

Christianity is not exclusively a teaching about salvation, but it is salvation itself, brought about by God in the history of the world. As a matter of fact, in all religions there is an awareness that faith and 'history' [*historie*] coinhere.... In Christianity, however, salvation is unleashed, on the one hand, on the whole cosmic process, and on the other, on the heart and soul, the core and essence of all world history.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 119-20.

⁵⁷ Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 115-16.

In the above paragraph, similar to a kind of Hegelian religious view, Bavinck depicts Christianity as the supplier of historical meaning. Bavinck asserts that only Christianity is capable of presenting a universal view of history and of organically unifying humanity. In other words, “[Christianity] gives it content and form, meaning and purpose. It makes history what it is and what it must be.”⁵⁸

4.2.5 An Appraisal of Bavinck’s Historical View

The above demonstration provides the framework of Bavinck’s historical view, but there are still some ambiguities and tensions in his theory.

First, regarding to the subject of history and historical significance, Bavinck does not make a serious distinction between the role of Christianity and Christ. He frequently interchanges the two terms, giving the erroneous impression that the terms are identical. For example, in some texts, Bavinck goes on to point out that it is the Christ in history, and the action and resurrection of Jesus in history, that gives meaning to history and is at its heart, because, “God is Lord of the ages” and that “Christ is the turning point of those ages,” the history of humanity that can unite.⁵⁹ Without Christ, Bavinck asserts that “history falls to pieces. It has lost its heart, its kernel, its center, its distribution. It has lost itself in the history of races and nations, of natural and cultural peoples.”⁶⁰ It is clear that, to a certain extent, Bavinck has equated Christianity with Christ in understanding history.

⁵⁸ Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 121.

⁵⁹ *PoR*, 116.

⁶⁰ *PoR*, 115.

When talking about special revelation, Bavinck underlines this even further, saying that “the special revelation given to us in Christ does not only confirm certain assumptions for us. History begins here and must begin here, but it itself gives us history, the core and true content of all history. Christianity itself is history; it creates history, is one of the main factors of history, and is itself the very thing that elevates history above nature and natural processes.”⁶¹ Regrettably, this absolute and arbitrary conclusion forces Bavinck to forget his own resistance to the singular linear historical view, and to place the diverse and complicated history in a Procrustean way to fit the particular phase of Christianity in the West. As mentioned in the literature review in the preceding section, this ambiguity is one of the reasons for the disagreement, among some academics, such as Veenhof, regard Bavinck’s history as universal history, while others, such as Hielema, regard it as redemptive history.

Second, Bavinck is aware of the impact and shape of globalization and scientific development on modern historical horizons. There is a tension between his modern historical consciousness and his conventional conception of redemptive history. Based on organism, Bavinck tries not only to overcome various dualisms and dichotomies, but also to break with the traditional Western Christian view of history. Bavinck recognizes the flaw of that single linear interpretation of history, and underlines a multilinear and diversified historical perspective. This displays Bavinck’s ability to see history from a modern perspective. Bavinck makes an effort to understand universal and redemptive history as a unified whole. This creates tension and conflict in Bavinck’s view of history, and he also confuses the significance of Christ for history with the significance of

⁶¹ *PoR*, 115.

Christianity for history, without making the more nuanced distinctions that have led him to simplify or dismiss Greek, as well as non-Western, non-Christian history as non-historical meanings.

Bavinck, for example, constrained by the limitations of his own time, simplifies the Greek view of history as a kind of Cyclicism, claiming that

They knew people, but not humanity, and for that reason they could not arrive at a uniform history. History was caught up in the rising and falling of nations, in a monotonous repetition of the past... There is a restless coming and going of worlds, but in that endless process there is no progress, no hope of an eternal rest. By contrast, Christianity presents a history of humanity, a development that proceeds from a certain point and moves toward a specific goal, progressing toward the absolute ideal... History becomes an immense drama that leads through suffering to glory, a divine comedy that shows the gradual but certain realization of the kingdom of God and that casts glimpses of divine glory over this sad world.⁶²

Such an opinion, however, was still popular in Western historical theory at the beginning of the twentieth century, but this simplistic dichotomy is entirely incorrect in the expansion and deepening of the studies of global and religious history after Bavinck, so this theory has been criticized and challenged by many scholars.⁶³ In the next part, we will see how Pannenberg changes his view in his early and later thought.

Moreover, Bavinck falls into the same fallacy that he condemns about the linear narrative of history, when he argues, "In Christianity, God becomes the God of history. For the ancient peoples, God always remained a force of nature to which also society,

⁶² Bavinck, "Evolution (1907)" in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 107.

⁶³ Robert Bernasconi, "With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel's Eurocentrism," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 22, no. 2 (2000): 171-201; John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14-21; and Enrique Dussel, "Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-System and the Limits of Modernity," in *The Cultures of Globalization* edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 3-31.

meaning humanity, was in the end subjected; but in Christianity, God is the God of history, who fulfills his counsel in the world.”⁶⁴ Here Bavinck, in addition to ignoring the question of how to deal with other non-Christian religions before and after the establishment of Christianity, is not historically accurate simply by looking at the history of Christianity. For example, to some extent, Bavinck even ignores the historical relevance of Judaism and the issue of how Christianity dealt with Judaism. More than that, in fact, Bavinck tends to view history through the narrow lens of Western Christianity, while neglecting the historical view of the Eastern Church in the same Christian setting. Thus, Bavinck’s emphasis on an organic and multilinear approach is swallowed up by his own rushed narrative of his desire to unify universal history with salvation history. Bavinck’s theory must respond to the following inquiries: Are the historiographies of cultures and peoples meaningless, where have not been touched by Christian missions, such as pre-modern China, India, and Africa? Or are they simply interpreted as preparatory work and paving the way for the global expansion of Christianity? Specifically, are they possible that ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian’s historiography *The Records* or Herodotus’s *Histories*, without having been baptized by the Christian historical narrative, is neither historical nor ultimately meaningful? Eventually, the meaning of universal history becomes not a real world history, but a history of the spread of Western Christianity.

Besides, we can plainly see his Western-centric vision of history, even a kind of colonialism in Bavinck's discourse. In 1913, he wrote one article, “Christianity and Natural Science,” in which he discusses the use of humanistic or Christian education in

⁶⁴ Bavinck, “Christianity and Natural Science” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 97.

Dutch colonial education in Indonesia. Bavinck further points out that it was Christianity that made universal history possible; he says,

it is Christianity that has made possible a uniform history and made it known to us as one mighty, gigantic drama that includes all peoples, the entire world. On that basis I believe that we have to dispute the claim that culture without religion and without Christianity would definitely be adequate for the population in our colonies in order to give that population what it needs.⁶⁵

Although we cannot anachronistically expect Bavinck, who lived over a century ago, to be thoughtful and critical of colonialism, this disregard of the meaning and complexity of Indonesian indigenous history at least casts doubt on the validity of Bavinck's concept of universal history.⁶⁶ At least one thing is sure: that Bavinck is still engrossed in his own critique of the historical view.

4.3 Pannenberg on History and Revelation

In the following section, I will expound upon Pannenberg's historical view, subsequently undertaking a comparative analysis with Bavinck's historical view. I suggest that Pannenberg's historical perspective has the potential to provide some rectifications and supplements to Bavinck's viewpoint. In Pannenberg's system, the role of history and historical method is more prominent than in Bavinck's. It will be shown in the following part that Pannenberg, like Bavinck, strives to overcome the modern various dualism in the relationship between revelation and history, and instead offers an integrated, totality approach. The similarities in historical themes between Bavinck and

⁶⁵ Bavinck, "Christianity and Natural Science," 84.

⁶⁶ Anderson offers a perspective on how local people formed Indonesian nationalism and identity, as well as the peculiar language, in their opposition to colonial education during the Dutch colonial period. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), 131-35.

Pannenberg allow for a conversation and comparison between the two men, as well as demonstrating that, despite their differences, they share many modern thought resources on the understanding of history and revelation.

4.3.1 Literature Review

Although scholars have differing opinions and reservations about Pannenberg's historical view, most agree that Pannenberg's approach incorporates various modern ideas, especially German idealism, in order to overcome various dualism and extend the special historical event to universal history in the context of the history of transmission of traditions, which was considered a challenge and alternative to the dialectical theology, but also to the narrative of redemptive history.⁶⁷ Jürgen Moltmann applauds Pannenberg's proposition of "revelation as history." He thinks that Pannenberg's theory aptly tackles the dualistic tendencies since Kantian criticism, which tend to separate historical events from revelation. So, Pannenberg's theory can "free the theological consideration of the 'self-revelation' of God from the fetters of the reflectivity subjectivity," but Moltmann also notes that Pannenberg does not give a clear definition for the term of "history."⁶⁸ According to Theodore James Whapham, Pannenberg is a proponent of historical reason, who was inspired by Hegel, Dilthey, and Gadamer.⁶⁹ James Robinson emphasizes that Pannenberg rejects both redemptive history

⁶⁷ James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 1-15; Braaten and Philip Clayton edited, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 9.

⁶⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 76, 83-84.

⁶⁹ Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 18.

(*Heilsgeschichte*) and the “prehistory (*Urgeschichte*)” represented by Barth. Rather, Pannenberg believes that by integrating the methodologies of critical historical research, history may be understood as an objective event, as a “reality in its totality,” resulting in “a Christian narration of history.”⁷⁰ Carl Braaten, on the other hand, understands Pannenberg’s view of history in the context of German intellectual history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and claims that Pannenberg’s method “attempts to free the category of history from the naturalistic, positivistic determinant from which it suffered in its late nineteenth-century application in Biblical research.”⁷¹ Similarly, Avery Dulles points out that Pannenberg’s view of history “objected that the nineteenth-century salvation-history school stopped halfway.”⁷² Dulles affirms that Pannenberg’s historical paradigm “is more organic” and “less authoritarian than the propositional.”⁷³ But Dulles still criticizes Pannenberg’s interpretation of historical events, claiming that it blurs the barrier between historical reason and faith, resulting in a misunderstanding of the resurrection. Consequently, Pannenberg seeks to defend the objectivity of resurrection via the historical criticism. Dulles contends that the category of resurrection belongs to faith, but is mistreated when based on reason.⁷⁴

For Pannenberg’s historical paradigm, supporters approvingly argue that Pannenberg’s historical-theological approach finds a foundation for objectivity in

⁷⁰ Robinson, “Revelation as Word and as History,” in Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 27.

⁷¹ Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, 19.

⁷² Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 58.

⁷³ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 61.

⁷⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 64-65.

subjective faith. Not only does Pannenberg's thought have a certain openness to the future, but it can also harmonize theology and historical criticism, bringing theology back into the public domain, allowing interdisciplinary dialogue, and preventing the degeneration of Christianity to a subjective, private faith. Thus, Pannenberg extends the Christian concept of history in the past in a narrow sense to universal history, and combines historical understanding and hermeneutics, avoiding the conflicts and contradictions caused by the dichotomy between historical events and meanings.⁷⁵

However, Pannenberg's critics believe that he fails to discern between history and myth, and as a result has misunderstood the resurrection as a confirmed historical event.⁷⁶ Despite Pannenberg's efforts to bring an objectivity theology into conversation with the discipline of history, historians may find Pannenberg's emphasis on genuine historical events, such as the resurrection, to be unconvincing and unacceptable.⁷⁷ While disagreeing that Pannenberg's thought is historicism, William Hamilton argues that when Pannenberg combines history and hermeneutics, Pannenberg does not achieve the objectivity of historical events that he seeks, leading his fallacy of subjectivism. Hamilton comments that "it would seem that Pannenberg, with his special understanding of historical method, is doing much the same thing as Bultmann is doing with his distinction

⁷⁵ Hiroshi Obayashi, "Pannenberg and Troeltsch: History and Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1970): 401-419; Iain G. Nicol, "Facts and Meanings: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Theology as History and the Role of the Historical-Critical Method," *Religious Studies* 12, no. 2 (1976): 129-139; Helmut G. Harder, and W. Taylor Stevenson. "The Continuity of History and Faith in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Toward an Erotics of History," *The Journal of Religion* 51, no. 1 (1971): 34-56; Whapham, *The Unity of Theology*, 27-30.

⁷⁶ Robinson and Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 200-202.

⁷⁷ Robinson and Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 152-54.

between *Geschichte* and *Historie*.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, Iain G. Nicol says because that Pannenberg’s definition of “universal history” still reads history through the lens of the Jewish-Christian tradition, his historical tradition “is not open to the threat of new events which bear within themselves the power to shatter it.”⁷⁹ Thus, Nicol doubts the universal validity of this concept of “universal history.”

The controversy regarding Pannenberg’s historical-revelation position, as seen in the literature review above, centers on whether Pannenberg’s historical method provides an objective, universal scientific method, as Pannenberg asserts, and whether Pannenberg’s concept of universal history is valid.

4.3.2 Pannenberg on Historical Research and Historical Criticism

In this section, I will go through Pannenberg’s historical method and view of history. I argue that Pannenberg’s historical method is the product of a critical reflection on the modern historical method. The close connection between Pannenberg’s view of history and his philosophical system as a whole, such as “whole” and “part,” “universal” and “particular” and so on, has been overlooked to some extent by Pannenberg’s supporters and critics. Thus, Pannenberg’s approach to the resurrection as a historical event is methodologically valid and even is consistent with postmodern historiographical considerations. The main problem, however, is how to deal with the scriptures of other religions regarding to the similar concept of resurrection. I also further argue that Pannenberg himself also changed and revised the concept of universal history because of

⁷⁸ Robinson and Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 192.

⁷⁹ Nicol, “Facts and Meanings,” 138.

some early criticisms and his later studies. In addition, I shall examine and compare Pannenberg's theory with Bavinck's views discussed above. I think Pannenberg's view of history is similar to Bavinck's in many ways, and his relationship between hermeneutics and history may compensate for Bavinck's deficiencies.

Regarding their views on modern historical methodology, Pannenberg and Bavinck share some similarities, with both rejecting the positivist and historicist approach to history and realizing that historical research is not only a process of studying objective facts, while being influenced by the subjective factors of those involved. Following historian Collingwood, Pannenberg argues that historical studies are not an inductive process, in which one collects as much detailed information as possible at random and then discovers some objective laws. Rather, people always hypothesize and interpret historical events from their own existing perceptions. Therefore, Pannenberg arrives at a similar conclusion as Bavinck, that historical studies are guided by human interest from the beginning and entails some subjectivity.⁸⁰

For Pannenberg, the impact of neo-Kantianism and positivism on the social sciences, especially in historical research, was a radical dichotomy between fact and value. He points out that this dichotomy of fact and meaning is intolerable for the Christian faith, for it not only makes the faith a subjective interpretation, but also implies "an outmoded and questionable positivist historical method."⁸¹

⁸⁰ *BQT*, 1:71-72.

⁸¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Focal Essay: The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth," in Robinson and Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 126.

Similar to Bavinck's position, Pannenberg defines positivist historiography as a sort of historicism that is exclusively concerned with individual occurrences. Nevertheless, there is a difference between historical research and empirical science. Because historical events do not lend themselves to repeated tests like those found in empirical research, the current falsification criteria cannot be used to determine the truth of history.⁸² Because *Historie* is restricted to the investigation of past events and processes, it is impossible to comprehend all elements of the phenomenon in historical investigation. But *Geschichte*'s course has an impetus, "that takes it beyond the present and will in the future reveal the facts of the past in a new light, disclose new semantic relationships in them."⁸³ Thus, historical investigation necessarily involves the ultimate meaning and the essence of realities; like Bavinck, Pannenberg states that "since the meaning of a past event can be fully determined only in the total context of history [*Geschichte*] as a whole. This means that the frame of reference in philosophy must include not only past history but also the present and the future, while the historian excludes these from the formal scope of his discipline."⁸⁴

Nicol is well aware that Pannenberg is commenting on and criticizing historical investigation based on his own philosophical system as a whole.⁸⁵ Pannenberg is able to unite the universal and the contingent, the subjective and the objective in historical research. Pannenberg nevertheless agrees with Bavinck on this way, that the abstraction

⁸² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 62.

⁸³ Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 69.

⁸⁴ Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 70.

⁸⁵ Nicol, "Facts and Meanings," 131-32.

of the many events of a concrete process in the historiographical narrative does not rule out the contingency of events, Pannenberg emphasizes that “the whole sequence, as well as the individual events in it, is irreversible and unrepeatable. The individual events...are important because of their place and function in the sequence of the unique process, because of their relation to a historical process whose distinctive shape is discernible only in terms of its outcome.”⁸⁶ While doing historical investigation, one does not exhaust all of the events that occur throughout in the process, but rather selects only those that are representative and that have a substantial influence on the outcome. Thus, the particularity and contingency in history are not eliminated.

Pannenberg recognizes the need for faith in historical criticism, arguing that historical criticism is not the root of biblical authority and theology’s crisis.⁸⁷ However, Pannenberg also offers a critique of historical criticism. First, Pannenberg argues that historical criticism is a kind of anthropocentrism because it has tacitly eliminated all transcendental reality as a matter of course from the historical investigation. Today, historical research and the history of God’s revelation appear to have split into two entirely different fields, with the former being defined as discovering and reconstructing past events and then interpreting and understanding them in the light of contemporary experience, while the latter is considered to be based on a biblical witness that goes beyond ordinary criteria and cannot be evaluated by historical research. As a consequence, the former is commonly considered as objective, whereas the latter is

⁸⁶ *ST*, 2:67.

⁸⁷ *BQT*, 1:62.

regarded as subjective.⁸⁸ On the contrary, Pannenberg maintains that the history to which faith refers must also be objective and testable, “the history of God from which faith lives bear witness to the one true God only because the symphony of all human life finds its fulfillment in it.”⁸⁹

Pannenberg’s historical view, which attempts to integrate subjectivity and objectivity in history, has also been met with some criticism and skepticism. Some scholars like Klein and Hamilton criticize Pannenberg’s approach as purely speculation and even “justification by method,”⁹⁰ these criticisms are already understanding knowledge and faith as a dualism of objectivity and subjectivity. To this Pannenberg responds that the revelation received by faith is not an isolated event that occurs once and for all, but rather it presents itself as a whole over time, since “faith does not take the place of knowledge. On the contrary, it has its basis in an event which is a matter for knowing and which becomes known to us only by more or less adequate information.”⁹¹ Pannenberg is clearly attempting to avoid the mischaracterizing of faith as only a subjectivity sensation that may be reduced to a kind of self-delusion, and he is conscious of the influence of knowledge on one’s inner faith, but Pannenberg does not deny the component of subjectivity either.

⁸⁸ *BQT*, 1:38.

⁸⁹ *BQT*, 1:38.

⁹⁰ Günter Klein, ‘Offenbarung als Geschichte? Marginalien zu einem theologischen Program’, *Monatsschrift für Pastoralthologie* 51 (1962), 55-79; Robinson and Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 192.

⁹¹ Robinson and Cobb, Jr. eds., *Theology as History*, 129.

4.3.3 Pannenberg on the Meaning of History

Pannenberg, however, does not specifically address the issue of historical periodization, as Bavinck does. Rather, based on his “totality” theology, Pannenberg regards history as an undivided whole, a comprehensive aggregate of events, and any artificial historical periodization violates this integrity. He substitutes the issue of historical periodization with the notion of universal history and rejects the narrative of redemptive history. According to Pannenberg, only the meaning of history is reflected in universal history. The concept of universal history allows theology to escape from the rootless condition of subjective theology and provides an alternative to the single-line narrative of salvation history. He criticizes the perspective of redemptive history, which may quickly devolve into a self-construction of religious history that is largely subjective illusion.⁹² Thus, both the existential theology of Bultmann and Gogarten, “which dissolves history into the historicity of existence,” and Karl Barth’s understanding of the Incarnation in terms of “pre-history (*Urgeschichte*),” reduce real history to a historicity. Pannenberg points out that the above views and the traditional redemptive history view developed by Martin Kähler have the same motivation: they both regard critical-history investigation as a scientifically proven fact, which is incompatible with the events of salvation history, and thus must retreat from the objective historical experience to historicity, which emphasizes subjectivity.⁹³ Like Bavinck, in response to Troeltsch’s combination of historical-critical and analogical method to understanding history, Pannenberg comments that one of the assumptions driving Troeltsch’s theory is universal

⁹² *BQT*, 2:68-69.

⁹³ *BQT*, 1:15-16.

homogeneity. The problem is that Troeltsch's theory focuses on events of non-homogeneity by analogy, but it fails to unify universality and particularity.⁹⁴ Because of the inherent limits of human knowledge, the analogy approach to understanding history is likewise constrained. As Obayashi points out, Pannenberg's universal history provides a broad perspective, when compared to Troeltsch's Kantian epistemology.⁹⁵

Pannenberg argues that the notion of God itself entails the concept of universal history, and for all events in history, "no particular unitary event can be definitively understood from within itself."⁹⁶ Only through understanding history as a whole can the specific, particular historical events be fully comprehended. On the one hand, Pannenberg rejects Troeltsch's use of the metaphysics of universal history to rule out the possibility of contingency of events; on the other hand, like Bavinck, Pannenberg opposes a simply morphological approach to the unity of humans and thus to the unity of history. Pannenberg provides some examples such as Dilthey's use of psychological types as the basis for universal history, or Spengler, Toynbee, and Jaspers' appeals to cultural phenomena to bring about universal history. He concludes that "if one thinks of the unity of mankind in the sense of a biological unity of the species, or as a unity of a stream of life, one does not yet have a historical unity."⁹⁷ Pannenberg insists that the modern, secular historical view does not enable human beings to be understood as the subject which unified historical process, which is why Ranke and Droysen's historiographies

⁹⁴ *BQT*, 1:44-48.

⁹⁵ Obayashi, "Pannenberg and Troeltsch," 408.

⁹⁶ *BQT*, 1:68.

⁹⁷ *BQT*, 1:74.

leave room for theology.⁹⁸ And theology cannot ignore the notion of history if it insists on the veracity of God's historical action.⁹⁹

In Pannenberg's philosophical system, another problem in universal history involves how to deal with the relationship between "part" and "whole," that is, how to unite the historical whole with individual historical events.¹⁰⁰ Pannenberg argues that the category of "whole" in theology is based on the idea of "God," which is a "reference to the totality of what exists finitely in the world."¹⁰¹ Accordingly, history as a whole has both transcendence and immanence. Once the transcendent aspect is ignored, the contingency of the world also loses its contingency, for the world is seen as a mechanical world. Only God's freedom and transcendence create the unity between contingency and necessity that is present in universal history, as well as the true meaning of universal history. History is not unified solely by virtue of its transcendent origin. Not only are events contingent in regard to one another, but they also cohere among each other. This unity "is grounded in the transcendent unity of God, which manifests itself as faithfulness."¹⁰²

Pannenberg underlines that the relationship between "whole" and "part" is not only important for understanding history, but it also serves as a foundation of

⁹⁸ *ST*, 1:232n105.

⁹⁹ *ST*, 1:230-32.

¹⁰⁰ Pannenberg, *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland*, 53-54.

¹⁰¹ Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, 142.

¹⁰² *BQT*, 1:75.

hermeneutics.¹⁰³ He adheres to Hegel's notion that individuals can only comprehend themselves in wholeness and universality, in order to understand one another. In contrast to Bavinck's appeal to the authority of Scripture and tradition, Pannenberg recognizes the necessity for hermeneutics between the gulf between past and present,¹⁰⁴ which is generally lacking from Bavinck's system. Pannenberg is keenly aware that the current historical research already includes hermeneutics to interpret the texts of the past. But there is still a difference between the hermeneutical method and the universal-historical method, even though both are interpreters of history on the basis of the text.

After critiquing and revising the theories of Hegel and Gadamer, Pannenberg offers an improved synthesis of Hegelian philosophy and Gadamer's hermeneutics. According to Pannenberg, the hermeneutical interpretation is solely between the previous text and the current interpreter, while the universal-historical method requires a unified human history and meaning as a premise to sustain it. However, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Without hermeneutics, a purely positivist study of history is meaningless, and historical events that are just happenings in the past are of no significance to people in the present. On the contrary, since Herodotus's historiography, history has meant "is guided by an interest in the present."¹⁰⁵ But Pannenberg criticizes Gadamer's fusion of horizons, noting its unspoken horizon of meaning and claiming that "only a conception of the actual course of history linking the past with the present situation and its horizon of the future can form the comprehensive horizon within which

¹⁰³ Pannenberg, *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland*, 54.

¹⁰⁴ *BQT*, 1:6-8.

¹⁰⁵ *BQT*, 1:103.

the interpreter's limited horizon of the present and the historical horizon of the text fuse together."¹⁰⁶ He also points out that Hegel's system emphasizes the unfolding of the absolute idea in history while ignoring the incapacity to perceive this absolute idea due to human finitude. Pannenberg reminds that "we must instead ask how it is possible today to develop a conception of universal history which, in contrast to Hegel's would preserve the finitude of human experience and thereby the openness of the future as well as the intrinsic claim of the individual."¹⁰⁷ Pannenberg claims that, although Hegel proposes the end of history, he ignores the connection between the eschatological character of history and the preaching of Jesus that his contemporary exegesis had started to address, and therefore Hegelian unity of history remains abstract and erroneous. On the contrary, Pannenberg believes that the union of true hermeneutics and universal history must be rooted in the connection between the eschatological character of history and the preaching of Jesus, and that, "because the hermeneutical theme itself leads back to the problem of universal history," moreover, without the universal history, "an understanding of transmitted texts in their history differentiation from the present cannot be adequately."¹⁰⁸ In short, Pannenberg asserts that the meaning of universal history must on the basic conditions: an eschatological framework of the totality of history and hermeneutics.

¹⁰⁶ *BQT*, 1:129.

¹⁰⁷ *BQT*, 1:135.

¹⁰⁸ *BQT*, 1:136.

4.3.4 Pannenberg on the Relationship between History and Revelation

When it comes to revelation and history, Pannenberg does not agree with Bavinck that revelation is what makes history known. Rather, he believes that revelation can only be understood through history. To put it differently, Bavinck views revelation as the foundation and premise for history, believing that revelation carries the essence of history, and precedes it. In contrast, Pannenberg posits that history itself is the foundation that bears revelation, revelation and history unfold concurrently. For Pannenberg, humans come to recognize revelation through historical events themselves. Revelation cannot exist apart from history. In fact, revelation and history are inherently unified, and he does not see revelation as prerequisite for history but rather sees them as revelation as history.

He clearly highlights this as one of the points of contention between himself and Barth's views. According to Pannenberg, Barth "formulates statements about the redemptive event by means of analogies based on the concept of revelation of God."¹⁰⁹ For Pannenberg, all such analogies "from above to below," which already "presuppose the construction of a concept of God by means of an analogy 'from below,'"¹¹⁰ since human knowledge of God can only be gained from historical experience. Therefore, theology derives a concept of God, first of all, from historical events that progressively disclose God's revelation, "and therefore cannot be presupposed as something that makes it possible to grasp this knowledge." Pannenberg asserts that "all statements about the redemptive event remain bound to analogies 'from below,' whose applicability is subject

¹⁰⁹ *BQT*, 1:52.

¹¹⁰ *BQT*, 1:53.

to the procedure of historical criticism.”¹¹¹ Like Bavinck’s progressive perspective of revelation, Pannenberg suggests that history and revelation are not once and for all fulfillment, but Pannenberg stresses the different reason for this: the future remains open. Based on this premise, Pannenberg points out that the process of hermeneutics is also not a one-time fulfillment, since it is itself in the process of this reality, and so much “towards an ever new stage of the process characterized by a new understanding of reality as a whole.”¹¹² This is not to suggest that the totality of history and its interpretation do not have an ultimate end. Pannenberg ties the issue to the question of the historical Jesus, because Jesus as the revelation of God, and the singularity of the historical figure of Jesus discloses the revelation of God.

Pannenberg emphasizes that the historical Jesus is a specially meaning for history and revelation. For Pannenberg, the historical Jesus “is the basis of the specific historicness of the process of tradition which has emanated from him,” and “only within the horizon of the totality of history in general... is it possible to understand the particular present age in relation to Jesus, the origin of the history of the transmission of the Christian tradition, in such a way as to preserve the historical difference and thereby the particularity of Jesus in contrast to the present age.”¹¹³ Thus, theological hermeneutics and historical interpretation are not mutually exclusive. Rather, Pannenberg insists that the two can be reconciled in the historical Jesus. Pannenberg adds, “the totality of history to which theological talk about God and his revelation in Jesus are related now

¹¹¹ *BQT*, 1:53.

¹¹² *BQT*, 1:158.

¹¹³ *BQT*, 1:158.

constitutes an unavoidable theme of historical hermeneutic, for the reason that all historical study remains oriented to the problem of universal history.”¹¹⁴ In other words, the only way to understand the unity of historical and theological interpretation is through the unity of the history of Jesus.¹¹⁵ For Pannenberg, the question of the historical Jesus demonstrates the true relationship between revelation and history. He says, “it was directed toward the coming God as the ultimate future of the world through which the totality of the world and its history would become manifest.”¹¹⁶

In contrast to the traditional interpretation of the historical Jesus that focuses on special revelation, Pannenberg places more emphasis on the historical Jesus undertaking is to unite history and truth together. However, as we all know, one of the most controversial concerns among Pannenberg scholars is about the resurrection of Jesus.¹¹⁷ Pannenberg’s true purpose is to overcome the dualism that has separated truth and history since the Enlightenment. In his view, the event of Jesus’s resurrection unifies the universal history and the eternal truth, and provides the meaning of history. Indeed, the totality of history has been encapsulated in the particular event, namely, the resurrection of Jesus.

A deeper issue remains, namely, whether modern historiography can reconcile itself with contingent miracles and whether historical theory can give room for discussion

¹¹⁴ *BQT*, 1:159.

¹¹⁵ *BQT*, 1:152.

¹¹⁶ *BQT*, 1:176.

¹¹⁷ Herbert Burhenn, “Pannenberg’s Argument for the Historicity of the Resurrection,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40, no. 3 (1972): 368-79; Brian O. McDermott, “Pannenberg’s Resurrection Christology: A Critique,” *Theological Studies* 35, no. 4 (1974): 711-721; Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, 78-102.

miracles without excluding the possibility of miracles in its premises. Pannenberg clearly does not consider the certainty of resurrection event to be a matter of faith, but rather one that must be verified like any other historical event. In his later writings, Pannenberg does not avoid the controversy over his position, and points out that the truth of any historical event itself can only be probabilistically guaranteed to be credible; he acknowledges that the debate over the issue of resurrection may not end until the end of history, thus emphasizing a historical interpretation that remains open to the future. But Pannenberg maintains that making judgments regarding historical events, especially the resurrection, “depends not only on examining the individual date...but also on our understanding of reality.... Certainly historical reconstruction is always oriented to a common-sense view of reality,” and as a result, this interpretative standpoint may be “in a state of constant flux,” and new perspectives may emerge.¹¹⁸ If the possibility of resurrection events is ruled out in historiography, Pannenberg contends that “they must distinguish between the degree to which individual findings and the greater coherence of alternative description force them to this judgment, and the degree to which it is the result of a fundamental preconception.”¹¹⁹

4.3.5 An Appraisal of Pannenberg’s Historical View

First, Pannenberg’s critique of historical research is logical, and it shares some of the same perspective as anti-foundationalist postmodern historiography.¹²⁰ Unlike other

¹¹⁸ *ST*, 2:362.

¹¹⁹ *ST*, 2:362.

¹²⁰ LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 1-24.

Pannenberg researchers who have questioned whether the resurrection can be accepted as historical fact, I argue that the true challenge to Pannenberg's view lies not in historical method *per se*, but in the accounts of the resurrection in other religions and cultures. In fact, the event of resurrection itself and the discourse surrounding it are not unique to Christianity. They are reported in a variety of religions and predate the Christian account.¹²¹ After accepting Pannenberg's view of the resurrection as a universal and objective truth, the question of whether or not to accept other religions' narrative as facts arises. Finally, one can either make an objective judgment on this by comparing religion and history or a subjective choice by excluding other religions. But neither of these ways fit Pannenberg's own starting point of theology as an objective science and the quest for criteria for objectivity of faith. Eventually, Pannenberg was compelled to follow Bultmann's option, choosing between objective historicity and de-mythologizing.

Moreover, we can find a shift in Pannenberg's understanding of historical consciousness between his early and later works. This is something he himself also noticed, but regrettably, Pannenberg scholars and critics failed to pay attention to this crucial adjustment. Early Pannenberg, like Bavinck, emphasized that Israel evolved a historical consciousness that was unlike anything else in the mythological cultures of the Near East and was unique in history. The presupposition of Israel's historical consciousness was based on the concept of the reality of God, which produced a single-linear view of history, as opposed to the classical cyclical view. Pannenberg uses this as a

¹²¹ Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas* vol.1, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 331-33.

promise-fulfillment structure, noting that this unique vision of history continues to grow into world history and has become the cornerstone of world history.¹²²

However, when it comes to the question of the meaning of history, the later Pannenberg himself explicitly points out the change in his own system of thought. According to Pannenberg, the modern concept of universal history has been seen as a product of Christianity since Dilthey, and that in the mid-twentieth century, Mircea Eliade and Löwith continued the view that only Judeo-Christian understood history as a single-linear and irreversible process, distinguishing Christian historical view from the cosmic cyclical theories of other religions and cultures. These historical theories contend that Christianity provides the paradigm and framework for history and its meaning as we know it in modern. Only Christianity, unlike other cultures and religions, views history as an irreversible, non-cyclical process with a eschaton. However, the later Pannenberg revises his early work and concedes that current research has disproved this assertion. In fact, even in the historical writing of the ancient Greeks and Romans or other cultures, there is not just an exclusive and single historical view, but numerous, including historically progressive and non-cyclical historical views. Both the ancient East and Greece refute this hasty assertion. Thus, the meaning and course of history should be diversified rather than single, while Pannenberg continues to believe that Israel was the first to grasp the unique meaning of history as a manifestation of God.¹²³

Although Pannenberg feels Christianity has a special significance in history, it is not the kind of thing that Bavinck believes can serve as the basis for historical unity.

¹²² *BQT*, 1:16-20.

¹²³ Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie*, 119-23.

Rather than Christianity, Logos, as the principle of order in the creation of the world, is not a timeless universal structure, but the concrete, historical world order, “the principle of the unity of its history.”¹²⁴ Thus, it is Logos that continues to unfold throughout history, bringing together both universality and particularity, as well as diversity and unity. The universal relationship between the created and the creator is most complex and comprehensive in the human stage, most fully revealed in its entirety in the uniqueness of Jesus. Pannenberg expands the concept of universal history to the scope of world history beyond the history of Christianity, rather than declaring arbitrarily, as Bavinck does, that Christianity has a monopoly on the interpretation of the meaning of universal history.

Furthermore, contrary to what some critics usually claim, Pannenberg does not overconcentrate the event of the resurrection alone. Rather, Pannenberg speaks of the incarnation and the resurrection as a whole historical event. Therefore, Pannenberg sees the incarnation of Christ as “part of the function of the Logos as the principle of the world’s unity, which is not an abstractly descriptive principle but the creative principle.” Moreover, the incarnation is viewed as the integrating center of the world’s historical order, “which is grounded in the Logos and will find its perfect form only in the eschatological future of the world's consummation and transformation into the kingdom of God in his creation.”¹²⁵

Pannenberg argues that the meaning of the resurrection, from an eschatological perspective, provides the ultimate answer to the fate of the individual and of humanity. It is clear that Pannenberg’s thought is concerning the relationship between the “whole” and

¹²⁴ *ST*, 2:63.

¹²⁵ *ST*, 2:64.

the “individual,” i.e., Pannenberg not only continues the emphasis of Dilthey and Heidegger on the death of the individual life as a totality to explore the question of meaning, but Pannenberg also connects the individual to the human history and destiny as a whole through the concept of universal history. He does this because “the individual cannot anticipate the wholeness of his own human being without simultaneously including in this the more encompassing whole of the society which he serves and by means of which he lives his life.”¹²⁶ In contrast to Bavinck’s use of Christianity as the bearer of universal history, Pannenberg considers the universal existential experience of human beings as the more ultimate universal concern, which is plainly more credible and reasonable.

4.4 Conclusion

Existing research on Herman Bavinck has largely ignored his view of history. Scholars who study Pannenberg have gone further in emphasizing Pannenberg’s historical perspective but they ignored the important shift in Pannenberg’s thought. In order to bridge these gaps, I bring these two theologians into dialogue and comparison. I have elaborated on their critical reflections on modern historical method, the relationship between history and revelation, and the meaning of universal history, showing that the theme of history is significant in their theologies.

As expounded in the chapter two, Bavinck’s organism and Pannenberg’s framework of totality serve not only as recurring motif throughout their respective bodies of thought but also exhibit noteworthy similarities. These similarities are largely affected

¹²⁶ *BQT*, 1:170.

and shaped by German idealism, a connection that is further manifested in their respective understanding of historical view. In this chapter, my argument is that both Bavinck and Pannenberg modernize the Christian view of history, introducing “universal history” to supersede tradition notions, such as “sacred history.” Using motifs like organism and totality, they seek to bridge the divisive “dualisms” found in both classic Christian historical view and contemporary historicism. Even though some limitations are evident in their theological portrayals of history, their insights undeniably offer a fresh and expansive lens through which to perceive revelation within the modern landscape.

First of all, both Bavinck and Pannenberg reflect on the flaws of modern positivist historiography. Both attempt to overcome the dualism that has separated fact and meaning since Kant’s time. They try to transcend the subjectivism of theology that arises from avoiding historical criticism and try to find a certainty of faith. In comparison, Pannenberg absorbs the results of the development of hermeneutics and history since World War II, and thus merges hermeneutics and historical research into theological contemplation more fully.

Secondly, there is no doubt that both Bavinck and Pannenberg were influenced by the notion of “universal history” and related the objectivity and universality of faith to this notion. Bavinck’s thought demonstrates a tension between tradition and modernity in this approach. On the one hand, he emphasizes the multilinearity and diversity of world history and meaning. On the other hand, he perpetuates a linear narrative of salvation history, equating the universal history with the history of Christian development. Reductionism creates a contradiction in Bavinck’s thought and ultimately constructs a single-linear narrative of salvation history with Western Christianity as the subject of

history. In fact, Bavinck's historical view hovers on the line between modern and orthodox. Furthermore, many of the commonalities between Bavinck and Pannenberg that are provided in their comparison also show Bavinck's modern consciousness for history and catholicity outside of his own Reformed circle.

Pannenberg's conception of history implies his whole system of modified Hegelian philosophy, namely, "whole" and "part," "universal" and "particular." But Pannenberg did not swallow Hegelian theory without criticism, as is often alleged; rather, Pannenberg amended Hegel's theory of history to make it more open. In contrast to Bavinck, Pannenberg recognizes that a single-line historical narrative of Christianity does not correspond to the facts of world history, and he points out that this historical view ignores the complexity of other civilizations and religions, which is a necessary correction to Bavinck's view.

Thirdly, while Pannenberg has recognized the diversity of historical meanings, there is still an "Occidentalism" underpinning in his and Bavinck's concepts of "universal history." This involves raising the question of whether the "universality" of "universal" history is warranted. Indeed, both Bavinck and Pannenberg ignore the fact that the historiography is not only a record, but also a form of power and domination.¹²⁷ Because of this, one can still question the historical interpretation and meaning provided by Christianity for global history, not because of revelation and the gospel, but because of western colonial expansion, its colonization and conquest of other peoples, in which

¹²⁷ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-31.

diverse histories and meanings were eliminated in favor of a dominant western narrative. Bavinck's discussion of the Dutch colony in Indonesia exemplifies this.

Besides, for the concept of "universal history" to be truly "universal," it is necessary to break away from the perspective of the Western-Latin Church and engage in dialogue with Orthodoxy and non-Western theologies, as well as consider gender and other non-Western historical cultures and so on.¹²⁸ Like Moltmann, who has reflected and reminded, "Oppressive alienations have not merely come about through academic theology, over against the congregation. More serious is the two-thousand-year-old ascendancy in Christianity of the *traditional theology* determined by men."¹²⁹ Indeed, Pannenberg is aware of many theological positions and has endeavored to dialogue with them. While the dilemma that Bavinck and Pannenberg have here remains that of distinguishing between the objectivity of historical facts and the interpretation of the meaning of events. The issue is very similar to that described by Schillebeeckx, "theologians, both in their historical investigations and in their 'actualising' reflections, often have a barely concealed idealist concept of history."¹³⁰ Consequently, the interpretation of history and the reality of history itself inevitably come into conflict.

¹²⁸ For example, recently liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology etc., have all offered critical reflections on the "universality" of traditional Western theological thought. See, Gustavo, Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 3-11; James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 1-57; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 12-46.

¹²⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 12.

¹³⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism*, trans. N.D. Smith, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 131.

Regarding to the themes of history and revelation, Bavinck's and Pannenberg's thought are shaped not only by post-Enlightenment theology, but also by the emergence of history as a discipline in modern time. As a result, both of their thought are complicated, and they deal with many issues that aren't present in traditional theology. These are indicative of their efforts to keep theology as a science in the modern era. Although both Bavinck and Pannenberg seek the objectivity and universality of history, Bavinck remains entangled in the confusion of equating spiritual Christianity with the contingency and historicity of concrete western Christianity, thereby persisting in a subjective construction of history. Pannenberg, who is more deeply reflective than Bavinck, lacks a discussion of theories and notions of history outside of Western Christianity, but because he emphasizes the openness of a system to the future, he also gives the prospect of enhancing his own view of history. Despite their flaws, I think Bavinck and Pannenberg provide us with a valuable perspective on how theology might become more openness and scientific in response to the difficulties posed by historical studies.

In the following chapter, I will delve into a topic most pertinent to God's self-revelation: the Trinity. As the cornerstone of Christian doctrine, the Trinity is crucial for understanding the doctrine of revelation. I will explore Bavinck's and Pannenberg's trinitarian perspectives, and examine how they further elucidate their ideas on revelation based on this foundation.

Chapter 5

Trinity: Unity and Distinction

5.1 Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity, a cornerstone of faith, traversed a complex journey in the modern era. Initially, it experienced a phase of diminishing attention, only to undergo a renaissance of renewed interest and appreciation, reflecting the ebb and flow of theological focus over time. As Jürgen Moltmann puts it, for modern theological practice and the justification of theology, “the doctrine of the Trinity has very little essential importance.”¹ However, the thought of the Trinity was not considered to be resurgent until the twentieth century. According to Feenstra, recently “Christians of various traditions have paid renewed attention to the doctrine of the Trinity.”² It was believed that the doctrine of the Trinity, which is founded on revelation, is the core of Christian theology and serves as a basis for other doctrines of God.³ This doctrine is the way of speaking about God. There are several prominent Protestant representatives, including Karl Barth, Moltmann, and Pannenberg.⁴ According to Barth, “the doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Fortress Press, 1993), 2.

² Ronald J. Feenstra, “Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology*, edited by Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

³ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. by Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 233.

⁴ Samuel M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8-9.

what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation.”⁵

I will go over a few essential themes in both Bavinck’s and Pannenberg’s doctrines of the Trinity respectively in this chapter. My argument is that in spite of the fact that these two theologians come from different theological backgrounds and traditions, their respective trinitarian theologies have many commonalities and similarities, providing us a more comprehensive and openness scheme for comprehending the doctrine of God in modern context. This demonstration further supports the main arguments in my dissertation: Bavinck’s and Pannenberg’s contributions to Christian theology are distinguished by their rigorous investigation of both orthodox and modern ideas, their creative and pioneering treatment of Trinitarian doctrine. The notable similarities in Bavinck’s and Pannenberg’s interpretations and understandings of the Trinitarian doctrine demonstrate the ecumenical and openness characteristics of their theologies. This similarity suggests that their approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity transcend denominational boundaries, emphasizing a universal and inclusive perspective within Christian theology.

Given the vastness and complexity of the doctrine of the Trinity, I will concentrate on these themes: first, the loci of the doctrine of the Trinity in their theological systems; then, their views on the relationship between the Trinity and revelation; then, how Bavinck and Pannenberg understand the relationship between unity and differentiation, the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity in the doctrine.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Part 1, vol.1, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 301.

5.2 Bavinck's Doctrine of the Trinity

5.2.1 Literature Review

There is a general consensus among Bavinck scholars that trinitarian theology underlies Bavinck's thought.⁶ For instance, based on the claim made by Veenhof and others that Bavinck was influenced by German idealism, Adam Eitel's article goes on to discuss how German idealism, particularly Hegel's speculative trinitarian idea, had an impact on Bavinck's trinitarian theology.⁷ In contrast, Mattson, Eglinton, and Doornbos make an effort to cast Bavinck's trinitarian theology as a pure legacy of traditional Reformed thought as opposed to a "modern" Bavinck.⁸ These Bavinck scholars have significantly advanced the study of Bavinck, contributing notably to the field and also broadening the historical perspective through which Bavinck is understood. However, while emphasizing Bavinck's orthodoxy, there seems to be an underestimation of the impact that modern thought has had on him. This oversight might overlook the nuanced ways in which contemporary ideas influenced and shaped his work. This position implies, and even explicitly states, that Bavinck's trinitarian theology rests on Reformed orthodoxy and must never be infected by the contagious disease of "modernity," especially German idealism, and even is antithetical to these fashions. To illustrate this

⁶ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 346; Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, 119-20; Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 110; Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 21-33; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 28-29; Gayle Elizabeth Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology: The Ontological, Cosmological, and Soteriological Dimensions of the Doctrine of the Trinity," (Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Toronto: Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, 2019), 1-31.

⁷ Adam Eitel, "Trinity and History: Bavinck, Hegel, and Nineteenth Century Doctrines of God," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, ed. John Bolt (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 101-28.

⁸ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 17-18; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 66-70; Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 19-31.

Bavinck's image, Eglinton specifically contrasts Bavinck's organism and the doctrine of the Trinity with Hegel's, claiming that there is a significant distinction between them. Hegel's organism, in Eglinton's opinion, results in monism. In contrast, trinitarianism is at the heart of Bavinck's organicism. It is this difference in the Trinity that distinguishes Bavinck and Hegel.⁹ Thus, Eglinton comes to the conclusion that the most important distinction between Bavinck and Hegel is that Bavinck's organism is founded on the relationship between unity and diversity in the Trinity, "the Trinity is glorified as the organicism maintains simultaneous unity and diversity...its goal is to maintain unity and diversity in perpetuity."¹⁰ As a result, Eglinton asserts that despite Hegel's system involving the Trinity scheme and using the term "organism," Bavinck has not been influenced by these. Eglinton contends that there is not a "modern" Bavinck "following of Hegel, Schelling et al.," only a Bavinck whose basic identity and position are "trinitarianism of historical Reformed orthodoxy."¹¹

In a recent more, Doornbos discusses Bavinck's Trinity in more detail from three perspectives: ontology, cosmology, and soteriology. This contrasts with Eglinton's

⁹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 66-68.

¹⁰ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 69-70.

¹¹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 81. "It is noteworthy that Eglinton's *Trinity and Organism* discusses only Hegel, and the main reference is Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), to compare Hegel with Bavinck, yet Eglinton ignores the more influence of German idealism on theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Implicit in Eglinton's argument is also already the presupposition that German idealism is disconnected from traditional theologies such as Augustinianism, yet this presupposition does not hold. In fact, Beiser himself notes that the concept of organism is "a reaction against mechanism, which had dominated physics since the beginning of the seventeenth century..." (*Hegel*, 82-83), and it is within this trend that Hegel's organicism developed, and Beiser specifically claims that "the immediate origin of his organic concept seems to have been more religious than philosophy... His source of inspiration seems to have been the gospel of John..." (88). At the same time, Beiser acknowledges that Hegel is not an orthodox Christian theologian, but it is the organic concept that "provided him with an explanation for the trinity." (Beiser, *Hegel*, 88). Also see chapter 2.

relatively cursory conclusion. Doornbos is aware that in order to comprehend Bavinck's Trinitarianism, it requires "an in-depth examination of his engagement with nineteenth-century philosophical and theology treatment of the Trinity."¹² Then Doornbos criticizes the claims of some Bavinck's scholars, including Veenhof, Hielema, etc., for adhering to the same hypothesis as Eglinton and Mattson. Although these scholars like Veenhof acknowledge the significance of the Trinity in Bavinck's thought, Doornbos claims that "they focus on other doctrines or motifs as the *centre* or root of Bavinck's theology."¹³ Even though Doornbos acknowledges that some scholars, like John Bolt, emphasize the significance of Bavinck's trinitarianism, she still regretfully believes that these scholars continue to hold the wrong perspective, which "stunted further investigations concerning the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity."¹⁴ According to Doornbos, Bavinck scholarship has ignored systematic investigations about how Bavinck deals with unity and distinction in the doctrine of God. For Doornbos, it is also necessary to examine Bavinck's use of classical trinitarian terminology and structure, as well as his connection with nineteenth century philosophical and theological discussion.¹⁵ Doornbos argues, in line with Mattson and Eglinton, that in order to defeat post-Kantian dualism, "Bavinck appeals to the fundamental principle that he identifies in the Reformed tradition: the knowledge of God."¹⁶ She claims that the purpose of Bavinck's doctrine of Trinity "is not

¹² Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 7.

¹³ Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 4.

¹⁴ Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 5.

¹⁵ Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 7.

¹⁶ Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 60.

novelty,” but “is to communicate the deeply historic, broadly catholic doctrine of the Trinity.”¹⁷ She continues by adding the details that Mattson and Eglinton miss, and Doornbos goes into greater detail about how Bavinck handles the unity-diversity relationship in the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the connection between the *ad extra* and *ad intra* Trinity. She emphasizes numerous times that Bavinck’s sources all originate from the Reformed tradition rather than nineteenth-century philosophical thought. In her view, even though Bavinck employs some terminology from the nineteenth century and engages in a critical discussion with some philosophical ideas, the essence of Bavinck’s thought still “pure” Reformed.¹⁸ Doornbos concludes the characteristic of Bavinck’s theology and says “Bavinck’s theology is thoroughly trinitarian. The whole of his systematic theology is the doctrine of the Trinity in its ontological, cosmological, and soteriological dimensions.”¹⁹ In contrast to Eglinton, Doornbos devotes more space to discussing Bavinck’s relationship to the nineteenth century thought, including Bavinck’s response to the theories of Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and Feuerbach, and so on. Doornbos firmly believes that “Bavinck creatively appropriates the modern grammar of personality within a specifically Augustinian account of the relationship between the divine essence and persons.”²⁰ However, she acknowledges that Bavinck’s Trinity incorporates elements that have been overlooked by those advocating for an “Orthodox Bavinck,” particularly in terms of its truly creative aspects, “such as his articulation of God as absolute

¹⁷ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology,” 107.

¹⁸ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology,” 113n122, 129n25.

¹⁹ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology,” 238.

²⁰ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology,” 107.

personality, utilization of self-consciousness, and identification of revelation as self-revelation.”²¹ Therefore, a contentious issue arises: do these modern elements simply allow Bavinck to reinterpret Augustine's Trinitarian theology in a new language, or is Bavinck's doctrine of the Trinity distinct from traditional interpretations like Augustine's? Doornbos's research does not yet provide a satisfactory answer, and further discussion is needed.

Although the majority of Bavinck scholars recognize the significance of the Trinity in Bavinck's theology, a fundamental divergence lies in how much modern elements are present in Bavinck's doctrine and whether they are enough to determine the identity of Bavinck's thought as orthodox or modern. For some Bavinck scholars like Mattson, Eglinton, and Doornbos, their argument still begs a lot of questions. First, Bavinck's identity cannot be distinguished between “modern” and “orthodox” using the criteria named in their statement. Instead, it adopts the implicit premise that once Bavinck has criticized someone, it is tantamount to Bavinck not adopting and being shaped by his ideas, as Eglinton does when comparing Bavinck and Hegel.²² Second, in fact, Doornbos is aware that Bavinck's theology must be evaluated in a broader, beyond-Reformed context, and she notes that inquiring about the relationship between Bavinck's doctrine of the Trinity and the nineteenth-century theology and philosophy “remains wide open for new, positive contributions.”²³ However, there isn't a comprehensive comparison made

²¹ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology,” 224.

²² This argument holds that if an author critiques a specific theory, it shows that he or she has not been swayed by the critiqued point of view. However, that is not the case, with Pannenberg and Barth, who both criticize Hegel's system in their writings, while also being somewhat influenced by Hegel. Even Pannenberg is also regarded as a Hegelian.

²³ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology,” 7.

between Bavinck and modern theologies. Thus, like Mattson and Eglinton, Doornbos does not provide a certain consistent standard between “orthodox” and “modern” to support this argument.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, there are many similarities between Bavinck’s doctrine of the Trinity and Pannenberg’s. As their trinitarian theologies are an effort to overcome dualism since Kant, and they share many intellectual sources. Besides, as Bolt claims, Pannenberg’s trinitarian theology is an extension and elaboration of Bavinck’s thought.²⁴ If this is the case, for the argument of Doornbos,²⁵ the assertion that Bavinck’s Trinitarian theology is entirely a continuation of orthodoxy without any novelty is not sustainable.

I will primarily focus on several issues surrounding Bavinck’s doctrine of the Trinity in the following section, starting with its *loci* in Bavinck’s dogmatics; the relationship between the Trinity and revelation; and the relationship between unity and difference (distinction) in the Trinity, as well as the immanent and the economic Trinity.

5.2.2 Trinity as the Foundation of Dogmatics

Bavinck sees the Trinity as the foundation of the world and its threefold cause. Thus, this doctrine “is the core of the Christian faith, the root of all its dogmas, the basic content of the new covenant.”²⁶ He argues that many of the most significant doctrinal

²⁴ Bolt, “Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg,” 103-114.

²⁵ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology,” 107.

²⁶ *RD*, 2:260.

errors in history can be traced back to deviations from this doctrine. Christian theology is the ongoing recognition of the Triune God through God's revelation; Bavinck emphasizes that "the confession of God's Trinity functions at the center of our thought and life."²⁷ As Heilema comments, for Bavinck, "the Trinity is the most important means of understanding God... and is much more than a theological concept or even a doctrine."²⁸

Bavinck emphasizes that the outline of dogmatics is based on the trinitarian scheme. He points out that this trinitarian method is not abstract and cannot be divorced from revelation and religious experience, because "all things are from God and unto God. The trinitarian scheme guards against a barren uniformity and guarantees life, development, process."²⁹ For Bavinck, theology cannot reduce the diversity of religious experience to speculative theories.

5.2.3 Revelation and Analogy

Bavinck is convinced that pure speculative reason and philosophy cannot construct the doctrine of Trinity. However, he does not discount their importance in the trinitarian scheme. He takes a dialectical perspective on this doctrine. According to Bavinck, the Trinity has parts that are both understandable and can be narrated by nonbiblical-philosophical terms, and are formulated as the doctrine. However, one must also admit that there is a mysterious side in the Trinity, which is beyond the capacity of

²⁷ *RD*, 2:331.

²⁸ Heilema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 110.

²⁹ *RD*, 1:112.

the human mind to comprehend. While the doctrine of the Trinity is grounded in revelation, it also calls for the use of extrabiblical terminology to describe and express it.

First of all, Bavinck stresses that the ultimate foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity is God's revelation. Although there are many *vestigia trinitatis* in nature and history, the special revelation, namely, Christ and Scriptures, precisely reveals the doctrine of the Trinity. The relations between the three persons in the Trinity are demonstrated by the Scriptures. And Christ unveils the mystery of the triune God, "because God communicated himself in all his fullness to him." Thus, rather than reason, "Scripture alone is the final ground for the doctrine of the Trinity."³⁰

Second, Bavinck affirms the contribution of reason in the doctrine of the Trinity with reservations, for "reason can at most somewhat clarify this doctrine *a posteriori*."³¹ Similar to Barth and Pannenberg, Bavinck contends that the foundation and first principle of the ontological Trinity is "the absolute self-revelation of God in the person of Christ and the absolute self-communication of God in the Holy Spirit."³² Bavinck believes that this claim agrees with both Augustine and Thomas: although *vestigia trinitatis* can be experienced in creation for the human being, it is not knowable by the pure reason, "for the creation is a work of the Trinity as a whole and therefore displays the unity of the being, not the distinction of persons."³³ There are various trinitarian analogies that can be found in nature, history, and human consciousness. On the one hand, he affirms to some

³⁰ *RD*, 2:257.

³¹ *RD*, 2:329.

³² *RD*, 2:296.

³³ *RD*, 2:329.

extent the positive role of modern philosophical triplicity from Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel; on the other hand, he notes that the church and theology “assumed a reserved attitude toward these philosophical construals of the Trinity.”³⁴ Contrary to the argument that Bavinck who ultimately rejected German idealism,³⁵ Bavinck confirms the value of analogies and philosophical speculation in the thought of German idealism. For the post-Kantian idealism, Bavinck remarks that, “although the analogies and proofs advanced for the Trinity do not demonstrate the truth of the dogma, they serve mainly to make clear the many-sided usefulness and rich significance of this confession.”³⁶ Moreover, Bavinck analyzes Hegel’s and Schelling’s idea of Trinity at length, then he assesses that this speculative philosophy “again brought the trinitarian dogma in favor.”³⁷

However, Bavinck emphasizes the effect of sin, so he separates his position from that of speculative philosophy. Although Scripture indicates that nature and reason “will show these imprints and human beings will exhibit the image of the triune God,” only in thought illumined by revelation can the Trinity be known a priori “to know from Scripture as triune in his mode of existence and actions.”³⁸ Since reason cannot take the place of revelation to serve as the basis of faith, but “can show that what Scripture teaches us is neither impossible nor absurd.”³⁹

³⁴ *RD*, 2:260.

³⁵ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 66-81.

³⁶ *RD*, 2:331.

³⁷ *RD*, 2:328.

³⁸ *RD*, 2:330.

³⁹ *RD*, 2:330.

Following Bavinck's logic, sin prevents the human from knowing the consciousness of the Trinity, which actually exists in the human being *a priori* as revelation. But the attempts of nineteenth century idealism to deduce the Trinity from the concepts of love, knowledge or the Holy Spirit failed in Bavinck's view, because they were only abstract and empty concepts. Instead, Bavinck asserts that Trinity is the premise and basis of theological epistemology and concepts, "apart from it, they are mere names, sounds, empty terms... Only by the Trinity do we begin to understand that God as he is in himself... is the independent, eternal, omniscient, and all-benevolent One."⁴⁰

Thus, Bavinck remarks that only Scripture is "the final ground for the doctrine of Trinity."⁴¹ Neither analogy nor speculation can be used like revelation as *a priori*, but rather *a posteriori*. The analogies for the Trinity have some limitations. For example, Bavinck criticizes the traditional trinitarian concept of "person," which is used to describe divine nature. For human beings, this term is a generic concept; persons are distinct and separate among human beings. But the divine person "is totally and quantitatively the same in each person. The Persons, though distinct, are not separate."⁴² Bavinck concurs with Augustine that referring to the Trinity as persons is "not to express what that is but only not to be silent."⁴³ Additionally, the analogy fails to adequately convey the relationship between unity and diversity in the Trinity, because "in the case of

⁴⁰ *RD*, 2:332.

⁴¹ *RD*, 2:260.

⁴² *RD*, 2:300.

⁴³ *RD*, 2:302.

creatures we see only a faint analogy of it. Either the unity or the diversity does not come into its own.”⁴⁴

5.2.4 Unity and Diversity

In this section, I aim to highlight that in discussing unity and diversity in the doctrine of the Trinity, Bavinck employs a crucial modern concept, “distinction” or “differentiation,” which is often overlooked.

For Bavinck, understanding the interrelationship between unity and diversity in the Trinity is crucial for the development of church dogmatics in history. The doctrine of the Trinity is established in history through progressive revelation. One can discern the unity of the triune God through the general revelation. But only under the special revelation can one know the diversity in Trinity.⁴⁵ Moreover, the way of church treats this theme varies in different ages. Bavinck specially notes that before the Nicaea, “the main difficulty was to derive a threesome from the oneness of God; after Nicaea, the reverse is true.”⁴⁶ In other words, Bavinck points out that historically, there have been two distinct approaches and perspectives in understanding the Trinity. One approach is based on the concept of unity, followed by a discussion of diversity; the other starts with diversity, meaning the three Persons, and then considers how these distinct Persons, or this diversity, can achieve unity. In Bavinck’s view, this represents one of the key differences between early doctrine of Trinitarian theology and modern Trinitarian theology. Thus,

⁴⁴ *RD*, 2:331.

⁴⁵ *RD*, 2:329.

⁴⁶ *RD*, 2:285.

Bavinck emphasizes that when discussing unity and diversity in the Trinity, it can be understood through a unity in diversity relationship rather than by deducing diversity from unity. For this reason, Bavinck's doctrine of the Trinity gains a more modern veneer of identity.

Bavinck insists that the Trinity exhibits both unity and diversity, as opposed to the prevailing idea in traditional dogmatics that diversity is deduced from unity. He argues that only both absolute unity and absolute diversity are present in God; God can be triune and the three persons are consubstantial.⁴⁷ As Bolt points out, Bavinck's catholicity of Christianity and overcoming the modern variety of dualism "are rooted in his perception of the unity of God himself."⁴⁸ However, Bavinck does not downplay the Trinity's diversity. He claims that although the three persons are the same in essence, they are distinctive within the divine essence. Thus, Bavinck rejects both the Arianism and Sabellianism. He further argues that diversity can only manifest itself. If it is distinguished within the unity of the Trinity. He says,

For the *homoousia* of the three persons has meaning and significance only if they are truly and really distinct [*onderscheiden*] from one another, as distinct [*onderscheiden*] bearers of the same substance. The diversity of the subjects who act side by side in divine revelation, in creation and in re-creation, arises from the diversity that exists among the three persons in the divine being. There could be no distinction [*onderschied*] *ad extra* in the unity of the divine being, if there were no distinction *ad intra*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *RD*, 2:331.

⁴⁸ Bolt, *Imitation*, 108.

⁴⁹ *RD*, 2: 332; also see Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. 4e druk (Kampen: Kok, 1928-1930), 2:345. *onderscheiden* emphasis added.

According to the above passage, the self-distinction in three persons reveals both unity and diversity in Trinity. This distinction is not external, but in the *ad intra* of the Trinity.

In describing the relationship between unity and diversity, the term “self-distinction” used by Bavinck has very “modern” characteristics. Regarding the relationship between unity and diversity, Bavinck uses two concepts of self-distinction (*zelfonderscheiding*) and distinction (*onderscheiden*) to describe the relationship as the three persons are not three individuals alongside each other and separated from each other in One Godhead, as in Pannenberg, which I will discuss in the following section. In fact, these two terms, while not conventional, are typical of contemporary terminologies use to describe the Trinity. According to Pannenberg, “the term ‘self-distinction [*Selbstunerscheidung*]’ has been used in trinitarian theology since the nineteenth century but almost in the sense of bringing forth of a second and third divine person by the Father. Starting with the self-distinction of the Son from the Father, however, we can use the term in a different sense, namely, that the one who distinguishes himself from another defines himself as also dependent on that other.”⁵⁰

However, Bavinck scholars frequently miss this point. When Eglinton discusses Bavinck’s ideas on unity and diversity in the doctrine of Trinity, a contradiction occurs. Eglinton asserts that in Bavinck’s thought, “unity precedes diversity.”⁵¹ But Eglinton also specifically quotes Bavinck’s sentence that, “in God, too, there is unity in diversity, diversity in unity. Indeed, this order and this harmony is present in him absolutely... in

⁵⁰ *ST*, 1:313n167; also see German Version, *ST*, 1:340n170. *Selbstunerscheidung*, emphasis added.

⁵¹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68.

God both are present: absolute unity as well as absolute diversity.”⁵² In contrast to the positions of Eglinton and Doornbos,⁵³ I argue that according to Bavinck, since diversity and unity are both absolute wholes in Godhead, there is neither a temporal nor a logical hierarchy between them. In fact, in Bavinck’s doctrine of the Trinity, there are two crucial concepts that have been long overlooked: distinction and self-distinction. They are key to understanding Bavinck’s themes of diversity and unity. Unfortunately, these two important concepts have not been discussed much.⁵⁴

Using the concept of distinction (also translated as differentiation in the English version), Bavinck precisely explains the relation between unity and diversity in the Trinity. Additionally, Bavinck notes that the three persons’ self-differentiation is what differentiates divine persons from human persons. He says,

The divine nature similarly develops its fullness in three persons, but in God there three person are not three individuals alongside each other and separated from each other but a threefold self-differentiation [*zelfonderscheiding*] with the divine being. This self-differentiation results from the self-unfolding of the divine nature into personality, thus making it *tri-persona*.⁵⁵

In the unity of divine essence, the three persons demonstrate their diversity and the triune relationship through self-differentiation (self-distinction). Bavinck concurs with Augustine and rejects the opinion that the Father is the triune origin and foundation

⁵² *RD*, 2: 331-32. Also in Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 88.

⁵³ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 85-89.

⁵⁴ Doornbos, “Herman Bavinck’s Trinitarian Theology,” 112-121.

⁵⁵ *RD*, 2:303. *GD*, 2:310. emphasis added. It should be noted that for Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* (also Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology*), differentiation or distinction in the English version, the two terms are usually derived from the original term. According on how the English version is translated, I will alternately use the two terms in the text that follows.

for the relationship of Trinity.⁵⁶ He holds that the distinction [*onderscheid*] of the three persons in the unity of the divine essence “can not lie in any substance but only in their relations.”⁵⁷ The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are “distinct subjects in the one divine essence”⁵⁸ and “modes of existence within the being.”⁵⁹ However, the divine being in three persons is not substantially different, but in relationships.⁶⁰ Bavinck continues by emphasizing the terminology of “distinction (difference),” and says that,

The difference [*onderscheid*] did not consist in any substance but only in the relations, but this distinction [*onderscheid*] is grounded in revelation and therefore objective and real. The difference really exists, namely, in the mode of existence. The persons are modes of existence within the being; hence, the persons differ among themselves as one mode of existence differs from another, or—as the illustration has it—as the open palm differs from the closed fist.⁶¹

Bavinck uses the comparison between the palm and the fist to explain how threeness and oneness relate to one another. The distinction between being and person in the divine being is the difference between Father, Son, and Spirit in divine being. The three persons are not three different beings, but one and the same being. Through the differentiation of the three persons from each other, the “inward” and the “outward”

⁵⁶ Bavinck says, Augustine “does not derive the trinity from the Father but from the unity of the divine essence, nor does he conceive of it as accidental but rather as an essential characteristic of the divine being.” In *RD*, 2:303.

⁵⁷ *RD*, 2:304 and *GD*, 2:310.

⁵⁸ *RD*, 2:304.

⁵⁹ *RD*, 2:305.

⁶⁰ *RD*, 2:305.

⁶¹ *RD*, 2:304 and *GD*, 2:311-12.

relations of the Trinity are revealed. Thus, the three persons are in reciprocal relationship, “the divine being is completely coextensive with being Father, Son, and Spirit.”⁶²

Based on concepts of unity and self-differentiation (self-distinction) in relation to the Trinity, Bavinck critiques Feuerbach’s religious theory of projection. He argues that the relation of the Trinity is not a projection of the relation of human beings, nor is it patriarchal as it is later criticized by feminist theology. Rather, God is the archetype of human relationships, and this description is determined by the inherent relationship between the three persons in the Trinity, ensuring that neither God’s threeness nor his oneness subtracted from one another but are instead harmoniously united. Bavinck says, “The unfolding of the divine being occurs within that being, thus leaving the oneness and simplicity of that being undiminished... although the three persons do not differ in essence, they are distinct subjects, hypostases, or subsistences, which precisely for that reason bring about within the being of God the complete unfolding of that being.”⁶³ Thus, the Trinity is through generation and spiration, “related to each other in an absolute manner; their personal distinctness as subjects completely coincides with their immanent interpersonal relationship.”⁶⁴

Bavinck does not take the Father as the sole source in the Trinity, but the Trinity itself as the basis of unity and diversity. Because Bavinck understands the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity through the lens of distinction and self-distinction, he further emphasizes the equal and reciprocal relationship among the three

⁶² *RD*, 2:305.

⁶³ *RD*, 2:306.

⁶⁴ *RD*, 2:306.

Persons. According to Bavinck, the paternity of the Father, the Son's sonship, and the Spirit's procession do not imply that they are temporal beings. These are descriptions of their relationship rather than descriptions of the three persons in essence. Bavinck concurs with the Western Church's position of the *filioque*. He contends that the Eastern Church rejects that the Spirit proceeded from the Son for fear of falling into subordinationism. As a result, the Orthodox church supports that the Father is the fountain and origin of the Godhead, and that Godhead unity in the Trinity can be achieved by using the Father as the first principle.⁶⁵ According to Bavinck, the Orthodox cannot deal with the relationship among the three Persons, but with the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Father and the Spirit. However, the Orthodox ignored the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, so "the two are more or less independent of each other; the both open their own way to the Father." As a result, the Orthodox church falls into a dualism, "orthodoxy and mysticism, the intellect and the will, exist dualistically side by side."⁶⁶

Bavinck contends that to comprehend the Trinity, one must take into account both the transcendence and the immanence of God. God's unity is only perfect and absolute in this way, and it is not diminished by the self-distinction among the three persons. God's immanence enables one to understand God's revelation by analogy. But God's transcendence ensures that this analogy does not eliminate the harmony between God's unity and diversity. Bavinck says,

Among creatures diversity in the nature of the case implies a degree of separation and division. All created beings necessarily exist in space and time and therefore

⁶⁵ *RD*, 2:317.

⁶⁶ *RD*, 2:317.

live side by side or sequentially. But the attributes of eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, goodness, and so on, by their very nature exclude all separation and division. God is absolute unity and simplicity, without composition or division; and that unity itself is not ethical or contractual in nature, as it is among humans, but absolute; nor is it accidental, but it is essential to the divine being.⁶⁷

In this passage, Bavinck emphasizes God's transcendence over time and space. Here, like Barth, Bavinck actually makes use of the concept and attributes of God to guarantee the unity between the oneness and the triune nature of the Godhead. From a metaphysical standpoint, Bavinck rules out the possibility of contingency due to the concept of God's absoluteness. In Bavinck's argument, the harmonization of unity and diversity is still defended from the concept of God himself.

5.2.5 Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity

Hence, we need to discuss how Bavinck views the relation between the immanent and the economic Trinity. Bavinck also uses the Trinity's unity and diversity as the epistemological and ontological basis for understanding the two kinds of Trinity. The idea that "the 'ontological' Trinity is mirrored in the 'economic' Trinity" is one of Bavinck's well known claims.⁶⁸ The immanent relations among the three persons in the Trinity manifest themselves externally, and the economy of God is "common to the three and indivisible."⁶⁹ Bavinck observes that while the economy has a single author, the process of salvation has a sequence, "all things proceed from the Father, are

⁶⁷ *RD*, 2:300.

⁶⁸ *RD*, 2:318.

⁶⁹ *RD*, 2:259.

accomplished by the Son, and completed in the Spirit.”⁷⁰ The outward works (*opera ad extra*) reveals “the special properties and works are attributes to each of the three persons... in such a way that the order present between the persons in the ontological Trinity is revealed.”⁷¹

Bavinck continues to discuss the two kinds of Trinity by the concept of differentiation (distinction). The three persons share the same divine nature and attributes. But it is the immanent self-distinction that corresponds to the economic distinctions in *ad extra*.⁷² Bavinck states that,

All the works *ad extra*...are works of the Trinity as a whole. Yet, in an “economic” sense, the work of creation is more specifically assigned to the Father, the work of redemption to the Son, the work of sanctification to the Holy Spirit. Just as in the ontological Trinity the Father is first in the order of subsistence, the Son second, the Spirit third, so also in the history of revelation the Father preceded the Son, and the Son in turn preceded the Holy Spirit.⁷³

According to Bavinck, although the work of creation and redemption is accomplished by one God, there is a different sequence among the three persons due to their self-distinction as seen in the redemptive history. Bavinck points out that it is through God’s self-revelation that the distinction among the three persons in the immanent relation of Godhead, which ontologically presents the attributes of the triune God; however, as Bavinck’s mirror analogy is intended to show, from an epistemological point of view, one recognizes the distinction among the three persons through the economy, as a mirror presents the immanent relations in essence.

⁷⁰ *RD*, 2:259.

⁷¹ *RD*, 2:318.

⁷² *RD*, 2:318-19.

⁷³ *RD*, 2:319-20.

In summary, Bavinck underscores the vital link between divine revelation and the doctrine of the Trinity. He suggests that understanding the nature of God as Trinity is deeply intertwined with how God reveals Himself to humanity. Bavinck acknowledges the critical role of theological and philosophical language, as well as metaphysical concepts, in comprehending the Trinity. He points out that the immanent relations of the three persons within the Godhead are also manifested outwardly in the economic Trinity. Contrary to completely rejecting the impact of German Idealism following Immanuel Kant, Bavinck acknowledges its positive significance for Trinitarian theology. He particularly utilizes terms like “self-differentiation” and “differentiation” to interpret the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity. These ideas display some “modern” consciousness and traits. Compared to motifs like organicism, Bavinck’s concept of “distinction” in articulating the doctrine of the Trinity is more often overlooked. However, in Pannenberg’s trinitarian theology, he employs “distinction” and “self-distinction” as crucial theoretical cornerstones and motifs throughout his trinitarian framework. In the following discussion on Pannenberg, I will further illustrate that Bavinck not only shares numerous commonalities with Pannenberg in the concept of distinction, but also exhibits many similarities in other aspects of trinitarian theology.

5.3 Pannenberg’s Doctrine of the Trinity

In the preceding exposition on Bavinck, I examined the some Bavinck scholars’ hypothesis, which to some extent isolates Bavinck from modern thought, particularly modern German idealism. Eglinton, for instance, to set Bavinck and Hegel in radical opposition, portrays Hegel as a modern philosopher who has broken with the Christian

theological tradition, whereas Bavinck passes directly over modern thought, inheriting the legacy of Augustine and Thomas, without taking any nourishment from modern philosophers such as Hegel and Schelling.⁷⁴ Eglinton claims that,

Bavinck notes the penchant of nineteenth-century philosophy, centred on Schelling's attempt to prove God's trinity via philosophy, for Trinitarian concepts. However, he expresses considerable reservation for this trend: standing foursquare with Aquinas, Calvin and many later Reformed and Lutheran theologians, Bavinck views the Trinity as knowable through revelation, rather than philosophical speculation.⁷⁵

However, apart from the discussion in Chapter 2 about the intellectual connection between Schelling and Bavinck, Schelling has explicitly stated that the philosophy of revelation cannot be reduced to mere rational speculation.⁷⁶ On the contrary, without revelation, humanity would be in a state of complete ignorance. Schelling emphasizes that the Trinity is the foundation of Christianity, stating, "Without it, Christianity could not exist. Therefore, the Trinity is also the basis of the philosophy of revelation; without it, one cannot find the way into the philosophy of revelation."⁷⁷ The situation might be quite the opposite of what Eglinton suggests; instead, it aligns more with Pass's assertion, "What Bavinck appropriates from German idealism is not merely a few organic components but a conceptual framework."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 107.

⁷⁵ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 111-12.

⁷⁶ *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 5.

⁷⁷ *Sämtliche Werke* XIII, 316-317.

⁷⁸ Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism? Reconsidering the Origins of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif," 68.

In contrast to Eglinton's view,⁷⁹ however, scholars of Hegel and German idealism have noted that Hegel shaped the modern doctrine of the Trinity.⁸⁰ Even Karl Barth admits unreservedly that German idealism, and Hegel's philosophy in particular, restored the Trinity to its central position in the doctrine of God.⁸¹ According to Pannenberg, there is the affinity between Barth's Trinitarianism and Hegelian system.⁸² It was not until Hegel that the doctrine of the Trinity ceased to be an auxiliary to the doctrine of God and instead became the doctrine of God's foundation. Even Hegel's contemporaries, Pannenberg argues, failed to recognize that Hegel placed the Trinity, and the incarnation which is based on the Trinity, at the center of Hegelian philosophy. Pannenberg, from the perspective of intellectual history, delineates the respective Trinitarian sources of Hegel and Bavinck. He asserts that the Hegelian Trinity is in the tradition of Augustine and Anselm and continues in Barth's thought.⁸³ If Pannenberg's stance is valid, then as I

⁷⁹ Eglinton claims that "Bavinck's theocentric starting point is Trinitarian, whereas Hegel's is monistic; and furthermore, his *telos* is non-reductionist, whereas that of Hegel is quite different." See Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 68.

⁸⁰ Samuel M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104-141; Cyril O'Regan, "The Trinity in Kant, Hegel, and Schelling," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 254-66; Paolo Diego Bubbio, "Hegel, the Trinity, and the 'I'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2014): 129-150.

⁸¹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 298-303.

⁸² Pannenberg, "Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre: ein Beitrag zur Beziehung zwischen Karl Barth und der Philosophie Hegels" in *Grundfragen Systematischer Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze*. Band 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 98.

⁸³ The real issue that deserves criticism, according to Pannenberg, is that both Hegel and Barth commit the same error, namely, that the Trinity should not be derived from a speculative conception of God as a subject, but rather from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Pannenberg would not share Bavinck's claim that the Trinity as *a priori* for the knowledge of God. Despite Barth's criticism of Hegel, Pannenberg maintains that Barth fails to escape Hegelian model that God's subjectivity as a principle for understanding God in the context of God's revelation and the distinction of the Trinity. Thus, Pannenberg rejects that the abstract, a priori, "from above" concept of God as a starting point for understanding God. See, Pannenberg, *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland*, 260.

discussed in the second chapter regarding Eglinton's viewpoint, which purely categorize German idealism as "modern" with no continuation of "orthodox" Christian thought and set them in opposition as "modern" versus "orthodox," might be somewhat untenable. On the contrary, based on Pannenberg's research, we can at least make a plausible inference that German idealism still carries forward certain "orthodox" elements, such as those from Augustine. Therefore, the thought of German idealists like Hegel and Schelling cannot be simply labeled as "modern" or completely disconnected from "orthodox." Instead, it represents a complex amalgamation of various influences and syntheses. In fact, Pannenberg's (and the German Hegelian study) interpretation of Hegel does not support Eglinton's arguments, making them unreliable.

In the following section, I will compare Pannenberg's trinitarian scheme with that of Bavinck. I argue that, despite some differences in detail, Pannenberg and Bavinck are able to show a great deal of agreement and common ground in the Trinity, and that the two theologians share significantly more intellectual sources, as Bolt argues, Pannenberg is able to provide an extension and complement to Bavinck's theology in the doctrine of the Trinity.⁸⁴

5.3.1 Literature Review

Although there is some divergence and debate among Pannenberg's scholars regarding his doctrine of God, there is a consensus that Pannenberg is a trinitarian

⁸⁴ John Bolt, "Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg," 114.

theologian.⁸⁵ Linn Tonstad applauds Pannenberg's Trinitarian theology, which "remains one of the most challenging and innovative systematic treatments of the doctrine developed during the recent revival of Trinitarian theology in the post-Barthian era."⁸⁶

Allan Galloway considered Pannenberg's Trinity to be the cornerstone of his system, and Galloway asserted that Pannenberg made numerous significant innovations and reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity, which "has extremely important apologetic significance in the modern world."⁸⁷ And without the trinitarian ontological basis, for Pannenberg's theory, "the doctrine of history as revelation would be mere metaphor."⁸⁸

Some Pannenberg scholars believe that his Trinitarian theology is founded on a critique and expansion of the ideas of Hegel and Barth.⁸⁹ As Bradshaw points out, on the one hand, Pannenberg shares much of Barth's insight into revelation; on the other hand, Pannenberg criticizes Barth's theology for neglecting the dimension of history. Pannenberg is able to "unite revelation with history and faith with general reason and cognition."⁹⁰ Bradshaw argues that in order to overcome dualism, Pannenberg's thoroughly trinitarian theology grounded in "the tradition of German dialectical idealism

⁸⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, "A Survey of the Literature," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*, 32-36; Robert W. Jenson, "Jesus in the Trinity: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Christology and Doctrine of the Trinity," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*, 188-206; R. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 2 (1990): 175-206; Timothy Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*.

⁸⁶ Linn Tonstad, "'The ultimate consequence of his self-distinction from the Father...': Difference and Hierarchy in Pannenberg's Trinity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 51, no. 4 (2009): 383.

⁸⁷ Allan D. Galloway, *Wolfhart Pannenberg*, in *Contemporary Religious Thinkers Series*, edited by H.D. Lewis (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1973), 102.

⁸⁸ Galloway, *Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 112.

⁸⁹ Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," 177.

⁹⁰ Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 137.

with certain original and crucial revisions which seek to avoid the pitfalls of idealist monism.”⁹¹ In addition, Pannenberg’s theology features a system of trinitarianism and organicism.⁹² If Bradshaw’s argument is correct, it demonstrates that the affinity of the theological foundations of Pannenberg and Bavinck, namely trinitarianism and organism.

Some scholars have held a reservedly critical stance toward Pannenberg’s Trinity, accusing it of being a deformation of tritheism, or noting that it actually implies a fourth person, with Anselm K. Min’s criticism being the most vehement. Min argues that Pannenberg does not make a good distinction between the three persons and the divine essence as the power in his system, so it seems there is “as a *fourth* entity over and behind the three persons” which dominates the divine essence.⁹³ In other words, the divine essence is a distinct fourth person from the other three. Then Min contends that Pannenberg does not elaborate on the material content of the three persons’ relationships. Rather, Pannenberg views the divine essence as “modes of being” and thus engages in a certain kind of modalism. Min claims that, “The basic problem with Pannenberg’s trinitarian theology as a whole, then, may be its underlying Hegelian philosophical model of the dialectic of self-manifestation itself.”⁹⁴ Unfortunately, Min fails to recognize the methodological distinction that Pannenberg emphasizes between his theory and Hegel’s, ignoring the difference between the two, and instead argues that Pannenberg’s trinitarian scheme is unchanged Hegelian trinitarianism. And he argues that because Pannenberg’s

⁹¹ Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 138.

⁹² Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology*, 138.

⁹³ Anselm K. Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg’s Hegelian Trinitarianism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 3 (2004): 264.

⁹⁴ Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg’s Hegelian Trinitarianism,” 268.

trinity is understood on the basis of Hegelian philosophical model of the dialectic of self-manifestation itself, Pannenberg confuses the immanent to the economic Trinity, and “reduces the divine essence itself to the sum total of its manifestations in the world and project economic into the immanent relations....”⁹⁵ However, Min’s interpretation that Pannenberg considers the divine essence as “modes of being” is a misunderstanding of Pannenberg’s stance. As Thiselton points out, this view is in fact Barth’s. And Thiselton elaborates, “In contrast to Karl Barth, Pannenberg regards the notion of understanding the Trinity in terms of different modes of being of one subject as inadequate. By contrast, he calls the persons of the Trinity ‘separate centers of action.’”⁹⁶

I will restrict my discussion of Pannenberg’s Trinity to issues that correspond to Bavinck’s discussion, and show the similarities and differences between the two theologians’ are. My argument is, first, that Pannenberg and Bavinck share many intellectual sources on the Trinity and have many similarities, but that Pannenberg updated the trinitarian paradigm by incorporating some modern innovations; second, Pannenberg discusses the Trinity as the foundation of the entire philosophical scheme, and when Pannenberg introduced modern physical concepts such as field theory, it actually produced a paradigm shift in the structure of trinitarian theology.

5.3.2 Trinity as the Foundation of Dogmatics

Like Bavinck, Pannenberg believes that the Trinity is central and foundation of theology and supports every subject of theology as a whole. For the *loci* of the Trinity in

⁹⁵ Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg’s Hegelian Trinitarianism,” 268.

⁹⁶ Thiselton, *Understanding Pannenberg*, 51.

his *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg holds the same view as Bavinck, noting the issue of traditional high scholasticism typically, which deals first with the existence and attributes of the one Godhead, and then with the Trinity, results in the Trinity being viewed as an appendix to the general doctrine of God. Pannenberg and Bavinck agree that Christology and other doctrines must be understood through the trinitarian scheme. And the true understanding of the doctrine of God is not simply the relation between the Father and the Son, but the relationships between the three persons in Trinity.⁹⁷ In his earlier works, Pannenberg states that “the doctrine of the Trinity formulates the concept of God as a historically experienced revelation.”⁹⁸ Moreover, in his *Systematic Theology*, following the theme “the Revelation of God,” Pannenberg discusses the Trinity as the starting point of the doctrine of God. Then he claims that for the testing and verification of the revelatory theology, discussing the events of revelation as presented in the biblical witness will “led to the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity.”⁹⁹

5.3.3 Revelation and Analogy

On the theme of revelation and analogy, Pannenberg and Bavinck also share similar perspectives. They both argue that the doctrine of Trinity is neither accessible by relying solely on Scriptures, nor is it the pure speculative thinking. Rather, the doctrine of Trinity is an exposition of God’s historical revelation by the philosophical analogy. Pannenberg maintains that early Christian theology attempted to demonstrate that the Old

⁹⁷ *ST*, 1:264-65.

⁹⁸ *RasH*, 143.

⁹⁹ *ST*, 1:257.

Testament implied certain trinitarian elements to illustrate that the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, which was consistent with the monotheism of the Old Testament, thus forming the concept of the Trinity. These “were not from the very outset opposed to Judaism and its belief in one God.”¹⁰⁰ He also emphasizes the fact that, with the development of modern historical-critical exegesis, it is no longer sufficient to support the doctrine of the Trinity by appealing solely to the scriptural witness of revelation or the baptismal formula. However, in contrast to Bavinck, Pannenberg rejects the Trinity as a “*priori* revelation” in human thought by the faith.

Despite both Bavinck and Pannenberg emphasizing revelation as the foundation of the doctrine of Trinity and the only means of cognition, the two theologians hold divergent views. The position of Bavinck is that the doctrine of Trinity is an *a priori* idea.¹⁰¹ In contrast, Pannenberg contends that the doctrine of Trinity is a combination of philosophical speculation and *a posteriori* inference from the experience.¹⁰² On the basis of this position, Pannenberg criticizes Augustine, Hegel, and Barth, arguing that their doctrines of Trinity all root the derivation of three persons to some degree from the essence of the one God, that is, they “subsume the threeness of the persons into the concept of a single personal God.”¹⁰³ For example, Pannenberg points out that Barth’s trinitarian system derives not from “the data of the historical revelation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, but from the formal concept of revelation as self-revelation... entails a

¹⁰⁰ *ST*, 1:275.

¹⁰¹ *RD*, 2:330.

¹⁰² *ST*, 1:277-80.

¹⁰³ *ST*, 1:294.

subject of revelation, an object, and revelation itself.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, this error leads to either modalism or subordinationism, preventing the construction of a true Trinitarian dogma. According to Pannenberg, the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be discussed from the abstract concept of revelation “from above” as Bath claims, but rather only from the historical event of revelation. It “must be based on the biblical witness to revelation or on the economy of salvation.”¹⁰⁵ In this regard, Pannenberg concludes that from Anselm to Barth, “this line of thinking derives from the psychological analogies of Augustine...”; however, while they criticize the vestiges of the Trinity, according to Pannenberg, Barth still relies on “the supreme vestige, the Trinity’s image in the human soul.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, Pannenberg refrains from using *a priori* analogies or triadic principles to explain the Trinity, for fear of falling into the quagmire of modalism or subordinationism.

Moreover, like Bavinck, Pannenberg also recognized the limitations of using the term “person” in Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁰⁷ He noted that this terminology can lead to a problematic understanding where it results in “either a finitizing of God or a pantheistic obliteration of the distinction between God and the world.”¹⁰⁸ This observation reflects a concern that the concept of “person,” as understood in human terms, might either reduce God to a finite being (finitizing) or, conversely, blur the lines between God and the created universe (pantheistic obliteration), thereby undermining the unique and

¹⁰⁴ *ST*, 1:296.

¹⁰⁵ *ST*, 1:299.

¹⁰⁶ *ST*, 1:304.

¹⁰⁷ According to Bavinck, “This difference in terminology...repeatedly occasioned misunderstanding between the East and West.” See *RD*, 2: 301.

¹⁰⁸ Olson, “Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 177.

transcendent nature of the divine in Christian theology. Pannenberg uses German idealism, particularly the thought of Hegel, to delve deeper into the understanding and interpretation of the term “person.” According to Thiselton, “Hegel was the first to elaborate the concept of ‘person’ in such a way that God’s unity became understandable precisely from the reciprocity of the divine persons.... Pannenberg clearly stands in contrast to Barth, who rejects the notion of ‘person’ in favor of ‘mode of being’ when speaking of God.”¹⁰⁹

In contrast to an abstract and “from above” concept of the Trinity, Pannenberg insists on a “from below” construction of the Trinity through concrete experience and emphasizes that the Trinity must be founded on revelation in the process of history. According to Min’s criticisms of Pannenberg, Pannenberg’s trinitarianism is pure Hegelian speculative philosophy.¹¹⁰ However, Min overlooks the fact that Pannenberg does not consider the ontology of the doctrine of God in terms of speculative philosophy, and argues that, “Pannenberg takes full advantage of the classical unifying function of the category of the divine essence by making it, in full Hegelian fashion, dialectical, self-differentiating and self-manifesting.”¹¹¹ Rather, Pannenberg criticizes the possibility of approaching the doctrine of God from a pure philosophical speculation and Hegelian system, which is distinct from religious experience and historical tradition.¹¹² For the concept of God derived from philosophical speculation “is not identical with the essence

¹⁰⁹ Thiselton, *Understanding Pannenberg*, 79.

¹¹⁰ Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love,” 263.

¹¹¹ Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love,” 255.

¹¹² *ST*, 1:339.

of God which reveals itself in his historical acts.”¹¹³ Pannenberg also clarifies a long-standing misconception: Hegel’s system does not always presuppose discernment either, but rather “the concept of essence always presupposes an existence into whose essence we inquire.”¹¹⁴

5.3.4 Unity and Diversity

In the section on Bavinck, I have already mentioned the concepts of “distinction (or differentiation)” and “self-distinction,” which are often overlooked by scholars of Bavinck. It is these two concepts that provide the tools for explaining and understanding the unity and diversity within Bavinck’s discussion of the Trinity. In Pannenberg’s framework, “distinction” and “self-distinction” are also foundational and significant concepts throughout his theological framework. According to Anthony C. Thiselton, “To Pannenberg one important factor was the self-differentiation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹¹⁵ Pannenberg explicitly differentiates his Trinitarian system from Hegel’s, because Hegel “presents the Trinity as the development of an absolute subject, a development that follows the pattern of self-consciousness,” thus, “this argument is incompatible with the faith in creation.”¹¹⁶ In contrast, Pannenberg advocates for a perspective of self-distinction, that is, understanding “the life of the Trinity from the

¹¹³ *ST*, 1:349.

¹¹⁴ *ST*, 1:366.

¹¹⁵ Thiselton, *Understanding Pannenberg*, 51.

¹¹⁶ *ST*, 2:28.

mutuality of the relationships between the persons within the Trinity.”¹¹⁷ This Hegelian incompatibility can be avoided by starting with the inter-personal relationships within the Trinity rather than with an absolute subject as Hegel does. Pannenberg states this viewpoint as follows: “For each of the persons, self-distinction from the others is a condition of their fellowship in the unity of the divine life, irrespective of the different forms of the self-distinction in each case.”¹¹⁸ Following this, I will discuss in detail how Pannenberg uses the concepts of distinction and self-distinction to understand the relationship between unity and diversity.

For Pannenberg, the concepts of distinction and self-distinction are not only crucial in trinitarian theology but also rectify some errors in traditional theology. According to Pannenberg, “if the trinitarian relations among Father, Son, and Spirit have the form of mutual self-distinction, they must be understood not merely as different modes of being of the one divine subject but as living realizations of separate centers of action.”¹¹⁹ Like Bavinck, Pannenberg opposes the idea of the Father as the origin of the three Persons. He further contends that both the Western and Eastern churches have, to some extent, overly emphasized certain aspects of Augustinian theology: “this mistaken formulation of Augustine points in fact to a defect which plagues the trinitarian theological language of both East and West, namely, that of seeing the relations among

¹¹⁷ *ST*, 2:28-29.

¹¹⁸ *ST*, 2:29.

¹¹⁹ *ST*, 1:319.

Father, Son, and Spirit exclusively as relations of origin.”¹²⁰ In Pannenberg’s perspective, this understanding “cannot do justice to the reciprocity in the relations.”¹²¹

As discussed in the Bavinck section, both Pannenberg and Bavinck consider the issue of unity and diversity to be one of the most important motif in the doctrine of Trinity. Pannenberg, like Bavinck, views the historical development of the doctrine of God as demonstrating how theology addresses the relation between oneness and threeness, and between unity and diversity in the Trinity. Both of them reject a certain traditional doctrine of Trinity, which is based on the Father’s monarchy. According to Pannenberg, it is difficult to avoid tritheism and subordinationism, if the Trinity is deduced from the unity of God, i.e., if the Father is traditionally regarded as the origin of the Trinity.¹²²

Pannenberg also reflects the traditional doctrine of unity and diversity. Still sharing Bavinck’s view, Pannenberg argues that the dogma established by Nicaea and Constantinople deals not with the problem of the three persons in the Trinity, but rather with the unity of the trinitarian God, namely, how the three persons are united into one Godhead. However, neither the Father as the origin, nor “by deriving the trinity from the concept of the unity of God as Spirit or love,” adequately explain this issue of unity.¹²³ He claims that, for traditional Protestant theology of Trinity, “its lack of inner connection with the doctrine of the absolute unity of God...” led to the sixteenth-century emergence

¹²⁰ *ST*, 1:319.

¹²¹ *ST*, 1:319.

¹²² *ST*, 1:282-83.

¹²³ *ST*, 1:342.

of Socinianism and anti-Trinitarianism.¹²⁴ Both Pannenberg and Bavinck sought to avoid subordination, and insist that the Father could not be the origin of the Trinity.¹²⁵

Since Augustine, the doctrine of Trinity has attempted to explain the relation between one and three, unity and diversity, according to Pannenberg. But Pannenberg criticizes Augustine for using psychological analogies to describe unity and trinity. For Pannenberg, there is an overemphasis on the unity in the Trinity, and the distinctions between each other in the Trinity are overlooked. The reason is precisely that Augustine bases trinity on the premise that the simple unity of the divine substance, whereas Pannenberg comments that “there can be no substantial distinction even though there are three persons.”¹²⁶

Pannenberg emphasizes the need for a social-relational perspective and the concept of distinction in understanding the relationship between unity and diversity in the Trinity. The distinction among the three persons “does not vanish in unity but that the unity of the living God is a unity in distinction.”¹²⁷ He borrows from Athanasius the crucial idea that “the Father would not be the Father without the Son and therefore that he was never without the Son.”¹²⁸ And Pannenberg distinguishes between the three persons using the concept of distinction. Thus, there is no single, sequential relationship between the three persons, but “each of the three persons relates to the others as others and

¹²⁴ *ST*, 1:290.

¹²⁵ *ST*, 1:279-80.

¹²⁶ *ST*, 1:284.

¹²⁷ *ST*, 1:342.

¹²⁸ *ST*, 1:273.

distinguishes itself from them.”¹²⁹ When he says that, Pannenberg makes clear the divergence between his own concept and the conventional concept of distinction. He says,

Relations among the three persons that are defined as mutual self-distinction cannot be reduced to relations of origin in the tradition sense. The Father does not merely beget the Son. He also hands over his kingdom to him and receives it back from him. The Son is not merely begotten of the Father. He is also obedient to him and he thereby glorifies him as the one God. The Spirit is not just breathed. He also fills the Son and glorifies him in his obedience to the Father, thereby glorifying the Father himself.¹³⁰

This once more demonstrates Pannenberg’s opposition to the conventional view that the Father is the origin of the Trinity. Pannenberg emphasizes the need to distinguish between the three persons. Moreover, Pannenberg claims that, “The self-distinction may take on its sharpest form in the Son, but precisely by this act of self-distinction, he too remains in the unity of the divine life because it is the condition of his unity with the Father.”¹³¹

In contrast to Bavinck, Pannenberg emphasizes and elaborates on the Holy Spirit in the Trinity through the modern lens of field theory. According to Pannenberg, if the Holy Spirit “was not differentiated from the Son as a separate hypostatic entity,” the Holy Spirit could only be regarded as a power from the Father, then the filling of the Son by the Spirit would also mean being a part of the Father.¹³² Consequently, there is only one person instead of three. Therefore, the subjectivity of the three persons in modern scheme

¹²⁹ *ST*, 1:320.

¹³⁰ *ST*, 1:320.

¹³¹ *ST*, 2:29.

¹³² *ST*, 1:269.

of Trinity is not achieved by the terminological concept of “person,” but rather by the three persons’ capacity to distinguish themselves from one another. Pannenberg says, “If the trinitarian relations among Father, Son, and Spirit have the form of mutual self-distinction, they must be understood not merely as different modes of being of the one divine subject but as living realizations of separate centers of action.”¹³³ For this reason, Pannenberg insists that inner-trinitarian relations serves as the origin and unity in Trinity rather than a single person as trinitarian origin and unity. The three persons are not “individualistically as if they could exist in separation from each other,” but “related to each of the others as others and as distinct from themselves.”¹³⁴

Pannenberg considers the trinitarian concept of God and the God of classical monotheism to be different. The former emphasizes the self-distinction and unity of the subjectivity in three persons, and describes “the particular unity of the living God,” who is progressively and organically presented in historical revelation, while the latter is “the dead or static unity of a supreme being as an existing entity.”¹³⁵ Thus, Pannenberg’s concept of Trinity is very different from overly philosophical one that Min et al. accuse him of having. Pannenberg contends that this doctrine of the Trinitarian God, which describes God’s action and revelation in history, enables Christianity to move away from a philosophical conception of God to a loving God.

¹³³ *ST*, 1:319.

¹³⁴ Olson, “Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity,” 191.

¹³⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, edited by Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 71.

In Pannenberg's epistemology, considering the relationship between unity and diversity in Trinity is one of the real challenges that has existed since the advent of modern critical philosophy. Since projective theories like Feuerbach's remain a challenge for theology, once the attributes of God are unified by analogy from ordinary and finite experience. Since the manifestation of the divine essence in being is a specific essence, according to Pannenberg, "which is distinct from all others. It distinguishes itself from others by its attributes."¹³⁶ Additionally, as defined concepts, the concepts of "person" and "unity" are themselves constrained. Because of the various finite qualities in this world, "they cannot be God's in his essence if we think of the divine essence in its own unrelated and transcendent self-identity apart from all relation to the world."¹³⁷ Actually, once one attempts to restore the unity of the divine essence by tracing back the variety of qualities that are ascribed to God—in distinction from the unity of his essence—to the multiplicity of divine outward relation, there are only abstract and empty concepts of divine essence, and an inner contradiction, because "God is not to be really distinguished from his attributes but is to be distinguished from the functions that form the stuff of his attributes as something that stand behind them."¹³⁸

Pannenberg appeals to the Hegelian concept of relationality to reconcile the contradiction. Three persons are reciprocal relationships and share the unity of the divine essence. He claims that "if the concept of essence is defined relationally, it can be more

¹³⁶ *ST*, 1:359.

¹³⁷ *ST*, 1:365.

¹³⁸ *ST*, 1:363.

closely linked to the relations between the person than had seemed possible hitherto.”¹³⁹
 And the divine relations implies God’s relations with the world. Divine essence and existence as three persons “are seen as forms of the existence of the divine essence both in the world and before it.”¹⁴⁰

According to Pannenberg, in order to understand the immanent relationships in the Trinity, one must understand how the Trinity and the world interact. Pannenberg sees this issue is the epistemological problem—which entails the relationship between the immanent (ontological) and the economic Trinity—can only be resolved by God’s activity in human history.

5.3.5 Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity

Pannenberg would concur with Bavinck’s metaphor of “mirror” to demonstrate the relation between the immanent and the economic Trinity. He agrees that “the immanent divine Logos is the same as the economic Logos, immanent Trinity is the same as the economic Trinity.”¹⁴¹ Thus, the three persons’ interactions and realizations in economic history express their intratrinitarian relation to each other.

Despite the fact that Pannenberg and Bavinck share this consensus. Pannenberg delves into greater depth and detail than Bavinck. Unlike Bavinck, Pannenberg does not fall on the side of the Western ecclesiastical tradition. Instead, he strives to strike a compromise between Eastern and Western. He contends that it is incorrect to interpret the

¹³⁹ *ST*, 1:367.

¹⁴⁰ *ST*, 1:367.

¹⁴¹ *ST*, 1:307.

immanent Trinity as an “exclusive as relations of origin,”¹⁴² if the eternal relationship between the three persons is reduced to nothing more than procession, begetting, and breathing (like Bavinck’s claim). It is unable to depict the genuine reactions in the eternal divine essence. He adds that the reciprocity in the trinitarian relation is reflected in the self-distinction between the three persons in one another. In other words, the three persons in the Trinity are neither one person’s unilateral subjectivity and the passive object of the other two persons; rather, the three persons have an interactive relationship with one another due to the self-distinction of their respective subjectivities in the Trinity.

With regard to the debate between action and subjectivity in the Trinity, Pannenberg’s exposition refutes Min’s criticism of him that he overemphasizes the monarchy of Spirit and appears to imply that the economic Trinity is simply the activity of the Spirit.¹⁴³ According to Min, “in a thoroughly Hegelian approach Pannenberg inverts the traditional ‘monarchy of the Father’ into the ‘monarchy of the Spirit’ without, however, explaining how the monarchy of the Spirit is compatible with the monarchy of the Father he still seems committed to.”¹⁴⁴ In fact, Pannenberg underlines that rather than the divine essence as Spirit, the three persons should be the subjects of God’s action in the economic Trinity. He claims, “only the three persons are the direct subjects of the divine action... it will first be an action of the trinitarian persons, whether in relation to one another or to creation.”¹⁴⁵ Pannenberg uses the Hegelian term “self-actualization of

¹⁴² *ST*, 1:273.

¹⁴³ Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg’s Hegelian Trinitarianism,” 268.

¹⁴⁴ Min, “The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg’s Hegelian Trinitarianism,” 262.

¹⁴⁵ *ST*, 1:384.

God” in the relation of creation to describe the action of God in history. And he disproves the charge that his trinitarianism imply the existence of a fourth person. He says, “The one God is thus the acting God, the subject of his action. But this being as subject is not a fourth in God alongside the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. It does not precede the persons and find development in the trinitarian differentiation. It expresses their living fellowship in action toward the world.”¹⁴⁶

Pannenberg shares Bavinck’s view that the economic Trinity unfolds, and is equivalent to the immanent Trinity, but he emphasizes the importance of history in harmonizing the immanent and the economic Trinity. Olson claims, Pannenberg combines the eternal with the present using the “ontological priority of the future” and the eschatological history, that is, “God’s real presence in the world... in the process of history such that only the fulfillment of history finally decides the truth of his reality.”¹⁴⁷ However, Pannenberg does not agree with Bavinck’s treatment of the immanent Trinity as a simple metaphysical ontology. Instead, he emphasizes that the immanent Trinity is not only eternal but also tied to time, is eschatological, and can only be confessed as anticipation of the final fulfillment of the economic Trinity. As Pannenberg notes, when the immanent Trinity is equated with the eternal Trinity, it does not imply that “the absorption of the immanent Trinity in the economic Trinity.”¹⁴⁸ The Trinity has sense and significance, because God is the same in both the eternal and the temporal.

Epistemologically, one can only know the immanent Trinity through the Trinity of

¹⁴⁶ *ST*, 1:389.

¹⁴⁷ Olson, “Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 198-99.

¹⁴⁸ *ST*, 1:331.

salvation history. Therefore, “God is the same in his eternal as he reveals himself of being historically.”¹⁴⁹

It’s worth noting that the concept of eternity that Pannenberg discusses here is not an antithesis of eternity and time, nor is it a condition beyond time or timeless. Pannenberg shares with Boethius and Barth the understanding that eternity is both “authentic duration and not just a negation of time” in addition to being “the unending, total, and perfect possession of life.”¹⁵⁰ Eternity is not only transcendental, but also the totality of both event and time. Pannenberg is able to combine the immanent and the economic Trinity and take into account the temporal nature of the economic Trinity as a result of his grasp of eternity. According to Pannenberg, Jesus and his proclamation already integrate eternity and time, immanence and economic, therefore the manifestation of the Trinity in the economic history is not merely a process that is realized after the end of time.¹⁵¹ From an ontological standpoint, the economic Trinity is identical to the immanent Trinity; however, from an epistemological perspective, the progressive revelation and equivalence of the immanent Trinity by the economic Trinity can only occur at the end of history and the particulate historical event of Jesus Christ.

5.3.6 Field Theory, Holy Spirit, and Love

In Pannenberg’s Trinitarian theology, understanding the Holy Spirit and the relationship between the three persons from the perspective of field theory elicits

¹⁴⁹ *ST*, 1:331.

¹⁵⁰ *ST*, 1:404 and 404n142.

¹⁵¹ *ST*, 1:401-10.

polarized evaluations among scholars of Pannenberg. Min criticizes Pannenberg's Trinitarian theology, asserting that it "runs the danger of postulating the divine essence as the 'fourth' entity above and beyond the three persons as well as that of modalism. In so far as he posits the Spirit as the divine essence that relates and unifies as the power of love, he incurs the danger of replacing the monarchy of the Father with the monarchy of the Spirit and subordinating the Father and the Son to the Holy Spirit."¹⁵² This critique suggests that Pannenberg's approach might inadvertently elevate the divine essence to a separate, fourth entity, potentially leading to a form of modalism, where the distinct persons of the Trinity are not properly maintained. Additionally, by emphasizing the Spirit as the unifying divine essence, Pannenberg is seen as risking the traditional hierarchical structure within the Trinity, possibly diminishing the roles of the Father and the Son in favor of the Holy Spirit.

Another viewpoint holds that Pannenberg innovatively revitalized traditional Trinitarian theology by employing modern physical concepts. According to Bradshaw, "the interesting point is that Spirit for Pannenberg bursts open the notion of mind and enables the theologian to recapture a sense of mystery in talking about God instead of the facile anthropomorphism that often accompanies the image of God as mind."¹⁵³

Given the varied and contentious debate surrounding Pannenberg's use of field theory to explain the framework of the Trinity, it is necessary to devote some discussion to this aspect. This will enable a more comprehensive presentation of Pannenberg's

¹⁵² Min, "The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg's Hegelian Trinitarianism," 268.

¹⁵³ Bradshaw, *Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 155.

Trinitarian framework. In Pannenberg's Trinitarian framework, several innovations and distinctive features are presented.

First, Pannenberg is not only discussing the purely ontological issues of Trinity, but also epistemological concerns, when he discusses how the Trinity is revealed, i.e., how one might know the Trinity by revelation. In regards to divine essence, Pannenberg contends that a distinction between one's own limited ideas and the matter itself is necessary due to the limitations of human insight. In order to understand ontological concerns regarding God, one must first and only understand through one's own epistemology.¹⁵⁴ Pannenberg, like Bavinck, agrees with Luther's position, and he uses Luther's distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus* to demonstrate the incomprehensibility in divine essence. This instead emphasizes the epistemic constraints of humans rather than implying that God is dualistic or has a fourth person. In addition, Pannenberg contends that God's nature as perceived through revelation in history, especially in the event of Jesus Christ, is still openness. In other words, "only at the end of history will the God who is hidden in his overruling of history and in individual destinies finally be universally known to be the same as the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ."¹⁵⁵ Therefore, divine essence is not immediately apparent. Pannenberg insists that one must be aware of the tension between the hidden and the revealed God in the doctrine of God.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Min's argument focuses on Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* I, Chapter 6, but he misses the epistemological theme that Pannenberg addresses in this chapter. In fact, Pannenberg discusses the epistemic development from Latin Soteriological theology, Lutheran theology to modern philosophical epistemology since Descartes. See, *ST*, 1: 347-59.

¹⁵⁵ *ST*, 1:340.

¹⁵⁶ *ST*, 1:340.

Despite Pannenberg's emphasis on the incomprehensibility of divine essence, it is nonetheless possible to know of God's existence. The epistemological issue of knowing what or who God is, that is, the inquiry to the relationship between the knowledge and experience of God's existence and the awareness of the nature of divine essence, has been a challenge for both Protestant theology and modern philosophy since Descartes and Kant. It is important to make clear how essence and existence relate to one another. According to Pannenberg, a thing's existence is a presupposition of its essence in a broad sense of epistemology. The Hegelian idea of the relationship between existence and essence is supported by Pannenberg, namely, the full development comes in existence as manifestation of essence. However, Pannenberg points out how Hegel differs from himself in that Hegel does not "treat existence as indefinite existence that is defined by reflection on its essence; it is defined existence as the existence of the essence."¹⁵⁷ On the contrary, Pannenberg makes reference to the triune God's revelation in history, especially how the economic Trinity presents the immanent Trinity as divine essence. For Pannenberg, there is no such thing as a fourth person or another hidden God; rather, there is only a mysterious, incomprehensible part of God's essence that is outside the boundaries of human reason and faith.

Second, Pannenberg uses modern physics, especially the field theory to resolve a long-standing theological conundrum over the meaning of the phrase "God is Spirit": the term Spirit is used to denote the divine essence, which is common to all three persons; on the other hand, the Spirit itself must be a person in Trinity. The paradox here is that the Spirit is both a person and a non-person at the same time. It is this that can be easily

¹⁵⁷ *ST*, 1:354-55n45.

accused of suggestion the existence of a fourth person behind the three persons. For example, Min criticizes Pannenberg's Trinity, claiming that it substitutes the Spirit for the Father as the origin of Trinity, and there is paradox in that the Spirit is both a person and a power. Therefore, Pannenberg's Trinity suggests the existence of a fourth person. The crux of the debate centers on whether Pannenberg's use of field theory framework can explain the paradoxical nature of the Holy Spirit being both a person and yet not a person in the traditional sense. In Pannenberg's view, this seemingly contradictory logic can only be resolved from a dialectical and field-theoretical perspective.

According to Pannenberg, his new paradigm resolves the conundrum in the Trinity. He provides a very thorough defense of why field theories should be included in the trinitarian scheme. He makes the argument that theology does not use analogies and popular concepts as tools for interpretation without criticism and reflection. The purpose of theology is to reflect and question the ideas it employs. But Pannenberg rejects "a direct theological interpretation of the field theories of physics," seeing these theories "as approximations to the reality."¹⁵⁸ Pannenberg presents an innovative scheme on comprehending the Trinity through modern quantum mechanics. This signifies a change in his theological paradigm, moving from the static Aristotelian-Newtonian scheme of the classic physical worldview to a dynamic-quantum one.¹⁵⁹ Pannenberg points out, theology uses the concept of field, because of "its own philosophical rather than scientific

¹⁵⁸ *ST*, 2:83.

¹⁵⁹ *ST*, 2:83.

presentation.”¹⁶⁰ In reality, the traditional doctrine of God already provide the potential for an explanation using the concept of field. He says,

it is more in keeping with what the Bible says about God as Spirit, or about the Spirit of God, to view what is meant as a dynamic field that is structured in trinitarian fashion, so that the person of the Holy Spirit is one of the personal concretion of the essence of God as Spirit in distinction from the Father and the Son.¹⁶¹

Pannenberg thinks there are similarities between the Trinity and the field theory, so the concept of field is able to as an analogy to describe the Trinity.¹⁶² The Spirit as a field, “can be thought of only as a concrete form of the one deity like the Father and the Son. He also stands over against the Father and the Son as his own center of action.”¹⁶³

Additionally, the Spirit’s person itself is not be interpreted as the field, “but as a unique manifestation (singularity) of the field of the divine essentiality.”¹⁶⁴ Regarding

Pannenberg’s framework, Bradshaw offers a high appraisal, stating, “Pannenberg can use scientific explanation as more than illustrative metaphor in this way, bringing together the facts told by science with the fact of God from theology, seeking to show harmony and mutual enlightenment.”¹⁶⁵

Third, a similar conundrum to “God is a Spirit” arises in the Trinity: how to reconcile the three persons with the definition of God as love. In accusing that

¹⁶⁰ *ST*, 1:383-84.

¹⁶¹ *ST*, 2:83.

¹⁶² *ST*, 2:83.

¹⁶³ *ST*, 1:383-84.

¹⁶⁴ *ST*, 2:83.

¹⁶⁵ Bradshaw, *Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 156.

Pannenberg's Trinity implies the existence of the fourth person, Min claims that Pannenberg made the Spirit or love the origin of the Trinity.¹⁶⁶ But Olson notes that Pannenberg opposes a simple theological reduction, which "attempted to derive the threeness of God from the essence of God as 'Love' instead of 'Spirit'...it easily falls into the trap of implicit Subordinationism..."¹⁶⁷ Instead, Pannenberg explicitly identifies the divine essence as love with the precondition that "the totality of the divine life common to all three persons and not identified with the first person of the Trinity."¹⁶⁸

According to Pannenberg, the social analogy and fellowship of the Trinity have historically been seen as a unity of love. However, in the modern age, this assertion has had to address Feuerbach's objections. In this approach, Pannenberg, like Bavinck, echoes Feuerbach's challenge, but in a more profound and creative way. In Feuerbach's projection theory, God is love and this love is merely a predicate. It is the imagination of a person's subjective desire to imagine a relationship with God. Once love is the essence that unites the three persons in one, this implies that God is the trinitarian subject, and that the divine essence is a fourth hypostasis. Pannenberg acknowledges that Feuerbach's critique is reasonable with reservations, but he rejects the view that there is a fourth subject hidden behind love and disputes the idea that "God is he who eternally loves himself."¹⁶⁹ Because "the one loves self in the other instead of loving the other as other, then love falls short of the full self-giving which is the condition that the one who loves

¹⁶⁶ Min, "The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg's Hegelian Trinitarianism," 262-64.

¹⁶⁷ Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," 182.

¹⁶⁸ Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," 183.

¹⁶⁹ *ST*, 1:426.

be given self afresh in the responsive love of the one who is loved.”¹⁷⁰ Rather, for God as love, this love is both the divine quality and the divine essence. The reciprocal love among three persons must be both a subject and a power, much as the Spirit, and cannot merely be seen as activated in their mutual relations. It is not a kind of one-sided dependence where one person is made to be subordinate to the other. Instead, in the fellowship of the triune God, “love as power that manifests itself in the mutual relations of the trinitarian persons is identical with the divine essence.”¹⁷¹ Since, much like the Spirit, love must be both a subject and a power in three persons, and it cannot transcend the threeness and become the fourth person. As a result, the phrases “God is Spirit” and “God is love” convey the same meaning, that is, “the same unity of essence by which Father, Son, and Spirit are united in the fellowship of the one God.”¹⁷²

Pannenberg offers a key to the conundrum of love that differs from the most of traditional doctrines of Trinity and Pneumatology. He asserts that the Spirit and love are connected, and says,

Love is no more a separate subject than the Spirit apart from the three persons. As the one and only essence of God it has its existence in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But it is the eternal power and deity which lives in the Father, Son and Spirit through their relations and which constitutes the unity of the one God in the communion of these three persons.¹⁷³

As was previously demonstrated, Pannenberg unites love and the Spirit using the analogy of field theory. He further illustrates this interaction of love in the Trinity:

¹⁷⁰ *ST*, 1:426.

¹⁷¹ *ST*, 1:427.

¹⁷² *ST*, 1:427.

¹⁷³ *ST*, 1:428.

The coming forth of the Son from the Father is the basic fulfilment of divine love. The essence of the Godhead is indeed Spirit. It is Spirit as a dynamic field, and as its manifestation in the coming forth of the Son shows itself to be the work of the Father, the dynamic of the Spirit radiates from the Father.... On the one side the Spirit and love constitute the common essence of deity, and on the other they come forth as a separate hypostasis in the Holy Spirit.¹⁷⁴

Rather than seeing love as an attribute of God like many traditional doctrines of God, Pannenberg stresses love as the divine essence. However, this identity is conditional. Pannenberg adds that “only if that can be recognized as the totality of the divine life common to all three persons and not identified with the first person of the Trinity.”¹⁷⁵ Love, as the divine essence, is always inseparable from the Spirit. Meanwhile, love must exist in the social relation of Trinity, and cannot be as an individual and independent entity.

Pannenberg’s innovative trinitarian scheme addresses modern thoughts’ critiques like Feuerbach’s effectively and offers a useful perspective for comprehending the Trinity. In Pannenberg’s term, this scheme for understanding God as Spirit and love departs from the conventional trinitarian view of a static, unidirectional relationship between the three persons. Instead, it creates an ecstatically related relationship in the Trinity, in which the three persons have their one selfhood and is connected to the other through love.¹⁷⁶ However, as Mark Hocknull points out, “this can lead to some difficulties in understanding Pannenberg’s trinitarian doctrine in regard to the ontology of

¹⁷⁴ *ST*, 1:429.

¹⁷⁵ Olson, “Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 183.

¹⁷⁶ *ST*, 1:428.

love as divine being.”¹⁷⁷ Once identifying Spirit with love, Pannenberg still leaves several contentious and open-ended questions. As an illustration, if Spirit and love are equated, then other attributes of the Spirit, such as holiness, and other revelation-related actions such as illumination etc., will be confused with the essence of divine love as essence. Pannenberg might be able to argue that the divine love is still the driving force behind the Spirit’s powerful dynamic action, while the motive and the action are not exactly identical. Thus, once the Spirit and love are equated, even though some of the traditional theological issues are resolved, there is still a risk of misunderstanding the distinctions and differences between the Spirit and love themselves. Moreover, due to this ambiguity, Pannenberg invites criticism of the nature of love as the concealed fourth person.

5.4 Conclusion

I have discussed some of the pertinent themes that Bavinck and Pannenberg touched on in their trinitarian doctrine in this chapter. This discussion reflects a central theme of my main dissertation: that the theologies of Bavinck and Pannenberg share many metaphysical foundations and both have developed a similar metaphysical theological framework by drawing extensively from both orthodox and modern sources. Both theologians demonstrate a unique synthesis of traditional Christian doctrine with modern philosophical thought, indicating their efforts to create a comprehensive and coherent theological framework that resonates with modern intellectual paradigms.

¹⁷⁷ Mark Hocknull, *Pannenberg on Evil, Love and God: the Realisation of Divine Love* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2016), 123.

First, in their respective doctrine of the Trinity, the two theologians demonstrate a startling degree of agreement and congruence. The trinitarianism serves as the primary scheme and motif in both Bavinck and Pannenberg's theologies. They both reject the Trinity as an add-on to the doctrine of God, viewing it instead as the motif and scheme of all theological *loci*. Both of them reject the prevailing trinitarian perspective that attributes the Father's monarchy as the trinitarian origin, and hold the three persons in the Trinity to be equal with one another.

Second, both theologians addressed some modern theological issues while also using a variety of contemporary ideas as fresh aids and extensions to the trinitarian doctrine. They both further reject the dualism of theological trends that have been prevalent since Descartes and Kant through the Trinity and seek totality, organic trinitarian theology that is based on the diversity and unity of God. The terminology used by Bavinck and Pannenberg, such as "distinction," "self-distinction" and the treatment of themes of the Trinity show the "modern elements" in their systems, particularly the influence of modern idealism, such as Hegel. Although this effect is not fully embraced, it is nonetheless modified with reservation, especially in Bavinck's theology. The consensus and coherence of Bavinck's and Pannenberg's trinitarian theologies show that they looked beyond their own denominational background to provide an ecumenical theological scheme that is both modern and carries on the tradition.

Third, Pannenberg's trinitarianism extends and supplements Bavinck's trinitarian system by introducing new perspectives like field theory to further explain the doctrine of Trinity. The ability and openness of theology to engage in dialogue with contemporary science is once again restored by this development, which also more effectively and

dynamically frees the doctrine of Trinity understanding from the classical-static physical worldview. Of course, there have also been significant controversies concerning Pannenberg's use of field theory to explain the Holy Spirit and love. In the aforementioned explanation, I provide a defense of Pannenberg by arguing that it is not justified to ignore Pannenberg's own interpretation, accusing him of positing the existence of a fourth person in the Trinity. However, Pannenberg's perplexity brought on by his somewhat equating the Spirit with love can also lead to certain controversies. Nevertheless, Pannenberg offers us a crucial trinitarian scheme that aids in our deeper consideration and comprehension of the doctrine of God.

Chapter 6

Epistemology: Knowledge, Faith, and Certainty

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the concepts of revelation as interpreted by Bavinck and Pannenberg, as well as the two objective modes of revelation: nature and history. Although the two theologians have different views, they share many commonalities and positions. One root of these similarities and common features is their assimilation and refinement of modern thought resources, particularly the ideas from German idealism. Bavinck's organicism and Pannenberg's motif of totality demonstrate this impact. In this chapter, I explore the epistemological aspects concerning the theology of revelation, mainly focusing on what Bavinck termed as the subjectivity of revelation: how people perceive and receive God's revelation.

Throughout the history of Christianity, from its early stages to the Enlightenment and the present day, the comprehension of God's revealed knowledge has frequently been reduced to a dichotomous choice: should one accept God's revelation and receive His knowledge through reason or faith? This contentious topic has been simplified to a clear opposition between reason and divine revelation, which gained significant emphasis during and after the Enlightenment.

This chapter looks into the epistemologies of Bavinck and Pannenberg, focusing mainly on their perspectives regarding faith, the correlation between faith and knowledge (reason), and the certainty of faith. My argument is that these theologians who are influenced by modern thought, specifically German idealism, aim to overcome the

dichotomy and opposition between faith and reason by employing an organic, integrated, and comprehensive approach to knowledge. Both theologians seek to rectify and enhance traditional views regarding the certainty of faith through a creative subject-object perspective. Pannenberg not only shares significant similarities with Bavinck but also extends Bavinck's understanding of the certainty of faith.

6.2 Bavinck's Epistemology: Knowledge, Faith, and Certainty

6.2.1 Literature Review

Based on studies on Bavinck, there is a common consensus that he prioritizes faith over reason, thereby sidestepping the controversial question of which is more essential, a debate prevalent among scholars of Pannenberg. Bavinck's epistemology is frequently interconnected with discussions surrounding his intellectual influences, resulting in the attribution of various "ism" labels to his epistemology. Bavinck is occasionally regarded as a trailblazer in contemporary Reformed epistemology or as an adversary of foundationalism.¹ Furthermore, numerous scholars highlight that Bavinck not only received but also perpetuated the epistemological traditions of Augustine, Aquinas, and other traditional Christian thinkers.² Although there is a consensus among scholars that Bavinck learns from the traditional Christian epistemology, there is considerable debate regarding whether he was influenced by post-Kantian modern

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Herman Bavinck: Proto Reformed Epistemologist," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no.1 (2010): 133-146.

² John Bolt, "Editor's Introduction," in *RD*, 1:14; David S Systma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology: The Argument and Sources of his Principia of Science," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck*, 1-56; Muller, "Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology," 5-35.

thought. The debate between the “orthodox” and “modern” perspectives has been addressed in previous chapters. For example, some scholars who study Bavinck, such as Veenhof, tend to emphasize a more “modern” aspect of Bavinck’s thinking, specifically his incorporation of organicism influenced by German idealism, particularly Schelling.³ Richard Muller observes that while Bavinck does not align with Schleiermacher’s theological views, his epistemology, particularly his understanding of consciousness and feeling, strongly echoes that of Schleiermacher.⁴ Conversely, scholars like Mattson and Eglinton contend that Bavinck borrowed contemporary terminology to express traditional Christian orthodox thoughts. They specifically argue that Bavinck’s organicism was not influenced by the organicism of German idealism, intentionally separating Bavinck from German idealism and asserting that he drew enough intellectual inspiration from traditional Reformed orthodoxy.⁵

Nathaniel Sutanto has recently presented a focused analysis of Bavinck’s epistemology, contending that Bavinck integrated ideas from both traditional and modern sources to develop his unique organicism and theological framework. Sutanto argues that Bavinck’s holistic and organic epistemology “allowed him to use the varied sources the way he did.”⁶ Contrary to the views of Mattson and Eglinton, who argue that Bavinck’s views were not inspired by modern German idealism, Sutanto acknowledges that “Bavinck’s tendency to appreciate his contemporary intellectual sense is not sourced by a

³ Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 255-68.

⁴ Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 23-24.

⁵ Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 51; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 205.

⁶ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 15.

positive endorsement of enlightenment,” however, Sutanto ultimately reaches a similar inference that Bavinck is “standing on the grounds traditions of the ancient, medieval and reformed divines”⁷ He argues that Bavinck, as a theologian, integrates various philosophical influences such as classic Thomistic, post-Kantian elements, idealism, Romanticism, and others, with the sole purpose of developing and articulating his organic motif. Sutanto asserts that by adopting this viewpoint, Bavinck can be comprehended as “a principled and orthodox theologian... ” who “felt free to use classical, Thomistic, and post-Kantian sources together as an application of his convictions concerning the catholicity of Christianity.”⁸ Accordingly, this not only eliminates the controversy between traditional and modern perspectives in Bavinck studies but also “further deepens our grasp of epistemology and the character of neo-Calvinism in distinction from other branches of Reformed theology.”⁹

While recognizing somewhat the validity of arguments from both sides of the debate on whether Bavinck is modern or orthodox, Sutanto endeavors to adopt a synthetic approach incorporating elements from both perspectives. Unlike Mattson and Eglinton, Sutanto does not outright deny the influence of modern thought on Bavinck. Paradoxically, he eventually concurs with Mattson and Eglinton regarding the organic motif, setting up his research under the assumption that their perspective is correct. He presents his study as one that “prioritizes the way in which Bavinck uses his sources

⁷ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 6.

⁸ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 13.

⁹ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 9.

by deploying the organic motif in line with the current readings offered by Eglinton and Mattson.”¹⁰

Without a doubt, Sutanto’s research broadens the comprehension of Bavinck’s epistemology by synthesizing the valid elements from opposing viewpoints in the previous discussions on Bavinck’s intellectual identity. Nevertheless, his perspective remains subject to scrutiny.

Firstly, Sutanto acknowledges that Bavinck used different intellectual resources from the nineteenth century. However, Sutanto argues that Bavinck’s organicism did not rely on contemporary resources but rather originated from earlier Christian orthodoxy. Like Eglinton, Sutanto perceives Bavinck’s organicism as a unique concept of “unity in diversity,”¹¹ which allows for a reinterpretation of Bavinck’s thoughts as a “synthesis of classical and modern patterns of thought.”¹² Nevertheless, the origin of Bavinck’s organicism, whether it stems from traditional Christianity or is influenced by German idealism, is a contention among Bavinck scholars. On the one hand, Sutanto recognizes Bavinck’s incorporation of contemporary intellectual trends; On the other hand, Bavinck also is standing on the grounds of orthodox. Both Sutanto’s conclusion and the conclusions of Mattson and Eglinton lack a clear and objective criterion to assess Bavinck’s adherence to “orthodoxy” and “modernity.” One may inquire how much traditional or modern elements are required to label Bavinck as “traditional” or “modern” and how these elements can be measured. Alternatively, their main argument

¹⁰ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 13.

¹¹ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 9.

¹² Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 9.

can be condensed to the view that Bavinck's organicism, by virtue of its uniqueness and direct reliance on orthodox sources, preserves the "traditional" heritage.

Both Eglinton and Sutanto distinguish Bavinck's organicism from German idealism by underscoring Bavinck's emphasis on "unity in diversity," a characteristic they argue is absent in German idealism.¹³ However, in chapter 2, I have already illustrated that the purportedly "unique" organicism of Bavinck is a common characteristic of German idealism, evident even in the organicism of Hegel and Schelling.¹⁴ Recently, Bruce Pass has contested the perspectives of Sutanto and Eglinton, who assert that Bavinck's organicism was not impacted by German idealism.¹⁵ Pass argues that Bavinck's organicism and epistemology are greatly impacted by Schelling. For example, Eglinton's description of Bavinck's organicism as "the mental and physical, the ideal and real, are only different stages of development or degree of organization of a single living force," and "that everything in nature and history conforms to a purpose or an end," Pass demonstrates, are thoughts stemming from Schelling's philosophical system.¹⁶

¹³ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 9.

¹⁴ As discussed in chapter 2, Zuckert notes that Hegel not only emphasized the relationship between unity and diversity, the whole and the parts, in organicism but also pointed out that this form of organicism also includes teleological: "Hegel takes this possibility to comprise the (in principle) full intelligibility of all particular parts/aspects of the organicism, as judged teleologically; here the universal (species, type) determines the particular not only abstractly, and with respect to some aspects, but with respect of its many, diverse, particular characteristics in systematic interrelation with one another... the organicism is a particular that is fully determined by its universal..." see Rachel Zuckert, "Organicism and System in German Idealism." In *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, edited by Karl Ameriks, 2nd ed, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 276.

¹⁵ Bruce Pass, "Trinity or German idealism? Reconsidering the Origins of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif." *Scottish Journal of Theology*(2023): 56-70.

¹⁶ Pass, "Trinity or German idealism?," 66-70.

Secondly, in terms of specific details in epistemology, Sutanto's argument also has certain limitations. Sutanto contends that Bavinck's epistemology diverges significantly from German idealism. He claims that the uniqueness of Bavinck's epistemology resides in acknowledging the necessity of a mediation in the cognitive process between representations and the things themselves. Bavinck observes that "knowledge of things... is always through mental representations; the consciousness mediates knowledge of objects and adds to it in some way."¹⁷ Furthermore, Sutanto argues that idealism fails to acknowledge the external world of experience as a valid source of knowledge. He asserts that idealism "fails to acknowledge the primordial character of our knowledge of the world, given through representations and immediately granted in self-consciousness. It hems itself into a sphere of representations in the mistaken attempt to infer the epistemic accessibility of the external world from internal representations, only to miss the inherently 'representational' character of those representations."¹⁸

Nevertheless, Sutanto's characterization of Bavinck's distinguishing features from German idealism is somewhat inaccurate. For instance, the emphasis on mediation in the cognitive process, as identified by Sutanto and attributed to Bavinck's epistemology, is a prevalent characteristic of German idealism. Furthermore, Sutanto claims that "Bavinck affirms the mediation of representations in the denial of naive (direct) realism."¹⁹

However, according to Walter Schulz, idealism relies on mediation to establish

¹⁷ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 123.

¹⁸ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 151.

¹⁹ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 123-24.

epistemological connections between representation and the things themselves. Schulz points out, “Idealistic thinking starts from the immediate: life and representation, and through its mediation, it subsumes this into the concept. Based on this mediation, it asserts itself against the immediate from which it came, as mediating thinking as its own.”²⁰ Schulz’s description of idealism suggests that idealism’s epistemology also originates from the immediate experience, and the knowledge of the relationship between representation and the things themselves is achieved through mediation. Schulz further observes that beginning with the later works of Schelling, German idealism places significant emphasis on commencing cognition from experience and our knowledge of the world.²¹ Even Kant stated that “all of our knowledge begins with experience.”²² Additionally, Muller points out an error in Sutanto’s analysis of early modern Reformed orthodox theology. Sutanto mistakenly uses the concept of “precognitive truths” to differentiate from “propositional truth,” disregarding the fact that the basic knowledge or common notions can only be reflective expressions of experience in Reformed orthodox, according to Muller “such basic truths... are not ‘precognitive’ or ‘primordial’—rather, they are ingrafted or intuitive and pre-ratiocinative.”²³ In other words, within Reformed orthodoxy, basic truths are not merely experiential; rather, they are always accompanied

²⁰ Walter Schulz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, (Stuttgart and Köln: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1955), 31. “Das idealistische Denken geht aus vom Unmittelbaren: dem Leben und der Vorstellung, und hebt dieses durch seine Vermittlung in den Begriff auf, um sich eben auf Grund dieser Vermittlung gegen das Unmittelbare, aus dem es kam, als vermittelndes Denkens als seine.”

²¹ Schulz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, 23-24.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 41.

²³ Muller, “Kuyper and Bavinck on Natural Theology,” 23n67.

by reflection on experience. This perspective does not conflict with the prevailing views of later idealism.

Pass also further demonstrates that the characteristic of “mediation” between subject and object in Bavinck’s epistemology, as suggested by Sutanto, is likewise the hallmark of Schelling’s epistemology. Pass says,

the ontological gap between the real and the idea, and the epistemological gap between subject and object, is what distinguishes Schelling’s organicism from pre-modern iterations of the same theme. Moreover, this indirect correspondence of mechanism and teleology—of efficient and final causes—features prominently in Bavinck’s formulation of several loci, especially Bavinck’s ordering of the divine decrees.²⁴

According to Pass, Bavinck’s epistemology is heavily influenced by Schelling, and furthermore, Bavinck’s organicism shares many aspects with German idealism, particularly the influence of Schelling. Pass explicitly points out that both Eglinton and Sutanto fail to acknowledge that the “organic” concepts of Friedrich Trendelenburg (1802- 72) and Rudolf Eucken (1846- 1926), cited by Bavinck, actually originate from Schelling’s philosophy. While Sutanto acknowledges Bavinck’s sympathies with Von Hartmann’s absolute idealism,²⁵ he fails to acknowledge that Hartmann’s organicist ideas also stem from Schelling.²⁶ In fact, Pass also points out, “Bavinck’s affinity with Von Hartmann can, therefore, be explained by their mutual interest in Schelling.”²⁷

Based on the preceding discussions of Bavinck’s epistemology, it is evident that there are varying perspectives. Mattson and Eglinton reject any assertion of modern

²⁴ Pass, “Trinity or German idealism?,” 63.

²⁵ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 122-49.

²⁶ Schulz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings*, 271.

²⁷ Pass, “Trinity or German idealism?,” 64.

thought's influence on Bavinck, seeing Bavinck only seeking intellectual inspiration from within orthodoxy. For instance, as I have already mentioned in chapter 2, Mattson emphasizes that Bavinck's thought originates "not in nineteenth century German philosophy, but in historic Reformed orthodoxy."²⁸ Meanwhile, Eglinton highlights that within Bavinck's framework of organicism, and says that "Bavinck loaded the term with trinitarian meaning. In doing so, he anchored himself in the Reformed tradition rather than in German idealism."²⁹ Sutanto, comparatively more moderate and neutral, acknowledges that Bavinck indeed absorbed and utilized many modern intellectual resources. However, he asserts that Bavinck's "organicism" is ultimately rooted in orthodox sources rather than being influenced by modern trends. Like Veenhof, Pass argues that "the claim that Bavinck's organic motif does not derive from German idealism is mistaken and misconstrues the type of synthesis of orthodoxy and modernity that Bavinck strove to achieve."³⁰ For Bavinck, "the idealist origins of the organicism elucidate its conceptual scope, demonstrating that it implies a great deal more than a similitude to living things or an affirmation of unity in diversity."³¹

In the subsequent discourse on Bavinck's epistemology and understanding of faith, I maintain my previous argument, discussed in chapter 2, that Bavinck assimilated numerous ideas from German idealism to modify and enhance traditional doctrines. I argue that Bavinck's approach and terminology in his epistemology and interpretation of

²⁸ Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 51.

²⁹ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 205.

³⁰ Pass, "Trinity or German idealism?," 69-70.

³¹ Pass, "Trinity or German idealism?," 70.

faith, while retaining certain orthodox elements, also exhibit significant modern characteristics, particularly those associated with German idealism. The purpose of this was to reconcile and overcome the dichotomy between faith and reason (knowledge). Bavinck incorporated a multitude of methods and concepts from German idealism. By embracing organicism, he went beyond the traditional medieval and Enlightenment dualism that frequently portrayed faith and reason as conflicting concepts. In addition, several scholars of Bavinck, such as Eglinton, argue that Bavinck unequivocally dismissed all manifestations of dualism. However, I will demonstrate in the following sections that Bavinck does not ignore the presence of a practical-life dualism tension while considering the subject of faith, despite his rejection of methodological dualism. In other words, Bavinck acknowledges the existence of a dualistic tension in the daily life of Christians.

6.2.2 Bavinck's General Epistemology and the Influence of German Idealism on His Thought

Bavinck addresses the correlation between faith and reason from the framework of general epistemology, a perspective bearing solid marks of its era. In the preceding chapters, I have elucidated Bavinck's recognition of the necessity to modify and extend the old theological framework to embrace modern historical and psychological studies. John Bolt keenly notices these remarkable shifts in Bavinck's approach. Bolt highlights two key points: first, Bavinck extends his exploration of revelation and epistemology beyond traditional dogmatic theology to reach the realm of

philosophy; second, Bavinck integrates modern terms like “self-consciousness” into his epistemological framework.³²

In addition, Bavinck employs modern terminology such as “subject” and “object” to comprehend knowledge. Moreover, he positions the Logos as the foundation of all knowledge, saying, “all knowledge is based on a kind of agreement between subject and object. This agreement originates from the divine mind of the Creator. It is the one self-same Logos who made all things in and outside of human beings.”³³ Bavinck specifically emphasizes that “reason is the embodiment of revelation” and “the world is an embodiment of the thoughts of God.”³⁴ E. P. Heideman even worries that Bavinck’s statements could be misinterpreted as heretical or Gnostic. According to Heideman, in order to prevent such allegations, Bavinck considers reason to be a created reason rather than an emanated reason.³⁵ Heideman ascribes Bavinck’s ideas to the impact of Aristotle and Thomas’s philosophy, aiming to break the dualism of subject and object established since Kant, and “in his discussion of the *principia* attempts to show that the means of receiving the truth of God and the truth of the world is the same.”³⁶ This analysis indicates that Bavinck’s epistemology, while grounded in traditional thought, also incorporated significant elements of modern philosophical concepts, particularly those from German idealism.

³² Bolt, “An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion,” 82.

³³ *RD*, 1:563.

³⁴ *RD*, 1:208, 501.

³⁵ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 138-146.

³⁶ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 146. Emphasis in original.

Bavinck underlines the deficiencies of traditional theological epistemology when confronted with new challenges in the modern era. The issues originated from the ideas of Descartes and Kant, centering on what ensures the reliability of our knowledge of external reality.³⁷ In contrast to Mattson and Eglinton's portrayal of Bavinck as being grounded in tradition in responding to modern problems, Bavinck demonstrates a synthesis and intricacy of intellectual influences in the themes of faith and knowledge, thereby actively interacting with this modern subject matter. Bavinck disagrees with Descartes's claim that "the human mind is able to produce all knowledge from within itself, with its own means, by means of thought."³⁸ He also does not endorse Kant's and Fichte's views that thinking "creates and constructs the entire world, not only the world of thought, but also the being itself."³⁹ However, Bavinck's terminology lacks explicit definitions for the points of view he critiques, such as idealism, rationalism, and empiricism. These perspectives, especially the concept of idealism discussed in Bavinck's work, diverge from our present definitions, specifically concerning German idealism. Hence, we can only discern Bavinck's opposition to specific perspectives and their respective proponents based on his portrayals. This further contributes to the complexity of comprehending Bavinck's epistemological position.

Bavinck argues that the premise of cognition lies in the existence of a knowable object, therefore enabling the acquisition of knowledge. Bavinck's main perspective concentrates on the assessment of how modern philosophy approaches the

³⁷ *RD*, 1:215.

³⁸ *RD*, 1:215.

³⁹ *RD*, 1:215.

connection between representations and things themselves, in line with the ongoing arguments in German idealism. He contends that idealism and rationalism, among others, inadequately address this relationship by wrongly regarding the organ of knowledge as the source of knowledge. He critiques a form of “rationalist idealism” that emphasizes that one can only know representations and not things themselves. Bavinck argues that this position “violates the natural realism of our ordinary experience in the world. Idealism confuses the organ of knowledge with its source and has as its consequence the notion that our senses always deceive us and give us false impressions of reality.”⁴⁰ In this context, Bavinck identifies the position of the idealism he opposes. First, this particular form of idealism fails to acknowledge the objectivity of the external reality and the knowability of things themselves. Second, it rejects the source of knowledge that originates from the external reality, attributing it instead to the faculty of thinking itself.

Bavinck identifies his stance as realism, which “acknowledges the primacy of the sense and the constraints placed by reality on the human mind.”⁴¹ Bavinck recognizes the interconnectedness of things themselves and phenomena, affirming that external realities exist independently of human perception as objective entities, unaffected by human attribution of properties. For example, he illustrates that a stove possesses the inherent property of warmth, independent of any attribution from the human mind. Instead, representation “must be an element that points directly back to reality.”⁴² For realism, according to Bavinck, the starting point of knowledge “ought to be ordinary daily

⁴⁰ *RD*, 1:207.

⁴¹ *RD*, 1:208.

⁴² *RD*, 1:223.

experience, the universal and natural certainty of human beings concerning the objective and truth of their knowledge.”⁴³ It implies that the priority of the sense. Additionally, “realism correctly assumes their reality *in the thing itself (in re)*, and therefore also in the human mind subsequent to the thing itself (*in mente hominis post rem*).”⁴⁴

While Bavinck differentiates his realism from idealism (which he sometimes refers to as absolute idealism), it should not be assumed that Bavinck was unaffected by idealist thinking. Furthermore, his concept of idealism should not be conflated with our present definition. Bavinck’s realism indeed exhibits shared characteristics with specific expressions of German idealism.

First, Bavinck’s realism shares similarities with the perspectives of certain idealist philosophers in terms of the emphasized features. Recent literature on German idealism has emphasized the rise of realism within the framework of idealism, specifically in the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer.⁴⁵ Bavinck argues that the distinction between realism and idealism stems from idealism’s rejection of an external, objective world and its erroneous identification of the cognitive organ of knowledge as the source of knowledge. However, according to Günter Zöllner, “Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer each modify the idealist outlook they inherited from Kant by systematically reevaluating the status of nature, body, will, and affective experience, all

⁴³ *RD*, 1:223.

⁴⁴ *RD*, 1:208. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Günter Zöllner, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, edited by Karl Ameriks, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 292-309.

of which receive recognition as primary factors in human reality and in reality *tout court*.”⁴⁶

Zöller’s description of the realism-idealism of Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer not only aligns with Bavinck’s realism but also exhibits several similarities. Zöller argues that Fichte’s realism “in question does not concern the subjective-relative reality of experience and its objects, that is, the appearances, but absolute reality, independent of the subject and its positings.”⁴⁷ In Fichte’s later system, “there would not be a conscious and self-conscious subject without a sphere of object to be known or acted on by that subject.”⁴⁸ The portrayal of Fichte’s realism exhibits similarities with Bavinck, especially the premise of an absolute objective reality independent of the subject, as well as emphasizing the requirement of a cognizable object for the subject to acquire knowledge about it.

Similarly, Schelling’s later works, which investigate the relationship between reason and reality, exhibit a substantial similarity to Bavinck’s realism. Zöller states that “Schelling insists that reason can only construct possibilities and that reality alone can provide us, by means of experience with the fact that a thing exists. For the late Schelling, being- that is, true, real being- transcends reason.”⁴⁹ Similarly to Bavinck, the

⁴⁶ Zöller, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 294. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ Zöller, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 296.

⁴⁸ Zöller, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 297.

⁴⁹ Zöller, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 304.

later Schelling stresses the objectivity of reality and the priority of experience and sensation, as opposed to reality being shaped by reason or concepts.

Second, Bavinck's general epistemology is evidently influenced by Schelling and Schopenhauer.⁵⁰ While Bavinck's epistemology does not entirely align with Schelling and Schopenhauer, it is evident that he integrated certain aspects of their ideas into his epistemological framework. Besides Pass's recent studies pointing out the intellectual connection between Bavinck and Schelling,⁵¹ Bavinck himself concedes, especially when discussing the doctrine of God's will, that Schelling's system effectively surpassed Hegel's rationalism and had a substantial impact on subsequent philosophy. According to Bavinck, in Schelling's latter works, Schelling developed his theological perspective, building upon the ideas he had previously articulated in his studies on human freedom. Schelling remained steadfast in his system of the primacy of the will, followed by Schopenhauer and von Hartmann. Bavinck concludes that "their philosophy is of the greatest significance for theism."⁵² Cory Brock and Sutanto also have recognized the essential impact of Schopenhauer on Bavinck's thoughts, as seen by Bavinck's frequent use of Schopenhauer's citations to substantiate his perspectives.⁵³ In addition, Sutanto has

⁵⁰ Bavinck frequently cites Schopenhauer's perspectives in his writings, and often not as objects of critique but rather as sources supporting his viewpoints. See, *RD*, 1: 221, 226, 227, 367, 425, 502, 540. Also see *PoR*, 32-36;187-88, and 231-32.

⁵¹ Pass, "Trinity or German idealism?," 56-70.

⁵² *RD*, 2:231.

⁵³ They say, "Bavinck uses Schopenhauer's contention that thinkers who identify God and reality (pantheism) are functionally advocates of a kind of atheism...Bavinck frequently cites Schopenhauer to argue for the case that our personhood and histories inevitably influence and form our thinking and acting... Also of significance...is Bavinck's appeal to Schopenhauer to argue that our default mode of being and immediate knowledge of the world are prior to and apart from conceptual reason...Bavinck's handwritten notes on Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*...resides in the Bavinck archives as item 279, which is the same notebook in which Bavinck summarizes Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophie des Unbewussten*." in *PoR*, 35n24.

acknowledged Bavinck's "sympathies with" Von Hartmann's epistemology.⁵⁴ When it comes to the topic of epistemology, Bavinck frequently explores the thoughts of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann in combination, particularly about concepts of consciousness and the unconscious.⁵⁵

For instance, when underlining that truth does not originate from books or abstract thinking but rather from the real world, Bavinck cites, "Observation is the source of all real science. 'Observations are the small coins; concepts the paper money,' said Schopenhauer."⁵⁶ And Bavinck adopts Schopenhauer's viewpoints to refute empiricism, Bavinck claims that "its impact on our lives and on the history of humankind is still much greater than that of the visible things about us. Human beings may be freely asked, then, to limit themselves in their research since in this domain no knowledge is possible, but this demand bounces off what Schopenhauer called the metaphysical need of the human spirit."⁵⁷ Bavinck's use of Schopenhauer is noteworthy. Schopenhauer's thoughts were not as well discussed in theological circles during Bavinck's day, unlike the more prominent figures like Hegel and Schelling. In addition, Bavinck explores various topics such as God's knowledge, the unconscious, suffering, and others, where he not only draws parallels between Schopenhauer and von Hartmann but also identifies a certain justification in Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy.⁵⁸ Bavinck also references

⁵⁴ Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 122-49.

⁵⁵ *RD*, 2:155, 193; 196; 231.

⁵⁶ *RD*, 1:226.

⁵⁷ *RD*, 1:221.

⁵⁸ *RD*, 2:193-96 and 211-12; *RD*, 3:178-79; *RD*, 4:646-47.

Schopenhauer's aphorisms, such as "People never stop praising the reliability and certainty of mathematics"⁵⁹ and "What you do follows from what you are"⁶⁰ to bolster his own arguments. Even on religious perspectives, Bavinck also positively states, "Schopenhauer correctly remarks, therefore, that religions have a great advantage over philosophical systems since they are instilled in children from their earliest youth on."⁶¹

In the recently published manuscripts of Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* volume 2, there is further evidence of Bavinck's regard for Schopenhauer's thought. To a large extent, Bavinck not only agrees with many points in Schopenhauer's ethics but also uses them to support his own views.⁶² For example, in discussing whether humans have moral responsibilities towards animals and plants, Bavinck initially refers to the discussion and viewpoints from Schopenhauer's *Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*.⁶³ When addressing modern societal topics like animal welfare and vegetarianism, Bavinck primarily draws upon Schopenhauer's *Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*.⁶⁴ Notably, in the Ethics manuscript, when discussing Kant's views, Bavinck does not directly quote Kant but interprets him through Schopenhauer's lens. For instance, Bavinck writes, "Or as Kant put it, act in such a way that the maxim of your action can be a universal law." In the editor's footnote for this statement, it's noted, "Ed. note: Bavinck adds the marginal

⁵⁹ *RD*, 1:221.

⁶⁰ *RD*, 1:367.

⁶¹ *RD*, 1:502.

⁶² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics vol.2: The Duties of the Christian Life*, edited by John Bolt et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 18n84, 20n102, 100, 363-63.

⁶³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 113.

⁶⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 319n51; 320.

reference ‘Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die beiden Grundprobleme der Ethik*, 232.’ This refers to the second of two lectures in this volume.”⁶⁵ Similarly, when discussing the seventh Commandment and touching on the topic of sexuality, Bavinck states, “Sexuality is at the heart of natural life. The sex drive is the strongest of all drives. The genitals are the root, the flashpoint of the will.”⁶⁶ The editor also notes that this view still originates from Schopenhauer, and writes: “Ed. note: At this point Bavinck takes over from Schopenhauer a comment about pederasty being especially common among ancient Greeks and Romans.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, when discussing the theme of human affection, Bavinck again supports his views with Schopenhauer’s, writing, “Schopenhauer writes that the will, human affections, cannot be changed. It is possible to improve someone’s head, but not their heart.”⁶⁸ with the editor’s footnote indicating, “Bavinck provided no specific references for this rich imagery, and a search of Schopenhauer’s *Two Fundamental Problems of Ethic* yielded no results. Bavinck likely summarized Schopenhauer’s view in his own words and imagery.”⁶⁹ Similar instances of referencing Schopenhauer occur numerous times throughout these organized manuscripts.⁷⁰

In the realm of epistemology, Bavinck typically resonates with Schopenhauer. As summarized by Zöllner, specific characteristic ideas of Schopenhauer are as follows:

⁶⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 20n102.

⁶⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 385.

⁶⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 385n133.

⁶⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 411.

⁶⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 411n288.

⁷⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol.2, 426; 449; 451-52, 452n155.

“reality exceeds the domain of reason”⁷¹ and the interrelation between subject and object, that is, “the fundamental relation between the subject qua intellect and the sum total of its objects (‘world as representation’) is not a one-sided relation between the grounding and the grounded, but a reciprocal relation or correlation: no subject without object and vice versa.”⁷² Not only do these perspectives reoccur in Bavinck’s discussions as mentioned above, but Bavinck also references Aristotle, Aquinas, and Schopenhauer together in discussing the priority of sense, in order to support his view, namely, “every perceptual image is formed in the consciousness itself from factors that are brought from the object to the mind by the different senses.”⁷³

As previously mentioned, Bavinck’s controversial perspectives, such as “reason is the embodiment of revelation” and “the world is an embodiment of the thoughts of God,”⁷⁴ exhibit a striking resemblance to Schopenhauer’s ideas in *The World as Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer posited the idea that “the organicism is the will itself,”⁷⁵ and believed that the world is the embodiment of the will, as well as the will is “always already *embodied* will.”⁷⁶ The usage of the term “embodiment” in this context partially demonstrates the relevance of Schopenhauer’s ideas on Bavinck.

⁷¹ Zöllner, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 304.

⁷² Zöllner, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 306.

⁷³ *RD*, 1:227 and 227n37.

⁷⁴ *RD*, 1:208, 501.

⁷⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* vol.2, translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 228.

⁷⁶ Zöllner, “German Realism: The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer,” 308. Emphasis in original.

While it cannot be claimed that Bavinck's epistemology is entirely derived from Schopenhauer, Bavinck is significantly influenced by Schopenhauer, similar to how he adapted and utilized the sources from Augustine and Thomas. Bavinck also incorporated the philosophical ideas of Schopenhauer and Schelling.

Recent studies on Schopenhauer have emphasized that his idealism might be characterized as "a form of transcendental realism." And Schopenhauer "is firmly realist: his argument for conceiving the world as will on the basis of the character of its phenomena involves referring them for their explanation to the constitution of something real and underlying, a ground which has its constitution (character, quality) independently of the subject and of the phenomena which derive from it."⁷⁷ This account of Schopenhauer's realism provides additional evidence for the commonalities rather than discrepancies in the epistemological positions of Schopenhauer and Bavinck. The preceding discourse suggests that Bavinck's epistemic thought is characterized by both diversity and integration. As some Bavinck scholars have argued, he not only upheld the traditional ideas of thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformed orthodox but also embraced and incorporated ideas from German idealism and others. In addition to the impact of Schelling as observed by Pass, Bavinck also includes and references many ideas from Schopenhauer. If Bavinck were solely relying on orthodox sources, then his reference to Schopenhauer and even the quoting of his aphorism would be superfluous.

⁷⁷ Sebastian Gardner, "Schopenhauer, Will and the Unconscious," in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, edited by C. Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 394-95.

6.2.3 Bavinck on Faith

After discussing Bavinck's general epistemology, I will investigate how Bavinck understands the relationship between faith and reason from an epistemological perspective.

According to Bavinck, faith is primarily an activity of human consciousness. He contends that "since all knowledge is mediated through human consciousness, revelation too is known as an act of human consciousness, namely faith."⁷⁸ And nature restored by grace serves as the link between subjective revelation and objective revelation. He posits that all knowledge begins with faith rather than proof. Bavinck emphasizes "the universality of faith points to the important of immediate, intuitive grasp of truth; our sure knowledge of reality is not limited to that which we obtain through our sense. It is immediate certainty rather than demonstrable certainty that make life in community, in society, possible."⁷⁹ In this context, Bavinck not only defines faith as an act of consciousness but also indicates that the truths grasped by faith can transcend the limit of human sensation.

Bavinck highlighted that the knowledge derived from faith and the knowledge from universal reason exhibit numerous similarities yet also notable distinctions. Some Bavinck scholars like Sutanto tend to equate Bavinck's knowledge of faith with general knowledge but overlook the distinction between them. They merely emphasize the aspect of Bavinck's epistemology, where knowledge is seen as the unity of subject and object,

⁷⁸ *RD*, 1:561.

⁷⁹ *RD*, 1:561.

achieved through experience and mediation.⁸⁰ However, these scholars fail to acknowledge that in discussing the knowledge of faith, Bavinck presents it as a particular case, distinct from his understanding of general knowledge. Bavinck suggests that the knowledge of faith transcends sensory experience and mediation, enabling an immediate, intuitive grasp of truth in human consciousness. This even exhibits some inconsistency with Bavinck's general epistemology.⁸¹ According to Bavinck, the self-consciousness of God is the *principium essendi* of our knowledge. For God, this reason and knowledge are direct, without the mediation. On the contrary, for the created beings, knowledge about God is always indirect; God cannot be known immediately.

However, Bavinck argues that faith is an organ of knowledge and a form of knowledge itself. While he declares that "all knowledge is rooted in faith and all faith includes an important element of knowing,"⁸² he also points out the unique nature of knowledge of faith, which diverges from other forms of knowledge and even contradicts his general epistemology. First, Bavinck believes that this knowledge of faith has certain boundaries and limitations. He explicitly opposes the idea that "the human will or intellect of the 'natural' person could be the means by which divine revelation is appropriated."⁸³ In other words, this knowledge of faith is a saving faith, not universally

⁸⁰ Sutanto claims that "although Bavinck is quite insistent that knowing subjects can access external objects in themselves, there are certain epistemological conditions that always attend the epistemic process, among which is the constructive role of the subject in the act of perception. Knowledge of things, in Bavinck's view, is always through mental representations; the consciousness mediates knowledge of objects and adds to it in some way." See Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 123.

⁸¹ For instance, Sutanto emphasizes the necessity of "mediation" in Bavinck's epistemology.

⁸² *RD*, 1:26.

⁸³ *RD*, 1:561.

and objectively applicable to everyone, but only to those who have acquired faith and whose nature has been restored by grace. Therefore, for Bavinck, knowledge cannot be the foundation of faith; rather, faith is the beginning of knowledge. As Heideman observes, Bavinck emphasizes that “faith preceded knowledge; self-consciousness, reflection.”⁸⁴

For Bavinck, the knowledge of God revealed in history and nature is not a ready-made system, but rather necessitates thorough comprehensive thinking and reflection to be grasped.⁸⁵ Accordingly, this starting point of subjective understanding is not reason but faith. Bavinck asserts, “all knowledge is rooted in faith, and for faith to be real, it must have an object that is knowable.”⁸⁶ In other words, all knowledge stems from faith, as people must initially believe that the object can be cognized. Hence, a dichotomy of entirely objective science or entirely subjective faith is implausible. The knowledge of revelation, like revelation itself, possesses both subjective and objective aspects, which are inseparable. Acquiring knowledge is only possible through the synthesis of these two aspects.⁸⁷ Pass observes, “Bavinck’s epistemology is formally structured in such a way as to account for the claim that the knowledge of God exists in an organic relation to the knowledge of self and the knowledge of the world.”⁸⁸ However, how these forms of

⁸⁴ Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 155.

⁸⁵ *RD*, 1:44.

⁸⁶ *RD*, 1:59.

⁸⁷ *RD*, 1:59.

⁸⁸ Bruce R. Pass, “Revelation and Reason in Herman Bavinck,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 80, no. 2 (2018): 259.

knowledge interconnect remains somewhat enigmatic. Pass suggests that Bavinck explains the relationship between human reason and divine revelation as a mystery.

It is noteworthy that Bavinck's conception of the relationship between subject and object specifically within the context of faith's knowledge is distinct from the more general understanding of the subject-object relationship. This distinction between these two types of knowledge has been disregarded in the Bavinck studies by Heideman and Sutanto, who failed to recognize the difference. When discussing general epistemology, Bavinck underlines that knowledge about an object must have a receptive subject. He adopts a view similar to Schopenhauer's subject-object relationship, as previously discussed. Bavinck states, "Light presupposes the eye, and sound is perceptible only by the ear. All that is objective exists for us only by means of a subjective consciousness; without consciousness the whole world is dead for us. Always in human beings an internal principle has to correspond to the external principle [revelation] if there is to be a relation between object and subject."⁸⁹ In this passage, Bavinck refers to humans as the subject of cognition, who acquire comprehension of the external world through revelation.

However, when discussing faith within human consciousness, Bavinck points out that the primary subject of knowledge is not the person themselves, but rather God Himself. Diverging from the previous Reformed tradition's categories of revelation, Bavinck distinguishes revelation into two parts: objective revelation and subjective revelation. He refers to external revelation through nature and history as objective revelation. Bavinck equates subjective revelation with God's illumination and

⁸⁹ *RD*, 1:564.

regeneration within the human heart. He claims that God Himself is the author of both objective and subjective revelation. In other words, God's revelation is initially received by God Himself. Thus, although the human heart or consciousness acts as the organ for receiving objective revelation, the Holy Spirit is the actual author. Bavinck states, "The Holy Spirit is the great and powerful witness to Christ, objectively in Scripture, subjectively in the very hearts of human beings. By that Spirit, we receive a fitting organ for the reception of external revelation. God can be known only by God: the light can be seen only in his light."⁹⁰ In this passage, Bavinck explicitly states that in the process of knowing about God, the subject and object of knowledge are God Himself. This is contrast to Bavinck's stance in his general epistemology, which primarily focuses on humans as the subject of knowledge.

According to Bavinck, the knowledge of faith consists of two essential subjects: God (the Holy Spirit) and human self-consciousness. Bavinck establishes a connection between faith and the doctrine of the illumination of the Holy Spirit, which is a proper foundation for the certainty of faith. This connection allows for the organic integration of these two epistemological subjects.

For Bavinck, humans can receive objective revelation through the Holy Spirit's work, because "the truth of God can be known only in faith by the illumination of the Holy Spirit."⁹¹ Bavinck argues that the subject and object of the knowledge about God are primarily God Himself. Then, the truth about God "can be known only in faith."⁹² It

⁹⁰ *RD*, 1:506.

⁹¹ *RD*, 1:565.

⁹² *RD*, 1:561.

implies that the subject of faith is the Holy Spirit and the person. Thus, Bavinck aligns with the Reformation theology view that faith “was not a matter of knowing a number of doctrinal truths but consisted in the soul’s union with the person of Christ according to the Scripture and with Scripture as the Word of Christ.... Its object was the grace of God in Christ; its foundation the witness of God in his Word; its author the Holy Spirit.”⁹³ The inner workings of the Holy Spirit empower humans to recognize the external, objective revelation. Bavinck posits that only in this way can the truth that only God can know God, and the truth of humans knowing God in Christ be united without any contradictions.

Besides, Bavinck regards the work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart as an enigma that does not produce new knowledge. The work of the Holy Spirit does not produce doctrines and propositions but is an ineffable mystery.⁹⁴ However, Bavinck points out that this mysterious subjective revelation, the witness of the Holy Spirit “only causes us to understand the truth that exists outside and independently of us as truth and therefore confirms and seals it in the human consciousness.”⁹⁵ According to Bavinck, “the relation of the Holy Spirit’s witness in the hearts of believers to the truth of revelation in Holy Scripture is, *mutatis mutandis*, no other than that of the human spirit to the object of its knowledge. The subject does not create the truth; the subject only recognizes and affirms it.”⁹⁶ It implies that Bavinck sees the Holy Spirit itself as a certain

⁹³ *RD*, 1:573.

⁹⁴ Pass, “Revelation and Reason in Herman Bavinck,” 259.

⁹⁵ *RD*, 1:588.

⁹⁶ *RD*, 1:588.

subject of cognition. For Bavinck, the ability of a person in Christ to become the subject of faith is due to the internal witness and work of the Holy Spirit, who enables the recognition of God's external revelation through faith. However, Bavinck also opposes the idea that humans can generate innate knowledge. Even when the Holy Spirit acts as a witness within the human heart, it does not produce new revelations but rather acknowledges what God has revealed historically.⁹⁷ Bavinck perceives this situation as a mystery while acknowledging that these elements organically constitute faith, he says, "subjectively, cognition and trust (*fiducia*) are always united in that faith. Objective religion, then, is not the product of subjective religion but given in divine revelation that we should walk in it."⁹⁸

6.2.4 Bavinck on the Certainty of Faith

Bavinck firmly believes that the source of knowledge comes from reason and faith, implying that knowledge possesses subjectivity. The certainty of knowledge is not entirely objective, because some certainties are acquired through personal observation, and others are intuitive kinds of certainty, the direct, intuitive certainty. He explains, "In this manner, we accept the so-called eternal verities (*veritates aeternae*) that constitute the bases and premises of the various sciences."⁹⁹ In fact, many things cannot be proven through rational reasoning, such as the shortest distance between two points being a straight line, the existence of the external world, and the reliability of logical laws.

⁹⁷ *RD*, 1:566.

⁹⁸ *RD*, 1:559.

⁹⁹ *RD*, 1:77.

Additionally, Bavinck suggests that the witness of credible persons can also serve as a source of certainty for our knowledge, “a certainty that in our daily lives and in the study of history is of the greatest significance and substantially expands our knowledge.”¹⁰⁰ This perspective acknowledges the role of testimony and personal experience in contributing to our comprehension of truth and reality. As a result, it expands the scope of accepted sources of knowledge beyond pure rationality.

Bavinck recognizes the potential for misinterpretation if he were seen as advocating a form of subjectivism or a stance akin to that of Schleiermacher, due to the exclusive reliance on the illumination of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of faith. He further elaborates, “there is no more important question than the one concerning the ground of our faith, the certainty of our salvation.”¹⁰¹ He posits that once the certainty of faith is established on the basis of the human as the subject, it forfeits its assuredness. Therefore, he points out that the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is the means of faith, while Scripture is the actual ground of faith. The organic connection between these two elements constitutes the genuine certainty of faith.¹⁰²

First, Bavinck claims that the certainty of faith does not come from scientific proof or intellectual or historical evidence. While these may benefit the formation of faith, they do not provide the foundational certainty of faith. He agrees with the

¹⁰⁰ *RD*, 1:77.

¹⁰¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. by Harry der Nederlanden (Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980), 10.

¹⁰² *RD*, 1:597.

consensus between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism that the deepest ground of faith “is located in the subject.”¹⁰³

Second, based on his framework of the dual subjects, Bavinck emphasizes that certainty based on the subject does not imply subjectivism. He opposes the traditional view that equates the certainty of faith directly with acknowledging the authority of Scripture. Following Calvin, Bavinck maintains that the internal witness of the Holy Spirit and the external, objective testimony of the authority of Scripture should be combined. These two elements establish the foundation of the certainty of faith, and neither can be excluded.¹⁰⁴

Bavinck expresses disapproval of the rationalist trends in later Reformed theological developments, such as those by Turretin and Amyrald, who overlooked the role of the Holy Spirit’s illumination and equated it with the ability to recognize “the marks and criteria of the divinity of Holy Scripture.”¹⁰⁵ This approach led to the conclusion that faith “is the product of insight into the marks of truth and divinity it bears.”¹⁰⁶ According to Bavinck, this approach is prone to falling to rationalism. Bavinck does not want merely to preserve the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy as it is; he criticizes it for neglecting the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Bavinck endorses two significant aspects of modern theology, particularly in Schleiermacher’s approach: the distinction between divine revelation and Scripture, and the emphasis on

¹⁰³ *RD*, 1:582.

¹⁰⁴ *RD*, 1:587.

¹⁰⁵ *RD*, 1:584.

¹⁰⁶ *RD*, 1:584.

the subjective component and human consciousness in the foundation of faith.¹⁰⁷ Bavinck thus summarized,

This witness of the Holy Spirit has been all too one-sidedly applied, by Calvin and later Reformed theologians, to the authority of Holy Scripture. It seemed that it had no other important than the subjective assurance that Scripture is the word of God. As a result this testimony came to stand by itself. It was separated from the life of faith and seemed to refer to an extraordinary revelation of which Michaelis has honest enough to admit that he had never experienced it.¹⁰⁸

In this passage, Bavinck points out the tendency of Reformed theology, starting from Calvin, to excessively prioritize the authority of Scripture as an external and objective certainty. However, Bavinck criticizes neglecting the Holy Spirit's internal experiential and subjective aspects, namely the religious-ethical dimension in this tendency. Although Bavinck does not provide any citations and directly discusses Michaelis's viewpoint, he highlights Michaelis's view, namely, the inseparability of internal life experiences and external objective revelation.¹⁰⁹ This discussion exemplifies Bavinck's approach of critically incorporating diverse traditional and modern theological ideas into his own reflective framework rather than blindly perpetuating Reformed orthodoxy.

When addressing the certainty of faith, Bavinck adopts a dialectical approach. He points out the old orthodox emphasis on the authority of Scripture while neglecting the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. However, in order to avoid slipping into subjectivism, Bavinck appeals that the internal witness of the Holy Spirit and the faith granted are not

¹⁰⁷ *RD*, 1:381, 564-65.

¹⁰⁸ *RD*, 1:593.

¹⁰⁹ From the context, Bavinck does not specify who Michaelis is. However, based on the literature listed in *RD*, it can be inferred that he is referring to Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), a German biblical scholar and orientalist. Notably, Michaelis was also the father-in-law of Friedrich Schelling. This connection to Schelling might further reflect the interweaving of biblical scholarship and philosophical thought in Bavinck's work.

solely personal or private but are instead received by the entire historical community of believers. Therefore, Bavinck sees that although the individual's faith and knowledge's limitations might lead to questions about certainty, within the entire community, individual subjectivity becomes an external objectivity of certainty. This perspective integrates the subjective experience of faith and the collective, historical affirmation of the faith community, thereby balancing personal conviction with communal confirmation.¹¹⁰

According to Bavinck, "Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit relate to each other as objective truth and subjective assurance, as the first principles and their self-evidence, as the light and the human eye."¹¹¹ In Bavinck's view, the subject of the certainty of faith is not only the individual but also the Holy Spirit, who is the source of subjective certainty. This dual-subjects paradigm guarantees that the certainty of faith encompasses both the subjective human aspects and the objective external characteristics.

However, Bavinck has to confront a practical issue: the existence of doubt concerning the certainty of faith within the human subjective experience. While Bavinck firmly upholds the objective existence of the certainty of faith, he acknowledges that believers who live in the world and confront real life, there exists a form of dualism. This dualism emerges from the tension between the objective certainty of faith grounded in divine revelation and the subjective experiences of doubt and uncertainty faced by individuals in their daily lives. He says,

Faith, since it is the conviction of things not seen, is a continual struggle. The sins of the heart and the errors of the mind gang up on faith and often have appearance

¹¹⁰ *RD*, 1:598.

¹¹¹ *RD*, 1:598.

in their favor. As long as believers are on earth, there remains in them a dualism, a dualism not of the head and the heart, but of the flesh (σαρξ) and the spirit (πνευμα), of the “old” (παλαιος) and the “new” (καινος) person (ανθρωπος). Faith more or less retains a supernatural character insofar as it transcends the nature of unspiritual persons. It is not yet fully natural; the moment it becomes natural it ceases and becomes sight. Faith is above all faith because it sees something that the unspiritual do not perceive. On the other hand, this dualism, however painful, serves to confirm faith.¹¹²

In this passage, Bavinck highlights that faith possesses spiritual and certainty characteristics while simultaneously acknowledging that it is fraught with tension in this world. For Bavinck, this perspective is not only doctrinal but also explains the authentic experiential process of Christian faith, illustrating that faith is dynamic and filled with tension. Contrary to Eglinton’s portrayal of Bavinck as opposing all dualism and having an “aversion to dualism,”¹¹³ Bavinck does not reject all forms of dualism. Instead, he opposes a Cartesian-Kantian style dualism that rigidly separates being and thinking, subject and object, in epistemology and methodology. However, Bavinck recognizes the constraints imposed by human finitude and sinfulness in cognition and practice, resulting in a form of dualism and tension in the practical exercise of faith. Despite his firm claims in the universality and certainty of faith, Bavinck recognizes that human frailty and finitude might give rise to doubt regarding certainty in practice.

In this part, I discuss how Bavinck’s general epistemology has modern characteristics, especially by embracing new cognitive structures and paradigms like the subject-object framework, in order to address the challenges emerging in the modern era. Moreover, Bavinck’s understanding of the knowledge of faith and his general

¹¹² *RD*, 1:592-93.

¹¹³ Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 49.

epistemology are not entirely consistent. He observes that the knowledge of faith is not universally and objectively applicable to everyone but is specific to believers. Bavinck revised the traditional Reformed understanding of the certainty of faith. To ensure this certainty transcends the trap of subjectivism, he suggests a dual-subject perspective in faith epistemology involving both the Holy Spirit and human self-consciousness.

In the following parts, I will discuss Pannenberg's epistemology, his idea of faith, and the certainty of faith. Additionally, I will draw comparisons between Pannenberg and Bavinck.

6.3 Pannenberg's Epistemology: Knowledge, Faith, and Certainty

6.3.1 Literature Review

Among Pannenberg scholars, Stanley J. Grenz is one of the first to observe that the relationship between faith and reason is one of the central themes in Pannenberg's theological system, serving as its foundation. However, there is divergence among scholars regarding Pannenberg's approach to the intricate relationship between faith and reason. Grenz suggests that for Pannenberg, "faith is not a separate way of knowing truth not open to the scientific method," but rather that revelations of God in history "are open to scientific confirmation."¹¹⁴ Don H. Olive points out that Pannenberg does not ground reason on human foundations and underscores the relationship between faith and the future. According to Olive, Pannenberg suggests that "although faith is primary for salvation, reason provides the foundation for that faith... reason is the logical

¹¹⁴ Stanley James Grenz, "The Appraisal of Pannenberg: A Survey of the Literature," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*, 21.

presupposition of faith.”¹¹⁵ When summarizing literature on Pannenberg, Grenz says, “Pannenberg has repeatedly been described as a rationalist. Several conservative critics have found aspects of his rationalistic approach problematic for the relation between faith and reason.”¹¹⁶ Pannenberg’s critics argue that his reliance on eschatological judgment to validate faith and proclaimed truths remains unresolved and unverifiable. More conservative scholars criticize Pannenberg for emphasizing universal revelation while neglecting the impact of sin and spiritual blindness after the Fall on faith.¹¹⁷ According to Grenz, the essential divergence between Pannenberg and his critics regarding the relationship between reason and faith lies in that Pannenberg “maintains, erroneously presupposes the autonomy of reason, which leads to an internal dilemma. In the end, he must either assume an epistemology which is contrary to his dominant thesis that faith is not an avenue of knowledge or he must acknowledge that he has not fully escaped subjectivism.”¹¹⁸ In other words, Pannenberg’s critics usually argue that he advocates for reason as an entity independent of faith, resulting in his epistemology that tends to either lean towards subjectivism or treat knowledge and faith as unrelated entities.

Avery Dulles criticized Pannenberg’s theology of revelation. He noted that in Pannenberg’s early works, when discussing the relationship between knowledge and faith, Pannenberg prioritized knowledge, viewing faith as a response to knowledge about

¹¹⁵ Don H. Olive, *Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Texas: Word Books, 1973), 39.

¹¹⁶ Grenz, “The Appraisal of Pannenberg: A Survey of the Literature,” 23.

¹¹⁷ Grenz, “The Appraisal of Pannenberg: A Survey of the Literature,” 22-23; also see Obayashi, “Pannenberg and Troeltsch: History and Religion,” 401-419; Fred H. Klooster, “Historical Method and the Resurrection in Pannenberg’s Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 11, no. 1 (1976): 5-33.

¹¹⁸ Grenz, “The Appraisal of Pannenberg: A Survey of the Literature,” 26.

God. According to Dulles, “faith would be cognitive. While resting on a cognitive basis, it would itself be purely fiducial.”¹¹⁹ Dulles argues this understanding presents several difficulties. First, this concept of faith “does not do full justice to the testimony of Scripture and of tradition.”¹²⁰ Second, Dulles asserts that Pannenberg’s emphasis on revelation’s content being knowable only after rational analysis of objective evidence leads to probability rather than certitude in events such as the resurrection of Jesus.¹²¹ However, Dulles acknowledges a complexity in Pannenberg’s thought. He states that Pannenberg “recognizes a dialectical interplay between faith and knowledge rather than positing the two as successive stages previously referred to... Knowledge and faith are intertwined, each sustaining, and being sustained by, the other.”¹²² This perspective differs from Grenz’s assertion that Pannenberg treats reason as independent of faith, possibly leading to a disconnection between faith and knowledge. Dulles recognizes the dialectical relationship of faith and knowledge in Pannenberg’s system, suggesting that they are not mutually exclusive but interrelated.

Some scholars have positively affirmed Pannenberg’s epistemology. For example, Timothy Bradshaw perceives Pannenberg’s epistemology as breaking away from the Kantian model of *a priori* reason that disregards history and time. He argues that Pannenberg transformed “the Hegelian understanding that reason is in time as it thinks ahead and reflects back on itself, and on the difference between itself and what it thinks

¹¹⁹ Dulles, “Revelation and Faith,” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Twelve American Critiques*, 184.

¹²⁰ Dulles, “Revelation and Faith,” 185.

¹²¹ Dulles, “Revelation and Faith,” 185.

¹²² Dulles, “Revelation and Faith,” 186.

about.”¹²³ Contrary to scholars such as Olive and Dulles, who assert that Pannenberg overemphasized reason, Bradshaw contends that faith and reason collectively constitute the source of knowledge in Pannenberg’s epistemology. According to Bradshaw, “reason does not provide a different kind of knowledge base than faith, faith has no independent access to historical knowledge which is true or not true in terms of historical criteria open for anyone.”¹²⁴ Bradshaw’s interpretation suggests that Pannenberg’s stance aligns with Bavinck’s epistemology, which considers knowledge and faith as mutually constituting the basis of knowledge.

Contrasting the criticism that Pannenberg leans excessively towards rationalism and neglects the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, E. Frank Tupper observes Pannenberg’s emphasis on the connection between faith and the Holy Spirit. Tupper states, “Pannenberg explicitly rejects an appeal to the Spirit for the legitimation of the truth of the kerygma, but he does not mean that the Spirit has nothing to do with the origin of faith.”¹²⁵ Indeed, Pannenberg discusses explicitly the theme of faith in his pneumatology.

F. LeRon Shults defends Pannenberg by pointing out that Pannenberg does not view reason as the foundation of faith. Instead, the theme of “relation to God” is central to Pannenberg’s thought system. According to Shults, Pannenberg’s “understanding of human reason as operating in such a way that it aims at a unity of truth. Human reason participates in the differentiation of the Logos.” Thus, reason “offers provisional explanations of the conditions of our religious experience of the true infinite.”¹²⁶ Shults

¹²³ Bradshaw, *Pannenberg*, 16.

¹²⁴ Bradshaw, *Pannenberg*, 18.

¹²⁵ Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 123.

¹²⁶ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 109.

argues that Pannenberg is not a foundationalist who prioritizes reason as the basis of theology. Instead, Pannenberg integrates faith, reason, and other factors as perspectives for understanding the relationship with God.¹²⁷ Following Shults's interpretation of Pannenberg's theology, it appears that Pannenberg and Bavinck share many similarities in their epistemological approaches, both integrating various elements to understand the divine-human relationship comprehensively.

In the aforementioned various perspectives, the primary debates are whether Pannenberg overemphasizes the role of reason and if faith becomes subordinate to reason. In the following section, I will discuss how Pannenberg understands faith and certainty to engage these issues. My argument is that Pannenberg does not prioritize reason over faith. Instead, he underscores a dialectical relationship between the two and particularly emphasizes the relationship between faith and the Holy Spirit. To a great extent, Pannenberg and Bavinck not only share considerable common ground in their understanding of faith, but also Pannenberg's perspectives can complement Bavinck's understanding of faith.

6.3.2 Pannenberg on Faith and Knowledge

In the theme of faith and knowledge, Pannenberg and Bavinck share many similar viewpoints and congruity. Both theologians view that the objective world known to humans exists in a threefold relationship: self, world, and God. Pannenberg, like Bavinck, posits that humans, as subjects of knowledge, experience reality only within the objective world, in space and time. Pannenberg suggests, "the contents of our perceptions and the

¹²⁷ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 83.

objects of our actions become accessible to us only through the objective and the openness of the human experience of the world.”¹²⁸ Both theologians agree on the indispensability of the external, objective reality and the subject of cognition. Contrasting Bavinck’s view that idealism overlooks external, objective reality, Pannenberg highlights that idealism does not deny external objective reality. Instead, the issue with German idealism, according to Pannenberg, lies in that it “regarded man’s dominion over the world as based on the power of logical reason. In that way idealism closed itself off from the accidental character of events and from the openness of the future.”¹²⁹ Pannenberg’s perspective enhances comprehension of the attributes of idealism and clarifies the commonalities and differences between idealism and Bavinck’s thoughts.

Contrary to the assertions of Dulles and other Pannenberg critics, Pannenberg emphasizes the irreplaceable role of faith, rather than placing reason as the foundation of cognition as they claim. Pannenberg argues that when confronted with the openness of the infinite, humans cannot rely solely on reason for cognition; instead, a kind of faith is imperative. Pannenberg specifically notes that for understanding anything—the world and others—faith is a requisite condition due to the limitations of the human condition. However, Pannenberg further points out that human openness to the world, others, and God ensures that even in uncertain situations, there can be a measure of certainty about the future within limited experiences. The result arises from the concurrent operation of reason and faith.¹³⁰ This perspective suggests a synergistic correlation between reason

¹²⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is Man?: Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. by Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 68.

¹²⁹ Pannenberg, *What is a Man?*, 27.

¹³⁰ Pannenberg, *What is Man?*, 28-40.

and faith in Pannenberg's epistemology, wherein both faculties contribute to human understanding in a world characterized by inherent certainty and openness.

According to Bavinck, faith differs from general objective knowledge and instead represents a unique form of knowledge that is unique to a specific group. Rather, in Pannenberg's view, knowledge is intricately related to reason, yet faith and knowledge are not entirely equivalent. Even the knowledge about faith differs from faith itself. Pannenberg also points out the common association between faith and knowledge: both are forms of relating to truth.

Pannenberg emphasizes the temporal dimension in the differentiating faith from the general knowledge, which is often neglected in theological discussions. He states, "Knowledge is oriented to the present or to what is already experienced. Faith, however, directs itself to the future, as trust. If the future alone will teach us what finally stands, then the decisive thing in the relation to truth is faith."¹³¹ Thus, the distinction between faith and knowledge is not reason, but the dimension of time. Pannenberg sees human knowledge as an access to what is truly constant, but with inherent limitations. Faith, however, transcends these limitations as "faith is always referred to a future knowledge of the truth."¹³² And "the relation of faith to time, to the future that God will bring, and therefore to God himself."¹³³ Therefore, the prevailing perception in the literature that Pannenberg prioritizes reason over or separate from faith fails to adequately capture Pannenberg's thought of time.

¹³¹ *ST*, 3:137.

¹³² *ST*, 3:137.

¹³³ *ST*, 3:138.

Compared to other theologians such as Bavinck, Pannenberg's paradigm of the relationship between time and faith presents a fresh perspective. For theologians like Bavinck, faith, to some extent, transcends reason; it can accept revelatory events in history and also believe in revelations yet to occur. As discussed in chapter 4 on the theme of history, for Pannenberg, revelatory events that have occurred in the past are accessible and objective to all people. These revelatory events are not qualitatively different from general historical events. Pannenberg acknowledges the necessity of faith in accepting historical revelations, but he asserts that these events can be verified and examined through reason. For future eschatological revelations, Pannenberg views them as the ultimate boundary of reason beyond the reach of empirical verification within current human experience. In this context, faith assumes an irreplaceable and unique role. Accordingly, Pannenberg asserts that, compared to reason, faith is more closely connected to a future knowledge of the truth. This differentiation underscores the significant emphasis on the future-oriented nature of faith, highlighting its function in apprehending truths that lie beyond the current scope of human reason.

Pannenberg establishes a connection between faith and the future, using this perspective to explain the relationship between the saving faith emphasized since the Reformation and historical knowledge (also called "historical faith"). According to Pannenberg, theologians like Melancthon during the Reformation era pointed out that historical knowledge alone is inadequate for individual salvation due to its inability to grasp deeper historical meanings. Instead, alongside historical knowledge or historical faith about salvation, there must be confident trust. Thus, pure historical knowledge alone cannot form the basis of faith. Like Bavinck, Pannenberg also stresses that this historical

knowledge about salvation is a necessary but insufficient condition. The historical significance of Jesus and God's promises are elements that shape and form faith.¹³⁴ In fact, Pannenberg and Bavinck concur with the role of historical faith: although it cannot be the true foundation of faith, it plays a role in the formation of faith.

Like Bavinck, Pannenberg insists that faith cannot be its own foundation; in other words, faith cannot originate solely from the human as the subject of cognition. He posits that the foundation and presupposition of faith should be God's historical revelation: "knowledge (*notitia*) of the facts of history in which God revealed himself and assent (*assensus*) to these are essential presuppositions of Christian trust (*fiducia*)."¹³⁵ Epistemologically, Pannenberg likely aligns with Bavinck in viewing that faith itself cannot be the object of faith or the knowledge of truth, nor can it be the guaranteeing of reality, because it would imply that faith "itself is the sustaining basis of its contents."¹³⁶ If the essence of faith is reliant on God's self-revelation, rather than something external to God, then faith cannot have itself as its foundation. Pannenberg argues that "so long as the reality of God and his historical revelation unequivocally precedes the subjectivity of faith can believers be certain that they trust in God and not in themselves."¹³⁷ While Pannenberg's terminology differs from Bavinck, the essential ideal of his view remains highly similar. According to Bavinck, the basis of faith lies in the agreement of subjective and objective revelation; for Pannenberg, it is about God's historical self-revelation and

¹³⁴ *ST*, 3:143-48.

¹³⁵ *ST*, 3:150.

¹³⁶ *ST*, 3:153.

¹³⁷ *ST*, 3:153.

subjective acknowledgment of this revelation as the presupposition of faith. On this point, there is no significant divergence between Bavinck and Pannenberg.

Pannenberg would disagree with Bavinck's view that faith, in terms of sequential order, precedes knowledge. In Pannenberg's perspective, if faith is considered a form of trust, it is not possible for an individual to possess pure trust in something or a revelation without any preexisting knowledge or comprehension. Bavinck, on the other hand, posits that faith is the beginning of all knowledge. Pannenberg does not recognize a faith that is radically independent of any knowledge. Nor does he believe that having historical knowledge about salvation (what Bavinck refers to as historical faith) necessarily leads to personal faith. Instead, he views knowledge and faith as an organically integrated whole. He argues,

In knowledge of the history of Jesus, and in assent to the church's message in imparting this knowledge that God is revealed in the facts linked to the identity of the person of Jesus, we do not primarily have psychological motives for faith but logical conditions for believing that faith's trust in the God revealed in Jesus Christ has a good material basis. This does not mean that knowledge and assent have to be separate themes or have to be seen only as problems. They are also posited in every act of Christian faith as presuppositions of confidence in the God revealed in Jesus Christ.¹³⁸

In this passage, Pannenberg suggests that, logically, before faith, there should exist some recognition by people of certain objective revelatory events of God in history, which then enables them to know more of God's objective revelation through faith.

Epistemologically, individuals cannot recognize or accept something without pre-existing knowledge. Therefore, Pannenberg criticizes Barth's view, which is similar to Bavinck's. According to Pannenberg, Barth mistakenly assumes the concept of knowledge,

¹³⁸ *ST*, 3:150.

namely, “that knowledge of what is acknowledged does not come first.”¹³⁹ As a result, Barth places the recognition and confession of faith after the free act of obedience. This stance, like Bavinck’s, posits faith as the starting point of all knowledge and faith action. However, for Pannenberg, such a position is not entirely supported by the Bible. Pannenberg notes that even in Romans 10:17, Paul is not promoting a kind of blind obedience of faith but rather a recognition of the truthfulness of the proclamation that leads to obedience. Therefore, Pannenberg asserts, “faith as a personal act of trust is referred to God alone. Yet this personal relation of faith to God comes through the historical self-revelation of God and through our knowledge of it.”¹⁴⁰

The differing stances of Pannenberg and Bavinck on whether revelation is universal and objective lead to their divergence in understanding the knowledge of faith. In the previous discussion on Bavinck’s concept of faith, Bavinck understands faith as an action and response of the consciousness, and the Holy Spirit illuminates this action towards objective revelation. Bavinck acknowledges that the Christian community and the church provide the preconditions for the reception of special revelation, but maintains that faith precedes knowledge, despite their interwoven nature. Pannenberg, while also emphasizing that faith cannot be separated from historical experience and the mediation of its relation to God, diverges from Bavinck in that he does not agree with the idea that God’s self-revelation is hidden to some and revealed to others. Pannenberg insists that objective revelation must be universal, and humans understand these revelations through faith and reason. Therefore, for Pannenberg, positions like Bavinck’s, which emphasize

¹³⁹ *ST*, 3:151.

¹⁴⁰ *ST*, 3:152.

that the knowledge of faith is objective but only accessible and understandable to a select few, are contradictory.

For Pannenberg, human consciousness is not a *tabula rasa* that spontaneously generates faith. Instead, in forming human consciousness, rationality, reflection, and knowledge about the external world and the self all contribute to the emergence of faith. He firmly holds that blind faith, devoid of knowledge, is impossible. Pannenberg views that, logically, while having reason and consciousness are prerequisites for being capable of faith, in reality, faith, and knowledge should be seen as an organically integrated and inseparable whole.¹⁴¹

Despite the differences in the sequence of faith and knowledge between Bavinck and Pannenberg, both agree that the true object of faith, the living God, is not only a Creator but also the Deliverer and Consummator. Knowledge regarding revelation does not originate from the individual's subjectivity, nor does it appear once and for all. Instead, for God's self-revelation unfolds gradually in history, there cannot exist a form of faith that is divorced from historical experience and still captures the essence of faith.

Regarding the themes of historical faith, both Pannenberg and Bavinck acknowledge the significant role of historical faith or knowledge in faith itself, while also concurring that historical faith is not the foundation for the certainty of faith. Faith, they argue, is primarily an acknowledgment of things unseen, and historical knowledge does not automatically translate into personal belief. Pannenberg emphasizes that knowledge of God's self-revelation is transmitted through the church's proclamation in history.

While individual trust and faith in God differ from this public declaration of faith, the

¹⁴¹ Pannenberg, *What is a Man?*, 28-33.

message that leads to personal faith is still derived from these historical proclamations by the church. Therefore, in the communal aspect of faith and knowledge about faith, Pannenberg remains compatible with Bavinck. However, Pannenberg diverges by not regarding historical knowledge as isolated or discrete from other forms of human knowledge. This knowledge should be subjected to rational critique and examination. In contrast, Bavinck distinguishes historical faith from other human knowledge, or sometimes categorizes it as objective revelation, transcending ordinary human knowledge. While Pannenberg did not directly engage with Bavinck's thought, he criticized positions similar to Bavinck's, such as Barth's. Pannenberg critiques the approach that attempts to predefine historical knowledge about faith as the content or object of faith to avoid historical criticism of revelatory events. This approach, he argues, leads to a perversion where "faith falls victim to the perversion of being its own basis and is robbed of any sense of having a ground in history preceding itself."¹⁴²

Pannenberg recognizes a modern obstacle to faith that Bavinck may not have adequately tackled: in contemporary society, not only are there various historical narratives, including those of Christianity, but modern individuals often no longer accept the universal historical events proclaimed by doctrines or the church as inherently authoritative. Accordingly, Pannenberg argues that addressing the historical basis of faith requires "only by accepting the involved relativity of historico-exegetical knowledge and being ready constantly to examine the historical foundations of faith and to revise contemporary presentations where necessary."¹⁴³ Even though the objective revelation

¹⁴² *ST*, 3:154.

¹⁴³ *ST*, 3:154.

has unfolded in history, its total meaning can only be fully revealed at the eschaton, owing to human limitations and the gradual process of divine revelation. Pannenberg does not believe that merely emphasizing the Holy Spirit's illumination corresponding to the external authority of Scripture can guarantee the objective authority and certainty of salvific historical events. Instead, he promotes a Gadamerian hermeneutical understanding where integrating historical and present dimensions shapes faith. This methodology provides an insight into historical revelation, but the true meaning of revelatory-historical events can only be fully disclosed as a totality in the future. Hence, understanding both the occurrence and the overarching meaning of historical events requires a fusion of faith and knowledge at present.

Accordingly, Pannenberg strongly opposes fideism, and he advocates for the truth proclaimed by faith to “must leave room for the fact that our knowledge of its object is relative and provisional.”¹⁴⁴ This perspective underscores a balance where knowledge and faith are not mutually exclusive, and neither is infallible. Instead, both faith and knowledge require further critical reflection. He says,

In contrast to the dogmatism of absolute truth claims that dominated the history of Christian thought for so long, recognition that historical knowledge is limited and provisional can be for Christian faith an occasion for deeper reflection on its own nature in its own provisional situation this side of God's definitive future. As concerns the object of faith itself, Christian trust in God can be the basis of quiet confidence that no historical criticism can destroy the truth of God's revelation but that this truth will constantly emerge even from the results of critical exegesis and reconstruction of the history of Jesus if revelation really did take place in that history.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ *ST*, 3:154.

¹⁴⁵ *ST*, 3:154.

This passage clearly illustrates Pannenberg's holistic view of the relationship between faith and historical knowledge. He maintains that until the eschaton is fully realized, all knowledge and faith are incomplete, and the whole meaning of truth is not yet entirely revealed. Therefore, even faith itself requires reflection and critique. However, this process of reflection and critique does not undermine the foundation of faith; on the contrary, Pannenberg argues that it helps to more clearly define what truly belongs to the realm of faith.

Accordingly, Pannenberg cautions against equating the concept of faith as understood in church history and doctrine with individual faith,¹⁴⁶ because in any era, all believers have limited understanding of knowledge and faith. Pannenberg distinguishes between the present Christian life of believers and the ultimate future of God, reaffirming his view that faith is not in opposition to knowledge. Instead, it is a form of knowledge based on current understanding and oriented towards the future—a characteristic he refers to as faith's knowledge.

Pannenberg, similar to Bavinck, emphasizes the separation between faith itself and the interpretations or explanations of faith. Pannenberg believes that similar to the essential difference between facts and interpretations of facts, "interpretations... are historical and provisional as compared to the identity of the object."¹⁴⁷ Likewise, the foundation of faith for believers and their understanding and experience with limited knowledge of faith cannot be entirely equated. This is also why different denominations have varied interpretations of the concept of faith. However, Pannenberg concedes that

¹⁴⁶ *ST*, 3:154-55.

¹⁴⁷ *ST*, 3:154.

doctrinal disagreements do not necessarily reflect fundamental differences in faith *per se*, but rather stem from human and historical limitations. He states, “awareness that interpretations are relative and provisional need not injure the conviction that the truth claim of our own faith knowledge is justified to the degree that there are cogent reasons for the conviction.”¹⁴⁸ Pannenberg does not espouse a relativistic stance towards interpretations of faith, treating all interpretations equally valid. Rather, the true meaning and legitimacy of interpretations are conferred by the facts themselves. He asserts, “the significance of what is interpreted may assert itself in the many interpretations according to the measure in which, as we test the contending interpretations by the matter itself, elements of its significance emerge.”¹⁴⁹

Pannenberg advocates for believers an eschatologically provisional understanding of faith, suggesting that the entirety of history and truth is interpreted within historical confines. This approach is particularly crucial in the comprehension of the person and history of Jesus, implying that the understanding of faith should not be confused with absolute truth itself. In a view akin to Bavinck’s, Pannenberg posits that the foundation of faith, namely, Jesus himself in his historical reality, or the trinitarian God revealing himself therein, as an anticipation of the future. This can become the foundation and object of faith. He says,

the history of Jesus has in its specific material structure the form of the promise to which faith corresponds. Hence knowledge of Jesus regarding his distinctive historical reality may be the ground of transition to the act of faith that is directed by way of Jesus to the Father notwithstanding the relativity of our human

¹⁴⁸ *ST*, 3:158.

¹⁴⁹ *ST*, 3:159.

knowledge, which will be ours in full clarity only face to face with the eschatological future of salvation that transcends all things present.¹⁵⁰

The essence of faith is encapsulated in the framework of faith and promise, an idea advocated since the Reformation, according to Pannenberg, “only *fiducia* does justice to the history of Jesus understood as promise, for only *fiducia* accepts the promise as promise.”¹⁵¹ Therefore, faith should have an object of orientation. Moreover, the formation of knowledge about the promise that shapes faith itself. Pannenberg describes a dialectical relationship between faith and knowledge, where faith cannot subsist antecedent to knowledge without a cognitive foundation. However, this does not imply that faith is based solely on reason. In Pannenberg’s view, faith and reason describe different faculties of human consciousness in understanding revelation. Neither can exist independently of the other, nor can one dominate the other. Thus, Pannenberg asserts that both faith and knowledge collectively form the manner in which people understand Christ and revelation.

Upon examining Bavinck’s work, I have observed Bavinck’s agreement with the Reformation emphasis on the foundation of faith being the witness of God in His Word, and its author the Holy Spirit, i.e., knowing Christ through both internal and external revelation. Pannenberg’s emphasis on the correlation between faith and promise, as well as the interplay between historical reality and the act of faith, all pointing collectively towards Christ, is in line with Bavinck’s perspective.

¹⁵⁰ *ST*, 3:161.

¹⁵¹ *ST*, 3:161.

6.3.3 Pannenberg on the Certainty of Faith

Regarding the theme of faith, Bavinck and Pannenberg, despite their divergence on the sequence and foundational premise of faith and knowledge, share substantial agreement or similar positions in their understanding of faith and its foundation. Similarly, on the theme of the certainty of faith, both theologians find common ground as well as differences. For Bavinck, the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit and the external authority of Scripture organically combine to form the foundation of faith and its certainty. He acknowledges the tension in this understanding of certainty, especially in the context of modern society. Bavinck recognizes that the subject of subjective revelation includes both the Holy Spirit and humans. However, he acknowledges doubts about this certainty due to human limitations and sinfulness. Because faith has communal and historical assurances in its objectivity, Bavinck ultimately asserts that the certainty of faith is an objective truth, despite the presence of many inexplicable mysteries.

In Pannenberg's view, relying on church dogmatics and the authority of Scripture to assure certainty of faith and salvation is considered an old theological paradigm, while modern theological criticism has already shaken these authorities. Like Bavinck, Pannenberg is aware that appealing solely to the witness of the Holy Spirit as a guarantor of certainty often falls into a form of subjectivism. To address this issue, Pannenberg adopts the following approaches.

First, Pannenberg stresses that appealing to the witness of the Holy Spirit in the conscience does not necessarily result in the bondage of subjectivity. He argues that understanding the origins of certainty through worldly experience can "protect the truth in the doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit in conscience against subjectivist

abridgment.”¹⁵² Unlike Bavinck or Barth, who emphasize “from above” revelation, Pannenberg considers everyday experiences “from below” as a condition for faith. In his view, faith cannot exist entirely independent of reason and knowledge based on past cognition. Epistemologically, it is impossible to isolate the self and its worldly experiences, and theology cannot ignore the impact of these worldly experiences on the self-certainty of the ego, “because it forms the setting for the mediation (by salvation history) of the new constitution of personal identity in the act of faith.”¹⁵³ Therefore, Pannenberg contends that neither Descartes’s self-certainty of the ego nor the certainty of empiricism has successfully demonstrated the ultimate source of certainty for all knowledge. Instead, he asserts, “we cannot detach the rise of self-certainty from the initial development of experience of the world, whether as regards the social environment or the world of things in time and space.”¹⁵⁴

Pannenberg underscores that the certainty of faith is composed of subjectivity and objectivity, and he does not entirely dismiss the contributions of German idealism to this theme. He maintains, “Only in this context can the mediating in salvation history of the grounding of subjectivity and its certainty on the relation to God be feasible again in theological thinking. The philosophy of German idealism made a pioneering start here, especially Hegel’s philosophy, even if on the premise of a definition of the relation between awareness of self and awareness of objects that is now questionable.”¹⁵⁵ He

¹⁵² *ST*, 3:167.

¹⁵³ *ST*, 3:166.

¹⁵⁴ *ST*, 3:165.

¹⁵⁵ *ST*, 3:165.

acknowledges German idealism's, particularly Hegel's philosophy, linking self-certainty with the experiential world. By connecting certainty to the experiential world, faith is established on the certainty of a relationship with God. Pannenberg argues that German idealism played a crucial role in modern thought by emphasizing that God is not merely the object of religious experience but also a subject of cognition. This perspective explains why humans, as finite subjects of cognition, have some assurance of certainty.¹⁵⁶ Accordingly, Bavinck's proposal of a dual subject, the Holy Spirit and humans, to safeguard the certainty of faith, aligns closely with Pannenberg's discussion of German idealism.

Second, like Bavinck, Pannenberg confirms Schleiermacher's emphasis on feeling, acknowledging that human perception of the world is primarily derived initially from sensations. Thus, feeling effectively depicts "the direct presence of the whole of undivided existence in each moment of life."¹⁵⁷ Contrary to the post-reformation emphasis often associating conscience with the certainty of faith, Pannenberg views feeling as preceding consciousness. Feeling is more fundamental, where conscience "is the nonthematic presence of the whole of one's own life relative to the world as we are offered this in feeling."¹⁵⁸ This feeling points towards an anticipatory articulation of the whole events, implying that the anticipation of the totality of the context of life and world becomes a condition for the certainty of faith.

¹⁵⁶ Pannenberg, *Problemgeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland*, 261-89.

¹⁵⁷ *ST*, 3:169-70.

¹⁵⁸ *ST*, 3:170.

However, Pannenberg does not conflate this personal, subjective experience of conviction immediately with the certainty of faith. As Tupper points out, “Pannenberg rejects the equating of faith with a subjective conviction that would supposedly compensate for the uncertainty of the believer’s historical knowledge of Jesus the Christ. Faith is not ‘subjectivity’s fortress’ into which the Christian can retreat when threatened by scientific knowledge.”¹⁵⁹ Pannenberg advocates that the primary conditions for the original certainty of faith are nonthematic feeling and life experience. This argument effectively refutes the allegation that Pannenberg relies entirely on reason as the basis for faith. In fact, in the theme of the certainty of faith, Pannenberg not only explores it in the context of pneumatology but also particularly emphasizes the significant role of feeling in forming faith.

Pannenberg’s nuanced understanding of the certainty of faith acknowledges its dual nature as both self-certainty and yet not entirely synonymous with the certainty of the experienced object. He counters the prevailing Protestant view that associates the assurance of faith with private confession. Pannenberg argues that the assurance of salvation in faith does not rest “on a judgment concerning the Christian’s own state of grace,” nor is it solely based “on human self-experience or self-certainty.”¹⁶⁰ Instead, he posits that “the certainty that rests on the promise of God... relates to the salvation of believers and therefore to the integrity of their selfhood.”¹⁶¹ It implies that the certainty of faith encompasses both subjective and objective elements. These two aspects are not in

¹⁵⁹ Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 125.

¹⁶⁰ *ST*, 3:162-63.

¹⁶¹ *ST*, 3:162.

dualistic opposition but integrally linked within the individual, forming a holistic totality. In this regard, Pannenberg's perspective aligns with that of Bavinck.

Third, similar to Bavinck, Pannenberg acknowledges that, in reality, individuals may question the certainty of their faith, and this certainty experiences tension over time and through events. He notes, "This certainty... is always in tension with the ongoing process of experience and is always exposed to assault, whether in relation to its object, the reality of God and its own historical basis of faith, or as regards its own subjectivity in relation to the object of faith."¹⁶² However, Pannenberg does not entirely align with Bavinck's stance, which attributes these doubts primarily to human limitations and sinfulness. Instead, Pannenberg further suggests that questioning itself is a necessary part of the reflective process in understanding the certainty of faith.

Pannenberg resonates with J. H. Newman's understanding of the certainty of faith, asserting that the certainty one has about something is, in fact, a reflective process derived from experiences and judgments about those experiences. This is consistent with Pannenberg's view that both faith and reason play roles in establishing the certainty of faith. Contrary to Bavinck's portrayal of faith and doubt as a dichotomous tension, Pannenberg perceives the process of faith development as one where faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive but are components of a whole that includes reflection, doubt, and further investigation. He notes, "the more individual judgments are set in relation to broader contexts by linking them to other judgments, the more, he thought, we can achieve the 'repose of mind' that marks the state of certainty."¹⁶³

¹⁶² *ST*, 3:170.

¹⁶³ *ST*, 3:167.

Moreover, Pannenberg modifies Newman's subjective comprehension of the certainty of faith by including the object of faith as an integral part of the cognitive process. He agrees with Hegel's assertion that the certainty of faith must be conditioned by the totality of truth. Pannenberg recognizes that both Hegel and Newman agree that knowing the truth is a reflective process, but he contends that Hegel's thought complements Newman's by addressing a crucial aspect: the difference between people's grasp of the concept of the certainty of faith and actual faith itself. According to Pannenberg, the subjective consciousness regarding to absolute truth or salvation "is essentially in itself a process whose direct and substantial unity is faith in the witness of the Spirit as the certainty of objective truth." He maintains that "faith and its assurance as an anticipation of truth that will have its final form in concept as the result of the process of experience."¹⁶⁴ Thus, faith is "an anticipation of absolute truth about reality as a whole, presents itself on the other as declaration of the Spirit who constitutes and consummates this whole."¹⁶⁵

In discussing the relationship between doubt and faith, Pannenberg has a more optimistic viewpoint of the correlation between doubt and faith than Bavinck. Pannenberg suggests that since God's revelation remains incomplete in history, questioning faith is "an essential part of God's self-declaration in the concreteness of human history."¹⁶⁶ For him, the object of faith, i.e., the truth and complete meaning of revelation, will ultimately be fully revealed at the end of the world. Thus, Pannenberg

¹⁶⁴ *ST*, 3:168.

¹⁶⁵ *ST*, 3:168.

¹⁶⁶ *ST*, 3:171.

argues that there is no absolutely correct, once-and-for-all historical doctrine about faith and revelation that unveils the entire truth. He argues, “here is not only criticism of inappropriate forms of picturing God but also the need to test historical and theological statements about the ground of faith in the person and history of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶⁷

Furthermore, Pannenberg affirms the significance of the certainty of faith, stating that, “faith can accept questioning of the knowledge of its object as an assault on the brokenness of its knowledge by God himself and with a readiness to receive further instruction about the basis of its confidence.”¹⁶⁸

To best convey Pannenberg's understanding of faith and certainty, it is appropriate to reference his own account. He says,

In this regard we need to share the reference to the totality of the world and our own lives in the act of faith only in the nonthematic form of feeling as something implicitly given in the concrete object and basis of faith and confession. It does not have to be thematic after the manner of a rational account of the implications of the concept of God. It may in any case be present in the form of hints in the verbal confession of God as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of the world. A rational account can never do full justice to what is present as a whole (even if vaguely) in feeling and to what is articulated in religious ideas. After the manner of feeling we have to confess that the consummation of the world and our own lives has dawned in the history of Jesus and that it is present to faith even if still provisionally, refracted by suffering and death.¹⁶⁹

This summary represents Pannenberg’s intricate understanding of faith and certainty, refuting the criticism that he solely emphasizes reason in comprehending revelation. Pannenberg returns to the foundations of epistemology to understand faith and revelation, highlighting that it is not pure reason that spontaneously generates cognition and

¹⁶⁷ *ST*, 3:171.

¹⁶⁸ *ST*, 3:171.

¹⁶⁹ *ST*, 3:172.

doctrine. Instead, it's the non-theoretical, everyday experiences and feelings that form the external basis for the formation of understanding and faith. Pannenberg emphasizes that subjective faith and its corresponding object are first and foremost related to personal experiential feelings and the overall relationship with the world. He states, "without this affirmation in feeling of the implications that the concept of God and statements about his action in the history of Jesus contain, we cannot make the act of faith."¹⁷⁰ This approach underscores the importance of feelings and personal experiences in contributing to the act of faith, suggesting that faith is not just intellectual assent but also deeply rooted in personal and existential encounters.

Furthermore, Pannenberg's interpretation from a totality perspective allows him to interconnect the certainty of faith with the promise itself. In this view, faith's certainty is not just an abstract concept but is intimately connected with the concrete promises of God and the historical reality of Jesus. Pannenberg's approach thus integrates personal experience, historical understanding, and theological reflection, offering a comprehensive and dynamic perspective on faith and its certainty. Bradshaw succinctly summarizes Pannenberg's thought as follows,

The totality of reality is constituted by the final future. Faith and reason are not to be regarded as wholly different, rather the opposite is true. Both depend on an eschatological horizon to yield meaning and truth. Both share the anticipatory structure of reaching ahead and looking for new insights from the future, which is open, which faith sees as rooted in God. Reality is laden with meaning as it moves through time, and for both faith and reason the future is the key to gaining a perspective of the totality of reality, albeit provisionally for the moment.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ *ST*, 3:172.

¹⁷¹ Bradshaw, *Pannenberg*, 17.

The summary of Pannenberg's perspective on faith reinforces that his concept of faith is not merely confined to the relational feeling between the subject and object of faith. It clarification refutes the criticism that Pannenberg bases faith entirely on reason. Instead, he presents an integrative view of human cognition that encompasses feeling, external experiences, internal illumination by the Holy Spirit, knowledge, and reflection on that knowledge. These elements are not standalone entities but are interwoven to collectively form the comprehensive certainty of faith. Pannenberg's approach signifies a holistic understanding of faith as an interconnected tapestry of various cognitive and experiential components. This perspective acknowledges the complexity of faith, recognizing that it involves both subjective experiences and objective truths.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the epistemologies of Bavinck and Pannenberg, particularly concerning knowledge, faith, and certainty. My argument posits that both Bavinck and Pannenberg, utilizing resources from modern thought, especially German idealism, have amended and enhanced the traditional doctrinal understanding of faith and certainty. They both attempt to overcome the dualistic and dichotomous approaches that separate faith from knowledge or reason, employing an organic, holistic epistemology. Within this particular framework, Bavinck and Pannenberg demonstrate numerous similarities while displaying nuanced distinctions.

First, Bavinck's epistemology, like his organicism and theology of revelation discussed in previous chapters, inherits much from traditional thought while also assimilating numerous modern ideas. His thought does not represent a dichotomous

choice between “traditional” and “modern” but rather a synthesis, drawing from a diverse range of sources. He employs modern concepts, such as the subject-object relationship, to understand faith, cautiously affirms Schleiermacher’s emphasis on feeling, and even incorporates numerous perspectives from Schopenhauer into his epistemology. This approach revises the traditional doctrinal tendency to reduce faith to a mere acknowledgment of creedal confessions and doctrines. Bavinck also develops the traditional correlation between pneumatology and Scripture to explain the procedural mechanism of faith in human consciousness. Diverging from traditional interpretations of faith, Bavinck not only positions the Holy Spirit as the subject of cognition but also regards the human self as a cognitive subject. This dual-subject approach to understanding God’s external revelation aligns with the principle that only God can know Himself without creating contradictions. Bavinck acknowledges that the certainty of faith encompasses both an objective dimension and a subjective aspect of personal feelings and consciousness. However, he admits that, in reality, for believers, there exists a genuine dualism between faith and doubt. This stance indicates that Bavinck does not oppose all forms of dualism but critiques methodological dualism while preserving the dualism encountered in reality and practice.

Second, Pannenberg, contrary to some critiques by Pannenberg scholars, does not overemphasize reason at the expense of faith and the theme of the Holy Spirit. In this chapter, I discussed Pannenberg’s understanding of faith, and certainty in his epistemological framework. For Pannenberg, his holistic thought organically combines reason, faith, and certainty. He does not posit knowledge and reason as the foundation of faith, nor the reverse. Instead, he delineates the distinct roles and faculties of faith and

reason in the epistemological process of humans. Additionally, Pannenberg highlights the temporal dimension, distinguishing the knowledge associated with faith and reason.

Third, in their epistemologies, Bavinck and Pannenberg find consensus on many issues regarding knowledge, faith, and certainty. Both theologians inherit traditional doctrines, emphasizing the necessity of historical faith in the formation of faith, while also critically adopting contributions from modern theology, such as Schleiermacher and German idealism. Bavinck, discussing the certainty of faith, introduces a dual subject of the Holy Spirit and the human to ensure objectivity and avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism. However, he ultimately views this process as a mystery and acknowledges a dualistic tension between faith and doubt in real life. Unlike Bavinck, Pannenberg incorporates doubt into the process of forming faith's certainty. He considers doubt as an intrinsic reflection within faith, not conflicting with faith or its certainty. Reflection is seen as both a necessary condition for the formation of faith and a crucial test of its certainty. Pannenberg, from an eschatological perspective, notes that the truth of God's revelation is not yet fully revealed but continues to unfold in history until the future. Hence, reason and faith are not about who precedes or determines whom but are part of a holistic process in human consciousness.

Furthermore, Pannenberg offers a more general and realistic explanation than Bavinck, suggesting that faith inevitably forms based on some external and pre-existing knowledge. He argues against the possibility of a wholly unknown object being the true object of faith, as it would result in *fideism* or blind faith. In contrast, Bavinck views this process as a mystery. In my view, both Bavinck and Pannenberg offer reasonable explanations in discussing the relationship between the formation of faith and reason, yet

neither can claim complete objective justification. on the one hand, people cannot form faith from absolute ignorance, only possessing a mere consciousness function called faith; On the other hand, as Bavinck says, this process also involves mystery. Thus, their viewpoints are not mutually exclusive but complementary. I lean towards their central themes of totality and organicism in understanding the relationship between faith and reason. They are not foundational or substitutive for each other; instead, they dynamically interact in the cognitive process of understanding objective revelation. Additionally, Pannenberg's inclusion of reflection and questioning in the formation of faith serves as a valuable complement to Bavinck's theory.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

John Bolt, one of the most prominent scholars currently studying Bavinck, has highlighted a deficiency in past research on Bavinck: the post-Bavinck Dutch Reformed theological tradition, as well as studies of Bavinck, “did not adequately integrate Herman Bavinck’s emphasis on an anthropologically sensitive metaphysics of religion.”¹ Bolt proposes a tentative exploration, suggesting that comparing the theological approaches of Bavinck and Pannenberg can offer deeper insights into concepts such as metaphysics, revelation, and religion. He posits that Pannenberg’s work can be used as an extension and further elaboration of Bavinck’s efforts to delineate the fundamental contours of a philosophy of revelation. This comparative study illuminates the individual contributions of each theologian and underscores the continuity and development of theology’s engagement with philosophical concepts in a modern context. Bolt’s approach emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary perspective in understanding the complex interplay between philosophy, metaphysics, and religious thought in contemporary theology.

My dissertation essentially continues and expands upon Bolt’s proposition, focusing on various themes related to the doctrine of revelation to examine the theological and metaphysical frameworks of Bavinck and Pannenberg. Indeed, Bolt’s assertion already hints at this direction, suggesting that Bavinck and Pannenberg share

¹ Bolt, “Metaphysics, Revelation, and Religion in Herman Bavinck and Wolfhart Pannenberg,” 103.

numerous similarities in their theological and metaphysical frameworks; they also share a rich pool of orthodox and modern intellectual resources.

Moreover, they both endeavor to ascertain how theology can be viable in modern society. It is likely that these commonalities, along with their openness, proactive engagement with the thought of their times, and their theological attitudes, led Bolt to recognize that despite there being no direct interaction between Bavinck and Pannenberg in their lifetimes, and Pannenberg never engaging directly with Bavinck's works, Pannenberg's theological contributions could be seen as an extension and expansion of Bavinck's theology of revelation. This dissertation revolves around this theme, asserting that despite their differences, both theologians exhibit similarities in their ideas of revelation, influenced by German idealism as a response to modern challenges to traditional doctrines of revelation. This demonstrates that Bavinck, akin to Pannenberg, was significantly influenced by modern thought, particularly German idealism, and his ideas evolved over his intellectual journey.

To better elucidate the viewpoints and structure of this dissertation, I provide a revisited overview of each chapter's key points and arguments.

Chapter 1 introduces the historical, social, and intellectual backgrounds of Bavinck and Pannenberg. This chapter aids readers in understanding how their doctrines of revelation and theological thoughts were shaped within these contexts.

In Chapter 2, I compare Bavinck's organicism with Pannenberg's motif of "totality," highlighting the similarities rooted in their mutual influences from the rich soil of orthodox and modern thought, especially German idealism. The chapter proposes that

their convergence reflects their response to modernity and the shared influence of German idealism.

Bavinck and Pannenberg both identified three modes of revelation: nature, history, and consciousness. I explore these themes within the doctrine of revelation across three chapters: nature in Chapter 3, history in Chapter 4, and consciousness in Chapter 6. In Chapter 5, I delve into one of the most striking similarities between Bavinck and Pannenberg, which is their theological framework of the Trinity, and discuss the connection between Trinitarian theology and revelation.

In Chapter 3, I critically examine the conceptual frameworks of natural theology as interpreted by Bavinck and Pannenberg. This analysis challenges the prevailing academic narrative that posits an opposition to natural theology by these theologians. Contrary to these assertions, my argument claims that both Bavinck and Pannenberg not only recognize but also emphasize the vital importance of natural theology, expanding its parameters to engage with contemporary scientific discourse and the phenomena of natural religions. The chapter delves into a nuanced exploration of how the interpretations of “nature” and “natural theology” have undergone significant shifts across various historical epochs. Bavinck and Pannenberg’s engagements with these evolving meanings are situated against a comprehensive tapestry of theological thought. Their analyses confront and dissect pivotal issues, notably the intricate relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions, and how theology can constructively interact with atheistic stances and critical perspectives from diverse religious viewpoints.

A particularly salient aspect of chapter 3 is the in-depth exploration of Pannenberg’s endeavor to broaden the scope of natural theology to encapsulate a

theology of nature. This ambitious extension represents an innovative synthesis of modern scientific paradigms with traditional theological constructs. Pannenberg's interdisciplinary approach, while presenting considerable challenges, serves to illuminate the profound relevance and transformative potential of contemporary theological inquiry within the sphere of natural science. This scholarly pursuit underscores the dynamic interplay between theology and science, highlighting theological thought's enduring significance and adaptability in the modern intellectual landscape.

In the fourth chapter, I engage with the theme of history, a subject that has been largely underexplored within the scholarship on Bavinck, in stark contrast to its frequent discussion among scholars of Pannenberg. The central thesis of this chapter contends that the historical perspectives of Bavinck and Pannenberg represent a significant departure from traditional Christian historiography, embodying a more contemporary and nuanced engagement with historical understanding. Both theologians advocate for the concept of "universal history" as a means to supplant the traditional narratives of "redemptive history" or "sacred history." In doing so, they employ the motifs of organicism and totality to navigate beyond the dualistic confines of conventional Christian historical perspectives and the limitations of contemporary historicism. This chapter scrutinizes both theologians' critiques of modern positivist historiography. It highlights their efforts to reconcile the dichotomy between empirical facts and meaning, thereby striving for a certainty of faith that transcends mere subjectivism. A distinctive aspect of Pannenberg's approach is his comprehensive integration of hermeneutics and historical research into theological discourse, reflecting a keen absorption of post-World War II advancements in these fields.

Moreover, Bavinck and Pannenberg were profoundly influenced by the concept of “universal history,” linking it to the notions of objectivity and universality in faith. Bavinck navigates the tension between tradition and modernity, emphasizing the multilinear and diverse nature of world history while upholding a linear narrative of salvation history. In contrast, Pannenberg critically examines the monolithic narrative of Christian history, underscoring its failure to accommodate the complexities of other civilizations and religious traditions.

Their explorations into history and revelation are shaped by the post-Enlightenment philosophical-theological landscape and the emergence of history as a distinct academic discipline. By addressing themes absent in traditional theological discourse, Bavinck and Pannenberg demonstrate a commitment to sustaining theology as a rigorous discipline in the modern era. While both theologians pursue a framework of history that is both objective and universal, Bavinck’s approach tends to conflate spiritual Christianity with the historicity of concrete Christian experiences, leading to a more subjective historical construction. Pannenberg, exhibiting a more reflective stance, may lack engagement with non-Western historical theories. However, his emphasis on a system’s openness to future developments holds promise for enriching his historical perspective. Despite certain limitations, the insights provided by Bavinck and Pannenberg offer invaluable contributions to the discourse on theology’s openness and scientific approach, particularly in response to the challenges posed by historical studies.

In Chapter 5, I articulate the significant commonalities in the Trinitarian theologies of Bavinck and Pannenberg. Despite originating from distinct theological backgrounds and historical periods, their approaches to Trinitarian thought exhibit

remarkable parallels, providing a synthesized and expansive methodology for comprehending the doctrine of God and revelation within contemporary frameworks. Both Bavinck and Pannenberg contribute profoundly to Christian theology, marked by their meticulous integration of orthodox and modern theological concepts, coupled with an innovative interpretation of the Trinitarian doctrine.

These theologians conceptualize the Trinity as a pivotal motif in their theological discourse. They challenge traditional notions of the Father's monarchy, advocating instead for a model of reciprocal relationships among the persons of the Trinity. In doing so, they adeptly incorporate contemporary philosophical thought to enrich the Trinitarian doctrine, pursuing an organic and holistic theological model that harmonizes the inherent diversity and unity within the concept of God.

Their employment of terms such as "distinction" and "self-distinction" mirrors the influences of German idealism, including those of Hegel, albeit with certain reservations, particularly in Bavinck's theology. Pannenberg's theological construction, in particular, extends Bavinck's Trinitarian framework by embracing concepts like field theory, thereby interweaving theological inquiry with contemporary scientific understandings and presenting a dynamic interpretation of the Trinity.

Despite certain controversies, especially regarding Pannenberg's application of field theory to elucidate the Holy Spirit and the nature of divine love, his theological approach offers a valuable and innovative framework for interpreting the doctrine of God and revelation. Chapter 5 underscores the intellectual rigor and creativity inherent in their theological explorations, highlighting their substantial contributions to the discourse on God's nature in the context of modern theological challenges.

Chapter 6 places a scholarly focus on the theme of epistemology, specifically addressing how individuals perceive and receive divine revelation. This aspect, termed as the subjectivity of revelation by Bavinck, is a crucial area of inquiry. In this chapter, I discuss the fundamental epistemological stances of Bavinck and Pannenberg, concentrating on three key aspects: the nature of faith, the interplay between faith and knowledge (reason), and the certainty of faith. My principal argument is that both theologians demonstrate an epistemological approach profoundly influenced by modern thought, particularly German idealism, and endeavor to bridge the traditional dichotomy between faith and reason through an organic and comprehensive methodology. This approach leads to a consensus on numerous issues related to knowledge, faith, and certainty, reflecting their integration of traditional doctrines with insights from modern theology.

Bavinck introduces the Holy Spirit and the human self as dual cognitive subjects to ensure objectivity in faith, while Pannenberg incorporates an intrinsic element of doubt within faith, viewing it not as a conflict but as a crucial aspect of faith's certainty. Pannenberg offers a realistic interpretation, positing that faith is formed based on external knowledge, thereby challenging the notion of blind faith in an entirely unknown entity.

Both theologians provide complementary perspectives on the relationship between faith and reason, emphasizing an interactive and dynamic cognitive process in the comprehension of objective revelation. Pannenberg's inclusion of reflection and questioning in the formation of faith serves as an enhancement to Bavinck's theory, adding depth to the understanding of faith's development. Their explorations present a nuanced and sophisticated view of how faith and reason coalesce in the realm of

theological inquiry, offering significant insights into the complex dynamics of belief and understanding in the context of divine revelation.

I am offering some reflections and thoughts that extend beyond the direct scope of my research, pertaining to Bavinck and Pannenberg as theologians.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have endeavored to present the complexity inherent in the theological thought of both these scholars. This complexity signifies their departure from rigid adherence to specific denominations or so-called “orthodox” doctrines and from perpetuating a single era’s theological perspectives as immutable truths. In my exploration of Bavinck and Pannenberg’s works, neither theologian was confined within particular dogmatic shackles. Their perspectives underwent significant evolution over the course of their lives. This is evident in how Bavinck’s concept of revelation transitioned from a primarily dogmatic focus to encompass philosophical aspects, and in Pannenberg’s evolving viewpoints on the role and understanding of history. This development, I believe, is characteristic of theological reflection, a continual process of understanding one’s beliefs within the context of faith, rather than clinging to outdated images. Despite the voluminous works and extensive secondary literature on both theologians, my comparison, due to scope limitations, focused primarily on aspects relevant to my thesis. However, this comparison might at least remind us of the ecumenical nature of theology, transcending denominational and temporal confines to seek a more universal consensus of faith. Future comparative studies might further illuminate this aspect.

Given the paucity of literature comparing these two theologians, I often engaged in dialogues with secondary sources that studied them independently within each chapter.

One significant challenge was selecting from the vast literature in their respective fields. To maintain coherence with the overall purpose of my dissertation, besides focusing on literature relevant to each chapter's theme, I primarily dialogued with a perspective that posited Bavinck's organicism as insulated from contemporary thoughts, particularly German idealism, and rooted solely in tradition. Methodologically, I disagree with this assumption that a thinker can perpetuate a certain orthodox thought without being influenced by the trends of the times, or that a thinker's ideas are always consistent and unchanging, without any changings and contradictions, as it implies an isolation from one's era and daily life, living solely within dogmatic traditions. In my readings, both Bavinck and Pannenberg, well-versed in modern academic rigor, critically engaged with and integrated the intellectual currents of their time into their theological constructs. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted, "What we possess... are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived."¹ This suggests that, while we may use fragments of traditional concepts and thoughts, we interpret and understand them within our own contexts. I lean towards the view that Bavinck and Pannenberg constructed their thoughts amidst a myriad of potential intellectual resources from both "orthodox" and "modern," rather than being forced into an either/or choice.

Lastly, both Bavinck and Pannenberg's systems exhibit self-reflection, openness, and honesty. Even Bavinck candidly acknowledged a tension between faith and daily life, a quality I believe essential for anyone engaged in theology. Theological and doctrinal

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 2.

systems are not likely to reach a final, all-encompassing form in any era. Instead, theology must continually confront and courageously ponder the diverse challenges of its time. As we enter the age of AI, many theological assumptions are undoubtedly challenged. The attempts of Bavinck to actively incorporate psychological and scientific research of his time, and Pannenberg's engagement with quantum physics and field theory, serve as inspirations for future theological studies. To conclude, I would like to quote Pannenberg, not only as a fitting end to my dissertation but also as a reminder of how theology might think in the present context:

This conflict between tradition and revolution can be overcome only by a tradition that in its own right is open for the future in an unlimited way.... The Christian tradition opens a free view for the future of the world in the light of God's future, yet does not rob men of an orientation to the richness of the forms of life in earlier times. Rather, the spirit of Christianity has accepted all the traditions it has encountered. Certainly, it has transformed these traditions, but it has also preserved them in a modified form.... However, at the same time, the Christian tradition also opens the possibility of a critical attitude in the light of God's future toward everything it preserves in human memory.... The spirit of Christianity can even take a critical relation to its own Christian inheritance. Only in this way can it preserve the purity of its nature and remain true to God's future.²

² Pannenberg, *What is a Man?*, 135-36.

Appendix 1: Propositions

Related to the dissertation:

1. Revelation is not confined to a single period or to a particular nation or region, but is woven throughout the whole history and human society.
2. Revelation possesses both objective and subjective characteristics.
3. Scripture is not entirely synonymous with revelation.
4. The doctrine and interpretations of the Church through the ages are not equivalent to revelation itself.
5. Revelation includes aspects of personal faith experiences, which are characterized by irreplaceable and ineffable mystery.
6. The interpretation and understanding of revelation cannot be limited to dogmatic theology but depend on philosophical reflection.
7. The understanding of revelation is largely constrained by its own historical context, knowledge, and experience.

Related to the graduate work:

1. For a long time, theological paradigms have been dominated by Western epistemology and intellectual traditions, necessitating a critical inheritance and development of these paradigms themselves in the present.
2. Theology should not only focus on speech and writing, which imply some form of power; it should also include the silence of the powerless and the state of exception.

3. Theology should not claim to be the discipline of “truth” but rather a process of self-reflection on revelation and faith practices.
4. Theology should not refuse entering into dialogues with other disciplines, ideologies and cultures.
5. Theology’s vitality and its real opportunity to address genuine issues arise from facing reality and returning to courageously inspecting the everyday reality.
6. Theology should not become a tool for endorsing any form of power but offer a path for critical self-reflection.
7. Theology is not an ideology but a process of critical and reflective thinking about oneself.

Others:

1. The digital age and artificial intelligence will reshape theological paradigms and interpretations from traditional theological systems and concepts.
2. Theology does not provide answers for the present but reposes questions.
3. In the present, there is a need to re-think what redemption is and who Christ is.

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