

# REFORMED DOGMATICS

VOLUME 2: GOD AND CREATION

HERMAN BAVINCK

JOHN BOLT, GENERAL EDITOR  
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To the Memory of  
M. Eugene Osterhaven  
1915–2004

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## PREFACE

The Dutch Reformed Translation Society (DRTS) was formed in 1994 by a group of businesspeople and professionals, pastors, and seminary professors, representing six different Reformed denominations, to sponsor the translation and facilitate the publication in English of classic Reformed theological and religious literature published in the Dutch language. It is incorporated as a nonprofit corporation in the State of Michigan and governed by a board of directors.

Believing that the Dutch Reformed tradition has many valuable works that deserve wider distribution than the limited accessibility the Dutch language allows, society members seek to spread and strengthen the Reformed faith. The first project of the DRTS is the definitive translation of Herman Bavinck's complete four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (*Reformed Dogmatics*). The society invites those who share its commitment to, and vision for, spreading the Reformed faith to write for additional information.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

With the publication of this second full volume of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, the Dutch Reformed Translation Society has completed half of its decade-long project to publish the complete English translation from Dutch of Bavinck's classic four-volume work. In addition to the first volume on Prolegomena, published a year ago, two half-volume works, one on the eschatology section<sup>1</sup> and the other on the creation section,<sup>2</sup> have been published. In chapters 8–14 this present volume contains the entirety of the creation volume (from *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 2, part 5, §§33–39 [##250–306], “Over de Wereld in haar Oorspronkelijke Staat” [Concerning the World in Its Original State]). The first seven chapters are a new translation of part 4, §§23–32 [##161–249], “God,” from *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, volume 2. This material had been available in an English translation by William Hendriksen.<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen's translation provided helpful outlines and summaries but did not include any footnotes or bibliographic material. The present edition contains all the footnotes, has been rearranged with new headings and subheadings, and introduces each chapter with a *précis* prepared by the editor. For ease of reference, the subparagraph numbers used by Bavinck have been retained in this volume. Later in this introduction we will briefly consider the contemporary relevance of both the section on the doctrine of God and the section on creation, but first we provide a few words about the author of *Reformed Dogmatics*. Who was Herman Bavinck, and why is this work of theology so important?

1. Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). This volume presented the second half of volume 4 of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.

2. Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). This volume presented the second half of volume 2 of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.

3. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. W. Hendriksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, first published a century ago, represents the concluding high point of some four centuries of remarkably productive Dutch Reformed theological reflection. From Bavinck's numerous citations of key Dutch Reformed theologians such as Voetius, de Moor, Vitringa, van Mastricht, Witsius, and Walaeus as well as the important Leiden *Synopsis purioris theologiae*,<sup>4</sup> it is clear he knew that tradition well and claimed it as his own. At the same time Bavinck was not simply a chronicler of his own church's past teaching. He seriously engaged other theological traditions, notably the Roman Catholic and the modern liberal Protestant ones; effectively mined the church fathers and great medieval thinkers; and placed his own distinct neo-Calvinist stamp on the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

## KAMPEN AND LEIDEN

To understand the distinct Bavinck flavor a brief historical orientation is necessary. Herman Bavinck was born on December 13, 1854. His father was an influential minister in the Dutch Christian Reformed Church (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk) that had seceded from the National Reformed Church in the Netherlands twenty years earlier.<sup>5</sup> The secession of 1834 was in the first place a protest against the state control of the Dutch Reformed Church; it also tapped into a long and rich tradition of ecclesiastical dissent on matters of doctrine, liturgy, and spirituality as well as polity. In particular, mention needs to be made here of the Dutch equivalent to English Puritanism, the so-called Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*),<sup>6</sup> the influential seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century movement of experiential Reformed theology and spirituality,<sup>7</sup> as well as an early-nineteenth-century international, aristocratic, evangelical revival movement known as the *Réveil*.<sup>8</sup> Bavinck's church, his fam-

4. The Leiden *Synopsis*, first published in 1625, is a large manual of Reformed doctrine as it was defined by the Synod of Dort. Well into the twentieth century it served as a standard reference textbook for the study of Reformed theology. (It is even cited by Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics*.) As an original-source reference work of classic Dutch Reformed theology, it is comparable to Heinrich Hepp's nineteenth-century, more broadly continental anthology *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). While serving as the minister of a Christian Reformed church in Franeker, Friesland, Bavinck edited the sixth and final edition of this handbook, which was published in 1881.

5. For a brief description of the background and character of the Secession church, see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), ch. 1: "Secession and Its Tangents."

6. See Joel R. Beeke, "The Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 298–327.

7. The crowning theological achievement of the *Nadere Reformatie* is the devout and theologically rich work of Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Redelijke Godsdienst*, first published in 1700 and frequently thereafter (including twenty Dutch editions in the eighteenth century alone!). This work is now available in English translation (ET): *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Ligonier, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992–95).

8. The standard work on the *Réveil* is M. Elizabeth Kluit, *Het Protestantse Réveil in Nederland en Daarbuiten, 1815–1865* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1970). Bratt also gives a brief summary in *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 10–13.

ily, and his own spirituality were thus definitively shaped by strong patterns of deep pietistic Reformed spirituality. Though the earlier phases of Dutch pietism affirmed orthodox Reformed theology and were also nonseparatist in their ecclesiology, by the mid-nineteenth century the Seceder group had become significantly separatist and sectarian in outlook.<sup>9</sup>

The second major influence on Bavinck's thought comes from the period of his theological training at the University of Leiden. The Christian Reformed Church had its own theological seminary, the Kampen Theological School, established in 1854. Bavinck, after studying at Kampen for one year (1873–74), indicated his desire to study with the University of Leiden's theological faculty, renowned for its aggressively modernist, "scientific" approach to theology.<sup>10</sup> His church community, including his parents, was stunned by this decision, which Bavinck explained as a desire "to become acquainted with the modern theology firsthand" and to receive "a more scientific training than the Theological School is presently able to provide."<sup>11</sup> The Leiden experience gave rise to what Bavinck perceived as the tension in his life between his commitment to orthodox theology and spirituality and his desire to understand and appreciate what he could about the modern world, including its worldview and culture. A telling and poignant entry in his personal journal at the beginning of his study period at Leiden (September 23, 1874) indicates his concern about being faithful to the faith he had publicly professed in the Christian Reformed church of Zwolle in March of that same year: "Will I remain standing [in the faith]? God grant it."<sup>12</sup> Upon completion of his doctoral work at Leiden in 1880, Bavinck candidly acknowledged the spiritual impoverishment that Leiden had cost him: "Leiden has benefited 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 of much that I recently, especially when I preach, recognize as vital for my own spiritual life."<sup>13</sup>

9. Bavinck himself called attention to this in his Kampen rectoral oration of 1888, when he complained that the Seceder emigration to America was a spiritual withdrawal and abandonment of "the Fatherland as lost to unbelief" ("The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 [1992]: 246). Recent historical scholarship, however, suggests that this note of separatism and cultural alienation must not be exaggerated. Though clearly a marginalized community in the Netherlands, the Seceders were not indifferent to educational, social, and political responsibilities. See John Bolt, "Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Dutch Reformed Church and Theology: A Review Article," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 434–42.

10. For an overview of the major schools of Dutch Reformed theology in the nineteenth century, see James Hutton MacKay, *Religious Thought in Holland during the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911). For more detailed discussion of the "modernist" school, see K. H. Roessingh, *De Moderne Theologie in Nederland: Hare Voorbereiding en Eerste Periode* (Groningen: Van der Kamp, 1915); Eldred C. Vanderlaan, *Protestant Modernism in Holland* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1924).

11. R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 20; cf. V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921), 30.

12. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten*, 19.

13. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 84.

It is thus not unfair to characterize Bavinck as a man between two worlds. One of his contemporaries once described Bavinck as “a Secession preacher and a representative of modern culture,” concluding: “That was a striking characteristic. In that duality is found Bavinck’s significance. That duality is also a reflection of the tension—at times 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.”<sup>14</sup> However, it is not necessary to rely only on the testimony of others. Bavinck clearly summarizes this tension in his own thought through an essay on the great nineteenth-century liberal Protestant theologian Albrecht Ritschl:

Therefore, whereas salvation in Christ was formerly considered primarily a means to separate man from sin and the world, to prepare him for heavenly blessedness and to cause him to enjoy undisturbed fellowship with God there, Ritschl posits the very opposite relationship: the purpose of salvation is precisely to enable a person, once he is freed from the oppressive feeling of sin and lives in the awareness of being a child of God, to exercise his earthly vocation and fulfill his moral purpose in this world. The antithesis, therefore, is fairly sharp: on the one side, a Christian life that considers the highest goal, now and hereafter, to be the contemplation of God and fellowship with him, and for that reason (always being more or less hostile to the riches of an earthly life) is in danger of falling into monasticism and asceticism, pietism and mysticism; but on the side of Ritschl, a Christian life that considers its highest goal to be the kingdom of God, that is, the moral obligation of mankind, and for that reason (always being more or less adverse to the withdrawal into solitude and quiet communion with God), is in danger of degenerating into a cold Pelagianism and an unfeeling moralism. *Personally, I do not yet see any way of combining the two points of view, but I do know that there is much that is excellent in both, and that both contain undeniable truth.*<sup>15</sup>

A certain tension in Bavinck’s thought between the claims of modernity—particularly its this-worldly, scientific orientation—and Reformed pietist orthodoxy’s tendency to stand aloof from modern culture continues to play a role even in his mature theology expressed in the *Reformed Dogmatics*. In his

14. Cited by Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 108. The contemporary cited is the Reformed jurist A. Anema, who was a colleague of Bavinck at the Free University of Amsterdam. A similar assessment of Bavinck as a man between two poles is given by F. H. von Meyenfeldt, “Prof. Dr. Herman Bavinck: 1854–1954, ‘Christus en de Cultuur,’” *Polemios* 9 (October 15, 1954); and G. W. Brillenburg-Wurth, “Bavincks Levenstrijd,” *Gereformeerde Weekblad* 10.25 (December 17, 1954).

15. H. Bavinck, “De Theologie van Albrecht Ritschl,” *Theologische Studiën* 6 (1888): 397; cited by Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 346–47, emphasis added by Veenhof. Kenneth Kirk contends that this tension, which he characterizes as one between “rigorism” and “humanism,” is a fundamental conflict in the history of Christian ethics from the outset. See K. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (London: Longmans, Green, 1931), 7–8.

eschatology Bavinck in a highly nuanced way still continues to speak favorably of certain emphases in a Ritschlian this-worldly perspective.<sup>16</sup>

In the section on the doctrine of creation in this volume (chs. 8–14) we see the tension repeatedly in Bavinck's relentless efforts to understand and, where he finds appropriate, to affirm, correct, or repudiate modern scientific claims in light of scriptural and Christian teaching.<sup>17</sup> Bavinck takes modern philosophy (Kant, Schelling, Hegel), Darwin, and the claims of geological and biological science seriously but never uncritically. His willingness as a theologian to engage modern thought and science seriously is a hallmark of his exemplary work. Though Bavinck's theological framework remains a valuable guide for contemporary readers, many of the specific scientific issues he addresses in this volume are dated by his late-nineteenth-century context. As Bavinck's own work illustrates so well, today's Reformed theologians and scientists learn from his example not by repristination but by fresh address to new and contemporary challenges.

## GRACE AND NATURE

It is therefore too simple merely to characterize Bavinck as a man trapped between two apparently incommensurate tugs at his soul, that of other-worldly pietism and this-worldly modernism. His heart and mind sought a trinitarian synthesis of Christianity and culture, a Christian worldview that incorporated what was best and true in both pietism and modernism, while above all honoring the theological and confessional richness of the Reformed tradition dating from Calvin. After commenting on the breakdown of the great medieval synthesis and the need for contemporary Christians to acquiesce in that breakdown, Bavinck expressed his hope for a new and better synthesis: "In this situation, the hope is not unfounded that a synthesis is possible between Christianity and culture, however antagonistic they may presently stand over against each other. If God has truly come to us in Christ, and is, in this age too, the Preserver and Ruler of all things, such a synthesis is not only possible but also necessary and shall surely be effected in its own time."<sup>18</sup> Bavinck found the vehicle for such an attempted synthesis in the trinitarian worldview of Dutch neo-Calvinism and became, along with neo-Calvinism's visionary pioneer Abraham Kuyper,<sup>19</sup> one of its chief and most respected spokesmen as well as its premier theologian.

16. Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things*, 161 (*Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, #578). According to Bavinck, Ritschl's this-worldliness "stands for an important truth" over against what he calls the "abstract supernaturalism of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church."

17. Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, passim (*Reformed Dogmatics*, below, pp. 407–619 [#250–306]).

18. H. Bavinck, *Het Christendom*, Groote Godsdiensten 2.7 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912), 60.

19. For a brief overview, see J. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, ch. 2: "Abraham Kuyper and Neo-Calvinism."

Unlike Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper grew up in the National Reformed Church of the Netherlands in a congenially moderate-modernist context. Kuyper's student years, also at Leiden, confirmed him in his modernist orientation until a series of experiences, especially during his years as a parish minister, brought about a dramatic conversion to Reformed, Calvinist orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> From that time Kuyper became a vigorous opponent of the modern spirit in church and society<sup>21</sup>—which he characterized by the siren call of the French Revolution, “Ni Dieu! Ni maitre!”<sup>22</sup>—seeking every avenue to oppose it with an alternative worldview, or as he called it, the “life-system” of Calvinism:

From the first, therefore, I have always said to myself, “If the battle is to be fought with honor and with a hope of victory, then principle must be arrayed against principle; then it must be felt that in Modernism the vast energy of an all-embracing life-system assails us, then also it must be understood that we have to take our stand in a life-system of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power. . . . When thus taken, I found and confessed and I still hold, that this manifestation of the Christian principle is given us in Calvinism. In Calvinism my heart has found rest. From Calvinism have I drawn the inspiration firmly and resolutely to take my stand in the thick of this great conflict of principles.[”]<sup>23</sup>

Kuyper's aggressive, this-worldly form of Calvinism was rooted in a trinitarian theological vision. The “dominating principle” of Calvinism, he contended, “was not soteriologically, justification by faith, but in the widest sense cosmologically, the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible.”<sup>24</sup>

For Kuyper, this fundamental principle of divine sovereignty led to four important derivatory and related doctrines or principles: common grace, antithesis, sphere sovereignty, and the distinction between the church as institute and the church as organism. The doctrine of common grace<sup>25</sup> is based on the

20. Kuyper chronicles these experiences in a revealing autobiographical work entitled *Confidentie* (Amsterdam: Höveker, 1873). A rich portrait of the young Abraham Kuyper is given by G. Puchinger, *Abraham Kuyper: De Jonge Kuyper (1837–1867)* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1987). See also the somewhat hagiographic biography by Frank Vandenberg, *Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960); and the more theologically and historically substantive one by Louis Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King: Reflection on the Times and Life of Abraham Kuyper* (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia, 1985). Brief accounts can also be found in Benjamin B. Warfield's introduction to A. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. H. De Vries (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1898); and in the translator's biographical note in A. Kuyper, *To Be Near to God*, trans. J. H. De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925).

21. See especially his famous address, *Het Modernisme, een Fata Morgana op Christelijke Gebied* (Amsterdam: De Hoogh, 1871). On page 52 of this work he acknowledges that he, too, once dreamed the dreams of modernism. This important essay is now available in J. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 87–124.

22. A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 10.

23. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

24. *Ibid.*, 79.

25. Kuyper's own position is developed in his *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam and Pretoria: Höveker & Wormser, 1902). A thorough examination of Kuyper's views can be found in S. U. Zuidema,

conviction that prior to, and to a certain extent independent of, the particular sovereignty of divine grace in redemption, there is a universal divine sovereignty in creation and providence, restraining the effects of sin and bestowing general gifts on all people, thus making human society and culture possible even among the unredeemed. Cultural life is rooted in creation and common grace and thus has a life of its own apart from the church.

This same insight is expressed more directly via the notion of sphere sovereignty. Kuyper was opposed to all Anabaptist and ascetic Christian versions of world-flight but was also equally opposed to the medieval Roman Catholic synthesis of culture and church. The various spheres of human activity—family, education, business, science, art—do not derive their *raison d'être* and the shape of their life from redemption or from the church, but from the law of God the Creator. They are thus relatively autonomous—also from the interference of the state—and are directly responsible to God.<sup>26</sup> In this regard Kuyper clearly distinguished two different understandings of the church—the church as institute gathered around the Word and sacraments, and the church as organism diversely spread out in the manifold vocations of life. It is not explicitly as members of the institutional church but as members of the body of Christ, organized in Christian communal activity (schools, political parties, labor unions, institutions of mercy), that believers live out their earthly vocations. Though aggressively this-worldly, Kuyper was an avowed and articulate opponent of the *volkskerk* tradition, which tended to merge national sociocultural identity with that of a theocratic church ideal.<sup>27</sup>

To state this differently: Kuyper's emphasis on common grace—used polemically to motivate pious, orthodox Dutch Reformed Christians to Christian social, political, and cultural activity—must never be seen in isolation from his equally strong emphasis on its spiritual antithesis. The regenerating work of the Holy Spirit breaks humanity in two and creates, according to Kuyper, “two kinds of consciousness, that of the regenerate and the unregenerate; and these two cannot be identical.” Furthermore, these “two kinds of people” will develop “two kinds of science.” The conflict in the scientific enterprise is not

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“Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper,” in *Communication and Confrontation* (Toronto: Wedge, 1971), 52–105. Cf. J. Ridderbos, *De Theologische Cultuurbeschouwing van Abraham Kuyper* (Kampen: Kok, 1947). The doctrine of common grace has been much debated among conservative Dutch Reformed folk in the Netherlands and the United States, tragically leading to church divisions. For an overview of the doctrine in the Reformed tradition, see H. Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Goes: Oostebaan & Le Coindre, 1928).

26. “In this independent character a special *higher authority* is of necessity involved and this highest authority we intentionally call *sovereignty in the individual social sphere*, in order that it may be sharply and decidedly expressed that these different developments of social life have *nothing above themselves but God*, and that the state cannot intrude here, and has nothing to command in their domain” (*Lectures on Calvinism*, 91).

27. On Kuyper's ecclesiology, see H. Zwaanstra, “Abraham Kuyper's Conception of the Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974): 149–81; on his attitude to the *volkskerk* tradition, see H. J. Langman, *Kuyper en de Volkskerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1950).

between science and faith but between “two scientific systems, . . . each having its own faith.”<sup>28</sup>

Here in this trinitarian, world-affirming, but nonetheless resolutely anti-theological Calvinism, Bavinck found the resources to bring some unity to his thought.<sup>29</sup> “The thoughtful person,” he notes, “places the doctrine of the trinity in the very center of the full-orbed life of nature and mankind. . . . The mind of the Christian is not satisfied until every form of existence has been referred to the triune God and until the confession of the trinity has received the place of prominence in our thought and life.”<sup>30</sup> Repeatedly in his writings Bavinck defines the essence of the Christian religion in a trinitarian, creation-affirming way. A typical formulation: “The essence of the Christian religion consists in this, that the creation of the Father, devastated by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God, and re-created by the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God.”<sup>31</sup> Put more simply, the fundamental theme that shapes Bavinck’s entire theology is the trinitarian idea that grace restores nature.<sup>32</sup>

The evidence for “grace restores nature” being the fundamental defining and shaping theme of Bavinck’s theology is not hard to find. In an important address on common grace, given in 1888 at the Kampen Theological School, Bavinck sought to impress on his Christian Reformed audience the importance of Christian sociocultural activity. He appealed to the doctrine of creation, insisting that its diversity is not removed by redemption but cleansed. “Grace does not remain outside or above or beside nature but rather permeates and wholly renews it. And thus nature, reborn by grace, will be brought to its highest revelation. That situation will again return in which we serve God freely and happily, without compulsion or fear, simply out of love, and in harmony with our true nature. That is the genuine *religio naturalis*.” In other words: “Christianity does not introduce a single substantial foreign element into the creation. It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new. It restores what was corrupted by sin. It atones the guilty and cures what is sick; the wounded it heals.”<sup>33</sup>

28. A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 133; cf. *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, 150–82. A helpful discussion of Kuyper’s view of science is given by Del Ratzsch, “Abraham Kuyper’s Philosophy of Science,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 277–303.

29. The relation between Bavinck and Kuyper, including differences as well as commonalities, is discussed in greater detail in John Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck” (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, Ontario, 1982), especially ch. 3: “Herman Bavinck as a Neo-Calvinist Thinker.”

30. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. W. Hendriksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 329; see below, pp. 329–34 (#231).

31. H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 112 (#35).

32. This is the conclusion of Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 346; and Eugene Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959), 191, 195. See Bavinck, *The Last Things*, 200 n. 4 (*Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, #572).

33. H. Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 59–60, 61.

## CREATION: IN THE BEGINNING

The creation section of this volume (chs. 8–14) illustrates well these distinctive characteristics of Bavinck's thought. The fundamental theme that grace does not undo nature but restores and heals means that Bavinck's doctrine of creation must be a key starting place for understanding his theology. It is thus no surprise that Bavinck begins by telling us that the doctrine of creation is the starting point and distinguishing characteristic of true religion. Creation is the formulation of human dependence on a God who is distinct from the creature but who nonetheless in a loving, fatherly way preserves it. Creation is a distinct emphasis of the Reformed tradition according to Bavinck, a way of affirming that God's will is its origin and God's glory its goal. In the opening chapter Bavinck demonstrates his full awareness of ancient and contemporary alternatives to creation—of a popular as well as philosophical nature—and insists that it is through revelation alone that we can confidently repudiate emanationist and pantheist worldviews. What Bavinck says here sounds remarkably current and relevant for today's many forms of New Age spirituality.

Remarkably relevant too is Bavinck's careful, biblically circumspect discussion, in the ninth chapter, of angels and the spiritual world. Materialist denials of the spiritual world of angels and demons destroy religion itself, he contends, because religion depends on the supernatural, upon miracle and revelation. Bavinck's strong emphasis on this world as the theater of God's glory and thus on the importance of Christian cultural activity does not lead to the dualophobia of some later neo-Calvinists who stoutly resist all "dualism" (such as body/soul) in fear that they diminish and devalue the creational and material in favor of the spiritual.<sup>34</sup> Bavinck insists upon a clear distinction between the spiritual and the material world, though he also insists that they must never be separated in Christian thought.

Balance also characterizes Bavinck's treatment of origins and the relation between science and the Genesis accounts of creation. All religions, he notes, have "creation" stories, but the biblical account is strikingly different in its orientation: Theogonic myths have no place in the Genesis accounts, and the Bible simply assumes the existence of one God. Though Genesis does not give a precise scientific explanation of origins—the earth is the *spiritual* rather than the astronomical center of the universe—it is important, according to Bavinck, to insist on the historical rather than merely mythical or visionary character of its creation account. An original unity of the human race and its historical fall into sin are essential to the biblical narrative and worldview. Creation is thus more than just a debate about the age of the earth and the evolutionary origins of humanity, important as these questions are. The solidarity of the human race, original sin, the atonement in Christ, the universality of the kingdom of God, and our responsibility to love our neighbor—all are grounded in a key

34. For an example, offered in critique of this tendency, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 235–36.

dimension of the doctrine of creation, the unity of the human race created in God's own image. Creation thus is the presupposition of all religion and morality. It is especially in the fifth part of this volume, on the image of God, that Bavinck's characteristic understanding of the relation between nature and grace, discussed above, comes clearly into view.

That a present-day emphasis on creation does not imply a devaluation of the future life of eternal glory is clear from Bavinck's discussion of human destiny. The final state of glory for humanity, given in Christ, the Second Adam, is far greater than the original state of integrity of humanity. Here again, Bavinck displays no fear of "dualism" but insists that the original creation perfection was only a preparation for the final glory, where God will be all in all and impart his glory to his creatures. In the confidence of that hope the Christian believer trusts in the heavenly Father's care and preservation of his creation, a believing hope that provides unspeakable comfort and consolation in the midst of this vale of tears. Here the pastoral purpose of good creation theology becomes clear; our heavenly Father is Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who turns all things to our good.

### THE CREATOR IS THE TRIUNE GOD

Bavinck's balanced doctrine of creation is self-consciously rooted in his trinitarian doctrine of God. He begins the chapter (8) on creation with the following direct linkage: "The realization of the counsel of God begins with creation. Creation is the initial act and foundation of all divine revelation and therefore the foundation of all religious and ethical life as well." A biblical doctrine of God sees his counsel or decree as the link that connects God and the world. As the first of God's external acts, creation is vitally important; subsequent acts of God must be seen in the light of creation. Thus, redemptive grace does not diminish or elevate or divinize creation but *restores* it. As the same time, as the expression of God's decree, creation is not necessary but is contingent and dependent on God. God is self-sufficient; he does not need creation, and thus the error of pantheism is avoided as well as that of Deism.

Creation out of nothing is the work of the triune God. Bavinck's understanding of creation is inseparable from his strongly trinitarian theology, and the doctrines of God and creation taken together provide a response to two important contemporary challenges to theism: emanationism and deistic secularism. The latter is the fruit of Enlightenment thought after Immanuel Kant and Isaac Newton, in which there is no room for God's immanence in the physical cosmos. The universe is seen as a well-oiled machine, a wound-up clock that runs on its own mechanism and immanent laws. In this scientific materialism God is made mundane, and an Arian view of Christ follows; he can only be a creature, a human who is extraordinary but most definitely not divine. Enlightenment rationality is cold comfort for flesh-and-blood people;

a nude physical universe, without spiritual clothing, cannot satisfy the longings of the human heart either in its joys or its sorrows.

As we begin the third millennium *anno Domini*, our Western world is awash with a new spirituality that is the exact opposite of the Enlightenment; the cosmos is once again regarded as enchanted.<sup>35</sup> Here the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and a contingent universe is replaced with a doctrine of emanation from the divine. Now the universe is deified; it is overflowing with divine “stuff.” Jesus can now be considered divine, but so is everyone else; in fact, so is *everything* else. By contrast, Christian theology posits a twofold communication in God—the generation (emanation) of the Son as an inner trinitarian reality, and the creation of the world *ex nihilo*. According to Bavinck, the reality of creation, even its very possibility, depends on God being triune. “Without generation, creation would not be possible. If, in an absolute sense, God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.”<sup>36</sup>

A few more examples of Bavinck’s contemporary relevance, also in relation to his doctrine of creation, can be found in the doctrine of God in the first half of this volume. In chapter 2 Bavinck’s treatment of the cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God parallels recent discussions on evolution and “intelligent design.”<sup>37</sup> The discussion of God’s names (ch. 3) is a solid though indirect response to recent efforts by some feminist theologians to invoke feminine names for God. Bavinck argues convincingly that only God can name himself and that this naming is restricted by biblical revelation, which cannot be accommodated to fashionable currents of contemporary ideology and arbitrarily changed. Bavinck also provides clear, understandable biblical guidance on current discussions in theology about divine aseity, eternity, personality, and simplicity (in ch. 4). Bavinck strongly opposes all notions of divine temporality and mutability: “The idea of becoming predicated of the divine being is of no help whatever in theology.”<sup>38</sup> To deny immutability is to “rob God of his divine nature and religion of its firm foundation and assured comfort.”

The same concern about “religion’s firm foundation” and “assured comfort” for believers also applies to Bavinck’s treatment of God’s omniscience, foreknowledge, middle knowledge (ch. 5), as well as the chapter (14) on providence. Those who have been confused by some of the claims of so-called open theism, which denies God’s omniscience and foreknowledge of future contingent events, will find here solid biblical-theological analysis and sure-footed pastoral guidance.

35. See James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003).

36. See below, p. 420 (#254) [= *In the Beginning*, p. 39].

37. For an overview of the debate and literature, see Thomas Woodward, *Doubts about Darwin: A History of Intelligent Design* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

38. See below, p. 158 (#193).

In sum, Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, of which this volume is a truly representative sample, is biblically and confessionally faithful, pastorally sensitive, challenging, and still relevant. Bavinck's life and thought reflect a serious effort to be pious, orthodox, and thoroughly contemporary. To pietists fearful of the modern world, on the one hand, and to critics of orthodoxy skeptical about its continuing relevance, on the other, Bavinck's example suggests a model answer: an engaging trinitarian vision of Christian discipleship in God's world.

In conclusion, a few words are needed about the editing decisions that govern this translated volume, which is based on the second, expanded edition of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.<sup>39</sup> The fourteen chapters of this volume correspond to seventeen in the original (called "paragraphs" in the Dutch edition). All chapters correspond to the Dutch units except for chapter 2, "The Knowledge of God," which combines units 24 and 25 in the original; and chapter 3, "The Names of God," which combines units 26–28 in the original. In addition, the headings subdividing each chapter are new. These, along with the chapter synopses, which are also not in the original, have been supplied by the editor. Bavinck's original footnotes have all been retained and brought up to contemporary bibliographic standards. Additional notes added by the editor are clearly marked. Works from the nineteenth century to the present are noted usually with full bibliographic information given in the first note of each chapter and with subsequent references abbreviated. Classic works produced prior to the nineteenth century (the church fathers, Aquinas's *Summa*, Calvin's *Institutes*, post-Reformation Protestant and Catholic works), for which there are often numerous editions, are cited only by author, title, and standard notation of sections. More complete information for originals or accessible editions is given in the bibliography appended at the end of this volume. Where English translations (ET) of foreign titles were available and could be consulted, they have been used rather than the original. Unless indicated in the note by direct reference to a specific translation, renderings of Latin, Greek, German, and French material are those of the translator, working from Bavinck's original text. References in the notes and bibliography that are incomplete or could not be confirmed are marked with an asterisk (\*). To facilitate comparison with the Dutch original, this English edition retains the subparagraph numbers (##161–306 in square brackets in the text) used in the second and subsequent Dutch editions. Cross-references to volumes 1 and 2 of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* cite the page numbers of the already released *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 1: *Prolegomena*, and of the present volume. Subparagraph numbers (marked with #) accompany these references to facilitate cross-reference to the Dutch editions. Cross-references to volumes 3 and 4 of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* cite only the subparagraph number (marked with #).

39. The four volumes of the first edition of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* were published in the years 1895 through 1901. The second revised and expanded edition appeared between 1906 and 1911; the third edition, unaltered from the second, in 1918; the fourth, unaltered except for different pagination, in 1928.

On January 24, 2004, while this volume was in production, Dr. M. Eugene Osterhaven (emeritus Albertus C. Van Raalte Professor of Systematic Theology at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan) went to be with his Lord and ours. Gene was one of the founders of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, our colleague on the board, a dear friend, trusted advisor, and beloved brother in Christ. We thank God for his service to Christ's church and kingdom, service of which we were richly blessed beneficiaries. We shall miss him deeply and in gratitude dedicate this volume to his memory.

PART I  
KNOWING  
GOD

# 1

## THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD

*The knowledge of God is the central, core dogma, the exclusive content of theology. From the start of its labors dogmatic theology is shrouded in mystery; it stands before God the incomprehensible One. This knowledge leads to adoration and worship; to know God is to live. Knowing God is possible for us because God is personal, exalted above the earth and yet in fellowship with human beings on earth.*

*God's special relationship with his people Israel, with Zion as his dwelling place, suggests not confinement or limitation but election. Israel's religion did not evolve from henotheism to ethical monotheism but is rooted in the divine call of Abraham/Israel and God's initiative in establishing a covenant with Israel. Though the Old Testament refers to "other gods," it never takes their reality seriously. Israel's God is God alone, the Lord of heaven and earth. He is the Creator of heaven and earth, who manifests himself in various ways to specific people at particular times. This revelation is never exhaustive of God's being but partial and preparatory to the supreme and permanent revelation in Jesus Christ. This personal God is the high and lofty One, who inhabits eternity and also is with those who are of a contrite and humble spirit. His fullness dwells bodily in Christ, who emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. He also resides in the church as his temple. God is both personal and absolute.*

*Unity of God's personality and absoluteness is not maintained outside the revelation given in Scripture. Philosophers, notably in the Platonist tradition, see God (the Good) as the distant One, the unknowable One, transcending even Being itself. In Plotinus only negative theology remains; we can only say what God is not. Gnosticism went even further, considering God as absolutely unknowable and ineffable, the eternal silent abyss.*

*Christian theology agrees that human knowledge of God is not exhaustive: we cannot know God in his essence. Since no description or naming of God can be adequate, human language struggles even to say what God is not. This incomprehensibility of God's essence was most vigorously affirmed by Pseudo-Dionysius and John Scotus Erigena, for whom God transcends even being and knowing itself. Scholastic theology was more cautious and positive but affirmed*

*God's essential unknowability. Thomas Aquinas distinguished the immediate vision of God, knowledge by faith, from knowledge by reason. The former is ordinarily reserved for heaven; on earth all knowledge is mediate. God is knowable only in his works, notably in the perfections of his creatures.*

*Though not necessarily following Luther's "hidden God," Reformed theology in its aversion to all idolatry has insisted that God infinitely surpasses our understanding, imagination, and language. As the Reformation tradition's consciousness of divine incomprehensibility waned, philosophers, notably Kant, reaffirmed it. The three transcendental ideas—the soul, the world, and God—cannot be objectively demonstrated; they can only be postulated as the necessary conditions for knowledge. That they are "known" by practical reason does not add to our volume of real, meaning scientific, knowledge. With the exception of Hegel, the doctrine of divine unknowability has penetrated modern consciousness. All predicates about God are seen to be statements about humanity writ large. God is a human projection (Feuerbach); religion is the deification of humanity itself.*

*For others, this sort of atheism has also claimed too much. Human limitations and the finiteness of human knowledge should lead us to abstain from such judgments. Knowledge is limited to the observable (positivism), and beyond that we confess our ignorance (agnosticism). Metaphysics was distrusted and speculation eschewed. This agnosticism, of course, means the death of theology, though theologians did attempt various rescue missions.*

*Agnosticism does have weighty arguments on its side. As humans we are limited in our finiteness. Modern thought, however, goes further and argues that divine absoluteness and personality are forever incompatible. To conceive of God in personal terms is to make him finite. For God to relate to us, he must be somehow limited. Consequently, all that is reasonably left is some version of an impersonal moral world order.*

*Now, Christian theology has always acknowledged the tension between our view of God as personal and absolute. We are limited to the knowledge obtained by sense perception; we affirm the unsearchable majesty and sovereign highness of God. But though God is thus beyond our full comprehension and description, we do confess to having the knowledge of God. This knowledge is analogical and the gift of revelation. We know God through his works and in his relation to us, his creatures. This truth is beyond our comprehension; it is a mystery but not self-contradictory. Rather, it reflects the classic distinction Christian theology has always made between negative (apophatic) and positive (cataphatic) theology.*

*If we cannot speak of God analogically, then we cannot speak of him at all. If God cannot be known, neither can he be felt or experienced in any way. All religion is then empty. But modern philosophical agnosticism makes the same error as ancient Gnosticism. By reducing God to "inexpressible depth" and "eternal silence," they make the universe godless, in the most absolute sense of the word. What it all comes down to is whether God has willed and found a*

*way to reveal himself in the domain of creatures. This, the Christian church and Christian theology affirm, has indeed occurred. Thanks to revelation, we have true knowledge of God, knowledge that is relative and finite rather than comprehensive. Incomprehensibility does not imply agnosticism but an ingredient of the Christian claim to have received by revelation a specific, limited, yet well-defined and true knowledge of God. In the words of Basil, "The knowledge of God consists in the perception of his incomprehensibility."*

## BEFORE THE DIVINE MYSTERY

[161] Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics. To be sure, the term “mystery” (μυστήριον) in Scripture does not mean an abstract supernatural truth in the Roman Catholic sense. Yet Scripture is equally far removed from the idea that believers can grasp the revealed mysteries in a scientific sense.<sup>1</sup> In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding. In that sense it is all mystery with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself. From the very start of its labors, it faces the incomprehensible One. From him it derives its inception, for from him are all things. But also in the remaining loci, when it turns its attention to creatures, it views them only in relation to God as they exist from him and through him and for him [Rom. 11:36]. So then, the knowledge of God is the only dogma, the exclusive content, of the entire field of dogmatics. All the doctrines treated in dogmatics—whether they concern the universe, humanity, Christ, and so forth—are but the explication of the one central dogma of the knowledge of God. All things are considered in light of God, subsumed under him, traced back to him as the starting point. Dogmatics is always called upon to ponder and describe God and God alone, whose glory is in creation and re-creation, in nature and grace, in the world and in the church. It is the knowledge of him alone that dogmatics must put on display.

By pursuing this aim, dogmatics does not become a dry and academic exercise, without practical usefulness for life. The more it reflects on God, the knowledge of whom is its only content, the more it will be moved to adoration and worship. Only if it never forgets to think and speak about matters rather than about mere *words*, only if it remains a theology of facts and does not degenerate into a theology of rhetoric, only then is dogmatics as the scientific description of the knowledge of God also superlatively fruitful for life. The knowledge of God-in-Christ, after all, is life itself (Ps. 89:16; Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:34; John 17:3). For that reason Augustine desired to know nothing other and more than God and himself. “I desire to know God and the soul. Nothing more? No: nothing at all.” For that reason, too, Calvin began his *Institutes* with the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves, and for that reason

1. Cf. H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 618 (#159).

the Genevan catechism, answering the first question, “What is the chief end of human life?” stated, “That human beings may know the God by whom they were created.”<sup>2</sup>

But the moment we dare to speak about God the question arises: How can we? We are human and he is the Lord our God. Between him and us there seems to be no such kinship or communion as would enable us to name him truthfully. The distance between God and us is the gulf between the Infinite and the finite, between eternity and time, between being and becoming, between the All and the nothing. However little we know of God, even the faintest notion implies that he is a being who is infinitely exalted above every creature. While Holy Scripture affirms this truth in the strongest terms, it nevertheless sets forth a doctrine of God that fully upholds his knowability. Scripture, one must remember, never makes any attempt to prove the existence of God, but simply presupposes it. Moreover, in this connection it consistently assumes that human beings have an ineradicable sense of that existence and a certain knowledge of God’s being. This knowledge does not arise from their own investigation and reflection, but is due to the fact that God on his part revealed himself to us in nature and history, in prophecy and miracle, by ordinary and by extraordinary means. In Scripture, therefore, the knowability of God is never in doubt even for a moment. The fool may say in his heart, “There is no God,” but those who open their eyes perceive from all directions the witness of his existence, of his eternal power and deity (Isa. 40:26; Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:19–20). The purpose of God’s revelation, according to Scripture, is precisely that human beings may know God and so receive eternal life (John 17:3; 20:31).

Thanks to that revelation, it is certain, first of all, that God is a person, a conscious and freely willing being, not confined to the world but exalted high above it. The pantheistic understanding that equates God and the world is absolutely foreign to Scripture. This personality of God is so prominent everywhere that the question may arise whether by it his oneness, spirituality, and infinity are not being shortchanged. Some texts convey the impression that God is a being who, though greater and more powerful than human beings, is nevertheless confined to certain localities and restricted in his presence and activity by the boundaries of country and people. Not only does Scripture ascribe to God—as we will see later—an array of human organs and attributes; but also it even says that he walked in the garden (Gen. 3:8), came down to see Babel’s construction of a tower (Gen. 11:5, 7), appeared to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28:10ff.), gave his law on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19ff.), dwelt between the cherubim on Zion in Jerusalem (1 Sam. 4:4; 1 Kings 8:7, 10–11). Scripture also therefore calls him the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the king of Zion, the God of the Hebrews, the God of Israel, and so on. Many modern

2. Cf. Westminster Catechism, Q & A 1, in *Creeeds of Christendom*, ed. P. Schaff and rev. D. S. Schaff, 6th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1931; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990). Ed. note: Bavinck refers to E. F. Karl Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1903), 612.

theologians have inferred from these expressions that Israel's most ancient religion was polydaemonism, that YHWH, taken over from the Kenites, was originally a mountain god, a fire god, or a thunder god, and that after the conquest of Canaan he gradually became the God of Israel's land and people, and that this henotheism only became absolute monotheism as a result of the ethical conception of his essence in the works of the prophets.<sup>3</sup>

This evolutionistic representation, however, fails to do justice to the facts of Scripture and is incompatible with a number of elements that, according to the witness of Scripture, are integral to the doctrine of God. A few remarks will make this clear. The creation of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:7, 21), like YHWH's walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8), are recounted graphically but are represented as being the activity of the same God who made the entire universe (Gen. 2:4b). YHWH's appearance at the building of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:5, 7) is introduced by saying that he descended, that is, came down from heaven, which is therefore viewed as his real dwelling place. In Genesis 28:11ff., a pericope that in modern works on Israel's religious history is considered a locus classicus (also cf. Josh. 24:26ff.; Judg. 6:20ff.; 1 Sam. 6:14), not the stone but heaven is YHWH's dwelling place; in verses 12 and 13, the LORD introduces himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac, promises to Jacob the land of Canaan and innumerable descendants, and guarantees that he will protect him wherever he may go (vv. 13–15). The idea of a "stone deity" is wholly absent here; the stone is merely a memorial of the marvelous event that occurred there. The localization of YHWH on Mount Sinai (Exod. 3:1, 5, 18; Judg. 5:5; 1 Kings 19:8) occurs just as much in writings that, according to modern criticism, are of later origin and definitely monotheistic (Deut. 33:2; Hab. 3:3; Ps. 68:8). True, YHWH revealed himself on Mount Sinai, but he does not reside there in the sense that he was confined to it. On the contrary, he came down from heaven upon Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:18, 20). In the same way, Scripture speaks of an intimate relationship between YHWH and the land and people of Israel but does this not only in records from an older period (Gen. 4:4; Judg. 11:24; 1 Sam. 26:19; 2 Sam. 15:8; 2 Kings 3:27; 5:17) but also in witnesses that, according to many critics, date from the monotheistic period (Deut. 4:29; Amos 1:2; Isa. 8:18; Jer. 2:7; 12:14; 16:13; Ezek. 10:18ff.; 11:23; 43:1ff.; Jon. 1:3; Ruth 1:16; cf. John 4:19). YHWH is the God of Israel by virtue of his election and covenant. Accordingly, in an unclean pagan country he cannot be worshiped in the proper, prescribed manner, as also the prophets testify (Hos. 9:3–6; Amos 7:17; etc.), but that is very different from saying that outside of Canaan he cannot be present and active. On the contrary: he accompanies Jacob wherever he travels (Gen. 28:15), is with Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 39:2), raises up the widow's son by the prophet Elijah in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:10ff.), is recognized by Naaman as the God of the whole earth (2 Kings 5:17ff.).

3. Cf. Karl Marti, *Geschichte der israelitischen Religion*, 3d ed. (Strassburg: F. Bull, 1897), 22ff.

## GOD AND THE GODS

As a result of this close relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament dispensation, many texts do not pronounce themselves, so to speak, on the question whether the gods of other peoples are in any way real. In the first commandment the Lord himself says: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3), and elsewhere we are told that the Lord is greater than all other gods (Exod. 15:11; 18:11). In Judges 11:24 Jephthah speaks as if Chemosh, Moab’s god, really existed, and in 1 Samuel 26:19 David talks as if banishment from the heritage of the Lord amounted to the worship of other gods. But viewed in their context none of these passages conveys the kind of henotheism many [scholars] attempt to infer from them. This is evident from the fact that next to the first commandment (Exod. 20:3), there is the fourth (Exod. 20:10), which ascribes the creation of heaven and earth to YHWH and by implication confesses the clearest monotheism. Also, according to the Yahwist, the Lord is the God of heaven and earth, the God of all humanity (Gen. 6:5–7; 8:21; 9:19; 18:1ff., 25; etc.). In Genesis 24:3, 7 he is called the God of heaven and earth, and in Exodus 19:5 the whole earth is his. In the text cited above [Judg. 11:24], Jephthah accommodates himself to the person to whom he is speaking, and in 1 Samuel 26:19 David says nothing but what we find everywhere in the Old Testament, namely, that in this dispensation God has a special relationship to Israel’s land and people. In the writings which, also according to modern critics, are of a later date and hold to a definite monotheism, the same expressions occur that we find in more ancient books: the Lord is God of gods and superior to all gods (Deut. 3:24; 4:7; 10:17; 29:26; 32:12, 16; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chron. 28:23; Jer. 22:9; Ps. 95:3; 97:9; etc.; cf. 1 Cor. 8:5ff.; 10:20).

The distinction between a higher and a lower deity in the Old Testament—a distinction already advocated by Gnosticism—therefore does violence to the facts and, when employed as a standard for source criticism, leads to boundless arbitrariness and hopeless confusion. There of course is a difference between the religion of the people, which often consisted of image worship and idolatry, and the religion that the Lord required both in his law and through the prophets of Israel, and in connection with this a difference between a history of the religion of Israel and a theology of the Old Testament (*historia revelationis*). Neither can it be denied that different authors in the Old Testament highlight different attributes of the divine being. But the sources by no means warrant the evolutionistic view, according to which the religion of Israel developed from polydaemonism, via henotheism, into absolute monotheism. On the contrary: throughout the whole Old Testament and in all its authors, the doctrine of God comprises, albeit in varying degrees, the following elements:

1. God is a personal being, self-existent, with a life, consciousness, and will of his own, not confined to nature but exalted high above it, the Creator of heaven and earth.
2. This God can appear and manifest himself in certain specific places, at certain specific times, to specific persons: to the patriarchs, to Moses and the prophets; in the garden of Eden, at Babel's construction of a tower, at Bethel, on Mount Sinai, in Canaan, at Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, and so forth.
3. Throughout the whole Old Testament, not only in the preprophetic but also in the prophetic era, this revelation is preparatory in character. It occurs in signs, dreams, and visions, by means of the lot, the Urim and Thummim, by angels and by the *malakh* YHWH [angel of the LORD]. It usually occurs at certain specific moments, then ceases and becomes history. It is therefore more or less external, stays outside of and above the persons in question, is more a revelation to than in people, and indicates by this peculiar feature that it serves to announce and prepare for the supreme and permanent revelation of God in the person of Christ and his ongoing indwelling in the church.
4. The revelation of God in the Old Testament, accordingly, does not exhaustively coincide with his being. It does indeed furnish true and reliable knowledge of God, but not a knowledge that exhaustively corresponds to his being. The stone at Bethel, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire in the wilderness, the thunder on Mount Sinai, the cloud in the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant (etc.) are signs and pledges of his presence, but do not encompass and confine him. Moses, with whom God spoke as with a friend, only saw God after he had passed by him (Exod. 33:23). One cannot see God and live (Exod. 33:20; Lev. 16:2). He is without form (Deut. 4:12, 15). One cannot make an image of him (Exod. 20:4). He dwells in darkness: clouds and darkness are the sign of his presence (Exod. 20:21; Deut. 4:11; 5:22; 1 Kings 8:12; 2 Chron. 6:1).
5. The same God who in his revelation limits himself, as it were, to certain specific places, times, and persons is at the same time infinitely exalted above the whole realm of nature and every creature. Even in the parts of Scripture that stress this temporal and local manifestation, the sense of his sublimity and omnipotence is not lacking. The Lord who walks in his garden is the Creator of heaven and earth. The God who appears to Jacob is in control of the future. Although the God of Israel dwells in the midst of his people in the house that Solomon built for him, he cannot even be contained by the heavens (1 Kings 8:27). He manifests himself in nature and sympathizes, as it were, with his people, but he is simultaneously the incomprehensible One (Job 26:14; 36:26; 37:5), the incomparable One (Isa. 40:18, 25; 46:5), the one who is infinitely exalted above time and space and every creature (Isa. 40:12ff.; 41:4;

44:6; 48:12), the one true God (Exod 20:3, 11; Deut. 4:35, 39; 32:19; 1 Sam. 2:2; Isa. 44:8). Although he reveals himself in his names, no name is adequate to the purpose. He is nameless; his name is a name of wonder (Gen. 32:29; Judg. 13:18; Prov. 30:4). Neither the hidden ground, the depths [חַדְקָר] of God, nor the boundaries, the extreme limit, the very essence [תְּכֵלֶת] of the Almighty, is attainable (Job 11:7; Sirach 43:31–32). In a word, throughout the Old Testament these two elements occur hand in hand: God is with those who are of a contrite and humble spirit, and nevertheless is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity (Isa. 57:15).

6. In the New Testament we encounter the same combination. God dwells in inaccessible light. No one has seen him or can see him (John 1:18; 6:46; 1 Tim. 6:16). He is above all change (James 1:17), time (Rev. 1:8; 22:13), space (Acts 17:27–28), and creatures (Acts 17:24). No one knows him except the Son and the Spirit (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:11). But God has caused his fullness to dwell in Christ bodily (Col. 2:9), resides in the church as in his temple (1 Cor. 3:16), and makes his home in those who love Jesus and keep his Word (John 14:23). Or to put it in modern theological language, in Scripture the personality and the absoluteness of God go hand in hand.

[162] The moment we step outside the domain of this special revelation in Scripture, we find that in all religious and philosophical systems the unity of the personality and absoluteness of God is broken. Generally speaking, pagans identify themselves religiously by the fact that, knowing God, they do not glorify him as God but exchange his glory for creaturely images [Rom. 1:21–23]. Then, sooner or later, a philosophical view reacts against this disposition and emphasizes God's absoluteness while denying his personality. Among Brahmins, God is the Unknowable One without either names or attributes, who is known only by those who do not know.<sup>4</sup> The Qur'an frequently describes Allah in very anthropomorphic language. Among Muhammad's followers, however, many arose who interpreted this language spiritually and even refused to ascribe any attributes to God.<sup>5</sup> Greek philosophy also frequently taught this unknowability with regard to God. According to a famous tale, the philosopher Simonides, responding to the question, Who is God? put to him by the tyrant Hiero, kept on asking for more and more time to frame

4. S. Hoekstra, *Wijsgerige Godsdienstleer*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Van Kampen, 1894–95), II, 2; Eduard von Hartmann, *Religionsphilosophie*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Bad Sachsa im Harz: Hermann Haacke, 1907), I, 278; Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1905), II, 49ff.; Paul Wurm, *Handbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (Calwer Verlagsverein; Stuttgart: Verlag der Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1904).

5. R. P. A. Dozy, *Het Islamisme* (Haarlem: A. C. Kruseman, 1836), 131ff.; M. Houtsma, *De Strijd over het Dogma in den Islam tot op el-As'fari* (Leiden: S. C. van Doesburgh, 1875), 120ff.; P. de la Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 3d ed., II, 510.

an answer.<sup>6</sup> According to Diogenes, Protagoras's book *On the Gods* began as follows: "With regard to the gods I do not have the ability to know whether they exist or not. For there are many things that prevent a person from knowing; for example, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life."<sup>7</sup> Carneades of Cyrene not only sharply criticized belief in the gods but denied the possibility of forming an idea of God. Plato rejected all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic representations of the deity and stated in *Timaeus* §34: "Now to discover the Maker and Father of this universe is an enormous job, and, having discovered him, to tell everyone about him is impossible."<sup>8</sup>

Similarly in *The Republic* VI, 19, he states that the deity or idea of the good transcends not only all that exists but even "Being itself." Philo combined this Platonic philosophy with the teaching of the Old Testament and found the same idea expressed in the name YHWH. Not only is God free from all the imperfections present in finite, changeable, and dependent creatures, but also far exceeds their perfections. He is better than virtue, knowledge, and beauty; purer than oneness, more blessed than bliss itself. Actually, he is without any attributes or qualities and without names and therefore cannot be understood or described. He is unknowable in his very being. We can know *that* he is, not *what* he is. Only "being" can truly be ascribed to him; the name YHWH alone describes his being.<sup>9</sup>

Plotinus is the most radical of all. Plato still ascribed many attributes to God. Philo complements his negative theology with a positive one in which he describes God as a personal, omnipotent, and perfect being. But according to Plotinus nothing can be said of God that is not negative. God is absolutely one—above all plurality—and therefore not describable in terms of thought or the good, not even in terms of being, for all these determinations still imply a certain plurality. As pure unity, God is indeed the cause of thought, being, and the good, but he himself is distinct from them and transcends them. He is unbounded, infinite, without form, and so altogether different from every creature that not even activity, life, thought, consciousness, or being can be ascribed to him. He is inapprehensible by our thought and language. We cannot say what he is, only what he is not. Even the terms "the One" and "the Good," which Plotinus usually employs, do not describe his essence but only his relation to his creatures, and only denote his absolute causality.<sup>10</sup>

Gnosticism made the gulf between God and his creatures even greater. It posited an absolute separation between the supreme God and the world. In nature, in Israel, and in Christianity there was no real revelation of God, only of

6. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I, 22.

7. H. Ritter and Ludwig Preller, *Historia philosophiae graecae* (Gothae: I. A. Perthes, 1888), 183.

8. E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*, 4th ed., 3 vols. (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1879), II, 928ff.

9. E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*, 3d ed., 5 vols. (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag [L. W. Reisland], 1895), V, 353ff.; A. F. Dähne, *Geschichtliche Darstellung der jüdisch-alexandrischen Religionsphilosophie* (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1834), I, 114ff.; Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2d ed., 5 vols. (1890; reprinted, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), III.2, 880ff.

10. E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie*, 3d ed., 476–96.

aeons. Hence, there was no natural theology—either innate or acquired—nor a revealed theology. For a creature, the supreme God is absolutely unknowable and inaccessible. He is an “unknowable abyss, ineffable, eternal silence.”<sup>11</sup>

## DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

This theory of the incomprehensibility of God and of the unknowability of his essence also became the starting point and fundamental idea of Christian theology. Neither in creation nor in re-creation does God reveal himself exhaustively. He cannot fully impart himself to creatures. For that to be possible they themselves would have to be divine. There is, therefore, no exhaustive knowledge of God. There is no name that makes his essence known to us. There is no concept that fully encompasses him. There is no description that fully defines him. That which lies behind revelation is completely unknowable. We cannot approach it either by our thought, our imagination, or our language. The letter of Barnabas already poses the question: “If the Son of God had not become incarnate, then how could human beings have beheld him and lived?” Justin Martyr calls God inexpressible, immobile, nameless. Even words like “Father,” “God,” and “Lord” are not real names but “appellations derived from [his] beneficence and works.” God cannot appear, go about, or be seen; whenever such things are ascribed to God, they refer to the Son, his emissary. Also in Irenaeus, one encounters the antithesis—very common in his time, yet mistaken, and partly gnostic—between the Father who is hidden, invisible, and unknowable, and the Son who has revealed him. In the work of Clement of Alexandria, God is “pure oneness.” If we eliminate from our thoughts all that is creaturely, we do not apprehend what he is, but only what he is not. Neither form, movement, location, number, properties, nor names, and so on, can be attributed to him. If we nevertheless call him “one,” “good,” “Father,” “Creator,” “Lord,” and so forth, we do not thereby express his true essence but only his power. He even transcends oneness. In a word, as Athanasius puts it, he “transcends all being and human comprehension.”<sup>12</sup> So also speak Origen, Eusebius, and many other theologians of the early centuries.<sup>13</sup>

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 11, 24.

12. *Epistle of Barnabas*, ch. 5; Justin Martyr, *Apology*, I, 61; II, 6; idem, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 127; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 20; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, V, 11–12; idem, *Paedagogus*, I, 8; Athanasius, *Against the Nations*, 2.

13. Origen, *On First Principles*, I, 1, 5ff.; idem, *Against Celsus*, VI, 65; Eusebius, *Praep. evang.*, V, 1; Theophilus, *To Autolytus*, I, 3; Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* (Leipzig: J. C. Heinrichs, 1888), 5; Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix*, trans. G. W. Clarke (New York: Newman Press, 1974); Novatianus, *Novatiani Romanae urbis Presbytery de trinitate liber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 2; Cyprian, *On the Vanity of Idols*, 5; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, I, 6. Cf. W. Münscher, *Lehrbuch des christlichen Dogmengeschichte*, ed. D. von Coelln, 3d ed., 2 vols. in 3 (Cassel: J. C. Drieger, 1832–38), I, 132ff.; K. R. Hagenbach, *A Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, trans. C. W. Buch, 6th rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York: Sheldon, 1869), §37; J. Schwane, *Dogmengeschichte*, 4 vols. (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1882–95), I, 72ff.

We encounter the same idea in Augustine and John of Damascus. In his description of God Augustine proceeds from the concept of “being.” He is the One who is, as the name YHWH indicates. This is his true name, the name that indicates what he is in himself; all other names indicate what he is toward us (*Serm.* 6 n. 4; *Serm.* 7 n. 7). Therefore, when we want to say what he is, we are only saying what, by comparison with all finite beings, he is not. He is “inexpressible. It is easier for us to say what he is not than what he is.” He is not earth, sea, heaven, angel, and so on, nothing creaturely. All we can say is what he is not (*Enarr.*, in Ps. 85 n. 12; *De doct. chr.*, I, 6; *De ord.*, II, 47). “By thinking we try to reach a nature than which nothing is better or more sublime” (*De doct. chr.*, I, 7). But he cannot be conceived as he is, for he transcends all that is physical, changeable, and the result of process (*Tr. Act.* 23 in *Ev. John.* n. 9). “Who is there whose conception of God truly corresponds to how he is?” (*Isa.* VI, 29). He is incomprehensible and has to be so, “for if you comprehend him it is not God you comprehend” (*Serm.* 117 n. 5). If, then, we finally want to say what we think of him, we struggle with language. “For what is thought of God is truer than what is said, and his being is truer than what is thought” (*De trin.*, VII, 4). If we nevertheless insist on saying something about him, our language is not “adequate” but only serves to enable us to say something, and to think of a being who surpasses all else (*De doct. chr.*, I, 6).

“Just as no intellect is able properly to conceive of God, so no definition is able properly to define or describe him” (*De cogn. verae vitae*, 7). “God is known better by not knowing” (*De ord.*, II, 44). John of Damascus similarly avers that God is the “ineffable and incomprehensible divine being.” We speak of God in our own way and know what God has revealed of himself, but the nature of God’s being and the manner of his existence in all creatures we do not know. That God is, is clear, but “what he is in essence and nature is altogether incomprehensible and unknowable.” When we say God is unborn, immutable, without beginning, and so on, we are only saying what he is not. To state positively what he is, is impossible. He is no part of all existing things, not because he does not exist, but because he transcends “all beings and even being itself.” What we say positively concerning God does not refer to his nature but to “the things regarding his nature.”<sup>14</sup>

[163] This unknowability of God’s essence was even more vigorously affirmed by Pseudo-Dionysius (to whom John of Damascus already appeals) and by John Scotus Erigena. According to the Areopagite, there is no concept, expression, or word that directly expresses God’s essence. Accordingly, God is described with unusual, metaphorical terms. He is “infinity beyond being,” “oneness that is beyond intelligence,” “the inscrutable One out of the reach of every rational process.” “Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supraexistent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no

14. John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, I, 1, 2, 4, 9.

name. It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending all existence; it alone could give an authoritative account of what really is.”<sup>15</sup> We can neither describe nor think this one, unknown Being, who transcends the entire realm of existent being, who is above every name, word, and intellect, and all that is finite. It is only because he is the cause and origin of all things that we, like Scripture, can name him in terms of his effects. Hence, on the one hand, he is “nameless” (anonymous), and on the other, he “has many names.” But even the positive names we assign to God by virtue of his works do not reveal God’s essence to us, for they fit him in a totally different and infinitely more perfect way than they do creatures. Consequently, negative theology is more excellent than positive theology: it makes God known to us as transcending all creatures. Nevertheless, even negative theology fails to furnish us any knowledge of God’s being, for in the final analysis God surpasses both all negation and all affirmation, all assertion and all denial.<sup>16</sup>

We find precisely the same line of thought in the work of Erigena: God transcends all that is creaturely, even being and knowing. We only know *that* he is, not *who* he is. What we predicate of him is only true of him figuratively; in reality he is altogether different. Affirmative theology is unreal, metaphorical. It is surpassed by negative theology. “For God is more truthfully said not to be any of those things that are claimed of him than he is said to be. He is better known by not being known; ignorance of him is true wisdom.” Predicates of him, accordingly, are best augmented with the words *super* (above) and *plusquam* (beyond). He is above and beyond “essence,” “truth,” and “wisdom.” Indeed, he so far surpasses everything creaturely that he can be fairly described with the word “nothingness” (*nihilum*).<sup>17</sup>

Now, scholasticism at several points expressed itself more cautiously, and especially attached greater value to positive theology than did Pseudo-Dionysius and Erigena. Nevertheless, it fully affirmed the theory that God’s being as such is unknowable by humans. Anselm says that God’s names only describe him “by likeness” (*per similitudinem*), that the relative attributes of his being cannot be predicated, and the absolute only in a quidditative, not in a qualitative sense.<sup>18</sup> According to Albert the Great, God transcends all being and thought. He cannot be reached by human thought: “He can be touched but not grasped

15. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* I, 1 (588B), in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colin Luibheid, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1987), 49–50. Ed. note: For clarity and accuracy, Bavinck’s loose paraphrasing of this passage in Pseudo-Dionysius has been changed to the full citation from I.1 of *The Divine Names*.

16. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), c. 1 §1ff., §2; c. 5.

17. Erigena, *The Divine Nature*, I, 7ff.; II, 23ff.; III, 19ff.; A. Stöckl, *Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, 3 vols. (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1864–66), I, 45ff.; F. C. Baur, *Die christlichen Lehre von der Dreieinigkeit und Menschwerdung Gottes*, 3 vols. (Tübingen: C. F. Oslander, 1841–43), II, 274; J. I. Doedes, *Inleiding tot de Leer van God* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1876), 133ff.

18. Anselm, *Monologion*, c. 15–17, 63.

by our comprehension.” There is no name that gives expression to his essence. He is incomprehensible and inexpressible.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Aquinas differentiates between three kinds of knowledge of God: the immediate vision of God (in terms of his essence), knowledge by faith, and knowledge by natural reason. The first far surpasses natural human knowledge and can only be attained by supernatural grace. It is reserved for heaven, only rarely granted to a person here on earth, and in any case never renders possible the comprehension of God. On earth the knowledge of God is mediate. We cannot know God as he is in himself, but only “as the first and most eminent cause of all things.” We can only deduce the cause from the effects. The same is true of the knowledge we receive of God from his special revelation through faith. We learn to know him more fully “the more and the more excellent of his effects are shown to us.” But even this faith-knowledge does not give us a knowledge of God *per essentiam* (in terms of his essence). There is no knowledge of God’s essence, his “whatness,” in terms of its uniqueness; we only know his disposition toward his creatures. There is no name that fully expresses his essence. It far surpasses that which we can know and say concerning God. Although positive names may designate God’s essence, they do so most imperfectly, just as the creatures, from which the names are derived, imperfectly represent him. God is knowable only “insofar as he is represented in the perfections of his creatures.”<sup>20</sup>

In the subsequent development of scholasticism, however, this truth of the incomprehensibility of God was pushed into the background. The doctrine of God became increasingly elaborate. God’s existence, names, essence, persons, and attributes were so minutely and precisely developed that no room was left for his incomprehensibility. It became an ordinary attribute alongside the others, and was given equally elaborate and dialectical treatment. Against Thomas, Duns Scotus asserted that there was indeed a quidditative, albeit imperfect, knowledge of God.<sup>21</sup> Nominalism already registered its protests against Scotus’s position and became more or less skeptical. Durandus wrote that there was no such thing as an “abstract knowledge” of the divine essence. And Occam declared: “Neither the divine essence, nor divine quiddity, nor anything that pertains to the nature of God, nor anything that is truly God, can be known by us here so that there is nothing else that comes to us from God in the way of an object.”<sup>22</sup>

Mysticism sought to obtain a knowledge of God other than that which is garnered in the way of dialectics. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, Nicholas of Cusa, in his work *On Learned Ignorance*, asserted that no truth could be obtained by reason but only by faith—faith conceived mystically as a new organ in humans. After the Reformation, Roman Catholic theology returned

19. According to A. Stöckl, *Philosophie des Mittelalters*, II, 370.

20. T. Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I, qu. 12, 13.

21. Duns Scotus, *Sentences*, I, dist. 3, qu. 2.

22. According to A. Stöckl, *Philosophie des Mittelalters*, II, 1009.

to scholasticism and again adopted the doctrine of the unknowability of God's essence in the way Thomas understood it.<sup>23</sup> At the Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III, this doctrine was even ecclesiastically defined and proclaimed: "God is ineffable."

The theology of the Reformation did not modify this view. In his work "The Bondage of the Will," Luther differentiates between the "hidden" and the "revealed" God, between God himself and the Word of God. In later years he gradually confined himself more to the latter, namely, to God as he has revealed himself in Christ: "That which is above us does not concern us." Yet, to him, the fullness of God's being was not exhaustively revealed in Christ either; on the contrary, there remained in God a dark and hidden background: "God as he is in his own nature and majesty, God in his absoluteness." And he, according to Luther, is "plainly unknowable, incomprehensible, and inaccessible."<sup>24</sup> Later Lutheran theologians, though they did not make such a sharp distinction between God's essence and his revelation, nevertheless all affirmed that there is no possibility of adequately naming and defining God.<sup>25</sup>

The Reformed concurred. Their profound aversion to all forms of idol worship made them everywhere distinguish sharply between that which is of God and that which is creaturely. More than any other theology they took seriously the proposition that "the finite cannot contain the infinite." Zwingli wrote: "*Of ourselves*<sup>26</sup> we know no more about the nature of God than beetles know about the nature of humans."<sup>27</sup> Calvin writes that we are toying with idle speculations when we pose the question: What is God? For us it is enough to inquire: "What is his nature and what is consistent with his nature?"<sup>28</sup> Later theologians spoke of the nonknowability of God's being in even stronger terms. Inasmuch as the finite cannot contain the infinite, all God's names serve not to make God's essence known to us but—in accordance with our understanding—to describe to some extent that of God which we need to know. The statements: "God cannot be defined," "God has no name," and "The finite cannot contain the infinite" recur in all [Reformed] theologians. They unanimously affirm that God infinitely surpasses

23. Cf., e.g., Franciscus Sylvius, *Commentarii in totam primam partem S. Thomae Aquinatis*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (Antwerp, 1693), I, 96ff. Ed. note: An English edition of 1726 (Venice: Typographia Balleoniana) is also available in microform (Pius XII Memorial Library, St. Louis University, St. Louis, Mo.). C. R. Billuart, *Cursus theologiae*, 9 vols. (1769–70), I, 228ff.; D. Petavius, *Theol. dogm.*, I, ch. 5; VIII, c. 6; G. Jansen, *Praelect. theol.*, II, 78ff.; *Theologia Wirceburgensi* (ed. Paris, 1880), II, 73ff.; C. Pesch, *Praelect. dogm.* (1895), II, 46ff.

24. J. Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, trans. Charles E. Hay, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), I, 99ff., 428ff.

25. J. Gerhard, *Loci. theol.* II, c. 5; cf. Heinrich F. F. Schmid, *Die Dogmatik der evangelische-lutherischen Kirche*, 9th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979), §17; K. Bretschneider, *Handbuch der Dogmatik* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1838), I, 443.

26. These italicized words must not be omitted as, for example, Hoekstra does in *Wijsgerige Godsdienstleer*, II, 14.

27. U. Zwingli, *Opera*, III, 157.

28. J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ii.2; I.v.9; *Commentary*, on Rom. 1:19.

our understanding, imagination, and language. Polanus, for example, states that the attributes ascribed to God in Scripture do not explain his nature and being. These attributes show us what is not God's nature and character rather than what is. "Whatever is said of God is not God, for God is ineffable. No divine attributes sufficiently explicate God's essence or nature, for it is infinite. That which is finite, moreover, cannot fittingly and fully enough explicate the infinite."<sup>29</sup>

However, in Reformed theology, too, the significance of God's incomprehensibility was increasingly lost from view. While it was still taught, it existed in the abstract and exerted no influence. The form in which the doctrine of God was treated soon became almost completely unchangeable. Other groups even did much worse. Socinianism did not even entertain the question of God's knowability. It had not the slightest interest in the knowledge of God's being. Knowing God was virtually tantamount to knowing him as the absolute Lord.<sup>30</sup> In his *Book about God and His Attributes* (1656), [Johann] Crell did indeed prove God's existence with an array of arguments but refrained from dealing with all questions relating to God's being, knowability, and so forth. Conrad Vorstius wrote *Treatise on God, or On the Nature and Attributes of God* (1610), in which he lapsed into the same Socinian errors.<sup>31</sup> The Remonstrants likewise felt no need to discuss metaphysical issues but warned against vain speculation and insisted on simplicity. According to them, the only thing that is strictly necessary to know is the will of God. The worship of God is much more necessary than the knowledge of God.<sup>32</sup> Rationalism considered itself sure of God's existence and attached but little value to knowledge of his being. It is as if people had lost all sense of the majesty and grandeur of God. Disregarding all so-called metaphysical questions, people rushed on to the will of God in order to know and to do it. Eternal life, they maintained, does not consist in knowing God but in doing his will. Bretschneider totally dismisses as superfluous the question whether God can be defined.<sup>33</sup>

## PHILOSOPHICAL AGNOSTICISM

[164] But when this truth of the incomprehensibility of God had been almost totally forgotten by theology, philosophy rose up to remind us of it. Rationalism, armed with its proofs for God's existence and its theory concerning God's attributes, saw itself as standing upon a solid scientific foundation. But Kant, though with his doctrine of God, virtue, and im-

29. A. Polanus, *Synt. theol.*, II, 6, 137. Cf. J. Zanchi(us), *De natura Dei, seu de divinis attributis*, in *Op. theol.*, II, col. 9–10; A. Hyperius, *Meth. theol.* (1574), 83–84; Z. Ursinus, *Tract. theol.* (1584), 35, 36, 39; *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, VI, 2; S. Maresius, *Syst. theol.*, 48; J. Alsted, *Theol. schol. did.*, 56ff.; B. de Moor, *Comm. in Marckii Comp.*, I, 505ff.

30. O. Fock, *Der Socianismus* (Kiel: C. Schröder, 1847), 414–16.

31. Cf. *Acta Syn. Dort*, session, 149ff.

32. Episcopius, *Inst. theol.* IV, 2, ch. 1; Limborch, *Theol. chr.*, II, 1.

33. Bretschneider, *Dogmatik*, I, 443; idem, *Systematische Entwicklung aller in der Dogmatik* (Leipzig: J. A. Baith, 1841), 341.

mortality he was still completely caught up in rationalism and moralism, nevertheless brought about an enormous change in the foundation on which this knowledge rested. Just as sensibility a priori brings with it the forms of space and time and the intellect a priori brings with it the categories, so also reason contains a priori synthetic principles and rules—especially the principle that it advances from the conditioned to the unconditioned.<sup>34</sup> The result is three transcendental ideas: the soul, the world, and God. However, these three ideas cannot be objectively demonstrated, only subjectively deduced from the nature of reason itself. We cannot perceive the object of these ideas; therefore, we cannot gain any scientific knowledge about them. In a scientific sense they are paralogsms, antinomies, ideals; our knowledge, however, is restricted to the sphere of experience.

These ideas, therefore, do not expand our knowledge but only regulate it. They introduce unity into our concepts and prompt us to view everything *as if* God, the soul, and the world existed. Science can neither prove nor deny the reality of these ideas. Psychology, cosmology (teleology), and theology, accordingly, are not sciences. The critique of pure reason winds up with a negative result. Practical reason, however, does allow us to accept the reality of these ideas. And Kant admittedly ascribes to God intellect, will, and other attributes, yet his real being remains hidden. Practical reason knows that these three ideas possess objective reality but no more than that. It does not add to the volume of our scientific knowledge. Speculative reason cannot do anything with these ideas except to let them regulate and purify our knowledge, and uses the idea of God to combat and avert anthropomorphism as a source of superstition and fanaticism. When intellect and will are attributed to God, it is merely a “practical” knowledge of God; it is in no sense a speculative one. For a person to abstract the anthropomorphic elements from it is to be left with no more than the word. The concept of God does not belong in metaphysics (which is nonexistent) but in ethics.<sup>35</sup>

Initially J. G. Fichte completely shared Kant’s point of view. In his *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, he allows belief in God on the postulates of reason and also ascribes to God certain definite qualities, like holiness, blessedness, omnipotence, justice, omniscience, and eternity. However, these alone do not furnish us with a definite understanding of God and a knowledge of his being *per se*. Even if they did, this still would not foster pure morality, but only damage it. Religion always pictures God anthropomorphically, in time and space, and even physically and does no harm by this as long as it does not conflict with morality and as long as this graphic representation is not held to be objectively valid. It must all be viewed as accommodation to our subjective need. Only

34. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (1929; reprinted, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 258ff.

35. I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103ff.

such a revelation can be of divine origin that presents an anthropomorphized God as being not objectively but only subjectively valid.<sup>36</sup>

Also Schleiermacher, though diverging in many respects from Kant and Fichte and aligning himself more closely with Spinoza, agreed with the former in the doctrine of the unknowability of God. While the idea of the unity of being and thought, of the real and the ideal, that is, the idea of God, is the assumption of all our knowledge, the ground of our thinking, this idea cannot be captured in thought and remains hidden “behind an [epistemological] curtain.” The moment we try to bring the Absolute closer to us, it is finitized in our thinking and we begin to speak in images.<sup>37</sup> In a word, the Absolute is not accessible to human knowledge. In his *Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher proposed the same ideas, though in a more religious and less elaborate form. God is the “whence” of our existence; and as such an absolute causality, he cannot be the object of our knowing but only the content of the feeling of absolute dependence.<sup>38</sup>

Since then the doctrine of the unknowability of God has progressively penetrated modern consciousness. Hegel, to be sure, had another position. While acknowledging that a religious representation was inadequate and suited only for the masses, he nevertheless believed that philosophy was able to strip this representation of its sense-related form and raise it to a “fully adequate” concept. Reason, in his opinion, raises itself step by step through several stages to the level of absolute knowledge, then looks at truth face to face and knows its essence to be Reason, Thought, the Idea itself. Philosophy, the pure science, specifically logic, is the description of God’s being as such. It understands the Absolute in its appropriate correspondent form as thought—in the form of a concept.<sup>39</sup> Along these Hegelian lines, by purifying and deepening the concepts, many thinkers<sup>40</sup> (e.g., Strauss, Biedermann, Ed. von Hartmann, Scholten) attempted to get even closer to transcendent reality. But in the case of others, Hegel’s philosophy led to a totally different outcome. They made the claim that a sense-related representation could never be overcome in the idea of God and therefore ended up in atheism. Feuerbach said that the personal God was nothing other than the essence of humans themselves, and theology nothing but anthropology.

36. J. G. Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 152ff.

37. F. Schleiermacher, *Dialektik* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1839), 60ff.

38. F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), §4, 4.

39. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, in *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Fr. Frommans, 1949–59 [1837]), IV, 43 [*Werke*, III, 33]. Ed. note: Where possible, references to Hegel’s writings will be cited from the modern Stuttgart edition or a published English translation. The title of Hegel’s work and Bavinck’s original citation from Hegel’s *Werke* will be given in square brackets.

40. D. F. Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1840–41), I, 523ff., 547ff., 609ff.; A. E. Biedermann, *Christliche Dogmatik* (Zürich: Fussli, 1869), II, 516ff.; E. von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, 11th ed. (Leipzig: H. Haacke, 1904), 155ff., 175ff.; idem, *Religionsphilosophie* (Bad Sachsa im Harz: Hermann Haacke, 1907), 608ff.; J. H. Scholten, *Dogmatices christianae initia*, 2d ed. (Lyons: P. Engels, 1858), 109ff.; idem, *De Leer der Hervormde Kerk in Hare Grondbeginselen*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Leyden: P. Engels, 1850–51), 199–200.

All that is predicated of God is derived from the sphere of humanity, not only personality but all attributes and names. Religion is the deification of humanity itself. Humans cannot rise above their own essence, and God therefore is, and always remains, a sense-related human being, not only in Christian dogmatics but also in philosophy.<sup>41</sup> Many, agreeing with Feuerbach, discarded the whole idea of God along with its anthropomorphic representation.<sup>42</sup>

Others, however, viewed this atheism as too radical. Considering the limited character of the human faculty of knowledge, which always remains confined to the sphere of the finite, these thinkers believed that we should limit ourselves to that which is given by observation (positivism), abstain from making any pronouncements on the existence and character of the supersensuous (abstentionism), and with reference to the latter, therefore, confess our absolute ignorance (agnosticism). In France, Auguste Comte limited the task of science to the observation and explanation of phenomena and hence excluded theology from the domain of the sciences.<sup>43</sup> In England it was especially Herbert Spencer who, armed with an array of arguments, combated the idea of the knowability of God.<sup>44</sup> And in Germany, sated with Hegel's panlogism, people returned to Kant's critical philosophy. Thus in the latter half of the nineteenth century agnosticism virtually reigned supreme. People distrusted all metaphysics and had an aversion to speculation. Only that which was concrete was considered trustworthy and belonged to the domain of the exact sciences.

Theology has so far fallen victim to the dread of this agnosticism that it hardly any longer dares to speak of a knowledge of God. It tries as much as possible to exclude all metaphysics (although of late we can see some reaction to this trend) and to restrict itself to the realm of the religious. It has become ashamed of its own name and has allowed itself to be rebaptized into a science of religion. For although agnosticism is in fact the death of theology, many theologians have nevertheless maintained it in another form. Kant regained by practical reason what he had lost by theoretical reason. Spencer left room for a religious veneration of the Unknowable. Even before him Sir William Hamilton and Dr. Henry Longueville Mansel had maintained that inasmuch as our thinking is always bound by space, time, distinction, and antithesis (etc.), it can never penetrate to the Absolute, though on religious grounds we

41. L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbook, Harper & Row, 1957 [1854]).

42. L. Büchner, *Kraft und Stoff* (Frankfurt a.M.: Meidinger Sohn, 1858), 392. Ed. note: This work is translated into English as *Force and Matter* from the 15th German edition, 4th ed. (New York: P. Eckler, 1891); idem, *Der Gottesbegriff und dessen Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, 2d ed. (Leipzig: Th. Thomas, 1874); E. Haeckel, *The History of Creation*, trans. and rev. E. R. Lankester, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1883), 30ff.; idem, *The Riddle of the Universe*, trans. Joseph McCabe (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), 319ff.; D. F. Strauss, *The Old Faith and the New*, trans. Mathilde Blind (New York: Holt, 1873), 155ff.; F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80; B. Carneri, *Der moderne Mensch: Versuche über Lebensführung* (Leipzig: Kröner, 1901), 73.

43. Cf. H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 220 (#66).

44. H. Spencer, *First Principles*, 5th ed. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1887), 68–97.

must continue to affirm the idea of God as a personal being.<sup>45</sup> Neo-Kantians in Germany arrived at a similar dualism. While thinking at its best may lead us to the idea of the Absolute, in religion we cannot be satisfied with that notion. Here we need a God who is like us, whom we may picture as a person, and who cares for his children like a father. True, such a religious view is always vulnerable to criticism on the part of science. It is not the highest and the most truthful, but we cannot do better.<sup>46</sup> In the same way others have searched for compensation in humanism, moral idealism, the formation of ideals, spiritism, theosophy, Buddhism, etc., in exchange for what science had stolen from them in Christian theology.

[165] The grounds on which this agnosticism bases itself are very weighty. In the first place, it can marshal the argument which from antiquity has been advanced against all possibility of knowledge by sophists and skeptics, namely, that all human knowledge is subjective and relative. Nothing in the universe stands by itself: object and subject are interdependent. Things and their properties only come into being as they are when they come to stand in some relation to someone's perception. A thing only becomes something as a result of its relation to the senses of a subject. We can therefore never say what a thing essentially is aside from our observation of that thing. We can only say that at a given moment something appears to us to be such and such. "Man is the measure of all things." Although this argument is weighty, it proves too much. If it were valid it would not only render impossible the knowledge of God but all knowledge of the human race and the world. We have already discussed this idealism in the previous volume,<sup>47</sup> moreover, and can therefore be excused from further dealing with it here.

But agnosticism has at its disposal a number of grounds that are especially directed against the knowability of God. To be sure, philosophy and theology were at all times, as we saw above, persuaded of the inadequate character of our knowledge of God. Negative predicates only tell us what God is not and positive predicates apply to him in a way that is very different from the way they apply to creatures. The limited, finite, and anthropomorphic character of our knowledge of God was recognized by all. But in modern times the nonattainability of knowledge of God has been argued on the basis of other, more radical, grounds. Subjectively, scholars have pointed out the limited character

45. W. Hamilton, "On the Philosophy of the Unconditioned," *Edinburgh Review* (October 1829); H. Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought* (Oxford: J. Wright, 1858); I. Dorner, *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie*, 6 (1861): 320ff., 347ff.; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), I, 346ff.

46. R. A. Lipsius, *Lehrbuch der evangelisch-protestantischen Dogmatik* (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetsche, 1893), §§229ff., 243ff.; A. Ritschl, *Theologie und Metaphysik* (Bonn: A. Marcus, 1886), 8ff. (ed. note: Bavinck, likely in error, cites an unknown title *Metaphysik und Religion*); idem, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, 4th ed., 3 vols. (Bonn: A. Marcus, 1895–1903), III, 211ff.; L. W. E. Rauwenhoff, *Wijsbegeerte van de Godsdienst* (Leiden: Brill & van Doesburgh, 1887), 611ff.; S. Hoekstra, *Wijsgerige Godsdienstleer*, II, 11ff.

47. See H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 214 (#64).

of the human faculty of knowledge; and, objectively, they have pointed out the self-contradiction to which every God-concept is subject. Kant did the former; Fichte the latter. Kant examined the human faculty of cognition and came to the conclusion that the forms of perception and the categories of the intellect came along with the subject and had validity in the world of phenomena, but made impossible for us any knowledge of the noumena. The transcendent ideas of God, the world, and the soul do regulate our conduct, and a moral person can only act as if, corresponding to these three ideas, there is an objective reality, but none of this is demonstrable.

At this point Fichte weighed in with the further objection that absoluteness and personality are forever incompatible. Spinoza had already made the point that all determination is negation and, therefore, that the more determined and concrete a thing becomes, the more finite and limited it is. By that process, certainly, it ceases to be what other things are: when a given thing is white, it can no longer be red or black. God, accordingly, cannot be something determinate alongside and distinct from creatures, but is the substance of all creatures, the one infinite being, so that everything that exists, exists in him.<sup>48</sup> Now this philosophical premise was applied by Fichte to the concept of personality. Personality and consciousness are things we have found in ourselves and therefore cannot be conceived without limitation and finiteness. The moment we apply them to God, we make him a finite, limited, human being. The only thing religion really needs, accordingly, is the moral world order. That is all. The idea of a particular personal existence of God is not necessary for religion and also indemonstrable, even impossible and self-contradictory.<sup>49</sup> Those who desire such a God are still in the power of eudaemonism. This argument then became widespread and returns with great frequency.<sup>50</sup>

At bottom this antithesis between absoluteness and personality is none other than that which in Christian theology was always felt and expressed in negative and positive (apophatic and cataphatic) theology. However much the proofs against the knowability of God are each time presented in a different form, in fact they are always the same and consistently come down to the following. Human beings are bound to sense perception and always derive the

48. B. Spinoza, *Epist.* 50; *Ethics*, I, prop. 14, 15.

49. J. G. Fichte, "Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung," in *Gesamtausgabe*, by J. G. Fichte, 15 vols. (Stuttgart: Bad Cannstatt, 1977), V, 318–57; cf. Kuno Fischer, *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, 2d ed., 11 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1924), V, 628ff.

50. Cf. Schelling in his first period, "Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie," in *Ausgewählte Werke*, by F. W. J. Schelling (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967–68), I, 8 [*Werke*, I, 1, 200]. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, vol. II, sect. 2, 1, B: "Der mechanische Process," in *Sämtliche Werke*, by G. W. F. Hegel, 22 vols. (Stuttgart: Fr. Frommanns Verlag, 1949–58), V, 184ff. Ed. note: Bavinck's references to Schelling that are to works incorporated into the new unrevised but abridged and repaginated *Ausgewählte Werke* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968) will be cited with the full title of the work as well as Bavinck's original reference. Since this is not a complete edition of Schelling's original *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'scher, 1856–61), writings not included in the new edition will be cited as *Werke*, using Bavinck's original reference. F. Schleiermacher, *Speeches on Religion*; A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipo-*

material of thought from the visible world. They do not see the spiritual and cannot elevate themselves to the world of invisible things, inasmuch as they always remain bound to space and time. Also, their thinking is material and finite and limited. Just as the eagle is confined to the atmosphere (Hamilton) and fish to the water of a pond (Lange), so our thinking always moves within the sphere of that which is finite. In addition, thought by virtue of its nature presupposes a distinction between subject and object; and since these are opposed to each other and limit each other, neither of them can be absolute. Hamilton therefore said, "To think is to condition," and Mansel expressed the same thing by saying, "Distinction is necessarily limitation." Knowledge of the absolute, accordingly, is a contradiction in terms. It indicates that one has knowledge of something that is "absolute," that is, detached, without relation, and is at the same time related to a knowing subject because it is known. Now if this is the structure of thought and we still want to think (about) and know God, we invariably either lower the Absolute to the level of the finite and make God into a personal, limited, humanlike being; or attempt to transcend all the limitations of space and time, strip our idea of God of all likeness to a finite creature, and end up with an empty abstract idea devoid of value for religion. Indeed, even the idea slips away: under the sway of our thinking the Absolute has been reduced to nothing. Absoluteness and personality, infinity and causality, immutability and communicability, absolute transcendence and likeness to the creature—all these pairs seem irreconcilable in the concept of God. We are caught up in an insoluble antinomy. It is as if we are only left with the choice between gross realism and vacuous idealism, between a God who is nothing but an enlarged version of a human person and a cold abstraction that freezes and destroys the religion of the heart.

## THE MYSTERY OF AN ABSOLUTE, PERSONAL GOD

[166] To a considerable extent we can assent to and wholeheartedly affirm this doctrine of the unknowability of God. Scripture and the church emphatically assert the unsearchable majesty and sovereign highness of God. There is no knowledge of God as he is in himself. We are human and he is the Lord our God. There is no name that fully expresses his being, no definition that captures him. He infinitely transcends our picture of him, our ideas of him, our language concerning him. He is not comparable to any creature. All the nations are accounted by him as less than nothing and vanity. "God has no name. He cannot be defined." He can be apprehended; he cannot be comprehended. There is some knowledge ( $\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ) but no thorough grasp ( $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\lambda\eta\psi\iota\varsigma$ ) of God. This

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*mena* I, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5 (Leipzig: F. V. Brockhaus, 1919), 123ff.; E. von Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, 11th ed. (Leipzig: H. Haacke, 1904) II, 175ff.; idem, *Religionsphilosophie*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Bad Sachsa im Harz: Hermann Haacke, 1907), II, 145–63; idem, *Lotzes Philosophie* (Leipzig: W. Friedrich, 1888), 168ff.; D. F. Strauss, *Christliche Glaubenslehre*, I, 502; A. Biedermann, *Dogmatik*, II, 457–72, 537–47; A. Drews, *Die Religion als Selbstbewusstsein Gottes* (Jena and Leipzig: E. Diederichs, 1906), 324ff.

is how the case is put throughout Scripture and all of theology. And when a shallow rationalism considered a fully adequate knowledge of God a possibility, Christian theology always opposed the idea in the strongest terms.

According to Socrates Scholasticus, Eunominus, a follower of Arius, is said to have taught that he knew God equally well as himself.<sup>51</sup> God's being, according to him, consisted solely in his "uncreatedness" (ἀγεννησία), and this idea gave him a clear, distinct, and fully adequate concept of the divine being. God's knowledge of himself was not any more adequate, and a human knowledge of God was not any less adequate, than was expressed in this predicate. Centuries later Spinoza declared he had just as clear an idea of God as he did of a triangle, though he did not mean to say he knew God totally.<sup>52</sup> And in the nineteenth century Hegel taught that in conceptual philosophy the Absolute achieved full self-consciousness and was therefore fully and adequately known by the philosopher; and that our God-consciousness is nothing other than God's self-consciousness. God exists to the extent he is known by us, that is, to the extent he knows himself in us. This rationalism has most energetically been opposed and repudiated in the Christian church.<sup>53</sup>

Involved here is a matter of profound religious importance, to which Augustine gave expression as follows: "We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder if you do not comprehend? *For if you comprehend, it is not God you comprehend.* Let it be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To attain some slight knowledge of God is a great blessing; to comprehend him, however, is totally impossible."<sup>54</sup> God is the sole object of all our love, precisely because he is the infinite and incomprehensible One. Although Scripture and the church, thus as it were, accept the premises of agnosticism and are even more deeply convinced of human limitations and the incomparable grandeur of God than Kant and Spencer, they draw from these realities a very different conclusion. Hilary put it as follows: "The perfection of learning is to know God in such a way that, though you realize he is not unknowable, yet you know him as indescribable."<sup>55</sup> The knowledge we have of God is altogether unique. This knowledge may be called positive insofar as by it we recognize a being infinite and distinct from all finite creatures. On the other hand, it is negative because we cannot ascribe a single predicate to God as we conceive that predicate in relation to creatures. It is therefore an *analogical* knowledge: a knowledge of a being who is unknowable in himself, yet able to make something of himself known in the being he created.

51. Socrates Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates* (London: S. Bagster, 1844; H. Bonn, 1853), IV, 7.

52. B. Spinoza, *Epist.* 60.

53. Basil, *Hexaemeron*, hom. 1; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 28; cf. J. Schwane, *Dogmengeschichte*, II<sup>2</sup>, 27ff.

54. Augustine, *Lectures on the Gospel of John*, tract. 38, *NPNF* (1), VII, 217–21.

55. Hilary of Poitiers, *De trinitate*, II, 7.

Here, indeed, lies something of an antinomy. Rather, agnosticism, suffering from a confusion of concepts, sees here an irresolvable contradiction in what Christian theology regards as an adorable mystery. It is completely incomprehensible to us how God can reveal himself and to some extent make himself known in created beings: eternity in time, immensity in space, infinity in the finite, immutability in change, being in becoming, the all, as it were, in that which is nothing. This mystery cannot be comprehended; it can only be gratefully acknowledged. But mystery and self-contradiction are not synonymous. Pantheistic philosophy has turned the one, mystery, into the other, self-contradiction. When it equates the absolute with the indefinite and calls all determination a limitation and negation, it is guilty of confusing concepts. There is a world of difference between infinite and endless, between omnipotent and the sum of all power, between eternity and the sum of all moments of time, and so forth, and in the same way between the Absolute and the indefinite, the unbounded, the boundless. Pantheism begins by injecting its own God-concept into these words and so finds it easy to accuse theism of being inconsistent with them. To say that God is the infinite One and can and does nevertheless reveal himself in finite creatures, though this belief is a recognition of an incomprehensible mystery—the miracle of creation, after all—is by no means the admission of a palpable absurdity. The finite cannot diminish the infinity of God if it is only grounded in God's Absolute being.

Similarly, our knowledge does not limit God because (1) it is grounded in him, (2) can only exist through him, and (3) especially has as its object and content God as the infinite One. Furthermore, if absoluteness precludes all limitation, and all determination is negation, it is not only not permissible to speak of God as personality, but it is equally wrong still to call him the Absolute, unity, the good, essential being, substance (etc.). Pantheism suffers from the illusion that it has completed its God-concept if only the ideas of personality and self-consciousness are removed from it as contradictory elements. And the theistic philosophers of the first half of the nineteenth century (for example, I. H. Fichte, Carus, Steffens, Weisse, Ulrici, et al.), driven by reaction, became all too attached to this concept of personality, thinking that in the concept of absolute personality they possessed a fully adequate description of the divine being. Indeed, many pertinent remarks have been made in criticism of pantheism to prove that personality is not inconsistent with the absolute being of God. As long as absoluteness is not equated with boundlessness, with infinite extension in all directions, it is hard to see how personality would be incompatible with it. Rightly considered, all it means is that God's self-consciousness is equally deep and rich, equally infinite, as his being. Granted, while in our (human) case personality may arise and awaken over against that which is a nonself, it does not originate there, but has roots and a content of its own in human nature. In the case of God personality is and can therefore be the eternal synthesis

of himself with himself, infinite self-knowledge and self-determination, and therefore not dependent on a nonself.<sup>56</sup>

Still we have to grant the truth of what the older Fichte said, namely, that personality is a concept borrowed from the human realm and hence, when applied to God, always to some extent falls short. The concept of personality, when applied to God, is not fully adequate and in principle no better than all other anthropomorphisms we use with reference to God. The Christian church and Christian theology, it must be remembered, never used the word “personality” to describe God’s being; and in respect of the three modes of subsistence in that being, they only spoke of persons reluctantly and for lack of a better term. At the same time this situation makes clear that pantheism has not gained anything when it points out the incongruity of this concept. The antithesis between absoluteness and personality is identical with that between negative and positive theology. Even if the word “personality” is inappropriate, this does not settle anything; the same question is bound to surface again and again. If all determination is negation, then God may not be called the One, the Existent One, or the Absolute either. In that case all thought and speech about God is prohibited. If as humans we may not speak of God in a human and analogical manner, we have no choice but to be silent. To think and speak divinely of God is beyond us. But then all religion implodes. If God cannot be known, neither can he be felt and, in that feeling, enjoyed. Feeling is as finite as the intellect and finitizes and humanizes God in the same way. No possibility then exists either of God revealing himself objectively in his creatures or of us subjectively perceiving him by any organ. All religion, then, is sacrilege and all theology blasphemy.

Given this outcome, the question concerning God’s knowability has been reduced to another question, namely, whether God has willed and found a way to reveal himself in the domain of creatures. For Kant is perfectly correct when he says that our knowledge does not extend farther than our experience.<sup>57</sup> If God has not revealed himself, then neither is there any knowledge of him. But if he has revealed himself there is something, however little, that can be perceived by us and so lead to knowledge. Then, however, it is also self-evident that the denial of the knowability of God coincides completely with the denial that God has revealed himself in the works of his hands.

Agnosticism, in fact, relapses into the error of ancient Gnosticism. God is mere “inexpressible depth” and “eternal silence.” There is no communion or kinship between him and his creatures. The universe is, then, in the most absolute sense of the word, godless. There is not a trace of him to be found in the whole world. The world, then, is the product of an inferior God, a demiurge, or of chance. Humanity has not been created in God’s image but is simply a product of nature and without God in the world. No religion or

56. I. H. Fichte, *Die Idee der Persönlichkeit und der individuellen Fortdauer* (Leipzig: Dyk, 1855).

57. I. Kant., *Critique of Pure Reason*, 432ff.

theology is possible on the basis of either creation or re-creation. God and the world are absolutely separate.

Worse, agnosticism cannot escape the implication that God *cannot* reveal himself. It confines him to himself, makes him into an unknown invisible power who has neither consciousness nor will, who can in no way communicate himself, who is eternal silence. And, just as in Manichaeism, the world is elevated to the status of a power alongside and over against God, a power incapable of in any way giving him access to itself and completely unfit to radiate even a particle of his glory. Agnosticism thus actually ends in atheism, of which it is merely the nineteenth-century form and name. Still, as a rule agnosticism does not go that far and still maintains the existence of the Unknowable. As soon as it adopts this position, however, it is caught up in an intolerable self-contradiction. Augustine already commented that the proposition that we know nothing of God already presupposes a lot of knowledge of God and therefore that what we have here is a contradiction in terms. For when we call God “inexpressible,” we are at the same time saying a lot about him, so that in fact he is not “inexpressible.” “For it is no small amount of knowledge . . . if before we know what God is we already know what he is not.” Not-knowing is itself extensive and positive: it amounts to “no small beginning of the knowledge of God.”<sup>58</sup> It is already quite significant to know that God is in no way creaturely. The same is true with reference to the agnostics. Spencer, for example, asserts that we are under pressure from our own thinking to assume the existence of an absolute being as ground of the universe, though on account of our finiteness and limitedness we cannot form any concept of such a being. But if we are so finite and limited, what is it that prompts us to conceive the idea of an absolute Being and to assume its existence? And if we are really forced to assume the existence of such an absolute Being, why should knowledge of that Being be totally impossible?

There is a big difference, certainly, between having an absolute knowledge and having a relative knowledge of such an absolute Being. Given the finiteness of human beings, the former is never an option. If Eunomius were correct in saying that either we know God’s being or else we do not know God at all, then human beings could not possess true knowledge of finite things either. What we know of God we know only of his revelation and therefore only as much as he is pleased to make known to us concerning himself and as much as finite humans can absorb. Knowledge of God, accordingly, can be true and pure, but it is always most relative and does not include but excludes comprehension. Basil was right in telling Eunomius that “the knowledge of God consists in the perception of his incomprehensibility.”<sup>59</sup> But this insight itself already constitutes substantial knowledge. For that reason not a single agnostic is prepared in the end to restrict himself or herself to saying that the matter is unclear (*non liquet*). Spencer, for example, keeps saying that we do

58. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I, 6; idem, *The Trinity*, VIII, 2; idem, *Epistle ad Consent*.

59. Basil, according to O. Bardenhewer, *Patrologie* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1894), 260. Ed. note: ET: *Patrology* (St. Louis: Herder, 1908).

not know the Absolute; at the same time he has an idea of it, demonstrates its existence, and assigns an array of properties to it. He asserts that it is not a negative but a positive concept; that it is the cause of everything; that it is a power mostly analogous to our will, infinite, eternal, omnipresent (etc.). This certainly is no longer agnosticism, but a very specific kind of knowledge and a rather well-defined God-concept. Agnosticism, inherently untenable and afraid of atheism, serves in the end to justify a pantheistic God-concept.