Participation and Communicability

THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN

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PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNICABILITY

**HERMAN BAVINCK AND JOHN MILBANK
ON THE RELATION BETWEEN GOD AND THE WORLD**

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

TER VERKRIJGING VAN DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR IN DE THEOLOGIE,

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door

Wolter Huttinga

Sponsored by STICHTING AFBOUW KAMPEN

You should be patient
with the unsolved matters in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves,
like closed chambers,
and books that are written
in a very strange language.
The point is: to live everything.
If you live the questions,
you will gradually,
without noticing,
one strange day
live into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke,
From *Letters to a young poet*

The windows of his room looked out into the garden, and our garden was a shady one, with old trees in it which were coming into bud. The first birds of spring were fluttering in the branches, chirruping and singing at the windows. And looking at them and admiring them, he began suddenly begging their forgiveness: 'Birds of heaven, happy birds, forgive me, for I have sinned against you.' None of us could understand that at the time, but he shed tears of joy. 'Yes,' he said, 'there was such a glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky; only I lived in shame and dishonoured it all and did not notice the beauty and glory.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky,
From *The Brothers Karamazow*

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Acknowledgements

O Lord, open Thou our lips…

Having finished this study, I am thankful in many ways. In the first place, I am thankful for the subject of my thesis and the persons I have been able to study. Herman Bavinck and John Milbank, different as they are in style, have both been great sources of wisdom and thought who will influence me for the rest of my life. Furthermore, the theme of participation connected me with the wisdom of the Fathers of the church and evoked my appreciation for the Platonic-Christian Catholic tradition. Thus a new world has been opened for me, for which I will always be grateful.

Although I usually relish the task of writing (especially in Dutch), the scope of the study demanded by a dissertation, and the complexity, vastness and inherent mystery of my main questions often made me hesitant to write at all. This was a new experience for me. However, if even 'the relation between God and the world', around which this study revolves, does not cause a human being to hesitate, then what does?

I thank Barend Kamphuis for giving me the opportunity and the space for this study, as well as his ongoing support and his answering of my many questions. His open-minded and stimulating attitude gave me the courage to go frankly on paths not often treaded by theologians in our own Reformed tradition. I am also very grateful for having been introduced to Hans Boersma. Both standing in the Reformed tradition, we share the intuition that in the Catholic tradition and particularly in its 'sacramentality' lies something of deep and abiding value for Reformed theology. Moreover, this study has been improved greatly by his sharp and thorough comments on earlier drafts.

Kampen Theological University has been an oasis for study and reflection upon the themes of this study. In the past years, it seems to have realized anew what great minds, and what a great tradition it houses. Although not everyone will have realized that a highly 'catholicizing' thinker was working in their midst, I hope that the results and the 'sphere' of this study will add to the intellectual and spiritual climate that characterise the practice of Reformed theology in Kampen.

I thank many people whose company has supported me a lot, not only by discussing themes and parts of my dissertation, but also by their friendliness, their simply 'being there', and last but not least their 'gezelligheid'. I will mention some of them (but definitely not all!) here. I thank my good and friendly colleagues in Kampen and particularly the different PhD students and Post-Docs with whom I have been privileged to work. Particularly I wish to mention Lammert Kamphuis, with whom I was able to work closely and discuss numerous insights, and with whom I have shared in joy and in suffering. I also mention James Eglinton, whose coming to Kampen has been a joy and blessing for me personally, but also for the Kampen University in general. I also thank these (and other) persons for sharing their many jokes with me: a huge source of inspiration.

The research group in Systematic Theology shared between Kampen and Apeldoorn has been a stimulating and instructive context for learning how to do theology at a high academic level. The same can be said of the NOSTER seminar on Dogmatics, Ethics and Philosophy of Religion. I cherish the many seminars and Master Classes I have attended. Quite simply, I had a great time in participating in this group.

This dissertation could not have been completed without the hospitality and the quiet and spiritual working environment provided by the Dominican monastery in Zwolle. For quite some years I have been able to study and write there at the library. Thank you, brothers and sisters, for allowing me to be in your midst! I hope and trust that finishing my dissertation will not mean the end of our relationship. The support by the people of Spectrum has also been very important, and particularly I mention Dick Mostert and Helen Catsburg. Their vision, and their attentive presence, which I think is as 'therapeutic' as it is 'theological', kept me aware of the life that this academic project breathes.

The years I have been working on this project have also been the years that my wife Annelie and I became the parents of two boys, Kees and Joris. I am grateful that Annelie and the boys are there, in good and in bad days. May we learn together to grow in sharing and living the joy of God, day by day.

... and our mouths shall show forth Thy praise.

List of Abbreviations

GD Bavinck, H. *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vols. I-IV. 4th ed. Kampen: Kok, 1928-1930.

RD Bavinck, H. *Reformed Dogmatics*, vols. I-IV, transl. J. Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008.

RO *Radical Orthodoxy*

ST Aquinas, T. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 5 vols. 1911, rev. 1920. Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, 1981 (reprint).

1. Introduction

1.1 'Who are we to you?'

In the intense theological and metaphysical film *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick, 2011), a whispered voice-over poses a number of questions to God: 'How did you come to me? In what shape? Who are we to you?' Characters in the film ask these questions, both existential and ontological, in the context of the stories about their broken lives. Where does God 'come into' our lives and into this whole world? In what way do we connect with the divine? The film 'answers' these questions by showing images of the boiling, erupting, shining, flowering process of evolution – a rendering of the film's motto: 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?' (Job 38:4), which was considered too grotesque by some reviewers – but also by telling the story of a family with its glorious and tragic moments, a story of failing parenthood and incomprehensible reconciliation.

Where then does the relation between God and our fragile human lives 'begin' and where is the source or the foundation of this relation to be found? Or, on a larger scale, how can we consider the relation between God and the world? With such questions, a serious moment of silence is appropriate, also at the beginning of this study. Where do we begin? Do I start with the computer I am using to type these words, the books on my desk, the room I am sitting in? Or do I have to look away, into the sky, to the birds, or to the flowers and the trees? Is it perhaps better to plunge into history, the history of Christianity, of civilisation, of the whole world? I can also read the bible on this matter, or study different philosophical conceptions, or observe and try to interpret what I see through a microscope or a telescope (assuming, of course, that I would understand anything of what I see).

If I want to be theologically correct, the answer should be perhaps that I have to look to Jesus Christ, or more correctly, that I have to enter into a personal relationship with Christ, that 'union with Christ' is the source and apex of all that can be said about God and the world. But then, who is Christ and how can I connect with him? Do I have to know who the 'historical Jesus' was, or do I simply have to be a member of the Church, the body of Christ? And

what do Christ and the Kingdom of God have to do with 'normal life', with creation itself, with the story of every human being, let alone with every animal, plant or rock? Or we might ask another question: Is it primarily my mind that does the job of 'entering' that relationship with God, or is it my complete bodily existence – and what do I even mean when I use such an expression?

There is no end to such questioning, and inevitably one will realise that these questions are in the end impossible to answer, since the relation being investigated is always already there, realised far before and beyond our inquiry into it. We are not in charge so as to untangle the story that we are woven into. We simply have to live our lives and repeatedly and carefully ask our questions to 'live into the answer', as Rilke expresses it in his poem. We have to be patient. This study intends to contribute to this 'history of asking' into the relation between God and the world. It does so by interpreting the works of two theologians, John Milbank and Herman Bavinck, and analysing, comparing and evaluating their conceptions of this relation. The central concept that will be examined in this discussion is that of participation. Why this concept is so important in this study and why these two theologians have been chosen for this purpose will be explained in this introductory chapter.

1.2 Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition

1.2.1 Cambridge, Amsterdam, Kampen

'The relation between God and the world': the subject of the present study is as big as that, and this study therefore intends to dive into what it sees as the mother of all questions. A clear focus is therefore necessary; indeed, it is not without a clear occasion and a defined space to move in that the question of the relation between God and the world is being investigated here. In attempting to shed some light on the relation between God and the world, I have chosen to set up a conversation between two different theological traditions that conceptualise this relation. The first tradition is known as *Radical Orthodoxy*, a recent British and North American theological phenomenon, represented here by John Milbank (1952-). The second is Reformed theology, represented here by the neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). The immediate cause for this study is the reappearance

on the theological agenda of the concept of participation of the created in the divine, as it was proposed by *Radical Orthodoxy* in the late 1990s. Ever since, this concept has fascinated many junior and senior theologians, and it is the fascination for this concept that has prompted this study. Standing myself in the Reformed tradition, I am particularly interested in the conversation between *Radical Orthodoxy* and the Reformed tradition and in what the two 'traditions' can offer each other. This study represents an attempt to contribute to this conversation and to deepen it.

In *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, James K. A. Smith 'maps' *Radical Orthodoxy*, offering, as he calls it, a guide for the perplexed.[1] He begins his book by sketching the wider theological map in which *Radical Orthodoxy* is situated, with a number of 'capitals' representing important theological traditions. The two cities that Smith mostly travels between in his work are Cambridge and Amsterdam: Cambridge, because it was in a sense the home of *Radical Orthodoxy* in 1999, and Amsterdam, because that is where the origins of Smith's Reformed standpoint are located, specifically at the Free University where Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd forged their Reformed theology and philosophy, respectively. The present study modestly weaves another small city into the network of theological capitals: Kampen, The Netherlands, where this study is written. Herman Bavinck was born and raised in Kampen, taught at his churches' Theological School there and also wrote his *Reformed Dogmatics* in Kampen.[2]

1.2.2 Radical Orthodoxy

In 1999, the theologians John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock launched a new series of books entitled *Radical Orthodoxy*. The first volume, *Radical Orthodoxy: a new theology*, started with a firm and programmatic

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[1] J.K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 25 ff.

[2] As 'capitals' in Bavinck's own life, we should add Leiden, where he received his own theological education, as well as Amsterdam, where he finally accepted an appointment at the Free University. If Bavinck is primarily considered a 'Neo-Calvinist', as someone working completely in line with Abraham Kuyper, it could be argued that he should simply be mentioned as a representative of 'Amsterdam' on Smith's map. Nonetheless, Bavinck showed such an independent theological approach and was so reluctant to being 'absorbed' by Kuyper that his own situatedness in Kampen deserves attention. For more biographical details about Bavinck, see 3.1.1.

introduction, proclaiming the implosion of secularism and stating that theology should reclaim the world 'by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework'.[3] The authors asserted that a purely immanent approach to finite beings does not safeguard their worldliness, as is often thought to be the case, but causes them to slide into nothingness. Instead, the introduction proposed a theological perspective on the world identified as the 'participation' of the human in the divine, not as a new concept, but as a way of thinking that was considered to be developed by Plato and then reworked in the Christian tradition. This concept of participation was said to guarantee that no territory of the world can be considered independent of God, while at the same time allowing the finite its own integrity.[4] In the essays that followed, several authors discussed problems and challenges of secular culture from a theological standpoint, paying particular attention to the liturgical life of the church.

To many established players in the theological field, the statements in *Radical Orthodoxy* were hard to digest. *Radical Orthodoxy* (RO) soon became one of the most talked about phenomena in the theological world (at least in North America and Western Europe) and was often the subject of heated debate.[5] The voice of the RO-authors was often experienced as overly pedantic, or even militant and aggressive. Anyone who reads the introduction in the *Radical Orthodoxy* volume can see why. But to me and other younger theologians coming from the Reformed tradition, the focus on participation and the way the authors developed this theme along with their criticism on

[3] J. Milbank et al. (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: a new theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

[4] Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

[5] See e.g. Fergus Kerr's telling remark on the back cover of *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*: 'Radical Orthodoxy, like it or hate it (and many do!), is the only interesting phenomenon on the British theological scene.' Telling was also the appearance (probably in Cambridge circles, shortly after the publication of *Radical Orthodoxy*) of 'Twenty-Four Theses' boldly promoting RO, and the 'Twenty More Theses' that consisted of a hilarious critique of the former. L.P. Hemming spoke of a 'respectful rudeness' in the discussions between RO and its interlocutors, in L.P. Hemming (ed.), *Radical orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 4. A more aggressive stance was taken by D. Hedley, who drew attention to the 'non-dialogical character of RO' and suggested that John Milbank's 'authoritarian and anti-liberal' narrative is almost fascist: 'Radical Orthodoxy and Apocalyptic Difference: Cambridge Platonism, and Milbank's Romantic Christian Cabbala' in W.J. Hankey and D. Hedley (eds.), *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 99-115.

secular society was a very welcome and promising sound. On the one hand, it resonated with important motifs in our own specific, neo-Calvinist tradition (see further below), but on the other hand, it also articulated a lost sense of mystery we had been longing for. For me personally it also touched upon a poetical and metaphysical theological level that was almost completely absent from my own ecclesial tradition.

To some extent, RO started as a 'Cambridge movement', since most of the contributors to the *Radical Orthodoxy* volume were working in Cambridge at the time when the book was published. RO seemed also to be bound strictly to specific ecclesial traditions: all of the contributors were Anglicans 'of a High Church persuasion' or Roman Catholics.[6] Although there were complaints that RO was not open to dialogue with others, in the following years several books appeared containing critical discussions with RO theologians, and RO became a theological orientation with an increasingly ecumenical face.[7] Meanwhile, many commentators kept asking: What exactly is RO? Is it a group, a movement, or can we even call it a theological 'school'? In a discussion with James Smith, Graham Ward pointed out that RO is to be seen as a shared 'theological sensibility' instead of a clearly demarcated theological school or movement.[8] Likewise, Catherine Pickstock described RO as a 'loose tendency' instead of an exclusive movement.[9] Mild and open as these descriptions may be, they also make it almost impossible to study such a phenomenon. For who is in and who is out? Many contemporary theologians could in fact count as RO

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[6] Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 'Acknowledgements'.

[7] There was a friendly debate with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church in *Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquiry*, a thorough conversation with representatives of the Reformed tradition in J.K.A. Smith and J.H. Olthuis (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), as well as with Eastern Orthodox theologians in A. Pabst and C. Schneider (eds.), *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). John Milbank thought of RO as 'an ecumenical theology that can speak to several different Christian communities' of which he considered James Smith's evangelical-Dooyeweerdian reception a good example, Smith, *Introducing*, 12. R.E. Webber has pointed out that there is a young generation of evangelicals who feel attracted to the thought of RO, concomitant with new attention for topics like tradition, embodiment and the Church, R.E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 72-82.

[8] Ward, 'In the Economy of the Divine: A Response to James K.A. Smith', *PNEUMA: Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 25 (2003), 117; Smith, *Introducing*, 63-70.

[9] C. Pickstock, 'Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins', Scottish Journal of Theology 54 (2001), 405.

theologians if they are read with a degree of flexibility. The relative vagueness of RO renders it impossible to analyse it properly. The same maxim that applies in so many areas of reality applies also here: if it is everything, it is nothing.

In this study, RO will therefore be represented by its major voice, John Milbank. The choice of authors could have been extended to include also Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, or other contributors to the RO-series, but John Milbank's work is already so full of conceptualisations of the relation between God and the world and so rich in sources and images shaping these conceptualisations that a limitation to his work alone will not be harmful but rather fruitful for a proper discussion between RO and the Reformed Tradition. Furthermore, in Milbank's work we do not receive a distorted or one-sided image of RO; on the contrary, he represents the pre-eminent voice of RO.

This study comes at a time when the storm around RO has abated. The series of books has come to an end, and the three main RO players Milbank, Ward and Pickstock are working on their own theological programmes, in different places. This does not mean, however, that the post-secular theological sensibility they shared has disappeared with the series.[10] It is also important to note that it did not start with the series. Prior to 1999, the central themes of RO were already present in the works of Milbank, Ward and Pickstock, as well as in the works of several other more or less like-minded theologians who themselves did not necessarily write in the series.[11] For example, Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, Ward's *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* and Pickstock's *After Writing* had been published before

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[10] Some of the 'spirit of RO' is particularly present at the University of Nottingham, in the Centre of Theology and Philosophy, of which John Milbank is the Director. Book series like *Veritas*, *Interventions* and *Illuminations*, stemming from the centre, convey the intentions of RO, theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/publications.

[11] Theological tendencies that are mentioned as being similar to RO are e.g. found in the Yale School, in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, Rowan Williams, Fergus Kerr, Nicholas Lash, David Burrell and Peter Ochs. The similarity lies in the post-secular intention of these theological tendencies, as well as their engaging in 'social political and critical theory and metaphysics, on the basis of tradition-based reasoning', G. Ward, 'In the Economy of the Divine', 115-116. Smith, *Introducing*, 41.

the name RO was launched, but are regarded by several commentators as being of great importance in discussions of RO.[12]

1.2.3 Conversation with the Reformed tradition
In the early 2000s, several discussions were organised with RO. One of these took place with North American representatives of the Reformed Tradition. In 2003, a conference was held at Calvin College (Grand Rapids, USA) involving both Reformed and RO theologians, which culminated in the publication of *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition.*[13] From the Reformed side, there was both recognition and criticism of RO, and while some attendees felt attracted to some notion of participation, others had their theological reservations. Important points in RO that were recognised and valued were, first, RO's refusal of an autonomous, secular realm – resonating with Abraham Kuyper's famous dictum that 'there is not a single square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine!'' – and, second, its affirmation of the fundamental goodness of creation, which opens up all realms of culture as places of transcendence.[14] Earlier, James K.A. Smith had already suggested that John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (often regarded as the first sketch of a RO-theology) echoed what could be heard almost a century ago in the Reformed theology of Abraham Kuyper, particularly as it was unfolded in the thought of Herman Dooyeweerd. He added, however, that some important questions still lingered.[15]

First, several authors have questioned whether RO *really* does honour the physicality and materiality of created life, contending that RO considers embodiment as a means to ascend to the divine life, as a ladder that can be discarded once we have access to the beatific vision. Does RO really have a correct view on creation, the fall and incarnation?[16] Second, several Reformed

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[12] Smith*, Introducing*, 34. Cf. J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Second Edition (First edition 1990) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); G. Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); C. Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
[13] J.K.A. Smith, J.H. Olthuis (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 2005.
[14] Smith and Olthuis (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 18, 280.
[15] Smith, *Introducing*, 26.
[16] See particularly the articles of J.K.A. Smith, 61-72, and A.D. Chaplin, 89-106.

authors expressed concerns about the concept of participation, which some attempted to overcome by stressing the Reformed concept of the covenant. For example, one such critic stated that while participation is focussed on 'overcoming estrangement' between God and man, covenantal theology is directed towards the 'meeting of a stranger'.[17] Participation appears thus to blur the boundary between Creator and creation, while the Reformed tradition has always insisted firmly on this boundary as necessary for maintaining the integrity of creation.[18] Third, the Reformed tradition was defended against what was considered an all too swift dismissal by RO authors, with Reformed theologians simply denying that the Reformed tradition already worked within a secular paradigm. John Duns Scotus, who has been a key figure in the tradition of Reformed Orthodoxy, was defended against the serious charges levelled against him by RO theologians who tended to see him as one of the 'inventors' of secular knowledge.[19] Special attention was also paid to the sacramental character of John Calvin's theology, whose work was said to resemble the analogical worldview promoted by RO. It was noted, for example, that Calvin stresses our union with Christ in the Lord's Supper, in which God mediates himself to us and lifts us up into his life.[20]

The major point of concern from a Reformed standpoint was RO's view on the relation between the Creator and creation. Is it necessary to see the created world as in a way 'participating' in the divine life? Some Reformed theologians welcomed this view and even recognised it in their own tradition, but to what extent is participation actually compatible with Reformed theology? Does created life not have its own integrity? In his afterword to *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, James H. Olthuis summarised the discussion by pointing out that RO and the Reformed Tradition share the same intentions but differ on how to achieve them. What they share is the desire 'to keep God and creation in intimate connection, while honouring their difference'.[21] While the Reformed Tradition is concerned that RO's pre-

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[17] M.S. Horton, *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 107-132.
[18] The latter was mentioned especially in the chapters on politics, from a Kuyperian-Dooyeweerdian standpoint. L. Zuidervaart, *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 135-149 and J. Chaplin, 151-182.
[19] R. Sweetman, *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 73-87.
[20] L. Smit, *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 205-227. Similar comments were made by N.R. Kerr, 229-242.
[21] J.H. Olthuis, *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 284.

occupation with God and creation in terms of participation and analogy will lead to the downplaying of their respective integrity, RO is concerned that the Reformed tradition allows too great a distance between God and creation and thus creates room for the secular.

1.2.4 Herman Bavinck

The present study intends to take a significant next step in this conversation and attempts to address these questions again. It focuses on the concept of participation, and highlights a theologian who as yet has not been introduced to the discussion but may deepen the conversation between RO and the Reformed tradition. This is the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck. Although Bavinck is firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition, he is known for his openness towards other traditions and other strands of thought. His four-volume *magnum opus*, the *Reformed Dogmatics*, particularly demonstrates his ability to connect broad discussions of different traditions of theology and philosophy with his contemporary culture. The word that perhaps best characterises Bavinck's theology is *catholicity*, since, as G.C. Berkouwer once noted, 'he was always looking for paths beyond strict antithesis, even the most difficult possible footpaths to follow, along which one could meet', thereby suggesting that Bavinck's work has a mediating quality.[22]

Furthermore, there are certain elements in Bavinck's theology that qualify him as a particularly interesting conversation partner for RO. Just like RO, Bavinck stresses the need for a theological view of the world, and even considers religion as the very source of civilisation, as the basis of life in the family, state and society. This view is theologically motivated since, according to Bavinck, God and the world are sharply distinguished, but at the same time stand in the closest connection to each other.[23] The indispensability of the

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[22] G.C. Berkouwer, quoting G. Wurth, in *Zoeken en vinden* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 41. Berkouwer gives his chapter on Bavinck the title 'catholicity'. The word 'catholicity' occurs most famously in the title of Bavinck's published speech *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1968), in which he stresses the universality of God's work in contrast with the sectarian and separatist tendencies he notices in his own church denomination.

[23] H. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 1-2. Interestingly, Bavinck continues this article by stressing the importance of the Reformation for this view, because there the image of God was not considered as a

theological for the affairs of this world is equally important for RO as it is for Bavinck.

Moreover, there is an almost unnoticed sense of participation in Bavinck's work, which connects him even more with RO. This has been noted by Barend Kamphuis, who emphasised that for Bavinck the incarnation of the Word of God is 'the central fact of the entire history of the world'.[24] The incarnation is not a separate fact in salvation history, but is rooted in the trinitarian being of God, presupposed and prepared in creation, and anticipated in the history of revelation. In the words of Bavinck: 'Revelation, after all, is based on the same idea as the incarnation: on the communicability of God, both in his being to the Son (generation) and outside his being (creation).'[25] Kamphuis considers this 'communicability of God' to be Bavinck's most important and original contribution in his treatment of the incarnation: God can communicate himself to creatures, while still remaining himself. In this connection, Bavinck speaks of communion with God through Christ as a mystical union: 'It is so close that it transforms humans in the divine image and makes them participants in the divine nature.'[26] The notion of God's communicability in Bavinck's work is also mentioned by Gerrit Riemer as the key feature by which he may be connected to the theme of participation, as it occurs in the work of Milbank.[27]

So where does this 'participatory' language in Bavinck's thought stem from? Does Bavinck consider the relation between God and the world generally within the framework of participation? In what ways does his outlook resemble John Milbank's, and in what ways does it differ? In clarifying how Bavinck describes the relation between God and the world and in

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supernatural addition but as an integral part of the nature of man – over against the mechanical 'Roman' view as he calls it.

[24] B. Kamphuis, 'Chalcedon in Kampen', *Theologia Reformata* 48 (2005), 29. He refers to H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.

[25] 'Chalcedon in Kampen', 31. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* III, 281.

[26] 'Chalcedon in Kampen', 31. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* III, 304. On the concept of 'mystical union with Christ' in Bavinck, cf. H. Burger, *Being in Christ* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 101-108; H. Burger, 'Een eeuwigdurende verbondenheid: Bavincks concept van de unio mystica', in G. Harinck and G. Neven (eds.), *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006), 265-286, and R.N. Gleason, *The Centrality of the Unio Mystica in the Theology of Herman Bavinck*. (Th.D. Thesis, Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001).

[27] G. Riemer, *betoverdewereld: over de theologische reactie van John Milbank op de dood van het realisme* (Master thesis, Kampen Theological University, 2006), 56.

analysing how his description can be called 'participatory', this study hopes to develop the conversation between RO and the Reformed tradition. One of the most important elements that needs to emerge more clearly is whether or not participation does or can have a place in a Reformed perspective.

1.2.5 Main tasks

In sum, this study intends to enter the vast and mysterious question of the relation between God and the world. It approaches this question from the viewpoint of the concept of participation as it was proposed by RO and as it is particularly substantiated in the work of John Milbank. This viewpoint is then contrasted and brought into conversation with the work of Herman Bavinck, a Dutch Reformed theologian. In the case of Milbank, this study tries to clarify in his work what the concept of participation exactly implies for the relation between God and the world. In the case of Bavinck, this study attempts to obtain from his work as complete a picture as possible of the relation between God and the world, and to analyse whether or not this picture is deserving of the label of 'participation'. By interpreting, analysing and evaluating the works of John Milbank and Herman Bavinck, and putting their concepts in the perspective of the concept of participation, the present study hopes to clarify how the concept of participation can have a place within a Reformed perspective.

1.3 Method

1.3.1 Ontological questions

The shared goal of RO and the Reformed tradition can be articulated, in the words of James Olthuis, as the desire 'to keep God and creation in intimate connection, while honouring their difference'. How then do Milbank and Bavinck perceive the relationship between God and creation, and how are their perspectives 'participatory'? What do they share, and where do they differ? These questions will of course largely direct the attention of this study to the doctrine of God and Creation, but it will also be necessary to consider Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology and even the Prolegomena of theology or the question 'what is theology?'

The theme of the relation between God and the world, but particularly the focus on the concept of participation which is the pivotal concept of this study, significantly moves the subject of this study onto the field ontology. If we speak about the relation between God and creation, we involve ourselves in ontological questions, whether we like it or not. For example, what account do we have of the being of God and the being of creation, and how are they related? Do we envisage one ontology in which God and created beings have their well-ordered places, or is God's being utterly different from ours? Should God-talk be univocal, equivocal or analogical? And if it is analogical, what exactly does this imply? In analysing how RO and Bavinck envision the relation between God and the world, this study seeks to clarify how they envision being and how they relate it to God's being. Stated otherwise, the present study attempts to clarify the 'theological ontology' of RO and Bavinck.

Ontology, and even the more 'contaminated' word metaphysics, can be said to have made their way back onto the theological agenda, concurring with a renewed interest in the Trinity. The common criticism on metaphysics charges that it abstracts from sensible, lived reality to enter a highly speculative and equally rationalistic domain. Metaphysics is considered to bracket out all particular details of beings to seek the most general, static and empty reality, called 'being'. This idea of being has been the subject of heavy criticism, and there was a time when theologians considered it necessary to remove metaphysics from theology altogether.[28] However, although they are conscious of the criticism of metaphysics and onto-theology, some theologians are beginning to underline the necessity of metaphysics for theology again,

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[28] The most famous criticism of mingling metaphysics with theology in the twentieth century came from Martin Heidegger, who wrote that for the metaphysical God 'man can neither fall on his knees in awe, nor can he play music or dance before this god.' He continues: 'The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus closer to the divine God' or is 'more open to Him', M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 72. Philosophically, this direction has been followed by Jacques Derrida, and in a more theological guise by John D. Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion. It is not a coincidence that the new focus is on liturgy, prayer, worship and desire for God, without wanting to capture anything of a stable identity of 'God'. In Caputo's work this is called the 'messianic', 'a waiting without a horizon of determinate expectation', whereas Marion focuses on the 'iconic' that escapes the idolising gaze. J.D. Caputo, *The Prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 134-139 and J.L. Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7-24.

interestingly with the same desire for liveliness which they in fact share with anti-metaphysical theologians: 'without metaphysics theology tends to become boring, unimaginative, and ultimately uninspiring.'[29] Theological metaphysics, a 'trinitarian ontology' or even the famously scorned *analogia entis* can be considered as ways to connect the being of God with creaturely beings in an interplay of intimacy and distance which transcends a self-enclosed materialistic world.[30]

It is an altogether reasonable endeavour to analyse RO's theological ontology, since the search for such an ontology lies at the very heart of its project. Yet is it also reasonable to look for a theological ontology in Bavinck, or in any theologian from the Reformed tradition? It has been asserted that the Reformed tradition with its criticism on all scholastic speculation did away with metaphysics, and that the Reformation simply went back to some kind of 'biblical teaching' that was free from all philosophy. Or, at least, it has been claimed that the early Reformers did away with such speculation, only for that speculation to sneak back in again with the use of Aristotelian philosophy during what is now referred to as the period of Orthodoxy.[31]

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[29] J. R. Betz, 'The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination', in C. Cunningham and P.M. Candler Jr. (eds.), *Belief and Metaphysics* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 44.

[30] Cf. the collection of essays *Belief and Metaphysics*. Hans Burger mentions in this current thinkers like Gerhard Ebeling, Colin Gunton, Eberhard Jüngel, John Milbank, Christoph Schwöbel, Miroslav Volf and John Zizioulas, *Being in Christ*, 6-7. Also Maarten Wisse observes from the 1990s onwards 'a new interest in metaphysical ways of thinking our world experience from an explicitly religious perspective'. M. Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology beyond Participation: Augustine's* De Trinitate *and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 2.

[31] This is perhaps the most shallow, popular version of more serious theological standpoints throughout the last two centuries. For example, within the neo-orthodox strand of thought it has been contended that there was a healthy biblical and christocentric focus in the period of the Reformation which was soon clouded by a rigid predestinarian system (cf. among others for this claim the works of T.F. Torrance, e.g. *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. I (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), 91-93.). This contrast can also be viewed as favouring a 'Lutheran' or 'German Reformed' standpoint, which focuses on soteriology and considers it to be in opposition to the 'central dogma of predestination' in the Calvinist line (cf. the works of H. Heppe, E. Bizer and H.E. Weber.). Other ways of opposing the Reformation with the period of Orthodoxy stress the scholastic, rationalistic character of Reformed Orthodoxy and even envision this within a scheme of 'Hebrew' vs. 'Greek' thinking (cf. S. van der Linde, "Het 'Griekse' denken in kerk, theologie en geloofspraktijk: een eerste inleiding' in *Theologia Reformata* 28 (1985), 248-268. Considering in particular a resurgence of metaphysics in the Reformed Tradition, Brian G. Armstrong famously

This line of thought has recently suffered serious challenges, particularly in the work of Richard A. Muller. In the first place, Muller connects the Reformers and their later successors to a greater degree than had commonly been done, and, secondly, he places the Reformers – especially John Calvin – more in the context of their own time and against their medieval theological background.[32] According to Muller, Reformed Orthodoxy is a 'doctrinal development resting on a fairly diverse theological heritage', and he emphasises that the Reformation stands within the broad tradition of Western theology, not only in discontinuity but also in continuity with the patristic and medieval heritage, thereby implying that its theology was involved in metaphysical thought as well.[33] Muller concludes from a thorough reading of the sources that the Reformed tradition was 'highly eclectic' on the level of metaphysics. It used late medieval traditions that followed Augustinian, Thomistic, Scotistic or nominalistic lines of thought, which commonly used Aristotelian language, structures and contents. The Reformers blended different, at times even contradicting traditions, because they had no commitment to any prior school of thought.[34]

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asserted that Reformed Orthodoxy, in contrast with the Reformers, 'had a pronounced interest in metaphysical matters, in abstract, speculative thought, particularly with reference to the doctrine of God', B. G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut heresy* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 32. An overview of the discussion about continuity and discontinuity between 'Calvin and the Calvinists' can be found in R.A. Muller, *After Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63-80, and R.T. te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 18-42.

[32] See e.g. his four-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), *The unaccomodated Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) on Calvin and his time and the aforementioned *After Calvin* on the 'Calvin and the Calvinists'-issue.

[33] Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* I, 45. Similar claims can be found in *After Calvin*, 63-80.

[34] Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* III, 108. Interestingly, John Milbank asserts in *Radical Orthodoxy and The Reformed Tradition* that 'Calvin's humanist and practical theology is one that is implicitly in search of a metaphysics' (35), which should at best have been a 'realist, analogical and participatory' one, but since, tragically, mainly a Suarezian metaphysics was available, the Reformed tradition became acquainted with univocal and nominalist currents. Although more nuanced views on Calvin's metaphysical embeddedness are available, the question if Scotism and its univocalism really became 'the' ontological standard for Reformed Orthodoxy is an interesting one, on which the discussion is still developing. Antonie Vos seems to defend such a position, whereas Richard Muller counters it. A. Vos, 'Scholasticism and Reformation' in Asselt, W.J. van and Dekker, E. (eds.) *Reformation and Scholasticism:*

Whether or not participation can at least have a place in the Reformed tradition is a question which in turn presupposes the question whether the Reformed tradition is in any way invested in metaphysics. As we will see, Herman Bavinck's work makes a major plea for metaphysics in theology. It will be necessary, however, to consider more carefully what exactly this metaphysical content looks like, and whether or not it tends to a participatory metaphysics. The question might also be framed as follows: in which metaphysical current (or perhaps currents) within the Reformed tradition does Herman Bavinck stand?

1.3.2 Difference in systematic degree

Even if there is enough reason to interpret both Milbank and Bavinck through an ontological lens, a number of methodological difficulties remain that would seem to plead against the setting up of such a conversation between them. At least on the face of the way they present themselves, their theologies are very unlike. One of the striking ways in which postmodern theologies differ from modern ones, is their unsystematic and essayistic presentation. This is related to a different view on knowledge, which within a modern outlook is considered more as a 'building': first one has to find a secure foundation, and then it is possible to raise a structure of knowledge on this foundation. In a postmodern perspective the priority has been shifted from knowledge to language, or 'signs'. The knowledge we gain has a more scattered character and is not placed in an ordered system. We do not move neatly from A to B and then to C, but we see the different signs as a chaotic whole and can eclectically pick one of the signs, but do not dare to say if this particular sign is arbitrarily connected to the other ones in a necessary caused chain.

This difference is clearly visible in the works of Bavinck and Milbank. Milbank explicitly explains how his work is composed: 'The fragmentary, and not the systematic character of the literary pile should be explicitly foregrounded'. Further on in the same sentence he admits that he purposely 'exhibits and offers a ruin'.[35] The systematisation in Milbank's work is thus

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An Ecumenical Enterprise (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 117; and R. Muller, 'Not Scotist: understandings of being, univocity, and analogy in early-modern Reformed thought', *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 14 (2012), 127-150.

[35] J. Milbank, *TheFuture of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 175-176.

more of an *ad hoc*-character and loose. This is not to imply, however, that Bavinck's theology is typically modern and firmly systematised. He admittedly did write a *Dogmatics* in four neat volumes that look impressively systematic when they are placed in order on a shelf or when we look at the table of contents. His *Dogmatics* is clearly structured in *loci* along the traditional Reformed order, beginning with Revelation, God and Creation, all the way to the Church and Eschatology.[36] Bavinck, however, sees at once much more unity and much more plurality in theology than this 'system' allows for: 'The different dogmas are not isolated propositions, but constitute a unity. Actually there is only one dogma, one that is rooted in Scripture and that has branched out and divided in a wide range of particular dogmas', referring to the triune God who communicates himself to creation, for which Bavinck uses his beloved 'organic' language.[37] As we will see more often in this study, when Bavinck uses a distinction that superficially seems neat and clear, it is usually undergirded by a much more fundamental theological viewpoint that suspends clearly defined distinctions.

In terms of the 'building'-analogy, this means that the conversation between Bavinck and Milbank has the character of a comparison between a 'building' and a 'ruin'.[38] However, if properly interpreted, it is clear that Bavinck's 'building' is aware of its own constructed status, and thus constantly

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[36] Although the exact interpretation of this order might have changed impressively, this way of ordering the content of dogmatics has in fact been in use from John of Damascus onwards, found its most famous expression in Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and was, with some changes, also used by Reformed theologians. Cf. R. Reeling Brouwer, *Grondvormen van theologische systematiek* (Vught: Skandalon, 2009), 112-113.

[37] RD I, 94 (GD1, 71). In the first book of his *Dogmatics*, Bavinck states that this unity lies in the fact that God is the origin and destination of theology: 'It takes its point of departure in God and views all creatures only in relation to him. But proceeding from God, it descends to his works, in order through them again to ascend to and end in him', RD I, 112 (GD1, 89).

[38] The comparison between dogmatic works and buildings was made in witty fashion by Luco van den Brom in his inaugural lecture at the University of Utrecht. For example, he compares Barth's *Church Dogmatics* with an office complex, Pannenberg's and Jenson's works with more modest but still impressive mansions, and the Dutch theologian G.C. Berkouwer's *Dogmatische Studiën* with a 'bungalowpark' (who is therefore, according to van den Brom, the most 'postmodern', since he refuses a system). L. van den Brom, *Theoloog als jongleur: positionering van de christelijke geloofsleer*, Utrechtse theologische reeks, 50 (Utrecht: Faculteit godgeleerdheid, 2006), 13-14.

relativises its systematization. At the same time, Milbank's 'ruin' is constantly on its way to a systematisation that should not be overestimated and yet makes it possible to speak in more general terms of his position than the chaos of the 'literary pile' would initially suggest.

1.3.3 Difference in time

A conversation between Bavinck and Milbank also faces the 'problem of time', since they are separated by the greater part of the twentieth century. Bavinck tried to engage Reformed theology with the problems and challenges that arose in the nineteenth century, while Milbank leans on developments in late twentieth-century theology and philosophy, especially postmodernism, and also engages with typical questions of the early twenty-first century, such as the return of religion in the public sphere and religious violence. The two world wars of the twentieth century, and the violent rise and fall of totalitarian and utterly modern regimes gave a new perspective on modernity that is common sense to RO, but was still hidden for Bavinck.

Furthermore, Bavinck's theological work, being conducted over a century ago, does not involve several important philosophical developments which took place in the twentieth century and are considered to be important points of concern for contemporary theology, especially when it comes to questions about ontology in theological discourse. It is important to be aware that Bavinck preceded these developments, and not to criticise him ahead of time for failing to deal with them.[39]

In the first place, Bavinck worked during a time in which idealism and empiricism were still the two main streams of philosophical thought and were deemed the only ways of looking at the world scientifically. Bavinck is not yet familiar with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, although he does show signs

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[39] Since the main question of this study has an ontological character, the matter of the 'difference in time' between Bavinck and Milbank is not discussed here along theological-historical lines, for example by identifying Bavinck as 'pre-Barthian' and Milbank as responding to post-Barthian neo-orthodoxy, thereby emphasising Barth's place as the pivotal point in twentieth-century theology. Since Barthian theology purposely remained 'purely theological' it did not affect the metaphysical layers this study is interested in and is therefore not of substantial importance for the intended conversation.

of a weariness vis-à-vis the dichotomies of late nineteenth-century philosophy and searches for a way to move beyond them.[40]

Secondly, and even more importantly, Bavinck worked before what we have come to call the 'death of metaphysics'. In the wake of Heidegger and Derrida, there has been a serious tendency to 'free' theology from the language of being, with all its associations of staticness, essentialism, hierarchy and even violence.[41] This does not mean that Bavinck used metaphysical language without any hesitation; rather, he was aware that the mingling of theology with metaphysics had been subject to severe criticism, in his time especially from the school of Albrecht Ritschl.[42] However, Bavinck invoked metaphysics as a useful and even necessary register for theology against the Neo-Kantian and Positivist trends of his age.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Bavinck was active before the so-called 'linguistic' or 'hermeneutical' turn, which his theology seems not to anticipate in any way. In the twentieth century, due to thinkers like Wittgenstein and the later Heidegger, as well as (post-)structuralist theorists, language earned an important status in philosophy and theology. No longer was language seen in a purely instrumental way, simply as a tool used by the mind to represent reality, but instead it was considered as being itself constitutive and even having creative power. We do not simply 'use' our language, we are 'in' language and perhaps shaped or even commanded by it to a greater degree than we ourselves realise. Although, as we shall see, this development is very important in Milbank's work, the question of language and hermeneutics is almost invisible in Bavinck. We simply cannot compare Milbank and Bavinck on a doctrinal level without being aware of these kinds of differences.

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[40] Like many contemporaries, Bavinck deplored the fact that both idealism (or 'rationalism') and empiricism had not been able to give a proper account of the relationship between subject and object: 'Does not the whole of modern philosophy, in its Cartesian as well in its Baconian expression, need revision? Are there not other and better principles of science, principles that protect us from materialism as well as idealism?' RD I, 222 (GD1, 195).

[41] Cf. 1.3.1.

[42] See e.g. RD I, 168-170 (GD1, 142-145) and H. Bavinck, 'De theologie van Albrecht Ritschl', *Theologische Studiën* 6 (1888), 369-403.

1.3.4 Fusing horizons

As such, time represents a hermeneutical problem since it complicates a fair comparison between two thinkers up to the point where they appear to speak of completely different things or even live in different worlds. Nevertheless, in spite of the period of time that separates them, they both still participate in a similar theological debate. Both Bavinck and Milbank criticise an all too easy adaptation of theology to the claims of modernity, although they have no desire simply to retrieve a pre-modern theology. Time and again Bavinck welcomes 'great elements of truth' in modern theology when he faces the challenges of his day, without surrendering himself to the anti-theological worldviews underlying it. In just the same way, John Milbank depicts the renaissance, humanism and the Enlightenment not simply as deteriorations, but as half-hearted theological developments. What Bavinck and Milbank share is a vision of an 'alternative modernity': modernity in a theological framework.

Furthermore, following the thought of Gadamer, we can consider distance in time not as a problem, but as a constitutive factor for understanding. It is not the intention of this study to overcome the particular, time-bound character of the works of Bavinck and Milbank to achieve a comparison in what Anthony Thiselton calls 'an abstract, timeless, conceptually pure doctrinal domain'.[43] Since we perceive an old text as something strange, as something 'other', Gadamer encourages us not to cover up this strangeness, but to unfold it.[44] However, hermeneutics is not only a question of laying bare the historic differences between text and reader, but is also a discovery of the familiarity between them. According to Gadamer, this 'play between strangeness and familiarity' is even the 'true place of hermeneutics'. The

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[43] Cf. A.C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 62-63.

[44] H.G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode. Gesammelte Werke, Band 1* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 311. In discussing the positive use of prejudices, Gadamer even mentions that we have to 'stir them up' ('reizen'): 'Ein Vorurteil gleichsam vor sich zu bringen, kann nicht gelingen, solange dies Vorurteil beständig und unbemerkt im Spiele ist, sondern nur dann, wenn es sozusagen gereizt wird.' *Wahrheit und Methode*, 304. This 'reizen' is in fact what we did in 1.3.1-1.3.3.

strangeness lies in the distance in time, while familiarity is given with belonging to one and the same tradition.[45]

The notion of tradition, not as an obstacle for understanding, but as a creative and even necessary factor for understanding has been widely acknowledged in theology. Alister McGrath, for example, writes favourably of tradition as the 'corporate memory of the community', whether it be scientific, philosophical or religious, stressing that particularly Christian faith does not come into existence in a conceptual vacuum, 'but is both generated and informed by a corporate tradition' which is called the community of faith.[46] It is therefore noteworthy that Bavinck and Milbank invest heavily in linking their theology with tradition. They both intend to work in continuity with the patristic and medieval theological tradition, and therefore hope to develop a theology that is deserving of the name 'catholic'. Despite all the differences in language, conceptual preferences and theological and philosophical context, they both work within the larger horizon of the Christian tradition and tap the same, shared sources. For this reason, we have good reason to hope that they also share in the same questions.

As McGrath writes, 'the present is able to empathize with, and even to selectively appropriate, the past'. He stresses the community as bearer of the tradition, and notes that people standing within the same community tradition '*detect a resonance* of values, language and concepts with the past' (italics mine). In the same way, even though RO and the Reformed tradition were considered as two different traditions, James K. A. Smith in his work asserted that RO 'resonates' with important concerns of the Reformed tradition and that John Milbank's work 'echoed' the works of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd.[47] This seems simply to be the way engagement with past theologies works hermeneutically: something new 'resonates' with something old, or 'echoes' it. It is, as Gadamer has it, a play between strangeness and familiarity.

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[45] 'Sie spielt zwischen Fremdheit und Vertrautheit, die die Überlieferung für uns hat, zwischen der historisch gemeinten, abständigen Gegenständlichkeit und der Zugehörigkeit zu einer Tradition. *In diesem Zwischen ist der wahre Ort der Hermeneutik.*' (italics Gadamer's), *Wahrheit und Methode*, 300.

[46] A.E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 177-178. This is what Gadamer calls our 'historically effected consciousness' ('wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein'), *Wahrheit und Methode*, 307.

[47] Smith and Olthuis (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 18; Smith, *Introducing*, 26; and this study, 1.2.3.

Gadamer furthermore sees in hermeneutics a logic of question and answer: texts can be considered as 'answers to a question'. This does not mean that we only have to reconstruct the 'original question' of the text, but that we also discover that the text is asking us a question.[48] According to Gadamer, no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question. Both text and reader are interwoven in the same questions, a form of dialectics which Gadamer understands as the reciprocity of a conversation. This is why hermeneutics for him has the form of a conversation, and the last section of *Truth and Method* is devoted to speech. Accordingly, the present study is intended as a conversation between two strands of thought, separated in time and even in intention, but nonetheless both standing within the same Christian tradition. The bodies of texts from both Bavinck and Milbank are considered as 'answers to a question', namely: 'How can we keep God and creation in intimate connection with each other, while honouring their difference?' This study wants to listen carefully to the way each of them answers this question as well as the way they ask it, and finally to allow them to interrogate each other, as it were, in a conversation.

1.3.5 Belongingness and critical distance

When this study compares Milbank with Bavinck, it does not simply dismiss Bavinck's way of viewing things because his conceptual tools appear outdated. Instead, his voice is taken seriously as an authority, as a 'classic' within the same Christian tradition. The notion of the 'classic' was famously introduced into the field of systematic theology by David Tracy. He understands the systematic theologian's main task to be the interpretation of the religious classics of a culture. Classics, as Tracy describes them, are recognised as expressions of the human spirit that 'so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status'.[49] A classic 'surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us', it 'upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible'. The classic is characterised by an 'excess of meaning' and is therefore constantly newly appropriated and interpreted. In this way, the works of both Bavinck and Milbank can be read as 'classics'.

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[48] Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 375-384.
[49] D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 108.

Bavinck, as well as Abraham Kuyper, in a sense re-invented orthodox reformed theology and gave it a renewed voice in modern culture. No longer was 'calvinism' something purely for small groups of the culturally irrelevant pious, but it became something culturally, academically and even politically appealing. Today the attention for and the appropriations of his work are not diminishing, but even growing in number.

In the case of Milbank, we are of course dealing with a body of work that is young and even still developing, which does not render it altogether suitable to the label of a 'classic'. However, the enormous impact of his work as well as its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the ongoing history of reception and critical interpretation of it which is itself already impressive in scope, gives it something of the status and 'functions' that Tracy describes as characteristics of classics. There is something in his work that 'struck a chord', as testified by the positive and perhaps even more so by the dozens of critical and even hostile reactions. By now, many of the things Milbank wrote in his *Theology and Social Theory* that were found to be subversive by his readers in the early 1990s are considered common sense among theologians today. This at the very least adds to the classic character of his work, which is, again according to Tracy, constituted by the degree to which 'its memory haunts us' (where the question remains open as to whether this 'haunting' is considered a positive or a negative characteristic).[50] Bavinck's and Milbank's texts are in this study thus both read as 'classics'. I do not intend to bind them by my own methodological device, but hope to create room for their creative force to be unleashed.

Therefore, this study follows the lead of Gadamer's hermeneutics with its focus on 'belongingness'. Gadamer's approach in the end aims at overcoming the estrangement between reader and text and tries to find some kind of harmony. Since artistic interpretation functions as the main framework for his approach, Gadamer (following Heidegger) focuses on the shared 'event of being' which the work of art reveals and in which the interpreter shares. This study intends to remain largely loyal to this approach. It believes in the importance of 'faithful attendance to' and therefore also 'involvement in' the traditions under study, and refuses to allow a guiding principle, method or

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[50] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 108.

scheme to decide what is going to be found.[51] It therefore understands its task mainly to be, in the words of David Tracy, 'to enter into a disciplined and responsive conversation with the subject matter – the responses and, above all, the fundamental questions – of the tradition'.[52]

As such, however, there does not seem to be much space for critical distance between the text and the interpreter. How is it still possible to criticise a text? This question about the lack of critical distance in Gadamer's hermeneutics was raised by Jürgen Habermas and, to a lesser degree, also by Paul Ricoeur. This study hopes to achieve a good balance between the aspects of both proximity and critical distance, since, together with Ricoeur, I regard the task of the interpreter to be not only understanding (*verstehen*, the hermeneutical task), but also explanation (*erklären*, the critical task).[53]

The proximity is guaranteed by giving each of the theologians treated in this study a chapter of their own (chapters 3 and 4) dedicated to listening carefully to their own texts, with all their concepts, nuances and internal tensions, concerning the relation between God and the world. Their own voices will therefore be central in these chapters. The critical distance, however, will also already be present there, through other scholars' interpretations of and discussions with Bavinck and Milbank. Moreover, since participation is the central concept in this study, the third and fourth chapters will be preceded by a separate chapter on participation (chapter 2): what is participation, what did it mean in the theological tradition and what does it imply for the relation between God and the world? As such, this study attempts at least to 'objectify' the discussion about participation in this second chapter, which also functions as the backdrop to an analysis for positioning Bavinck and Milbank in the 'participatory spectrum' (chapter 5). It is in this last chapter that the real conversation between Bavinck and Milbank will take

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[51] These terms are derived from David Tracy, who articulates this approach by writing that 'religion, like art, discloses new resources of meaning and truth to anyone willing to risk allowing that disclosure to "happen". It will happen, the systematic-as-hermeneutical theologians believe, by faithful attendance to, and thereby involvement in and interpretation of, the truth-disclosure of genuinely new possibilities for human life in any classical religious tradition of taste, tact and common (communal) sense'. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 67.

[52] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 100.

[53] P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 71-88.

place. In what way can their theologies be called 'participatory'? What questions do their theologies pose to each other? At the end, this conversation will render clues for the extent to which the concept of participation is or should be at home in Reformed theology.

To arrive at an evaluation of Bavinck's and Milbank's positions on the relation between God and the world and the participatory character of their conceptions, this study uses three ways to achieve critical distance towards their respective works. First, in chapter 2, participation will be given conceptual clarification. This sets a 'standard' for analysing in what sense their conceptions fit in or depart from the participatory tradition. Second, in the chapters on Bavinck and Milbank (i.e., chapters 3 and 4), fundamental discussions with and interpretations of their works will be described. Finally, with the chapter on participation as a backdrop, Bavinck and Milbank will be allowed to 'interrogate' each other in chapter 5.

Critical distance by analysis is not, however, the ultimate goal this study serves. Its encompassing context is to enter more deeply into the mystery with which it starts: the relation between God and the world. In this way, the present study is undertaken in the conviction that theological positions have to be assessed, but that in the end it is not the individual theologian, but rather time or tradition (not to mention God) that judges. This study is therefore conducted not in the certainty of a clear outcome, but in the hope of growth in wisdom.

2. Participation

2.1 Participatory family resemblances

The subject matter of this study is the relation between God and the world, a subject which is as large a subject matter as can be. The immediate cause that prompted this study however, was the particular plea of RO to consider this relation specifically in terms of participation. Before we consider how Bavinck's conception of God and the world relates to participation and what the notion of participation concretely means in Milbank's theology, it is helpful to gain some understanding of what participation really is. This means that the present study will attempt to some degree to define participation from the history of this concept in philosophy and theology and to identify what its implications are for the relation between God and the world. As such we will gain a better understanding of what we are talking about by the time we move on to the actual analysis of Bavinck and Milbank.

To talk about 'definition' and to presume that we can get a picture of what participation 'exactly is', however, is to be naively optimistic about the clarity of language. What we can do in this chapter is to shed some light on the history and theological implications of the concept, but we cannot clearly define participation. It would be particularly misleading if this study were only to look for the word *participatio* or its Greek origin *methexis* and their derivations, and to see what they imply in their context, since 'the meaning of the concept of participation for systematic theology is by far greater than the actual use of the word participation suggests', as H. R. Schlette rightly observes.[1] In his study on participation in patristic theology, F. Normann similarly points to the metaphorical character of the concept which thereby renders it impossible to fixate its meaning.[2]

Although it would be hard to distinguish strictly between 'metaphor' and 'concept' anywhere, I in this study support the idea that participation does not have a fixed meaning. To investigate what participation implies is not only to

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[1] H.R. Schlette, 'Teilhabe' in H. Fries (ed.), *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe*. Vol. 2 (München: Kösel-Verlag, 1963), 640.

[2] F. Normann, *Teilhabe – ein Schlüsselwort der Vätertheologie*. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978), 17.

look for a word with its meaning, but also to look for a family of words, concepts and images. It is to look for what Wittgenstein called 'a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail'.[3] This chapter does not therefore intend to abstract the word participation with its supposed 'meaning', but will attempt to retrieve a particular participatory language about God and the world, which can to a great extent be called the Christian-Platonic language about God and the world. It is hoped that this awareness clarifies why it is impossible to give a clear-cut definition of participation. Nevertheless, even if the concept of participation is not clearly definable, in what follows we will list some of its important characteristics and give a presentation of its 'family'.[4]

The project of this chapter is a precarious hermeneutical undertaking, since it involves more than a thousand years of theological and philosophical history on a subject that is often not even clearly visible at the immediate surface of theological texts. In contrast with the later chapters on Bavinck and Milbank, the present chapter relies more heavily on guidance from experts in the field and makes greater use of secondary literature. Of course 'experts' too can be one-sided, and, moreover, the particular choice of experts will be largely determinative for the outcome. The experts who have been selected for this chapter at least all share this general view, namely that a fruitful conversation has taken place between Christianity and Platonism which proved highly influential for Christian reasoning on the relation between God and the world. Accordingly there was a 'Christian Platonic synthesis' that still exists today in the Christian East and that in the West remained the main conceptual framework in Christianity for more than a thousand years. Even after the medieval period the Platonic tradition does not appear to have died, but was constantly revived, albeit in a more hidden and marginal way than it was in the first millennium. This Christian Platonic tradition is the context in

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[3] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 32 (remark 66).

[4] The complaint of the 'vagueness' of the concept can often be heard, which, according to John Wippel, is a complaint that accompanied participation from the very outset: 'there has been considerable difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory definition or even description of participation since the days when such notion came to be developed in Greek philosophy'. J. F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 96.

which the concept of participation is at home, and will therefore form the focus of the present chapter.

2.2 Historical-conceptual survey

2.2.1 Plato

Any overview of the development of the concept of participation in the history of philosophy and theology must start with Plato. Not that Christian theologians who used the language of participation thought of themselves as pupils of Plato: they saw themselves as pupils of Christ, and intended to speak faithfully to the meaning of Scripture. However, Plato's work is the starting point of participatory thinking which left deep traces of its influence on Christian theology. Plato created an ontology which connected this world and its endless *becoming* with a world of eternal changeless *being*, the world of Ideas. In this way, Plato seemed to create a dualistic ontology: there is a phenomenal world of 'shadows', over against the real world of the Ideas, which are only mediated by the soul.

However, it can well be contended that Plato's main concern is the relation, the 'traffic', between the Ideas and the particulars.[5] There is a participation (*methexis*) of the image in its original. The present world, which is a world of constant becoming, consists of imperfect images of the eternal Ideas, and by means of their ability to depict, to make manifest, these images imperfectly participate in that which the originals contain in the fullness of their own being. Although in his work Plato describes something like a separate world of Ideas over against our phenomenal world, this is mainly to emphasise that everything is grounded in and derives its particularity from an

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[5] The most (in)famous example of dualistic imagery in Plato is of course the myth of the cave in the *Republic*, Book VII, 514a-520a. However, Andrew Louth interprets this story as an instruction of contemplation for those who are in love with reality rather than the establishment of a second world aside from the one we know. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 5-6. The references to Plato in this study are to the Loeb Classical Library, 12 vols. Greek text and English translation (London: Heinemann, 1914-1952).

Absolute. In every particular thing, therefore, there is some sort of manifestation or *parousia* of the Idea.[6]

The manifestations of an Idea are not separate from the Idea, but instead depend on it in everything, and there are all kinds of words that indicate a required constant 'return to' the original which is in fact stirred by the manifestations themselves. There is, for example, the language of 'seeing': a carpenter who makes a device does not, after a first failed attempt in which he broke his product, have the broken version in mind, but he 'looks at' the *eidos* of the device which will be embodied in it when the product is successfully made (which in this case renders the Idea also highly teleological).[7] There is also the language of 'ascension', most famously in the *Symposion*. It is the love for particular beautiful bodies that directs us upward to Beauty as such, leading us to contemplate the essence of Beauty. As in the *Republic*, if we have come to see the Idea, we will never be completely satisfied with its lower manifestations and constantly feel somewhat 'homesick' since we have beheld their perfection.[8] In this conception, Plato does not simply place the Ideas in strict opposition to this world, but he wants to emphasise that this world already participates in them, and that it is a matter of concentration, purification and contemplation to reach for 'the real thing', since 'all other things are beautiful through a participation of it', as Diotima says in her discourse on Beauty.[9]

Plato thus does not provide a scheme of separation between the highest and the particular beings, but rather of grades and levels of participation, involving a movement of *eros* towards the highest.[10] This can perhaps be seen most clearly in his account of knowledge: to know is not to gain something that comes from outside; if you want to have it, you have to be 'in it', to participate in it. Socrates emphasises that knowledge has the character of remembering and that knowledge of the virtues is in fact impossible without being a virtuous person yourself: to know virtue is to participate in it to some

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[6] Normann, *Teilhabe*, 39. Cf. E. v. Ivánka, *Plato Christianus: Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1964), 30-32.

[7] Plato, *Cratylus*, 389.

[8] Plato, *Symposion*, 210a – 211b. *Republic*, Book VII, 520a.

[9] Plato, *Symposion*, 211b.

[10] Plato, *Symposion*, 212.

extent.[11] In Plato's conception 'only like can know like', and knowledge therefore always has the character of a form of attunement to that which is to some extent already there but can be enjoyed and participated in more fully – hence the soul is always longing for more, longing to return to full reality.[12] *Eros* and desire are therefore characteristics of Platonic thought throughout its reception history. Thinking itself is an erotic activity. All these examples give rise to the thought that Plato's conception can be read as a story not of an aversion towards everyday reality and a love for a higher world of Ideas, but of a love for reality since it participates in Reality, which can be sought through intensification, concentration and purification.

For later Christian interpretations of Plato, however, there were basically two possible ontological readings of his work: either this world exists primarily as a 'fall' from the original, true being, which we constantly have to seek by means of the eternal soul, leaving behind the contamination of matter, or else it exists primarily as 'grace', as a constant gift from an absolute source whose traces we are put onto, but which nonetheless shines in everything that participates in it, albeit in a lesser degree. One hardly needs to explain that the latter interpretation was the most suitable as a context for Christian speaking about creation, although the 'threat' of the first interpretation, which in Christian terms equates creation and fall, definitely lurked beneath the surface. If we speak of a threat, however, it should be noted that both readings of Plato actually contain a threat to Christian theology: the first threat is that of 'dualism', the second of 'monism'. Both ways of reading Plato were present in the reception of his thought in later traditions.

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[11] This is most systematically so in Plato's *Meno*. See e.g. the end of the dialogue, 99e-100a. Cf. P. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Transl. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 2002), 42-50; Louth, *Origins*, 1-3.

[12] Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 90b-d: 'When a man has cultivated in himself the love of knowledge and true thinking (...), then such a man, if he comes to touch upon the truth, will find it absolutely necessary to enjoy that truth entirely, at least in so far as human nature is capable of participating in immortality.' He who assimilates his thinking to the eternal things 'renders himself like the object which he contemplates, in conformity with its original nature' and in so doing he attains 'the perfect fulfillment of life which the gods have proposed to humans'. Translation adopted from J. A. McGuckin, 'The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians' in M.J. Christensen and J. A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 101.

2.2.2 Neoplatonism

Plato's thoughts underwent a long history of reception as they first passed through Aristotelian criticism and later through innumerable adaptations and alterations in the periods of so-called Middle- and Neoplatonism. These developments proved to have had great impact on the Christian conception of the divine and of the relation between God and the world. One of the distinctive features of the Neoplatonic conception of the divine is that it is utterly productive, as it can be found in Plotinus: 'When anything else comes to perfection we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else. (…) Fire warms, snow cools, and drugs act on something else in a way corresponding to their own nature.' Doing this, they all imitate the First Principle, which cannot 'remain in itself as if it grudged to give of itself or was impotent'.[13] This world exists in a procession from and return to the superabundant overflowing One, which is, if we compare it to Plato's thought, even beyond the Ideas, beyond being itself. Everything desires to return to the One, to the fullness of being from which it proceeds. The most important thing that can be said of the One is thus that it produces, it brings forth, or, as David Bradshaw has it, 'the first Good must engender something which, though not identical to it, is in some way an image or extension of its being.'[14]

The One, however, had to remain unchanged in this process – otherwise it would not be the One. This posed a major difficulty for Plotinus. That the One is ultimately productive is just as important as that it does not undergo change.[15] Plotinus tried to solve this conundrum with a double account of the concept of *energeia*: there is an activity that belongs to the substance (*energeia tes ousias*) and one that goes out from substance (*ek tes ousias*). For example, there is in fire a heat that constitutes the substance of fire, and a heat that goes out and heats but by which the fire does not change as fire. Likewise, the sun

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[13] Plotinus, *Enneads* V.4.1, 26-36. Quotations from Plotinus are taken from Plotinus, *Enneads*. Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols. Greek text and English translation by A. H. Armstrong. (London: Heinemann, 1966-1988).

[14] D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 75; Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*. 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38.

[15] Cf. *Enneads* VI.9.3: 'Generative of all, the Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quality nor quantity nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest…'

does not change or become less sun because of its shining.[16] These two modes of *energeia*, one internal and one external, constitute what is called the two-act model in Plotinus, which has been of great importance in the philosophical and theological tradition.

Central to a Neoplatonic view on participation is the idea of emanation from and return to the One (*proodos* and *epistrophe*), also known as the *exitus-reditus* scheme: The One overflows into Intellect (*nous*), Intellect into Soul and Soul into embodied life. This is a movement from unity to diversity, which is again drawn back to unity. Aside from the image of the sun with its rays, Plotinus often uses the image of the circle, the One being the centre of the circle which contains everything that can emanate from it.[17]

From a modern point of view, Aristotelian or Neoplatonic views on the divine are often labelled as 'static', or are said to be 'bereft of life'. Certainly, all the movements that belong to life as we experience it are usually crossed out as far as the divine is concerned, but one wonders how 'static' this really renders the divine. In Aristotle, the divine is famously said to be without motion (*akinetos*); however, *energeia* is still the pre-eminent word for denoting what God is. Aristotle purged *energeia* not only of *kinesis*, but also of *dynamis* (potentiality), which renders the divine being as pure act, as a state of complete fulfilment.[18] Therefore, the divine is something ultimately proceeding and giving, but itself without change.

An interesting word that can be used for the divine is therefore 'silence', as it is found for example in Proclus. Every plurality of the world is not simply eliminated, but 'folded up' within the One. He calls it the achievement of silence: 'There must be before the Word the silence that supports the Word. (...) It is a word of the silence before the intelligibles; but when the intelligibles are silenced, it is silence.' From a created view, the divine life can be seen as a form of silence, but it is the silence that is 'between the notes', the uncomprehended source in which the music shares.[19]

Although the One seems to be far away as a remote source, the 'higher' can pre-eminently be found 'inward'. To return to the One it is necessary to turn inward into oneself where the divine can be encountered through a process of

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[16] Plotinus, *Enneads* V.4.2, 27-39; Cf. Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 76.
[17] Plotinus, *Enneads*, e.g. V.1, VI.8.
[18] Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 24-44.
[19] Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 149-150.

ascension. Therefore, knowledge of the ultimate is in Neoplatonism bound up with self-knowledge.[20]

From Plotinus on, different currents can be traced. The first is that of theurgical Platonism, as in the pagan philosophers Iamblichus and Proclus, but also in the Eastern Christian tradition.[21] Here religious life is basically considered as participation in the divine *energeiai*, through ritual and prayer. It is a very active conception of connecting with God (or the gods), and therefore not primarily contemplative. A major characteristic of this current was the distinction between *ousia* and *energeia* in God. Human beings can participate in the latter, but not in the former. God's *energeiai* are known and named, whereas his *ousia* has no nam

e and is only known through the *energeiai*. In the Cappadocian Fathers, the *energeiai* are in fact the names of God: they manifest the *ousia*, but they do not constitute it. These self-manifestations, as Bradshaw observes, 'are God as He is capable of being apprehended by us'.[22] There is therefore a decisive distinction between God as he is unknown, uncommunicated and unparticipated (i.e., God's *ousia*) and God as he is known, communicated and participated (i.e., God's *energeiai*). In this way, human beings or creation in general can be said to 'participate in God' without participating in the divine *ousia* itself, which remains mysterious.

Applied in a Christian context, this conceptuality is able to articulate beautifully the practice and experience of the church as 'co-working' with God: through prayer and liturgy and through the act of loving, we really enter into the divine workings. For example, applied to the theme of love, the concept of divine *energeiai* gives a theological rationale to hymns like *ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est*, and can be considered to follow the johanneic line that 'God is love, and the man that dwells in love, dwells in God'.[23]

Another strand of interpretation was followed in the West. A groundbreaking innovation took place in an anonymous commentary on

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[20] Cf. Louth, *Origins*, 40.
[21] In this current of thought we find the Cappadocian Fathers, Maximus Confessor, John of Damascus and Gregory Palamas. It was, however, also already present in Philo, Iamblichus and Athanasius.
[22] Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 169.
[23] 1 John 4:16.

Plato's *Parmenides*.[24] The commentator makes a distinction between pure being (*to einai*) and derivative being (*to on*). The One is neither being, nor substance, nor is it a form of *energeia*, but it is *to energein katharon*, 'pure act', which is 'not fixed in relation to something'.[25] The commentator distinguishes between being in the infinitive and as participle, pure being and derivative being, the former being simply pure activity, without any specification of a subject performing the action. This conception has exercised a strong influence in Christian thinking on the participation of creation in the divine, and as we will see later on it can be found in Marius Victorinus, Boethius, and, last but not least, in Thomas Aquinas' use of *esse*.

2.2.3 Church Fathers

Although Tertullian asked rhetorically what 'Athens' has to do with 'Jerusalem',[26] Platonic thought was commonly considered a suitable framework for thinking through the implications of the Jewish-Christian faith. It is important to realise that our modern conceptions about the 'philosophical' and the 'theological' (or the 'religious') and their 'relations' do not fit the classical context. Platonism in itself was highly religious, and, as Pierre Hadot has emphasised, it was itself foremost a form of religious practice.[27] Platonism involved a religious zeal and a guidance of the soul that was not rejected, but rather 'filled' in the Christian framework.

The waters in which patristic theology moved were those of participation. As Friedrich Normann writes in his study on participation in the patristic era: 'Participation in God is the preferred, most suitable framework in which fit the manifold images and analogies that depict the mystery of the union of God and man'.[28] He points, for example, to the concept that is widely in use from Ireneaus on, the 'wonderful exchange' of the Incarnation, as it was famously

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[24] Pierre Hadot identified this commentator as Porphyry. For a discussion of this commentary, see P. Hadot, 'Dieu comme acte d'être dans je néoplatonisme: A propos des théories d'É. Gilson sur la métaphysique de l'Exode' in P. Vignaux, *Dieu et l'être: Exégèses d'Exode 3,14 et de Coran 20,11-24* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), 57-63.

[25] Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 103, 107.

[26] Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, VII. A. Roberts, J. Donaldsons (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Reprint 1978).

[27] This is Hadot's argument throughout *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

[28] Normann, *Teilhabe*, 304.

put: 'God became man, that man might become God'.[29] The fathers did not refrain from speaking openly about *theosis* as humanity's goal. This was not intended as a surrender of our creaturely status, but rather as an affirmation of the glorious goal for which man is created, namely being the image of God, which is given its full realisation in the Incarnation.

There were, however, also some important ways in which the Christian tradition distanced itself radically from Platonism. The first point of departure for the Christian tradition was the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*. In Platonism, the soul clearly belonged to the divine realm, whereas the body was material and earthly. In a Christian framework, however, it was particularly Athanasius who emphasised the kinship of the soul with the body as it is given in its createdness. In Athanasius' thought – and here he fully agreed with his opponent Arius – there is no intermediate zone between God and the world. A gap thus separates Origen and Athanasius: both developed 'mystical theologies' and both found it appropriate to speak of the divinisation of human beings, but Origen's way is a divinisation of the soul through contemplation, whereas Athanasius' approach is conformity with the image of God, provided by the Word who condescended to our fallen state in the Incarnation.[30]

Creatio ex nihilo leaves creation in a position of utter humility and dependence, since it is always waiting for God to allow the knowledge of himself to be shared with creation. If Neoplatonism is said to have a negative theology, then the orthodox Christian reception of Neoplatonism is even more negative, since the soul is no longer the vehicle to connect with the divine. *Creatio ex nihilo* means that there is simply a gulf between God and the world, between the uncreated self-subsistent and that which is created out of nothing by the will of God. This world is not an extension of God's being.

In Platonism, E. von Ivánka notes, the idea of creation is impossible. It is impossible to think of something that is not 'God' but is also not an 'anti-God' or a 'fall from God'.[31] The notion of the created is unthinkable for the Platonic mind. In patristic thought the pantheistic as well as the dualistic implications

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[29] Normann points to this way of speaking in e.g. Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians and Cyril of Alexandria.

[30] Cf. Louth, *Origins*, 75-80.

[31] E. von Ivánka, *Plato Christianus: Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1964), 87-88.

of Neoplatonism were countered: the world is not there because it *has to be* there in a necessary movement of descent from and ascent to the divine, but because God willed it. The notion of participation combined with the doctrine of creation out of nothing implies dependence. As Peter Leithart writes concerning participation in the work of Athanasius: 'Creation is by participation because it is dependent for its life, stability and existence on power and energy that is not inherent in the creation itself.'[32]

However, creation denotes not only 'distance', it denotes also a mysterious glory that is being communicated. Gregory of Nyssa writes that God created spiritual beings in order that others might join him in enjoying his richness, and that they might be filled with his goodness and desire increasingly to partake in it. How moving, spatial and temporal things come forth from God is, however, incomprehensible – and von Ivánka notes how clearly Gregory breaks with Plotinus here, who considered the rendering transparent of this 'coming forth' to be the very task of philosophy.[33] The susceptibility of the gracious communication of the divine is the very core of what it is to be created, but such a notion still does not render this communication perspicuous.

A second point that must be mentioned on which the Christian tradition distanced itself from Platonism is the Trinity. In the Christian tradition, God is not purely oneness over against the plurality of the world. In comparing Pseudo-Dionysius with Plotinus, Vladimir Lossky stresses the fact that Dionysius' conception of God is even beyond the apophaticism of Plotinus. For Plotinus, the divine is characterised by oneness, but for Dionysius, speaking in a Trinitarian mode, 'God is neither one, nor unity'. In the Trinitarian conception even the oneness of God is transcended and the word 'incomprehensibility' is the best word to define what God is to us.[34] Christian orthodoxy has maintained the mystery at the heart of the Godhead without giving in to the tendency to reduce the Three to the One, or the One to the Three. 'The one and the many both go back to the heart of who God is', as Hans

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[32] P. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 66.
[33] Von Ivánka, *Plato Christianus*, 177.
[34] V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1973), 29-31.

Boersma summarises this position.[35] The combination of this view of God with the idea that God created the world out of nothing produced a much more positive view on matter than Platonism allowed. Through the notions of *creatio ex nihilo* and the confession of the Trinity, Christian theology was able to overcome the Scylla of monism as well as the Charybdis of dualism which both lurked beneath the surface in Platonism.

Creation and Trinity render the world more mysterious, as a product of grace, and they render God more incomprehensible than in Neoplatonism. According to Gregory of Nyssa, we only know the spiritual and immaterial by its workings in the sensible, material world.[36] We therefore recognise God as being active in the material, and we know that he is distinct from matter, but we do not know what his very being is – a view that implies the aforementioned distinction between divine energies and *ousia*. We give his workings all kinds of names, like wisdom, goodness, power or eternity, but these names do not signify God in his being. God is ineffable, and therefore not simply good, but beyond goodness – or even: not God, but 'beyond God', since 'God' is also a name or concept. Encountering God, therefore, is entering the 'night' or the 'cloud of unknowing' as it was famously expressed in an anonymous writing from the late Middle Ages.[37] The soul must be satisfied by knowing that God is, and that God is distinct from all that is thinkable, and must therefore honour the ineffable with silence. The difference between God and the world in this framework is impressive.

Such a negative theology, however, is not without knowledge of its own kind. The soul, in its turn towards God, loves God and in this love it already participates in God, since 'God is love'. Gregory's mystical theology is therefore strongly committed to the Platonic axiom that 'like can only be known by like'. In the act of loving God, you become more what God is: love.[38] Participation in

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[35] H. Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 34.

[36] Cf. Gregory's *In Hexaemeron*, 9-10. H. R. Drobner (ed.), *Gregorii Nysseni in Hexaemeron. Opera Exegetica in Genesim, Pars I.* Gregorii Nysseni Opera Vol. IV, Pars I (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 18-21.

[37] *The Cloud of Unknowing and other works*. Transl. A. C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

[38] For Gregory's insistence on God's utter unknowability on the one hand and our 'knowing by desire' on the other, see particularly his Homilies on the Song of Songs. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Transl. R. A. Norris Jr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

the divine is for Gregory not that human nature is simply a 'decreased divinity', but that it is fundamentally open for gracious communication of God's being, or, as von Ivánka writes, finite being is itself nothing but the openness for this communication, from which it can turn away, or by which it can allow itself to be completely determined. The positions of creature and creator in this participatory relationship can therefore be characterised as 'loving-striving' on the one hand, and 'giving-gracing' on the other.[39]

In the third place – and it becomes more and more evident here that these motifs are not isolated, but deeply connected – there is the Christian notion of the incarnation. In Christ God became man, he 'came to his own'. In order to see what 'incarnation' does with 'participation' we will take as our example a larger discussion on the way these motifs function in the work of Augustine, which leads us to a consideration of what the specific Christian 'grammar' did with the notion of participation.

2.2.4 Augustine

The most famous and probably the most intensely debated example of Platonic influence and participatory content in patristic theology is Augustine. The interpretations of his work vary from 'deeply Plotinian' to 'a complete break with Neoplatonism', but many interpreters interestingly seem to hold on to both of these theses, which locate Augustine in the same sphere that this study considers the *patres* commonly to be moving in: on the one hand participation is the world in which his theology moves, while on the other hand he fundamentally breaks with some typically Platonic notions.

If we simply start at the very beginning of the *Confessiones*, Augustine's famous line that 'you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you' already witnesses of his kinship with Platonism: the soul longs for God, to return to the One who unites all that is dispersed in our earthly lives. In Book seven of the *Confessiones* Augustine describes something like an ontological conversion through the writings of the Platonists, who taught him that everything that is comes from God, and thus that everything that is, is good.[40] It is, however, the stumbling-block of the incarnation that he does not

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[39] Von Ivánka, *Plato Christianus*, 176-177.
[40] Augustine, *Confessiones* book VII, in particular IX,13-XII,18. Augustine tells the story here in phrases taken from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. For the references to the *Confessiones, De Trinitate* and *De Civitate Dei*, see P. Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-*

find in their works and which he still dislikes. Augustine still had to learn the humility and weakness of Jesus Christ, he tells us. The highest goodness and truth is not to be found if we strive superhumanly above ourselves, but if we enter in the lowly way of Jesus, through dust, humility, the cross and death. The Platonists, according to Augustine, 'see the fatherland at a distance, and yet do not embrace the way to get there', as John Cavadini paraphrases him on the basis of a reading of *De Civitate Dei*.[41]

In *De Trinitate* we can discern something like an *exitus-reditus* scheme, which allows us to see this work as reflecting the movement of the human soul on its way from and to the triune God. In the first seven books Augustine tries to understand what God has revealed about his triune being in Scripture. After that, he develops the path of the soul towards God, which begins in its discernment of God as 'truth'.[42] This realisation does not yield an easy pathway back to God, but at least instigates a yearning for God, a longing for the homeland, knowing that a gulf lies in-between. The crux is that man is made in the image of God (or 'after' the image of God, as Augustine emphasises[43]), which image will always strive to return to its archetype and find in itself traces of and analogies with its Trinitarian archetype. This return to the archetype is by no means an easy thing, which Augustine emphasises by discussing the root of sin which can be discerned in the fall of Adam and Eve. Again, he does not offer an easy path of contemplation that simply moves inward into the soul, where it will obviously find the divine.

When it comes to participation, Augustine makes an important distinction here between knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*). The mind is concerned with two 'worlds', one of contemplation of the eternal, unchangeable things, which is the realm of wisdom, and the other directed to the 'changeable and corporeal things, without which this life does not go on', which is the realm of knowledge. It thus seems that Augustine separates the divine from the earthly, and thus breaks with a real participatory paradigm. However, in that same context, he is completely clear about the fact that *scientia* and the changeable world are not the end of man: 'whatever we do

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Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. First Series, vol. 1-3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1878. Reprint 1978).

[41] J. C. Cavadini, 'Trinity and Apologetics in the Theology of St. Augustine', *Modern Theology* 29 (2013), 61.

[42] Augustine, *De Trinitate* VIII.2.3.

[43] *De Trinitate* VII.6.12.

rationally in the using of temporal things, we may do it with the contemplation of attaining eternal things, passing through the former, but cleaving to the latter.'[44] A lot of what Augustine is saying in this respect is summed up in his rendering of Job 28:28: 'Behold, piety is wisdom (*sapientia*), and to abstain from evil is knowledge (*scientia*)'. Of course, the only real thing that is our true end is piety and wisdom, but the realm we live in now is the realm of evil. If we want to attain the highest, eternal goods – which are definitely ours to attain – we have to fight the battle against sin, which is humbly fought in the temporal world, with the humble means of knowledge.[45]

It is not a surprise then that Augustine goes on to discuss the Incarnation of the Word: in him are contained both *sapientia* and *scientia* ('as the apostle says: 'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge''). What Christ did among us are 'temporal things', so we attain to him through knowledge. However, passing through this *scientia* (or 'faith', as it is called in the same context) we reach *sapientia* as well: 'we stretch through knowledge to wisdom; yet we do not withdraw from one and the same Christ'. Simply put, eternity is not reached by diving into the soul and being lifted up towards the divine, but is only reached through the Mediator.[46] As in the *Confessiones*, it is emphatically again the way of humility that must be followed in order to attain the highest, and in this Augustine follows a logic that can be found on almost every page of the New Testament and that we recognised as the primary patristic point of departure from a purely Plotinian framework of ascent. The Incarnation signifies 'humility' as well as 'rest', because, as he says to the Platonists in *De Civitate Dei*, in order for them to rest in the truth, 'it is lowliness that is requisite'.[47]

Our participation in the divine does not follow a route of contemplative escape from the earthly, but passes through a participation in the example of God in Jesus Christ. Participating in his words and works we will be transformed more and more into the Image of God. We cannot do without the Mediator and without mediation of bodily works, because this is precisely the

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[44] *De Trinitate* XII.12.19.
[45] *De Trinitate* XII.14.22.
[46] *De Trinitate* XIII.19.24.
[47] *De Civitate Dei* X.29.

place where God has chosen to reveal himself.[48] The human soul is the *imago trinitatis*, but in its fallen state it has to be instructed through the senses to be again what it is meant to be.[49]

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[48] See e.g. *De Trinitate* XIV.17.23: 'He, then, who is day by day renewed by making progress in the knowledge of God, and in righteousness and true holiness, transfers his love from things temporal to things eternal, from things visible to things intelligible, from things carnal to things spiritual; and diligently perseveres in bridling and lessening his desire for the former, and in binding himself by love to the latter.' Interestingly, this sounds like a Christian retelling of Diotima's speech on Beauty in Plato's Symposium. For the need of the Mediator/mediation in participating in the divine, see De Trinitate XIII.19.24: 'And those distinguished philosophers of the heathen who have been able to understand and discern the invisible things of God by those things which are made, have yet, as is said of them, 'held down the truth in iniquity'; because they philosophized without a Mediator, that is, without the man Christ, (…) placed as they were in these lowest things, they could not but seek some media through which they might attain to those lofty things which they had understood.' This is exactly parallel to Augustine's own story in Confessiones VII in which he also 'saw the light' through the Platonic writings, but did not succeed to 'remain' in it, because he still lacked the right mediation (through the Incarnation) which trained him in the true Christian way of humility and love. See also John C. Cavadini, 'The Quest for Truth in Augustine's *De Trinitate*', Theological Studies 58 (1997), 440.

[49] This reading of Augustine's *De Trinitate* partly corresponds with, but on important points also contradicts, Maarten Wisse's impressive reading in his *Trinitarian Theology beyond Participation: Augustine's* De Trinitate *and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011). I think Wisse correctly criticises interpretations of Augustine that too easily adopt Augustine's text for a 'social trinitarian' program or an incarnational theology. Unfortunately, however, Wisse strictly opposes two theological realms that in patristic theology belong together. On the one hand Wisse identifies (twentieth-century) theologies that speculatively presuppose a union of the human with the divine which is, according to these theologies, simply *manifested* in Christ – and these are what Wisse therefore calls 'christologies of manifestation' (RO being his pre-eminent example here). These theologies of 'intellectual speculation' are in Wisse's typology opposed to a different kind of theology that is full of 'fear and trembling' for God, a realm in which 'knowing God is no intellectual achievement' but is 'the eschatological destiny of the pure of heart, paving their way with humility and putting their trust in Christ' (147). It is, in short, the seriousness of sin that is emphasised in this latter theological 'world'. As may be observed in my reading of *De Trinitate*, I recognise both these 'worlds' in Augustine's work, but – and this is where I differ from Wisse – not as a non-participatory ontology versus a participatory one, but as one 'Christian participatory' picture. Particularly within a Christian framework, participation is totally a matter of humility, of the reality of sin, of suffering with Christ, and is highly respectful of God's incomprehensible being. We therefore do not adopt from Wisse his contrast between Augustine and participation. In order to

2.2.5 The double sign of the Incarnation

In the above we described a part of Augustine's work in greater detail in order to give an example of what Louth aptly calls an 'unresolved tension' among the fathers: on the one hand they think fully within a Platonic framework in which the soul's search for God is an ascent to God, with the soul itself properly belonging with God, and on the other hand there is the logic of the Incarnation, a descent which gives man the possibility of union with God which is not simply open to him by nature. Louth continues: 'And yet man *is* made in the image of God, and so these movements of ascent and descent cross one another and remain – as a fact of experience – in unresolved tension.'[50] If, therefore, we summarise the patristic view on participation, we would have to say that it is an ascent of the soul through the descent of the incarnate Word.

But what is the role of sin in all this? Is the incarnation God's 'reaction' to sin, his method of 'reparation'? Although much modern theology has strongly protested against such a view, this divine 'motif' of the incarnation is too obviously present in the patristic writings – not to mention Scripture itself – to be denied. At the same time, this is not the whole story. The incarnation of the Word is not seen apart from the original created nature of human beings. Therefore, incarnation is more than just a method of repair, but it is the gift to humanity of what is human, namely union with the divine, which is nothing less than what man was made for.

That this implies more than simply 'reparation' appears, for example, in Athanasius' classic on the incarnation of the Word. There he writes about human beings that, although 'they were by nature subject to corruption, the grace of their union with the Word made them capable of escaping from the natural law, provided that they retained the beauty of innocence with which they were created.'[51] There was still something 'instable' in man, although he was created as 'sharing the nature of the Word'.[52] The incarnation stands in Athanasius' work not on its own, but is placed in a story of God's ongoing 'unfolding' towards human beings, even if they turn away from him so

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sustain this opposition, one has to downplay the clearly participatory framework and content of *De Trinitate*.

[50] Louth, *Origins*, xiv.

[51] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word,* 4. In P. Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Second Series, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1891. Reprint 1978).

[52] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 4.

decidedly and work steadfastly on their 'dehumanisation'. The incarnation of the Word therefore does not stand under the sign of sin alone. It in fact stands under the double sign of death and resurrection, the latter 'putting an end to corruption' and therefore finally giving the stability of sharing in God's life that man originally lacked. Accordingly, it would seem that a patristic view on the incarnation serves the double goal of reparation and elevation, or, in their own terms, 'deification'.

Although this survey does not enter deeply into specific Trinitarian or Christological details, we might briefly mention that much of what we tend to see nowadays as 'different things' was considered as one in the patristic age. The Incarnation, Christ's suffering and his death on the cross were considered as one kenotic movement, so for example a pure 'theology of the cross' is not to be found in the period under consideration.[53] Moreover, the Incarnation – or, as we should rather say, the kenotic incarnational movement – was not considered independently of man's purpose as the image of God. Man is not crossed out, but fulfilled in Christ: in him, God gave man what man was destined to be. Creation and salvation were therefore not considered as two altogether different things.

What did the specifically Christian grammar in the end do with the idea of participation? As we saw, Christian worship and theology contained several critical concepts that seriously altered pagan views of the relation between God and the world. We saw in the first place how *creatio ex nihilo* and, in the second place, the concept of the Trinity distinguished Christianity radically from a typical Platonic worldview. In the third place, and most extensively with respect to Augustine, we reflected on the role of the Incarnation. The Christian focus on the Incarnation provided a form of union with God that did not attempt to get away from matter through the 'highway of the soul', but passed through a deeply embodied spirituality, through humility and suffering. Concomitant with these ideas was a strong notion of sin, interpreted as *privatio boni*: it is the absence of the good, which amounts to saying that it is the absence of being. The idea of sin and the centrality of the fall therefore

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[53] Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *Het werk van Christus*. Dogmatische studien (Kampen: Kok, 1953), 32: '[The Church] saw historically the *unity* of incarnation and cross. (…) The incarnation is not an independent phase on the way of salvation, which is then followed by the way of the cross as a *second* and *new* phase' (my translation; italics in original).

do not put a melancholic gloss on creation itself; instead, they emphasise the qualification of creation which God gives in Genesis 1, that it was 'very good'. However, the specifically Christian grammar did not function as a set of critical concepts *against* a participatory ontology. It was simply written into a participatory ontology, and filled and deepened it. There was no conflict between 'biblical', 'soteriological' concepts of Christ on the one hand, and 'cosmological', 'philosophical' ones on the other, but the two merged into one cosmological-christological discourse.[54]

When it comes to participation, or its sister concept of deification, the conception of man as *imago dei* has been far more important for the development of Christian participatory thought than, for example, a single 'disturbing' text in the New Testament that speaks boldly about our 'partaking in the divine nature'.[55] The idea that man is created in the image of God fits well within a Platonic scheme of archetype and image, and was therefore commonly interpreted along these lines. The image longs for its perfection, its fulfilling, which is the archetype, but finds itself bound in sin, and stands before a breach. Only through conformity with God incarnate will we be able to find the way to our true origin and end. Man's creation in the image of God and Christ's restoration of this image after the fall provide a basic narrative which fully opens up patristic theology to Platonic conceptuality, and at the same time cuts the early fathers off from the most basic assumptions of Platonism.

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[54] Cf. J. R. Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 160.

[55] 2 Peter 1:4. 'The term *theosis* itself is not explicitly advanced by scriptural authority', J.A. McGuckin in *Partakers in the Divine Nature*, 96. For a very precise interpretation of the phrase *theias koinonoi phusis* and its context, cf. S. Hafemann, '"Divine Nature" in 2. Pet. 1,4 within its Eschatological Context', *Biblica* 94 (2013), 80-99. Hafeman argues that *phusis* must here be defined as 'God's dynamic character as expressed in the attitudes and/or actions that it brings forth or produces'. For 'partaking in the divine nature' as a relevant notion in both Eastern and Western theology, see P. M. Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature: Deification and Communion* (London: T&T Clark, 2010). Collins also observes that 2 Pet. 1:4 'does not evoke much interest' among the early Christian writers, and that the notion of deification was embedded in a much wider account of Scriptural reasoning. Instead, he argues that, if one needs to point to a 'proof-text' for the doctrine of deification, it would rather be Psalm 82:6, read through its adoption in John 10:31-36. *Partaking in Divine Nature*, 32-48.

2.2.6 Thomas Aquinas

Within a survey that had to be kept short for the present purposes, Augustine already received a relatively great amount of attention. However, also Thomas Aquinas' view on participation demands a separate and larger section. Participation is a major theme in Thomas' works , but still needed to be highlighted anew in more recent scholarship.[56] In the middle of the twentieth century, Cornelio Fabro and Louis-Bertrand Geiger gave particular attention to the theme in Aquinas' metaphysics, and more recently John Wippel and Rudi te Velde have attempted to advance these older readings of the participation theme. All of them consider that there are in Aquinas' metaphysics both an Aristotelian current and a Platonic one which stand in tension with each other, although Aquinas attempted to synthesise the two and was more or less successful in this endeavour. The theme of participation belongs to his 'Platonic side' and is clearly important throughout his work, but one wonders whether he really did succeed in fitting it into the Aristotelian content of his thought – although this is not the immediate focus of this study. Thomas is in fact the *consummation* of the participatory tradition since he seems on the one hand in his Aristotelianism to open up a more 'this-worldly perspective' than was traditionally the case, but on the other hand merges this perspective with a participatory Platonism. If one considers this attempt to be successful, then Thomas is the master of participation, but if one interprets his work as being unsatisfactory in this respect, he can also be seen as the one who actually destroyed participatory theology.

If we attempt to get at the meaning of participation in Thomas' work, we find – more than in the works of his Christian Platonic predecessors – something like a search for conceptual clarification of the term. Participation literally means *partem capere*, Thomas says: something takes a part of something else. We speak of participation when 'something receives in particular fashion that which belongs to another universally' – a phrase that

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[56] Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 140: 'It is as if Aristotle's verdict on participation as no more than an idle word without a precise meaning has, for centuries, prevented the Thomistic school from arriving at a positive assessment of what Thomas intends to express by Participation'; Cf. J. Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 8; F. Kerr, *After Aquinas: versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 215n27.

speaks the language of the Platonic tradition.[57] Thomas gives this definition in his commentary on Boethius' *De Hebdomadibus*, in which he attempts to take up and develop the participation theme as it functions in Boethius' thought. Thomas takes over the Boethian distinction between that which is (*quod est*) and being itself (*esse ipsum*), in which the former is said to participate in the latter.

Thomas then distinguishes three kinds of participation: the first takes place in relations of species, genus and individual. An individual participates in the genus 'but does not possess the intelligible content of the genus in all its amplitude and extension'.[58] For example, Socrates participates in the species 'man', but he by no means exhausts 'man', nor is he identical with the common nature which the species express. The second kind of participation takes place in relations of subject and accident and of matter and form. The receiving principle participates in the received form. There is a receiving subject which receives a perfection, the combination of which makes it a composition. For example, a statue consists of matter which has been constructed in some form; the statue would not be this statue if its matter did not participate in this specific shape. The third kind of participation, however, is the most relevant when it comes to the creature's participation in God: according to Thomas, an effect can be said to participate in its cause, especially when the effect is not equal to the power of its cause. The effect participates in diminished fashion in the power of the cause, just like for example illuminated air participates in the light of the sun which is fully realised in the sun itself.

If we want to form an idea of the way Thomas deals with the relation between created being and the being of God, it is in the first place important to note that creatures are for him compositions of *essentia* and *esse*, while this distinction does not apply when we want to talk about God: his essence is his existence, and Thomas therefore calls God *ipsum esse subsistens*.[59] Whereas a creature exists of both act and potency, God is pure act, and this is precisely the character *esse* therefore has: the act of existing or supreme actuality. In contrast to creatures, in God there is nothing unrealised, no hint of potency.

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[57] R. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 11; Wippel, *Metaphysical thought*, 96.
[58] Te Velde, *Participation*, 12; Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 97.
[59] ST1, q3. a4; ST1, q4. a2; ST1, q13. a11. References to Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* are taken from the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 5 vols. rev. ed. 1920 (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, 1981 (reprint)).

Thus Thomas' account of *esse* is very close to the account of God we already encountered in the anonymous commentary on the *Parmenides*, which interpreted the One as *to energein katharon* and made an important distinction between *to einai* and *to on*, with the latter participating in the former. It is particularly through Boethius that this current of thought influenced Thomas' participatory thought.[60]

Thomas agrees with the Platonic Christian tradition that God's creating exists in his *communicatio boni*: God does not want to keep his goodness to himself, but wants others to share in it.[61] This renders any goodness (and also being) of creatures completely participatory, dependent. They receive what they are *ab alio*. Although Thomas distinguishes sharply between creator and creature, he does not oppose them as simply two 'beings', the one as the highest being and the other a lower or lesser being. God is Being itself, and creation participates in Being to a lesser degree. The concept of participation thus does not seem to articulate an arrogance in speaking about the status of creation, but emphasises, on the contrary, the humbleness of creatures in relation to God's fullness. What they are is not themselves, but belongs originally and ultimately to God.

However, more than the thinkers in the Neoplatonic framework, Thomas is concerned about goodness as something essentially and intrinsically belonging to creatures. According to Te Velde, Aquinas keeps the Aristotelian aspect (i.e., the intrinsic immanent goodness) and the Platonic aspect (i.e., the transcendent goodness) together in a synthesis which focuses on the 'likeness' (*similitudo*) to God in which we are created, which is something which we have of ourselves and which also has its origin in divine goodness. Accordingly, in his *De Veritate* Thomas gives a twofold answer to the question why things are said to be good: in the first place, they are good because of 'an immanent form given to them as a likeness of the highest good', and furthermore 'because of the first goodness as exemplary and effective principle of all created goodness'.[62]

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[60] For this line of reasoning, see 2.2.2; For its reception history in Scholastic theology, see Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 114-118.

[61] See 2.2.2; Te Velde, *Participation*, 23; Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius' famous maxim: 'Bonum est diffusivum sui'.

[62] Te Velde, *Participation*, 26.

Although the participatory relation between God and creation has the character of a cause (in the sense of an 'origin') and an effect, the relation also bears a distinctive mark of teleology. The cause in which the effect dimly participates is also the final cause, which influences the effect. Something is good because it is directed towards the ultimate good, which is God. The absoluteness from which we derive our particularity is not only a source but also an end: we are from it and we tend towards it, through attraction and desire.

If then for Thomas creation participates to a lesser degree in 'to be' (*esse*), what does this imply for the relation between God and creation? At times it seems as if Thomas simply contends that creatures participate in *esse subsistens*, that is, 'in God'. However, Thomas makes a distinction between *esse subsistens* and *esse commune*, where the latter is the *esse* in which every particular being participates.[63] If he did not make this distinction, he would favour pantheism, as he himself thinks, since the existence (*esse*) of any particular being would literally be a part of God, which is definitely not what Thomas has in mind. When Thomas distinguishes these two, the most important distinction is that nothing can be added to self-subsisting *esse*, whereas *esse commune* is neutral with respect to addition. *Esse commune* does not subsist apart from the individual existents in which it is received.[64]

Thomas does not, however, strictly separate the two, since then the whole conception of creation participating in the divine *esse* would disappear. John Wippel points to the fact that the theme of participating in *esse* belongs to the third kind of participation distinguished by Thomas, that of an effect in its cause. To participate in something is to be caused by something else. The discovery of individual beings as participating in *esse commune* refers to their caused character by the unparticipated source, *esse subsistens*. As Wippel observes: 'Once this is established, one can speak of them as actually participating in *esse subsistens* as well'.[65] Something can participate in a

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[63] *Esse commune* is something different from *ens commune* (which would be easier to understand if we relate Thomas to the *einai-to on* distinction). Thomas in fact makes the classical distinction even more subtle (and more difficult). Although *esse commune* and *esse subsistens* are not the same, there simply is a divine 'ring' to the word *esse* which the word *ens* does not have. Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 111-112.

[64] Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 112, 116.

[65] Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 117. This way of reasoning sounds very much like Thomas' way of reasoning in the famous 'five ways' (ST1 q2, a3): A certain effect

perfection which transcends the effect totally, but in which the effect is still said to participate.

To understand Thomas' view on participation it is also important to grasp something of his insistence on analogy as the word that characterises the way creation is 'linked' with the divine. Already by his time the term analogy had a long reception history as it developed from a theory of 'proportion between numbers' to a metaphysical term expressing ontological similitudes between diverse kinds of being.[66] Thomas develops the theme of analogy, confronted with the question as to how the names and attributes we use for God relate to God's very being.[67] There are two ways of speaking about God that he disapproves of, namely univocal and equivocal discourse. Univocal discourse claims that our words like goodness or wisdom denote exactly the same thing when they are predicated of God as when they are predicated of created beings. Equivocal discourse, on the other hand, claims that we have no idea what it means to predicate, for example, 'goodness' of God. In equivocal discourse our human terms are completely emptied of their meaning when applied to God, since God is so transcendent and unknowable. Although Thomas seems to have more sympathy for the latter than the former option, he chooses a third way, which in a sense lies in-between these two ways of speaking about God although it in fact also encompasses them both.[68]

In the first place, it is quite something for Thomas to contend that God can be named at all, that is, that there are names – we would say 'words' or 'properties' – that genuinely express something about God, because the unknowability of the divine essence occupies a position in the very foreground of his thought. Therefore, words referring to God primarily express the distance between the creature and the creator, rather than their likeness.

makes us move to its cause, which makes us move again to the cause of this cause, a chain of reasoning that can only stop at the ultimately uncaused cause, which is God. Likewise, the chain of participation cannot simply stop at *esse commune*, since it too is participated *esse*.

[66] T. J. White, 'Introduction: The Analogia Entis Controversy and its Contemporary Significance' in T.J. White, (ed)., *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

[67] The discussion can be found in ST1, q13.

[68] Thomas strictly disapproves of univocity in 1 q13 a5 ('impossibile est aliquid praedicari de Deo et creatures univoce'). Although he also says that predications of God are at least not purely equivocal (sed ned etiam pure aequivoce), he still goes on to reject this position as strongly as univocal predication.

Anything that Thomas contends about the analogy between God and creatures is thus embedded firmly in a context of 'negative theology' – that is, it expresses more God's transcendence than his closeness to creatures, for 'what he is not is clearer to us than what he is'.[69]

Naming God is naming the perfections that are contained in him and flow from him into creation. It is, however, out of the question for this knowledge to be adequate, since it is knowing God 'as the excelling principle of whose form the effect falls short'.[70] In sum, 'whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist eminently'.[71] Knowing God is knowing a source that is so abundant and excelling that knowing it rather has the character of not-knowing than knowing. Strangely God is maximally knowable, since he is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, but 'what is supremely knowable in itself may not be knowable to a particular intellect on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect.'[72] There is an excess of meaning in God which makes him both utterly knowable and utterly beyond knowability, so that according to Thomas the principle of our knowledge is *wonder*.[73] Thomas' analogical view on the relation between the divine and the created,

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[69] ST1 q1, a9. Cf. R. te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 72-77.

[70] ST1, q13, a2. Although it is not so that Thomas strictly spreaking 'taught' what was later called the 'analogy of being', his account of analogy and his broader view on the relation between the world and God have given rise to discussions of this theme. A theologian who heavily (and correctly) emphasised the distance between creator and creature that is implied in the *analogia entis* was Erich Przywara. He described analogy (from a much broader group of sources than Thomas alone) as "Beziehung' die in dem masse als 'echte' Beziehung sich kundtut, als sie das grundlegende 'Anderssein' Gottes gegenüber dem Geschöpflichen ausdrückt', so it is 'Analogie als Beziehung gegenseitigen Andersseins', E. Przywara, *Analogia entis: Metaphysik I. Prinzip* (München: Kösel & Pustet, 1932), 95. Przywara intends to interpret the *analogia entis* in a way that is faithful to the way it was articulated at the fourth Lateran Council: *inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda* (*Analogia entis*, 97). Przywara emphasised the greater dissimilarity which surrounds any similarity. Cf. J. Palakeel, *The use of analogy in theological discourse: An Investigation in Ecumenical Perspective* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1995), 104-105. Cf. also the accurate analyses of Przywara's account of the *analogia entis* and Karl Barth's famous critique in T.J. White, (ed.), *The Analogy of Being*.

[71] ST1, q13, a5.

[72] ST1, q12, a1

[73] See Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 78.

with its double aspect of excess and negativity, once again shows how humbling the effect of participation is for any view of the created. Thomas' work testifies in a significant way that participatory thought does not lift up the created world to the level of uncreated being, but renders creation fully dependent on the mystery that is at the heart of what creation is: its divine source and end.[74]

2.2.7 Participatory traces in the Reformed tradition: Calvin and Edwards

For the purposes of the present study, Thomas Aquinas will function as roughly an endpoint in the history of participation. This is, however, only partly justified. In Thomas' work the participatory current, which he received from the Christian-Platonic tradition, already had to share the place of honour with Aristotelian concepts. To put it otherwise, since Aristotle was simply *the philosopher* for Thomas, it can be conceded that Plato was in fact succeeded by Aristotle as the court-philosopher of theology (although this is a matter of debate). In 2.2.6 above we saw how these different conceptualities created a tension in Thomas' thought and in his position on participation. However, participatory thought did not completely vanish and leave the theological scene after him.

For all interpreters it is clear that at least *something* radically changed in the late Middle Ages, articulated by new ways of thinking that often bear

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[74] Thomas' conception of analogy as a theologically correct account of the way this world is related to God is in fact a conceptualisation of something that was already firmly rooted in the tradition. The following beautiful and famous passage from Augustine's *Confessiones,* for example, is in fact a more poetic expression of what Thomas conceptualises:
'But what is it that I love in loving you? Not corporeal beauty, nor the splendour of time, nor the radiance of the light, so pleasant to our eyes, nor the sweet melodies of songs of all kinds, nor the fragrant smell of flowers, and ointments, and spices, not manna and honey, not limbs pleasant to the embracements of flesh. I love not these things when I love my God; and yet I love a certain kind of light, and sound, and fragrance, and food, and embracement in loving my God, who is the light, sound, fragrance, food, and embracement of my inner man - where that light shines unto my soul which no place can contain, where that sounds which time snatches not away, where there is a fragrance which no breeze disperses, where there is a food which no eating can diminish, and where that clings which no satiety can sunder. This is what I love, when I love my God.' *Confessions*, X, 6. The three ways implied here are in fact negation, analogy and 'pointing to the source and end', which in Thomas as well as Augustine belong deeply together.

names like Scotism (after the theologian John Duns Scotus), or voluntarism or nominalism, which tore apart the Christian-Platonic tradition and therefore put an end to participatory thought as the main way to view the relation between God and the world. Although these developments had so many facets that they cannot simply be reduced to one clear interpretation, the differences between medieval and early modern thought are striking. For example, considering the experience of time, Charles Taylor observes that time in the medieval period time was considered as 'a moving image of eternity', a conception which articulates an ultimately participatory outlook, but that this conception as a main framework of interpreting the world has been lost in our 'horizontal flow of secular time'.[75] Although participatory ontology became increasingly marginal, it did not, however, leave the scene altogether. For this study, it is particularly interesting what became of it in the Reformed tradition.

Following Richard Muller, this study sees continuity rather than discontinuity between medieval theology and the Reformed tradition in metaphysical matters. Reformed theologians attempted to articulate their faith in the language and conceptions that were academically available in their time. Since the late-Medieval landscape in metaphysics was rather dispersed, the Reformed theologians picked up these different currents of thought in an eclectic way. Muller argues that 'protestant theologians and philosophers were aware of the trajectories of thought that flowed out of the later Middle Ages into the Renaissance and Reformation eras – whether the Thomistic, Scotistic, or the nominalistic lines of argument'.[76] Since the protestant thinkers were not bounded to one particular school, they could just blend different perspectives from earlier protestant sources, as well as from different classical and medieval sources.

There did, however, seem to be a Scotistic preference among the mainstream of Protestant theologians. The very influential metaphysical work of Francisco Suárez, the *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, was received among protestants as a standard text on metaphysics, a fact which represents an important development when it comes to participatory ontology. Suárez followed Duns Scotus in maintaining a univocal conception of being,

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[75] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 54-59.
[76] R. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 3, The Divine Essence and Attributes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108.

pertaining to both God and creation, and thus broke with the tradition's *analogia entis* whose way of speaking about God and creation belonged to the participatory conception. Suárez explicitly rejected the idea of participation because he departed from the Thomistic-Platonic assumption that God contains the exemplars of finite being, which therefore derive their being from God by participation.[77] Although Suárez' framework was far from uncontested, it became highly influential among Protestant Scholastic theologians, who therefore largely departed from participatory thinking.[78]

This does not mean that Christian Platonism and participatory thought simply disappeared. Several Protestant thinkers were consciously or unconsciously deeply influenced by participatory currents of thought. These currents existed and remained as influential fragments of the 'ruin' of the participatory tradition. In the present discussion, two different, influential Protestant thinkers will serve as examples of participatory thought in the Reformed tradition: John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards.

Although Calvin does not offer anything like a 'doctrine' of participation, participation in the divine is a very important theme in his work. This is what Todd Billings has convincingly argued in his *Calvin, Participation and the Gift*. To be sure, a metaphysical-speculative development of the theme is not to be expected in Calvin's work, but the theme of communion with God through Christ in terms of participation is clearly important for him, 'largely because it

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[77] A concise description of the movement from Thomism to Scotism (or the use of Thomist terms with Scotistic content) can be found in J.L. Marion, 'The Idea of God' in D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds.), The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy. Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 265-268.

[78] In a later article, Muller pushes his own argument in a somewhat different direction: against a current of interpretation that views Reformed Scholasticism as 'mainly Scotist', he emphasises the deeply Thomist, analogical metaphysical accounts of a host of Reformed Scholastics. As in his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Muller mentions particularly Zanchi, Keckermann, Maccovius and Burgersdijk as the more 'Platonizing Protestants'. Instead of advancing his usual view of 'Reformed metaphysical eclecticism' (which, nevertheless, does remain standing), he argues here for an emphasis amongst the Reformed Scholastics *against univocity* and in fact tries to move them away from pure Scotism. R. Muller, 'Not Scotist: understandings of being, univocity, and analogy in early-modern Reformed thought', *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 14 (2012), 127-150. This does, however, sound like a major shift from Muller's earlier view that 'Scotus, the nominalists after him, and virtually all of the formulators of Protestant theology denied the Thomist *analogia entis* and declared that no *proportion* exists between the finite and the infinite.' Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 1, 234.

is a biblical and patristic category', Billings comments.[79] Like the present study, Billings adopts an approach of searching for a participatory 'language-family' in which participation takes its place among other similar words like 'union', 'engrafting' and 'adoption', which all indicate what it means to be 'in Christ'.[80] This picture of Calvin's metaphysics fits within the kind of picture Muller gives of the protestant thinkers after Calvin: he does not adhere to one clear principle or school, but draws freely on a variety of schools and traditions, whatever 'he feels will strengthen his biblical account of the *loci* of doctrine'.[81] Therefore, Calvin is eclectic when it comes to his choice of metaphysical sources.

From Irenaeus, Calvin adopts the language of Christ as the second Adam, who fulfils and restores creation in uniting human beings to God. Furthermore, Calvin leans heavily on Cyril of Alexandria who applies christology to a 'eucharistic theology' with a strong emphasis on the vivification which is transmitted to us in the Lord's Supper.[82] The union between Christ and believers tends in Calvin to the language of a 'mystical union', which has even led interpreters to compare Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux, although the erotic character of that union, which is explicit and central in Bernard, is absent in Calvin.[83] Even the term 'deification' is not too much for Calvin when it comes to his description of the intimacy of God's indwelling in human beings through Christ. It should be noted, however, that all mystical language takes its place within his soteriological framework. Deification is therefore an appropriate term for Calvin's theology of union, 'if understood as a soteriology that affirms the unity of humanity and divinity, such that redemption involves the transformation of believers to be incorporated into the Triune life of God, while remaining creatures', as Billings carefully remarks.[84]

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[79] J.T. Billings, *Calvin, Participation and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.

[80] Billings, *Calvin*, 19.

[81] Billings, *Calvin*, 38.

[82] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 17, 9. References to and quotations from the Institutes refer to J. T. McNeill (ed.) and F. L. Battles (transl.), Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

[83] Cf. particularly his account of the union with Christ in the Lord's Supper, *Institutes*, IV, 17.

[84] Billings, *Calvin*, 54.

Similarly, Julie Canlis argues for a reading of Calvin's work as a 'spiritual theology of ascent'. Leaning heavily on Irenaeus, Calvin emphasises how the believer, through Christ, is 'drawn into the triune relations'. Calvin stood in the participatory tradition in a particular way. He was far from uncritical about tendencies that have been described above as fundamentally belonging to this tradition. He criticised Augustine, for example, who placed *eros* for God, as an active love of the believer, at the centre of what it is to be a Christian. Calvin rather focused on the believer's passivity in this process – that is, he focused not on our desire for God, but on God's love toward us as it is poured out in our hearts by the Spirit (and any Eastern notion of 'synergy' is therefore taboo in Calvin).[85] He does not agree with the tradition that understands the relation between God and man in terms of 'like returning to like', but conceives of participation as 'bringing unlike to participate in unlike'.[86] Therefore, Canlis does not see Calvin's view on participation as being grounded in an 'anthropological endowment', but as based on 'the freedom of God and his desire for communion as expressed in the person of Jesus Christ'.[87]

Although it is clear that Calvin uses language and themes that belong to the participatory Christian-Platonic tradition, he uses these themes ambiguously. Participatory language may be at the heart of what he is saying, but Calvin does not have a participatory ontology. Although he thinks that participation in God is the 'natural state' of human beings, after the fall 'God does not appear as a loving, gracious God except by divine revelation'. Apart from revelation, God appears as a judge and a tyrant.[88] God can shine forth his goodness as much as he wants, but he does not reach us, blinded as we are by sin. In Calvin it seems to be that the overt participatory themes he uses simply stand in tension with his overall non-participatory ontology.

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[85] Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5:5, in J. Calvin, *Commentaries on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 2012).
[86] J. Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 30.
[87] Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 49. Although she makes perfectly clear where Calvin breaks with the Christian Platonic tradition, Canlis mistakenly considers Calvin's emphasis on the passiveness of human beings in the work of grace simply as 'the' Christian narrative when she states: 'In the Christian narrative, the human drama is less a matter of "like returning to like" than an act of salvation, of grace bringing unlike to participate in unlike' (30). The opposition between 'grace' and the human being actively longing for God may in fact be less clear than she presupposes.
[88] Billings, Calvin, 149n22.

The American theologian Jonathan Edwards represents an altogether different example in terms of the influence of participatory thought in the Reformed tradition. He of course lived much later than Calvin and in a different context, used other sources and had his own set of questions to confront. Edwards saw Protestant orthodoxy confronted with Enlightenment rationalism, and for his response he appropriated much of the Platonic tradition of participation. Instead of grounding philosophy on doubt and atomistic individualism, Edwards focused on the heart which senses the harmonious unity of nature and experience. Underlying his metaphysical thought is an aesthetic vision of reality and the idea of 'excellency'. 'Being', he writes, 'is nothing else but proportion'. Reality consists of a 'web of relations constituted by "the consent of being to being."'[89] Edwards had a very dynamic view on being, which was closely connected to his dynamic, Trinitarian view on the nature of God.

Edwards does not refrain from calling the world an 'emanation from God' and describes God as 'Being in General', 'the Being of Beings' or even 'the sum of all being'. God's nature, according to Edwards, can perhaps best be characterised as 'beauty'. Therefore it must 'appear, shine forth, manifest and communicate itself.'[90] Although God is absolutely perfect, he nonetheless enlarges himself through communication. There is something here like a Neoplatonic idea of *exitus* and *reditus* that undergirds much of Edwards' metaphysical thought. God created the world in order to express his divine excellency which could be known and admired. Not the happiness of humanity, but 'the diffusion of God's excellent fullness' is the ultimate goal of creation.[91] In keeping the being of God and the world closely together, Edwards was clearly inspired by Platonic currents of thought.

When he argues that Edwards' theology contains an account of 'divinization', Michael McClymond is aware that several protestant thinkers

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[89] J. Edwards, 'Personal Narrative' in G. S. Claghorn (ed), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Vol. 16. Letters and Personal Writings. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 791-799. Cf. E. Brooks Holifield, 'Edwards as theologian' in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 145.
[90] Edwards, 'Dissertation on the End for which God created the World', in *The Works of President Edwards*. Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1869), 212-213. Cf. S. H. Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. Expanded Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 172.
[91] Brooks Holifield, 'Edwards as theologian', 149.

were worried about Edwards' (apparent) insistence on the continuity between creator and creature. When he defends the view that Edwards' teaching on justification has strong parallels in the Orthodox doctrine of divinisation, however, he emphasises the claim of A. N. Williams that 'deification focuses not on humanity, but on the God who invites humanity to share divine life'.[92] This 'theocentric' emphasis is also reflected in Edwards' work and seems to be a marker for the Orthodox-Catholic character of his view on human participation in the divine life.[93]

If we try to understand how the Platonic content of their thought came to Calvin and Edwards, it would seem that in Calvin his Platonism – which is closely related to his participatory and sacramental outlook – exists as a fragmented inheritance of the Christian-Platonic past, whereas in Edwards this past was much more forgotten or openly despised. As many commentators observe, Edwards had inherited his Platonic preference from the Cambridge Platonists, a group of philosophers who led a revival of Platonic thought in post-Enlightenment Britain.[94] In both Calvin and Edwards, we seem to have protestant thinkers who dealt eclectically with metaphysical issues, but were clearly influenced by the Christian-Platonic participatory tradition.

2.2.8 Conclusions

It is difficult, of course, to draw general conclusions from a survey of the tradition which shows so many differences. In this respect Hans Boersma is entirely correct when he refers to the participatory current described above

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[92] M. J. McClymond, 'Salvation as Divinization: Jonathan Edwards, Gregory Palamas and the Theological Uses of Neoplatonism' in P. Helm and O. D. Crisp (eds.), *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 141; referring to A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36.

[93] Cf. an interesting parallel in the work of the Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi who comments on the mystical expression 'I am God': 'Some people think this is a great pretension, but 'I am God' is in fact a great humility. Those who say, instead, 'I am a servant of God' believe that two exist, themselves and God. But those who say, 'I am God' have become nothing and have cast themselves to the winds. They say, 'I am God' meaning, 'I am not, God is all. There is no existence but God. I have lost all separation. I am nothing.' In this the humility is greater.' A.J. Arberry (transl.), *Discourses of Rumi* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006), 83.

[94] Cf. Lee, *Philosophical Theology*, 11-13; McClymond, 'Salvation as Divinization', 142-144; Brooks Holifield, 'Edwards as Theologian', 145.

as the 'Platonist-Christian synthesis'.[95] The immense differences between Plato and Thomas are easily discernible, and yet we can speak of a synthesis, of a shared understanding of the world and its relation with the divine, even considering that this synthesis involves a fusion of Christians and pagans, a blend of Eastern and Western outlooks, to mention only some of the widely diverging trajectories involved.

In its most general sense, participation means 'receiving a share in something', a something that is bigger and more perfect than that which is shared by the participant. From Plato and later Platonism we receive a picture of participation that is vast, and has many different colours and vocabularies. This world is conceived as necessarily receiving its existence from an Absolute, which is the source and end of all that is. Particulars derive their existence from this ultimate reality, and in fact 'are real' insofar as they participate in this reality. What we call reality is therefore what it is, because it receives a share in Reality. Accordingly we can say that any participant has a real, but derived and partial possession of what it participates in.

However, more important than the attempt at definition is the presentation of the semantic family in which the notion of participation figures. More than a concept with fixed meaning supposed by the user, participation is a member of a language-family. The goal of the current chapter was to realise a presentation of this family, by noticing, for example, its kinship with concepts like deification, analogy and *privatio boni*. The participatory family speaks with its own vocabulary, in which specific words and metaphors play their role. Words and expressions like 'the sun with its rays' and 'like is only known by like', the important epistemological role attributed to *eros* and desire, an *exitus-reditus* scheme, the divine as an 'abundance' or 'fountain' of life and being are all examples of language that point to participatory thought. In what follows, we will identify the most important systematic implications.

A common characteristic of participatory thought is indeed the role of *eros* and desire. Since this world exists in an embodiment of the divine Ideas, there is an *eros*, a deep desire to return to the source of everything that is. As we saw, especially in a Christian context, this desire is not directed against the material world, but has the character of a mystical ascent of intensification,

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[95] Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, esp. 33-39.

concentration and purification. The created hears a constant call from the Father of all things to dwell in him and to receive from him all that makes life what it is: goodness, truth, beauty. Therefore, the human heart is restless until it rests in him, as Augustine wrote. Connected with this idea of desire is that participatory thought always contains some version of the movement of *exitus* and *reditus*. All things come forth from God and find their goal in him. This world therefore stands in a movement from and to God, which gives it something dynamic rather than static.

Participation implies a particular language about the divine as well as the status of creation. What does it say about God? What strikes us in the survey above is that the conception of God is usually one of productivity and activity. From Plotinus to Thomas, the divine is entirely outward-directed, generous and an inexhaustible source of activity. God is anything but 'static' - although from our created point of view any description of the divine being can only be achieved by crossing out temporal and spatial categories (categories of 'movement'), and therefore stands in a negative modus. The divine, however, remains the incomprehensible source in which everything else shares.

What this implies for creation is that the world cannot be simply conceived of as an 'extra', something that is somehow 'added' to the divine being. For if God sums up and contains all being and is called an infinite, boundless 'sea of being', how could anything be added to this divine being? God therefore cannot be said to 'relate' to this world, but is 'an act, not fixed in relation to something' as the Commentator on the *Parmenides* already had it. This is echoed in Thomas' contention that 'in God there is no real relation to creatures', but that it is the other way around alone: all creatures are ordered to him, and thus 'really related to God Himself'.[96] This is an important notion for our study, which addresses simply the 'relation between God and the world'. The participatory tradition qualifies this relation by emphasising that it is only real in the creature, and therefore asymmetrical and non-mutual. Any account of creation in the period under discussion must have some notion of participation, since it is unthinkable for there to be any being that does not derive from God's being.

It is striking how 'theocentric' all descriptions of the world are in this tradition. If we want to 'define' the world within a participatory framework,

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[96] ST1, q13, a7.

we just end up making a vague allusion to the divine being in which it shares. To state it somewhat abruptly, there is not God *and* the world as two 'beings' which can (or cannot) 'relate', but there is just God sharing his being with something other, which nonetheless owes its existence to its relatedness to God. In this tradition, human beings can be characterised as fundamentally open to the graceful communication of God's being, since finite being is itself the openness for this communication from which it can turn away, or to which it can humbly turn itself to be filled with joy, goodness and life, or, in short, with being.

Although this would seem to lead to a quite 'optimistic' conception of the continuous relation between the participant and that which is participated, the reception history of the notion of participation has shown itself to be rather 'negative' about this relation. Although the divine *ousia* is necessarily manifested by its energies, our participation in these energies by no means brings us into the realm of divine *ousia*. One thing that emerges very clearly from the survey of participation in this chapter is the fact that the difference between the created and the creator is at the forefront of the concept. From an earthly perspective, there is nothing but humble reverence for the divine. This reverence and humility does not decrease, but only increases if we discern our earthly existence as workings of the divine. The maxim for the fathers, which still functions in Thomas Aquinas, is that we can say about God what he is not rather than what he is, although we confess that anything that we are and that we call life and being is a participation in the divine workings.

We live because we live in the rays of the sun – and therefore we are children of the light – but there is no way we can ever literally be 'in' the sun, let alone that we can in some way 'be the sun'.[97] The concept of participation does not imply that creation elevates itself to literally a small part of the divine being. Although this seems to be implied by the very word participation ('taking a part of the cake'), this is, however, not what the theological tradition meant by it, at least as long as it chose for the path of analogy as Thomas did,

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[97] It has to be noted that language can become slippery here. Jonathan Edwards, for example, did call human beings sharing in the divine life 'little suns, partaking of the nature of the fountain of the fountain of their light'. Edwards, 'Religious Affections' in J. E. Smith (ed.), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 200-201. We should be careful, however, not to over-interpret poetic and enthusiastic expressions – which are abundant in the work of a figure like Edwards.

and not for univocity in speaking about the created and the divine. What the Christian tradition expressed with participation never results in a mode of self-exaltation of the created, but remains exclusively in a mode of divine glorification.

Participation is not about human beings sharing in something that elevates them to a super-human level in which they can boast, but it focuses on the divine being in which creation humbly and joyfully shares. The language of participation necessarily calls for the language of 'receiving' and 'sharing' something 'given', and therefore the language of grace and humility, as well as a deep connection between humanity and all created beings.

On the basis of this chapter it can therefore be posited that the concept of participation is qualified in ways that keep it from an identification of the divine with the created. One such qualification is the *ousia-energeiai* distinction which functions particularly in the context of Eastern theological discourse on deification, but there is also the distinction between God as being in the infinitive (*to einai*, *to energein katharon*, or *esse*) and created being as derivative being, as participle (*to on*, *ens*). Such a conceptuality has it both ways. God is ultimately knowable *and* ultimately unknown because of the abundance of being, that is, the unbounded activity that so surpasses our capacity of knowing and being that it cannot be apprehended. And yet, on our part there is only 'being' and 'knowing', inasmuch as we participate in this ungraspable *esse*.

Participation was the ontological water of patristic theology. However, the 'Christian grammar' distinguished participation in a Christian context from a pagan Platonic outlook. In the first place, *creatio ex nihilo* places the soul, with the body, in the created rather than the divine sphere. It emphasises the gulf between creator and creature. The world is not there as a necessary fall from the divine, but it is actively willed by God. Nonetheless, this world exists as a mysterious communication of divine glory. Second, there is the conception of the Trinity. In Christian conceptuality God is not primarily characterised by 'oneness' as in Plotinus, but is even beyond 'oneness', so that God's being is ultimately apophatic. God is an incomprehensible harmony who nonetheless invites us to share in his life. In the third place, the doctrine of the Incarnation offers a way of communion with the divine that pictures a path that differs strictly from Platonism. On this point we follow the analysis of Andrew Louth, who has argued that patristic theology must be seen as standing in an

unresolved tension of ascent and descent. The ascent lies in the high goal for which man is created, namely being the image of God. The descent focuses on the path of humility through our conformity with the way of Christ. The divine life is not found through an escape from embodied life into the soul, but by going deeply through that embodied life. In the fallen state this also involves passing through pain, fighting against sin and taking up one's cross.

3. Herman Bavinck

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Biography

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was the son of a pastor of the conservative Reformed Dutch Secession (*Afscheiding*; 1834) churches, the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*.[1] After one year of studying theology at the denominational Theological School in Kampen, Bavinck made the remarkable choice to continue his theological education at the liberal theological faculty at Leiden. It was not that Bavinck wanted to leave his inherited ecclesial context behind, but he sought a more academic approach to theology and clearly his bright mind was hungry for more than the Kampen School could offer. After he completed his studies with a doctor's degree, he served as pastor to a Reformed church for less than two years, before being called by the churches he served to teach theology in Kampen. There he wrote the first edition of his most famous work, the four-volume *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (*Reformed Dogmatics*).

Already during his time as a student in Leiden, Bavinck felt greatly attracted by the writings and activities of Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper's Free University in Amsterdam in particular offered an at once orthodox Reformed and academic atmosphere which was very appealing to Bavinck. When Kuyper's *Doleantie* (1886) churches and Bavinck's own Secession churches united to form the Dutch Reformed Churches in 1892, it was Bavinck's heartfelt wish that the Kampen Theological School and the theological faculty of the Free University would merge. When this did not happen, he accepted an appointment as professor of theology at the Free University, a decision he made after quite some years of initial reluctance. He left the small and quiet city of Kampen, where he had lived and worked for so many years, and moved to Amsterdam, a city that clearly resonated with Bavinck's cultural and intellectual inclinations. At the same time, this move meant a break with the

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[1] For more biographical information, see R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966); V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. ten Have, 1921). A recent English biography is R. Gleason, *Herman Bavinck, Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, Theologian* (Philippsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publications, 2010).

brothers and sisters of the humble and faithful Secessionist environment for whom Bavinck still felt a great love. On the personal level Bavinck was often torn between intellectually and culturally engaged contexts – in which he clearly flourished – and the humble, pious and even 'mystical' side of his character that never left him. The cities of Amsterdam and Kampen can be given symbolic meaning within the context of Bavinck's life: he combined both the intellectual and cultural grandeur of 'Amsterdam', and the piety of 'Kampen' – an integration but also a tension in his character that in fact colours all of his work.[2]

In these Amsterdam years, Bavinck became politically active in Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party, as chair of the party and member of the Senate. Interestingly, in his research and publications he moved away from doctrinal theology to the fields of philosophy, pedagogy and education. Bavinck was apparently quite serious in his repeated insistence on the 'catholicity' of the Christian faith, which meant for him that it was a culturally and politically engaging force.[3]

3.1.2 Reading Bavinck

Reading Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is not very difficult for someone who is familiar with the Reformed theological tradition. One immediately recognises the arrangement of the topics, and similarly Scripture occupies a very prominently place throughout his reasoning. Furthermore, one encounters distinctly Reformed emphases on grace, faith, the covenant and the like. The *Reformed Dogmatics* is a work that presents itself as standing in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy. Bavinck's use of language is also generally quite clear. However, there are some intricacies to his work that in fact make it very difficult to interpret.

First, in the lengthy expositions we find in Bavinck, in which he outlines the various existing views on the subject matter in question, it is often difficult to discern his own voice in the discussion. The way he represents the opinions of others, even those with whom he obviously disagrees, always belies a deep sympathy which may cause the reader to wonder to what extent Bavinck

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[2] Although in the following the critique on the so-called 'two Bavincks hypothesis' (a 'modern' versus an 'orthodox' one) will be supported, it is still relevant to draw attention to this tension in Bavinck.
[3] Cf. Bavinck, *Katholiciteit*.

actually agreed with the author under discussion. When reading Bavinck, one often wonders: 'Whose voice is this?' In Bavinck's idiom, even the most obvious heresies sound tempting. He himself makes no secret of this, as he often confesses that 'there lies a great and deep truth' in this or that view – even if in the end it is not his own. The synthesising character of Bavinck's mind makes it hard to ascertain what does and does not belong to the thread of his theology.

Secondly, words that clearly belong to any interpretation of Bavinck are 'tension' and 'ambiguity'. That Bavinck's work did not in a straightforward and secure manner lead the way to the Reformed future (like Kuyper's work was commonly perceived to do), was already clear to his contemporaries.[4] Later authoritative commentaries, most eminently the work of Jan Veenhof, only confirmed the idea of the great 'tensions' in Bavinck's work, as that between 'the general' and 'the special' when it comes to divine revelation.[5] In what follows we will often observe how Bavinck on the face of it appears to make a clear-cut division, which at several other moments appears nevertheless to be undermined by a more 'diffusing' theological perspective. This habit renders Bavinck's work extremely rich and interesting to interpret, but at the same time also very difficult.

This study mainly relies on the revised edition of Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, which has been translated into English (so that for the sake of convenience, references will be given to both the Dutch and English texts). In

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[4] Cf. particularly Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*.

[5] J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie: De openbarings- en Schriftbeschouwing van Herman Bavinck in vergelijking met die der ethische theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1968), e.g. 406-416. The always searching, tension-filled character of his views even gave rise to rumours that Bavinck at the end of his life moved away from an orthodox Reformed standpoint, particularly considering his view on Scripture. Hepp already denied this (albeit in a mode of averting disturbance), but did give an impressing picture of the matters that troubled Bavinck's mind in his later years, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 319-335. These rumours, which have never really been substantiated, are probably mainly fed by the misguided supposition that having a searching, intellectual and mystically inclined mind is irreconcilable with being 'orthodox Reformed'. Cf. on this question G. Harinck et al. (eds.), *'Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende': Aantekeningen van H. Bavinck over de zaak-Netelenbos, het Schriftgezag en de situatie van de Gereformeerde Kerken (november 1919)* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1994).

this work we find a mature and extensive version of Bavinck's relevant views. Although a case can be made for historical developments in his thought and perhaps even for discontinuities between different phases in his life, the present study sees Bavinck developing and growing along a for the most part continuous theological line. Even the so-called turn 'away from theology' in his later career, for example, is no coincidence and clearly fits his 'catholic' theological vision which was already present from the beginning.

3.1.3 Theological and philosophical context
In terms of the influences on Bavinck's thought, it is interesting to note how several contrasting sources are adopted and fused together in what in him still sounds as a single harmonising voice. A first observation we can make is that Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is not as 'typically Reformed' as the name suggests. It is consciously rooted in the catholic, that is, patristic and medieval theological tradition. There are quotations from many Church Fathers, although Augustine appears to be the voice that is most commonly present and decisive. There is also extensive agreement with the scholastic writings of Peter Lombard, Bonaventure and, most prominently, Thomas Aquinas. Bavinck's broad, catholic Christian context has probably been the most overlooked and least valued aspect of his work, since interpreters tend to place him exclusively between the two poles of Reformed orthodoxy and Modernism. The present focus on participation, however, will rather emphasise his rootedness in the Christian tradition and therefore observe how he (often implicitly) is embedded in the Christian Platonic participatory tradition.

Secondly, one finds in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* a strong emphasis on Reformed theology, with a clear preference for Calvin. This applies not only in terms of the references, but is also a matter of mindset and atmosphere. Bavinck's work is never 'pietistic', but it still breathes the Reformed mindset with its sensitivity for the holiness of God and the sinfulness of the human race. Aside from the works of the Reformers, Bavinck builds also on the theological oeuvre of later Reformed orthodoxy. His *Dogmatics* even adopts most of the distinctions which evolved in Reformed theology during this period, such as the distinction between *theologia archetypa* and *ektypa*, as we will discuss it later on in this chapter. Therefore, superficially read his work

has the character of a typical work from Reformed orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the contents have a different, much more modern flavour.

This flavour, in the third place, is due to Bavinck's constant conversation with modern and Romantic philosophy and theology. As George Harinck has noted: 'Kuyper and Bavinck used their modern schooling to accommodate Reformed theology to their age.'[6] It is the atmosphere of the nineteenth century that one breathes in Bavinck's work, and it witnesses a constant struggle to reach an understanding with the cultural climate of his days. Philosophically, Bavinck is often found to be in discussion with Kant and Hegel, but then particularly with the way their thought had been adopted in contemporary theology. Some currents are clearly denounced, while others linger in some way in his own thought. Ritschl and his anti-metaphysical school, for example, are quite clearly refuted by Bavinck. Although Schleiermacher is also heavily criticised, he still does seem to have impressed a more enduring stamp on Bavinck's thought.[7] In general, Bavinck is very open to the historicising climate of the nineteenth century, that is, the view which holds ideas not to have 'fallen from the sky', but to have evolved and developed through time.[8]

It has already been noted that Bavinck's work contains great and important tensions. To a large degree, these tensions can be summarised as a constant interaction between a 'modern' and a 'pre-modern' inclination. Bavinck on the one hand moves within the dichotomising forces of modernity, as is evident, for example, from his heavy reliance on the distinction between subject and object. On the other hand, and more importantly, he employs a harmonising and unifying theological vision. It has often been observed how important in this context the language of 'the organic' is for Bavinck, as it was

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[6] G. Harinck, 'Why Was Bavinck in Need of a Philosophy of Revelation?' in J. Bowlin (ed.), *The Kuyper Center Review* vol 2: Revelation and Common Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 35. Kuyper had also studied theology in Leiden, quite some years before Bavinck arrived there.

[7] Nowhere does this appear more emphatically than in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, in which an extreme theological and philosophical (epistemological) importance is attached to the notion of 'self-consciousness', H. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 53-82.

[8] For a broad overview of the way Bavinck and Kuyper were influenced by German idealistic philosophy and theology, with a focus on the transition from 'mechanical', natural scientific modes of explanation towards a historical, dynamic and therefore 'organic' approach, see Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 250-268

also for Kuyper. James Eglinton has headed Bavinck scholarship in the right direction by pointing out that this is not a purely Romantic or Hegelian 'aberration' from orthodox theology, but that it must be considered within the framework of his orthodox Trinitarian way of thinking.[9] The Romantic flavour of Bavinck's harmonising and unifying vision is connected with his rather 'pre-modern', traditional Trinitarian view. In the course of this study it will become evident that there are even more traditional, catholic currents in Bavinck.

3.2 The divine movement of knowing

In order to keep as close as possible to Bavinck's own voice, the discussion of his views below will follow the arrangement of topics that he himself approved: the order of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. This order is not uncontested, also not by Bavinck himself, but it still is a suitable way to see how his view of the relation between God and the world unfolds. This chapter will attempt to examine in particular how Bavinck's expositions relate to the theme and tradition of participation, although this aspect will as such be made more explicit in chapter five, in the context also of the views of John Milbank. The following begins with Bavinck's prolegomena. What are, according to Bavinck, the basic elements of theology? What makes theology what it is?

3.2.1 Metaphysical necessities (1): Knowledge and truth
According to Bavinck, Dogmatics can be defined as the 'scientific system of the knowledge of God'.[10] He purposely chooses for 'knowledge of God' as the core of theology, over against the majority of theologians in his time who opted for

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[9] This study therefore supports Eglinton's criticism on the 'two Bavincks hypothesis'. This is the view, most notoriously expressed by J. Veenhof, that the main tension in Bavinck is the one between the 'orthodox' and the 'modern' Bavinck. Eglinton convincingly argues that there is only 'one', that is, a 'trinitarian' Bavinck. The Romantic metaphors do not add to an ostensibly 'modern, unorthodox' Bavinck, but, since Romanticism was itself a thorough critique on Enlightenment rationality, these metaphors function in a traditional theological framework that is in fact older and more integrating than the modern one. J.P. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

[10] RD1, 38 (GD1, 13).

a definition centred around religious feeling, the faith of the Church or ethics as the core of theology. All these theologians worked more or less within the Kantian scheme in which knowledge was strictly separated from faith, a distinction that Bavinck was not prepared to admit.

His appeal for knowledge to be understood as the keyword in theology goes hand in hand with a plea for metaphysics, which similarly went against the intuitions of many of his theological contemporaries. Theology is a science, says Bavinck, because it is interested not simply in describing 'what is', but in describing 'what has to be considered as truth'. What theology aims at is 'not the real, but the ideal, the logical, the necessary'.[11] When theology does this, it 'immediately returns to God, and becomes again in the strict sense theology', Bavinck writes in the first edition of his *Dogmatics*.[12] Like any science, theology lives on knowledge and truth, which is given with the thoughts of God as he communicates them in nature and history.[13] In theology, we deal with God himself who speaks, who communicates, who reveals his thoughts. The knowledge that dogmatics aims at 'can only be a transcript of the knowledge God has revealed concerning himself in his Word'.[14]

This does not mean, according to Bavinck, that dogmatics simply repeats the Bible: it is not a 'biblical theology' that halts at the words of Scripture, but 'it absorbs its content rationally in its conscience'. Dogmatics must 'rationally reproduce the content of revelation that relates to the knowledge of God.'[15] It is no coincidence then that Bavinck considers it to be the task of the theologian to 'think God's thoughts after him'.[16] There is something like a Platonic original which has to be reflected and embodied in theology.[17] The

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[11] RD1, 37 (GD1, 12). As purely idealistic as this may sound, we will nonetheless see that Idealism is not at all the position Bavinck assumes.

[12] This sentence can only be found in the first edition of GD1, 8. In the second and later editions, Bavinck says less emphatically that theology aiming at truth again 'returns to the old view of theology', RD1, 37 (GD1, 13).

[13] A more extensive interpretation of Bavinck's view on theology dealing with knowledge and its relation to the other sciences can be found in W. Huttinga, 'Marie Antoinette or Mystical Depth?: Herman Bavinck on Theology as Queen of the Sciences' in J. Eglinton and G. Harinck (eds.), *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution* (London: T&T Clark, 2014, forthcoming).

[14] RD1, 42 (GD1, 18).

[15] RD1, 45 (GD1, 21).

[16] RD1, 44 (GD1, 21).

[17] As to Bavinck's apparent love for a Christian Platonic epistemology, R. H. Bremmer interestingly points to the importance of the revival of Thomism in his days. Alongside

thinking and the knowledge involved in theology is a 'thinking after', it is a search to 'follow' and lacks all autonomy.[18] Interestingly, in this 'thinking after', theology is not set apart from the other sciences, since all knowledge indeed depends on the communication of God's thoughts: without God, there is no knowledge. In fact, 'knowledge' in Bavinck's theology has the same sound as 'salvation'. Knowledge of God is not a first step which in the second place brings salvation, but it is itself salvation: 'Truth as such has value. Knowledge as such is a good. To know God in the face of Christ (...) not only *results* in blessedness, but *is* as such blessedness and eternal life.'[19]

3.2.2 Metaphysical necessities (2): Unity

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his own intensive readings of Aquinas, Bavinck was influenced deeply by *Die Erkenntnistheorie des heiligen Thomas von Aquin*, a German translation of an Italian book by the neo-Thomist P. M. Liberatore. In this book, Liberatore points to the importance of Plato and Augustine for Thomas' conception. According to Liberatore's reading, Augustine cleansed Plato's theory of the Ideas of its mistakes and considered human knowing as 'a participation of the very Ideas subsisting in the divine Spirit'. Although Augustine was still unclear about the way in which this participation took place, Thomas Aquinas provided clarity. Aside from Liberatore, Bavinck in his understanding of Platonic thinking relies heavily on Kleutgen, *Philosophie der Vorzeit*. Bremmer mentions Kleutgen as one of the promoters of neo-Thomism in Germany. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck*, 328-331.

[18] To 'think after' is a literal translation of the Dutch word 'nadenken', which usually simply means 'thinking', but which is taken very literally when Bavinck uses it in connection with the thoughts of God. Every *denken* is '*na-denken*' – every thinking is 'thinking after', which emphasises thinking in the framework of a Platonic original that is imitated. Cf. also RD1, 521 (GD1, 488): 'We can only reflect on that which has been preconceived and comes to our consciousness through the world.' Literally, Bavinck states that we can only 'think after' what has been 'thought before' us, so we in fact 'imitate' God's thinking humanly. The context here is that there must be 'being' before or outside our thinking, which Bavinck emphasises against the 'speculative method'.

[19] RD1, 53 (GD1, 31). Cf. Huttinga, 'Marie Antoinette'. A pivotal statement from Scripture is for Bavinck 'this is eternal life, that they may know you', John 17:3. However, further on in his *Dogmatics* when he discusses 'the seat of religion', Bavinck does seem to establish a dichotomy between knowledge and salvation: 'The aim of science is knowledge; in religion it is comfort, peace, salvation', RD1, 257 (GD1, 230). Yet in the end, Bavinck is here in fact trying to explain that religion does not aim for knowledge separated from the other human faculties, namely the emotions and will. Accordingly, 'knowledge' is here discussed as a human faculty, distinguished from the 'knowledge of God' which permeates the mind, heart and soul. In other words, we can say that Bavinck distinguishes 'secular knowledge' from 'theological knowledge', the latter of which he deems much more encompassing.

Not only should theology 'think after' the thoughts of God, but it should also trace their unity. According to Bavinck, dogmatics does not consider the different dogmas as isolated propositions, but should search for their unity. 'Actually', says Bavinck using his beloved organic language, 'there is only one dogma, one that is rooted in Scripture and that has branched out and divided in a wide range of particular dogmas'. Bavinck boldly states: 'There is only one dogma' – a saying that makes one curious to know what that might actually be called.

The unity of theology and, in the end, of all knowledge, is found in God: 'For if the knowledge of God has been revealed by himself in his Word, it cannot contain contradictorily elements or be in conflict with what is known of God from nature and history. God's thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily form an organic unity.'[20] If there is to be truth, it has to be one and simple, in short, it has to be in God. God relates to the world as unity to plurality.

However, according to Bavinck this is not a strict contrast, but a relation of giving and recollecting: 'Every creature as such exists by, and hence, for God. Science exists also for God's sake and finds its final goal in his glory. Specifically, this then is true of theology; in a special sense it is from God and by God, and hence for God as well.'[21] This is why Bavinck claims that theology should not be expelled from the university, as some propose, but can instead be rightly called 'the queen of sciences'. Bavinck sees a divine movement in things, from God to God, that is, from oneness to diversity and back to unity. Creation is always searching for this unity and truth, and in particular the human mind will not rest until it has found it. This element may appropriately be qualified as the metaphysical depth of Bavinck's theology. A creature is only a creature because of something outside of it, because of something that is not the creature, but is nonetheless its sole source, ground and purpose. We find the creature in this movement and can only understand it in this movement.[22]

The dynamic between unity and difference also plays an important role in Bavinck's treatment of the organisation of dogmatics. Bavinck repeats that 'the content of dogmatics is the knowledge of God as he has revealed it in Christ

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[20] RD1, 44 (GD1, 21).
[21] RD1, 53 (GD1, 31).
[22] Cf. again the more extensive analysis in Huttinga, 'Marie Antoinette'.

though his Word'. The question for Bavinck is: Should we favour a purely theological approach in arranging the different topics, taking the trinity as our main framework, or should we take a historical approach which does justice to the development of revelation through history? In his own solution, Bavinck tries to combine these two aspects, which may be called the 'theological and the historical' aspects of theology, as well as 'unity and plurality' or even 'being and becoming'. Bavinck says that a trinitarian scheme for ordering the dogmatic content is quite appealing: 'It commends itself by its purely theological character: God is beginning and end, alpha and omega. Nature and history are both subsumed under him. All things are from God and unto God. The Trinitarian scheme guards against a barren uniformity and guarantees life, development, process.'[23]

However, Bavinck identifies the great danger of this approach in the possibility of 'speculative misuse', when history is sacrificed to the system and the development of this world is incorporated into the Trinitarian life of God. The problem is, in fact, that being and becoming come to be blurred. Bavinck refers to the works of John Scotus Erigena, Böhme, Baader, Schelling and Hegel to show where such an approach goes wrong.[24] In general, as we will see more often, Bavinck is suspicious of Neoplatonic and Romantic conceptions of the relation between God and the world, which he calls 'pantheistic'. Therefore, Bavinck favours an order that he calls theological and 'historical-genetic': 'It too takes its point of departing in God and views all creatures only in relation to him. But proceeding from God, it descends to his works, in order through them again to ascend to and end in him.'[25]

The main advantage of this approach, according to Bavinck, is that God is not pulled down into the process of history and that history itself is treated

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[23] RD1, (GD1, 89).

[24] For the same kind of criticism, see RD1, 167 (GD1, 142), where Bavinck discusses conceptions that give 'becoming' a place in God. The problem of the connection between God and the world 'is solved by seeking the ground of the world in the nature of God and by the idea that theogony, the trinitarian process in God, is more or less equated with or at least paralleled by cosmogony. God himself comes to the full development of his being only in and through the cosmic process.' Cf. for a discussion of Bavinck's critique on Hegel: J. Eglinton, 'To Be or to Become – That Is the Question: Locating the Actualistic in Bavinck's Ontology', J. Bowlin (ed.) *The Kuyper Center Review. Vol 2: Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 105-125.

[25] RD1, 112 (GD1, 89).

more properly. Simply stated, God and his works are more clearly distinguished. However, this does not conflict with the fact that dogmatics 'describes for us God, always God, from beginning to end – God in his being, God in his creation, God against sin, God in Christ, God (…) guiding the whole of creation back to the objective he decreed for it: the glory of his name.' In fact, theology is one great exposition on God – in everything. This characteristic of Bavinck's thought will resonate throughout his entire view on theology and its relation to the theme of participation.

By way of conclusion, we can remark that Bavinck already early on in his prolegomena gives important clues for what he deems to be important for the relation between God and the world. In other words, his prolegomena are in themselves already fully theological. He emphasizes that to think is always 'to think after', to follow the track of God in history and to stand in the movement 'from God to God'. There is also a great stress on unity, but not at the cost of the plurality and the dynamics in which this world gives itself. In the following these themes will be broadened and deepened by way of an examination of Bavinck's theological *principia*.

3.2.3 God's being and our knowing

We have already encountered a number of basic principles of Bavinck's theology, but in this subsection we will see more clearly how they work. Bavinck assumes that 'knowledge of God' is the core of dogmatics. But how does this knowledge work? How do we acquire this knowledge, how does it come to us? Bavinck discusses these questions within the framework of what he calls the three *principia* of theology. The greater part of his prolegomena is cast in the mould of the three theological *principia* he distinguishes: *principium essendi* (God), *principium cognoscendi externum* (Christ, Scripture) and *principium cognoscendi internum* (the Holy Spirit, or 'faith').

Bavinck derives the use of these *principia* mainly from his reading of different Reformed orthodox sources, although they did not attribute the same epistemological value to these principles as he does. As Henk van den Belt has argued, Bavinck 'interprets the Reformed tradition from the perspective of modernity (…) to deal with the object- subject dichotomy'. Bavinck invests in a distinction that already lay hidden beneath the surface in the Reformed

tradition, but was not as evident as he claims it to have been.[26] And although Bavinck presents the *principia* as a clear-cut division, there is in reality a considerable fluidity between them in his work, so that the division is much more complicated than it seems to be at first sight. This section will demonstrate how Bavinck, beneath the seemingly clear division of his *principia*, struggles with the dichotomies between 'unity and plurality' and 'inside and outside'.

The *principium essendi* of theology is God, or, to add an important remark, God as he is in himself. The *principium cognoscendi* of theology is 'God's revelation', so that God makes a move outside himself. In this movement, this making known, he is absolutely 'free, self-conscious and true'. Although Bavinck stresses that this making known differs from the way one human being makes himself known to another, he points to what he considers an important analogy with man: 'A man must reveal himself, manifest himself by appearance, word, and act, so that we can somewhat learn to know him.'[27] Significantly, Bavinck refers here to 1 Corinthians 2, according to which the spirit alone can know a person's thoughts, just like the Spirit alone knows the 'deep things of God'. Bavinck uses this verse to point to the analogy between 'depth' in people and the 'depths' in God, the indwelling thoughts that somehow must 'go outside' if we want to know anything about them. There is an 'inside' and an 'outside' with respect to God, just as there is with human beings.

It is clear that Bavinck, like Reformed orthodoxy, stresses the importance of the distinction between God's knowledge of himself (*theologia archetypa*) and our knowledge of God (*theologia ectypa*), and that in parallel to the distinction between the *principium essendi* and the *principium cognoscendi*.[28] We are not God and we have no direct access to the thoughts of God, so that we are dependent on revelation, on God granting us (limited) knowledge of

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[26] Van den Belt gives an extensive clarification of Bavinck's use of the *principia*, and shows how Bavinck pushes them in his own direction. Van den Belt also refers to older clarifications of the terms in van der Walt, Heideman, Bremmer and Veenhof. H. van den Belt, *Autopistia. The Self-Convincing Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology* (PhD Thesis, Leiden 2006), 257-273.

[27] RD1, 212 (GD1, 183). 'Appearance, word and act' will appear to be analogous with the three ways in revelation: theophany, prophecy and miracle.

[28] Cf. H. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1883), 29; Van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 259.

himself. However, the means by which this knowledge comes (where Bavinck mentions Scripture and the Church) are no more than instrumental, and, 'in a sense, incidental and provisional'. They are incidental, because they stand in the larger movement 'from God, to God': 'The object of God's self-revelation accordingly, is to introduce his knowledge into the human consciousness and through it again to set the stage for the glorification of God himself'.[29] Or in even stronger terms Bavinck writes: 'God reveals himself for his own sake', so that also in the realm of the *principium cognoscendi*, we are dealing with the *principium essendi* all along. We 'find' our knowing and we 'encounter' our own being in the journey from God to God.[30] The *principium essendi* and the *principium cognoscendi* (or: 'God's being' and 'our knowing') are therefore not as strictly separated from each other as the distinction would seem to imply.[31]

3.2.4 Outside and inside

According to Bavinck, the final goal of God's self-revelation is that God be glorified. In attaining this goal it is necessary that his revelation does not 'end outside of, before, or in proximity of human beings but must reach into human beings themselves.'[32] It cannot only be external, but must also be internal. This is where the distinction between the *principium cognoscendi externum* and *internum* comes to the fore. Bavinck draws a movement from inside of God to outside of God, towards human beings, but then not only outside of but also into human beings. If the movement were to stay outside of human beings, it would not be finished and would not reach its final goal, the glorification of God. Here we see basically the same idea we encountered in the former

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[29] RD1, 213 (GD1, 184).

[30] RD1, 346 (GD1, 318), discussing 'special revelation': 'The final goal again is God himself, for he can never come to an end in creation but can only rest in himself. God reveals himself for his own sake: to delight in the glorification of his own attributes. But on the journey toward this final end we do after all encounter the creature, particularly the human being, who serves as instrument to bring to manifestation the glory of God's name before the eyes of God.'

[31] This 'spirit of Bavinck' which always seeks to harmonise what it first separates is clearly felt and rejected by S.P. van der Walt in *Die Wijsbegeerte van Herman Bavinck* (Potchefstroom: Pro Rege Pers Beperk, 1953), 152-173. Van der Walt would have preferred a 'strictly philosophical' approach in Bavinck's epistemology (by which he means a 'Calvinist philosophical approach'), cleansed from theological motifs, which have their place 'in their own sphere'. His criticism, therefore, has a strong 'Dooyeweerdian' sound to it in the notion of 'sphere sovereignty'.

[32] RD1, 213 (GD1, 184).

section: the thoughts of God have to enter history and humanity in order to permeate everything and bring it back to its glorifying goal.[33]

Although three *principia* can be distinguished, they are, however, 'essentially one', 'rooted in the Trinitarian being of God. It is the Father, who, through the Son as *Logos*, imparts himself to his creatures in the Spirit'.[34] The three *principia* are intimately linked with the Trinity, and can therefore be called 'triune principia'. This means that Bavinck associates the internal self-knowledge of God with the Father, the outward movement of revelation as an 'objective reality' with the Son (or 'the Word') and the internalisation of this movement with the Holy Spirit.

There is in Bavinck's thought a great emphasis on the distinction as well as the relation between the objective and the subjective: 'Science always consists in a logical relation between subject and object'.[35] This is true for theology as well, and in fact Bavinck sees this relation as a theological truth – thereby reminding us that theology is for Bavinck the queen of the sciences. In choosing an epistemological position, Bavinck rejects rationalism (or idealism) and empiricism (or materialism) and favours realism.

Interestingly, what Bavinck finds decisive is that realism most closely fits 'ordinary daily experience', while rationalism subjects the objective world to the human mind and empiricism subjects human consciousness to the world outside. Bavinck takes his standpoint in 'common sense', and is eager not to let abstract philosophy rule over everyday life. In this context he quotes Aristotle: *primum vivere, deinde philosophari*. The human intellect is not able to produce the knowledge of things, says Bavinck: 'The primary impetus therefore comes

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[33] This stress on the internal side of the knowledge of God is highly reminiscent of what C. van der Kooi points out in the work of John Calvin. In Calvin's work, the self is still 'porous' in a premodern sense (to use a term from Charles Taylor) and revelation is therefore comparable to drops of water which cannot stay at the surface but have to penetrate the surface in order to bring fertility. Knowledge has to be 'useful' and must lead to adoration and an intimate relation with God and is therefore not meant for 'speculation', in order to satisfy our curiosity. C. van der Kooi, *Als in een Spiegel: God kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth* (Kampen: Kok, 2002), 64-75, 113-117.

[34] RD1, 214 (GD1, 186).

[35] RD1, 214 (GD1, 186). The importance of stating the difference, but searching for the integration of subject and object, cannot be overemphasised in Bavinck. As will be observed further below, the difference is far more encompassing than merely a 'scientific principle'. For example, with Herbert Spencer, Bavinck holds also life itself to be 'the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations', RD1, 501 (GD1, 466).

from the sensible world. (...) But the moment the intellect is activated, it immediately and spontaneously works in its own way and according to its own nature.'[36] Bavinck therefore accords 'realism' to the outside as well as the inside, without intending to subdue either one of them. As we will see at greater length below, the ultimate reason for this is the *Logos* which is at work in both of them.

It is important for Bavinck not to 'force things', which he does consider to be happening in both rationalism and empiricism. There is in his thought a spirit of 'fittingness' which is altogether theologically motivated. Time and again Bavinck writes that subject and object, inside and outside, 'organically correspond'. Discussing the relation between language, concepts and (objective) reality he writes: 'It seems strange, even amazing' that with our representations which we convert into concepts, which in turn are processed again along the laws of thought, we obtain results 'that correspond to reality'. In entertaining concepts 'we are not distancing ourselves from reality, but we increasingly approximate it.' This conviction can, according to Bavinck, 'rest only in the belief that it is the same *Logos* who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two.'[37] Bavinck thus uses the full implication of the term *Logos*, which means both 'word' and 'thought'; it is the Word of God in creation, and it is 'rationality' in the order of things and in creatures. Bavinck is then quick to add that this correspondence is not identification: 'the being of things as such, their existence, remains outside of us', they 'never enter into us'. However, referring to Thomas Aquinas Bavinck says that we see not by being in the sun, but by the light of the sun that shines

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[36] RD1, 225 (GD1, 198).
[37] RD1, 231 (GD1, 205). Cf. Bavinck's extensive discussion of the relation between being and knowing in *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* 17-18: 'The organs of our perception are, because of a common origin, related to the elements of which the whole universe is constructed (...). In any of these (senses, wh) lives a specific energy, but an energy that corresponds with the different workings that radiate from the objective world to the senses.' Particularly in *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, Bavinck adopts an interesting discourse on 'energies' to speak of the relation between the divine and the created. Although the *Logos* is not yet explicitly mentioned in this context, it is the fundamental supposition also of this discourse, as becomes apparent later on: 'The doctrine of the creation of all things by the Word of God is the explanation of all knowing ('kennen en weten'), the supposition of the correspondence between subject and object', 23.

upon us: 'Reason in us is that divine light; it is not itself the divine *logos*, but it participates in it.'[38] There is correspondence, but not identity, there is communication, but not emanation. Being and thinking correspond, but are not identical.[39]

In sum, although Bavinck works within the framework of three distinct *principia*, he is also aware that they are in fact blurred. In the first place, the main distinction between the principium *essendi* and the principium *cognoscendi* is not as strict as it seems, since it is in fact 'God's being all along', even in our knowledge of God. Our *cognoscere* is not equated with God's *esse*, but it does participate in it, so that every movement in the realm of the knowing of God still depends on God's very being.

In the second place, although the Word is primarily associated with the *externum* and the Spirit with the *internum*, it is for Bavinck nonetheless the *Logos* that *relates* inside and outside. He associates the *Logos* not only with 'reality outside', but also with 'the laws of thought within us', with 'beauty in nature' on the one hand, but also with the 'response in the human sense of beauty' on the other, so that the *Logos* seems to have an external as well as an internal side to it. According to Bavinck, 'genuine religion can exist only in the complete harmony of the internal with the external revelation'.[40] Thus, although the distinction between the three *principia* is simply assumed and presented by Bavinck, he also relativises the distinction between all three of them.

3.3 Revelation

Even though the foregoing had the character of 'prolegomena', for Bavinck there is in fact no single moment when we are 'outside' of the relation between God and the world. This is only reinforced when he moves the discussion on to revelation. In Reformed theology, the notion of revelation is a

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[38] RD1, 232 (GD1, 206).

[39] This is again also the point of *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 11-30.

[40] RD1, 279 (GD1, 253). The word 'correspondence', which is used in the English translation of the *Dogmatics*, is here replaced by 'harmony' for the simple reason that the latter more clearly reflects the Dutch word 'harmonie'. There are, however, various places where Bavinck does use 'correspondence' or 'correlation' to express his view.

very important issue. 'Revelation and Scripture' is the usual couple that can be found at the beginning of an exposition of dogmatic content, and has often functioned as an epistemic foundation for that which follows. This is also the case in Bavinck's *Dogmatics*. But the discourse of revelation renders for Bavinck far more than 'the source of reliable information' for the divine. The different conceptions and vocabularies Bavinck uses in reference to revelation develop into something theologically more encompassing than that. 'Revelation' in fact becomes a name that denotes the all-embracing movement from God to God, as described earlier on in this chapter. Bavinck's discourse on revelation opens up the theme that will be pivotal in this study, namely God's communicability. This study is hardly the first to see the intricacies involved in Bavinck's understanding of revelation. Jan Veenhof in particular devoted a lengthy study to this subtle topic in Bavinck.[41]

3.3.1 What is revelation?
'If we are to know something about God, he must come forward out of his hiddenness, in some way make himself perceivable, and hence reveal himself.'[42] This depiction of the state of affairs marks Bavinck's conception of revelation. There is 'hiddenness' to God from our perspective, analogous to the unknown 'hidden inside' of another person, which has to be overcome if we want to know the other. In his conception of revelation, Bavinck is keen to avoid a collision between God and the world. God is the transcendent other, 'distinct from and elevated above the world', but nevertheless also descending into the world and having communion with it. If there is to be union, there has to be distinction. Moreover, revelation is a 'conscious, voluntary, intentional disclosure of God to human beings'.[43] The divine power is not impersonal, but has consciousness and will, so that it can 'intend' things. Bavinck strictly distinguishes his view on revelation from any notion of 'emanation', which would involve an 'involuntary translucency of God in his works'. Revelation is an *act*, which involves consciousness, freedom and will on God's side.

Bavinck sets apart his position especially vis-à-vis Romantic thinkers for whom revelation is simply everything or is identified with the whole of nature. For example, 'according to Schelling in his first period, the entire world was

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[41] Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*.
[42] RD1, 285-286 (GD1, 257).
[43] RD1, 286 (GD1, 257).

the self-revelation of God', Bavinck critically writes.[44] Similarly, Hegel taught that 'God does not reveal himself *to* human beings by a passing event in time but *in* human beings themselves and achieves consciousness in them.' Thus, if we allow ourselves the liberty of placing the opposing views in Bavinck's mouth, we learn that revelation for him has the character of 'a passing event in time' and is primarily something that comes from the outside: it comes *to* us and not from *within* us. Moreover, God does not become himself in the process of revelation. God does not 'become' in any way at all. Although Bavinck greatly appreciated the historical mindset of the nineteenth century, he wanted to hold on to the distinction according to which becoming is something of this world, whereas being belongs primarily to God.[45]

Bavinck is concerned that in this conception 'the distinction between natural and supernatural revelation completely vanishes',[46] although he at the same time does not advocate a separation between the two. It is by no means the intention to seek a 'harmonic unity' that separates Bavinck from these thinkers, since we have already seen that this was an intention he harboured as well. What Bavinck fears in this current of thought is the danger of naturalism or monism, as he ultimately sees it coming to expression in reductionist materialists like Ernst Haeckel. Interestingly, pantheistic conceptions in which God and nature are more or less identified seem to collapse into atheistic worldviews: what makes them similar is their insistence on the unity of God and the world, without any notion of difference. There is only room for one 'natural' cause – regardless of whether or not this naturality has a supernatural tinge to it.[47]

Yet how does Bavinck envision the relation between natural and supernatural? It is clear that he in principle assumes a strong supernaturalistic view on revelation: to believe in God who reveals himself is to believe literally in an order above the natural order. In other words, Bavinck's insistence on the supernatural is analogous to his plea for

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[44] RD1, 292 (GD1, 264).
[45] Cf. J. Eglinton, 'To Be or to Become – That Is the Question: Locating the Actualistic in Bavinck's Ontology', J. Bowlin (ed.) *The Kuyper Center Review. Vol 2: Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 109-121.
[46] RD1, 293 (GD1, 265).
[47] In Bavinck's work, this position is particularly challenged in his Stone Lectures as published in *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909).

metaphysics in theology.[48] However, it is also clear that Bavinck does not in any way imply a dualistic view on the world that distinguishes between the natural and the supernatural as if they represent two different realms. Although he does use the distinction between natural and supernatural, Bavinck is not at all content with it, especially since it so easily becomes a dualistic system in which faith and reason, the spiritual and the secular, the heavenly and the earthly, are completely separated from each other. Revelation, according to Bavinck, simply is 'supernatural', and creation is the first revelation of God. Hence, 'all that is and happens is, in a real sense, a work of God.' Furthermore, 'the supernatural is not at odds with human nature, nor with the nature of creatures; it belongs, so to speak, to humanity's essence.'[49] Bavinck's tendency to demonstrate that the supernatural is the giving source of anything we call natural seems to deconstruct the notion of the 'natural'; for if the supernatural is in fact the 'nature' of human beings, then what do we still mean by 'nature'?

However, to complicate things even further, in a paragraph dedicated to the subject of 'revelation and nature' which Bavinck included in the second edition of his *Dogmatics*, he appeals for a clear definition of the terms 'natural' and 'supernatural'. He adopts a definition of nature from a philosophical dictionary, claiming that nature 'generally denotes that which develops apart from any alien power or influence, solely in terms of its own internal forces and laws.' Supernatural then is said to be 'all that surpasses created things and does not have its cause in creatures but in the omnipotence of God'.[50] It is, however, again not Bavinck's intention to posit two separate realms in reality. In order to discard such a standpoint, Bavinck refers to the omnipresence of God, also in things that are called 'natural'. He goes as far as to state that 'all things reveal God to us', since 'everything is his deed. (...) He is present with his being in all things' – statements which raise the question as to what was in fact so wrong about the aforementioned quote from Schelling.[51] However, at

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[48] Quite explicitly and existentially Bavinck expresses this idea in RD1, 376 (GD1, 346): 'If there is no beyond, no God who is above nature, no supernatural order, then sin, darkness, and death have the last word. The revelation of Scripture makes known to us another world, a world of holiness and glory.'

[49] RD1, 308 (GD1, 279).

[50] RD1, 356 (GD1, 325).

[51] Cf. Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1904) 80-84. For Bavinck's broad view on revelation, cf. also Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 319.

this point Bavinck again quickly denounces any view that confuses the natural with the supernatural or claims that 'revelation, inspiration, and miracle belong to the original capacity of human nature'. Instead, he asserts that the supernatural 'from the beginning has been included by God in nature in the broader sense, i.e., in the divinely determined destiny of things, in the divine world plan.' Only in this sense can Bavinck safely state that 'miracles most certainly belong to nature': They are 'incorporated in the world-idea itself and serve the completion and perfecting of a fallen world'.[52]

Bavinck wants to adhere to the distinction between supernatural and natural, albeit primarily with an apologetic goal: he does not want to leave the term nature to the 'monists' so as to misuse it as a purely immanent term, nor is he willing to allow a 'Romantic' confusion of nature and the supernatural, which then is given the name '*geistleiblich*' or 'divine-human'.[53] Meanwhile, his readers are constantly pulled back and forth between the monistic pantheism and the dualistic deism he wants to avoid, without ever reaching a satisfying conceptual articulation of Bavinck's own stance. Any time Bavinck in his work emphatically argues for a deep connection between the 'general' and the 'special', he on the next page always realises that he must now emphasise that they are not, however, identical.

Nowhere is this tension in Bavinck described better and more extensively than in Veenhof's seminal work *Revelatie en inspiratie*. He correctly extends the tension in Bavinck between general and special revelation to a tension that also exists between creation and recreation (or creation and revelation, and even creation and incarnation), nature and grace, deism and pantheism.[54] Bavinck was so eager not to separate the created world from God's salvific act in Jesus Christ that he frequently speaks in a mode that diffuses what is often called 'nature' and 'grace'. While Veenhof is clearly disturbed about this tendency in Bavinck, in chapter 5 below we will consider whether this is really a disappointing element in Bavinck's thought or rather actually one of its more

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[52] RD1, 373 (GD1, 344). Bavinck's term 'wereld-idee' is here translated more literally as 'world-idea' instead of 'design of the world' which is used in RD1, because of the important and intended link with the Platonic 'ideas'.
[53] Cf. the correct observation in Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 278: 'When he uses the expression in question (supranatural, wh), he almost always means to oppose naturalism.'
[54] For Veenhof's broad description of Bavinck's view on revelation, see *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 250-415.

redeeming moments. In the end, Bavinck as always tries to harmonise the fronts he is battling against when he states that revelation 'is a world by itself, distinct from nature, to be sure, but still made for it, akin to it, and intended for it.' As with the relation between subject and object, it is once more 'correspondence' all over again.

3.3.2 General and special revelation

Although Bavinck uses the traditional terms natural and supernatural, when it comes to revelation he prefers to work with another set of terms, namely general and special revelation, which has the more biblical sound of 'the history of salvation'. The fact that Bavinck uses both the couplet natural-supernatural as well as the couplet general-special is related to a double conceptuality which is closely related to his conception of the relation between God and the world in general. On the one hand, Bavinck works within an ontological discourse in the sphere of classical metaphysics, but on the other he is influenced by a more biblically oriented discourse of 'salvation history'. The presence of this double discourse will be treated more thoroughly later on in this chapter. As is typical for Bavinck, these two discourses simply stand alongside each other, and it would be hard – if not impossible – to decide which one is decisive. One thing is sure, however. This parallel discourse does not make it any easier to come to a clear interpretation of Bavinck's view on revelation, as the following will testify.

General revelation, according to Bavinck, refers to God's 'broad' revelation in nature, whereas special revelation focuses on the narrower circles of Israel, Scripture and Jesus. This distinction is not analogous with the distinction between natural and supernatural: we already saw that God's creation is ultimately his broad revelation and is as 'supernatural' as it is 'general'. Likewise, we can point to Jesus' life and conclude that it is full of 'natural' events which, nonetheless, belong to the 'special revelation' which forms his complete existence. The reason why Bavinck prefers this distinction is that it better safeguards revelation as a single work of God, therefore free of the 'Roman, dualistic' separation between natural and supernatural.

Nevertheless, in the aforementioned addition on 'revelation and nature' that we find in the second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck confusingly *does* equate supernatural revelation with special revelation. The entire theme of this later paragraph is framed within the contrast between the

natural and supernatural again, whereas in the first edition of Bavinck's work it had already been decided that 'general' and 'special' ought to replace 'natural' and 'supernatural'. This later addition raises the question whether the distinction between natural and supernatural, rather than the distinction between general and special revelation, does not in fact constitute *the* central tension in Bavinck's thought.

As such, the relation between general and special is basically equivalent to the distinction between 'less' and 'more', or between 'vaguer' and 'clearer'. For example, in general revelation it is God's deity that comes to the fore, whereas in special revelation 'it is the Triune God who ever clearly makes himself known in his personal distinctions'.[55] In other words, through general revelation we can know that there is a God, and through special revelation we learn what this God is like. Again, nature and the supernatural are not contrasted with each other, since special revelation does not pull you out of nature and history, but makes you 'see the revelation of God in nature much better and much more clearly than before'. Referring to Calvin, Bavinck speaks of the spectacles of Scripture, which alone allow us to 'see God in everything and everything in God'. Therefore, Christians are fully 'at home in the world'.[56] Christians, according to Bavinck, do not have a monopoly on the supernatural. God communicates himself to all in creation: 'theophany, mantic and magic are the ways by which all revelation comes to human beings.'[57] Special revelation does not overthrow this threefold order of revelation, but it builds on it and intensifies it.[58] The special revelation familiar to the Christian does not stand over against general revelation, but it is 'paganism's fulfillment' and the kingdom of heaven is deeply connected with the realm of nature. Time and again, Bavinck uses a vocabulary of 'ground', 'beginning' and 'foundation' when he discusses the realm of general revelation, and expressions like 'building on' and 'linking up with' when he discusses its relation with special revelation. Special revelation is according to Bavinck *more* than creation, but it

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[55] RD1, 342 (GD1, 314).
[56] RD1, 321 (GD1, 293).
[57] RD1, 326 (GD1, 297).
[58] Bavinck's stance is rather ambiguous, since he states on the one hand that 'the divine descends so deeply into the human that the boundaries between special revelation and analogous phenomena are sometimes hard to draw', RD1 343 (GD1, 315), but on the other hand criticises those who 'erase the boundaries between prophecy and divination, miracle and magic, inspiration and illumination'.

is not *of a different kind*, since it is the same God who reveals himself in creation and does not stop revealing himself.

In sum, we can say that with general revelation Bavinck simply means 'creation', which is as theological or 'supernatural' as it is general and 'natural', while special revelation usually simply denotes 'revelation'. However, although Bavinck insists on the distinction between the two, his most important theological motive is their inherent unity: 'General revelation maintains the unity of nature and grace, of the world and the kingdom of God, of the natural order and the moral order, of creation and re-creation (…), and in all these things the unity of the divine being.'[59] It is one and the same God who communicates himself and, therefore, 'general and special revelation interact with each other'.

3.3.3 'The ongoing rapport between heaven and earth'

'Revelation in Christianity is a history', Bavinck writes when he moves from revelation to Scripture. Thus this act of God has a very transitory character. Still, it contains the 'eternal thoughts' of God for which the theologian must search, since eventually the goal of theology is, as we saw, to 'think after God'. When he discusses the relation between revelation and Scripture, Bavinck once more offers us an interesting glimpse of his ontology and epistemology. First, there is 'thought'. But for thought to be revealed, there has to be 'word'. And for 'word' to be stable, there has to be 'writing'. This is the route which the 'inscripturation of the Word' follows and in which, according to Bavinck, an ontological loss is inevitable: 'Thought is richer than speech, and speech is richer than writing.'[60]

It is clear then that Scripture is but a servant to revelation, and that it has a momentary, instrumental value. Bavinck links this theme immediately to the incarnation: just like the word became flesh, so it also became writing. And just like Christ is not the goal of revelation, so Scripture is not its goal either: 'The purpose of revelation is not Christ; Christ is the centre and the means; the purpose is that God will again dwell in his creatures and reveal his glory in the cosmos. (…) And to achieve this purpose the word of revelation passes into Scripture.' We see then again the same movement we saw in 3.2 above: Just like our knowledge (of God and everything else), we 'find' Christ and Scripture

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[59] RD1, 322 (GD1, 294).
[60] RD1, 378 (GD1, 349).

on the way from God, to God. Not the things we encounter on this way – although they may be indispensable – but the movement itself is all-important.

The process of inscripturation not only produces ontological loss, but there is also gain: it is necessary that this movement of revelation be allowed to do its work thoroughly. We already saw that revelation has an 'outer' side, but also needs an 'inner' side, since it has to enter into human beings, into nature, and into history to really complete the glorifying movement. In the same way, revelation has to become Scripture so that it can 'enter the life of humankind' and fully become its possession. Bavinck clearly associates Scripture with the objective and 'finished' part of revelation, leaving the effectuation and continuation of this work to the Spirit.

This is not, however, the full picture, and once again an overly strict object-subject scheme comes under tension. Bavinck makes the interesting remark about Scripture that 'those who do not participate in its life cannot understand its meaning and point of view'. One has to 'live in Scripture' to understand it, and apart from the Church 'Scripture is an enigma and an offense'.[61] With this we once again see an important moment of necessary 'inwardness', even within the realm of the *principium externum*. Scripture is not a purely outward phenomenon, but one must live in it.[62] Bavinck even calls Scripture 'the eternally ongoing speech of God to us', so that it is not just a book from the past, but it 'binds us to the living Lord in the heavens.'[63] According to Bavinck, Scripture seems to have 'sacramental' value: it is 'the ongoing rapport between heaven and earth, between Christ and his Church'.[64]

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[61] RD1, 384 (GD1, 356).

[62] Further on, after he has articulated something from his very personal existential struggle with the acceptance of the authority of Scripture, Bavinck says that 'those who do not want to eat before they understand the entire process by which food arrives at their table will starve to death. And those who do not want to believe the Word of God before they see all problems resolved will die of spiritual starvation', RD1 442 (GD1, 413). You have to be 'in the process' while grappling to understand it.

[63] Bavinck goes on to say: 'It does not even have the intent to furnish us a historical story by the standard of reliability demanded in other realms of knowledge. Holy Scripture is a *tendenz*-book'. RD1, 384 (GD1, 356). And further on he remarks in the same vein: 'The historical books are (…) not history in our sense of the word but prophecy' RD1, 393 (GD1, 362).

[64] RD1, 385 (GD1, 357).

3.3.4 Scripture and God's communicability

Scripture thus stands in the larger movement of revelation as Bavinck discerns it. It is not a book that came falling down from heaven and has to be adopted as something alien to us, but again, in its 'special' revelatory character it is deeply connected with the 'general'. Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture is thoroughly taken up within the Trinitarian movement of revelation, in the first place with the *Logos*: 'All the revelations and words of God, both in the Old and the New Testament, have their ground, unity, and centre in him. (…) The word of God in nature, in Israel, in the NT, in Scripture may never even for a moment be separated and abstracted from him'.[65] Scripture is in the second place associated with the Spirit: 'the Spirit of God is immanent in everything that has been created. The immanence of God is the basis of all inspiration, including divine inspiration. Existence and life is conferred upon every creature from moment to moment by the inspiration of the Spirit.'[66] Scripture is like a river that flows in the riverbed of God's constant speaking of the world (*Logos*) and God's constant breathing which gives things life and being (Spirit).

The roles of the Son and the Spirit are not, however, the same. Bavinck associates the Son mainly with 'revelation' and the Spirit with 'inspiration', where the latter takes its place in a narrower circle. The resulting image begins to look as follows: the broadest circle of revelation is general revelation, which is narrowed down in special revelation (the Son) and narrowed down even further in inspiration (the Spirit). However, it is not Bavinck's intention to give the Son an elite status and to make the Spirit even something for the upper class alone, since this would obviously clash with his intention to show the correspondence between the 'general' and 'special'. Bavinck is simply concerned not to give any room for someone to evade the authority of Scripture due to the broadness of revelation outside of Scripture. Bavinck tries to safeguard the fact that 'for the church of all ages, Scripture is *the* revelation, i.e., the only instrument by which the revelation of God in Christ can be known.' He is anxious not to allow his broad framework of revelation to become an excuse to leave Scripture behind.

Yet it is more than fear that prompts Bavinck to cling to Scripture. Those who deny that God speaks uniquely through Scripture in principle deny 'that

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[65] RD1, 402 (GD1, 372).
[66] RD1, 426 (GD1, 396).

God revealed himself to human beings by speaking, by thoughts, and by words. All of revelation in Scripture is one continuous proof, however, that God not only speaks to human beings metaphorically, by nature and history, facts and events, but also repeatedly comes down to them to convey his thoughts in human words and language.' To adhere closely to Scripture is to adhere to the claim that God speaks and that it is in fact quite normal for him to do so and for us to receive his speech: it is not 'unnatural for human beings to receive a word from God that they have to accept and obey in childlike faith'.[67] They who disdain the divine character of Scripture deny the communicability of God and in fact deny the 'naturality of the supernatural'.

This idea of fittingness is also present in Bavinck's much debated account of 'organic inspiration'. Despite the fact that Bavinck devotes several pages to demonstrating that we have to battle against the hostility of our sinful hearts to accept the authority of Scripture, he also asserts, in quite another vein: 'God never coerces anyone'.[68] In becoming human as well as in inspiring Scripture, God does not 'take human beings by surprise'. So 'the *Logos* became flesh' runs parallel to 'the word became Scripture', and both of these motifs are in line with all of God's activity in the world.

Bavinck must admit that Scripture invokes a rule of heteronomy in revelation. We have to humble ourselves if we want to accept its divine character. Bavinck connects this with the present, sinful state in which we find ourselves. This is not, however, our goal: 'the duality of grace and nature, revelation and reason, authority and freedom, theology and philosophy, cannot last forever.' Our goal is to serve God 'in accordance with our natural inclination'. We must not, however, try to anticipate that ideal in this life, because it belongs to the future alone. They who do so 'indicate a very dangerous line of thought. They all proceed from a confusion between the present dispensation and that of the hereafter.'[69] In other words, a total naturality of the supernatural is something eschatological, when God will be 'all in all'. Now we walk by faith, not by sight, and there is a great need for authority. The need for this authority is, however, only felt when Scripture plays its role in the economy of the *externum*, the objective side of revelation, and when Bavinck plays this card *without* the usual ambiguity. He sounds

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[67] RD1, 430 (GD1, 400).
[68] RD1, 432 (GD1, 402).
[69] RD1, 473 (GD1, 443).

almost relieved when he ends his exposition on Scripture with the remark that Scripture is 'only a means, not the goal'.

3.3.5 God is only known by God

Bavinck happily continues with the internal side of revelation: 'when the economy of the Son, of objective revelation, is completed, that of the Spirit begins.'[70] It should no longer come as a surprise, however, that this distinction is far from clear. If the *principium externum* has a significant element of inwardness, will the *internum* not also have an element of externality?

There is indeed a factor in Bavinck's work that deconstructs an all too obvious movement from 'inside God' to 'outside of God' and again to the 'inside of human beings'. This is the factor of God's presence in all things, which we already mentioned above. If we know God, this knowing is not something 'of our own', but it is God knowing himself through our knowledge, since 'God can be known only by God'. And so, when we enter the realm of the Spirit, which according to Bavinck is the realm of the *internum* and of the subject, we do not enter a godless playground of subjectivity: 'The revelation of God in Christ does not ask for the support or approval of human beings. It posits and maintains itself in sublime majesty. (…) It itself conquers human hearts and makes itself irresistible.' The gift of the Spirit is thus 'revelation realising itself', or God completing the movement of revelation in glorification.[71]

'Only the regenerate see the kingdom of God', Bavinck writes at the outset of his exposition on faith.[72] He articulates this insight not only in the

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[70] RD1, 505 (GD1, 471).

[71] This same theological movement underlies Bavinck's famous reference to the phrase *Deus dixit* as the ground of all theology. It is of course far from obvious what *Deus dixit* as theological principle exactly implies. For Bavinck the *Deus dixit*-principle does not primarily have the authoritarian force of 'God has spoken, and now you shall obey, whether you want to or not', but rather moves us into the orbit of God's speaking and being. Bavinck writes: 'To the question: "Why do you believe?" Christians reply, "Because God has spoken, *Deus dixit*. They cannot indicate another, deeper ground. If you then ask them: "But why do you believe that God has spoken, say, in Scripture?" they can only answer that God so transformed them internally that they recognise Scripture as the word of God. But having said that, they said it all', RD1, 582 (GD1, 551). Believing is in this way interpreting yourself as standing in the flow of God's speech, and there is nothing 'behind' that speech that you can refer to.

[72] RD1, 564 (GD1, 532).

paragraphs on the *principium internum*, when he moves consciously within the realm of faith, but also throughout his entire prolegomena. For example, when writing about science, Bavinck states that the true scientist should be a 'man of God', meaning that he must be 'as much as possible a normal human being' and 'that he not bring false presuppositions into his work'.[73] Time and again, Bavinck interrupts his expositions on knowledge, truth, and their relationship with the *principia* of theology by playing the card of the 'virtuous person'.[74] 'Only those who are born of water and Spirit can see the kingdom of God', Bavinck writes, taking up John 3:5 in a passage where he contends that the theologian must assume a position *within* Christianity from the very outset if he wants to know its principles. To know goodness, you have to *be* good, to know truth, you have to *be* truthful – and consequently for Bavinck to be a theologian, you have to be 'godly'. Again, this is a way of 'internalising the external', since what you are looking for externally already has to be inside of you, for otherwise you would never be able to recognise it at all. It is not Bavinck's intention to install a principle of exclusivity here, as if 'theology is for the re-born Christians only.' Bavinck simply maintains a theocentric view in which 'only God can know God' is the leading principle, such that, if we want to know God, it has to be 'God in us' who enables us to do so.[75]

According to Bavinck, the internal side of revelation (which bears the name of 'faith') is not there to cherish its insideness. It can only be understood in relation, or, to use Bavinck's favoured word, in 'correspondence' with the external, objective world. Similarly, when he treated the *principium externum* and even earlier, that internal side of revelation had already been there. When Bavinck discusses the correspondence between subject and object through the *Logos*, he quotes Goethe, saying: 'Wär nicht das Auge Sonnenhaft, wie könnten wir das Licht erblicken?'[76] It follows that Bavinck does not intend to discuss

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[73] RD1, 43 (GD1, 19).

[74] The same tendency in Bavinck – although not in terms of the 'virtuous person' – is discussed in Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 391-399. Veenhof does not share what he calls Bavinck's 'optimism' about the human possibility to be attuned to the divine.

[75] See e.g. RD1, 587 (GD1, 557), with reference to John 8:47: 'Who is from God (*ek tou theou*) hears the words of God'. Bavinck writes there: 'No one can speak about God except those who speak out of Him and through Him' (I changed the translation 'from Him' to 'out of Him', in order to reflect more accurately the way Bavinck echoes this verse).

[76] RD1, 233 (GD1, 207).

'the eye' without 'the light', that is, he does not want to discuss the *internum* separate from the *externum*.

Faith is not something for the elite alone: It is 'not a new organ implanted in human beings, not a sixth sense, or a 'superadded gift'. However much it disagrees with the 'natural' human, it is nevertheless completely natural, normal, and human.'[77] Faith is not something that is available for analysis from all possible sides, since it exists in receiving, and the receiver is not something that exists without the received. Human beings 'are related to the whole world. Physically, vegetatively, sensorily, intellectually, ethically, and religiously there is correspondence between them and the world; they are microcosmos', they were made suited to this world, and the world to them. We constantly strive outwards to the world with which we are connected. We live from the truth which always comes from the outside and which we 'grasp and absorb'.

When this happens, when subject and object fully correspond, we in fact experience the 'normal situation', which Bavinck describes as 'rest, joy, blessedness'. He continues in an altogether mystical vein: 'In such situations the distance between us and the truth has vanished. The truth has found us, and we have found it. There is immediate contact.'[78] Interestingly, Bavinck does not give the impression that he is speaking here about an eschatological reality, or at least he does not give the impression of describing a situation in which we do not already share to some extent. There seems to be a vision of unity with the truth in which we already share if we want to know anything of 'truth' whatsoever.

Finally, the overlapping between the external and internal side of revelation, or perhaps their 'being-in-each-otherness', reaches its most confusing moment when Bavinck speaks of the *Logos* at the place where he is officially discussing the Spirit. Although it ought to be the *testimonium internum* of the Holy Spirit that bears witness in us of the truth of 'objective revelation' (Scripture), Bavinck within the scope of his rule according to which 'God can be known only by God' states that 'it is the *Logos* himself who through our spirit bears witness to the *Logos* in the world.'[79] And in the final pages of his discussion of the *principium internum* of theology he even denies

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[77] RD1, 566 (GD1, 534).
[78] RD1, 587 (GD1, 556).
[79] RD1, 587 (GD1, 557).

that it should be called 'faith', and rather insists on the phrase *ratio christiana*, that is, faith which seeks – and has found – understanding, or a Christian tradition which has absorbed Greek philosophy.[80] When Bavinck discusses the Spirit, the subject and faith, we never have to wait long for the *Logos*, the object and knowledge to interrupt the discussion.

It is no coincidence that he ends his prolegomena with what nearly amounts to a hymn on the knowledge of God: Knowledge 'terminates in adoration'. The Christian confession 'becomes a song of praise and thanksgiving. Of this kind, too, is the knowledge of God theology aims for. It is not just a knowing, much less a comprehending; it is better and more glorious than that: it is the knowledge which is life, "eternal life" (John 17:3)'.[81]

3.4 God's being and creation

In this section we will turn our attention to Bavinck's doctrine of God and creation. For Bavinck, this is in fact to enter the heart of the matter, according to his earlier announcement that theology is about God's being all along. In fact, readers do not get the sense that they have now entered a completely new terrain. With all that has already been said about 'knowing', 'truth', 'unity and difference', and with Bavinck's emphasis on the underlying movement from God to the world which again finds its goal in the glorification of God, it is crystal clear that we actually already entered the doctrine of God even before Bavinck formally discusses it. What follows nevertheless offers a brief overview of the way Bavinck envisions the relation between God and the world and how his view relates to the theme of participation.

3.4.1 God is being
For Bavinck, God's communicability is the cornerstone of theology. Through God's revelation, we have knowledge of him. But if we talk about 'knowledge of God', we have to face the fact that this knowledge is enshrouded in incomprehensibility. God's unknowability is according to Bavinck the principle of all theology, so that the *via negativa* is the ultimate condition surrounding any positive knowledge. God does not reveal himself

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[80] RD1, 609 (GD1, 577).
[81] RD1, 621 (GD1, 591).

exhaustively, Bavinck states, since if he were to communicate himself fully to his creatures, 'they themselves would have to be divine.'[82] But does this leave us with an unknown or even dark *deus absconditus*? This is not the impression he gives. There is in Bavinck's thought the image of a 'residue' in God, but it has the character of an unknowable fullness that only compels us to reverence: 'there remains in him an infinite fullness of power and life that is not revealed'.[83]

God's unknowability is not something we have to leave behind or fear, nor does it cause us to shrug our shoulders and quickly move on to the things we do know about God. Instead, God's unknowability is the first and foremost part of our positive knowledge about God, so that every knowledge of God flows necessarily from a source of not-knowing. It is a mystery that 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.'[84] There is a world of difference between infinity and endlessness, between omnipotence and the sum of all power, or, in short, between God and the world. Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that this utterly incomprehensible God is the giving source of all that is.

We give God many names, and do so rightly, Bavinck contends.[85] Still, our names do not 'touch' God, for he is beyond naming, and all names are inadequate: God is both *polynomos* (many-named) and *anonymos* (without name). Quoting Augustine, Bavinck remarks: 'You try to speak of him in some way? You find that he is everything'. We use many names, because we have many different needs: bread when we are hungry, water when we are thirsty, light when it is dark. With Augustine Bavinck says in this respect that 'God becomes everything for you, for he is the whole of things that you love'.[86] God is all of these things and none, so that God's anonymity gives rise to the 'polynymity' and vice versa. We must not withdraw from the world and its naming to find the real God, since this would leave us only with an abstract, empty concept, bereft of all life, but on the contrary, we have to plunge deeper

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[82] RD2, 36 (GD2, 9).
[83] RD2, 56 (GD2, 26).
[84] RD2, 49 (GD2, 22).
[85] 'Names' is used here of course in the classical theological sense of 'attributes'.
[86] RD2. 102 (GD2, 70).

and deeper into all worldly phenomena to find at least a trace of the fullness and richness that is God's being. The created world is the only place to find God, and it is by no means a hiding or retreating of God. God is real and true being, 'the sum of all reality and perfection', and everything that is owes its existence to God.[87]

Our names for God are 'but names', they are metaphors, but this does not imply that they are useless or without truth, Bavinck contends. On the contrary, 'real poetry is truth': all language, figures and symbols presuppose a 'penetration of the visible by the invisible world.'[88] Language is not simply *used* by God for revelation, but itself has a revelatory character. A metaphysics of language is the presupposition of the truthfulness of our names, since this world has been made capable of resonating the divine. Our names are capable of naming the spiritual, because they come forth out of the spiritual. For example, we do not simply call God 'father' after our earthly fathers, instead 'all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named after the Father' (with reference to Ephesians 3:15). Bavinck again depicts the earthly as a movement from God to God, so that strictly speaking it is not we who name God: 'It is God himself who (…) has put his splendid names in our mouth.'[89]

When he discusses the different attributes of God, Bavinck adopts from the theological tradition the distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes. The first group includes attributes like infinity and simplicity, which belong to God alone, while the second group contains attributes like goodness and wisdom, which are also known to created beings. Bavinck here in fact thus follows the *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae*, respectively. Bavinck is far from satisfied with this distinction, since it overly implies that God's being is divided into two parts: God in himself and God in relation to creation. Yet a strict separation would be impossible. For example, how could we speak of God's eternity if his works did not somehow reveal it to us? Incommunicable attributes are also communicated in creation, and likewise it must be pointed out that the positive attributes 'pertain to God in a different way than they do to created beings'. Any positive knowledge about God has a core of incommunicability. But still, God 'is himself all that in which creatures share: being and life and spirit, knowledge, holiness and

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[87] RD2, 106-110 (GD2, 74-79).
[88] RD2, 106 (GD2, 75).
[89] RD2, 107 (GD2, 76).

righteousness'.[90] Furthermore, the incommunicability does not remove God from created being, since he is 'the real, the true being, the fullness of being, the sum total of all reality and perfection'.[91]

Although Bavinck is careful not to value some attributes over others, he gives a certain priority to God's aseity and simplicity. He highly values harmony and unity: over against our world of differences, there is unity in God. All attributes are in God completely and simultaneously, so that the attributes should not be considered separate from his essence. In Bavinck's thought there is only one being: God's being. 'All being is contained in him'. This is articulated in God's *aseitas*. Only God has real, true being, and creation derives its being from this inexhaustible source. As a result, to emphasise God's *aseitas* is the same as to state that 'God is being'. In creating the world, God is not really moving outwards or doing something that is not already contained in his own being. This would involve change in God, or else that something could be added to the divine being, which is impossible. Bavinck in this sense follows the Neoplatonic line of thought, in which 'every effect remains in the cause'. As we saw, our naming of God is not a pure movement of 'ascending', but it is a circular movement: 'because everything comes from God, everything points to God'.[92] For example, when God loves others, 'he loves himself in them'; therefore, through creatures, God's love returns to himself.[93] The same applies to God's will. To state that God 'wills' something would seem to imply that God lacks something, that he strives for something he does not yet possess. Again, this is impossible. God's will is 'a will that finds rest and enjoyment in what it has acquired', it is 'the love that embraces its object'. And what God wills is therefore nothing other than himself: 'He wills creatures, not for something they are or that is in them, but for his own sake.

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[90] GD2, 106: 'Zoo is God (...) dan ook zelf dat alles wat schepselen aan zijn en leven en geest, aan kennis, heiligheid en gerechtigheid deelachtig zijn.' My own translation, particularly in the context of this study, is a bit more precise than what is found in RD2, 135.

[91] RD2, 123 (GD2, 93).

[92] RD2, 130 (GD2, 100).

[93] RD2, 211, 216 (GD2, 179, 183). The latter quotation is followed by a quote from Pseudo-Dionysius on God's love which is said to be 'an endless circle [traveling] through the Good, from the Good, in the Good, and to the Good, unerringly turning, ever on the same centre, ever in the same direction, always proceeding, always remaining, always being restored to itself'.

He remains his own goal. He never focuses on creatures as such, but through them he focuses on himself. Proceeding from himself, he returns to himself.'[94]

3.4.2 Trinity and communicability

Bavinck's theology is thus shot through with Trinitarian thought, as we saw, for example, in his prolegomena which are unthinkable without the Trinity. Nonetheless, in the second part of the *Dogmatics* he follows the classical western path, which deals in the first place with God's being and attributes, and then with the Trinity.[95] This does not mean that the two chapters are not deeply connected in Bavinck's thought. On the contrary, his contention that God's being is not abstract but full of life is simply articulated more profoundly in his account of the Trinity. Even before he discusses the Trinity, he makes it abundantly clear that God's being is not a bare unity over against the pluriformity of this world. His chapter on the Trinity plainly demonstrates that this has everything to do with the triune character of God's being. In a sense, his account of the Trinity has nothing new to say about God's being, but thoroughly explains what was already implied in all the passages about God as fullness of life and joy.[96]

According to Bavinck, the Trinity is the heart of Christian theology and every heresy imaginable can in the end be traced back to 'a departure from the doctrine of the Trinity'.[97] Again, the discussion is framed within the question of communicability. Arius' rejection of the divinity of the Son is for Bavinck a denial of the mystery that is the very heart of Christian theology: that God can communicate himself while remaining the same. God does not need intermediate beings to communicate himself to creation, as Greek dualistic conceptions indeed required. To counter this suggestion, Bavinck uses the ancient Christian notion of God's fecundity. God's Trinitarian being is a

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[94] RD2, 233 (GD2, 202).
[95] Bavinck consciously follows the path he sees developed by Augustine, in which the main principle is not the person of the Father but 'the one uncompounded essence of God', and in which the unity of the persons is vigorously confirmed, RD2, 287 (GD2, 253).
[96] A profound rendering of Bavinck's doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for the relation between creation and creator can be found in B. G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 19-64.
[97] RD2, 288 (GD2, 255).

plenitude of life, it is 'capable of expansion, unfolding, and communication'. According to Bavinck there is even 'production' in the divine being, such that 'working' and 'bringing forth' fully belong to God. But 'apart from the Trinity even the act of creation becomes inconceivable. For if God can not communicate himself, he is a darkened light, a dry spring, unable to exert himself outward to communicate himself to creatures'.[98]

Creating thus seems to have the character of a movement from 'inside God' to 'outside of God'. Creating is a 'going outward' and implies a difference between something *ad intra* and something *ad extra*. This is not, however, an absolute difference. From Bavinck's discussion of God's being it can be concluded that there is no real 'trespassing' between God and the world. Although God and the world are not identical, from God's point of view there is also no real 'border'. In creating the world, God does not move out of his own being to create something over against himself: The world 'does not exist apart from him or in opposition to him, but continues to rest in his spirit'.[99] In Bavinck's thought, 'God's being' and 'the world' already imply each other, and this is deeply connected to the Trinity.

The communication of the Father to the Son is for Bavinck the basis for the divine communication to creation. The *processiones* in God are not identical with the *processiones* in time, but the latter presuppose and require the former. There are different expressions in Bavinck's work that articulate the connection as well as the distinction between the Son and the world (or human beings). The Son is *archetypally* what human beings are *ectypally*. We can be called sons of God because of the Son of God, and we can be called image of God because of Christ who is the true image of God. We are 'by way of analogy' what Christ is 'in an absolute sense'. God communicates himself in an absolute sense to the Son, but 'in a relative sense' to creation.[100] In many different ways Bavinck tries to articulate that the world is not identical with the Son, but still stands 'in a peculiar relation' to him. He criticises the Apologists for not adequately distinguishing between the generation of the Son and the creation of the world. In their thought he still perceives a Gnostic dualism between God and world, between spirit and matter. The danger in their thought is that God the Father becomes hidden and separated from the

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[98] RD2, 308, (GD2, 275).
[99] RD2, 262 (GD2, 227).
[100] RD2, 333 (GD2, 300).

world, and that the Son becomes the real creator, or the 'cosmic idea', so that the Father and the Son are respectively associated with 'insideness' and 'moving outwards'. The world in this conception, 'if not anti-God, is nevertheless ungodly, God-less, devoid of deity'. To Bavinck, the world is not God, but the world is also not 'not-God'.

Although in Bavinck's eyes the Son cannot be called the 'cosmic idea', he does admit that this conception contains an important truth. The world is not eternal, as some philosophers and theologians have suggested, but its 'idea' is eternally in God's mind. Bavinck supposes a 'world idea' in God, not as a plan that is written at the beginning of time, but as something that stands in a close relationship with God's eternal being and thus 'encompasses in a single conception the end as well as the ways leading to it, the goal along with the means of reaching it'.[101] Bavinck closely connects – or even identifies – this world idea with God's counsel. The world idea is not identical with the Son, but it is nonetheless 'in' the Son. The Father 'thinks' the world idea, 'but all that the Father is and has and thinks he imparts to and expresses in the Son.' In him 'the Father contemplates the idea of the world itself, not as though it were identical with the Son, but so that he envisions and meets it in the Son in whom his fullness dwells'.[102] The world arises from the Son, is sustained by Him and rests in Him.

To be sure, there is in Bavinck's conception an 'outside' to God. The Son is not identical with the world, but contains as 'full expression of the divine being' also 'all that will exist as creature *outside* the divine being.' There is an 'outside' to God, but there is no 'over against' God. As we already saw, Bavinck thinks of God and the world within the framework of an 'outgoing' and a 'returning' to God. But this outgoing and returning does not imply 'alienation', a contrasting of God and world: 'The creation does not exist as a result of a passage of the world from being in God to being outside of God (…). The world is certainly no anti-God; it has no independent existence, and remains in God as its ongoing immanent cause'.[103] Nevertheless, any identification of God and the world should be rejected. The world is 'not a part of, or emanation from, the being of God.' It has 'a being and existence of its own, one that is different and distinct from the essence of God'. According to Bavinck, God relates to the

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[101] RD2, 397 (GD2, 360).
[102] RD2, 425 (GD2, 389).
[103] RD2, 419 (GD2, 382).

world as eternity relates to time, and these simply are incommensurable magnitudes. To inquire into the relation between God and the world is to ask how eternity passes into time.[104]

Pantheism, says Bavinck, tries to answer this question with an abundance of words and images, but Christian theology simply confesses its inability to understand their interconnectedness: 'As living, thinking beings in time, we stand before the mystery of eternal uncreated being and marvel.' Unparticipatory as this may seem, Bavinck still contends that the world 'is sustained in all its parts by God's omnipresent power, and time in all its moments is pervaded by the eternal being of our God. (…) Eternity is the immutable centre that sends out its rays to the entire circumference of time.' In this image, God's immutability and aseity as well as his communicability are articulated.[105]

Up to now, all attention has been devoted to the communication of the Father to the Son in relation to God's communication to the world. But where is the Spirit? It is clear that Bavinck's account of the Trinity has a less spectacular role for the Spirit than for the Son, a fate which his theology shares with most of western orthodox theology. However, especially with respect to the central role of God's communicability in Bavinck's work, there are some important passages in the *Reformed Dogmatics* that stress the relevance of the Spirit. In the first place, Bavinck notes that the Father 'possesses all things of himself' and can thus be called the 'fountain of deity', whereas the Son and the Spirit possess the same being and attributes 'by communication', which is the basis for their communication towards creation.[106] But what is particularly communicated through the Spirit? The central word that Bavinck uses in relation to the Spirit is 'immanence': the Spirit is 'God as the immanent principle of life'.[107]

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[104] RD2, 428-429 (GD2, 392).

[105] Cf. also his *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*: 'There is divine *dynamis*, divine *energeia* at work in the world, and because of them the things *are* and *work*. The divine energy is the source of all powers and energies in created beings, and since this divine energy is not a blind power, but is led by divine wisdom, the powers and workings in the world also show direction and course.' H. Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: Kok, 1929), 57.

[106] RD2, 273 (GD2, 238).

[107] RD2, 277 (GD2, 243).

Bavinck admits that the economy of the Spirit therefore appears more 'vague' to us, and suggests that this is why the theological constructions concerning the Holy Spirit have been less impressive than those concerning the Son. There is good reason for this vagueness: we ourselves live in the economy of the Holy Spirit. We do not tend to direct our prayers to the Spirit, as we do to the Father and the Son. This is not because he is less God, but 'because he is much more the author than the object of our prayer'. But as soon as the church begins to probe its own life and faith, it will 'acknowledge with joy both the personality and the deity of the Holy Spirit'.[108] Although we can be 'in the Son' as well as 'in the Spirit', Bavinck now and then juxtaposes Son and Spirit as 'objective principle' and 'subjective principle' of salvation. As with the *Logos*, the deity of the Spirit is necessary for the 'genuine communion between God and humans', since without God the Holy Spirit 'God remains above and outside us and does not dwell in humanity as in his temple'.

God's communicability or 'fecundity' stands or falls with the doctrine of the Trinity. Without God's communicability, that is, without the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, there would be 'a world separate from, outside of, and opposed to God'. Since God's internal and external relations are so closely related, there is a great truth in the notion of the world showing the *vestigia trinitatis*, and we can even call man the *imago trinitatis*. As James Eglinton rightly observes, for Bavinck this does not result in a love for seeing 'triads' everywhere in the created world, but points to an inner dynamic in his worldview: that there is in God as well as the world 'unity in diversity, diversity in unity'.[109]

3.4.3 Will and being

Although it can be concluded that this world owes its existence to God's fecundity, that is not the whole story Bavinck wants to tell. In his perception, God is not simply an overflowing source from which creation 'emanates'. He wants to preclude the idea that God is being 'flowed out into his creatures', since this would imply an identification of the world with God's being.

According to Bavinck, the doctrine of the Trinity keeps emanation and creation together. The world's coming into existence does not imply that it is an extension or part of God, nor is it something over against God. Christian

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[108] RD2, 311-312 (GD2, 278).
[109] Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 88. RD2, 331 (GD2, 298).

theology knows both emanation and creation, but it should be noted that the former word is reserved for the communication within God's being, and the latter for the communication *ad extra* – which two, as we saw, are nonetheless intimately connected to each other. According to Bavinck, theologians who did speak of emanation or participation did not mean that God flowed out into the world, but they only wanted to say that 'God is *ens per essentiam*, and the creature *ens per participationem*. Creatures indeed have a being of their own, but this being has its efficient and exemplary cause in the being of God.'[110]

The traditional Christian position on creation is that of a *creatio ex nihilo*. Bavinck takes a firm stance on this position, which, according to him, rejects concepts of emanation and therefore identification of God and the world. This world did not flow smoothly out of God's being, it comes 'out of nothing'. This does not mean that 'nothing' is now suddenly the father and source of all being: *ex nihilo* in fact means *post nihilum*, Bavinck states. The world is called from non-existence to existence 'by God's almighty power', so that *creatio ex nihilo* is a confession that matter finds its cause not in itself, but in God.

According to Bavinck, God's will is the ultimate cause of all that exists. There is only one answer to the question why God created the world and why things are the way they are: *Quia voluit*, because he so willed it.[111] When creation asks its creator why he created, it simply stands at a boundary. It cannot ascend higher than the will of God, and if it does, it runs the risk of searching for a 'ground in God's being', which then necessitates and eternalises creation. Creation therefore can be defined as 'the act of God through which, by his sovereign will, he brought the entire world out of nonbeing into being that is distinct from his own being'.[112] When we listen carefully to the idiom Bavinck uses ('act', 'sovereign will', 'distinct from his own being'), it is clear that any notion of emanation will be difficult to find in this definition. This world does not flow from God's being unconsciously, but is caused by his will.

Bavinck states that 'God cannot be conceived without will, freedom and power', but nonetheless God does not will something other than himself.[113] Granted, there is in God a 'propensity towards creation' which is traditionally

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[110] RD2, 419 (GD2, 382).
[111] RD2, 234, 430 (GD2, 203, 394).
[112] RD2, 416 (GD2, 379).
[113] RD2, 231 (GD2, 200).

distinguished from his 'propensity toward himself', but also the things 'other than himself' he still wills 'for himself'. God remains his own goal. Bavinck quotes the Reformed theologian Zanchi who wrote of God that 'the things that he wills outside of himself are the very things that in a sense already exist in him in whom all things exist'.[114] There is no lack, no need in God that prompts his desire for creation.

Although he stresses God's will as the ultimate cause for our created existence, Bavinck is careful not to speak about God's will as an unchecked and arbitrary reality. God's will 'has its motives' and should be kept as close as possible to the whole of his being, so as to prevent a voluntaristic or nominalistic position. Although the will of God is rightly called the ground of all things, it should not be separated from his nature. The interesting question is then which of the two prevails in Bavinck's thought. Is the ultimate cause for this world to be found in God's will or in God's being? The best answer, according to Bavinck, would be 'in both', or 'not purely in one of both, without the other'. It is clear in his discussion of the doctrine of God that God's being is prior to his will. But it is also not so that God's will functions as a filter or diaphragm that sorts out all the options taken from God's being and then communicates this narrower stock of being to the world. The world is revelation of God's knowledge, wisdom, love, goodness, glory and thus of his will.

At some moments in Bavinck's work, it seems as if he is drawing a clear picture of where we are to locate 'being' in God and where we are to locate 'will': The Son is generated from the being of the Father and thus fully shares in God's communication of being. Creation, on the other hand, needs God's 'antecedent decreeing will', such that 'being' would seem to be communicated in God's inner processions and 'will' would appear to be the gate to the processions to the outside world. However, although Bavinck often associates being with God's communication *ad intra* and will with his communication *ad extra*, this main framework does witness a certain necessary elasticity.[115] On

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[114] RD2, 184-185 (GD2, 202).
[115] A clear articulation of this main framework can be found in RD2, 420 (GD2, 383): 'Scripture, and therefore Christian theology, knows both emanation and creation, a twofold communication of God – one within and the other outside the divine being; one to the Son (…) and another to creatures (…); one from the being and another by the will of God.' Note the difference of the words 'from' and 'by' in the last part of the phrase. If the Dutch adverbs are even more literally translated, the passage would

the one hand even the eternal generation of the Son is no 'unconscious, unwilled emanation' and does not occur apart from the will and power of the Father.[116] As such, even 'emanation of being' is not without will. On the other hand, although this world finds its ultimate cause in God's will or 'absolute sovereignty', it is in the same breath called an 'image of the eternal' and a 'reflection of the divine being'. All that is and comes to pass 'is the realization of God's thought and will'; God's Counsel or world-plan has to do with his will as well as his ideas, and thus relates both to willing and to being.[117] In short, generation also involves God's will, and creation also involves God's being. Creation is no emanation, but it does require the notion of emanation so as to avoid a deistic alienation between God and the world.[118]

In the end, in his discussion of the doctrine of God, the Trinity, God's Counsel and Creation, Bavinck consciously remains standing before a mystery: why is there a world, when there is also God? This world seems so superfluous when it is compared with the fullness of God's being, and Bavinck is absolutely clear about the fact that the world is in no way 'needed' by God. The existence of this world is pure givenness. God creating the world is like a bird which sings for no other reason than singing itself: 'I pour out my heart like a little finch in the poplars; I sing and know no other goal'.[119]

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read: 'one *out of* [uit] the being and one *through* [door] the will of God' – which is analogous to the difference between the Latin *ex* and *per*.

[116] GD 276.

[117] On the connection between God's Counsel and the Platonic Ideas in Bavinck, see H.M. Yoo, *Raad en daad: Infra- en supralapsarisme in de nederlandse gereformeerde theologie van de 19e en 20e eeuw* (PhD Thesis, Kampen 1990), 77-79.

[118] It is only in a very loose and suggestive way that God's will is in Bavinck's work rooted particularly in the Spirit or the *spiratio*. Bavinck on the whole quite implicitly follows Augustine, who associated the Father with power, the Son with intellect and the Spirit with love or goodness. This 'loving' of God that lies in his *spiratio* is at one point in the *Dogmatics* explicitly associated with God's will: 'The *spiratio* by which the Father and the Son are the *principium* of the Spirit also contains within itself the willing of that world, the idea of which is comprehended within the divine wisdom.' Interestingly, Bavinck connects this information immediately with a comment about the *exitus* and *reditus* of creation: 'The creation thus proceeds from the Father through the Son in the Spirit in order that, in the Spirit and through the Son, it may return to the Father', RD2, 426 (GD2, 389).

[119] RD2, 435 (GD2, 398), a quote Bavinck takes from the Dutch poet Willem Bilderdijk. If we were to read too much into this quotation, we might conclude that creation according to Bavinck is simply all about emanation - which is not the case. Still, the

3.5 Man, Sin and Christ

Our discussion of Bavinck could have ended here, since we now have a picture of 'God and the world' through our reading of his doctrine of God and creation. However, we would miss something of vital importance, if we were to fail to examine his view on humanity and the course of its history. All that can be said of God and the world, according to Bavinck, can be found concisely in the human being. With the creation of man a story starts that contains everything pertaining to the relation between God and the world. This story partly breaks with, but on the other hand in fact also continues Bavinck's preceding, more 'ontological' discourse. Nowhere does this appear more intensely than in his account of the incarnation.

3.5.1 Adam and Christ

In his discussion of creation, Bavinck devotes most of his attention to man. Not that he does not value the whole of creation, since 'the entire world is a revelation of God, a mirror of his attributes and perfections. Every creature in its own way and degree is the embodiment of a divine thought'.[120] Man, however, contains the sum of all creation, is a 'mirror of the universe', *microcosmos* and *microtheos* all at once. Bavinck speaks of human beings in a way analogous to christology: he seeks a balance between a 'high' and a 'low' anthropology. Man is a creature that stands 'between angels and animals, related to but distinct from both. He unites and reconciles within himself both heaven and earth, things both invisible and visible'.[121] Man thus has a mediatory character and is in this sense preparatory for the incarnation, 'amenable to and fit for the highest degree of conformity to God and for the most intimate indwelling of God'.[122]

Man is according to Bavinck related to God as the ectype is related to its archetype: one cannot think the former without the latter. All that is in God finds its limited analogy in man. When it comes to the expression 'image of God', Bavinck therefore makes it clear that man is not the image of the Son, but

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fact remains that Bavinck uncritically quotes this sentence, giving it the air of a poetic utterance that contains 'all he really wants to say'.

[120] RD2, 531 (GD2, 491).
[121] RD2, 556 (GD2, 518).
[122] RD2, 560 (GD2, 522).

of the whole Trinity. Nor is the image of God related to the individual human being, but to humanity as a whole. In this sense, Adam cannot fully be called 'image of God': As 'man alone' he was in need of a woman, but as man and woman together, they were still in need of the full development of humanity in the course of history, since the image of God implies something so rich that 'it can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members.'[123] The image of God is something that is to be unfolded in history, in the expanding dominion over the earth, in a progress of knowledge and art. The image of God was not perfectly and completely revealed in Adam, but will be realized in humanity 'summarized under one head', Christ. Thus 'image of God' is an eschatological term, a term that will only be fully revealed under the guidance of God's providence.[124] Creation exists in the 'beginning of being', but the course of history shows God's progressive communication to creatures, which Bavinck even calls the 'progressive realization of the archetypal ideal of perfect wisdom and love'.[125]

Although Bavinck objects to the contention of some that Adam was still in a state of 'childish innocence', he does admit that Adam mainly pointed ahead to a glory that was still to come. With Augustine, Bavinck ascribes to Adam the *posse peccare* (as opposed to the present state of *non posse non peccare*, and the future state of *non posse peccare*). Adam stood still at the beginning of a path that was to be followed and 'had to pass on to higher glory – or to sin and death'.[126] Adam was created as a being that had to cross a border, to gain a higher goal. Adam was a type of Christ and Christ was the fulfilment of Adam. Thus, Christ and Adam relate to each other as grace relates to nature: the former builds on and fulfils the latter.

3.5.2 Sin
Although Adam was created with Christ in view, this does not mean that Christ's incarnation was simply the necessary consequence of the creation of

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[123] RD2, 577 (GD2, 538).

[124] The eschatological dimension of Bavinck's account of creation has been correctly observed and developed in B. G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny* as well as in Syd Hielema, *Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption* (Th. D. Thesis, Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, 1998).

[125] RD2, 608 (GD2, 568). The quote is from Samuel Harris, but Bavinck adopts it in his own argument.

[126] RD2, 564 (GD2, 526).

man. The Son of God did not become incarnate in order to elevate the nature of man, to divinise humanity, but *as a result of sin*.[127] What then is Bavinck's view on sin in the context of the divine being and work? In the first place, Bavinck steadfastly concurs with the *privatio boni*-tradition. Sin and evil are by no means powers in some sense equivalent to the good and to being. Although Bavinck carefully tries to describe something of sin's 'position' within the divine world-plan, he insists that its existence remains an 'incomprehensible mystery'. It has no necessity or right of existence, but it still is there. We know nothing of whence it came or what it is, since it has no substance of itself. Bavinck describes the paradox of sin's existence best when he states that 'sin itself came into the world without motivation, yet it is the motivation for all human thought and action.'[128] Although he clearly emphasises that sin does not belong to this world ontologically, he does go rather far when he recognises something 'positive' in the existence of evil. Bavinck cannot but confess that sin did not come into existence apart from God's will and counsel. Therefore, although God is in no way the author of sin, it still has to fulfil some 'role' in his plan.

Bavinck is very much impressed by the fact that in our world light and darkness seem to need each other: 'What storms are in nature, (...) false notes in music, dark shadows on a painting: that is sin in the world.' Although he sharply dismisses the view that these observations compel us to hypostasise evil – and thus render it as a good – he admits that he sees a deep truth in it.[129] Bavinck argues that 'the idea of sin was first conceived in God's mind' – and not in Satan's mind, nor in that of Adam or Eve.[130] Therefore, God *did will* sin, albeit in a different way than he willed the good. God is so completely holy and almighty that 'he can use sin as a means in his hand'. Furthermore, since humanity was created with the possibility of falling, it at the beginning lacked the *donum perseverantiae*. Human beings were, so to speak, not yet put to the test, and the image of God was therefore not yet fully unfolded in man. Sin had to be actualised to serve the glorification of God, in that he is victorious over sin. Bavinck says that God trusted his own and therefore the world's goodness so deeply that he allowed evil to unleash its wickedness in his creation. For

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[127] RD2, 547-548 (GD2, 508-509); RD3, 278 (GD3, 258-259).
[128] RD3, 145 (GD3, 125-126).
[129] RD3, 56 (GD3, 33-34).
[130] RD3, 66 (GD3, 44).

sin, in contrast to the good, 'is of such a nature that it destroys itself by the very freedom granted it; it dies of its own diseases; it dooms itself to death.'[131]

Therefore, although sin is in essence 'nothing', it still builds a horrifying (but apparently also self-defeating) kingdom of its own, and since it exists, it has to fulfil a 'positive' role in the unfolding of the divine glory. Bavinck can speak quite positively about sinful realities that play their role in the fallen world. The curse that lies over creation becomes in a sense a blessing: Because man was sent away to work 'in the sweat of his face', humanity was able to develop a culture, and death is not only a punishment, it is also mercy, since it prevents sin from being eternal.[132] In a quote that says much about the link between his worldview and christology, Bavinck writes that this world is 'a world full of humor, laughter mixed with tears, existing in the sign of the cross, and given immediately after the fall to Christ, the Man of sorrows, that he might save and subdue it.'[133] Bavinck's theology thus stands in the 'bittersweet' reality of the fallen world.

Yet how does God respond when man is fallen in sin? Bavinck follows the story in Genesis 3: God approaches man in the cool of the day and thus 'gives people time to come to themselves and to consider how they will answer him'. Bavinck adds: 'This approaching was grace'. And in the following conversation between God, Adam and Eve, the 'fundamental law' of all that will follow is made apparent: 'the road for the human race will pass through suffering to glory, through struggle to victory, through the cross to a crown, through the state of humiliation to that of exaltation'. What is opened is a world of laughing through our tears, a humour that 'stands under the sign of the cross'. This is the realm in which the covenant of grace operates.

3.5.3 The covenant of grace
Between his chapter on Sin and his chapter on Christ, Bavinck has a chapter on 'the covenant of grace'. With the participatory tradition in mind, the reader might wonder why this chapter is necessary. Why does Bavinck suddenly need

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[131] RD3, 64-65 (GD3, 42).

[132] RD3, 200 (GD3, 178-179), the last statement referring to Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, 23, 6 (God removed man 'far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue to be a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable').

[133] RD3, 200 (GD3, 179).

the conceptuality of the covenant? Bavinck is very insistent that the communion between God and man 'can only be reestablished from the side of God and at a certain point in time. From the very first moment of its revelation, grace assumes the form of a covenant'.[134]

From the Reformed tradition and its biblical-theological orientation, Bavinck adopts the conceptual language of the different 'covenants' between God and the world, and especially between God and man.[135] Originally, Adam's relationship with God had the character of a 'covenant of works', implying that eternal life was to be obtained by him by simple obedience to God's commandments. After the fall, this covenant was replaced – and in fact fulfilled – by the covenant of grace, which follows the way of union with Christ. At first sight this covenantal language seems to be superfluous within his ontological framework, but Bavinck gives a typical colouring of both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace that is indispensable for obtaining a complete picture of his view on the relation between God and the world.

When he describes the covenant of works, Bavinck gives important clues as to why he thinks 'covenant' is a fitting concept for describing the relation between God and the world. First, it emphasises the unbridgeable distance between creator and creature. In the second place, it emphasises that, if there is such a thing as a relation between God and the world, there must be condescension from the side of God. If there is to be a relation between God and man, Bavinck writes, 'then God has to come down from his lofty position, condescend to his creatures, impart, reveal, and give himself away to human beings'.[136] He refers in this context to Isaiah 57:15, according to which God 'who inhabits eternity and dwells in a high and holy place must also dwell with those who are of a humble spirit'.[137] The covenant thus also functions within the context of the communicability of God.

Rather than the covenant of works, however, the greater part of Bavinck's attention in his work goes out to the covenant of grace, which in fact seems to

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[134] RD3, 196 (GD3, 175).
[135] Bavinck particularly mentions Zwingli and Bullinger as fathers of the covenantal tradition.
[136] RD2, 569 (GD2, 531).
[137] RD2, 569 (GD2, 531).

be the only covenant that really matters conceptually.[138] Its importance is directly derived from what was noted in the former section regarding the world as it was newly 'introduced' after the fall. Bavinck pictures this world as 'unparticipatory' as possible: 'It is impossible to interpret life and history in the light of the love of God alone. At work throughout the creation is a principle of divine wrath that only a superficial person can deny. Not communion but separation prevails between God and humankind.'[139] It is worth pointing out that there is no sign here of the original notion of *privatio boni*, that 'hamartiological fellow' of participation. Therefore 'grace assumes the form of a covenant'. If there is to be union with God, it has to follow the way of redemption through Christ, and although Bavinck often speaks warmly about the 'mystical union with Christ', it is first and foremost the case that Christ gained 'objective atonement'. The relationship between Christ and believers is therefore primarily covenantal (or 'federal') and not mystical.[140] When it comes to the role of Christ, Bavinck focuses more on the 'objective side' than the subjective or the 'mystical' side. Christ is head of the covenant in which the believers participate, and this covenant is marked by the struggle in which the fallen world finds itself, the world that is 'given to Christ'.

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[138] Although the current study values the basic insights of Brian Mattson's study on the eschatological character of Bavinck's ontology, I disagree with its claims regarding the spectacular role played by the covenant of works in Bavinck. Mattson rightly observes that in Bavinck 'anthropology requires eschatology'. Mattson has a keen eye for the *telos* of glory that was implied already in the beginning, and notices that the 'image of God' is therefore something necessarily to be developed. In my view, however, he ties this character of Bavinck's work much too exclusively to the covenant of works. Although Mattson does some ingenious work in demonstrating why the covenant of works was more important to Bavinck than its rather brief mention and late appearance in his work would seem to suggest, his conclusion that Bavinck's emphasis on the organic relation between nature and grace 'is identified explicitly and exclusively as the doctrine of the covenant of works' (239) is too narrow. For a further discussion of this theme, see 5.3.4 of the current study.

[139] RD3, 172 (GD3, 153).

[140] *Contra* Ron Gleason who focusses entirely on the importance of the *unio mystica* in Bavinck. R.N. Gleason, *The Centrality of the Unio Mystica in the Theology of Herman Bavinck* (Th.D. dissertation, Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001). Hans Burger is correct to emphasise that 'Bavinck was anxious that emphasis on the mystical would obscure the objective, the juridical, the *extra nos*'. H. Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 116.

3.5.4 The contexts of the incarnation

As Bavinck is keen to emphasise, the incarnation was not something that suddenly happened, without any connection with the rest of God's workings in creation and history. The essence of Christ's coming in the world is already there in the conversation in Genesis 3, and is then developed in the history of Israel. Prior to the incarnation, there needs to be preparation and nurture. The incarnation therefore stands within the broader context of God's works. This preparation in the history of Israel is, however, only one of the three contexts which Bavinck discerns.[141]

First, Bavinck mentions the trinitarian being of God. As we have seen, for Bavinck God's trinitarian being expresses foremost his communicability. It is a trinitarian truth that God remains God and still communicates himself to others. The Trinity therefore opens up the possibility of a mediator who is both divine and human and thus connects God and man.[142] Second, the incarnation is rooted and prepared in creation. As we saw, Bavinck calls the creation of man in particular a preparation for the incarnation. Now Bavinck even suggests that the creation of man already is 'an antropomorphizing of God, and so in a sense and to that extent, an incarnation of God'.[143] Therefore it was fitting for creation that the incarnation should occur. Although incarnation is different from God's other workings in time, it is also akin to it: 'Generation, creation and incarnation are closely related, even if the latter ones do not necessarily flow from the preceding'. In the third place, Bavinck mentions the 'preparation' of the incarnation in the history of revelation after the fall, which we have already discussed above. With reference to the prologue of the Gospel of John, Bavinck mentions that the *Logos* from creation onwards 'communicated his life and light to creatures'. 'He came continually to his own in theophany, prophecy and miracle.'[144] To be sure, Bavinck does not teach that the incarnation would have occurred even without sin.

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[141] These contexts of the incarnation can be found in RD3, 274-282 (GD3, 254-263).
[142] Not in this immediate context but elsewhere Bavinck expresses his appreciation of the Reformed concept of the *pactum salutis* (covenant of peace, covenant of redemption) because it connects the sending of the Son in time as mediator with the eternal counsel of the trinitarian God, RD3, 212-216 (GD3, 192-196).
[143] RD3, 277 (GD3, 258). I use 'incarnation' instead of 'humanisation'. Bavinck uses the word 'menschwording', which is quite aptly translated as 'humanisation' although in Dutch theological language it is more literally associated with *the* incarnation.
[144] RD3, 280 (GD3, 261).

However, he focuses all the attention for the fittingness of the incarnation within the broad setting of God's being and works. For if sin was the only reason for the incarnation, then sin would be greater than God. The incarnation stands in the ongoing story of God's communication of life, light and being to creation, without which this world would cease to exist.

3.6 Provisional Conclusions

An extensive analysis and evaluation of Bavinck's account of the relation between God and the world, and of how that account relates to the theme of participation, will be given in chapter five. Then it will also be contrasted with John Milbank's views as described in the next chapter and placed within the perspective of the participatory tradition, as described in chapter two. However, while staying close to Bavinck's own perspective as this chapter intends to do, we can nevertheless already distinguish a number of features in his outlook that will prove important in the ensuing discussion.

This chapter has observed that Bavinck's understanding of theology implies a significant emphasis on the movement 'from God to God'. This movement is most notably articulated in terms of 'knowing'. Theology is all about 'the knowledge of God', which is communicated by God, enters and penetrates the created and then returns to the divine in a movement of glorification. Knowledge, and in particular theological knowledge, 'terminates in adoration', and for Bavinck all knowing is a sharing in the divine *Logos*. Although Bavinck invests heavily in the dichotomy between subject and object, he constantly relaxes this emphasis somewhat by an undergirding theological account in terms of the 'correspondence' between them, their 'organic relation' or, in most typically theological language, the *Logos* that connects them.

Another, related vocabulary is that of revelation. As Jan Veenhof already noted in his thorough study, there is in Bavinck's thought an important tension between the 'general' and the 'special'. Although Bavinck intends to distinguish revelation from creation, his discourse on revelation constantly becomes much broader than he at other moments seems to intend. The reason why the different dichotomies (between subject and object, or between the general and the special) are kept so closely together in Bavinck (to the

consternation of commentators like Heideman and Veenhof), is that there is in Bavinck's theology a pervasive discourse on divine being, even when it comes to the being of creation and to our knowledge of the divine. This divine communicability constantly works to disrupt the majority of the distinctions with which he superficially seems to work. The implications for Bavinck's relationship to the theme of participation will be discussed below in chapter five.

When he continues with the theme of sin and the coming of Christ, Bavinck seems to abandon his more ontologically coloured discourse which had pervaded the doctrine of God and creation. The reader now enters the story of salvation history, placed within the context of the 'covenant'. However, the Christ that figures in this story is deeply embedded in the being of God and creation. Sin is not allowed to rewrite the agenda of theology, since God's way to 'deal' with sin is to inscribe it in an ongoing communication of his own goodness and life.

4. John Milbank

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Biography

John Alasdair Milbank was born in 1952 in King's Langley, Hertfordshire, England. In the 1970s he studied modern history at Queen's College in Oxford and later theology at Westcott House in Cambridge, among others under Rowan Williams. Milbank then abandoned his initial pursuit of priestly ordination in the Anglican Church and obtained the title of doctor of philosophy with a dissertation on the thought of Giambattista Vico written under the supervision of Leon Pompa. From 1983 to 1991 he taught at Lancaster University, where he developed the ideas that would finally result in his best-known book *Theology and Social Theory* published in 1990. During the 1990s he held a variety of positions at the University of Cambridge, and until 2004 was active at the University of Virginia in the United States. Currently, he is professor of Religion, Politics and Ethics at the University of Nottingham, where he also serves as director to the Centre of Theology and Philosophy.

Milbank was raised a Methodist but became Anglican at the age of 21. He describes himself as originally 'a rather flaccid kind of Anglican with fairly liberal views', which were even 'somewhat pantheistic'.[1] Under the influence of Rowan Williams he began to develop in a more Anglo-Catholic way. Of course, it would be interesting to attempt to interpret his development away from 'Wesleyan' Methodism towards a liberal version of Anglicanism and finally what he sees as his 'conversion' to orthodox Christianity. Undoubtedly, the different strands of this development still linger in his thought, and people often are most marked by the points where they depart from a certain tradition or current of thought, which in Milbank's case could roughly be identified as Methodism and Liberalism.

If any aspect of the influence of Milbank's biography on his theology is to be mentioned, we might refer to his rootedness in what he himself, following Coleridge, calls 'the old, spiritual, Platonic England', which is 'open to the

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[1] From an online interview with Simon Oliver: 'Theologians in Conversation: Radical Orthodoxy': http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRemJU5mTPc (01-02-2014).

arrival of the strange and the unexpected'.[2] There is something particularly 'British' and 'Romantic' in his thought that alludes to the seriousness of fairy tales, as described by Chesterton and closely related to the stories of Lewis and Tolkien. If it is true that we to a large extent are what we are because of the 'stories we live by', then there are two quest stories that are high on the list of the stories that 'make' John Milbank: the quest for the Ring in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the quest for the Holy Grail in the King Arthur stories. Why this is so and what this implies for Milbank's theology will be demonstrated more clearly over the course of this chapter.

4.1.2 Reading Milbank

In *The Suspended Middle* Milbank writes about Henri de Lubac that 'some sort of spiritual failing rendered him incapable of expressing his views except through the interpretation of the views of others'.[3] The present study does not want to claim exactly the same thing about Milbank, although part of his observation about de Lubac is indeed true for him as well. 'Reading Milbank' most of the time means 'reading what Milbank is doing with others'. His books consist mainly of conversations with thinkers from the present and the past, with whom he either disagrees or agrees. In these many interpretative passages it is sometimes hard to find what Milbank himself thinks. Most of the time it is quite clear when he disagrees with a position, but it is often more difficult to discern exactly what his own position is. It is here that we face the same hermeneutical problem that Milbank himself has with de Lubac: where in the interpretation do we find his own position? Just like de Lubac, Milbank often (favourably) quotes or paraphrases some passage, highlighting an oft-forgotten or overlooked theme in someone's work, and thus pushing the interpretation of the thinker in question in a certain direction. In the following description of Milbank's view, we will assume that also in his account of others, we often simply hear his own voice. This is not meant as an *a priori* critique on his work, but as a clarification of how this study as a systematic study will attempt to arrive at Milbank's view on the relation between God and the world. This implies the risk that his position will be made more explicit

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[2] J. Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), ix.

[3] J. Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

than he himself may intend, and a procedure that to some extent flies in the face of the postmodern tendency to wipe out 'the person behind the text'. At least *some* clarity is needed on this point.

Clarity of writing is not one of the things Milbank pursues: 'the fragmentary, and not the systematic character of the literary pile should be explicitly foregrounded: one should exhibit and offer a ruin.'[4] What his work purposely offers is thus a ruin of fragmentary theology. For this reason we also do not find in Milbank's work one systematic exposition of the relation between God and the world, nor of 'participation'. Instead, the necessary information must be collected from parts scattered throughout his entire oeuvre. The task of this study is then to obtain a picture of his work that is as complete as possible and to distil from this picture the pieces that are of particular importance for the main question of this study. However, in order to achieve this task, there is little in Milbank's work that can be left aside, since one might well contend that the question of the relationship between God and the world is the central theme in all of his writings.

4.1.3 Theological and philosophical context

The most striking characteristic of Milbank's work that will attract the attention of the reader is its postmodern sphere. The themes and language are heavily marked by the continental *avant garde* philosophical context of the 1970s and 80s, especially in earlier works like *Theology and Social Theory* and *The Word Made Strange*. Many readers have complained about the impenetrable character of Milbank's prose, which is connected with its postmodern sphere. This complaint has, in fact, been levelled against *Radical Orthodoxy* in general.[5]

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[4] J. Milbank, *The Future of Love*, 175-176. Gordon Michalson is right to compare Milbank's fragmentary and eclectic writing with 'Kierkegaard's strategy of indirect communication'. G.E. Michalson, 'Re-reading the Post-Kantian tradition with John Milbank', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004), 359.

[5] This complaint has been most eloquently articulated by Stephen Long: 'Radical Orthodoxy's labyrinthine prose tempts some to read it only as an academic parlour game used for inconsequential power struggles in highbrow university religion and philosophy departments.' S. Long, 'Radical Orthodoxy' in K. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 133. Cf. S. Shakespeare, Radical Orthodoxy: A critical introduction. (London: SPCK, 2007), 2-3.

Especially in the two works mentioned above, Milbank attempts to give a theological direction to the postmodern current, which, according to him, is not a new direction, but in fact an ancient Christian one. Milbank intends to show that different postmodern concerns and points of critique on modern thought are already contained in Christian thought from the outset. Themes like the ontological importance of difference, the fluidity of substances and the priority of language over thinking are very important to the Platonic-Christian tradition as Milbank understands it, although this tradition is in fact often criticised for lacking these insights.

Milbank, however, does not just follow postmodern thought. In his work we find a critical theological engagement with the philosophical legacies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, which were further developed by thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida. It is therefore not a coincidence that the two greatest 'villains' in his work are nihilism and violence. Milbank usually does not simply oppose these thinkers, but follows them for a lengthy stretch, only to attempt to deconstruct their thought at some point – which is in fact a very postmodern approach.

Milbank's work stands in a tradition of criticism on modernity that developed over the course of the twentieth century and was most notably expressed in the *Frankfurter Schule*. Although representatives of this school do not appear very often in his work, their cultural criticism often sounds much like that of Milbank. As a more recent precursor to Milbank's criticism on modernity, one must mention the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. Although strictly speaking MacIntyre's work is 'philosophical', the theological, 'Thomistic' implications are clear. These implications are happily picked up by Milbank, and there is good reason to read his *Theology and Social Theory* as an attempt at a theological 'fulfilment' of MacIntyre's work.[6]

From a more theological perspective, Milbank's work breathes an atmosphere quite similar to that of postliberal theology, which finds its roots in Karl Barth's revival of the orthodox theological outlook over against a liberal mindset of accommodation. 'Postliberal theology' is a project that attempted to translate this Barthian position in a discourse on narrative and

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[6] J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 328-333. Cf. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Second Edition (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1984) and A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1988).

theological language.[7] Stanley Hauerwas' theology stands in this same postliberal current, combined with a strong 'MacIntyrean' focus on virtue ethics and the role of communities. Milbank's work situates itself quite close to this current, although he is critical of George Lindbeck's work and strongly distances himself from the theological project of Karl Barth.[8] Milbank does not consider his theological project to be developing a postliberal variant of protestant theology, but would rather see it as the development of a proper 'catholic' outlook, purged from modern and even early modern deviations – one of these deviations being protestantism itself.

The most important theological current that Milbank is to be identified with is the twentieth-century French catholic *nouvelle theologie*-movement, which pled for a patristic *ressourcement* of catholic theology and tried to overcome the neothomistic dualism between nature and grace by emphasising their mutual relationship in what came to be known as the notion of 'integralism'.[9] There is also a clear kinship between Milbank's work and that of Jean-Luc Marion. Both propagate a 'catholic move' with much emphasis on the liturgical life of the church as a result of postmodern considerations, although there are differences, perhaps most notably concerning the role of metaphysics and the status of 'being' with regard to the divine.[10]

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[7] Particularly in the work of Hans Frei the Barthian focus fuses with the narratological. As Ronald Michener summarises this stance: 'The Christian world consists of its own linguistic integrity and finds consistency within itself, similar to how a literary work of art is self-consistent within its own genre. It is not dependent on some pre-linguistic common understanding of reality.' R. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 46.

[8] Cf. for example J. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 28-29; also very concisely (and boldly) in 'The theological critique of philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi', in J. Milbank et al. (reds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 22: 'Therefore, while the Barthian claim is that post-Kantian philosophy liberates theology to be theological, the inner truth of his theology is that by allowing legitimacy to a methodologically atheist philosophy, he finishes by construing God on the model, ironically, of man without God'.

[9] For a very complete description of the figures and élan of *nouvelle théologie*, see H. Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie & Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[10] Marion, J.L. *God without Being: Hors-Texte* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Milbank, *The word Made Strange*, chapter 2: 'Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics'.

Although there are some strong affinities and clear similarities with other thinkers and currents, Milbank is, in fact quite like Herman Bavinck, more a lone ranger in the theological field than a clear representative of a school of thought. His style is eclectic and he uses a vast array of sources in a creative and independent manner. The most problematic aspect for his readers is that his work appears to be at home in almost every theological and philosophical discipline, and therefore oscillates constantly between discourses like patristics, modern and postmodern philosophy, medieval theology, politics, classical antiquity and so on.[11] In fact, Milbank seems to promote the very fusion of these disciplines in order to keep them alive. The drawback of this characteristic is, for many readers (and especially experts in these different fields), that he uses his sources inaccurately and in a somewhat arrogant way.[12]

4.2 Beyond the Secular

In this study Milbank's work will be interpreted as a theological 'narrative beyond secular reason', with a deconstructive as well as a constructive side. All the necessary information about Milbank's view on the divine in relation to the created has to be considered within the framework of his project to tell the story of an 'alternative modernity', as we will see. This project began most famously with the appearance of his *Theology and Social Theory*, which therefore presents itself as a suitable starting point for this chapter as well.[13]

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[11] Milbank's work, which he deems to be 'underwritten by uncommonly broad readings that few could hope to match', reminded Gordon Michalson of Hegel, of whom it was commented that 'he chose "omniscience" as his field of philosophical specialisation'. Further on, he supplements this comment by observing that Milbank (again like Hegel) 'understands the past better than it understands itself', which in the end of course becomes quite a problematic notion in his work. G.E. Michalson, 'Re-reading the Post-Kantian tradition', 359, 366.

[12] The most firm and extensive critique of this kind was given in W.J. Hankey and D. Hedley (eds.), *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

[13] Milbank's *Beyond Secular Order* only appeared after the present chapter was completed. Particularly the first part of this book ('Sequence of Modern Ontology') is highly relevant for our study. Fortunately I discovered that Milbank's analyses in this book never contradict but always confirm or clarify the analysis of his thought as it is undertaken in the current chapter, as some incidental references to this latest work in

4.2.1 Theology and Social Theory

The best place to begin an analysis of Milbank's representation of the relationship between God and the world is what is considered to be his *magnum opus*, namely *Theology and Social Theory*. Better stated, perhaps, *any* analysis of Milbank's work should in fact take its starting point in this work.[14] In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank tries to deconstruct the basic claims of social theory and provides an alternative theological outlook on the social. Although Milbank's critique is directed against the social sciences and their history, the book has a wider scope than this subject alone. Social theory comes under attack because of its inherent secularity, and *Theology and Social Theory* represents an attempt to move 'beyond secular reason', as also the subtitle states. Behind the story of social theory which is unravelled here stands the story of the secular.[15] The term 'story' is purposely chosen here, since one of the main goals of Milbank's book is to show that the claims of social theory *are stories*, myths, and not the self-evident truths they contend to be. According to Milbank, the secular as a realm that is independent of the sacred is something that had to be actively imagined and constructed in history, and did not already exist latently, waiting to emerge when the time was ripe.[16]

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what follows will show. J. Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[14] *Theology and Social Theory* is, however, not Milbank's first work. Prior to completing this work, he had already written his doctoral dissertation on Giambattista Vico which was published a year after *Theology and Social Theory*. A good interpretation of Milbank's motifs should also take this lesser known work into account, as the present study indeed intends to do; cf. particularly 4.4.3. However, *Theology and Social Theory* can still be said to contain all of Milbank's theological motifs in a nutshell, although since its appearance he has developed some different emphases and nuances.

[15] This larger program is again confirmed in Milbank's recent *Beyond Secular Order*, which is written as a 'sequel' to *Theology and Social Theory*.

[16] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9. This view is almost literally resonated in Charles Taylor's critique on what he calls 'subtraction theories' of secularisation, which explain modernity 'by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.' On the contrary, according to Taylor, 'an acceptable form of exclusive humanism *had to be imagined*' (my italics). C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 22, 27-28.

Mainly on the basis of a reading of *Theology and Social Theory* and its 'sequel' *The Word Made Strange*, Milbank's account of the secular can be defined as follows: The secular is an actively imagined, independent human realm which presupposes a reality of violence. This definition is composed of two main points which Milbank sees as failings in the notion of the secular. First, it presupposes an 'ontology of violence', as apparent in the necessity of violence or 'alienation' which secular thinkers tend to posit. Second, it supposes a rupture between the finite and the infinite. They are envisioned as two separate realms, of which only the former is relevant, whereas the latter is basically superfluous. *Theology and Social Theory* represents a major effort to deconstruct these two assumptions of the secular and to give an alternative theological outlook, which, according to Milbank, is in fact more original than the secular one.

For the purposes of the present study it is necessary to reproduce Milbank's analysis of the secular, since his account of the relationship between God and the world is highly sensitive to the historical developments that have shaped our current view on this relationship. The story of the secular is a story about God and the world which we inherited and in which we live in modernity. And if we want to see any perspective beyond this story, we will have to understand it better and see it more clearly. In what follows we will look more closely at the first characteristic of Milbank's representation of the secular, its inherent violence (4.2.2). This analysis gives rise to a next section that expounds his view on the character of Sin and the Fall, which will be relevant for this study (4.2.3). After that, the second characteristic of the secular in Milbank's description will be analysed, namely the rupture between the finite and the infinite (4.2.4).

4.2.2 The necessity of evil

According to Milbank, the secular outlook claims to have a 'human face' and wants to free humanity from its metaphysical chains. The space of the sacred had to decrease in order to create space for us, humans, to develop ourselves politically and technologically. Milbank contends that this view is self-deluded and points to the 'agonistic' side of the works of different modern thinkers, among them Hegel and Marx. Although Milbank praises Hegel for his efforts to overcome the dichotomies of the enlightenment in a theological philosophy, he is also very critical for him. According to Hegel, creation is primarily

negation and self-alienation, creation is itself a continuous Fall, for which reason Milbank qualifies his thought as 'gnostic'. Hegel 'sees a necessary beginning to self-conscious humanity in the merely self-seeking, self-preserving and 'evil' will.' In this way, 'there remains for him a realm of finitude that is purely arbitrary and contingent.'[17] In Hegel's thought, reality is depicted in a hierarchical way, a constant upwards striving of the absolute Spirit, which leaves everyday life behind as an indifferent field of battle.[18] In the same sense Milbank criticises Marx, who, intending to counter capitalism, ironically affirmed capitalism by calling it a necessary phase of human development. Milbank reads Marx's work as a deconstruction of the secular which unfortunately does not go far enough because it leaves 'the economic' in place as the essential factor in history.[19] Both Hegel and Marx basically fail at the same point: They posit a necessary realm of indifference, of negation and violence, and consider this an undeniable truth.

Milbank perceives the same kind of thinking in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida contends that all language – and, in the same way, all culture – is full of 'metaphysical mystification': language necessarily conceals and obscures violence, like the Egyptian hieroglyphs which were (allegedly) wielded by the priests to pursue their political agenda. Since it necessarily conceals the absence of the speaker, writing in the end signifies only absence and death. It is not that Milbank denies the possibility of these processes, but it is the necessity and inevitability of such a scheme that he protests against. Unlike Derrida, Milbank sees the abundance of writing by which culture is constituted not as a closed circle waiting for a never fulfilled promise ('presence'), but as a 'non-identical repetition', a never-ending exercise in abundance, always opening up for new future clarifications.[20] Milbank for example refers to psalm 119, with its many different words and phrases for the law and the keeping of the law. The repetition in this psalm 'does not result in confused obscurity, but in clarification, yet a process of clarification that is never foreclosed'.[21]

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[17] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 159.
[18] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 160.
[19] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 177-178; 191-197.
[20] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 55-83, esp. 60-61, 70-71.
[21] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* , 71. Milbank derives these comments from William Warburton.

According to Milbank, we are in the end dealing with 'ontologies of violence'. Derrida, Marx and Hegel are merely examples of secular thinkers who tend to 'hypostasize' or 'transcendentalize' death and violence, although they may have had the best intentions to act against these realities. As such, they do not simply describe the world as it really is, but they install or work within a malign *mythos*.[22] Milbank calls Hegel as well as Derrida 'gnostic' because both identify creation with the fall, and he considers this tendency symptomatic of the secular.[23] It is no coincidence then that he sees in Nietzsche's story of the *Wille sur Macht* 'the least self-deluded description of the secular': this is the malign, agonistic face of the secular, which only fails at the point where it does not see itself as a story, guided by its own doubtful literary taste.[24]

Milbank's position and expressions are firm, and have not escaped opposition.[25] It is clear that one of Milbank's important moves is to point at the great extent to which our view of the world is constituted by the stories we live in, by myths. He therefore does not want to argue on the basis of a neutral reason, but to tell a better story. He intends to 'outnarrate' violent myths with the peaceful story of Christianity, as he calls it in *Theology and Social Theory*. That this strategy is not unproblematic has been argued by several commentators, most extensively by Gavin Hyman. Milbank simply turns the

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[22] This is, says Milbank, even true of a 'peaceful thinker' like René Girard. His only way to avoid violence is to refuse it, 'like Jesus did'. Milbank asserts that there is for Girard only the negative gesture of refusal of desire, and not a positive, peaceful way of acting. Girard posits 'a real pre-religious phase of unlimited and anarchic conflict' and thus 'falls victim to a component of the pagan *mythos*'. Girard unwillingly confirms that violence is all there is, Milbank contends (*Theology and Social Theory*, 397-398).
[23] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, XV-XVI; 158-160; *The Word Made Strange*, 62.
[24] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278-280.
[25] This study only discusses accounts of criticism that really attempt to interpret Milbank's work, as this study itself intends to do. Much criticism does not really enter into a discussion with Milbank but ends up in mud-slinging - to which his work, admittedly, does invite. Douglas Hedley, for example, simply makes his case by calling Milbank's position 'anti-liberal', 'anti-humanistic' and 'authoritarian', and pushes Milbank's thought into a dubious camp by pointing to what he sees as strong resemblances with the French catholic anti-revolutionary Joseph de Maistre. In the end, Hedley's critique is an ingenious, academically acceptable way of calling Milbank a 'fascist'. D. Hedley, 'Radical Orthodoxy and Apocalyptic Difference: Cambridge Platonism, and Milbank's Romantic Christian Cabbala' in Hankey and Hedley, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, 99-115.

cannons around: in the past, it was secularism that shot at theology, but now theology 'shoots back'. Milbank gives theology the task to 'position' other discourses, or else it will be positioned by others, as is the case in a more liberal, adapting mode. By doing so, Milbank installs a basic dualism that gives rise to a host of other dualisms, 'between peace and violence, sacred and secular, nihilism and Christianity'.[26] Furthermore, Milbank problematises his own position because he espouses literary genres of narrative, rhetoric and stories, and thus promotes a sense of lightness and play that is quite incongruous with his own style which is 'rather heavy': 'the reality of his writing style seems rather to embody argument, reasons, and coercion.'[27] Milbank is, according to Hyman, therefore guilty of the same charge he levelled against secular thought: he tends to forget the fictive status of his own metanarrative. All this implies the serious critique that Milbank ironically, in opposing violence, himself embodies violence.[28]

An interesting parallel to Hyman's suggestion can be observed in the fact that Milbank writes poetry, which fits perfectly with the poetic kind of theology he envisages (as we will see further on). However, it has been rightly recognised that he does not fully *trust* poetry.[29] For example, the poems in his book *The Legend of Death* are guided by a heavy theological-philosophical preface, since he wants to make clear that 'this is what these poems mean, this is what they intend to say.' Even the poems themselves are often heavily loaded with argument. We might randomly point to an example from a poem called *via moderna*: 'For in reality it is the absolute trees / that are but shadowed / by the gusts of 'little things' / of our own nominal sad contriving'.[30] Milbank's poetry often tends more to theological prose than to poetry. Craig Hovey points to an important contradiction in Milbank's work, which is parallel to Hyman's criticism: 'The speaker's exaltation of place quite often paradoxically trades in the very abstraction he wants to leave behind.'

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[26] G. Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 70-71.
[27] Hyman, *Predicament*, 80.
[28] For Hyman's complete analysis, see *Predicament*, part. pages 65-94.
[29] C. Hovey, Review of J. Milbank, *The Legend of Death: Two Poetic sequences* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books 2008), *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 152.
[30] Milbank, *The Legend of Death: Two Poetic Sequences* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books 2008), 113.

The contradiction in his work lies in his 'forceful, abstract defense of concrete realities.'[31]

4.2.3 Sin: Enacting the Fall

We now have a picture of the first main characteristic of the secular in Milbank's description. The secular posits a 'realm of indifference', of primordial chaos: there *may* be some good, but there *is* evil. This positing of evil alongside the good is what Milbank calls 'gnostic' or 'pagan', a position he contrasts with the theological outlook that acts and thinks only out of the good. The Christian tradition has characterised evil as *privatio boni*, an interpretation that Milbank wants to defend against modern, secular conceptions of evil. He thus criticises the Kantian legacy of 'radical evil' which gives evil a 'positive foothold in being'.[32] If evil is not considered in the traditional way as negation of being, but is given a positive ontological status, then it is already on its way to being enacted.

This is also the reason why Milbank largely describes what we call 'morality' according to a Nietzschean mode: we usually do the good because there is evil, because we have to react to a prior evil situation. In a sense this implies that by our virtuous activity (or our intention to do so), we celebrate a prior necessary state of evil. This is a rationale Milbank observes in much

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[31] Hovey, Review of *The Legend of Death*, 152. To the observations of Hyman and Hovey should be added what G.E. Michalson writes about Milbank and particularly about *Theology and Social Theory*: 'There is, in fact, a curious asymmetry between Milbank's postmodernist attitude towards rationality and argument and his apparent confidence that his ambitious program of revisionist interpretation will carry argumentative force: his position on the former seems to undermine the authority in the latter'. Michalson interprets Milbank's work as a postmodern effort to 'imagine things differently', but sees this task undermined by his use of the conceptual vocabulary of the modern outlook. Michalson, 'Re-reading the Post-Kantian tradition', 368, 372.
In the Dutch theological field, in a way similar to Hyman, Tom Jacobs has argued that post-secular epistemologies rooted in 'local' traditions and narratives (his examples being Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milbank) will necessarily result in a fruitless situation where we just shout out what our position is, as loudly as possible. In particular in Milbank's work, this results in the paradoxical situation that he develops a violent rhetorical strategy in the name of an ontology of peace.
T. Jacobs, 'De postseculiere verleiding: De spanning tussen religie en moderniteit epistemologisch herzien.' *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* (48) 2008, 282-301.
[32] Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003),1-4.

secular morality: 'given death' we do our best to make something of our lives, to fearfully build a temporary fortress against death.[33]

With reference to Augustine, Milbank asserts that even the choice between good and evil is a fictional notion. According to Augustine, 'willing' in its natural created state can only be 'willing the good' and is guided by the vision of the good, as it was for Adam. When the notion of a choice between good and evil arises, this can only be understood as 'Fall': 'the invention of a false simulacrum within the repleteness of reality.'[34] What Adam lost above all was a vision of the Good, the vision of God. The core of Sin is therefore its self-invention: 'sin itself *is* sin, because it negates being, because it deals death, because it *invents* death.' Sin does not promote evil alongside the good, sin promotes the idea of 'good and evil' itself. Therefore, sin is not something that has to be 'acted against', since this would be the enactment of what sin itself is, but it has to be 'forgotten about'.[35]

Thus, the invention of evil as something alongside the good is parallel to the imagination of the secular, since both envision human will as something autonomous. 'Nothing' is strangely made into 'something', a realm outside of God is imagined and given the status of something self-subsistent which is irreversibly enacted in history and in culture. The implication for the relation between God and the world is clear: Imagining a realm outside of God is not an option for Milbank, since doing so is in fact 'enacting the Fall' and has nothing to do with granting the world some positive, independent status.

4.2.4 Fencing off the finite

Closely connected to the first characteristic of the secular is a second one, that is, the sharp division between the finite and the infinite: 'They suppose, wrongly, that one can 'round upon' society as a finite object, and give an exhaustive inventory, valid for all time, of the essential categorical determinants for human social existence.'[36] This is in a nutshell Milbank's

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[33] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 219-231, esp. 223-224.

[34] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 7-12, with reference to Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*.

[35] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 23. Cf. *Theology and Social Theory*, 416-417: There is only one way to respond to the sin of others (and our own) 'which would not itself be sinful and domineering, and that is to anticipate heaven, and act as if their sin was not there'.

[36] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 66.

main criticism of the fathers of sociology, Comte and Durkheim, and their predecessors. They deepen the Kantian critique of metaphysics, of a transcendent absolute, because we simply cannot have knowledge of such a thing. What we can know, however, is social reality, which comes to us as a system of empirical facts and laws. According to Comte and Durkheim, society is simply the most general and most given 'thing', over against the inaccessible realm of the transcendent. The social is even able to explain in full why we tend to be religious, since religion is 'in essence nothing but a form of social bonding', so that the finite is considered to be able to explain the infinite.[37] In this way, Milbank sees them developing the Kantian tendency to 'round upon finitude', 'to list once and for all the general *a priori* categories, both conceptual and sensory, into which the finite is organized.'[38]

What is wrong with such a development? In the case of the sociological positivists, Milbank contends that a society is not a 'given', but that every particular society projects and enacts itself in an unfounded *mythos*. To know something, to know any finite thing, is to be mediated by language and is to be informed by the ungraspable infinite.[39] Milbank contends that no finite thing can be known without any reference to the infinite and, as we saw, he criticises a Kantian legacy here, since it is the Kantian current which is unable to acknowledge any sphere of participatory mediation between the finite and the infinite. However, says Milbank, Kant does invoke an infinitude 'in which our spirits are truly at home'. Yet this infinity exists for us just as a border: it

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[37] In *Theology and Social Theory*, 60-62, this mechanism is traced in the work of Auguste Comte, and on p. 101ff. in the work of Peter Berger.

[38] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 66. Interestingly, in *The Future of Love*, 118, Milbank informs us that this critique of the Kantian legacy is inspired by what Foucault already called 'the analytic of finitude': 'By this he meant a historicism in which it is supposed that one can somehow round upon finitude and "represent" the human subject in terms of its supposed intrinsic limits as what truly "underlies" history.' Milbank contends that this analytic of finitude was 'notably beloved by twentieth-century theology, which was so often confined in an anthropological *episteme* and the illusion of a once and for all "representation" of the finite human subject.' The background of Milbank's analysis in Foucault's work renders *Theology and Social Theory* in the end highly 'Foucaultian', since the plot of this book is also caught up with the genealogies that constitute our current views. In this sense, *Theology and Social Theory* is fully on a par with Foucault's views, except for the acceptance of 'power' as a necessary evil – which would, again, be an example of the 'analytic of finitude'.

[39] This claim will be considered more extensively in 4.3.1.

influences the finite 'as the empty and incomprehensible formality of freedom'.[40] The infinite is for Kant 'sublime', which is literally 'across the border', and our contact with this reality is not one of participation, but of rupture. In a lengthy list of articles Milbank shows that modernity and, in its tracks, modern theology has largely followed this Kantian path.

However, Milbank's genealogy of the secular goes back beyond Kant. Anyone who is familiar with the work of Milbank knows that especially Duns Scotus is regularly appointed as the one who opened up the space for the secular. We will have a closer look on what Duns Scotus has achieved according to Milbank and how this achievement marked all western thought. According to Milbank, the crucial part in Scotus' thought is that he considered 'being' univocally applicable to God and created things. The being referred to in the proposition 'God is', is exactly the same as it is in the proposition 'this stone is'. Although Scotus insists on their difference, which is most prominently situated in the fact that God's being is infinite whereas the being of creation is finite, their 'being' still denotes the very same thing.[41] In this way, Milbank argues, Scotus develops the idea of one 'arena of being' in which both God and creation are placed.[42] This makes possible the notion that we can have a theory of being (ontology) 'which claims to be able fully to define the conditions of finite knowability' and which approaches finite things as being grounded in themselves.[43] In other words, Scotus created the idea of an autonomous, secular sphere of knowledge, and, not without some pathos, Milbank identifies this moment as 'the turning point in the destiny of the West'.[44] Being became an 'unambiguous' concept, which we are able to describe fully in an immanent way.

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[40] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 12.
[41] Richard Cross summarises the situation as follows: 'The difference between God and creatures, at least with regard to God's possession of the pure perfections, is ultimately one of degree'. He continues by remarking that 'an uncharitable account would be that Scotus' God is just a human person writ large'. R. Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39, 45.
[42] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 40-45; J. Milbank and C. Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 44-45: The early modern scholastics 'were indeed forced to reduce the divine *esse* to the status of a thing, since the only conceptual resource left open to their theology was to conceive God as 'a' being, however supreme.'
[43] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 44.
[44] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 44.

As such Duns Scotus opened the way for ontology as a discipline independent of theology, and thus separated philosophy from theology. Of course, there had always been a tension between 'revelation' and 'reason', not in the last place in the works of Thomas Aquinas, but Milbank claims that it was especially Duns Scotus who introduced such a definitive separation between them.[45] Aquinas left 'some ambiguity regarding how it was possible to speak of God by first speaking of finite beings', but Scotus simply affirmed this possibility. Aquinas left the door to secular knowledge ajar, and Duns Scotus kicked it wide open.[46]

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[45] Although the separation between revelation and reason (or 'grace' and 'nature') has often been traced back to Thomas Aquinas, particularly in neo-Thomism, Milbank has a view on Aquinas which sees nature and grace more closely together ('integral'), with the same attitude displayed by the twentieth-century current of *nouvelle théologie*. This view will be expounded in 4.4.1.

[46] In different critical discussions of Milbank's (and generally *Radical Orthodoxy*'s) criticism on Scotus, Milbank's analysis of Scotus' conception of univocity remains in fact unchallenged. The only thing in which these commentators differ from Milbank et al. is that they simply *do not see the problem* of Scotus' conception. Richard Cross stresses the fact that Duns Scotus's theory is 'purely semantic' and does not 'include any ontological commitments', although one might question if this really is a comfort to Milbank considering his view on language – and its intrinsic relation with ontology – which will be extensively discussed in the following. R. Cross, 'Scotus and Suárez at the Origins of Modernity', in Hankey and Hedley (eds.), *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, 65-80.
Cf. a concise rendering of Milbank's view, *Beyond Secular Order*, 29-31 (on univocity): 'In Aquinas it was still the case that an exploration of the meaning of the word 'good' involved an existential journey towards an inaccessible plenitude of the perfect goodness in God. So to delve into the richness of the meaning of good was also to ascend towards a higher contemplation and practice of goodness (...). Semantic and logical exploration was, in consequence, also here an ontological one'. *Beyond Secular order*, 29.
Robert Sweetman stresses the fact that Scotus, just like Henri of Ghent whose understanding of univocity he opposed, developed a question that Aquinas' conception of analogy left unanswered. Both Duns Scotus and Henri of Ghent developed and elaborated Aquinas' account, albeit in opposite directions. Like Cross, Sweetman stresses the fact that Scotus' account of univocity implies a semantic strategy to speak humanly about the divine. Whereas Henri focuses on 'the irreducible difference in proportion between creaturely circumscriptedness and the divine excess', Scotus intends to 'insist on terms and what they signify as abstracted from creaturely existence'. Again, Milbank's uneasiness with the implications of the relationship between language and being (divine and creaturely) as construed by Scotus is in this way emphasised rather than contradicted or refuted. Sweetman interestingly continues by noting that Aquinas adopted from Avicenna the distinction

There are two consequences to this development, which in fact are two sides of the same coin. In the first place, Milbank contends that Scotus' univocity of being created space for a secular theological discourse in which the traditional secondary causes and the first cause were collapsed into one final cause: God/Nature or 'Providence'.[47] After all, in this current of thought 'empirical facts' as well as the divine all partake in one and the same being. In the second place, the idea that we can fully describe finite being turned the infinite or the transcendent into a superfluous and even interfering idea. In a world that sets off a secular space of knowledge, every reference to the infinite would break the bounds of the natural and would vexingly result in 'irresolvable antinomies preventing any certain, determinate knowledge.'[48] In other words, pantheism and atheism are two sides of the same coin of univocal language about God.

Against what he understands to be the Scotist-Kantian current Milbank contends that we do not know what 'being' is, nor do we know what 'good' is, unless we in some way participate in the perfection of these things and are somehow on our way to the perfect realisation of goodness and being, that is, God. In the following we will consider this assertion in greater detail, and, in doing so, we will move from a deconstructing to a more constructive aspect of John Milbank's work.

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between God as *esse* ('to be') and creatures, which have a real distinction between their essence and their *esse* (cf. this study, 2.2.6). Scotus, on the other hand, picks up 'the essentialism of Avicennan metaphysics', and hence his ontological focus is rather on *ens*, and our knowing of particular essences. Therefore 'Scotus treats being as a common nature abstracted from this or that concrete being from God or creature'. Although Sweetman defends Scotus against all too harsh accusations that can be found e.g. in Milbank and points beautifully to the Franciscan social ontology that underlies his thought ('every creature is a single mystery created by God and as such unspeakably precious', 85), Milbank's problems with Duns Scotus are far from solved. R. Sweetman, 'Univocity, Analogy, and the Mystery of Being according to John Duns Scotus' in Smith and Olthuis (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 73-87. A concise and nuanced account of Duns Scotus view on univocity (in the context of the Reformed theologian Gisbertus Voetius' reliance on his thought) can be found in A. J. Beck, *Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676): Sein Theologieverständnis und seine Gotteslehre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 218-223.

[47] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 4, 37-41, 55. Milbank derives this idea from A. Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[48] J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 105

4.3 Created being in relation to divine fullness

Secular modernity has learned itself to think and act out of scarcity, Milbank asserts. 'We fear that there will not be world enough, or time'.[49] The Christian tradition, on the other hand, teaches that thinking and acting, or, in the broadest sense, 'living', is something that participates in a movement from fullness to fullness, which is the fullness of the divine being. This on the one hand opens up creation to an ultimate glory, but at the same time renders it aporetic and searching for its hidden source and end. In the following subsections we will examine how this notion is developed in Milbank's work in the three areas that are most prominent: his view on knowledge (4.3.1), his account of acting as an inchoative enacting of eternity (4.3.2) and his view on the relation between created differences and the Trinity (4.3.3).

4.3.1 Knowing: journeying in expectancy

Milbank's critique of the Scotist-Kantian current invokes what he calls the 'metacritical standpoint', against the 'critical' standpoint of Kant. This position he derives from the works of Johann Georg Hamann, a contemporary and critic of Kant. If Kant wants to determine where the limits are of what we can and what we cannot know (which makes up his 'critique'), then Hamann criticises this critique by arguing that we cannot know anything at all, that is, we cannot know anything with a supposed rational necessity, as Kant assumes. The rational gaze, Milbank claims in following Hamann, which seeks the objectively true, has to 'fix' the thing observed in a present instance, whereas every present moment is unmeasurable. If we want to 'know objectively' a tree, for example, we have to disconnect it from its context, from its constant development, from its relatedness with other organisms and even from all the stories the tree is embedded in.[50] Trying to know something with a rational necessity, apart from the flux and the relations it gives itself in, is in fact the same as killing it, or, to phrase it more in terms of the vocabulary Milbank employs, to expose its nothingness.

   We are not able to know a thing in isolation, but only as 'articulated' together with other things, as part of a story that comes forth from a

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[49] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 225.
[50] Milbank, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 27. Cf. *Theology and Social Theory*, 433-434.

mysterious source. We therefore need the notion of the relatedness of things, not as an extra, but as something constitutive of the thing itself. Milbank concurs with Hamann when he says that we have a sense of the depth of things: 'we take the surface of things as signs disclosing or promising such a depth.' When we *see* a tree, we also have to *hear* it being articulated in a story, like in Psalm 19: 'one day tells another, and night makes known to the other'. Milbank writes: 'There is a necessary 'taking together', or reading of the conjunction over and above what merely appears: for example, a tree does not appear to me as one tree, rather I *construe* this.' Milbank underlines Hamann's point of view that to know is basically to select, to desire and to construct 'aesthetically preferred patterns' which we should not mistake for necessary logic.[51]

The central word in the metacritical standpoint is *language*. According to Milbank, it is not possible to posit a thinking subject which 'uses' language. We think in language, so the 'thinking I' is not extricable from its having thoughts, using words, its continual self-expressing. This means that there is no extra-linguistic reasoning subject that is able to understand the finite realm. In his criticism of the Kantian critique, says Milbank, Hamann 'enmeshes us more deeply in physical finitude than even Kant would allow', but nonetheless, by diffusing the limit between finite and infinite, he allows for an indefinite view on humanity and culture which is open to the transcendent.[52]

In invoking, among others, the metacritical view of Hamann, Milbank attempts to deconstruct the secular presuppositions of 'what it is to know'. Against secular security, he posits a theological indeterminacy or openness. For example, knowing the good is 'journeying in expectancy' and 'to set off on an eschatological pilgrimage'. The preeminent symbol of knowing are the three magi in the bible, who were searching for a promised king, setting off into the unknown.[53] What Milbank is saying to a host of thinkers working loyally within the Kantian legacy in theology and philosophy is this: we are not so sure about what we can know, and perhaps we 'know' more about the unknowable than we assume – that is, if we are prepared to abandon the idea

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[51] Milbank, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 24-31.
[52] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 150-153.
[53] Milbank, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 28. The same kind of language is used for example in *The Future of Love*, 176: 'At the outset of the quest for knowledge lies a wonder and an astonishment inseparable from the lure of something revealed and grace-imbued – something one must love, trust, and have faith in.'

that we are able to fully know the finite. Another way of putting it is to say that we are not 'in charge', not of what we know and not of what we do. What our actions mean lies ahead of us, no matter how earnestly we investigate our own intentions.

One of the other thinkers who stress this point, according to Milbank, is Maurice Blondel, whose theory of action he approvingly discusses in *Theology and Social Theory*.[54] According to Milbank, Blondel argues that the human will is never equal to itself, never at ease, but always strives forward, and desires a completion that goes beyond any goal it can obtain within its own power. What we accomplish, the products of our action, is never the same as what we will: 'The significance of what we do, what we say, somehow permanently escapes us'.[55] Blondel thus rejects the idea that action is the expression of a prior original in our thought. With regard to epistemology, Milbank claims that Blondel does not believe in fixed conditions under which things appear to us, and therefore even denies the existence of substances or essences underlying the series of appearances. 'The event of knowledge *is* the reality of the thing, or rather its momentary reality', Milbank writes. Blondel does not envision a closed, fixed circle of immanence, but rather sees the finite as radically open to the infinite. To think and to know is to be confronted with an infinite power of illumination outside of us.[56]

Not only in his approval of Blondel, but also on a much broader level in his work, Milbank values this kind of dynamic, relational ontology. In his work one sees him trying to maintain a balance between modern essentialism on the one hand and postmodern fluctualism on the other: 'While we must accept and embrace the revisability of the given world, this dynamism need not and should not refuse notions of nature and essence, not as what is exhaustively given, but as what may eventually be disclosed as valuable abiding gift with

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[54] Besides Maurice Blondel, we could choose a host of other thinkers in Milbank's work who testify to this way of thinking. Here we have simply chosen some telling fragments of the 'literary pile', as Milbank describes his own work.

[55] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 211.

[56] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 212. A typical articulation of his epistemological view can also be found in Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, this time with Adorno (against Husserl): 'It is because real things remain densely other and cannot be fully known that the mind registers them as proper objects of cognitive awareness; it is finally the very unknowability of things as things which gives them to us as things-to-be-known', *Beyond Secular Order*, 68.

and through time, rather than despite it'.[57] With this Milbank places himself in the classical debate about the relation between being and becoming which we already encountered in Bavinck's work. Reality is not something of fixed essences, nor is it a pure flux, but it is about relations and proportions that are constitutive to what a thing is 'essentially' – the essence therefore being something 'malleable'. Definitions of essences should be always open for the unexpected, because the most telling feature is necessarily still to come. According to Milbank, things therefore have an endless arriving or 'eschatological' essence.

Another vocabulary in Milbank's work by which he articulates this ontological stance is the language of 'the gift'. He asserts that God is not simply 'giver' and we 'recipients of a gift', since this would render us in a position of self-possession. There is no recipient apart from the gift, but on the contrary a gift is what we are. All our knowing, willing and feeling is a constant gift and a giving on, such that Milbank can even state that the gift *is* giving. This opposes

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[57] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 201. Other examples where Milbank articulates his 'relational ontology' can be found e.g. in *The Word Made Strange*, 20: 'As things are, in fact, entirely constituted through networks of changing relationships and any distinction of 'substance' from 'accident' can only be pragmatic and temporary, the more one seeks to isolate them in their determinate finitude, the more their concreteness altogether escapes us, and their sheer particularity becomes paradoxically their only remaining property.' And in *Truth in Aquinas*, interpreting Aquinas' thought, Milbank observes: 'relations entered into in time can be nonetheless included in the definition of what a thing essentially is.' Goodness, for example, 'concerns the intrinsic proportionate ordering of one thing to another' and truth 'concerns the presence of one thing in another'. Milbank calls this a 'theological ontology of constitutive supernatural supplementation and ecstatic relationality' which reveals a cosmos 'already in a sense graced' (*Truth in Aquinas*, 43-44). And, finally, the same point of view can also be found in 'The Double Glory, or Paradox versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Zizek'. In Davis, C. (ed.), *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 133: 'A thing, in order to be a thing at all, must sustain a certain consistency and relative completeness, like a town that retains roughly the same centripetal configuration and defensible boundaries over many centuries. This consistency can be termed "substance", however loosely this may be conceived, and without insisting on any priority of substance over event; indeed, for "event" as a category to be ontologically fundamental there must be an oscillating balance between the two, since an event is defined by its fusing of transformation with the establishment of a new relative habitual stability and the modification of preceding stabilities.'

itself to any association of knowing with 'commanding'; instead, it associates knowing with gratitude.[58]

It is obvious that Milbank wishes to use much of the postmodern criticism on the Cartesian *cogito* and the Kantian positing of limits. However, he claims that these postmodern insights have always been a part of the Christian tradition, since they simply concur with the view of *creatio ex nihilo*: everything that is, is created out of nothing. This idea 'radically rules out all representational realism in its regard – as the Cappadocians, Maximus and Augustine all realized. There are no things, no ultimate substances, only shifting relations and generations in time.'[59] Elsewhere Milbank emphasises that 'God is speaking the world out of a void'.[60] What this involves is that no finite thing has any stability in itself, a position that he shares with postmodern nihilism – which is, according to Milbank, a position quite close to the truth, except that it is unable to link the *nihil* with a mysterious hidden source that is worthy of our reverence. In sum, Milbank criticises the project of modernity for seeking stability and certainty where it is not to be found, namely in an immanent, self-enclosed world.

So what is knowing, according to Milbank? His position is perhaps best described using the expression above: 'journeying in expectancy'. It is not that he asserts that all our constructions in time are simply wrong, but that we have to remember that they are provisional, temporal attempts. We strive 'to set up, in hope, certain contingent structures of truth and justice – to set up Jerusalem and not Babylon.'[61] To know is not to fence off finitude, but to open up to infinite illumination. Being able to think at all is to partially grasp God's self-disclosure.[62] There is in Milbank's work a move from epistemology to ontology, since epistemology is not able to stand on its own, but stands in a wider, though diffuse ontology.[63] Milbank follows the line he recognises in Blondel: 'his philosophy does not claim to say where thought should begin, but

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[58] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 43-44. This logic of the gift is the focus of the entire book *Being Reconciled*.
[59] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 433.
[60] Milbank, again following Hamann, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 26.
[61] Milbank, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 29.
[62] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 24.
[63] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 433: 'Knowledge itself is not 'something else' in relation to Being, a 'reflection' of Being, but only a particularly complex form of relation'.

merely points, impotently, to where thought is already begun' and thus has premises 'which are beyond the reach of any critique'.[64]

4.3.2 Acting: a glimpse of the eternal

It is, however, clearly not Milbank's intention to create a postmodern account of knowledge. On the one hand, his criticism on Kant does concur with postmodern criticism on the Cartesian *cogito*, and the possibility of a universal rationality. His position furthermore does leave us more uncertain than within the modernist framework, and in the midst of 'physical finitude' without any escape to a 'clean' rationality. This position, however, does not imply for Milbank a stance of 'erring' or lingering in meaninglessness, in the way some postmodern theologians have suggested.[65]

One example of a sentence in which Milbank departs from such a position is: 'The lesson here (...) is that God alone is good, alone true, alone being'.[66] According to Milbank, we can never find any sufficient stable goodness, truth or being in our world, since this world is one of dynamic, interrelated, open-ended realities. The stability, unity and certainty we desire and search for is to be found in God alone. If there is to be peace, forgiveness, or whatever else we call 'good' in this world, it participates in this eternal source of peace and forgiveness, of all good things. So in a sense, God in Milbank's work does function like a 'standard' for this world and for human acts: 'A thing is 'true' to the degree that it participates in the divine standard for its own realization.'[67] Remarkably, although Milbank's postmodern inclination is constantly present, we also have to face the fact that he is at the same time also a full-blooded Platonist.

Milbank is not, however, a Platonist in the sense that he imagines an ideal world apart from our visible world, where the perfect 'Ideas' are to be found, and which we can only reach by giving up the prison of our bodily existence.

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[64] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 212. The same idea, derived from Jacobi: 'thinking always arrives on the scene too late to provide its own foundations', Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 160.

[65] Cf. M. C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[66] Milbank, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 28.

[67] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 22. And elsewhere: 'The only possible clue to how to search for the truth must be if truth itself offers one some advance glimmering of its own character'. Milbank, *The Future of Love*, 176.

The central word for Milbank is, not entirely surprisingly by now, 'participation' or, in Plato's idiom, *methexis*, particularly the way it was used by Neoplatonic thinkers like Proclus and Iamblichus.[68] The idea in this current that appeals to Milbank is that the divine, through emanation, is in some way present in the finite world, and can be participated in. Through a liturgical encounter with the material, culminating in worship, we can partake in the divine. The Christian tradition adopted this notion and radicalised it, says Milbank, because it did not leave any material residue of chaos which does not participate, as was indeed the case in Plato. Furthermore, the Christian tradition did not conceive of God simply as 'the One', which renders participation impossible, since if we approach the One, 'it tends to dissolve the thinker who approaches'.[69] Christianity had a different conception of God (as Triune), and thus valued the material quite differently (as radically positive) than the Neoplatonists did.[70]

Milbank's thought presupposes that there is a perfect realisation of being, of goodness, truth and beauty, and that to have any notion of these realities at all is to partially share in them.[71] Aside from the word participation, Milbank uses also the word 'anticipation'. To act truthfully, or for something to be true, is to anticipate the perfection of truth that lies beyond our comprehension. In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank calls the Church's acting 'to anticipate heaven'. Referring to Augustine, Milbank says that there is a 'subordination of the passing to the abiding' and, for example, the city is 'first and foremost a heavenly reality'.[72] So what we call the city, or, to choose another example, what we call 'human', is not grounded in itself, but in its 'increasing imitation of divine goodness and of divine being'.[73] Any view on the city or on humanity has to be theological from the outset. Accordingly, there is in Milbank's thought a necessary priority of the heavenly or eschatological reality over

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[68] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 114-115.
[69] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 115.
[70] Milbank's conception of the Trinity will be elaborated in the next paragraph, 4.3.3.
[71] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 22-23 (already quoted above) and 29: 'the only thing that authenticates perfection (and indeed, the only thing that defines it), must be some sort of experience of its actuality. And this is indeed implied by Aquinas's repeated insistence on God's partial communication of his good to creatures, in such a way that their goods can only be understood as good in their pointing away from themselves to the perfection they hint at'.
[72] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 408, 414, 417.
[73] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 15.

against the secular, sinful status quo – only the first is real, the second is a stubborn illusion. To define what, for example, 'truth', 'peace' or 'human' is, is not to summarise what counts immanently as 'true', 'peaceful' or 'human', but to point to a dimly anticipated divine perfection of these realities, and paradoxically this pointing away is the only way to know them at all.

A postmodern objection might be that Milbank in this way is installing a Neoplatonic 'unity beyond being', that, although he is aware of the endless flux of reality, he simply does away with difference by suddenly crossing over to an eternal realm of stability, unity and identity. In the following subsection one part of this objection will be encountered, demonstrating that God for Milbank is not 'unity beyond being', but 'difference in harmony'. Another part of the objection has perhaps already been answered, although to many postmodern minds it may not be convincing. If Milbank claims that everything we encounter in the flux of reality flows from a divine source, he does not say that we have some simple access to this source, or that we can contemplatively plug into it. As source of the finite, the infinite remains mysterious, hidden, and can only be glimpsed, but by no means possessed. For example, once more in his discussion of the peaceful community of the Church, Milbank writes: 'In heaven it is perfect, but on earth, its sway is not utopian; for now we glimpse dimly its perfection within a process of reconciliation that is but fragmentarily realized.'[74] He compares redemption with a ray of light that God has shown us. Just like in the stories about the Philosopher's Stone or the Holy Grail, there is just a rumour that the stone or grail once was found, and if it is found again, it will be lost again immediately. Redemption is therefore always the object of a quest, and 'only those possessed by a true light-hearted folly will dare to abandon everything else in order to pursue it'. Milbank goes on to state that 'The Church is the brotherhood and sisterhood of the Grail: of those ceaselessly questing for the Eucharist which is the source of the Church, and so perpetually questing for the Church itself. The latter is not a given, but

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[74] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 105. Elsewhere Milbank, following Vico, writes: 'The point is not that one should shelter in God alone in the face of a total doubt of all finitude. Rather (…) only when things are thought of in connection with God, or from 'God's point of view', (to the degree that this is possible) will they appear in their most adequate degree of truth'. Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744.* Part 1, The early metaphysics (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 240-241

arrives endlessly, in passing.'[75] Redemption is a gift of God that we never possess, but nonetheless do pass on.

Then again, why do we need this idea of perfection and why can we not stay near to our familiar world full of mixtures, differences and imperfection? According to Milbank the answer must be, in the first place, that we have to stay in a world full of mixtures and differences, since it is not possible to fence off the finite, and since we know that every interpretation of the world is always opened up by new ones, even if we try very hard to describe 'essentials'. In the second place, however, we *need* a vision of the good to guide our action. Since we are 'locked in a world of deep-seated conflict' it helps to imagine a state of total peace, because it 'allows us to unthink the necessity of violence', to replace the evil *mythos* by a good one.[76] As we have seen, Milbank writes that what Adam lost was primarily a vision of God. However, human beings are created with a certain foretaste of the vision of God and they have to pursue this vision if they want to be what they creaturely are. If they did not act out of this beatific vision, they would resign themselves to sinfulness, which is, as we have also seen, to follow the illusory notion of a choice between good and evil and not to acknowledge God as the repleteness of being.[77]

4.3.3 Participating in divine difference

Milbank does not want to posit a Godhead that coincides with Neoplatonic 'unity beyond Being' as a fixed point that ends all differences. On the contrary, if we think in a fully Trinitarian way, Milbank contends, we are able to situate an 'infinite emanation of difference within the Godhead itself', a way of thinking that dissolves the antinomy in ancient reason between unity and difference.[78] It is not so that we find in God the unifying solution for all earthly differences, but rather the Trinity deconstructs any dialectics between unity and difference. The Trinitarian God, says Milbank, does not possess the 'unity of a bare simplicity' over against the created order, since he would then stand indifferent towards the created world. On the contrary, 'God's love for what he creates implies that the creation is generated within a harmonious order

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[75] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 105.
[76] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 416.
[77] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 7-8, in reference to Augustine. Cf 4.2.3.
[78] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 435.

intrinsic to God's own being.' There must be 'some analogous exchange of predicates' between God and created being if we want to conceive God as an absolute that is itself difference, and that includes all differences. In this conception of the relation between God and creation, Milbank wants to preclude both nihilism, which regards difference as the only transcendental reality, as well as a voluntaristic theology, which regards God as a 'naked will' over against his creation.[79]

The Trinitarian God is 'the God who differentiates' and the created world participates in this differentiation, or even *is* this differentiation, Milbank states. He speculatively describes the Trinity as a concept that is able to create space for something 'outside' of God to participate in God, so that we must prevent the creation of a sharp division between generation *ad intra* and creation *ad extra*. In fact, creation is already given with the differences in God. The first difference in God is the relation between the Father and the Son: 'God in his creation *ad intra* in the *Logos* 'incorporates' within himself the creation *ad extra*, including human history.'[80] However, this is not a difference that differentiates, but rather constitutes unity: the Son 'causes backwards' the Father, so that the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father.

The two poles are what they are through their relating, so they 'might appear to be locked within this relation' and 'can appear to be enclosed within a totality'.[81] It is only when we discern the *second difference*, the Holy Spirit, that we are able to see a difference, which, after constituting unity, becomes a response to unity that is more than unity. The Spirit opens up the divine life to an endless realm of response and interpretation. However, the Spirit does not create or represent a realm outside of God, since it is an equally pure relation

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[79] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 437.

[80] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 80; Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 189: 'God simply *is* the going outside himself' and 'creation, in its coming to be, *is* the divine Son', referring to Meister Eckhart. Although Eckhart 'expresses himself in extreme terms', Milbank considers him nonetheless in accordance with orthodox Christianity, since e.g. Aquinas already asserted basically the same thing: 'God, being simple, possesses only one eternal act, such that his decision to create and performance of creation are included in the outgoing of the Son and the Spirit' and therefore 'the distinction between God and not-God is aporetic', 'The Double Glory', 190.

[81] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 430-431. See also *The Word Made Strange*, chapter 7 ('The Second Difference'), and *Being Reconciled*, Preface, x: The Holy Spirit is 'a desire that even exceeds the closed communion of a dyad, looking for infinite and multiple reciprocities'.

to the Father, but 'through' the Son; therefore, the Son truly becomes a mediator because of the Spirit.[82]

It is particularly Milbank's preference for a linguistic approach to the Trinity that implies the end of a definite distinction between processions *ad intra* and *ad extra*: 'God speaks the entire human text in the eternal Word and interprets it in the Holy Spirit.'[83] Humanity is not something over against God, but is already 'spoken' with the *Logos*, and is given the possibility of a free creative response in the Spirit. So the Son is 'speech' or 'plenitude of expression' and the Spirit is 'creative response' or 'endless interpretation', which Milbank associates with the Church. The Son and the Spirit are not separately available, and the former is even irreversibly dependent on the latter, just like Christ was dependent on the consent of Mary to the angel Gabriel, with Mary herself being the pre-eminent symbol of the Church.[84]

In his conception of the Trinity, Milbank relativises the distinction between an immanent and an economic Trinity. But contrary to the theological trend of the past decades to purely emphasise the economic against the immanent Trinity, there is according to Milbank in fact only an immanent Trinity, in which creation participates.[85] But does this really imply that there is no 'outside' to God whatsoever? Indeed, we do not have to look 'outside God' to find creation, since 'outside' or otherness is already 'in' God. As we saw in the preceding subsection, there is no goodness or truth apart from God and our participating in this divine reality, so strictly there is 'nothing extra alongside God'.[86] Creation depends on a constant flow of

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[82] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 186-188.

[83] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 78.

[84] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 185-186.

[85] See e.g. 'The Double Glory', 201: 'The finite, like the Son and the Spirit, *is* only emanated participation (…). But emanated participation is also absolute relationality (…), in which God is not "really related" to his creation but the creation is *only* its relatedness to God, its creative source, in its very independence from God and even its native capacity for spontaneity.'

[86] Milbank, 'The theological critique of philosophy', 28; 'The Double Glory', 191. Cf. in similarly clear fashion 'Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon' in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 62: 'In the case of the whole of Creation, how can it possibly exist at all? There is nothing but God, in his ubiquity. If there is also the Creation as well as God, then the Creation must lie within God. The internally emanated Son and Spirit are already the Creation as gift and response, expression and interpretation'.

gratuitous being from God, and not on some granted independence, and if we do call creation 'independent', this independence is fully situated in its reception of the gift of being. In Milbank's conception, it is strictly the fall – and not creation itself – which necessitates an economic presence of the Trinity, 'since the fall 'entraps' the divine glory which is Trinitarian'. The fall turns 'a positive ontological distance between God and humanity into a tragic distance of distortion and confusion'.[87]

The conclusion seems to be that in Milbank's thought it is impossible that there is anything over against God, since this very idea would create a secular space. This view is parallel to his idea of the invention of evil *alongside* the good, which itself embodies the fall. Creation is in any case for Milbank not the same as God 'making space outside himself', making a world that stands over against him and is free to choose for or against him, since this would produce a gnostic Hegelian story of necessary negation and (perhaps) final reconciliation. Milbank's conception of God significantly deconstructs the idea that there is 'inside' and 'outside' to God. Since God is difference, we do not have to determine in the first place what he exactly is 'in himself' and then to consider how he 'relates' to things other than his own being. In line with his epistemology/ontology Milbank can say that God is not a substance, just as creation does not consist of absolute autonomous substances.[88] Concomitantly with his view on the divine, Milbank emphasises that there are no stable, discrete 'things' apart from God who continually gives them being. The question whether or not these views have pantheistic or panentheistic implications, which is of central importance for the discussion between Bavinck and Milbank (and, on a broader scale, for the discussion between the Reformed tradition and *Radical Orthodoxy*) will be discussed below in chapter 5.

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[87] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 182. In 'The Double Glory', 188-189, Milbank maintains against Slavoj Zizek, who discards the immanent Trinity in a 'Hegelian' move of divine becoming which purely values divine presence as an economic activity, that clinging to the notion of an immanent Trinity is 'much more interesting, because then one has declared, not that the ordinary and disappointing is after all the All, but rather that the ordinary is after all not ordinary, and so is not after all disappointing'.
[88] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 431.

4.4 God and the world: guiding principles

At this point the present study finds itself in the middle of a dangerous endeavour: to systematise, albeit roughly, an oeuvre that constantly resists systematisation. Since we insist on our intention not to impress on the work described a scheme that violates its content, the degree of systematization for Milbank will have to be modest. For this reason, we have chosen three themes that are closely related to what has already been put forward in the preceding sections which articulate the most important things that Milbank wants to say about the relation between God and the world. They function as 'guiding principles' or constantly present 'motifs' throughout his work, to accompany the main picture described above. This must not be taken to mean, however, that in the foregoing the 'foundation' of Milbank's theology was laid, upon which the three main 'pillars' are now to be erected. His work cannot be interpreted as a building, but is rather a labyrinth without beginning or end, or, as he himself contends, a ruin, an accumulation of fragments, itself constituting a 'stuttering argument'. All of the following subsections therefore provide hermeneutical keys which will allow the reader to re-interpret Milbank's work in different terms.

4.4.1 Thinking the impossible middle

In section 4.3.1 above we discussed the question 'what is knowing?' There knowing proved for Milbank to be inextricably bound up with being. He claims that on their own, appearances are nothing. They can only come to us as appearances if we perceive them flowing from the mysterious source that gives them their inherent depth, a source that contains both unity and difference, forming a harmony of unity through difference, which Milbank conceives in the Trinity. We cannot know where our knowing begins, nor are we in a position to decide what the conditions of possibility for our knowing are, but can only point out that our knowing has somehow already begun, that it finds itself in a larger field of 'theontology', as it might be called, which is strictly neither a theology nor an ontology, but something that works 'in the between' of those two.[89]

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[89] Cf. Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 35, where Milbank calls Aquinas' account of being 'theoontology' instead of 'ontotheology'. He also calls it a 'non-

There is in Milbank's work no doubt about the fact that an independent ontology, apart from theology, is impossible. We already saw that he accuses Duns Scotus and Suárez in particular of such a separation, since they gave birth to the possibility of pre-theological metaphysics. As we noted above, it is, according to Milbank, impossible to speak of being apart from God. He emphasises the distinction in Aquinas' work between the divine *esse* and the *ens commune* of creatures.[90] We can talk of 'our being' but we hardly know what it is, since only God is being, such that there is just a 'hidden manifestness of Being in beings'.[91] All that 'is' 'derives from Being as a donating source', and so our being is always something borrowed.

We can go so far as to state that '*esse est Deus*', as Milbank quotes Meister Eckhart. At first sight this might seem to imply a full-blooded pantheistic statement, but what it in fact does, says Milbank, is to claim that only God is perfect, realised being, and that we do not have any grasp of *esse* as an univocal term. The creature is only a 'share' in the divine being, which of course is given with the language of 'participation'.[92] This share, however, is not a real 'part of God'. We do not have any direct access to the mind of God, as Nicolas Malebranche later imagined, since this would presuppose a univocal being, shared by God and creation.[93] In Malebranche's conception, we know a finite part of God's knowledge of himself, 'just as we might know Paris, but not the rest of France'. Milbank calls this 'semi-pantheism'.[94] The Eckhartian view, which Milbank supports, never treats God as an *ens* on the same level as created *entia*, but it rather states that God is the 'eminent reality of all *entia*'.[95] Our being is just to be on our way to Being, and we partially grasp it, but do not possess it. Everything derives 'from a distant inaccessible source, (…)

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ontology', 'articulated *between* the discourses of philosophy and theology', like the ontological endeavours of Henri de Lubac, *The Suspended Middle*, 5.

[90] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, chapter 2: 'Only Theology overcomes Metaphysics'. Cf. this study, 2.2.6.

[91] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 41.

[92] Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 201.

[93] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 55, 58. Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) was a French priest and philosopher who sought to synthesize Augustine and Descartes epistemologically.

[94] Milbank, *The Religious Dimension* vol. 1, 59-60.

[95] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 43, referring to De Lubac; 'Sophiology and Theurgy', 64-65.

rendering all finite beings *entirely accidental*'. In this way, Eckhart 'evacuated the metaphysical site in favour of theology'.[96]

However, in this conclusion Milbank places himself in a difficult position. In a superficial reading, his theology seems to claim that there is no real place for nature or humanity, and that everything is subsumed under God. Yet his theology does not imply that God's being is in fact taking over created being, or that created beings are suppressed by God's being. On the contrary, following Henri de Lubac he states that 'Christianity is a humanism, else it is misunderstood'.[97] Another part of the difficulty of Milbank's self-positioning is the same difficult space he sees De Lubac moving in, namely the 'suspended middle' between philosophy and theology, or, for example, nature and grace. The problem is that there simply *is* no such place, especially not if we look for it in everyday 'secular' reality in the university faculties. Up to now, it is clear that Milbank does not want to do ontology in a purely existential human way. It is also clear that he does not want to do doctrinal theology in the sense that he does not want to talk about the reality of God separated from creation, human making and development. In his book *The Suspended Middle* he gives a lively description of how this quest for 'the impossible middle' haunted De Lubac's career. But how does Milbank himself search for a conceptualisation of it?

In line with the *nouvelle théologie*, Milbank wants to overcome the dichotomy between nature and grace by seeing grace not as something extrinsically added to nature but as intrinsically completing it, thereby seeing nature as being 'in a sense already graced'. Milbank, with De Lubac, considers creation as the natural desire for the supernatural, which implies that there is a 'dynamic link between the two orders', being 'at once entirely an aspect of the Creation and entirely also the work, in advance of itself, of grace'. The natural desire is by no means purely natural, but is itself a gift, so that our natural desire for the supernatural is something at once wholly divine and wholly natural.[98] In the end, the classic language of nature and grace seems to reach its conceptual limits here.

Here we reach the apex of Milbank's discussion of the relationship between God and creation, which he calls 'analogy', or 'paradox' in more

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[96] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 44-45.
[97] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 9.
[98] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 38-40.

recent works. An important consequence of the Eckhartian stance that *esse est Deus* is that we can say that God is 'more stone in the stone than the stone' or that God is more our self than we are ourselves.[99] As giving source he must be 'the inner reality of everything'; however, at the same time, God is 'infinitely more unlike creatures than he is like them'. Milbank speaks of this analogy between the Creator and creation in the same way as Erich Przywara interpreted the *analogia entis*, faithful to the teaching of the fourth Lateran Council: 'there is greater similarity between creator and creature only within an ever greater dissimilarity'.[100]

Milbank is very careful not to allow this analogical language to slide into dialectics. Hegel, says Milbank, defines a thing in contradictory fashion, that is, in relation to what it is not. For example, the north is the not-south, and for the north to be defined it *needs* the south, so that in the end we can conclude that the north *is* in a sense what it is not, namely the south.[101] The same applies to the infinite and the finite in Hegel: there is a continuous tension or struggle between them, and the one always seeks to become the other, for the basic contradiction to be resolved – which is in fact their mutual abolition. So in Hegel's thought, God *is* the world in an endless becoming. Instead of an impossible contradiction that must be endlessly and conflictually overcome, Milbank pleads for what he calls a paradoxical 'coincidence of opposites' that can be persisted with.[102]

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[99] Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 192, 202.
[100] Cf. this study, 2.2.6. In *Beyond Secular Order*, Milbank criticises what he considers a post-Scotist account of causation which he calls the *concursus* model, 'which involves the notion that God and creatures can contribute different shares to a causal upshot, like two horses pulling the same barge' (or 'like a man pushing along a supermarket trolley, but being slightly assisted by his toddler son'). Milbank instead favours the more Platonising *influentia*-model, in which a higher cause does not merely act externally upon a lower one, but 'flows into' it, so that in the workings of the lower causes it is in fact the higher form that shows its influence, which renders the lower one a 'response'. With Proclus and Aquinas, Milbank asserts that 'higher causes are always, in a covert fashion, more powerfully at work, even at lower levels'. *Beyond Secular Order*, 42-49; 99-105.
[101] Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 136-137. In *Beyond Secular Reason* Milbank repeats this criticism on Hegel: 'the mark of a thing's being is that it instantiates a 'can be this' in such a way that the fate of 'there will not be a this' always hovers over it as the shadow of death, and fundamentally defines it'. This is what Milbank had earlier called Hegel's 'gnosticism'. *Beyond Secular Order*, 50-56.
[102] Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 163-164.

Milbank refuses to speak of God and creation as two contrasted univocal 'poles' that can be related and have certain things in common and others not. Instead, 'what is like the other is like the other precisely in respect of its difference; while that which is different is different from the other in respect of its likeness'.[103] Milbank contends that if this notion violates the principle of non-contradiction, it is because relations between the finite and the infinite simply require such a violation. If we ask in what we do actually participate when we speak of 'participation in God's being', the answer should be 'the imparticipable'. Milbank's view on the heart of what participation is can also be illustrated with a longer quotation: 'The entire point of the Neoplatonic idea of participation (...), is that the ultimate shares itself without reserve, while nonetheless entirely reserving itself in its unsoundable mystery. What it gives in a measure is the ungivable, and it is only the ungivable that can be given. Hence it is precisely the imparticipable that can be participated and actually because it is imparticipable, an inexhaustible fountain.'[104] It is not that the divine is divine because it 'holds something back', but because it is so 'giving' that it at once completely surpasses our being and understanding.[105]

Milbank's theology is in search of mediation between God and creation, but this is not a mediation of univocal identities which collapses into an equivocal process of differentiation. In Milbank's conception, there is no 'between' between God and creation. The mediation he looks for 'does not lie between the poles, but rather remains simultaneously at both poles at once' – which is what gives it its paradoxical character.[106] There is therefore not a third term, like being, which includes both God and creation, since this would turn being into an idol, standing higher than creation and even higher than God. On the contrary, God is in creation, while simultaneously creation is in God, without

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[103] Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 164.
[104] Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 101n196.
[105] Although a full analysis and evaluation will be given in the next chapter, one cannot but notice already here the similarity to the current study's analysis of divine actuality in 2.2.2 and 2.2.6 and Bavinck's notion of divine fecundity in the Trinity, 3.4.1 and 3.4.2.
[106] Aside from 'The Double Glory', see for this view also 'Sophiology and Theurgy', 70: 'Mediation does not lie between, but at once on one side and the other through an obscure but crucial echo or attunement'.

the two being univocally identical.[107] In trying to overcome the dichotomy between nature and grace, Milbank's thought seems to be in search of a language to speak about God and creation 'in one (Divine-human) word', which actually coincides with the 'word made flesh', but he is always aware that this can only be an analogical or paradoxical possibility, so that it is at the same time fully human and fully divine. This, of course, brings us to Milbank's thought on the incarnation.

4.4.2 Incarnation

There is in Milbank's work a 'spirit of blurring'. Rules and boundaries, so firmly set out by modernity, are transgressed and relativised with pleasure, in typically postmodern fashion.[108] One might simply be irritated or amused by this aspect of Milbank's work, and yet it reaches its greatest significance theologically when this boundary-crossing reaches the point of the mother of all boundaries: the boundary between God and the world. This boundary immediately comes into sight in theology when we speak of the being of God and creation, but also, and perhaps even more emphatically, when we talk about Christ, the God-man. How does Milbank envision Christology, and, in particular, what light does Christ shed on the relationship between God and creation? We will reflect further on this question, beginning with Milbank's view on the incarnation as it stems from his interpretations of Thomas Aquinas.

With Aquinas, Milbank contends that the incarnation was *conveniens* to God, that is, 'fitting' and most suitable for its goal. Milbank claims that this is an aesthetic term which hovers between the view that the incarnation was strictly necessary (as with Anselm) and that is completely arbitrary according to God's *potentia absoluta* (as with the nominalists).[109] One of the reasons Aquinas mentions for the *convenientia* of the incarnation was that humanity had always been predestined to deification. 'Humanity has a natural kinship with the supernatural', Milbank writes, which is already given with its being created in the image of God. There is, therefore, already from the beginning a

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[107] 'Sophiology and Theurgy', 64-65. In this article, Milbank explores the concept of sophia not as 'hovering between God and creation', but as simultaneously on both sides.

[108] Milbank himself writes about the postmodern characteristic of 'boundary confusion' in *Being Reconciled*, chapter 10 ('Culture: The gospel of affinity').

[109] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 60-61; *Being Reconciled*, 64-68.

remote kinship between humanity and the Son who bears the image of the Father.[110]

It is clear that for Milbank the Incarnation was more than a remedy for sin. That is to say, the occasion for the incarnation was indeed the fallen state of creation, but the incarnation 'exceeded its occasion' and it brought about 'a new ontological state for the Creation: the causing of a human creature directly to subsist in a divine hypostasis.'[111] Milbank calls this 'a mode of divine self-sharing more absolute than the most absolute giving of the infinite to the finite according to its capacity for reception', resulting in 'the utter fusion of the finite with the infinite (though not the other way around)'.[112] In Christ, even his strictly human qualities show his divine nature, which he passes on especially in the Eucharistic elements. What this means is that through our senses – in the Eucharist, and from there in all of our lives – we are reinstructed for our spiritual ascent towards God. As Milbank says after Aquinas, we need to have a certain foretaste of our true end in order to attain it. There is thus a *surplus* of the Incarnation, exceeding redemption, which renders the cosmos sacramental.[113] This is, however, grounded in the hypostatic union in Christ.

In terms of the classical christological battles over the natures of Christ, Milbank is more careful not to be Nestorian (separating the two natures of Christ) than not to be Cyrillic ('monophysite', fusing the two natures together

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[110] Being on the one hand capable of 'rational articulation' while remaining on the other hand 'material and animal', humanity is a synthesis of creation, in itself a microcosm, for which it is so 'appropriate' that it receives the goal of creation, Aquinas writes, because it has kinship with the *Logos*, since 'all creatures are nothing but a kind of real expression and representation of those things which are comprehended in the conception of the divine word' (Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 62-63, esp. note 13). Humanity as well as the *Logos* are 'comprehensions' of the whole of creation.
[111] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 63. Also in *Being Reconciled* Milbank stresses that reconciliation should not be seen as a purely negative gesture, of God looking over or forgetting our sins, but instead as a positive giving. That God becomes incarnate is not 'God putting things straight again' but 'God not stopping to give' and installing an economy of giving (*Being Reconciled*, 44-49). And in another chapter Milbank writes: 'Real, positive Christological forgiveness is (…) not reactive, since it is only the sustained giving of the original gift, despite its refusal' (*Being Reconciled*, 68).
[112] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 63.
[113] Milbank refers to Aquinas' invocation of the *felix culpa* which was pronounced at the lighting of the Easter candle, because human nature was raised to something greater after sin (ST III q1 a3).

in one divine hypostasis). Milbank again follows Aquinas when he states that 'there is only one *esse* in Christ, which is the divine *esse ipsum*'. There is also an assumed humanity, but this is so unified with the divine that it does not 'add' anything to it, which would anyhow be impossible given the repleteness of God's being, which is already in excess of itself.[114] There is in Christ no 'accidental exteriority' of the human nature to the divine hypostasis, since that would attribute to the former some kind of independent existence. What we call Christ's individual human nature is only held together by the eternal hypostasis of the Son, and this renders his divine-human nature not as something individualistic, incommunicable, as a 'locatable human idol'. The Incarnation does not sacralise only one site, but it produces a 'proliferation of sacred sites'.[115] For human beings this means that they can participate in Christ's humanity which is enhypostasised by the *Logos*.

Milbank is not afraid to speak of a 'fusion', 'blending' or 'synergy' between the human and the divine through Christ.[116] Again, as in the previous subsection, we can see his theology as being in search of mediation. Milbank's quest is to prevent any separation of the divine and the human in Christ, quite parallel with his anti-secular stance: there is no way that the human can be something of itself. He writes: 'Christianity is the religion of the obliteration of boundaries'.[117] Above all, with the doctrine of the Incarnation, 'Christianity violates the boundary between created and creator, immanence and transcendence, humanity and God'; in this way, the 'arch taboo grounding all the others is broken'. Although Milbank may speak in somewhat exaggerated fashion here, his work seems at times to be in serious tension with the orthodox Chalcedonian creed and especially with one of the four negations

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[114] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 66-67.

[115] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 69.

[116] For example, speaking about the concept of sophia, Milbank states "Sophia' names the synergic fusion of human and divine work which is brought about through the Incarnation and Pentecost and sustained by liturgical activity' ('Sophiology and Theurgy', 66). And later on he adds: 'Christ as in two natures has finally blended the divine and the created Sophia'. However, Milbank confirms that Christ 'sustains through his concretely realized character the separation of human and divine nature.'

[117] Examples of the limits that Christianity explodes are, according to Milbank, limits 'between nations, between races, between the sexes, between the household and the city, between ritual purity and impurity, between work and leisure, between days of the week, between sign and reality (in the Sacraments), between the end of time and living in time' (*Being Reconciled*, 196).

concerning the two natures of Christ, which states that they are 'unconfused'.[118]

Milbank, however, wants to give a 'full retrieval' of the Chalcedonian position. It is not as if he has some well-defined doctrine of the person of Christ which states that in him God and man are 'blurred' – his analogical or paradoxical approach towards the relation between God and the world would clearly prevent such a strict identification. Nothing can be 'mixed' with God, since nothing can be added to the replete divine being. It seems rather to be his intention to approach Christ through the church, or in other words, to approach Christ as a reality in which we participate.[119] Just as it is impossible in Milbank's theology to talk about God without creation, so it is impossible to talk about the person of Christ without the church, his body. What Christ brought about in this world, according to Milbank, was not a 'fetishizable' divine-human object whose identity we can discuss forever, but is primarily 'a mode of being'.[120] It was his character of affinity with God that Jesus passed on to his disciples.[121] Milbank wants to prevent any description of Christ that presupposes an underlying essence or closed-off idea of personhood. Christ is not a well-defined subject to whom we as different subjects can relate, or with whom we can identify, as with a character in a novel, but his entire 'personality' is made up of his words and works, and there is not a single one of his words and works that the 'body of Christ' cannot participate in.[122] On the one hand Milbank's Christ is thus to a great extent a secret – 'who Jesus Christ

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[118] According to Chalcedon, 'this one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably [united]'. It must be conceded that the context of this quotation particularly stresses the *unity* of Christ: one hypostasis, one and the same Son, one *Logos*, one Lord Jesus Christ.

[119] For this emphasis, see particularly *The Word Made Strange*, chapters 5 and 6 and *Being Reconciled*, chapter 10.

[120] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, chapter 6, esp. 148. In *Beyond Secular Order*, Milbank summarises his 'broad' Christology, over against what he calls an 'instrumentalized' Christology, which ensures a 'fetishistic, over-pious and too literally mimetic devotion to Christ's life and death, reduced to literal terms and shorn of its allegorical links with the intrinsic shape of every human destiny'. This instrumentalised Christology forgets 'the narrative dimension of his life in favour of a neat set of propositions about his saving significance which in fact obliterates the saving *mystery*'. *Beyond Secular Order*, 79-80.

[121] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 203.

[122] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 149-150.

was' is not to be speculated about; but on the other hand he 'breaks' Christ open for his followers, considering Christ as the 'narration' and the church, his body, as the 're-narration' and 're-realization'. In this way, the Church can be called an ongoing Incarnation of Christ.[123] In sum, when Milbank speaks of the blurring of finite and infinite in Christ, he is not 'defining' the person of Christ, but he wants to characterise the way of being that Christ installed, and he wants to emphasise that Christ is God's continuous self-giving to creation.

4.4.3 The priority of the made

Milbank's work throughout witnesses a quest for new 'theological transcendentals' which function in a theology 'beyond secular reason'. Like the medieval thinkers who discerned such *transcendentalia* as *esse*, *unum*, *bonum*, *verum* and *pulchrum*, Milbank is also in search of 'a word or idea which is such that it may be predicated of anything whatsoever, but that no *predicans* can be adequate to the full meaning which the word suggests.'[124] This implies that the transcendental is just as much about God as it is about creation, although God contains the transcendental in an absolute sense, and creation only by participation. Milbank tries to extend the *transcendentalia*-tradition in his work by seeking for concepts, for language, that transcends the different categories and boundaries we usually discern. This does not, however, imply a pure retrieval of the medieval scholastic tradition, but an extension towards modernity, and its attention for human making. Milbank also wishes to give these new transcendentals a fully theological – that is trinitarian – character, since the classic transcendentals tend to give rise to the idea that they are informed by a sphere of 'autonomous philosophy'.

In *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank is eager to show that the social is not something 'purely human', but that theology itself is 'sociology', since God is a social God of difference in harmony. Therefore, the social can be called a transcendental, transcending the border between God and creation, speaking in one word about God as well as the created order – though not univocally, but analogically or paradoxically, as described in 4.4.1 above. In other places, and specifically in *Being Reconciled*, Milbank describes the 'gift' or *donum* as a

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[123] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 156-157.
[124] This is Milbank's description of the scholastic term 'transcendental' in *The Religious Dimension*, 133.

theological transcendental.[125] 'God gives' is not only a statement about God, it is also a statement about what creation is: gift, and further giving, an infinite economy of exchange.

However, the most prominent transcendental in Milbank's work is *Verbum* or *Logos*, the Word that is God and simultaneously constitutive for creation. Milbank elaborates this theme particularly in *The Word Made Strange* and his earlier *The religious dimension in the thought of Giambattista Vico*.[126] God is not an essence that is in itself strictly separated from creation, but God *is* divine utterance and in this sense already 'the world'. Thus, what we call language or culture or history is not in any way a 'problem, external to faith', Milbank writes.[127] The idea to accord *Verbum* the status of a transcendental is not Milbank's own, but is derived from the work of Giambattista Vico, who in turn derived it from Nicholas of Cusa. Here we will analyse this transcendental as the concept that stands at the beginning and end of Milbank's account of the relationship between God and the world.

In the first place, we need to be aware that *Verbum* is not strictly speaking what we usually understand with 'word' or 'speech', but that it has the character of 'making'. That this world *is*, is because it is *made* by God which is exactly the same as to say that the world exists solely through the 'Word of God'. Everything that is, is made, since God's speaking has the character of making. Therefore, 'the made' or *factum* or *Verbum* can be called a transcendental.

'Making', 'production' or *poiesis* have been central themes in Milbank's work from the very beginning of his academic career. Even before he wrote *Theology and Social Theory*, the theological meaning of making was already the central subject of his study on Vico. Up to now, the present study perhaps still gives the impression that Milbank wants to do away with modernity and the endeavours of humanity, to reinstall a medieval theocentric metaphysical vision. His vision of how we 'connect with God' would then perhaps be that of contemplation. Such an understanding would, however, be the very opposite

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[125] From the Preface of *Being Reconciled*, I derive the idea that Milbank's work is an ongoing quest for theological transcendentals. *Being Reconciled*, ix.

[126] Another example of a 'transcendental' in Milbank's work could be the concept of Sophia, given his description of this divine-human reality in 'Sophiology and Theurgy'. This article, however, remains the only place in which he develops this particularly 'sophiological' vocabulary.

[127] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 79.

of what Milbank is actually trying to do. We already saw that he favourably repeats De Lubac's statement that 'Christianity is a humanism, else it is misunderstood'.[128] His theological concern is not to construe the human as something finished and closed-off within itself, nor to envision God as a reality that is enclosed in its own substance. We can see in his work a tendency to connect the 'metaphysical' Middle Ages with the 'humanistic' and 'poetic' Renaissance, and therefore a heavy stress on human activity and production. However, the realm of human making is not something that can only exist by leaving behind the theological; instead, it is made possible and sustained by the theological alone. This project, which seeks to hold together the human and the divine through the transcendental of 'making', is what makes up Milbank's vision of an 'alternative modernity', which runs throughout his entire oeuvre.[129]

The concept of *verbum* or *factum* is of paramount importance for the present study, since it in fact contains everything that Milbank wants to say about the relationship between God and creation. How do we conceive of God? How do we conceive of the relation between God and the world? One way to imagine God and his relation to 'other things' could be that God in the first place *is*, that he in the second place *knows* or *wills* (himself and 'other things') and in the third place *makes*, or 'undertakes action outside himself'. An important – if not the most important – feature of Milbank's account of this relation is his deconstruction of this tripartite image. From Vico he adopts the idea that making is not something secondary (or even tertiary), but that there is a priority of the made. When we look at a product, at something made, we tend to separate it from the 'idea that the maker had'. Milbank is eager to show that there is no knowledge that is separate from the product. If we want to point to the knowledge that the maker has of the product, we realise it is always 'maker's knowledge'. The real knowledge of the artistic product is the finished product itself.[130] Milbank's view on the priority of the made is closely

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[128] 4.4.1; *The Suspended Middle*, 9.
[129] Already programmatically as a conclusion to the first volume of his Vico study: 'An alternative version of modernity', *The Religious Dimension*, 327-335.
[130] In several places in his work, Milbank tries to deconstruct the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, or at least to point to their constant interaction. For Aristotle, *praxis* is an act which remains with the subject (intransitive, 'doing'), whereas *poiesis* passes over into something external (transitive, 'making'). *Praxis* is the activity most favoured by Aristotle and is connected with the realm of ethics. This,

connected with his view on the 'indefinite' character of our knowing and acting: 'We do not really know what we are going to do until we have decided what to do and therefore have already done the thing. To decide is but to mime the action in advance.'[131] An act is not a sheer product of a prior thought, but is 'equiprimordial with knowing and being' and thus in itself 'embodied thought', participating in the wider embodied thought of creation.

By speaking in this way, Milbank launches a critique on a strict duality between cause and effect. If we call God 'cause' we must realise that to be the cause is simultaneously to be entirely in the effects, as Milbank maintains with the Neoplatonist notion of *influentia*.[132] In lower causes, the 'higher causes are always, in a covert fashion, more powerfully at work'. Likewise, God can be called 'architect' of the universe only if we consider that he not only constitutes the 'formal ground plan' of the world but is also 'the comprehensive *esse* of the entire construction'.[133]

An important expression that Milbank often uses in this context is 'always already'. For example, God is not first unity and then difference, but since he is trinitarian, he is 'always already difference', he is always already emanating or going beyond himself. Another example derived from Milbank's thought is the following. It is not so that we first think and then use language to express our thoughts, but thinking is 'always already language'. In the same way, cultural mediation and making are not secondary activities, but are always already there, and not preceded by any passive state of 'being'.[134]

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says Milbank, is because for Aristotle it is hard to conceive of a 'gain of being' in the departure from pure reasoning towards an external goal. Milbank's problem with this conception is that it presupposes that 'the made' is dependent on 'pre-existing speculative knowledge', whereas he himself would emphasise with Vico that every knowledge is 'maker's knowledge', which is not to say that *poesis* 'swallows' *theoria* and *praxis*, but that they are 'never free from some involvement with making', *The religious dimension*, 95-96. Cf. *The Word Made Strange*, 123-124.

[131] Milbank, *The Future of Love*, 177.

[132] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 31-32; *Beyond Secular Order*, 42-49; 99-105.

[133] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 40-41, arguing that Aquinas thus 'breaks with Aristotle's psycho-political paradigm for metaphysics'.

[134] The expression 'always already' can be traced back to the works of Heidegger, Ricoeur and Derrida. Milbank mainly refers to Derrida's *On Grammatology*, where he discusses the 'Supplement of the Origin'. Milbank writes about this that 'any 'first' thing for Derrida has consequently already manifested itself through something else' (the most prominent example in Derrida's work is that language is 'always already'

This is why Milbank is so strongly opposed to what he describes as the Kantian notion of knowing which allows for the finite realm no interruption of the infinite or transcendent. For human beings, making – and thus knowing – has an important element of uncertainty. If we complete a product it means that we finally have knowledge of it, but we simultaneously realise that this is not 'it', since our product is incomplete and only a partial realisation of 'truth'. We realise that our works are located in an infinite work, that our works are parts of God's continuous creation. Since our knowing is making, we know nothing definitively, but are constantly striving ahead to the completion of our knowledge, which ultimately lies in God. Our making and knowing is a successive and gradual becoming, but in God this is all realised 'in a moment.'[135]

As we have already seen, this implies that there is no distinction to be made in God between *intra* and *extra*. His 'making' does not come into view only in relation to creation, but God is creative in his very being. The Word of God, which he utters eternally, is not prior to reality, but is more like the sum of all reality. With a reference to Aquinas, Milbank states that 'Creation takes place entirely in virtue of God's activity *ad intra*', and that creation is nothing but 'reception of the fullness of the divine act'.[136] Again, Milbank seeks to hold on to this paradox: 'the world owes its entire continuing reality to God, yet is independent of God'. This does not imply that God is tied to the finite world, but creation is seen as an excessive effect of an 'infinite inner creation'. As a consequence of this, we can say that for Milbank creation participates in the divine creation.

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text), *The Word Made Strange*, 61. In fact, the *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity, functions in Milbank's work as this 'original supplement'.

[135] See e.g. *The religious dimension*, 130, where Milbank paraphrases Vico: 'Whereas God is *infinitum*, humanity is *quod tendit ad infinitum*. *Explicatio* certainly implies a constant uncertainty as to our proper substance, but in escaping from our incompletion towards the divine *comprehensio*, we travel towards an unreachable point where our exact substance is known and realised (…). Createdness properly belongs to us as becoming, as *facere*, but our full particularity is sustained by the completion of this createdness, within the godhead itself.'

[136] *The religious dimension*, 125.

4.5 Provisional Conclusions

Although the reader may already have drawn some lines of connection between Milbank and Bavinck, that task will as such be postponed until the next and final chapter. Just as chapter three did for Bavinck, so this discussion of Milbank attempted to keep as close as possible to his own voice and discourse. The present chapter thus entered the specific 'narration' in which his theology is embedded, and sought to listen to its own vocabulary and illuminate it 'from the inside out'.

Why is it still so difficult to describe Milbank's view on the relation between God and the world? Probably because his account of this relation does not have a clear linear development, starting a discussion of revelation, continuing with a doctrine of God which is again followed by an account of creation, and so on. His participatory view implies that it is always everything at once and that his work therefore has no clear starting point, but is, as he would himself say, 'always already begun'. This does not mean, however, that a number of clear main points cannot be discerned.

This study chose to read Milbank's work as a 'narration beyond secular reason' and for that reason started with his views on the secular in *Theology and Social Theory*. To arrive at Milbank's constructive side, one first has to follow his deconstructive work. In his account of the relation between God and the world, Milbank wants to reach 'imaginatively' beyond the secular position, in which he discerns two problematic areas. In the first place, the secular position is caught up within a sphere of necessary evil. The secular in fact 'redoes the fall', since it imagines evil as something that exists necessarily alongside the good. Milbank seeks to avoid this position and wants to imagine the relationship between God and the world as a relation of the giving and receiving of God's fullness of love, goodness and life.

In the second place, the secular 'fences off the finite' since it claims to know what there is to know and permits no intermingling of the immanent with the transcendent.
Although Milbank thinks that the secular in this way all too neatly separates the divine and the created, he nonetheless points to the idea of 'univocity of being' that in his mind underlies this outlook. In this way of thinking, the ontological stress is rather on discrete beings with their shared 'univocal' being, than it is on the divine *esse* ('to be') in which all beings 'dimly share'. It

presupposes that our human concepts are unambiguously the same when we apply them to God. Not surprisingly, Milbank understands pantheism to be a possible consequence of this position: our goodness or our thinking is literally just a small 'part of' the divine goodness or thinking, which amounts to a much too literal view on 'participation', the very thing Milbank wants to avoid. The other, most prominent consequence of univocity, however, is an unbridgeable rupture between God and the world. As such, God tends to become 'a being' – albeit 'infinite' – over against created beings.

The path Milbank prefers is that of analogy: what we call 'our being' is just something borrowed of the divine being and is thus never finished, closed off and clearly knowable. Milbank's treatment of our human knowing and acting therefore has a very open and uncertain character. This 'postmodern' emphasis on human 'erring' is connected with a rather 'premodern' stress on the fullness of God's being, in which it nonetheless participates. Our knowing and being constantly points away from itself to God's being. Knowing is the catching of a glimpse of the full, eternal and harmonious being of the triune God.

In Milbank's thought there is no 'purity'. God and creation are not neatly set apart, and there is no way we can discuss either one of them separately. This appears most strikingly in Milbank's account of the incarnation. Strictly speaking, there is nothing over against God, but on the other hand, we do speak and must speak, Milbank says, about the 'independence of creation'. He sees this problem resolved in the Trinity: the world exists in the differentiation between the persons of the Trinity. The Trinity deconstructs any sharp distinction between 'inside' and 'outside': 'God's decision to create and the performance of creation are included in the outgoing of the Son and the Spirit'.[137] In this way, the world owes its independence of God to its dependence on God.

Milbank's Trinitarian undermining of the distinction between 'outside' and 'inside' is consequently translated into a discourse on language as well as on making, which may be called a 'constructivist' view on the relation between God and the world. Since God's being is in itself creative, emanative and utterly giving, there is no way to consider creation as something over against the divine being. The very word 'and' in the phrase 'God and the world' is a

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[137] 'The Double Glory', 190.

necessary one, but can also have disastrous connotations within a secular framework. The central 'apologetic' point of *Theology and Social Theory* fully marks Milbank's participatory view: Human culture and development is not something that flourishes when we withdraw it from the divine being, but only when we enter into it, with making, production and culture at its heart.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

As was noted in the first chapter, this study attempts to make a contribution to the field of theology on several levels. In the first place, it takes its starting point and develops itself consciously in the sphere of wonder. Since it occupies itself with the relation between God and the world, it does not primarily aim at the development of knowledge, but at the deepening of mystery. It intends to be a way of speaking that searches for reverential silence. This level is the encompassing context within which the present study moves.

In the second place, this study seeks to contribute to an existing theological discourse. It adds to and tries to deepen the discussion between *Radical Orthodoxy* and the Reformed tradition. A discussion of this kind was held in 2003, but the issues that were under discussion are still relevant now. Considered within a wider scope, a deepening of this discussion also relates to the dialogue between Catholic and Protestant theology and church practices.

Third, since the core of the discussion between RO and the Reformed tradition clearly lies in the concept of participation – 'is it or is it not at home in Reformed theology?' – the present study focuses on this concept. It chose Herman Bavinck as the representative for Reformed theology and John Milbank as the representative for RO. By now, it should have become clearer what participation implies for Milbank and in what sense Bavinck's theology, consciously or unconsciously, is participatory. This chapter will continue the analysis and discussion of their theologies and consider how this analysis adds to the discussion between RO and the Reformed tradition.

Taking up again the methodological comments in chapter 1, we recall that this study intends to work within the interplay between 'belongingness' and 'critical distance'.[1] Instead of purely assessing positions from without, chapters 3 and 4 functioned to really 'enter' the thought of Bavinck and Milbank without allowing an imposed scheme to decide what is going to be found. It leaves intact what we in chapter 1 called the 'event of being' that

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[1] 1.3, and esp. 1.3.5.

their works reveal. In these chapters, therefore, it was belongingness that stood at the forefront.

Without altogether abandoning this emphasis, the fifth and final chapter does attempt to 'position' Bavinck and Milbank and to assess their positions. Although 'judgement' in the first place constitutes a wider task than that which is achieved in a single particular study, it remains true, as John Webster once remarked, that 'any work in constructive systematic theology (…) requires the articulation of judgements'.[2] This judging task is here considered in the way David Tracy describes the task of systematic theology: 'to enter into a disciplined and responsive conversation with the subject matter – the responses and, above all, the fundamental questions – of the tradition'.[3]

How then do Bavinck and Milbank contribute to what has been called the shared intention of RO and the Reformed tradition, namely 'to keep God and creation in intimate connection, while honouring their difference'?[4] In section 1.2.3 we saw that Reformed theologians have been concerned that RO's pre-occupation with God and creation in terms of participation and analogy leads to the downplaying of their respective integrity. Meanwhile, the RO theologians have been concerned that the Reformed tradition allows too great a distance between God and creation and thus creates room for the secular. How does this in fact function in Bavinck and Milbank? By comparing and evaluating their thought in the context of the concept of participation, this chapter hopes to provide answers to this question and therefore to deepen the discussion.

A guiding principle in the discussion will be the question if Bavinck's and Milbank's conceptions are, what Vincent Brümmer called, 'consonant with the tradition'. For Brümmer, consonance with the tradition is the first of four criteria for evaluating if some particular conceptual model is capable of functioning as a key-model (or 'root metaphor') which produces a coherent and integrating way of 'understanding life and the world in relation to God'.[5] This study chooses to work with this first 'criterion' alone, which is then

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[2] J. Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', in J. Webster et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 583.
[3] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 100.
[4] Olthuis in Smith and Olthuis (eds.) *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 284. Cf. 1.2.3.
[5] V. Brümmer, 'Metaphorical thinking and systematic theology', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 43 (1989), 222-228.

allowed to 'absorb' and reinterpret the elements of truth inherent in Brümmer's remaining criteria: b) comprehensive coherence; c) adequacy for the demands of life and d) personal authenticity.[6] He elucidates the factor of

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[6] As to Brümmer's second criterion, the question will at least be relevant whether Bavinck's or Milbank's conceptions are *nuanced*, that is, whether they do not tend to overlook important aspects that are present in the broadness of the wisdom of the tradition.

As to his third criterion, it is true that theologians cannot simply repeat the same considerations over and over again. Time has its own dynamics, which asks for flexibility and changing articulations of the tradition and even for changing conceptualities. It can also be necessary to criticise certain positions within the tradition. It is therefore a task that is as necessary as it is difficult for the theologian to ask constantly: 'is this theological position or expression the right one *today*?' Does it appeal to the present cultural and ecclesial situation? Does it articulate an answer to a 'need', no matter how 'traditional'? At this point, however, the present study intends to be more careful than Brümmer is. It agrees to some extent with his statement that 'changes in the demands of life bring about changes in the aspects of faith which are relevant and necessary in order to make sense of life and cope meaningfully with our experience of the world'. However, it is often so that precisely those parts of the tradition that are offensive, hard to digest or apparently outdated that you need most (as has been realised in recent decades with the once 'outdated' concept of the Trinity). One just has to look better, think more or often simply *wait longer* to understand why a certain aspect of the tradition or an articulation of it is in the end good and useful. The symbols of faith that have been handed down to us do not open themselves instantaneously, but have to be treated with patience, and are too rich to be easily put aside on the pretext of being outdated. Referring to one of the mottos of this study, we might say that they are 'like closed chambers and books that are written in a very strange language'. Brümmer's example in this respect is very revealing. He favourably quotes Sallie McFague who claims that the metaphor of 'Christ as the victorious king and lord' in our present situation is irrelevant and harmful, since, as she claims, it considers evil as something 'separate from human beings rather than as the outcome of human decisions and actions'. A new metaphor should do justice to our new sensibility, which is 'the need for human responsibility in a nuclear age'. My problem with this approach is not the fact that this 'new sensibility' already sounds outdated (since being outdated within five years is part of the game in this way of considering theology), but the fact that a symbol, so rich and filled with expectation to be revealed and filled with new meaning, is put aside all too easily. There is no patience, no expectation for new meanings, and in short, no sense of tradition in McFague's outlook.

The fourth criterion is what Brümmer calls the 'final court' of personal integrity. This stance of personal freedom (although one might ask if we are actually 'free' to choose the path we want) seems so obvious that it does not warrant special attention in a criterion.

In general, this study is unable to use all of Brümmer's criteria since I do not support his view on theology which consciously makes it analogous to scientific research.

'consonance with the tradition' by stating that no matter how innovative theologians intend to be, they always receive their models and ways of speaking from the religious tradition in which they stand. The question that matters for this study is of course: 'Which tradition do you mean?' Otherwise stated, which tradition is decisive? Is it the Reformed tradition or the Catholic tradition or a particular current within these traditions? This study is written from the perspective of the Neo-Calvinist Reformed tradition, but it considers this tradition a very open one, also open to ways of thinking that might typically be undervalued within this tradition. As Bavinck realised and emphasised in his work, to stand in the Reformed tradition is to be connected with a catholic Christian identity. Milbank and Bavinck are therefore considered as working within one 'catholic Christian' space, with very different colourings, but dedicated to the same theological standards for which they can also be held responsible.[7] Chapter 2 provided the conceptual tools and the theological virtues that make up the catholic space that will be used in this chapter.

Moreover, Brümmer speaks of 'consonance with', not 'submission to' the tradition or some part of it. There is a lot of space for creative interpretation and the question of doing justice to 'the tradition' is an endless one. The tradition is far from a monolithic unity, but has many different voices and emphases. But the idea of 'consonance' expresses that a theological discourse has to be recognisable for those who consider themselves as part of the

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Although Brümmer is very cautious and careful about the use of models, and although he emphasises their provisional character and their necessary connection with metaphoric language, he depicts the theologian as constantly developing and probing models or key-models to see which one 'works best'. This study does not adopt the notion that a theologian is someone who 'works with a key model'. I would rather depict the theologian as someone who receives, interprets, translates and passes on what tradition hands down to him or her, constantly realising how open for creative interpretation the received symbols actually are (and, admittedly, Brümmer himself clearly articulates this stance in his description of the first criterion). As a theologian, you like any believer inhabit a story that is older and bigger than you are. If your current ('modern') view of the world does not 'fit' one or more aspects of the theological tradition, then perhaps you should listen longer and harder, instead of constantly changing and adapting your theological conceptuality. For a very concise articulation of the position assumed also in the present study over against Brümmer, cf. Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', 583-585, and the rest of the article.
[7] For a larger methodological discussion on the possibility to bring Bavinck and Milbank into one discussion, see 1.3.

Christian tradition and, moreover, that it is firmly rooted in the biblical and patristic sources. If, for example, one of the theologians under discussion is deemed to be seriously compromising God's transcendence or immanence, this will be considered problematic.

However, in considering the notion of 'consonance with the tradition', more important than the question whether Bavinck or Milbank cross some 'dangerous' conceptual line is the question whether their views are developed carefully, with humble respect for that which is greater, namely the voice of tradition, the voice of Scripture. Because it would be hard to 'probe the hearts' of these theologians, we must approach that question mostly as a matter of tone, voice and attitude. Therefore, we will have to give serious consideration to the question if they move modestly and carefully into the very mysteries they describe. And although it is a difficult task, there is no way to discuss the consonance with the tradition without this layer of interpretation. Therefore, this fifth chapter intends to move within the ethos articulated by John Webster: 'what is required are, once again, skills of theological judgement schooled by the Christian past, alert to present opportunity, and enacted with deference and hope.'[8] The discussion in this chapter is foremost a matter of theological virtue.

5.2 God and the world

5.2.1 Pantheism? Panentheism?
The central question that hovers over the conversation between *Radical Orthodoxy* and the Reformed tradition is if the concept of participation, as it was presented by *Radical Orthodoxy*, sufficiently honours the difference between the creator and creation. Does it not imply or at least tend to some form of pantheism if we say that the created being participates in the divine? Or should we rather call it panentheism – as has been suggested in a recent interpretation of John Milbank's work?[9] From an orthodox Reformed perspective, both implications seem to be unacceptable, since they would diminish the transcendence of God.[10]

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[8] Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', 596.
[9] A. Mir, 'A panentheist reading of John Milbank', *Modern Theology* 28 (2012), 526-560.
[10] Cf. B. Kamphuis, who on the one hand praises the position of panentheism for its emphasis on the intimate connection between God and the world and its vision of

However, one needs to ask what is meant by pantheism and panentheism, and to consider whether these terms are suitable for the discussion. To frame a theological discussion in terms of pantheism or panentheism (just like framing it in terms of transcendence and immanence) is to try to provide some clarity as to where a particular theology stands. Perhaps this is a clarity that is misleading, since the terms are of quite recent date and therefore anachronistic when they are related to a discussion of a premodern theological concept. To shed some light on the history and implications of these terms, this section will therefore begin with a brief overview on what pantheism and panentheism are taken to mean.

Although it is often used as a name to 'judge' positions that identify God and the world too much, pantheism is in fact a position that strictly speaking is almost never taken in western theological positions. The word pantheism, coined by John Toland, gained popularity in the eighteenth century through the writings of Benedict Spinoza, and was linked closely with such words as deism, atheism and materialism, and is often simply synonymous with 'Spinozism'. Spinoza, in attempting to overcome Descartes' spirit-matter dualism, applied the concept of substance exclusively to God. He therefore claimed that everything that is, is in fact a part of the divine.[11]

The criticism often implied in the use of the word pantheism is not that the world is made 'too divine', but that the divine is made 'too worldly'. It therefore empties God of meaning. However, even Spinoza was not, strictly speaking, a 'pantheist'. Although he famously identified God and nature (*aeternum* (…) *illud et infinitum Ens, quod Deum, seu Naturam appelamus*), and although he rejected the idea of creation and assumed that this world emerged 'necessarily' from God, his views on God and on nature were quite differentiated and do not imply a pure and unqualified pantheism, which

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unity, but who on the other hand is also worried that God is so deeply pulled down into the world that 'the horizon of our world has become decisive for speaking about God'. Is there still a 'beyond'? B. Kamphuis, 'Alles in alles: rehabilitatie van het panentheisme?', *Theologia Reformata* 48 (2005), 194-206.

[11] C. Jamme, 'Pantheismus', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 25 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 630-635; M. Wolfes, 'Pantheismus', *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 6 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 853-858; W. Schröder, 'Pantheismus', *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 7 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 59-62.

Hegel took to mean that 'everything, the particular things together, in their particularity, their accidentality, are God'.[12]

A point of criticism on Spinoza's conception that is of importance for this study is, in the words of F.H. Jacobi, that 'he rejected any transition from the infinite to the finite'. Spinoza's system lacked 'the existence of a living God'. According to F. Schlegel, pantheism was a form of nihilism, since it denied the substantial autonomous existence of the finite (which sounds like the critique levelled against *Radical Orthodoxy* that it does not do justice to the 'integrity of creation'). However, many Romantic thinkers and poets, who searched for a way to reach beyond the dualism and rationalism of the Enlightenment, felt a strong desire for a vision of unity and were attracted to the idea of a divine force in nature, which drove them to defend some form of Spinozism or pantheism.[13]

If Spinoza's pantheism is best labelled as 'substantial', in the sense that the world is divine as being literally a part of the divine substance, then the later Romantic references to pantheism are more 'dynamic' in character: God's being unfolds itself in the development of history, in the world's 'becoming'. The pantheistic view was thus more historicised. However, thinkers who can be counted as part of this current, like Hegel and Schelling for example, never wanted to be identified with pantheism because they missed in it the fundamental notion of human freedom.

In sum, pantheism usually denotes the view that does not wish to distinguish between God and the world, that does not believe in a supernatural or transcendent God nor in a personal God, but does consider the natural world as something inherently 'divine'. The common thread running through the different discussions about pantheism was the question how the worldview that spawned from the natural sciences corresponded with an 'all-besouled' cosmos. The 'pantheistic option' was to relate those two views as closely as possible, a standpoint that by the end of the nineteenth century became known as 'monism', as represented by E. Haeckel, W. Ostwald and

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[12] Jamme, 'Pantheismus', 630-631; Schröder, 'Pantheismus', 61.
[13] Jamme mentions (at least in some moment of their careers) Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Böhme, Novalis, Hölderlin (and to a lesser degree Hegel). E. Quapp expands this list by discussing Lessing and Schleiermacher in his part of the article ('Pantheismus', III. Theologiegeschichtlich, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 635-641).

others. Pantheism and materialism appeared to be two sides of the same coin.[14]

The other word that often appears in the discussion, 'panentheism', came into use in the nineteenth century as a criticism on (what was called) classical theism on the one hand, and pantheism on the other. As a term it was first introduced by K. F. Krause, a student of Hegel and Fichte. Panentheism sees the world as immanent in God, but still emphasises God's transcendence, so that the world does not coincide with God. Usually, panentheism continues the Hegelian line of thought in which the world's becoming is seen as a development within God.

As John Macquarrie describes it, panentheism is in fact closer to a theistic than a pantheistic position, but has serious problems with a number of classic theistic views. Theism is thus thought to leave God and the world too much in isolation, to have an image of God that is not touched by the suffering and evil in the world (as in the classical divine attributes of eternity, immutability and impassibility). According to the panentheist position, the problem with 'classical theism' is that the existence and development of the world do not add something to God's being and plenitude.[15] In a recent and nuanced account of panentheism, Philip Clayton emphasizes that the crucial notion of 'in' (the 'en') of panentheism works in both directions, and therefore contains a metaphorical tension. The 'in' works in both directions since the world is 'in' God and at the same time God is 'in' the world. 'God depends on the world because the nature of God's actual experience depends on the interactions with finite creatures like ourselves', Clayton has it.[16] Therefore, he emphasizes that the notion of the *inter*dependence of God and the world is central to the concept of panentheism. The current study follows Clayton in considering this notion crucial for the panentheistic position.

According to Macquarrie, the concept of the Trinity, according to which the Son and the Spirit are as equally 'God' as the Father is, connected God and the world so closely that it can already be called 'panentheistic'. However, only those views are called explicitly panentheistic a) that are influenced by

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[14] Jamme, 'Pantheismus', 634.

[15] J. Macquarrie, 'Panentheismus', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol 25 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 611-615.

[16] P. Clayton, 'Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific Perspective', P. Clayton and A. Peacocke (eds.), *In whom we live and move and have our being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 83.

philosophical conceptions with panentheistic implications, such as Neoplatonism or Hegelianism; or b) that focus on the biblical witnesses of God's involvement with human history, including the cosmological speculations in the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.[17]

The lines between theism, panentheism and pantheism are in practice rather diffuse. Here the terms in question are considered not as timeless conceptual positions, but as historically evolved articulations of a desire 'to keep God and the world in intimate connection' that more or less fail to effectively articulate the difference between them.[18] Panentheism, with its crucial notion of 'in' at least distinguishes God and the world more than the view that 'everything is God'. In contrast to pantheism, which is usually just a label one wants to avoid, panentheism is a more 'respectable stance' within the Christian tradition, although it considers itself a break with classical, traditional positions. Pantheism presupposes an identification of God and the world, whereas panentheism sees God as 'more than the world'. The panentheistic view also sees God as more 'personal' and 'relational' than pantheism does. However, although different accounts reach high levels of sophistication, it seems that particularly in its dominant Hegelian guise, panentheism involves God being in some way 'dependent' on the becoming of

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[17] Macquarrie, 'Panentheismus', 613. Also based on the Pauline cosmological speculations (particularly the expression *panta en pasin* in 1 Cor. 15), G.H. van Kooten concludes that 'Hegel's panentheism cannot necessarily be considered heterodox'. G. H. van Kooten, *The Pauline Debate on the Cosmos: Graeco-Roman Cosmology and Jewish Eschatology in Paul and in the Pseudo-Pauline Letters to the Collosians and the Ephesians* (Ph. D. diss., Leiden University, 2001), thesis VIII of the added theses, cf. 93-97.

[18] Considering these terms as 'historically evolved articulations of a desire' is a way to depart from e.g. Charles Hartshorne's position, which discusses different expressions of pan(en)theism in a 'modal table'. By using modal concepts of necessity and contingency he indeed manages to classify different ideas about the relation between God and the created world, and this 'with a precision not customary in the past', as he himself claims. Unfortunately, the precision an overview of this kind delivers is false and self-deluded. A way of speaking or 'discourse' about God and the world should be and remain what it is: a way of speaking, a discourse. Something of the necessary ambiguity of language is betrayed when a discourse is translated into a clearly delineated 'logical position'. C. Hartshorne, 'Pantheism and Panentheism', *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11 (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 165-171.

the world, which implies a break with the theological tradition and thus an important lack of 'consonance with' it.[19]

In the following sections, the analysis of Bavinck's and Milbank's positions on the relation between God and the world will be continued and the conceptual implications of their views will be clarified. Since the discussion between *Radical Orthodoxy* and the Reformed tradition is often framed within the terms pantheism and/or panentheism, these terms will here function as interpretive tools. It should be kept in mind, however, that these terms, as modern philosophical conceptions, are not necessarily the best to interpret theological positions that are based on a premodern participatory theology.

5.2.2 Bavinck: between pantheism and deism

In his discussion of the doctrine of God and creation, Bavinck describes himself as attempting to steer a middle course between pantheism on the one hand and deism on the other.[20] These two terms in fact 'frame' the discussion about God and the world for Bavinck: pantheism confuses them, whereas deism strictly opposes them. The concept of panentheism, it should be noted, is absent in his work. Superficially read, Bavinck's theology seems to posit pantheism and deism as the extremes that he wants to find a nuanced middle

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[19] This continues to be the case in sophisticated, sensible accounts of panentheism, like those of John Macquarrie and Philip Clayton. The world must 'add' something to God, otherwise he is not touched by our suffering. It is a matter of *inter*dependence, as Clayton emphasises. Macquarrie, 'Panentheismus'; P. Clayton, 'Panentheism', 81-84.

[20] See RD2, 331 (GD2, 298), discussing the Trinity: 'The church fathers already observed that this doctrine rejects the errors of, while absorbing the elements of truth inherent in, Deism and pantheism, monism and polytheism. Deism creates a vast gulf between God and his creatures, cancels out their mutual relatedness, and reduces God to an abstract entity (…). Pantheism, though it brings God nearer to us, equates him with the created world, erases the boundary line between the Creator and the creature, robs God of any being or life of his own, thus totally undermining religion. But the Christian doctrine of the Trinity makes God known as essentially distinct from the world, yet having a blessed life of his own.' See also RD2, 382 (GD2, 420), where Bavinck discusses the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*: 'The doctrine of creation out of nothing, in fact, gives to Christian theology a place between Gnosticism and Arianism, that is, between pantheism and Deism'. And lastly RD2, 598-604 (GD2, 558-563), where Bavinck explicitly discusses pantheism and deism: 'Pantheism knows of no distinction between the being of God and the being of the world and – idealistically – lets the world be swallowed up in God or – materialistically – lets God be swallowed up in the world.' Clearly, pantheism and deism do not denote for Bavinck historical, modern concepts, but 'eternal' enemies of true Christianity.

to, which he considers the only truly Christian way of speaking. This is, however, not a completely accurate picture of what Bavinck is doing. The deistic view that strictly opposes God and the world on an ontological level is never an interesting option for him. The pantheistic view, however, which emphasises the divine presence in the created world, *does* function as an interesting conversation partner for him.[21] Bavinck's work can therefore be read as a great effort to posit Christianity against pantheism, while absorbing what he in fact considers to be its good and healthy intuitions. Just as Bavinck repeatedly asserts that Christianity does not believe that 'grace destroys nature' but that 'grace fulfils nature', he can analogously be said to assert that Christianity does not destroy the pantheistic view, but fulfils its desires.

Although, as we saw throughout chapter 3, Bavinck's theology witnesses a great pursuit for unity and harmony by which he is connected with the Romantic thinkers of the nineteenth century, he argues that the pantheistic urge for 'identity', 'to see the whole as governed by a single principle', simply leads to a dry, abstract view on the world which does not do justice to its richness and diversity.[22] Particularly in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck criticises the 'monistic' view on the world as he observes its articulation in the natural sciences as well as in pantheistic theological proposals, according to which 'the divine revelation must be co-extensive with all that exists'.[23] In

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[21] For example, Bavinck accuses the pantheistic position of 'arrogance', but he also notes that it 'testifies of deeper thought and warmer feeling' than deism. Notwithstanding the strong dismissal, these expressions are for Bavinck important articulations of appreciation; articulations that are always absent when he discusses deism. H. Bavinck, *De wetenschap der h. godgeleerdheid* , 14.

[22] Bavinck gives the core of his argument against pantheism a strong rhetorical and aesthetic force: 'The pantheistic identity of thought and being proved to be in error, all the more because "Substance", the "Idea", the "All", or however pantheism may designate the Absolute, is not a fullness of being but pure potentiality, an abstraction without content, a mere nothing. And this is supposed to be the explanation of the riches of the world, the multiplicity of the existent! Let those believe it who can!', RD2, 413 (GD2, 376). Cf. RD2, 435 (GD2, 399), which claims that pantheism and its 'sister' materialism 'fail to appreciate the richness and diversity of the world; erase the boundaries between heaven and earth, matter and spirit, soul and body, man and animal, intellect and will, time and eternity, Creator and creature, being and nonbeing and dissolve all distinctions in a bath of deadly uniformity'.

[23] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 14-15. Bavinck refers to the proponents of a so-called 'New Theology' which in his days tried to 'identify revelation and evolution' and asserted that God is 'that which is implied in all being, the reality behind all

3.3.1 we saw that Bavinck accuses Schelling of the same habit: to fully equate the world and God's revelation. What is significant for this study is that Bavinck criticises the 'Romantic pantheists' in one breath with Neoplatonic Christian thinkers who likewise diffuse the divine and the created.[24] The Romantic pantheists are equated with the representatives of 'Neoplatonic mysticism' who speak of the divinisation of man and obliterate the boundary between the Creator and creation. Bavinck criticises these thinkers because they do not distinguish between God's being and this world's becoming. They include the becoming of the world in God's Trinitarian life and therefore their view on 'cosmogony' (the becoming of the world) turns into 'theogony' (the becoming of God). Bavinck, on the other hand, explicitly considers it his task as a Reformed theologian to maintain the difference between Creator and creation.[25]

Notwithstanding his strong demarcation from pantheism, however, Bavinck still wants to develop his theology along the way that 'absorbs the elements of truth' inherent in pantheism. This way is indicated by the doctrine of the Trinity, which Bavinck considers to be the very heart of Christian theology and therefore of any articulation of the relation between God and the

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phenomena, the sum of the forces of the universe', cf. Campbell, R.J. *The New Theology* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1907).

[24] See 3.2.2 of this study, which refers to RD1, 112 (GD1, 89) and RD1, 167 (GD1, 142). Bavinck mentions e.g. Philo, Scotus Eriugena, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart together with thinkers like Böhme, Baader, Schelling and Hegel. To these two references we can add RD1, 148 (GD1, 123), where Bavinck criticises Roman Catholic mysticism, and an interesting section in RD 372-373 (GD1, 343), in which he discusses different views on miracles, and where he discusses the particular view that sees the miracle as something inherently belonging to human nature – in this sense opposing enlightenment rationalism. Bavinck summarises his critique on this view as follows: 'It confuses the natural with the supernatural, the supernatural with the religious/ethical, and erases the boundaries between prophecy and divination, miracle and magic, inspiration and illumination'. Clear as this may seem, however, the discussion on Bavinck's view on revelation offered in this study (3.3.2) attempted to show how great Bavinck's ambiguities are in this respect. At least one part of Bavinck *does* proclaim the 'supernaturalizing of the natural'.

[25] Bavinck took this stance also in his criticism on the Dutch current of the so-called 'ethical theology' of Chantepie de la Saussaye and others. Notwithstanding his high estimation of their work, he sees their thought as developing a basically 'pantheistic' line, associated with Schelling, Hegel and Schleiermacher. In their work, 'the ground error is of course the wiping out of the distinction between the Creator and creation'. H. Bavinck, *De theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye: Bijdrage tot de kennis der ethische theologie* (Leiden: Donner, 1884), 88.

world. In chapter 3 we saw how Bavinck's emphasis on the Trinity coincides with his emphasis on God's communicability. Renouncing the Trinity is for Bavinck the heart of any heresy, since it does not honour the mystery that he considers to be the very backbone of Christian theology: that God communicates himself while remaining the same.[26] For that reason, he sketches the divine as being full of life, 'capable of expansion, unfolding and communication'. Bavinck stresses the ancient Christian notion of God's fecundity to emphasise the productivity at the heart of the godhead. The processions in God are not identical with, but nonetheless indispensable for, God's workings in time. Bavinck in this context often uses the language of 'archetype' and 'ectype'. For example, the eternal generation of the Son is said to be the archetype of the creation of man. God's internal communication is the archetype of his communication *ad extra*.[27] God's triunity, expressing God's communicability, has led Christianity throughout the ages on a road between the deviations represented by pantheism and deism, since it keeps a close connection between God and the world 'while honouring their difference'. As we will argue below, it is his emphasis on God's communicability that connects Bavinck's work with the tradition of participation.

A remaining difficult question in Bavinck's conception is if there is strictly speaking an 'outside' to God. His repeated emphasis on the distinction between the internal and the external processions seems to confirm that this is indeed the case. However, in 3.4.2 of this study it was pointed out that Bavinck in fact asserts both that there *is* and that there *is not* an outside to God. Although it is the former assertion that stands in the forefront of his conception, he does clearly articulate also the latter: 'The creation does not exist as a result of a passage of the world from being in God to being outside of God (…). The world is certainly no anti-God; it has no independent existence, and remains in God as its ongoing immanent cause'. Such a statement clearly echoes the Neoplaonic view that 'the effect remains in the cause'.[28] Bavinck writes this in the context of the doctrine of creation. There is, from the perspective of God's being, no real 'boundary' that is crossed when the world is created. There is no literal 'distance' between God and the world, as there is

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[26] See 3.4.2 of this study.
[27] See 3.4.2; RD2, 333 (GD2, 299-300).
[28] RD2, 419 (GD2, 382).

between a king and his realm.[29] The created world 'does not exist apart from him or in opposition to him, but continues to rest in his spirit'.[30]

If we try to clarify theological language in terms of the 'boundary' between Creator and creation, in Bavinck's theology the 'boundary' seems only to exist from the perspective of creation. The 'outside' of the world is not strictly speaking an outside to God. On the one hand Bavinck can state that immutable being 'posits' the mutable world of becoming outside of itself 'as on a stage', and that there is no 'transition' between the two, nor something that mediates between them. And, to be sure, 'there is a deep gulf between the being of God and that of all creatures'.[31] In this way Bavinck emphasises the 'externality' of the world in relation to God, but on the other hand he also stresses that in the world God in fact 'sees his own image reflected'. God does not see the world for its own sake, but for himself. In God's 'willing' of the world he in fact wills himself. In the world, God reveals himself 'to delight in the glorification of his own excellences'.[32]

We saw in chapter 3 that creation for Bavinck is characterised as a movement from God to God, and that anything created has to be seen in the light of this all-important movement. Dogmatics according to Bavinck describes 'God, always God, from beginning to end – God in his being, God in his creation, God against sin, God in Christ, God (…) guiding the whole of creation back to the objective he decreed for it: the glory of his name.'[33] No matter how deeply we enter into the story of creation, its fall and its redemption, it remains a story about God in everything.

5.2.3 Participation in Bavinck
If we interpret Bavinck's theology as a quest for an orthodox Christian path between pantheism and deism (where the former is actually the only interesting conversation partner to him), what is then the key concept guiding his view? Among the many possible answers, this study emphasised Bavinck's use of the image of God's communicability. It started with the suggestion articulated by Barend Kamphuis and Gerrit Riemer that Bavinck's idea of

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[29] GD2, 139.
[30] RD2, 262 (GD2, 227).
[31] RD2, 158-159 (GD2, 128-129).
[32] 3.2.3 and 3.4.1; RD1, 346 (GD1, 318).
[33] 3.2.2.

God's communicability might lead to an interpretation of his theology which comes close to the notion of participation.[34] The survey of the concept of participation provided in this study, combined with its reading of Bavinck's work, cannot but confirm this hypothesis. His extensive use of the concept as it became apparent in chapter 3 is in fact the way his theology unconsciously moves itself into the orbit of participation. Bavinck's stress on God's communicability reveals his openness to the concept of participation. This will be demonstrated more clearly in section 4.2.4 below.[35]

It ought to be clear that Bavinck himself, at least if we simply look at the surface of his text, is not fond of the concept of participation. For him it has too much a 'flavour' of emanation, which he considers an overly pantheistic notion for viewing the relation between God and the world. However, it should be noted in the first place that Bavinck formally does agree with the concept of participation, as will be demonstrated in what follows. In the second place, in section 4.2.4 it will be argued that participation occupies a greater place in his thought than his purely formal assent to the concept together with his hesitancy actually to use the word would seem to suggest. Here the emphasis Bavinck places on God's communicability will be the guiding principle.

In line with the tradition, Bavinck is not averse to denoting God with the word 'being'. He does not consider this term as an *abstractum*, but as 'the richest, most perfect, most intensive, most determinate and concrete, absolute and simple Being'.[36] With the tradition, Bavinck reserves the word *esse* for God. God is 'the real, true being, the fullness of being, the sum total of all reality and perfection, the totality of being, that grants all other beings existence, an immeasurable and unbounded ocean of being'.[37] Speaking in this vein, Bavinck even claims (unconsciously *pace* Schelling) that the whole world

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[34] 1.2.4.

[35] Bavinck's reliance on (Neo-)Platonic conceptuality has been observed by Veenhof and Bremmer: 'Bavinck is (…) more in line with Platonism and Neoplatonism than with Aristotelianism' (Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 126); 'In the great systems of Plato, Augustine and Thomas, Bavinck found the answers to the questions that modern times and modernism posed for dogmatics' (Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 331). To my knowledge, a discussion of the specific theme of 'participation' in Bavinck (closely linked with a discussion of Thomas Aquinas) can only be found in H. Jansen, *Relationality and the Concept of God* (Amsterdam: Ph.D. Thesis, Free University, 1995), 40-61.

[36] 3.4.1, RD2, 121 (GD2, 90).

[37] 3.4.1, RD2, 123 (GD2, 93).

is therefore a revelation of God. Notably, he asserts that 'God, the source and archetype of man, *is himself all that in which creatures share*: being and life and spirit, knowledge, holiness and righteousness.'[38] Bavinck even seems to propagate a position that, taken literally, is panentheistic, when he claims that, 'instead of saying that God is in all things, it would be better to say that all things are in him'.[39]

However, rather than panentheism, Bavinck's rendering of the relation between God and the world can instead be interpreted in terms of participation. The preceding quotes were taken from Bavinck's discussion of the divine attributes. In this discussion he makes it clear that they all say both 'is' and 'is not' about God. Bavinck contends that God's being which he has, 'so to speak, in common with all creatures', does not pertain to him 'in the same sense as it does to them, univocally, but only in an analogical sense'.[40] When Bavinck points out that God's being is at the same time the complete surpassing of all our created being (the *via eminentiae*) as well as the complete negation of all our created being (the *via negationis*) he refers to the use that has been made in the Christian tradition of the 'analogy' between the creator and the created, which, according to him, finds its roots in Plato's idea that 'only God is good by himself, but the creatures only by *metoche*' (participation).[41] In this way, Bavinck connects his preference for the analogical way of speaking about the relation between God and the world with the notion of participation, a connection which this study also observed in chapter 2 above.

When we move to his discussion of the doctrine of creation, we find Bavinck mentioning participation also here, albeit more hesitatingly. Bavinck is averse to any notion of 'emanation' in the doctrine of creation – this in his eyes implies pantheism. For this reason he is also hesitant towards the notion of 'participation' as it was used in the tradition. However, when the Scholastics spoke of 'the creature's participation in the being and life of God', Bavinck claims that they did not mean 'emanation in the strict sense, as if God's own being flowed out into his creatures and so unfolded in them.' They only meant to say 'that God is *ens per essentiam*, but the creature *ens per*

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[38] RD2, 135 (GD2, 106), my italics. See 3.4.1.
[39] RD2, 167 (GD2, 138).
[40] RD2, 121 (GD2, 91).
[41] RD2, 131 (GD2, 101).

participationem'.[42] Bavinck time and again emphasises that God and creation have a being 'of their own', but that the being of creation finds its source and end in God's being. Purged from the notion of emanation, participation is a useful and welcome concept to express the relation between God and the world.

Now and then, however, Bavinck seems simply to oppose God and the world as two different principles, without any participatory relation at all. For example, contra Hegel who took God and the world together in one movement of 'becoming', Bavinck emphasises that 'becoming' belongs to the world and not to God. To God, on the other hand, belongs the word 'being'. Again, Bavinck takes the traditional path according to which God does not become or change. But how are we to understand that? Do God and the world suddenly live in separate domains, perhaps only interrupted by Jesus Christ who uniquely *did* unite these two principles? The picture is more subtle than that, since Bavinck makes it clear that the becoming of this world only exists because of the being of God. This world only becomes, develops, moves in a certain direction, because God's being is its 'motor'. Without God's being, the world would not become in any way whatsoever; it would simply float around in nothingness with a 'monotonous tumult in the ocean of being'.[43] Bavinck assumes that God's being somehow penetrates everything that makes this world what it is.[44] Paraphrasing Bavinck, we could say that this world becomes, since it participates in God's being. God's *esse* does not denote the separation with creation, but denotes his utter communicability as well as creation's dependence on and participation in this *esse*.[45]

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[42] RD2, 419 (GD2, 382).

[43] Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 59. Cf. W. Huttinga, 'Een eentonig golfgeklots in den oceaan van het zijn', in A. Flipse and G. Harinck (eds.) *Waar komen we vandaan? Anderhalve eeuw evolutiedebat in protestants-christelijk Nederland* (Ter Lezing vol. 8, Historisch Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme, 2011), 20.

[44] Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* 57: 'There is divine *dynamis*, divine *energeia* at work in the world, and because of them the things *are* and *work*. The divine energy is the source of all powers and energies in created beings, and since this divine energy is not a blind power, but is led by divine wisdom, the powers and workings in the world also show direction and course.'

[45] This could have been emphasised more in the (generally very correct) rendering of Bavinck's ontology in J. Eglinton, 'To Be or to Become – That Is the Question: Locating the Actualistic in Bavinck's Ontology', J. Bowlin (ed.) *The Kuyper Center Review. Vol 2: Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 109-121. Eglinton is

This participatory view characterises Bavinck's entire discussion of God's attributes. God's eternity is to Bavinck on the one hand something that places us at the ultimate boundary: 'As living, thinking beings in time, we stand before the mystery of eternal uncreated being and marvel.' But this does not put us strictly over against God, since Bavinck also contends that in every moment in time beats the 'pulse of eternity'. Or, to give another example, God is immutable, but 'he nevertheless, as it were, lives the life of his creatures and participates in all their changing states'.[46] And to conclude the series, Bavinck adds that God's omnipresence, his not being confined by space, on the one hand precludes attributing any locality to God, but on the other hand he claims that 'the relation of God to space is such that as the infinite One, existing within himself, God fills to repletion every point of space and sustains it by his immensity.' Although Bavinck does not actually mention the concept of participation, he in fact claims about all of these attributes that creation is because it participates in God's being, a view which is necessarily accompanied by an analogical and non-univocal way of viewing this relation.[47]

right to see Bavinck's emphasis on the ontological distance between God and the world, which indeed can be summarized as the difference between 'being and becoming'. He is also right in focusing on the organic, which he interprets through a Trinitarian lens, as a principle that still holds them closely together. Nevertheless, Eglinton remains overly defensive when he states that 'this becoming (of the world, wh) occurs separately from true being (of God, wh); God's being is the cause of the universe's becoming'. According to Eglinton this last sentence is supposed to mean that 'being the cause' is 'being separate' from the thing caused, an implication which is not only contradicted by the Platonic-Christian tradition on causation, but also by Bavinck, who, borrowing intensely from this tradition, never pictures God and the world simply as standing over against each other. Furthermore, Eglinton too easily pictures Christ in Bavinck's work as the unique 'unity of being and becoming', although he correctly demonstrates the relatedness of Christ with Bavinck's conception of man as *imago dei*, and therefore the interrelatedness between Christology and anthropology in Bavinck's theology. These small but significant comments on Eglinton's article show that, as the present study also hopes to show, the last word has not yet been spoken on Bavinck's ontology.

[46] A remarkable expression, since in the Platonic tradition, the lower can participate in the higher, but not the other way around. If Bavinck were to follow through the implications of this statement, he would end up in a Hegelian position.

[47] Although Henry Jansen performs a thorough analysis of Bavinck's account of the divine being (which he considers to be closely related to Thomas Aquinas' account), I cannot agree with the contrast he draws between the 'philosophical language of being' and the 'personal, biblical and more relational' way of speaking that he himself prefers. Jansen does well to observe that both these 'idioms' are present in Bavinck,

Bavinck's primary concern is not to make this relation between God and the world transparent, but to reveal its mystery: 'it is a mystery that 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.'[48] This respect for mystery once again connects Bavinck with the Christian thinkers of the participatory tradition, for example with Gregory of Nyssa, who respected the mystery of the fact that spatial and temporal things come forth from God, while Plotinus saw the explaining of this 'forthcoming' as the very task of philosophy.[49]

The strange ambiguity in Bavinck's work, namely that the created world in some way *is* and in some way *is not* 'outside God', can be explained by his participatory outlook. Bavinck thinks along the same lines we discerned in Thomas Aquinas: God, defined as *esse*, has the character of an abundant fountain of all that is good, life, beauty and so on. God contains all that we find good in creation, since the only reason creation exists is its sharing in the divine being. This is the participatory view that Bavinck shares with Thomas and the rest of the participatory tradition as discussed in chapter 2 above.

As such, the divine in creation seems to be pulled down, or perhaps creation is elevated to the level of the divine. Interestingly, however, when Bavinck notices that his (often implicit) use of participatory language seems to connect the being of God and of creation so intimately, he does not have to withdraw from the participatory tradition to emphasise the difference between creator and creation. He simply expresses its double outcome, just like Thomas Aquinas did: God's knowability, the communicability of his goodness, his abundance of life is so extreme to created being that it at the same time surpasses all that we can know, comprehend or are capable of receiving. It is, to Thomas as well as to Bavinck, God's very communicability

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but he does not honour the fact that a classical theological discourse contains and transcends but *does not deny* a personal and even 'relational' account of the divine. The language of God as *esse* does not make him 'less a person' but rather transcends and fulfils everything we consider as personhood. Jansen, *Relationality and the Concept of God.*

[48] 3.4.1

[49] 2.2.3; von Ivánka, *Plato Christianus*, 177.

that makes him so inconceivable.[50] As always in the participatory tradition, Bavinck adduces the image of the sun: we see by the grace of the light of the sun, but we cannot stand to look into the sun itself, since it overwhelms us with our limited capacity to receive. This is fully in line with Bavinck's insistence on the interrelatedness of God's communicable and incommunicable attributes. God is both *polynomos* and *anonymos*, so we can say that in a sense he is everything we love, but at the same time none of that. Bavinck's preference for analogy, between pure univocity and equivocity, leads him with Thomas into the participatory sphere: Naming God is naming 'the excelling principle of whose form the effect falls short.'

5.2.4 Participation as communicability
Bavinck therefore sometimes explicitly, often implicitly, but always carefully concurs with the traditional Christian notion of participation. Much more than his hesitant use of the word itself, his account of the relation between God and the world, as was already evident in the former section, is full of participatory language and conceptuality.

The way Bavinck speaks of the way God's being is related to the beings of creatures is simply an affirmation of the traditional participatory idea that creatures *are* inasmuch as they participate in the being of God. He therefore adopts participatory metaphors, like the sun with its rays or God as the 'ocean of being'.[51] God as the unbounded ocean of being refers to the views on God as *energein katharon* (2.2.2) and Thomas' colouring of God's *esse* as *actus purus* (2.2.6). Therefore, Bavinck falls in with the traditional view that nothing can be added to the divine being as well as the view, so typical of the participatory stance, that God in fact does not 'relate' to the world, but that the situation is simply the other way around: this world exists in its relatedness to and its sharing in the divine *esse*.[52] Bavinck, in accordance with the participatory view, describes the divine as fully actualized being, full of life; God is 'capable of expansion, unfolding and communication'. Although Bavinck is careful to avoid connotations of emanation, God's being for him has the character of a

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[50] For this conception in Thomas, see 2.2.6 of this study, particularly the end of the section.

[51] 2.2.2 and 2.2.8

[52] See 2.2.2 on the appearance of this idea in the Commentary on the Parmenides, 2.2.6 for its development in Thomas Aquinas and 2.2.8 in the conclusions.

flowing fountain, a source of productivity and fertility. And although Bavinck is keen to emphasise that creation is not a necessary outflow of God's being but a product of his will (as discussed in 3.4.3), he still 'naively' adopts the poetic language of Willem Bilderdijk, comparing God with a little finch in the poplars which cannot but pour out its heart, which 'sings and knows no other goal'.

It is, however, foremost the central concept of God's communicability that connects Bavinck with the participatory tradition. Gregory of Nyssa considered the susceptibility of the gracious communication of the divine as the very core of what it is to be created, as we saw in 2.2.3. Finite being is itself nothing but the openness for divine communication. Bavinck agrees and works with this traditional image of God as fecund, productive, communicative being and creation as the openness for this communication. This is the same image that was also preferred by a thinker like Jonathan Edwards: God's nature, which is to him foremost characterised by beauty, cannot but 'appear, shine forth, manifest and communicate itself' (although Bavinck would be worried by Edwards' all too easy 'emanative' picture and the language of the 'enlargement' of God's being in this process).[53]

God's communicability, expressed first and foremost in the Trinity, can be considered as the ontological cornerstone of Bavinck's theology, as chapter 3 made clear. 'Communicability', however, is not the only concept that for Bavinck expresses how the being of the Triune God relates to the being of the world. Bavinck frequently uses typical nineteenth-century language and concepts of the 'organic' to express this relation, as well as the word 'correspondence' which occurs repeatedly in his writings. Bavinck perceives God's communicability, through his Trinitarian being, in all the world: in the organic relation between subject and object, the inside and the outside, the harmony between unity and plurality, the correspondence between 'general' and 'special' revelation, in the fact that things are different and have a being of their own, but that they are nonetheless still connected and cannot be considered separate from each other.

It is therefore no surprise that Bavinck is not averse to the tradition that sees *vestigia trinitatis* in creation, although he warns against speculative

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[53] See 2.2.7. For the theme of divine communicability in Edwards, cf. the study of W. M. Schweitzer, *God is a Communicative Being: Divine Communicativeness and Harmony in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

excrescenses on this point. Here the correctness of James Eglinton's study must be emphasised: Bavinck's use of organic language seems to be primarily connected with his Trinitarian standpoint, and must not be seen purely as an adaptation of nineteenth-century philosophy and seem even to compromise his 'orthodoxy'.[54] To Bavinck organic language clearly articulates what is primarily an orthodox Trinitarian truth: 'There is the most profuse diversity [in the cosmos] and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity. The foundation of both diversity and unity is in God. (...) Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches. In virtue of this unity the world can, metaphorically, be called an organism, in which all parts are connected with each other and influence each other reciprocally.'[55]

Not only in Bavinck's discussion of God's being and creation, but also throughout his entire theology the centrality of God's communicability is apparent. In chapter 3 we discerned the movement from God to God as the all-important movement that underlies Bavinck's theology, which is in fact an adoption of the Platonic-Christian *exitus-reditus*-movement. In this movement we then 'find' everything else: creation, humanity, Christ, Scripture – all are moments that belong in God's story in order to move 'from God to God'. It does not strike us as strange then when all the *theologoumena* stand within the framework of God's communicability, since they all attribute to God's 'delight in the glorification of his own excellences'. In this study a number of different moments were identified in Bavinck's *Dogmatics* where this framework was seen to function.

First, already in the prolegomena, it appeared that to Bavinck any act of knowing participates in God's knowing.[56] With Thomas, Bavinck explicitly contends that our reason can be called the 'divine light' within us: 'it is not itself the divine *logos*, but it participates in it.'[57] Second, when Bavinck throughout his *Dogmatics* expounds on language in general or Scripture in particular, he often takes a stance that fits within the participatory tradition. A discussion of God's attributes opens up for Bavinck a discussion on what human language is *per se*. Language is not something we just 'have', 'use' and

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[54] Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*.
[55] Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 71, referring to RD2, 435-436 (GD2, 399-400).
[56] See 3.2 of this study; cf. also W. Huttinga, 'Marie Antoinette'.
[57] RD1, 232 (GD1, 206).

can apply at some point to God. It is the other way around: all language, figures and symbols presuppose a 'penetration of the visible by the invisible world' and therefore Bavinck states that 'real poetry is truth'.[58] Language is not simply *used* by God for revelation, but itself has a revelatory character. This world, and therefore also language, is made capable of resonating the divine. The Platonic-Christian heritage that lies hidden beneath this vision emerges when Bavinck goes on to quote Paul who 'platonically' stated that 'all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named after the Father'.[59] Human language therefore participates in God's communicability. Not only naming God, but any naming whatsoever presupposes 'God, who has put his splendid names in our mouth'. Similarly, when he discusses the authority of Scripture, Bavinck considers it 'fitting' within God's workings that he reveals himself in human language, that there is something 'natural' that has a supernatural origin and is therefore fully capable of revealing God. Bavinck accordingly sees a close parallel between the word becoming Scripture and the *Logos* becoming flesh.[60]

In the third place, God's communicability forms a constant undercurrent which unites ('organically') all the differences and distinctions Bavinck sketches out in his work – and it is this habit that has worried Reformed commentators most in Bavinck. The apex of this habit can be found in his discussion of the incarnation. Bavinck emphasises that the incarnation of the Son of God was not something that happened without a context, as we noted above in 3.5.4. The incarnation was identified as something that fits within the broader workings of God in general. Bavinck therefore connects the incarnation with God's Trinitarian being, God's act of creation (particularly the creation of man) and the history of revelation. The continuous thread that runs throughout this context is God's communicability, since the *Logos*, so Bavinck paraphrases the prologue of John, has always 'communicated his life and light to creatures'. God becoming man is the culmination of something that goes to the heart of who God is. When Bavinck connects Christ with all of God's workings in the world, this is parallel to the heavy emphasis he places on the relation between 'general' and 'special' revelation.[61] Although Bavinck

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[58] RD2, 106 (GD2, 75).
[59] 3.4.1.
[60] 3.3.4.
[61] 3.3.2.

clearly argues that the difference between them ought to be maintained, the emphasis in his work is always on their unity, continuity, or their 'organic correspondence', as leading commentators like Jan Veenhof and Eugene Heideman have critically observed. The core of their criticism seems to be that Bavinck in this way does not account sufficiently for the magnitude of the incarnation. How is Christ still unique within such a vision? This question is of the highest importance, but the discussion of it will be postponed until section 5.3 below.

5.2.5 Again: how to read John Milbank
In the preceding sections this study took some time to argue why and how Bavinck's rendering of the relation between God and the world is, perhaps surprisingly, highly participatory. In John Milbank's case, there is no need to argue for the presence of the concept of participation in his work, since he himself declares that the concept is central to his theology. We do, however, still have to deal with the implications of the concept in his work. Does the way Milbank deals with participation resemble the account of participation which this study gave in chapter 2, and which we encountered again in the analysis of Bavinck's work in the preceding sections? And does his account in some way imply pantheism or panentheism? The latter has, in fact, been argued extensively by Amene Mir, who offers several reasons for the plausibility of a 'panentheistic reading of John Milbank'. In moving to Milbank again, this chapter will use an assessment of Mir's article as a way to open up his work to the current discussion. But first some remarks have to be made (and partly repeated) on how the present study reads Milbank.

This study interpreted John Milbank's work in general and his insistence on the central role of participation in theology in particular within the framework of his anti- or post-secular agenda. Behind almost everything he writes lies a critique on what he considers to be the Kantian habit of limiting, of setting the boundaries in our perception of the world. A significant point in Milbank's work is his identification of the roots of this habit in Duns Scotus' univocal predication of being to God and creation, since it provided space for the modern idea that we can have a 'secular' sphere of ontology and knowability which we may exhaustively describe without being bothered by the disturbing interference of something that lies behind these 'borders'. The pivotal point in Milbank's thought is always that the very existence of these

borders is something completely 'made up'. The existence of a 'border' between the finite and the infinite was a contingent, historical invention, something that we should not reconcile ourselves to.[62] This counter-narrative is understood to be the backbone of all of Milbank's theological claims. His provocative genealogy, which we outlined above in chapter 4, provides the main interpretive framework for his theological positions.

This is important to note, since it precludes a reading of Milbank's work that reads him in a sense 'too seriously' and too strictly as a dogmatician, as a typical spokesman of (orthodox) Christian doctrine. Although any *Dogmatics* or *Systematic Theology* will allow itself to be read as a narrative – that is, not as a set of timeless expositions of the Christian faith, but as a creative encounter with its time and context – Milbank's 'dogmatics' has this character *par excellence*. Therefore participation, together with its accompanying conceptual articulations, should in Milbank's work not be interpreted primarily as ways of (timeless, purely conceptual) dogmatic positioning, but first and foremost as *rhetorical strategies* in his anti-secular narrative.[63] In this way, Milbank's work, as he himself would be happy to acknowledge, transcends the borders of the way Systematic Theology is often dealt with. In spite of this, a decision was made in this study still to treat Milbank as a systematic theologian. After all, although his work is extremely unsystematic in its nature, it remains possible to discuss it in a systematic theological way.[64] What sets the evaluation of the present study apart from others is its awareness of the rhetorical, narratological character of Milbank's work and its implications.

5.2.6 John Milbank: Panentheism?

Amene Mir makes a compelling case for labelling John Milbank's work as panentheistic. In a thorough reading of his work, Mir found dozens of phrases and conceptualities that might be called 'panentheist'. By way of summary, Mir states that in Milbank's work 'creation is embraced and contained within the life of the divine, such that creation and the divine can be said to be in dipolar

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[62] See 4.2.4. for Milbank's critique on the Scotistic-Kantian current.
[63] This is how Milbank's work was analysed in 4.1.2, and the problematic sides to this character of his theology were noted at the end of 4.2.2.
[64] For this 'decision' see 4.1.2.

asymmetrical relation'.[65] This dipolar asymmetrical relation is important for his definition of what counts as panentheism. It on the one hand stands opposed to pantheism, which Mir describes as viewing the relation between God and the world as 'symmetrical' so as to turn 'relation' into 'identification'. On the other hand it differs from 'classical theism' which according to Mir views creation as 'external' to the divine.[66]

Mir highlights statements in Milbank's work that are clearly open for panentheistic interpretation. In *Truth in Aquinas*, Milbank for example claims in Neoplatonic fashion that God as cause does not 'precede' the effects of creation, but is cause 'as realised in the event of the giving the effects', which resembles Proclus' saying that the 'effect remains in the cause'. Therefore creation can be said to be 'included in the uttering of the *Logos*'.[67] Particularly on the basis of his reading of *Theology and Social Theory*, Mir gives an extensive discussion of Milbank's Trinitarian speculations which imply that creation is a 'harmonious order intrinsic to God's own being'.[68] Mir points out the consequences of such speculations: The generation of the Son is for Milbank not really separated from the creation of the world, which would imply that Milbank, although he claims the opposite, in reality sees the divine as the 'world soul'. Mir is particularly focused on the language of 'inside' and 'outside'. In his quotations from Milbank as well as his own renderings of the latter's work, Mir constantly italicises words that emphasise that this world lies literally within God: 'creatures are *included* in the eternal uttering', creation should not be considered as *outside* the divine but as *internal* to it, 'God's love for what he creates implies that creation is generated *within* a harmonious order *intrinsic* to God's own being'.

Although he is correct to draw attention to how closely God's being and the being of the world are related in Milbank's work (as similarly noted in chapter 4 above), Mir's framing of Milbank's work is overly one-sided. He overlooks what this study considers a pre-eminent characteristic of the participatory tradition and what clearly functions in Milbank, namely its analogical and non-univocal way of speaking about God. Despite the phrases found in Milbank's work as also highlighted by Mir, there is no way that this world for Milbank

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[65] Mir, 'A Panentheist Reading', 526.
[66] Mir, 'A Panentheist Reading', 529.
[67] Mir, 'A Panentheist Reading', 531; cf. Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 31.
[68] Mir, 'A Panentheist Reading', 534; cf. Milbank, *Theology*, 437.

literally lies 'within God'. Mir does not have sufficient attention for the fact that for Milbank 'withinnes' or 'outsideness' to God must always be placed between quotation marks, since, as Mir himself rightly observes, the character of God's *esse* for Milbank transcends the boundary between inside and outside. God's trinitarian being goes beyond pure self-containment, and is not a purely external relating to something 'other'.

Although Milbank is much less careful than Bavinck, this study suggests that the ways they speak belong to the same conceptual, that is participatory, space. As we saw, we managed also to 'catch' Bavinck on statements that, taken literally, are panentheistic. Yet it hardly makes sense to call him a panentheist, given that he shows himself to be painstakingly faithful to any position that is considered 'classical theist'. The only way one might possibly call both Bavinck and Milbank (along with the participatory tradition) 'panentheist' is to insist on their claim that this world lies within God as in its always eminent, transcendent cause, emphasising that this cause is in fact so eminent that it does not make any sense at all to claim that something lies 'within' it. This way of speaking at least precludes the literal character of any 'within' in this relation. It both claims and cancels the 'withinness'. Since Mir misses the point of the analogical language for the participatory relation between God and the world, he overestimates the language of 'withinness' in Milbank.[69]

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[69] An account of panentheism that is more sensible to the notion of analogy can be found in the work of Philip Clayton, who, although he stresses the importance of the central 'in' metaphor in panentheism, states that the word 'in', like all metaphors, creates too much tension to be taken literally. Nevertheless, the main reason he gives for this tension, namely that the 'in' in panentheism works in both directions (the world is in God, and God is in the world), would be problematic for both Milbank and Bavinck. That the world is fully dependent on God is not the problem, but that 'God depends on the world because the nature of God's actual experience depends on the interactions with finite creatures like ourselves' would indeed be problematic for both of them – although, as we will see in 5.2.7, in his account of the 'priority of the made' Milbank does adopt something of the idea of the 'surprise' that creation and its creativity evokes, even to God. For both Milbank and Bavinck, following Aquinas, God is not really related to the world, but this world is its relatedness to God – a way of speaking that is fully at home in a participatory, but not a panentheistic vocabulary. What is fundamentally lacking in their view, therefore, – and this is consistent with the Platonic-Christian view on participation – is Clayton's notion of the *inter*dependence of God and the world (his italics). Clayton, 'Panentheism', 73-91, esp. 81-84.

Particularly in more recent writings, such as *The Monstrosity of Christ* and his article on Sophiology and Theurgy, Milbank explains his own position in terms of 'paradox'. Here he rejects a 'Hegelian' account of the relation between God and the world, which, with its dialectical character, always works towards the absorption of the one by the other, or, as Milbank calls it, their 'mutual abolition'. It is exactly this dynamics which is at work in the logic of pantheism as well as panentheism. It is important to note that Milbank is very well aware that he is distancing his theological position from such 'Hegelianism'. Instead he chooses for analogy, or, as he calls it in these articles, 'paradox'. Milbank follows Meister Eckhart who contended that God (as *esse*) is more ourselves than we are ourselves: 'The God who is the giving source of everything must be the inner reality of everything – more each thing than each thing is itself, more stone in the stone than the stone, and more man in the man than the man'. Milbank is right to argue that this is something altogether different from pantheism, since such a position does not conceive of God as the sum of all things, or simply as the 'highest being', but sees God's *esse* as 'inconceivably beyond any whole' – which echoes the Neoplatonic view on the divine as discussed in section 2.2.2.

Therefore, although God is more like creatures than they are themselves, God is nonetheless even 'more unlike creatures than he is like them', where opposites are held together in a way similar to what we observed also in Aquinas, which way indeed deserves to be called 'paradoxical'.[70] It is interesting to see that Milbank and Bavinck work within the same conceptual space here, since both argue – in fact, following Aquinas – for the connection between God's communicability and his incommunicability. As communicating source he is so absolute that he is beyond everything we can 'eminently' claim about him, so that the *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae* imply and intensify each other.

5.2.7 Beyond the tradition: Milbank's anti-secular agenda

There is, however, an important aspect of Milbank's work that does position him beyond the traditional participatory way of speaking about the relation between creation and the divine, and, so this study contends, also beyond the 'modesty' of this tradition. The chapter on Milbank concluded by stressing the

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[70] Cf. the end of 2.2.6.

all-important presence of 'the made' in his work. All of Milbank's expositions on metaphysical issues, no matter how closely they relate to the views of premodern Christianity, have an 'innovative' character as to their concern for 'the made'. Milbank's metaphysics has a linguistic and constructivist character, and although he contends that these characteristics have deep roots within the Christian tradition itself, he also admits that, in emphasising the linguistic and fabricated character of what we call being and thinking, he is moving beyond the tradition. Or, at least, he tries to follow an 'alternative' and often overlooked pattern in the tradition that is connected with names like Eriugena, Cusanus, Vico, and later Romantic thinkers like Herder and Hamann. These names belong to the tradition Milbank would like to represent, which emphasises the 'poetic' or 'the priority of the made'.

The most important implication of this current is that there is in fact no difference between 'being' and 'making'. God's being and knowing cannot be said to be there 'in the first place', a reality to which his ability (or his decision) to create can only be added in the second place. Making is 'equiprimordial' with being and knowing. Indeed, as such there is an emphasis on the traditional notion that creating the world in no way 'changes' God, since creating somehow belongs to what God 'essentially' is. Interestingly, this is also in line with Bavinck's (equally traditional) stress on God's communicability, fecundity and even 'productivity'. Just like Milbank, Bavinck closely connects generation and creation, since, if we were to disconnect them, we would lose the heart of what creation is all about: God.

However, Milbank's emphasis on the creative character of the divine also leads him to expressions that are at the very least less careful. In chapter four above, this study noted that, because of the creative character of God's being, of his being 'in excess of himself', there is according to Milbank no distinction to be made in God between *intra* and *extra* (as also Amene Mir, of course, aptly notices).[71] Unlike Bavinck, Milbank seems to be prepared not only to *connect* generation and creation closely, but also to *identify* them. The Word of God which God utters eternally is not prior to reality, but is to Milbank 'the sum of all reality'. This becomes alarmingly univocal, particularly when he exhibits the language of 'explication' and 'unfolding'. Milbank now and then calls the world 'the explication' of what is 'implied' in God. The world is a finite

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[71] 4.3.3 and 4.4.3.

'unfolding' of the infinite, and so creation participates, as co-creating, in the divine act of creating. There is a parallel of this way of speaking in Neoplatonism, which also saw the multitude of the world 'folded up in the One', and which used the image of the point and the circle, the former being the divine and the latter being the world, again, as an explication of what was ultimately contained in the divine. This way of thinking can be traced throughout Milbank's work from the very start, since it already formed the cornerstone of his study on Vico.

As has already been observed in chapter 2, the traditional stress on *creatio ex nihilo* prevents the relation between God and the world from becoming in any way perspicuous.[72] As we saw, Bavinck realised – and this seems to connect him with Eastern, negative theology – that 'it is a mystery that 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.'[73] The modesty of this perspective also appears in the fact that Bavinck does and Milbank does not have a proper account of the divine will. To the perspective of *creatio ex nihilo* also belongs, as Bavinck repeatedly emphasises, that God actively willed the existence of creation. This study found Bavinck claiming that the ultimate boundary for creation, when it asks of God what his reasons for creating were, is to be situated at the divine will. One should not look for these reasons at a higher level, searching for a 'ground in God's being' which necessitates and eternalises creation.[74] *Quia voluit* is according to Bavinck the ultimate answer to the question why there is God *and* the world. Instead of an account of the famously criticised, arbitrary and 'naked' divine will, for Bavinck we have here a reality of wonder. The existence of the world is a mystery of superfluous givenness, which produces an even greater glory than the glory which is itself already complete in God.

This emphasis on mystery does not move Bavinck away from a participatory framework, but, as this study contends, is fully part of his participatory framework. Remarkably, also Milbank is very clear about the fact that this mystery belongs to any participatory outlook, and yet he is all too often prepared to make statements that render the relation between God and

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[72] 2.2.3.
[73] 3.4.1
[74] 3.4.3.

the world rather perspicuous, in a way that tends to univocity, and even to such a degree that it is sometimes hard to see why the world is not 'necessary' to God. These are notions which Milbank vehemently rejects, but to which his thought nonetheless gives rise.

To go beyond Mir, some implications of Milbank's work do not tend just to panentheism, but even simply to pantheism. Mir interprets Milbank's understanding of the act of creation as something 'completely internal to God'.[75] However, once again Mir's obsession with the language of 'external' versus 'internal' proves problematic, since it leads him to conclude that for Milbank creation is not outside the divine, but internal to it, 'rather as not identical with the divine'. In this last supposition, Mir misses the point. For Milbank, to be divine *is* to create. There is no divinity 'before' creation but only in creating. Therefore, since creation exists in its being creative, in its emanative character, it reflects the divine in a disturbingly univocal way.[76] To be fair to Milbank, his entire work opposes a univocal view on the relation between God and the world. In Duns Scotus he sees 'being' turning into something that can be univocally predicated of God and creation, which renders it something beyond God and thus an 'idol'. Accordingly, it would be interesting to hear how Milbank's own theology precludes 'making' from being a similar, univocal idol.

In an article on the distinction between *theoria* and *poesis* and in conversation with John Milbank (among others), Wayne Hankey summarises Aquinas' view as follows: 'For Aquinas, the self-differentiation of God, his internal emanation, which is the return of the divine being upon itself in knowledge and love, is the origin and *ratio* of the divine emanation *ad extra*, creation. But in Thomas' view, for creation to be free, to be a genuine act of love, a gift, the process of the divine life must be complete in itself.'[77] If this is

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[75] Mir, 'Panentheist Reading', 532.

[76] In an interesting remark on Pseudo-Dionysius, A.N. Williams claims that there is in some moments of his work 'an apparent lack of concern to maintain the divide between the Giver and recipients of perfection'. Milbank, deeply influenced as he is by Pseudo-Dionysius, seems to have inherited this 'lack of concern'. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that Milbank does not 'honour the difference', but that it is something that often simply does not have his immediate attention. Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 30.

[77] W.J. Hankey, '*Theoria versus Poesis*: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion and John Zizioulas', *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 407.

an accurate picture of Thomas' teaching, and perhaps even in a more general sense of the classical traditional understanding of the relation between God and the world, then it is clearly recognisable in everything Bavinck contends about this relation. Particularly the last part of the quotation from Hankey, however, sounds at odds with Milbank's work. Since he holds that being is equiprimordial with making, God is not 'complete' without reference to his creating and the world already seems to be given with the 'idea of God'.

However, this study would miss the point if it were simply to sum up Milbank's seemingly heterodox expressions, lift them out of their context and make a case for his deviation from the tradition, as is so often done. We have to take seriously the creative project in which his work is embedded and its search for post-secular language. As this study has argued, Milbank's work is not to be treated primarily as a site of dogmatic content. It is rather a site of post-secular theological narration in which the dogmatic content functions within a rhetorical strategy. Milbank constantly highlights those aspects of the tradition (and sometimes rather marginal parts of that tradition as it is received in the West) that emphasise the things he needs in his post-secular story. His theology weaves together different 'non-secular' conceptualities in a way of 'imagining otherwise'. He challenges his readers to imagine a modernity that did not put God and the world, eternity and time, God's being and our making, in competing positions.[78] This challenge gives his theology a certain one-sidedness, but particularly when we are aware of the strong anti-univocal tendency of his work, there can be no substantial theological reasons for dismissing a theological position that affirms so strongly the *affinity* between God and his creation.

5.2.8 Conclusions

Pantheism and panentheism are not the best labels to use when discussing a participatory view. This study considers pantheism and panentheism to be

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[78] This view on interpreting Milbank, as has been stated before, was eloquently put forward by Gordon Michalson, who reminds us that Milbank's work is 'deployed for the sake of altering our sensibility, of jarring us into an awareness of a road not taken'. Therefore, 'his is not a mere "methodological" debate with theological opponents over, say, the possibility of a "point of contact" between humanity and God for theology – an alteration in sensibility runs deeper than any methodological debate and is far more subtle, as well as much more difficult to argue for.' Michalson, 'Re-reading the post-Kantian tradition', 371.

modern philosophical conceptions about the relation between God and the world. They are historically evolved articulations of a desire to keep God and the world in intimate connection that nevertheless more or less fail to articulate the difference between them effectively.[79] Both Bavinck and Milbank stress the non-univocal or analogical character of the way they wish to speak about the relation between the world and God. Therefore, any literal identification of God and the world (as in pantheism) or any view that literally considers this world as lying or developing 'in God' or that stresses their interdependence (as in panentheism) is precluded in their views, although the language they use sometimes gives rise to the suspicion that they do indeed hold to one of these positions – and in Milbank's work this is much more often the case than it is in Bavinck's.

The analogical view on the relation between God and the world claims at once both ever greater distance and ever greater intimacy. This study supports the interpretation offered by John Milbank of this way of speaking when he identified it as 'paradoxical'. This is comparable with Bavinck's idea that God's communicability does not compromise but reinforces his incommunicability. God is so much our being that he is at the same time more different from us than we can imagine. Conversely, God's eternity, although it is completely incommunicable, is still the 'heartbeat' of every moment in time. The emphasis both Bavinck and Milbank put on the liveliness and productivity of God and therefore his deep connection with the life of the created confirms the idea that so-called 'classical theism', seen from the perspective of participation, cannot be further removed from the oft-criticised notions of being static and bereft of life and of placing God and creation over against each other.

In the end, this study renders a rather mild verdict on Milbank's seemingly 'panentheist' or 'pantheist' expressions. In the first place, his stress on analogy safeguards him from literal panentheism or pantheism. In the second place, it has to be considered that he uses this language in telling a story 'beyond secular reason'. The creative strategy in which his theology is involved must

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[79] Of course, particularly theologians who hold to some version of panentheism have tried to do justice to both God's immanence and his transcendence. Yet it seems that the point of the *inter*dependence of God and the world (the expression is borrowed from Philip Clayton), which is pivotal in panentheism, departs from the participatory view which renders only the world dependent on God's being, and not vice versa.

be taken into account. Bavinck is much more careful in his expressions, since he understands his theological task to be to give an exposition of the Catholic-Reformed tradition. Although in executing this task he of course also uses a lot of typical nineteenth-century colourings and emphases, and although he tends to forget that certain Reformed peculiarities are not as 'traditional' as he thinks, his work is more 'conservative' than Milbank's. Surprisingly, although 'participation' is the word that pertains primarily to Milbank's theology, Bavinck's theology in fact develops itself as faithfully to the participatory tradition as Milbank's. In a sense his position is even *closer* to that tradition as it is understood in this study than Milbank's position is, since Bavinck speaks with the same modesty about the relation between God and the world.

Radical Orthodoxy in general, and John Milbank in particular, have been accused of not fully honouring the difference between God and the world. Even before it attempted to assess this judgement, this study demanded attention for the postmodern, postsecular narratological strategy which characterises Milbank's theology. This character involves a certain one-sidedness, since his preference for concepts and metaphors focuses more on the unity between the divine and the created than on their difference, which culminates in his discourse on 'making'. Milbank emphasises that making is pre-eminently divine and that any human making (and culture and language) therefore shares in this divine reality and is not something that purely belongs to a supposed emancipated-from-the-divine human realm. In what he sees as an 'alternative modernity', Milbank tries to harmonise the contemplative and the active, the metaphysical and the humanistic – which is the ultimate theological 'dream' that runs throughout his entire oeuvre.[80]

However, in deploying this strategy, Milbank sometimes seems to forget that the participatory tradition, which involves analogical discourse on the divine, tends always more to the apophatic than to the kataphatic. Considering humanity to share in the divine life is no license for free-floating divine-human speculations about art, culture and politics, but gives rise to humility, along the line of the words of the apostle Paul: 'what do you have, that you did not receive?'[81] Existing in the receiving and passing on of divine life, human beings

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[80] In Milbank's own words, with reference to Coleridge, Newman and Ruskin: 'a particular insular blending of 'the empirical' with 'the Platonic'. Milbank, *Future of Love*, x.
[81] 1 Corinthians 4:7.

are never in a position to boast in their 'ontological situation', since they do not know exactly where and even who they are, since their being ultimately lies in God, as Milbank never tires of explaining. Although this emphasis should lead to a stance of (epistemological and ontological) humility, such humility is often hard to find in Milbank's work. There is often a sphere of certainty, of 'explaining' the divine-human situation that does not correspond with the modesty of the participatory stance.

Nevertheless, in their stress on the ever eminent being of God in which created being nonetheless participates, both Bavinck and Milbank in their theologies 'keep God and creation in intimate connection, while honouring their difference'. Milbank effectively develops the view that God's being transcends the border between 'inside' and 'outside', and that there is therefore no literal 'distance' between God and creation, which in no way compromises the unbridgeable difference between them. Bavinck in the same way has it that there is in creation no literal transition from being in God to being outside of God. Both Bavinck and Milbank emphasise, therefore, that difference is not the same as distance.[82] In this way, both theologians are able to insist that the classical theist account of God, with its participatory implications, is about the 'ever greater' being of God as well as about his being more intimate to us than we can imagine.

Bavinck in his work attaches much more value to the distinction between the inside and the outside of God, since to emphasise this difference is for him one of the 'strongholds' against pantheism. Unconsciously, however, Bavinck – as we saw throughout chapter 3 – in this way heavily invests in the modern dichotomy between inside (the subjective) and outside (the objective), a dichotomy that is only held together by his theological stress on the Trinity (often in the language of 'the organic') which comes with a participatory ontology. Therefore, we can conclude that the theological voice of participation which is so prominent in Milbank is more of an 'undercurrent' in Bavinck. But as is typical for an undercurrent, although it is often not immediately there at the surface of Bavinck's argument, particularly through the language of God's communicability it still is present everywhere. It is to the merit of Milbank's perspective that this study was able to perceive and value this current in Bavinck.

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[82] Cf. Brian Mattson on Bavinck, *Restored to our Destiny*, 20.

5.3 Ontology and soteriology

5.3.1 Reformed uneasiness with ontological participation

Reformed theologians clearly share an uneasiness towards the theme of participation. This uneasiness takes on different forms and leads to different levels of rejection of participation as a central theological concept. A general point of concern is if and how participation should be considered as an 'ontological' concept. It is not so that Reformed theologians these days shy away from ontology or metaphysics altogether (as was sometimes the case in earlier times, as noted above in 1.3.1), but they consider ontology to have a more secondary, relative importance. Since this study intends to develop the discussion if and how participation can function as an ontological concept in the Reformed tradition, it is useful to listen to these critical voices. The present section (5.3.1) will therefore identify and discuss different Reformed voices that witness caution and uneasiness with participation as an ontological theme.

John Webster, for example, confesses that he remains uneasy 'with at least some uses of the idiom of participation in the theology of creation and salvation', and pleads for a more classical Calvinist view in which the demarcations between Creator and creature are 'rather strictly drawn'.[83] However, although Webster is strongly opposed to any view of emanationism, he also wants to avoid the other extreme, that of 'extrinsicism' (which sounds similar to Bavinck's way to avoid the two poles of pantheism and deism). Interestingly, although Webster is opposed to the notion of participation (or perhaps what he considers its emanationist 'excesses'), he turns to a theological vocabulary that this study considers to be moving itself into the orbit of participation. Again, like Bavinck, Webster calls God an abundance of life, an inexhaustible ocean and fountain of being, metaphors which he puts rightly on a par with the notion of God's actuality (and therefore the absence of potentiality), by which God is described as *actus purus*.[84]

Webster then contrasts ontological, philosophical speculations about the exact nature of *deitas* with God's self-communicative energy, which can simply

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[83] Webster, 'Perfection and Participation' in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* T.J. White, O.P. (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 380.
[84] Webster, 'Perfection and Participation', 381.

be called 'revelation'. Webster makes exactly the same move as Bavinck: The pivotal point of theology is not our human 'abstract' considerations about what can be counted as divine being, but what God communicates about himself (in Scripture, in the history of salvation, and supremely by his Trinitarian being). This study considers that Webster – precisely in making this move – finds himself, like Bavinck, in a very participatory framework. Not our metaphysical speculations, but God's self-manifestation, his shining forth, his communication in creation is what matters. Webster emphasises divine perfection and therefore also *aseity* and *apatheia* as necessary starting-points for any discourse about God and the world.[85] Again, this study observed Bavinck and Milbank emphasising this very same thing, in concordance with the participatory tradition. Divine perfection does contrast with the 'Hegelian' kind of view that Webster opposes, according to which God in order to be perfect also must be involved with change and historical contingency. In light of chapters 3 and 4 of this study, it should be abundantly clear that on this matter Webster's voice forms a harmonious chorus together with Bavinck and Milbank.

Webster is not strictly against the idea of adopting participation in a Reformed framework, but he mentions an important condition. He is sympathetic towards the participatory notions in Calvin's work, which are tied to soteriology and sacramental theology, such that participation is confined to 'being in Christ'.[86] Reformed theologians did not 'extend' participation into a metaphysics or into a 'theology of created being as such'. Although he seems to be content with this modesty, Webster leaves open the question if such a movement in his view is possible or not.

At the same time, this study's findings suggest that it is hard to see participation 'extended' from soteriology to creation, since to confine participation to a purely soteriological context would already be to narrow its original scope. The overview offered in chapter 2 of this study observed how in the participatory tradition the soteriological finds its place in a creational account of God shining forth his goodness – an account, therefore, of divine being – and of the world as a receiving and passing on of divine glory.

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[85] Webster, 'Perfection and Participation', 384-385.
[86] Webster, 'Perfection and Participation', 386. 'Being in Christ' is also the subject of Hans Burger's dissertation, which seeks to produce building blocks for a theological ontology by developing this theme.

Soteriology and ontology should therefore not be placed over against each other, but both belong to God's communicable being. Bavinck's work testifies profoundly to the fact that participation is at home within the doctrines of God and creation, and *exactly for that reason* belongs to soteriology as well – and not 'perhaps' the other way around, as Webster suggests. In view of the rest of Webster's article, it does not seem that he opposes such an idea, but it is rather the case that he is uneasy about adopting the notion of participation in his theology because of the all too easy emanationist connotations – again, as the case was with Bavinck.

Another example of such uneasiness can be found in the work of Colin Gunton. Although his theological work testifies of an enduring emphasis on the importance of trinitarian theology, he seems at times to wonder what kind of a 'Pandora's box' this renewed trinitarian fashion in theology has opened. Gunton observes that different forms of social trinitarianism, eager as they are to emphasise the relation between creation and the divine *processiones*, fall prey to some form of Hegelianism 'which itself has deep roots in neoplatonic emanationism'. Once again, Bavinck's enemies arrive on the scene, and it is not long before also the word 'pantheism' makes its appearance. Gunton's fear is that in some of these social-trinitarian views there is in the end 'ultimately only one reality, the divine-worldly emanation, which constitutes the world and then swallows it up'. These views do not acknowledge that God is a communion of love *prior to* and *independent of* the creation, and so some of them suppose that for example 'suffering and tragedy are incorporated into the divine life'.[87]

However, Gunton goes further than Webster in developing a participatory account of the relation between God and the world. Gunton's deep interest in the systematic implications of the divine workings of Father, Son and Spirit leads him to a real ontological discourse about God and the world. He rarely if ever uses the word participation, but his analogical account of *perichoresis* as

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[87] C. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Second Edition; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), Preface to the Second Edition, xv-xxi. Gunton refers to the work of Ted Peters, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Peter Hodgson.

an 'implication of the unity-in-variety of the divine economic involvement in the world' in fact functions in a completely participatory way.[88]

Maarten Wisse, on the contrary, is from the Reformed side the most outspoken and vehement critic of participation. He published a book in which he fully framed his interpretation of Augustine's *De Trinitate* within an anti-participatory argument. His biggest problem with participatory outlooks, among which *Radical Orthodoxy* plays the key role, is that they turn christology into a 'repetition of ontology'.[89] Even more explicitly than we observed in Webster, in Wisse's monograph, ontology and soteriology function as two different 'worlds', and he accuses several Augustine interpreters of pushing Christ into the ontological rather than the soteriological realm. In this way, they create what he calls 'christologies of manifestation'. Christ is turned into something of an ontological 'device' which only manifests and confirms what was in fact already completely laid out in creation, namely that humanity is made to be united with God and therefore to be deified.[90] Using Augustine, Wisse makes a strong plea for taking the difference between the world and God seriously and emphasising the gravity of sin.[91]

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[88] Cf. C. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity. The Bampton Lectures 1992* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), particularly chapter 6.

[89] Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology*, 44.

[90] A clear example of opposing ontology and soteriology can also be found in the *Christelijke Dogmatiek* of G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi, which has become a new standard volume on dogmatics in Dutch theology. The authors emphatically discuss participation within a soteriological and pneumatological context. Although they criticise Maarten Wisse for arguing against any form of participatory thinking, they simply state that participation 'is a pneumatological and not an ontological category; it does not belong to the way things are, but it is brought about by the Spirit' (615). G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012).

[91] Wisse opposes the two theological worlds as follows: 'The one (the ontological-participatory, wh) is a world in which it seems only important to know, to have the right view of how the world is related to God. (...) We can know this truth even if our life is not in accordance with it. Beauty, eros, love, a dazzling intellectual dynamics is said to be our source of joy and happiness. The other (soteriological, wh) world is one of fear and trembling, one in which intellectual attempts to unravel the ontological structure of God and world will be dealt with in a very sceptical if not sharply negative way. Knowing God is no intellectual achievement; it is the eschatological destiny of the

Lastly, Todd Billings, whose discourse on participation in the work of John Calvin was already discussed in chapter 2, and who confesses to have learnt a lot from Milbank's emphasis on participation, articulates an important Reformed hesitation towards the ontological, or, as he has it, 'unclear' use of the theme in Milbank's work. Calvin, Billings says, is clear about the difference between justification and sanctification. In the sphere of justification, which comes first, grace is something from outside of ourselves, but only in the sphere of sanctification is grace 'a participatory regeneration by the Spirit' and can it also be articulated in the language of adopting, engrafting and union. Therefore, Billings, with Calvin, is clear about the realm in which participation exclusively plays a role: in the second sphere of grace, *in nobis.*

Billings accordingly has a serious problem with the emphasis on the necessary *reception* of grace in Milbank's work: by Israel, by Mary, by the church, in short, by human receptive agency. Here Billings touches upon the very heart of the Reformed uneasiness with participation. Is grace something primarily and fundamentally 'from the outside', *extra nos*, or is human nature itself something fundamentally 'graced' – or otherwise no human nature at all? To abandon the first position, so Billings implies, is to leave the ultimate Reformed position. We are caught up then with the Platonic principle that 'like can only be known by like', so that there is a fundamental 'capacity to receive' in human beings. The point Billings touches upon is the same as that which was articulated in strong terms by Wisse: if participation (in an ontological, broad sense) in fact implies that nature is fundamentally graced, why did Christ come at all? Only to manifest that everything is ontologically 'all right'? Indeed, Scripture would have to be put aside completely to assert such a thing.

What the Reformed commentators noted in this section articulates not so much an aversion against ontology, but an impression of the relative use of ontology in theology. The voice that connects these thinkers claims that theology is not primarily about ontology, but about 'something else'. This 'something else' is considered in terms of a more soteriological, christological position, which requires a much stronger focus on human sinfulness, and it is

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pure of heart, paving their way with humility and putting their trust in Christ.'
Trinitarian Theology, 147.

articulated as listening to the specific language of Scripture and making the logic of that language decisive for our speaking about God and the world.[92]

Interestingly, however, the critical questions are not only to be asked of Milbank, but they can be and have been asked of Bavinck as well, as we will see further on. Since the present study found Bavinck fundamentally to be moving within an ontological participatory space, it no longer considers it a surprise that Bavinck evokes the same questions. The following will therefore address the question how a participatory standpoint discusses the notions of sin and incarnation (5.3.3 and 5.3.4). Here Bavinck's and Milbank's positions on these notions will be recaptured and brought into conversation with the participatory tradition as discussed in chapter 2. Before we embark on this endeavour, however, we will begin with a discussion about 'knowing and salvation'. If it is true that theology in a Reformed perspective is first of all about salvation, then why do Milbank and Bavinck need to have such developed accounts of what 'knowing' is in the first place? Is it because they are indulging in misguided philosophical hobbies and have forgotten about their main tasks as theologians, or does epistemology have something to do with soteriology?

5.3.2 Knowing and salvation

One of the biggest points of criticism from the Reformed standpoint against the notion of participation, as found in Milbank, is that it seems only to circle around the 'right way of knowing'. Reformed commentators find his work lacking of the seriousness of the situation of fallen humanity and its need for redemption. As we saw in chapter 4 (particularly in 4.3.1), Milbank's theology indeed invests a lot of energy in an account of knowledge. He criticises what he identifies as the Kantian-Scotistic current for delimiting – and so 'secularising' – the realm of what we can know. He is not interested in outlining where thought begins and what it can think, since thinking has

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[92] For the sake of space, there has to be an end to the list of Reformed critics of participation and/or *Radical Orthodoxy* here, but at least the name of Michael Horton should also be mentioned. His recent works all contain critical discussions with Milbank and Graham Ward, which articulate the same concerns as those developed in this section (and are particularly close to the critique of Wisse). Very concise and to the point is Horton's criticism on participation (and his favouring of the concept of the covenant instead) in J. Smith and J. H. Olthuis (eds.) *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, 107-132.

'always already begun' and cannot point to its own premises: 'Thinking always arrives on the scene too late to provide its own foundations', Milbank notes, with a reference to Jacobi.[93] His epistemology therefore does not stand on its own but is moved consciously into the orbit of ontology, into the wider context where it just seems to find itself. Some Reformed commentators, however, seem to be begging the question: 'But why should a theologian bother so much about these questions?' And is one justified to claim that the theological tradition articulates this same point? In order to bring the matter closer to the Reformed mind, Bavinck might perhaps be added to the following discussion as well.

As we have seen, 'knowing' is for Milbank something that cannot be seen as separate. It is necessarily connected with words like 'desiring', 'willing' and 'loving'. It is even connected with 'grace'. Since knowing involves the instability of identities and essences, it is directed towards something fundamentally 'to come', and therefore can be said to have an eschatological moment. Knowing is moved away from its modern association with power and commanding, towards the sphere and stance of gratitude, Milbank states. We depend on God granting knowledge to us, and it is not something which is 'ours'. Although Milbank's view is deeply inspired by late twentieth-century postmodern thought, an important account of knowing that is comparable to it can be found in Bavinck as well.

There is an encompassing 'divine movement' discernable in Bavinck's thought, which develops along the lines of a Platonic-Christian *exitus-reditus-*movement according to which this world stands in a movement from God, to God. Just like in Milbank's thought, so also in Bavinck the world loses something of its 'fixed identity'. Although this is not strictly speaking a theme for Bavinck, the different *theologoumena* in his dogmatics are consciously considered as standing in this encompassing movement and therefore cannot be looked upon independently. Theology becomes a story with interrelated topics in a divine 'plot'. That is to say: even Scripture, even the covenant of grace and even Christ serve as 'means' within this movement and are not the goal of the theological enterprise. If a goal has to be articulated, for Bavinck it

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[93] Milbank, 'The Double Glory', 160

is the glory of God's being in the fullness of its riches. In theology it is therefore 'God's being all along'.[94]

The all-important character of God's being is the main reason for Bavinck to attribute a central theological place of importance to his account of knowledge. He even sounds 'Milbankian' in his criticism of modern accounts of knowing: 'the human mind does not let itself be constrained by boundaries, not even those set by Kant and Comte'.[95] Although Bavinck is clear about the fact that being and knowing are separated, his view on knowing, just like Milbank's, moves him into the wider orbit of being, even the being of God himself.[96] For Bavinck, creation exists in an embodiment of divine ideas – which again shows how deeply Bavinck is rooted within the Christian Platonic tradition. Thinking, and emphatically theological thinking, is tracing the unity and coherence of these divine ideas. With our human thinking, we 'think after' God's ideas, we try to trace and follow the divine thoughts.[97] Therefore, he relates the notions of 'knowing' and 'salvation' very closely to each other, a move which he discerns also in one of his favourite passages from Scripture in this context: 'This is eternal life, that they may know you' (John 17:3). 'Knowing God' is not a first step of connecting with the divine, but it is an articulation of our participation in the divine being. Epistemology is for Bavinck not some difficult gate you must pass through in order to take your place around the theological table and to start the meal, as is indeed the case in a typical modern philosophical framework. Knowledge is the meal itself, it is to eat, and this is the reason why the prolegomena in Bavinck's *Dogmatics* are already so deeply theological.

Since knowing is about the heart of theology, it of course cannot be for Bavinck a detached intellectual 'game'. In Bavinck, again following the Platonic Christian tradition, we find a strong notion of the participatory epistemological rule that 'like can only be known by like'. For example, if you want to know truth, you have to be truthful. 'Someone only knows the truth

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[94] Cf. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 94-95.

[95] Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 31.

[96] Bavinck discusses this issue concisely in *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*. E.g. with a reference to Augustine, Bavinck argues that 'we know things, because they are, but they are, because God has known them', 28. And: 'both being and knowing have their *ratio* in the Word by which God created everything', 33.

[97] See 3.2 of this study. On the relationship between theological knowledge and 'knowledge in general', cf. also W. Huttinga, 'Marie Antoinette'.

inasmuch as he is it'.[98] If you want to know goodness, you have to be a good person, and if you want to know God, you have to be 'godly', pious. This emphasis on the 'virtuous knower', the attuning of the knower to that which is known, can be traced throughout Bavinck's work, and is conceptually coined in his idea of the necessary correspondence between subject and object.[99]

It is exactly at this point that not only Milbank, but apparently also Bavinck, at least according to some interpretations of the Reformed tradition, seems to cross a border of what is acceptable. They do not see salvation as something that is purely *extra nos*, but there is something in our createdness that already consists in our sharing in the divine life and has to be addressed and intensified. In both Milbank *and* Bavinck, nature has to be already 'graced' so as to be what it is. Although Bavinck also uses concepts and metaphors that point in a different direction, he can simply state that even in this sinful, fallen world, to experience the correspondence between subject and object is in fact to experience 'the normal situation' of 'rest, joy, blessedness'. In this situation 'the truth has found us, and we have found it. There is immediate contact.'[100]

Although they live philosophically and theologically in altogether different eras, Bavinck and Milbank highly concur in their accounts of knowledge. Both to a large degree attach knowing to 'knowing God' and see knowing as something that refers in the first place to its divine source, the being of God, and in the second place to its divine end, the eschatological moment when we will know all things in God and God in all things. And although this may be an 'eschatological vision' on knowing, our present state of knowing would be empty if it did not somehow participate in this vision. Therefore, 'knowledge as such is a good', as Bavinck contends. Not only 'theological knowledge' but any act of knowing is on its way to the knowing and seeing of God.[101]

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[98] *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 29.

[99] See 3.3.5 above. Bavinck's and Milbank's insistence on knowledge as something quite different from a detached intellectual game is not purely part of their christian heritage. As Pierre Hadot has shown, already in pre-Socratic Greece, Sophia was 'knowing how to' and in particular 'knowing how to live'. Socrates (or Plato) even turned the idea of wisdom towards a discourse on 'knowing how to be'. Already in Platonic thought there was a great stress on knowing as something morally relevant, leading one into a certain way of 'being'. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 9-51.

[100] See 3.3.5.

[101] In an important discussion of Milbank's view on knowledge, connected with his interpretation of Aquinas' epistemology/ontology, Paul DeHart suggests that Milbank interprets Aquinas falsely as stating that our knowing is an inchoative experience of

This study therefore argues that both these theologians in occupying themselves with knowledge and knowing are not asking 'preliminary' questions for theology, but in doing so are entering the heart of the relation of the created with the divine. For Bavinck no less than for Milbank, 'knowing' is considered as being on its way to 'know God'. Furthermore, the views of Bavinck and Milbank on knowledge, in concordance with the participatory tradition, do not offer haughty conceptions which intend to lift up human beings by the 'right way of knowing' to a super-human, divine level. They instead invoke a humble, receptive attitude. It is not that they point strictly to a human capacity which functions as the foundation for our salvation, to articulate their intentions in terms of the Reformed abhorrence for this theme. Just like 'deification' is not a way to elevate human beings to a level that they do not belong to but is more a confession that 'we are nothing and God is everything', so Bavinck's and Milbank's views on knowledge testify of creation's 'empty hands' and point to the divine and ultimately unknown giving source in which our knowing and thinking participates.

5.3.3 Sin and evil

With this, the question of Bavinck's and Milbank's accounts of sin becomes an acute one. To what extent is human being destroyed by sin, particularly in its ability to know? How can the knower be 'attuned to' that which is known if the

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God's perfect knowledge. Although this study is quite content not to enter the interpretive debate on Aquinas' account of analogy (a 'grammatical/linguistic' versus an 'ontological' one, or an 'apophatic' versus a 'kataphatic' one), some comments can be made.

In the first place, this study admits the critique that Milbank sometimes speaks 'too optimistically' about the participation of the created in the divine. That Milbank's notion of 'analogy as paradox' is in fact much more nuanced (both kataphatic and apophatic at once) can unfortunately not be derived from the limited discussion of Aquinas on which DeHart builds.

Second, what this study misses in DeHart's discussion is the broader perspective of the tradition, which *did* emphasise this participatory relation by means of the *logos* (and is adopted by both Bavinck and Milbank). This study sees no problem in reading ST I q13 (on the relationship between our naming and the naming of the divine) against the much broader traditional metaphysical background of how creation and creator relate by way of participation which does indeed function in Aquinas, as discussed above in 2.2.6. In fact, this seems to be the more plausible thing to do. Whether this renders a reading of Aquinas that is 'too platonising' to be plausible is a subject open to debate. See P. J. DeHart, 'On being heard but not seen: Milbank and Lash on Aquinas, analogy and agnosticism', *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 243-277.

knower is bound to control, damage, distort or even hate that which is known? Can we, in our relation with God, somehow rely on God's being and our createdness, on our 'participation in the divine being', or is this 'route' destroyed by sin and is any way of relating with God therefore blocked, except the way that is called 'Christ'? Of course, in the context of this study these questions cannot be answered in their fullness and breadth, but the work of Milbank and Bavinck, as well as the overview of the participatory tradition offered in chapter 2, provide some important clues for these questions.

From a Reformed perspective, the account of knowledge that Milbank and Bavinck share seems to be problematic. Both hold to some version of the position that human knowledge participates in God's knowledge. To Milbank, any act of knowing is in fact an inchoative participation in God's knowing, and Bavinck considers human reason not as identical with but still as participating in the divine *Logos*. But does this not contradict the idea that our knowing is deeply affected by sin?[102] In working towards an answer, we will first recapitulate the pivotal points in Bavinck's and Milbank's discussions of sin and evil (5.3.3) and then concomitantly their views on incarnation (5.3.4).

Both Bavinck and Milbank strongly insist on *privatio boni* as the pre-eminent character of sin. Since for them 'being' and 'the good' stand in forefront, evil is not something considered ontologically equal to the good. Sin and evil can therefore never set the agenda for theology, since that can only be done by God's very being. Yet how is sin then to be taken seriously, given the fact that it nonetheless 'is there'?

The last sentence, in its unconsciously 'naïve' formulation, would already have problematic connotations for Milbank. For him, sin is not simply 'there', and is definitively not there as a 'given fact'. Sin and evil are realities that are brought about in the realm of imagination and narration. In his mind the problem with secular views on the world is that they simply posit evil as a fact, as a given which is necessarily there and which forms the only secure ground on which we build our worldviews, ethics and so on. But just like the secular, so too evil had to be 'invented' and, before it was enacted, it had to be

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[102] Eugene Heideman is quite clear when he articulates his concerns about Bavinck's theology. He is worried by the necessary correspondence between subject and object which for Bavinck ultimately occurs in the *Logos*: 'There is the suspicion that the subject and the object have been so closely related that Bavinck has not been able to escape completely the pantheism which he fears and criticizes'. Heideman, *The relation of revelation and reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, 144.

'imagined' as a 'false simulacrum within the repleteness of reality'.[103] Therefore, human action ought not to involve an 'acting against evil', since such a reaction would involve a re-enactment of sin itself and confirm its very existence. Sin is therefore 'something to be forgotten about'. Milbank's project is again one of 'imagining otherwise', of telling a story of the fullness of life, and hoping that this is the story that will be enacted.

In Bavinck's *Dogmatics*, however, notwithstanding its substantial 'nothingness', sin does play a role in the theological story.[104] It even fulfils a role in God's world plan. When humanity is fallen in sin, God hands the world over into the economy of the Mediator, which is called the 'covenant of grace'. The path that is to be followed is the path of the cross, which passes 'through suffering to glory, through struggle to victory, through the cross to a crown, through the state of humiliation to that of exaltation'. Therefore, although Bavinck speaks very carefully here, there is in the end something of a 'positive role' for sin in the divine story. It enables humanity to obtain the *donum perseverantiae*, which in the end even contributes to the glorification of God, being victorious over sin.

From both sides, there emerges then a question for the other. For Milbank, it would be the question if sin in Bavinck's Reformed perspective is not actively engendered. If sin is allowed to play a 'role' in the theological plot, is this not, to put it bluntly, to do the devil's will? What does sin become if it is allowed to set the agenda for what can be theologically (and therefore ontologically and epistemologically) said after Adam's fall? It comes dangerously close to being 'bigger than God'. From the other side, one might ask of Milbank if he in fact does not ignore the seriousness of fallen reality. If sin has to be 'imagined away', then what do we make of the undeniable reality of our broken lives? Although Milbank in several parts of his oeuvre has a keen eye for the reality of sin and evil as an ephemeral fabric we are woven into, there is a clear tendency in his thought to pass over the earthly to the heavenly, eternal state of things, the clearest example of which already appears in *Theology and Social Theory*: to overcome secular violence, we have to imagine heavenly peace. Of course, we should not contrast Bavinck's and Milbank's views more than is necessary. In both their views, sin and evil are considered as ambiguous but nonetheless very 'real' realities that, although

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[103] For a more extended discussion, see 4.2.3.
[104] See 3.5.

they strictly have no 'being' and are purely parasitic, still are interwoven into our world text. The question is, however: how are we to deal with this ambiguous reality?

With his focus on the role of imagination, Milbank has a valuable point. Reformed theology should be careful not to put 'sin, and what God does with it' at the centre of theological reflection. That would be giving evil too much honour. It is God's triune being, which gives and does not stop giving even after humanity has turned away from Him, that should be at the centre of the attention. Milbank's emphasis rightly points to the eschatology of our acting. Every act is a projection, an 'imagination' of the good life, pointing to the goodness which is hidden in God, but still proleptically present. But Milbank's emphasis on the theological task of 're-imagining the good' has an equally deep pitfall, which becomes painstakingly clear for example in his introduction to *The Word Made Strange*. There he complains that the complete ecclesial task seems to fall on the shoulders of the individual theologian. Since the church lacks a real practice of hope and love, it is the theologian who first has to *imagine* the virtuous life in order that it can be lived again. Although there is much to say in favour of the role of 'imagining the good' in hoping and aiming for a new and good practice, in Milbank's theological framework it in fact means that the individual theologian has to 'undo the fall'. Since the fall existed first and foremost in Adam's imagining of the 'secular', of something alongside the good, theology's task is to re-imagine the good and hope that this will open up the possibility for a good practice again. The present study considers this to be a serious overestimation of what theology, or at least the 'individual theologian', can do. To give the theologian the task of 'redeeming estrangement' is to give him or her a role that functions too much as a soteriological task.

Bavinck's account of sin, however, is again not so far removed from Milbank's. At least in an important undercurrent of his argument as we followed it in chapter 3, he 'imagines sin away' just like Milbank does. Like Milbank, Bavinck argues for the fundamental nothingness of sin. Therefore God trusted the situation of giving the world over to sin, and let it have the world, and even his beloved son. This trust has to do with the nothingness of sin, since it is 'of such a nature that it destroys itself by the very freedom

granted it; it dies of its own diseases; it dooms itself to death'.[105] The views of Bavinck and Milbank on sin and evil both sound much like what the main character Pi Patel in the novel *The life of Pi* brings forward about death: 'The reason death sticks so closely to life isn't biological necessity; it's envy. Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it can. But life leaps over oblivion lightly, losing only a thing or two of no importance, and gloom is but the passing shadow of a cloud...'[106] But if this is the case, if sin builds indeed an automatically self-defeating kingdom, then 'why did Christ have to come?' is a question that bothers at least some Reformed minds in this discussion. The question concerning Christ's coming is most clearly felt within the realm of the discussion of the incarnation, with which this study therefore continues – and finishes.

5.3.4 Incarnation

In his *Revelatie en inspiratie*, Jan Veenhof rightly observes that in Bavinck's work incarnation is deeply connected with the rest of God's revelation. Like the present study, Veenhof observes how in Bavinck general and special revelation, nature and grace are distinguished, but also have an important continuity. He adds: 'It is difficult to decide which has greater importance for Bavinck: the affinity or the difference?'[107] Because of Bavinck's imprecise formulations, Veenhof continues, it is impossible to interpret his theology as a 'creational' or 'grace'-theology. In Bavinck's discourse about God's communicability, which moves him into the orbit of participation, this study identified an important *rationale* for both the continuity and the discontinuity Veenhof observes. It is therefore not, as Veenhof has it, simply a matter of unclarity or insecurity on Bavinck's side, but the ever tense outcome of how the Trinitarian God communicates his life and being to this world – before *and after* sin breaks into it. Contrary to Veenhof's claim, this study in fact finds the impossibility to choose in Bavinck's work strictly between 'creation' and 'grace' a very fortunate one. As noted above in 5.3.1, any diffusing of ontology and soteriology belongs to the harmony of the workings of the Triune God and is therefore not a theological vice, but rather a virtue.

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[105] RD3, 64-65 (GD3, 42).
[106] Y. Martel, *Life of Pi* (New York: Mariner Books, 2001), 6.
[107] Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 409. For the whole discussion, cf. 406-416.

As we saw, Bavinck places great emphasis on the broader context of the incarnation, which can be characterised briefly in terms of God's communicative being. The incarnation then forms 'the crown' on this divine working. Since Bavinck so deeply correlates incarnation with creation, Veenhof asks whether he does not 'take away from the incarnation its final and most profound seriousness'.[108] Veenhof thus points to an important characteristic in Bavinck's work. He even omits some statements that would really be worrying for him, where Bavinck argues that humankind, even in its original creation, 'unites and *reconciles within himself* both heaven and earth, things both invisible and visible', an expression which even in its very vocabulary is 'unclear' about the difference between being and salvation.[109] Not only 'the person of Christ', but already humankind itself as at once *microcosmos* and *microtheos* has a mediatory character for Bavinck. Is this not an underestimation of the radical novelty of God's redeeming act in Christ, and does this not degrade special revelation to simply a special form of general revelation? Veenhof refers to the work of G. C. Berkouwer, who also insisted on the purely soteriological motif of the incarnation and resisted the idea suggested in the tradition that God would also have become man 'without sin'. Berkouwer therefore pleads strongly for an interpretation of the incarnation exclusively in terms of reparation and not of elevation.[110]

This study, however, persists in its conviction that the idea that the incarnation 'exceeds its occasion' as articulated by Milbank would at least in its formulation be accepted by Bavinck as well. Both Veenhof and Berkouwer are sensitive to the fact that purely focusing on the 'reparatory' motif of the incarnation, although this motif obviously has strong biblical and patristic roots, denies something of its broadness and of the divine freedom expressed

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[108] Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 411. Cf. Hans Burger in *Being in Christ*: 'The Christological teleology of creation is in tension with the contingent, soteriological character of the incarnation. As a result the unique character of the incarnation as an answer to sin and guilt seems to disappear, although Bavinck does not want this.' *Being in Christ*, 93.

[109] RD2, 556 (GD2, 518), italics added. Cf. 3.5.1.

[110] G.C. Berkouwer, *Het Werk van Christus*. Dogmatische Studiën (Kampen: Kok, 1953), 17-33. Berkouwer's dismissal of the idea of 'incarnation without sin' is closely tied to the type of theologians he observed defending the notion. He refers to H. Martensen and J. J. van Oosterzee, who seem to have defended the idea within a more or less optimistic 'nineteenth-century' evolutionary scheme of human development, not really hindered by a strong account of human sinfulness.

in it. The glorious divine communication in the incarnation would be compromised, if God were to be supposed to be purely 'reacting' against sin. Nonetheless, Veenhof and Berkouwer are unwilling to develop this theme any further. This study, however, pointed in chapter 2 to the 'double sign' under which the incarnation functioned for the fathers of the church, which could rightly be articulated in terms of reparation *and* elevation.[111] Bavinck's account of the creation of man, which focuses on the higher goal that still lies in the future and is only fulfilled in Christ, the true image of God, is not necessarily a typical nineteenth-century image of development and growth in Hegelian style (which Berkouwer and apparently also Veenhof fear), but can also for example be found in Athanasius' account of the incarnation. He too considers the incarnation as standing in the course of God's ongoing unfolding towards human beings and thus as the gift of what is utterly human: a stable union with the divine.[112] All this is not to deny that the occasion for the incarnation is God's condescension to a world fallen deeply in sin. This is the truth of the *felix culpa*-tradition Milbank carefully refers to, according to which humanity, by falling into sin, was able to receive a saviour who provided a glory that reached even beyond the original creation.[113]

Notwithstanding the similarities between Bavinck and Milbank, there are also strong differences between their approaches to the incarnation. For Bavinck, the reason why the incarnation exceeds its occasion is quite another one than it is for Milbank. For Bavinck, the occasion for the incarnation, namely that humanity is fallen in sin, stands far more at the forefront than it does for Milbank. As was observed in chapter 4, Bavinck's christology is preceded by a chapter on the covenant of grace. This covenant is the name of the 'new order' that was established after the fall. This fact alone already indicates that Bavinck, with the Reformed tradition he draws on, gives sin quite a pivotal and even 'constructive' role. Since the chapter on the covenant of grace precedes his christology, Bavinck's account of Christ functions mainly within this covenantal framework. For Bavinck, what stands in the forefront is the fact that the Son of God became incarnate because of sin, rather than that he became flesh in order to elevate the nature of man. However, we have already seen how important the broader context of the incarnation is for

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[111] Cf. 2.2.5.

[112] Cf. 2.2.5.

[113] Cf. 4.4.2.

Bavinck. The incarnation stands in the context of a) God's very Trinitarian being; b) the creation and particularly the creation of man and c) the history of revelation. Therefore the incarnation functions in the broader context of God's communicability. In this sense it 'exceeds its occasion', since it does not only refer to man's guilt, but primarily to God's glorious and giving being, which surrounds the fallen situation of humankind. In this sense, even Bavinck does have an account of elevation through the incarnation, although he opposes the term. The only reason why he opposes that term is in fact that it reminds him of the extrinsicist view (which he himself refers to as 'Roman') that something 'supernatural' is added to a supposedly natural account of humanity, while he wishes to emphasise the ongoing and increasing communication of God in nature and history – which again comes very close to Milbank's integralist motifs.[114]

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[114] Syd Hielema has a keen eye for this elevatory character in Bavinck's work. Like the current study, he stresses the fact that the incarnation for Bavinck exceeds its occasion (he calls it 'the eschatological character of redemption'), since it functions within the framework of God's triune being. S. Hielema, *Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption* (Th. D. Thesis, Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, 1998), 89-90 and particularly chapter 4, 120-199. Hielema challenges the dominant interpretations of Bavinck by Eugene Heideman, Cornelis Veenhof and John Bolt, which consider 'grace restores nature' to be the central theme in Bavinck's work. Although I would still be quite content with the old description, I value Hielema's observation of the exceeding character of redemption, albeit that this excess should not be considered exclusively forwards ('eschatological'), but also backwards, and therefore, in fact 'upwards'. The current study also emphasises the connecting principle of the triune divine being, which is communicated both in nature and grace, and it therefore builds on and develops the observations already made by commentators like Hielema in *Eschatological Understanding* and Eglinton in *Trinity and Organism*.

Likewise, this study values Brian Mattson's emphasis on the eschatological character of Bavinck's anthropology. With Mattson, I see a deep and important 'connective logic' between nature and grace which lies in a discourse of elevation and glorification. We seem to differ, however, on where the most basic dimension of this logic must be located in Bavinck. In my view, Mattson sees the covenant of works too exclusively as the factor that keeps nature and grace together. In my reading, this role is rather fulfilled by Bavinck's classical theological discourse of the all-encompassing unifying view of 'divine being' that is communicated in nature as well as in grace. For this reason, I referred to the language of the covenant of works as being rather 'superfluous' in chapter 3 above. B. G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*.

What is the 'most basic rationale' of Bavinck's theology? In distinguishing a 'central theme' in Bavinck's work, one must mention also the contribution of Ron Gleason, who has suggested that it is the mystical union with Christ. Without detracting from

The uneasiness felt by some of Bavinck's interpreters lies in the fact that he uses these two 'languages' in his *Dogmatics*: on the one hand the incarnation functions within the classic Reformed framework of the covenant of grace, which is unproblematic for them, and on the other hand it functions in an ontological participatory framework, which they find – unsurprisingly – disturbing. Bavinck's supplementing of the participatory starting point with the more biblically oriented framework of the covenant is entirely in line with a more general tendency of his work: for Bavinck, metaphysical conceptuality is always on speaking terms with biblical imagery. In this respect there is an important difference over against Milbank. Although he too now and then tries to connect biblical-theological lines with metaphysical discussions, this has a different character. For him, the bible in fact often only 'illustrates' what was already contained in his ontological speculations.[115]

It is therefore no surprise that Milbank's account of the incarnation – which can be found scattered throughout his work – stands in a somewhat different context than it does in Bavinck. For Milbank, Christ is in fact an 'answer' to a 'different question'. Again, Milbank's theological narration is a different story than the one Bavinck wants to tell. In his anti-Kantian and anti-Scotistic post-secular project, he happily welcomes in Christ a site of the 'obliteration of boundaries'. Christ brings about a new ontological state for the Creation: 'the causing of a human creature directly to subsist in a divine hypostasis', which results in 'the utter fusion of the finite with the infinite

the importance of this theme in Bavinck's christology, I would suggest that it can hardly count as *the* central theme in his work, since it is always surrounded by Bavinck's trinitarian ontology, which is in fact much more concisely articulated in his repeated emphasis that 'grace renews and restores nature'. Christology and even 'union with Christ' is not the place where Bavinck's theology finds its rest. In the end, the whole quest for a 'central motif' – analogous to the misguided nineteenth-century search for a 'central dogma', most notably in John Calvin's theology – should be kept at bay and is of relative importance for interpreting a theological oeuvre. R. N. Gleason, *The Centrality of the Unio Mystica*.

[115] In Milbank's work we sometimes encounter phrases like 'The New Testament is for this reason right to view…', which indicate that the bible for him does not speak as a natural authority and norm (which is 'beyond right or wrong' and simply to be accepted), but expresses something of a very respectable and important opinion. Even the voice and the teaching of the apostles can be 'assessed'. For this quote see *The Word Made Strange*, 223-224.

(though not the other way around)'.[116] In this way, Christ seems to come close to an 'ontological device', a danger that his theology does not manage to avoid altogether. Milbank somewhere describes the incarnation as producing a 'proliferation of sacred sites', which almost sounds as if Christ is a divine-human 'plant' that produces the sacred. Christ functions as 'the answer' to our current problem of divine-human mediation.[117]

In the end, however, such a judgement would miss the point Milbank wants to make. The focus of his argument is that Christ is not a 'fetishizable object', but primarily a 'mode of being' in which we participate.[118] Milbank does not give a pure description of 'who Christ is', but is aware that any description of Christ is linked to the practice of the church, his body, and therefore of the constellation of signs that Christ brings into this world.[119] Typically postmodern as it may sound, this emphasis is clearly rooted in the New Testament writings with their account of the ongoing work and 'presence' of Christ in and through the early Christian community.

As was made clear in chapter 4, Milbank's account of Christ constantly inclines more to a monophysite than a duophysite standpoint. Although he usually quickly corrects his own language when he realises that he stands on dangerous ground (at least within Christian orthodoxy), his preference is clear.[120] This is quite understandable, since Milbank's quest is not for a nuanced christology, but for a post-secular theological language. Separating the two natures of Christ all too strictly sounds to Milbank as giving in to a secular standpoint concerning what we can say about a supposedly pure human nature, without any relation with the divine. In his quest for imagining a position beyond the secular, Milbank as we have seen finds different symbols in the Christian tradition, which he exploits. In his oeuvre he 'experiments' with what he calls theological transcendentals which in one

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[116] Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 63. That this at least sounds at odds with the Chalcedonian creed was observed above in 4.4.2.

[117] For the 'proliferation' quote, see Milbank, *Truth in Aquinas*, 69; for Christ as the answer to divine-human mediation in the context of the history of Israel, see Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, chapter 5, 'A Christological Poetics'.

[118] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 148. Cf. 4.4.2.

[119] Although commentators tend to contrast Milbank's work with that of 'fellow RO-theologian' Graham Ward, his emphasis on Christ as a mode of being is highly similar to Ward's 'postmodern' christology in *Christ and Culture*. G. Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[120] An example of this is given in 4.4.2.

word articulate a divine-human reality.[121] This is the case with 'the social' as an ecclesial reality, 'the gift' as the divine-human economy of exchange, with the Word (as *verbum* or *factum*) that is God and that is simultaneously constitutive for creation, and also with the Eastern Christian concept of *Sophia* as a uniting principle of divine-human wisdom. Christ, with his two natures united in one person, in fact also 'functions' along the theoretical lines of Milbank's quest.

In this context as well the creative force of Milbank's work has to be taken seriously and kept in honour. Milbank really does manage to allow Christ to figure in a postmodern context in which the search for an embodied experience of the divine is a deep and widespread cultural longing.[122] However, once more this study finds that Bavinck's account – and this seems to be a repeating pattern in the discussion – represents the most nuanced voice. At least, it is Bavinck's view that captures all of the decisive elements within the patristic tradition as described in chapter 2. When we consider how the Christian tradition wrote its biblical narratives of Israel, Christ and the Church within a participatory framework, Bavinck works within the same cross-shaped tension which Andrew Louth suggests the fathers to have been moving in. As we saw, Louth speaks of an unresolved tension between ascent and descent in the patristic writings.[123] On the one hand humanity as image of God is made for union with the divine and therefore finds itself in a constant longing to return to God. Yet on the other hand the incarnation, God's descent into the humble fallen state of mankind, offers the route we all have to follow. The double movement therefore consists in an ascent of the soul through the descent of the incarnate Word.

This takes us back to the discussion of sin. Neither in Scripture nor in the church fathers is sin simply 'something to be forgotten about'. The reality we are invited to enter in the incarnation does not consist of somehow escaping our bodily and sinful existence, but of going with Christ into the depths of this fallen state. Rather than something to be forgotten about, sin is something that has to be gone through, faced and confessed as a reality that is bigger than us. Bavinck's statements about the 'new rule' that is installed after the world is fallen in sin and given over to the Mediator is perhaps best and most famously

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[121] See 4.4.3.

[122] For the same christological approach, cf. Ward, *Christ and Culture*.

[123] See 2.2.5.

articulated by Leonard Cohen: 'There is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in.'[124] As fallen creatures, we need to face our 'crack'. With Christ, as Augustine would say, we follow the way of humility within the realm of sin and death. And even the risen Lord, being victorious over death, still bears the wounds of the cross.[125]

Bavinck and Milbank differ when it comes to the role of sin and therefore the context in which the incarnation functions. However, they are united in the view that Christ brought a mode of being that is neither purely described by restoration from sin nor purely by elevation, but which is both. It 'exceeds its occasion' (Milbank) since it stands in the broader framework of God's communicability (Bavinck). For both theologians, the incarnation is 'fitting' within the broader realm of God's workings in creation and revelation. God's answer to sin in the incarnation, although it bears the marks of sin, is not determined by sin. It is determined by life, eternal life, which is God's very being.

The incarnation therefore welcomes the human being into the divine life, not by moving away from the realm of the body, but by entering it with all its

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[124] Leonard Cohen in his song *Anthem*. The entire chorus of the song runs as follows: 'Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in'. In an interview, Cohen importantly comments: ''Ring the bells that still can ring': they're few and far between, but you can find them. 'Forget your perfect offering', that is the hang-up that you're gonna work this thing out. Because we confuse this idea and we've forgotten the central myth of our culture which is the expulsion from the garden of Eden. This situation does not admit of solution of perfection. This is not the place where you make things perfect, neither in your marriage, nor in your work, nor anything, nor your love of God, nor your love of family or country. The thing is imperfect. And worse, there is a crack in everything that you can put together, physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind. But that's where the light gets in, and that's where the resurrection is and that's where the return, that's where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things.' http://www.leonardcohen-prologues.com/anthem.htm (last accessed 1 February 2014).
[125] John 20:24-27; cf. the image of Christ and the Lamb in Rev. 1:18, 5:6. To be sure, this notion is not overlooked by Milbank, who even mentions it explicitly in *The Word made Strange*, 139. In construing a Christology in linguistic terms, he says about Christ that 'to be a sign for us all, he must pass through death, since our signs speak only death; but to signify absolutely for us he must also re-define the sign of language as life, as eternal *logos* in the resurrection.' Therefore, Christ, as a constellation of signs, 'allows to be incorporated into his own person ugly constructions which in their new context assume a different appearance'. Christ, the crucified and risen, signifies a reality of death within the context of resurrection.

pain, hardships and struggle. It has to bear its cross and die. It reaches heaven by staying consequently on earth. This is also the case for the idiom of *scientia* and *sapientia* which we encountered in Augustine in chapter 2. *Scientia*, the worldly and temporary realm of knowledge, is united in Christ with *sapientia*, the eternal unchanging realm of wisdom. By clinging to Christ we progress from *scientia* to *sapientia*, but not by leaving the bodily behind somewhere. Since God chose to reveal himself in the flesh, this is the realm that we must adhere to faithfully. As Augustine says, Christ is the *right* that is the *bodily* mediation with the divine, from which we must not withdraw, in which we have to remain.

5.3.5 Conclusions

This section began by noting the Reformed uneasiness with ontological participation. One of the Reformed tradition's main problems with participation is the fusing of ontology and soteriology, which it considers to be diminishing the seriousness of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, the fact that this criticism is felt by Reformed commentators of not only Milbank's but also Bavinck's work makes the suggestion that their 'ontological participatory' ways of speaking are closely related even more compelling.

This study, however, cannot but conclude that both Bavinck and Milbank in this way develop the patristic discourse in which soteriology and ontology are deeply connected, as it is consistently rendered by Bavinck with his focus on the unity of the being of God which is communicated. It therefore does not find it theologically disturbing, but in fact a fortunate outcome when theological language is 'not clear' about the distinction between ontology and soteriology, or about the difference between nature and grace. It keeps any discourse of 'being' filled dynamic and relational, and it keeps salvation (literally) grounded and therefore 'earthed'.

Not only Milbank, but also Bavinck has an account of the incarnation in which it 'exceeds its occasion'. It points not only towards sin, but primarily towards its context of the divine unfolding of glory from creation to eschaton. As we saw, an important difference between Bavinck and Milbank is that in Bavinck the participatory language is supplemented – though not eliminated – by covenantal language. This gives his theological story, and particularly the context of the incarnation, a more 'biblical' character. It takes his account of the incarnation out of the sphere of ontological speculation (in which it mainly

functions in Milbank) and into the biblical and patristic way of speaking – which, admittedly, does provide space for ontological speculation.

Much comes down to the differences in terms of where sin functions in their theologies. For Milbank, the incarnation functions mainly along the lines of a post-secular narration, which is a creative task of his theology that this study wishes to honour. His account is not simply 'untraditional', but it underemphasises something of the tradition that is more prominent in Bavinck. Theologically, more must be said than that sin is 'to be forgotten about'. The truth of the double biblical account of 'dying and living with Christ' has been felt in the experience of the Church throughout the ages. The way of the body, of suffering, the way of humility has been acknowledged as conformity with the incarnated Christ as well as unification with the divine life through him. The language of both 'reparation' and 'elevation' (and thus both soteriology and ontology) is therefore needed in a nuanced account of the incarnation.

5.4 Participation as humble ontology

5.4.1 The adoration of the Mystic Lamb

A visit to the Belgian city of Ghent offers one the opportunity to behold the majestic, world-famous work of the van Eyck brothers, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, finished in 1432 (see front cover). For safety reasons it has been removed from its original liturgical setting as an altarpiece in the Vijd-chapel and is now located in a cramped corner of the church, safely protected by bullet-proof glass. Even though this multi-panelled work is nowadays exhibited like a prisoner, it still communicates its overwhelming, deeply religious vision to the visitor.

The work tells the story of salvation history and focuses on Christ as its centre. The upper level of panels contains the heavenly realm and the lower one the earthly. Above in the middle we find the elevated Christ (or God the Father, or even the Trinity, since the van Eyck brothers left an interesting ambiguity here), flanked by Mary and John the Baptist. They are in turn flanked by angels, singing and playing music. On the far left and right corners of the upper level we then find Adam and Eve, as our fallen ancestors. The centre of the work to which all the attention is attracted is located on the large

middle panel of the lower register, which shows the adoration of the lamb that is slain, a reference to the Book of Revelation. This image is surrounded by different groups of saints: apostles, martyrs, prophets and, on the further panels, knights, pilgrims, judges and hermits. Right through the middle runs a vertical 'line' from the divine heavenly centre (the *deësis*) through the dove (the Spirit) and the Lamb (Christ) to the bottom of the middle piece, which contains a picture of the fountain of life, from which the water runs 'out of the image'.

In this way, the work contains a vision that resonates with the patristic participatory vision of unity with the divine through Christ, a story of elevation through restoration which does not exclude human history, but interprets it as tending towards it. It contains a story that stands emphatically in the context of the Fall of Adam and Eve, but is still all about the communication of divine glory which overwhelms the power of evil. However, the pivotal feature of the work has been lost since it was removed from its liturgical setting. The work is not meant as a spectacle, as 'something to watch and think about', but as something to participate in. The very central line which represents the divine life that runs from the heavenly realm through Christ has to spill over the border of the painting onto the very altar that is missing as its necessary context. It is the daily celebration of the eucharist, and therefore it is also *we* who are missing from the painting. We are nowadays confined to *watch* it and not to *participate* in it, as it was clearly meant to be.

Participation is about heavenly realities, communicated in the created, as is clear even from a first glance at the *Mystic Lamb*, with its beautiful bright colours, robes and particularly its overwhelmingly green pastures and hills. But this painting also clearly articulates how participation in this heavenly reality involves an earthly history of pain, martyrdom and struggle. It involves a pilgrimage and a quest for redemption and veneration, which finds its centre in the Lamb of God.

5.4.2 Humble ontology

What does this study render? It is hardly a surprise by now that implicitly or explicitly it has moved towards an argument in favour of a nuanced account of participation to be cherished also in the Reformed tradition. If this perhaps renders the Reformed tradition less typically 'Reformed' and more 'Catholic', this is an outcome that is warmly welcomed.

As Richard Muller's analysis of the Reformed Scholastic sources already makes clear, there is no clear ontological direction in which Reformed theology typically steered, but more a metaphysical eclecticism.[126] Bavinck interestingly fits within this scheme, since he too does not adhere clearly to a school of metaphysical thought, although he in particular leans heavily on Augustine's and Thomas' views on the way created being is analogically related to the divine. Univocity of being is not only Milbank's 'enemy', but is also clearly denounced by Bavinck. That Bavinck's theology has been found to be so highly participatory is at least an interesting and suggestive observation for the question as to whether or not some form of participation can have a place in Reformed theology.

We have seen how similarly *and* how differently Bavinck and Milbank in practice enflesh their theologies, both rooted in an ontological, participatory discourse. Bavinck is always the weighing, careful and nuanced one, and Milbank the visionary, daring and speculative one. And although Milbank is more complicated as to the style and content of his thought, Bavinck with the constant and predominant voice which nevertheless has important 'subtler voices' beneath the surface is in fact far more difficult to interpret. Both approaches and styles are needed and have their value in the Christian tradition. The hope I treasure is that this sense has been kept alive in my study, even though in this final chapter, particularly Milbank was subjected to some critical remarks. The reason probably is that this chapter explicitly honoured 'consonance with the tradition' as a criterion that cannot completely avoid giving a somewhat greater value to the most nuanced and careful voice than to the creative and speculative voice. In the end, however, my conviction is that both voices need each other dearly.

Why is it possible and even desirable for participation to have a place in Reformed theology? What already struck us in chapter 2 is that the concept of participation and its reception in the Christian tradition does not denote human elevation to a 'superhuman' level, and therefore does not function as an arrogant way of speaking which seeks 'the things that are too high for me'

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[126] See 2.2.7. Muller does, however, stress the Scotistic, univocal tendency which was derived through the adoption of Suárez' work as a standard text of metaphysics. This study leaves the discussion of the 'analogical' versus a 'univocal' tendency amongst the Reformed sources to others, but follows Muller's general observation of a Reformed 'eclecticism'.

(Psalm 131). It was, analogous with the concept of deification, observed as an expression of deepest humility and gratitude. This notion is especially emphasised in the work of Milbank, and to a lesser degree in Bavinck, as it was focussed on our knowing. With our knowing, we do not 'own' something, we are in no way 'in command', but we just point vaguely towards a promise which lies in the divine source and end of everything. As Milbank often emphasises: we exist in receiving and passing on. I cannot see why such a notion should not be fully embraced by Reformed theology, with its similarly theocentric and therefore also humble attitude.

Furthermore, particularly the traditional participatory emphasis on the incarnation seems to open up a way of thinking and of spiritual life that fits the Reformed attitude with its christological focus. It takes the reality of the fall, of sin and evil, seriously and instead of pushing them out of sight, it embraces them in a divine movement of descent and ascent. But the incarnation should not be narrowed to nothing more than an action of divine repair occasioned by sin. Bavinck and Milbank are fully consonant with the tradition when they stress that the context of the incarnation is the glorious unfolding of divine being.

Occupying yourself as a theologian with the theme of participation is a humbling experience. It is, of course, an ultimate topic which implies that you 'practice what you preach'. As Bavinck would say: if you want to have truth, you have to be truthful. To express consonance here with especially the Reformed tradition, fearful as it is to place any salvatory act or ground *in* the human person (and thus uneasy as it is with the notion of co-working with the divine), this study found a striking and humbling account of participation in the fathers of the church, and particularly in Augustine: we are not able to fly out of the sinful reality, and especially not on our own wings. We need the mediator to cling to, to hold fast onto him and never let him go. We need the strength and the stability of the divine-human mediator because we ourselves are so feeble and weak.

Therefore, occupying yourself as a theologian with participation is not developing an astonishing ontology that solves all the intellectual problems that may ever exist between our conception of God and of the world. It is primarily being absorbed by the mystery, the beauty and the joy of the divine life, and therefore being humbled, since you do not possess anything of these great matters, and just stand open-handed before God.

Samenvatting

Participatie en mededeelbaarheid: Herman Bavinck en John Milbank over de relatie tussen God en de wereld

1. Introductie

De aanleiding om het over de relatie tussen God en de wereld te hebben is de recente agendering van het concept 'participatie' door de Britse theologische stroming *Radical Orthodoxy*. Theologen binnen deze stroming zijn van mening dat alleen een theologie die denkt in de lijn van het Platoons-Christelijke concept van de 'participatie van het geschapene in God' voorbij het seculiere denken kan komen. Participatie is volgens hen een onmisbare manier om alle dingen in relatie tot God te kunnen denken.

Verschillende gereformeerde theologen gingen in gesprek met *Radical Orthodoxy*, waarbij het centrale concept participatie zowel weerklank vond als tegenspraak opriep. De centrale vraag was steeds: doet het denken over de relatie tussen God en de wereld in termen van participatie wel recht aan het fundamentele onderscheid tussen schepper en schepsel? Kortom, is participatie een welkom concept in de gereformeerde theologische traditie of zou je daarmee iets gevaarlijks binnenhalen dat wezensvreemd is aan de gereformeerde voorzichtigheid met betrekking tot het spreken over God? Deze studie wil dit gesprek verder en dieper voeren. Daartoe worden twee representanten van beide 'tradities' gekozen: John Milbank als voorman van *Radical Orthodoxy* en Herman Bavinck als een geschikte representant van de gereformeerde, specifiek neo-calvinistische traditie. Ook wordt een apart hoofdstuk gewijd aan de vraag wat participatie precies betekent en hoe het functioneerde in de theologische traditie.

Daarmee stelt deze studie *ontologische* vragen. Het is de visie van deze studie dat ook de protestantse traditie, hoewel vaak wars van metafysica, impliciet of expliciet ontologische belangen heeft en ontologische concepten hanteert en dat het dus zinvol is deze vragen te stellen. Omdat veel van wat er in dit boek gebeurt neerkomt op een 'vergelijking' dan wel een 'gesprek' tussen Herman Bavinck en John Milbank, is het van belang om te beseffen dat dit hermeneutisch geen eenvoudige zaak is. Milbank is met een heel ander 'project' bezig dan Bavinck destijds. Zijn werk is een tamelijk chaotische,

postmoderne berg van essayistische fragmenten, terwijl Bavinck een nette geordende klassieke *Dogmatiek* schreef. De twintigste eeuw met al z'n historische en filosofische verschuivingen die tussen hen in ligt, creëert een zeer verschillende context van denken over 'God en de wereld'. In de lijn van met name Gadamer betoogt deze studie dat juist het verschil tussen beiden gemunt moet worden. De verschillen en de afstand moeten niet weggepoetst, maar juist voelbaar worden gemaakt. Tegelijk speelt het theologisch spreken van beiden zich af in een grotere en gedeelde verstaanshorizon, namelijk die van de klassieke christelijke theologische traditie. Er zullen genoeg momenten zijn waarop hun vragen én hun antwoorden met elkaar resoneren of dissoneren om een eerlijk en zinvol gesprek op te leveren.

2. Participatie

Om een zinvol gesprek over participatie te voeren aan de hand van Bavinck en Milbank geeft deze studie eerst een overzicht van de geschiedenis en implicaties van het concept. Het gaat daarbij om veel meer dan een helder afgebakende definitie. Waar dit hoofdstuk naar zoekt is vooral een weergave van de 'taalfamilie' waartoe participatie behoort.

De geschiedenis van het concept participatie begint bij Plato. Plato is vaak dualistisch geïnterpreteerd, als denker die een wig creëerde tussen de wereld van de Ideeën en de zichtbare, materiële wereld. Zijn denken kan echter heel goed geïnterpreteerd worden als een vorm van verlangen naar het hoogste. Aangezien alle dingen meer of minder participeren in de Ideeën, zetten ze ons op het spoor van hun meest zuivere en intense manifestatie. Plato is dan ook veelal niet zozeer gelezen als iemand die een afkeer van de gewone werkelijkheid verkondigde, maar als iemand die vanuit verliefdheid op het alledaagse de ziel op het spoor van het hoogste zet.

Belangrijke veranderingen onderging de receptie van Plato onder andere via het werk van Plotinus. Plato's ideeënleer wordt in zijn denken sterk gevat in de dynamiek van het 'uitgaan van' en 'terugkeren tot' het Ene. Het Ene kenmerkt zich vooral door ultieme productiviteit en is sterk gekleurd door de Aristotelische begrippen *energeia* en *energein*, die later weer in Thomas' opvatting van Gods zijn als *actus purus* zullen terugkeren. Belangrijk zowel voor Plotinus als voor latere christelijke interpreten is zijn onderscheid tussen *energeia tes ousias* en *energeia ek tes ousias*. Dit zorgde voor een beeld van het goddelijke dat bestaat uit één grote stroom aan productiviteit, maar waarin

tegelijk wel een onderscheid tussen het goddelijke en de wereld gecreëerd wordt. God is ultiem 'gevend', maar wel 'onveranderlijk'. Vanuit het neoplatonisme ontwikkelde zich een theurgisch Platonisme, dat met name in het Oosterse christendom invloedrijk werd. Het religieuze leven wordt hier beschouwd als participatie in de goddelijke *energeiai*, 'werkingen'. Deze *energeiai* zijn de noodzakelijke manifestaties van de goddelijke *ousia*, het wezen van God, dat onzegbaar en onkenbaar is en waaraan de gelovige geen deel heeft. Een belangrijk en invloedrijk onderscheid dat verder gemaakt werd in het neoplatonisme is het onderscheid tussen 'puur zijn' (*to einai*) en 'afgeleid zijn' (*to on*), dat ook terugkeerde in Thomas' denken over God en de wereld.

Dit participatorische denken vormde het vaarwater van de kerkvaders. Veel christelijke theologie sloot naadloos aan bij de Platoonse inzichten: de mens is als beeld van God gemaakt om God te zoeken en te vinden en deel te hebben aan zijn goddelijk leven. Er zijn echter verschillende punten te noemen waarin christelijke denkers radicaal verschilden van heidense Platonisten. In de eerste plaats zorgde de voorstelling dat deze wereld is 'geschapen uit niets' (*creatio ex nihilo*) voor een breuk met het Platoonse denken. De wereld is geen noodzakelijke emanatie van het goddelijke, maar een wereld die gegeven en gewild is door een Ander. Deze wereld bestaat bij de gratie van communicatie van goddelijk zijn, maar wie of wat communiceert en ook het waarom van de communicatie blijft een ondoordringbaar mysterie. In de tweede plaats was het de triniteit die zorgde voor een christelijke grammatica die fundamenteel verschilde van de Platoonse. Niet 'eenheid' is het ultieme woord voor God, maar iets 'voorbij eenheid' en daarmee 'onkenbaarheid'. Dit zorgde voor een sterk negatieve theologie: wil je God leren kennen, dan moet je ont-kennen. Tegelijk is het schepsel, via het geschapene, op het spoor van God gezet. 'Als je liefhebt, participeer je in God, want God is liefde'. Zonder de bron te kennen hebben we er wel deel aan. In de derde plaats wijst deze studie op de rol van de incarnatie. Met name via een kijkje in het werk van Augustinus wordt duidelijk hoezeer de incarnatie een breuklijn met het Platonisme betekende. In zijn denken functioneert een participatorische ontologie, waarin al het tijdelijke zich uitstrekt naar het eeuwige. De incarnatie is echter het punt dat de Platonisten missen: 'Ze zien het vaderland wel in de verte liggen, maar weten niet hoe het moet worden bereikt'. De noodzaak van de Middelaar, de noodzaak van Christus betekent voor Augustinus de noodzaak om hem te

volgen in de weg van de lichamelijkheid, de weg van nederigheid en lijden en via deze weg rust en stabiliteit voor de ziel te vinden. Deze studie volgt de analyse van Andrew Louth, die het denken van de kerkvaders in een spanning ziet staan tussen 'opklimming tot God via de ziel' en 'afdaling en nederigheid via de incarnatie'. Zo is ook de incarnatie zelf een teken met twee kanten: Gods weg om het probleem van de zonde te 'repareren' staat in de grotere context van de communicatie van zijn glorie, waartoe de mens van meet af aan bestemd was.

Bij Thomas van Aquino is participatie van het geschapene in het goddelijke zijn een belangrijk gegeven, al is er veel discussie over de precieze implicaties. Als Thomas verschillende vormen van participatie bespreekt, blijkt de belangrijkste vorm voor de relatie tussen schepper en schepsel de participatie van een effect in zijn oorzaak te zijn. Het effect ligt, op neo-platoonse wijze, dus niet buiten de oorzaak. Allerlei onderscheidingen en samenstellingen die voor het creatuurlijke zijn gelden, moeten bij Thomas worden doorgestreept om over goddelijk zijn te kunnen spreken. Geschapen wezens bestaan altijd uit een compositie van geactualiseerd zijn en zijn in potentie, *esse* en *essentia*, terwijl dat bij God samenvalt. Zijn zijn is volledig geactualiseerd: *actus purus*. Strikt genomen komt het zijn (*esse*) alleen God toe, en schepselen kunnen daar alleen maar nederig en op afgeleide wijze in delen. Thomas' denken in termen van participatie gaat gelijk op met zijn denken over God in termen van analogie. Als we een eigenschap aan God toekennen is het nog maar de vraag of we begrijpen wat we daarmee bedoelen. Als we God eigenschappen toekennen, benoemen we zijn volmaaktheden die slechts op beperkte wijze in de schepping uitvloeien. Godskennis is heel dubbel bij Thomas: je kent een bron die zozeer zichzelf communiceert dat hij daarmee tegelijk volstrekt voorbij onze mogelijkheden tot kennen reikt. God is zo kenbaar dat hij onkenbaar is.

Ook al wordt Thomas vaak als eindpunt van de Platoons-Christelijke participatorische traditie besproken, toch lopen de lijnen nog verder door, zij het marginaler en gefragmenteerder. In dit hoofdstuk worden twee figuren uit de Protestantse traditie voor het voetlicht gehaald, om te laten zien dat het participatie-denken ook daar niet definitief verdwenen is na de middeleeuwen. *Johannes Calvijn* gebruikt een sterk participatorisch gekleurde taal als hij spreekt over de eenheid tussen mensen en God in Christus. Met name wanneer hij het avondmaal bespreekt neigt hij naar een discours van

mystieke eenheid, geënt op de eucharistische theologie van de kerkvaders. Anders echter dan bijvoorbeeld bij Augustinus en Bernard van Clairvaux staat niet de *eros*, het actieve verlangen naar God centraal, maar Gods liefde voor ons en onze 'passiviteit' in dat proces. Een heel ander voorbeeld van participatiedenken in een Protestantse context is *Jonathan Edwards*. Bij hem wordt dit denken ingezet in een theologie die zich verweert tegen het rationalisme en atomisme van de Verlichting. Edwards' ontologie wordt gekenmerkt door schoonheid en harmonie, waarbij hij de relaties waaruit de geschapen werkelijkheid bestaat ziet als een afspiegeling van goddelijk zijn. Edwards' denken is ervan doortrokken dat de mysterieuze pracht van de schepping iets zegt over hoe God in zijn wezen is. 'Goddelijke communicatie' vormt het hart van alles wat Edwards wil zeggen over de schepping.

Door een - uiteraard beperkt - overzicht te geven hoopt deze studie in dit hoofdstuk meer helderheid te hebben gegeven over waar participatie in de traditie voor staat. Het concept heeft geen heldere afgebakende betekenis die overal hetzelfde is. Belangrijker is het te zien dat participatie tot een taalfamilie behoort. Participatie kan niet zonder zusterconcepten als deificatie als het gaat om het doel van de mens, *privatio boni* als het gaat om de aard van de zonde en analogie als het gaat om de relatie tussen het schepsel en God. De wereld wordt geplaatst in de dynamiek van een *exitus* uit en een *reditus* tot God. Favoriete beelden zijn die van de zon en haar stralen en God als een overvloeiende bron van goedheid en zijn. Als het gaat om kennisleer wordt de nadruk gelegd op het verlangen van het menselijk subject naar het gekende. Sterker nog: er moet een bepaalde afstemming zijn van de kenner op het gekende. De participatorische ontologie kan gerust 'theocentrisch' genoemd worden. Als je tot een beschrijving van geschapen zijnden wilt komen zul je altijd terechtkomen bij de constatering dat in God hun eigenlijke zijn gelegen is. Participatie staat altijd in het teken van een nederig spreken over het schepsel en een groots spreken over God die er de bron en de gever van is.

3. Herman Bavinck

Om Bavincks visie op de relatie tussen God en de wereld te verhelderen benaderen we hem aan de hand van de volgorde van thema's zoals hij die geordend heeft in zijn Gereformeerde Dogmatiek. Om te beginnen bevatten Bavincks prolegomena, tegen de Kantiaanse trend van zijn tijd in, een pleidooi voor metafysica, waarin 'godskennis' en 'waarheid' centraal staan in de

theologie. Dit duidt direct op een Platoonse trek in zijn denken: theologie behelst het 'na-denken der gedachten Gods'. Ook 'eenheid' staat bij hem hoog in het vaandel. De pluraliteit in deze wereld is afkomstig van God en heeft in Hem haar doel. In God vinden de dingen hun harmonie en integratie.

Epistemologisch maakt Bavinck gebruik van drie theologische *principia*: het *principium essendi* (God), het *principium cognoscendi externum* (Christus, de Schrift) en het *principium cognoscendi internum* (de Geest, het geloof). Deze studie wijst erop dat deze onderscheidingen, die er helder uitzien, in de praktijk soms belangrijk genoeg door elkaar lopen. Hoewel Bavinck bijvoorbeeld helder wil onderscheiden tussen Gods zijn en onze kennis van God, blijken de manieren waarop godskennis tot ons komt toch vooral 'voorlopig' en 'incidenteel' te zijn. Wat voorop staat is de ontologische beweging 'van God tot God' waarin al ons kennen is opgenomen. Gods zijn omvat ook ons kennen.

De kennis van God, die Hij via zijn openbaring verspreidt, moet niet buiten de mens blijven staan, maar moet tot in alle vezels van de werkelijkheid doordringen. Zo investeert Bavinck veel energie in het werken met de verhouding tussen object en subject, tussen 'buiten' en 'binnen'. Het is voor hem een wonder dat innerlijk en het uiterlijk zo goed met elkaar corresponderen. Een wonder dat gelegen is in de *Logos* van God die beide 'werelden' schiep en zo de organische verbinding tussen beide garandeert. Bavinck gaat zover om onze rede te beschouwen als een goddelijk licht, dat weliswaar niet gelijk is aan de *Logos* van God, maar er wel in participeert. Net als bij het onderscheid tussen de drie *principia* wordt ook het onderscheid tussen subject en object voortdurend theologisch gedeconstrueerd: het verbindende principe van de *Logos* relativeert een te strikt onderscheid. Hat gaat Bavinck om de dieperliggende harmonie tussen beide. Ze moeten op elkaar betrokken zijn.

Ook in Bavincks opvatting van wat openbaring is laat hij verschillende benaderingen naast elkaar staan. Enerzijds is het heel belangrijk dat Gods openbaring van buitenaf krachtens Gods wil tot ons komt en dat het geen immanente kracht in de kosmos is, zoals de denkers van de Romantiek meenden. De grens tussen het natuurlijke en het bovennatuurlijke moet niet worden uitgewist en in een vorm van monisme eindigen. Anderzijds strijdt Bavinck tegen het dualisme dat natuurlijk en bovennatuurlijk te scherp scheidt. Het bovennatuurlijke is volgens Bavinck zelfs de essentie van alles

wat wij natuurlijk noemen. Zo deconstrueert hij, redenerend vanuit de alomtegenwoordigheid van God, wederom een onderscheid waar hij tegelijk wel mee werkt. Of het nu om 'natuurlijke' of 'bovennatuurlijke' openbaring, dan wel 'algemene' of 'bijzondere' openbaring gaat: altijd zoekt Bavinck de eenheid van Gods zijn die wordt gecommuniceerd in de onderscheidenheid der dingen.

Bavincks spreken over de Schrift lijkt soms een wereld op zichzelf te worden, een baken van autoriteit en zekerheid binnen de kaders van het *principium externum*. Toch worden ook daar de gestelde grenzen overschreden: ten eerste moet je als gelovige '*in* de Schrift leven' om hem als autoriteit te kunnen aanvaarden. Ten tweede staat de Schrift principieel in de grotere stroom van de beweging 'van God, tot God' en vervult zo een rol in Gods mededeelbaarheid. Overal spoelt zo 'het zijn van God' over de grenzen van de gebruikte onderscheidingen.

Als Bavinck aan de godsleer begint, valt het al snel op dat hij een grote en constitutieve rol toekent aan de onkenbaarheid van God. Dit is voor hem geen lastig obstakel, maar juist een positief kenmerk dat alle godskennis bepaalt. Juist die onkenbare God is de bron van alles wat is. Ook al werkt Bavinck met het onderscheid tussen mededeelbare en onmededeelbare eigenschappen, toch legt hij zich niet neer bij een strikte scheiding van die twee categorieën. Volstrekt onmededeelbaar kan een eigenschap als 'eeuwigheid' toch niet zijn? Waar hebben we het anders over? En een mededeelbare eigenschap als 'goedheid' zal iets heel anders betekenen wanneer hij op God wordt toegepast dan wanneer we het over een schepsel zeggen. Ondanks de fundamentele kern van onkenbaarheid die ligt in al ons spreken over God is Hij toch 'zelf dat alles wat schepselen aan zijn en leven en geest, aan kennis, heiligheid en gerechtigheid deelachtig zijn.' Instemmend met de Platoons-Christelijke traditie meent Bavinck dat God zelf 'het zijn' is, de volheid van zijn en leven die dus ook niets nodig heeft of begeert of aan verandering onderhevig is.

De triniteit is misschien wel het meest wezenlijke onderdeel van heel Bavincks theologie. Daar komen vrijwel al zijn theologische belangen samen. De triniteit waarborgt het feit dat God niet tegenover de wereld staat als een compleet 'vreemde'. De generatie van de Zoon en de processie van de Geest zijn bron en voorwaarde voor Gods communicatie in de schepping. Bavinck wil niet zover gaan om te stellen dat de wereld met het idee 'God' gegeven is, maar de triniteit drukt wel uit dat God een overvloeiende bron van leven is,

productief, in staat om iets te creëren dat niet puur tegenover hem staat, maar 'in zijn Geest blijft rusten'. Waarom er 'God' is én 'de wereld' (die immers strikt genomen niets toevoegt aan Gods zijn) is voor Bavinck een aanbiddelijk mysterie. Bij de vraag hoe en waarom eeuwigheid overgaat in tijd kunnen we alleen maar verwonderd stilstaan. En om zijn positie haarscherp te onderscheiden van elke notie van 'emanatie uit Gods wezen' benadrukt Bavinck dat schepping alles te maken heeft met de soevereine *wil* van God – als dan maar duidelijk blijft dat zijn wil alles te maken heeft met zijn 'zijn'.

Theologisch gezien is voor Bavinck de mens het meest fascinerende wezen op aarde: volledig aards en volledig hemels tegelijk, een bemiddelend wezen en daarom op zichzelf al een vooruitwijzing naar de incarnatie. Niet zozeer Adam zelf, maar de mensheid in z'n complete ontvouwing in de geschiedenis vormt volgens hem het 'beeld van God'. Adam wees vooruit en stond aan het begin van een pad dat nog gevolgd moest worden. De incarnatie van het Woord van God staat dan ook in de bredere verbanden: in de eerste plaats van de triniteit, die de mogelijkheid van een god-menselijke middelaar opent, in de tweede plaats is er dus de mens, die zelf al in zekere zin een 'vleeswording van God' betekent en in de derde plaats communiceerde God zichzelf in de loop van de geschiedenis van Israël voortdurend aan zijn volk.

Dat betekent niet dat de incarnatie er ook wel gekomen zou zijn 'zonder zonde'. Bavinck legt zonde uit in de klassieke lijn van *privatio boni*, maar kent er wel een zekere constitutieve status aan toe voor de wereld zoals wij die kennen. God wilde de zonde en gebruikt haar om tot een uiteindelijk diepere glorie van zijn naam te komen. Al direct na de zondeval wordt de weg 'door lijden tot heerlijkheid', de weg van Christus, geopenbaard. Ook komt op dit moment in Bavincks theologie pas de notie van het verbond ter sprake. Met name het genadeverbond speelt een grote rol als het gaat om de relatie tussen God en de wereld na de zondeval.

4. John Milbank

Deze studie vat Milbanks werk op als het vertellen van een verhaal van een alternatieve moderniteit, voorbij het seculiere. Een logische plek om te beginnen is dan zijn magnum opus, *Theology and Social Theory*. In dat boek valt Milbank 'het seculiere' aan dat volgens hem a) een ontologie van geweld predikt en b) werkt met de idee van een menselijke ('seculiere') ruimte , los

van het goddelijke. Dit is echter geen 'eeuwige waarheid', maar een actief verbeeld verhaal dat we graag over onszelf vertellen.

Met betrekking tot de eerste karakteristiek bespreekt Milbank tal van denkers die, hoewel ze veelal het beste met de mensheid voorhebben, in hun denken een primair domein van chaos en geweld aannemen dat uiteindelijk de enige ontologische basis van ons bestaan vormt. Wat zij daarmee doen is het vertellen en versterken van de kwaadaardige mythe dat oorlog de 'vader van alle dingen' is. Dit is wat Milbank de 'heidense' of ook wel 'gnostische' trek van de moderniteit noemt: zij verwart de schepping met de zondeval. De christelijke traditie stelt zich daarentegen een wereld voor die gave is van de volheid van goddelijk zijn. Zonde en kwaad zijn niet 'iets' maar slechts beroving van het goede (*privatio boni*). Door het kwaad een ontologische status te geven ben je al op weg de zondeval keer op keer opnieuw uit te voeren.

De andere karakteristiek van het seculiere is dat het ten onrechte doet alsof je voor eens en voor altijd een volledige beschrijving van het eindige kunt geven. Het meent daarbij het oneindige niet nodig te hebben, en houdt zich daarmee aan de grenzen tussen eindig en oneindig die Immanuël Kant stelde. De genealogie van deze karaktertrek van het seculiere gaat echter verder terug. Het was volgens Milbank Duns Scotus die voor het eerst expliciet afstand nam van een participatorische relatie tussen goddelijk zijn en geschapen zijn. Volgens hem was het zijn op dezelfde wijze (univook) van toepassing op God en mens, dus beiden kunnen een plaats toebedeeld krijgen in één univoke 'ontologie'. Op deze manier creëerde hij ruimte voor een kenbaarheid van het eindige die zich liever niet meer wil laten storen door inmenging met het oneindige. De weg van het seculiere denken met zijn inherente essentialisme (dingen hebben een eeuwig vaststaande kenbare 'kern') werd zo geopend.

Over verscheidene lijnen werkt Milbank zijn alternatieve theologische visie uit. In de eerste plaats valt die te vinden in zijn opvattingen over *kennis*. Daarvoor werkt hij met een visie die een veel belangrijkere plek voor de creativiteit van taal inruimt dan in seculiere epistemologie gebruikelijk is. We kunnen dingen niet objectief kennen, los van de stroom, de context waarin zij zich geven en de constitutieve relaties en proporties waarin zij staan. Kennen is een proces van selecteren, verlangen en 'esthetisch geprefereerde patronen' construeren. Het kennende subject wordt bij Milbank van zijn centrale troon

gestoten en verwachtingsvol en nederig geopend naar steeds nieuwe openbaringen van 'betekenis'. In plaats van 'zeker weten' is kennen bij Milbank zo 'verwachtingsvol reizen'.

Verder ontwikkelt Milbank een visie op *handelen* die verder gaat dan dat we maar wat in onzekerheid aanmodderen. Er is volgens hem wel degelijk zoiets als waarheid, zekerheid, stabiliteit en eenheid, maar die is er alleen in God. En al onze aardse goedheden zijn er voor zover ze participeren in die gevende bron. Niet chaos en geweld, maar eeuwige goedheid, waarheid en schoonheid zijn daarom de context van ons handelen. Strikt genomen weten we niet wat wij zijn en wat wij doen. We moeten ons handelen echter niet laten bepalen door de zondige status quo, maar leven vanuit een visioen van volmaaktheid, vrede en harmonie dat ons voortdrijft: God.

Centraal staat in dit denken voor Milbank de *triniteit*: Met de drie-eenheid weet het christendom voorbij de (Platoonse) gedachte te komen dat God pure 'eenheid' voorbij de verscheidenheid van de wereld is en anderzijds voorbij de (heidense) gedachte dat chaos en versplintering de ontologische bron van de dingen is. Met de triniteit zijn we in staat iets 'buiten' God te denken dat toch in hem participeert. Een strikt, kraakhelder onderscheid tussen 'binnen' en 'buiten' God kan zodoende niet meer getrokken worden. 'Binnen' God vinden we in de trinitarische relaties immers al een 'buiten' en we hebben volgens Milbank dan ook strikt genomen niet een aparte 'oeconomische triniteit' nodig om over de wereld te spreken. Schepping bestaat niet uit enige vorm van 'onafhankelijkheid' van God, maar uit een voortdurende stroom van gegeven zijn van God.

Op deze manier probeert Milbank een 'midden' te denken dat in de praktijk lastig te verbeelden is. Een midden tussen theologie en filosofie, tussen natuur en genade dat toch geen water bij de wijn van een van beide 'polen' wil doen. Deze manier van denken noemt hij denken over God en de wereld in termen van 'analogie' of 'paradox'. In tegenstelling tot Hegels dialectiek, waarin voortdurend de twee polen in elkaar opgaan, wil Milbank blijven staan bij een paradox: datgene waarin deze wereld participeert is het 'onparticipeerbare', wat Thomas en Eckhart aanduidden met Gods *esse*. Juist omdat het onparticipeerbaar is (en niet een soort 'univoke' reuzentaart waar je een klein stukje van krijgt), is het een oneindige bron van leven, goedheid en zijn.

Het is begrijpelijk dat in Milbanks zoektocht naar een niet-seculiere taal om zowel over God als de mens te spreken grote aandacht uitgaat naar de incarnatie, waarin God en mens op ultieme wijze samenkomen. Voor Milbank betekent de incarnatie meer dan een 'remedie voor de zonde': ze 'overstijgt haar aanleiding'. De incarnatie brengt een goddelijke doorschijning van het natuurlijke op gang die ervoor zorgt dat al het geschapene sacramenteel geladen wordt. Het is duidelijk dat Milbanks christologische aandacht minder uitgaat naar de onderscheidenheid van de twee naturen van Christus dan naar de eenheid, immers, een scheiding tussen beide opent maar wat gauw de weg naar een seculiere opvatting van wat 'de mens' of wat 'het eindige' is, zonder fundamentele inmenging met het goddelijke. Milbanks belangrijkste motief om de christologie zo te benaderen is dat hij Christus wil benaderen vanuit de kerk, vanuit zijn lichaam, vanuit de nieuwe 'manier van zijn' die zijn komst in gang gezet heeft.

Milbanks werk is zo te beschouwen als een zoektocht naar theologische taal voorbij het seculiere en dus een taal die zowel over het goddelijke als het menselijke spreekt, zonder ze in elkaar over te laten lopen. Het belangrijkste woord waarin dat gebeurt is *verbum* of *logos*, waarin Milbank niet alleen de notie van spreken, maar ook van maken vindt (aangezien Gods 'spreken' het 'maken' van deze wereld betekent). Milbanks werk wil geen theologie zijn die *in abstracto* over God denkt, maar die een visie biedt op wat menselijke culturele productie is in het licht van het goddelijk zijn. Milbank neemt het heel serieus dat God zelf primair productief is, dat Gods zijn bepaald wordt door zijn 'maken' en dat dit niet pas iets is dat in latere instantie bij zijn 'essentie' gevoegd wordt. Zo is ook menselijk maken niet te scheiden van menselijk 'kennen' en 'zijn'. 'Maken is equiprimordiaal met zijn'. Op deze manier is ons maken en produceren dus een participeren in goddelijke creativiteit en zijn.

5. Bespreking

De vraag die in de discussie tussen gereformeerde theologen en RO in de lucht hing, was of het centrale begrip participatie pantheïstische dan wel panentheïstische implicaties heeft. Er was, kortom, zorg over de handhaving van het verschil tussen schepper en schepsel. Dit slothoofdstuk gaat in de eerste plaats in op deze vragen. Hoe gaan Bavinck en Milbank om met de

relatie tussen schepper en schepsel en hoe verhouden zij zich tot de historische implicaties van het begrip participatie?

Eerst wordt verduidelijkt wat doorgaans verstaan wordt onder de gebruikte termen 'pantheïsme' en 'panentheïsme'. *Pantheïsme* wenst geen onderscheid te maken tussen God en de wereld. Begrippen als 'vrijheid' en 'schepping' en een 'persoonlijke God' zijn in deze visie niet mogelijk. Hoewel een strikt pantheïsme, waarin God en de wereld volstrekt samenvallen, vrijwel nooit aangehangen wordt, zijn er verschillende theologen en filosofen geweest die er min of meer mee geassocieerd kunnen worden. Vooral de Hegeliaanse, dynamische variant vond bijval: God wordt zichzelf in het worden van deze wereld. Anderen muntten de meer genuanceerde term *panentheisme*: een veel meer gerespecteerde (en loyale) positie binnen het christelijk theïsme. In deze visie ligt de wereld en de loop van haar geschiedenis uiteindelijk 'in God', maar is er wel meer ruimte voor Gods transcendentie. Een belangrijke notie is dat God en de wereld wederzijds van elkaar afhankelijk zijn. Ook wordt juist het 'persoonlijke' en 'relationele' van God doorgaans hoog gewaardeerd in panentheïstische voorstellingen.

In Bavincks werk valt het op dat hij steeds de uitersten van 'pantheïsme' enerzijds en 'deïsme' anderzijds probeert te vermijden. Voor deze studie is vooral zijn discussie met de 'pantheïserende' denkers van belang. Zij vertroebelen de grens tussen schepper en schepsel door het worden van deze wereld door te trekken tot een 'worden van God'. Voor Bavinck is de triniteit de kern van het christelijk geloof die de ontologische tussenweg tussen pantheïsme en deïsme waarborgt. De drie-eenheid verkondigt het mysterie dat God zichzelf volop meedeelt in de schepping en toch hetzelfde blijft. Maar is de wereld nu wel of niet iets 'buiten God'? Verschillende uitspraken van Bavinck leveren een ambivalent beeld, waarin wel degelijk gewerkt wordt met een onderscheid tussen 'binnen' en 'buiten' God. Uiteindelijk lijkt het er echter toch op neer te komen dat vanuit God geen strikte 'grens' gepasseerd wordt in zijn relatie tot de wereld. Deze 'grens' bestaat er alleen gezien vanuit de wereld ten opzichte van God.

Als het gaat om de formele aanwezigheid van het concept participatie in Bavincks werk, moet in de eerste plaats opgemerkt worden dat Bavinck er huiverig voor is, aangezien het voor hem teveel riekt naar emanatie en dus naar pantheïsme. In de tweede plaats blijkt Bavinck op enkele plaatsen echter wel degelijk in te stemmen met formuleringen die de relatie tussen God en de

wereld in termen van participatie aanduiden. Zolang het niet de idee impliceert van een letterlijke (univoke) uitvloeiing van Gods zijn in de schepping, is het voor Bavinck geen probleem om van participatie te spreken. Bavinck ziet God als *esse* en dat betekent aan de ene kant een diep ontologisch verschil met de wereld, maar aan de andere kant een doordringing van al wat is met het goddelijke als gevende en stuwende kracht. Bavinck blijft staan bij de 'dubbele uitkomst' van Thomas' participatie- en analogie-denken: Gods zijn is zo overvloedig, excessief en alomvattend dat het onze vermogens Hem te bevatten volkomen overstijgt en tegelijk is Hij op die manier wel de bron van alles wat wij zelf zijn. God is zo mededeelbaar dat Hij onbegrijpelijk is. Belangrijker echter dan de expliciete aanwezigheid van het woord participatie is de impliciete aanwezigheid van het concept in Bavincks complete ontologie, waar deze studie talloze voorbeelden van geeft. Bovenal is het Bavincks voortdurende nadruk op Gods mededeelbaarheid die hem verbindt met de participatorische traditie: deze wereld 'is' omdat zij een en al trinitarische mededeelbaarheid van Gods zijn is.

Vervolgens wordt John Milbanks visie onder de loep gelegd. Deze studie is niet overtuigd door Amene Mirs betoog dat Milbanks denken over God en de wereld 'panentheïstisch' genoemd moet worden. Weliswaar zijn er vele zinnen in zijn werk te vinden die verklaren dat deze wereld 'binnen' het goddelijke, trinitarische zijn valt. Mir legt echter ten onrechte veel nadruk op het discours 'binnen-buiten' dat Milbank nu juist met zijn betoog over Gods trinitarische zijn probeert te overstijgen. Milbank, zowel als Bavinck, beweegt zich in een klassiek theologisch discours dat voor onze moderne oren zo nu en dan verrassend 'panentheïstisch' kan aandoen, als dan maar helder blijft dat de wereld 'in God' ligt, als in haar altijd overstijgende oorzaak, die dus elk 'in' of 'buiten' overstijgt. Nog minder kan Milbanks positie 'pantheïstisch' genoemd worden. Hoewel hij meegaat in de pantheïstisch klinkende uitspraak *esse est deus* van Eckhart, maakt hij goed duidelijk dat dit juist duidt op het ons oneindig overstijgende zijn van God waaraan wij tegelijk ons bestaan danken.

Toch zitten er ook wel enkele dubieuze kanten aan Milbanks voorstelling. Vooral in zijn radicale interpretatie van Gods zijn als 'maken' gaat hij ten opzichte van de traditie een eigen weg, die vooral ingegeven is door zijn post-seculiere agenda. Zijn visie dat menselijk maken participeert in goddelijk maken stempelde van meet af aan zijn denken en lijkt er soms voor te zorgen dat niet (zoals hij Duns Scotus verwijt) 'zijn', maar wel 'maken' iets wordt dat

groter is dan God zelf. Terwijl Bavinck met de traditie bij het aanbiddelijk mysterie blijft staan dat er 'God' is én 'de wereld', probeert Milbank het geheim vaak doorzichtig te maken.

Al met al stemmen Bavinck en Milbank overeen in hun analogische discours over de relatie tussen God en de wereld waardoor pantheïsme, maar ook panentheïsme nooit een goed label zal zijn om op hun spreken te plakken. Vooral de 'wederzijdse relatie van afhankelijkheid' die binnen het panentheïsme van belang is, wordt daarvoor te ernstig door beiden weersproken. Beider discours over de relatie tussen God en de wereld verloopt langs de lijnen van de participatorische traditie. Bavinck lijkt hier soms zelfs nog dichter bij te staan dan Milbank als we bedenken hoezeer de nederigheid van het kennende subject en het aanvaarden van het mysterie van de schepping, die kenmerkend is voor deze traditie, aanwezig is in zijn denken.

Het tweede deel van het slothoofdstuk gaat verder in op de precieze implicaties van participatie voor de soteriologie, de zondeleer en de incarnatie en onderzoekt of deze implicaties te verenigen zijn met de verschillende gevoeligheden en belangen van de gereformeerde traditie. Zo worden allereerst protestantse stemmen beluisterd die kritiek uitoefenen op (onderdelen van) het concept participatie. Een van de opvallendste dingen is dat zij participatie wel als een soteriologische categorie willen accepteren, maar niet als een ontologische. Door te werken met ontologische participatie zou de rol van Christus die het heil brengt *extra nos* vertroebeld worden en zou de mens met zijn capaciteit om genade te ontvangen teveel op de voorgrond komen te staan.

Allereerst moet de aandacht echter uitgaan naar de nadruk op 'kennen' in de participatorische denklijn. 'Op de juiste manier kennen' lijkt bijna hetzelfde te zijn als 'heil' en dat geldt voor Bavinck net zo zeer als voor Milbank. Deze studie heeft uitvoerig laten zien hoe belangrijk het voor beiden is, dat kennen in de bredere kring getrokken wordt van 'zijn' dat uiteindelijk 'Gods zijn' is. Milbank en Bavinck verzetten zich allebei hevig tegen een seculier kennen, waarin de kenner zijn wereld dichttimmert en begrenst door zijn kennen. Het is voor beiden van het grootste belang dat juist ons menselijke kennen een weg opent naar transcendentie, naar 'kennis van God'. Het is kennen dat geen aardse zekerheid biedt, maar wel hoop, vertrouwen, geborgenheid, vrede en heil. Daarmee is duidelijk dat kennisleer voor hen meer is dan een

intellectueel spel. Het is geen theologische voorvraag, maar het vormt het hart van de theologische onderneming. Kennen is een vorm van mystiek 'schouwen' en daarmee is heel je bestaan en dus ook je gedrag in het geding. Kennen verwijst naar nederigheid en ontvankelijkheid.

Maar zijn we in een gevallen wereld wel in de positie om zoveel soteriologische waarde te hechten aan ons kennen? Zijn we daarvoor niet te fundamenteel verblind door de zonde? Bavinck en Milbank stemmen weer beide in met de traditionele opvatting van zonde als *privatio boni*. Het goede, het zijn van God staat altijd voorop en zonde zal nooit een eigen concurrerende substantie worden met eigen 'macht'. Milbank voert dit principe echter consequenter door dan Bavinck. Bavinck kent naast het ontologische discours ook een meer bijbels gekleurde, heilshistorische lijn waarin de zonde een daadwerkelijke 'plek' krijgt in het theologische plot. Zonde en dood vormen de markeringen op de weg van gebrokenheid die de mens te gaan heeft en die sinds de zondeval ook de weg van de Middelaar is. Deze studie is van mening dat Milbank een te grote, soteriologische taak toebedeelt aan de individuele theoloog die de zonde poëtisch 'weg kan verbeelden'.

Maar voor belangrijke interpreten staat de vraag nog steeds overeind - niet alleen aan Milbank, maar ook aan Bavinck: Hoe ernstig neem je de komst van Christus als de zonde zichzelf, vanwege haar eigen nietsheid, toch wel vernietigt? En maakt Bavinck de incarnatie niet veel te veel een gebeuren dat vrijwel al gegeven was met de schepping van de mens? Is zijn theologie nu een 'scheppings'- of een 'genade-theologie'? Deze studie ziet, mede op grond van het overzicht van het denken van de kerkvaders over incarnatie, geen heil in dit scherpe onderscheid. De incarnatie staat in het dubbele teken van verlossing en groei, van 'reparatie' en 'elevatie'. De reden hiervoor is dat Gods communicatieve zijn altijd de overhand heeft en niet het gegeven van de zonde. De incarnatie ook als elevatie opvatten is dus geen teken van een eenzijdig vooruitgangsgeloof dat de realiteit van de zonde niet serieus neemt. Het is een teken dat Gods communicatie van zijn 'zijn' de bepalende factor in de theologie is.

Ook al stemmen de christologische visies van Bavinck en Milbank op dit punt overeen, toch is 'Christus' voor hen uiteindelijk een antwoord op een heel verschillende vraag. Voor Milbank is Christus vooral aan antwoord op zijn theologische, post-seculiere vraag naar de mogelijkheid van bemiddeling

tussen God en de wereld. Christus wordt zo vooral een plaats van ontologische speculatie. Iets wat deze studie juist bij Bavinck waardeert is dat hij zich beweegt in de spanning die Andrew Louth analyseerde bij de kerkvaders: de lijn van 'verheffing' via de ziel en de lijn van 'nederdaling' via de incarnatie. Participeren in het leven van God betekent niet dat je een weg gaat die je uittilt boven de aardse weg van lichamelijkheid, nederigheid, strijd en dood maar die je daardoorheen voert. Dit alles ziet deze studie op overrompelende wijze geïllustreerd in het majestueuze altaarstuk van de gebroeders van Eyck, *De aanbidding van het lam Gods*, dat op de voorkant van dit boek is afgebeeld.

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