Theologische Universiteit Utrecht





LEARNING FROM HERMAN BAVINCK'S VIEW ON THEOSIS FOR AN INDIAN REFORMED ENGAGEMENT WITH HINDU TAMIL SIDDHA MYSTICISM'S CONCEPT OF ŚIVA DEIFICATION

Oliver Xavier Francis • **August 17, 2026** • **MIRT (TU Utrecht)**

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Seated figure of Śiva as Dakshinamurti circa 960 AD, Central Tamil Nadu, now in the British Museum (Public Domain)
Portrait of Herman Bavinck (c. 1911–1913), Atelier Prinses (Public Domain)

THEOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY UTRECHT

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In memoriam

Christina Roneikim Inbuon

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Christus victor mortis!

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Tamil Siddha Mysticism

The Indian state where I was born, Tamil Nadu, is famous for Siddha, a form of Hindu mysticism. Much of its fame stems from the Siddha system of medicine, a traditional, alchemy-based system. Almost every town and village in Tamil Nadu has Siddha medical centres. The Government of Tamil Nadu has also encouraged the study of Siddha Medicine through offering a Bachelor of Siddha Medicine and Surgery degree at the Tamil Nadu Dr M.G.R. Medical University in the state's capital city, Chennai.

The religious and philosophical background of these medical institutions and practices is rooted in Tamil Siddha mysticism, which also includes meditation through Yoga to seek immortality. The human body within this mystic system is treated as the temple of the god *Śiva*, and through rigorous yogic meditation, the body is primed to express the divine life within it, thus seeking to defeat death, or at least that is the claim. These mystic practices are well documented in classical Tamil literature and are discussed by Tamil Siddha theologians in contemporary literature.

Exploring a Reformed Response

Indian Christian theologians have discussed Hindu mysticism, but Tamil Siddha is not well explored. In this study, I desire to respond to Tamil Siddha mysticism by exploring insights for an apologetic dialogue with the school's theologians. A response to the practice of deification in Tamil Siddha mysticism needs the right conversation point. It is here that the doctrine of theosis, or deification, promises great value. Incidentally, I also found it very encouraging that theosis

has gained much popularity within Christian theology, and many Reformed scholars have shown interest in the subject.

Bavinck as the Intercultural Conversation Partner

My own leanings in theology are neo-Calvinist; my dialogue partner within the neo-Calvinist camp is the eminent Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck. I discovered that Bavinck speaks of theosis when I read the thesis by Reformed theologian Dmytro Bintsarovskyi,1 who has contributed to an interesting dialogue between Reformed theology and the Eastern Orthodox Church on the hiddenness and revelation of God. My primary reason for choosing Bavinck as the conversation partner who represents the Reformed tradition is that his theology contains important reflections on the relationship between God and humanity and analyses centuries of Christian thought and doctrine on the subject. The second reason is perhaps a very common one among most researchers who opt for Bavinck. Bavinck is a faithful representative of the Reformed position. While he wrestled with the impact of modernism, he always stayed committed to the Reformed tradition, meticulously working with sources from the past and present to develop a rich tapestry of Reformed theology for his time. The third reason I chose Bavinck is contextual. It is because of his appeal as a faithful steward of the Reformed tradition whose personal piety and theological project were never at variance. This is important for my own context, as in the Indian context, the personal lives of many gurus are not where they should be, and it is refreshing to follow the thoughts of someone like Bavinck, who reflects the wholeness of their theological project in personal life[2] and serves as an inspiration to aspiring

[1] Bintsarovskyi has indeed opened a new door in Bavinck studies, and I hope that this study will join and compliment this stream of theological richness and ecumenical dialogue in some way. For his thesis see:Dmytro Bintsarovskyi, "God Hidden and Revealed: A Reformed and an Eastern Orthodox Perspective" (Thesis, 2019), https://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl/149/.

[2] There are two powerful examples of this integrity that I draw from Bavinck scholar James Eglinton's critical biography of Bavinck. Firstly, Bavinck fell in love with someone older than him, and tried to woo her for thirteen years and failed. Yet, once he the door was closed, Bavinck moved on and never seemed to look back. Secondly, in

theologians from the Indian subcontinent like me. I do want to mention that Bavinck did not possess firsthand knowledge of theosis or Hindu mysticism. His response to the doctrine of theosis is purely academic. Still, it can provide the guidance needed for this study, given his prolific engagement with Christian writings across traditions, not only of his time but also diachronically through church history. I expect his theological grammar on theosis to map to other themes in his theology, and I hope to construct bridges to Tamil Siddha with these connected themes.

1.2 Overview of Christian Theological Responses to Hindu Mysticism

Indian Christian engagement with the mystic schools of Hinduism has developed along multiple theological trajectories rather than as a focussed, unified tradition. The diversity of responses reflects differences in theological commitments, intellectual and religious backgrounds, missiological priorities, and understandings of religious experience. For this study, the literature may be grouped into four broad theological trajectories. The first is the apologetic and confessional stream, which seeks to defend the uniqueness of the Christian gospel in dialogue with Hindu philosophical traditions. The second is the inculturation approach, in which the Christian faith is articulated through Indian philosophical, religious and experiential categories. The third trajectory, a small yet significant body of scholarship, has engaged *Śaiva* mysticism. Although *Śaiva* mysticism is distinguishable from the Tamil Siddha tradition, this body of scholarship represents the closest theological engagement with the subject matter of this

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his stint in Leiden, Bavinck encountered Atheist scholar Multatuli and found him interesting, even buying his book. But he was inspired by Kuyper and the influence of Multatuli only seems to have propelled him deeper into the Christian faith and not away from it. Also of note is his deep prayer life, which seems to be at the heart of what made Bavinck such a man of integrity. See James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 80,151.

research. The fourth is comparative theology, which places Hindu and Christian doctrines in constructive dialogue to illuminate the points of convergence and divergence.

1.2.1 The Apologetic and Confessional Engagement

Proponents of this approach seek to defend the uniqueness of the gospel while they critically evaluate Hindu Philosophical frameworks. Representatives of this approach are Nehemiah Goreh, Christopher Poshin David and Timothy Tennent.

The earliest representative was Goreh (1825-1895), whose *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Systems* remains one of the earliest apologetic engagements with Hindu philosophy.[3] He set a precedent for in-depth consideration of Hindu philosophy in Christian apologetics. A more contemporary exemplification is Reformed theologian David, who approaches Vivekananda's *neo-Vedānta* through the Presuppositional apologetic framework of Cornelius Van Til. The engagement does come across as confrontational rather than contextual, as the criterion for the Van Tillian apologia is "that it must prove the unintelligibility of neo-Hinduism and thereby establish the veracity of the Christian faith by the impossibility of the contrary".[4]

Tennent values contextuality in apologetics and presents a fictional dialogue between a Christian evangelical and representatives from various religious traditions. In his section on Hinduism, the evangelical dialogues with two of the major schools in India,[5] *Advaita* and *Vishistadvaita,* address objections raised by the evangelicals. Tennent's understanding of the theology of these

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[3] Refer to Irish Reformed theologian and missionary to India Robin Boyd's portrayal of Goreh here: Robin Boyd, "The Rational Refutation of Hinduism: Nehemiah Goreh," in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi, IN: ISPCK, 1994), 40–57, http://archive.org/details/introductiontoin0000robi.

[4] Christopher Poshin David, *Engaging Hinduism: Rethinking Christian Apologetics in India*, First Edition (New Delhi, IN: Christian World Imprints, 2020), 113.

[5] Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation With Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 46–61.

schools is remarkable, and his ability to engage in meaningful dialogue with his imaginative counterparts is commendable. While applaudably contextual, Tennent's work stops short of addressing mysticism.

1.2.2 Inculturation and Experiential Theology

This second trajectory seeks to articulate the Christian faith through Indian philosophical, religious and experiential categories. While the theological commitments of proponents differ considerably, they share a conviction that the Christian faith can be expressed successfully within the Indian religious worldview.

One expression of this trajectory appropriates Indian philosophical categories for theological reflection, and the pioneer here is Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907), who employed *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta* to articulate Christian doctrine for elite Hindus.[6] More recently, K.P. Aleaz (1934-2021) extended Upadhyaya's trajectory by proposing pluralistic inclusivism, arguing that Christian theology should be enriched through dialogue with other religious traditions. However, Aleaz uncritically accepted *neo-Vedānta's* portrayal of Jesus as a mystic Yogi,[7] moving into the territory of imbalanced contextualism that sacrifices the uniqueness of Christ.

Alongside philosophical inculcation stand experiential theologians like Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929), Bishop A.J. Appaswamy(1891-1980) and Pandipeddi Chenchiah (1886-1959). Sundar Singh presented Christianity as a lived union with Christ and embraced suffering as a

[6] Refer to Boyd's portrayal of Upadhyaya in Robin Boyd, "Nothing but the Highest: Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya," in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi, IN: ISPCK, 1994), 58–85, http://archive.org/details/introductiontoin0000robi.

[7] Kalarikkal Poulose Aleaz, *Harmony of Religions: The Relevance of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata, IN: Punthi-Pustak, 1993), 242–43.

means of bearing witness to the gospel. He did not prefer an intellectual theology.[8] Appaswamy, influenced by Sundar Singh, wrote a book on Sundar Singh in 1921 and a biography in 1958. He turned to the Bhakti movement for his theological direction and drew inspiration from the Vaishnavite Tamil guru *Ramanujā*.[9] Chenchiah further advanced this trajectory by describing the believer's union with Christ as the "yoga of the Spirit" and by interpreting the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of "new cosmic energy."[10] Although differing substantially in emphasis, these theologians share a concern to demonstrate that Christian faith may be experienced and lived within Indian religious forms rather than merely translated into Indian philosophical concepts. Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973) can be seen as the culmination of the experiential approach. Convinced that Western Christianity had become too intellectual, he preferred the mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, learned Yoga meditation under a Hindu guru,[11] and sought to engage in dialogue with Śaiva mysticism, which did not materialise during his lifetime. Taken together, these theologians represent the constructive trajectory within Indian Christian engagement with Hindu thought. Their work has demonstrated that Christian theology may enter into meaningful dialogue with Indian philosophy, spirituality, and religious experience without necessarily adopting an apologetic posture. The movement towards direct engagement with Śaiva mysticism emerges only at the very end of this trajectory through the legacy of Abhishiktananda, providing the immediate historical context for the next section.

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[8] For an elaborate treatment of Sundar Singh's life and theology, refer to Robin Boyd, "The Water of Life in an Indian Cup: Sundar Singh," in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi, IN: ISPCK, 1994), 86–109, http://archive.org/details/introductiontoin0000robi.

[9] For details on Appasamy's approach refer to Robin Boyd, "Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A.J. Appasamy," in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi, IN: ISPCK, 1994), 110–43, http://archive.org/details/introductiontoin0000robi.

[10] For more details on Chenchiah, see Robin Boyd, "The Theology of the New Creation: P. Chenchiah," in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi, IN: ISPCK, 1994), 144–64, http://archive.org/details/introductiontoin0000robi.

[11] For further details check Robin Boyd, "Swami Abhishiktananda," in *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (New Delhi, IN: ISPCK, 1994), 287–96, http://archive.org/details/introductiontoin0000robi.

1.2.3 Christian Engagement with Śaiva Mysticism

Following Abhishiktananda's passing, his close associates established the Abhishiktananda Society, which sought to carry forward his vision of Hindu-Christian dialogue. This culminated in the Society's 1990 retreat-seminar on "Mysticism: Śaiva and Christian," marking the first significant attempt to bring together Christian theologians and scholars of Śaiva mysticism for a theological conversation on mysticism. German Catholic scholar of Indian philosophy, Bettina Bäumer, went on to edit a book based on the papers presented. This is a significant event and is possibly the closest in terms of connection with the present thesis, which will research Tamil Siddha mysticism. Belgian scholar of Eastern Orthodox tradition, Serge Descy, in his paper discusses the Eastern Orthodox stance and makes a bold claim, stating, "the rapprochement is striking between the concept of deification in the Christian Eastern Tradition and that of realisation in the supreme identity of Atman and of the Brahman according to the Advaita-Vedanta".[12] This is significant for this study because it appears to expose a weakness in the Eastern Orthodox concept of theosis: the risk of rapid syncretism in the face of non-Christian mysticism. I will examine this further in Chapter 5 of the study.

Panikkar's approach is to propose a cosmotheandric model that integrates the human, divine, and cosmic dimensions of reality. Panikkar uses Trinitarian language and Biblical exegesis in a novel, untraditional method. Perhaps Sri Lankan Anglican lay theologian Vinoth Ramachandra's critique of Panikkar that he has "wandered so far away from basic Christian understandings that the possibility of genuine dialogue must seem remote"[13] bears weight. Panikkar seems to falter in upholding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in an attempt to find a common meeting point for the

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[12] Bettina Bäumer, ed., *Mysticism in Shaivism and Christianity*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, IN: D. K. Printworld, 1997), 243.

[13] Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 103.

mystical experiences of all religions. And this complaint can be levied against the other Christian authors participating in the dialogue.

Taken together, these contributions to Mysticism in *Śaivism* and Christianity constitute the most significant Christian engagement with *Śaiva* mysticism presently available. At the same time, they reveal a recurring tendency among several contributors to seek common mystical ground by softening or reinterpreting central Christian theological commitments.

1.2.4 Comparative Theology

Saivism as a topic of interreligious research has gained popularity. American theologian and missiologist Nathan Halloran[14] and British scholar of Hinduism and comparative religion Alastair McGlashan have focused on comparative theology of the human condition.[15] Recently, Indian theologian David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian has envisioned a post-foundationalist comparative Christology and engaged Saivism with his framework.[16]

1.2.5 Conclusion and Research Gap

The four trajectories I have covered reveal a spectrum of engagement with Hindu thought that ranges from apologetics lacking contextual grounding, apologetics with contextual grounding, but eschewing the mystical, contextually rich and complex dialogical approaches that often lean towards syncretism, experiential approaches that limit doctrinal enquiry, comparative theology that highlights points of convergence and departure but stays out of the realm of confrontation, and perhaps most interestingly, a combination of doctrine and mystical engagement like in the

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[14] See Nathan Halloran, "Māyā, Āṇava Mala and Original Sin: A Comparative Study," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 26, no. 1 (November 2013): 67–79, https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1548.
[15] Alastair R. McGlashan, "The Human Predicament," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 2009): 25–31, https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1436.
[16] Refer to Sivasubramanian's constructive comparative Christology here: David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology: Parity, Particularity, and Universality in Indian Interreligious Dialogues* (Lanham, Maryland: Fortress Academic, 2022), 129–70.

case of the Abhishiktananda Society which was close to having the right balance, and yet veered towards syncretism in its conversation with *Śaiva* mysticism. This last attempt, as I highlighted, is the closest engagement with Tamil Siddha mysticism. Tamil Siddha mysticism then lacks an apologetic response that can provide contextually grounded dialogue, doctrinal strength, and the ability to discuss mystical practice while remaining committed to the uniqueness of the Christian gospel.

1.3 Problem Statement

Christian engagement with Hindu mysticism has developed along several theological trajectories, including apologetics, inculturation, experiential theology, comparative theology, and seminar-level dialogue between Christian and Hindu theologians on Christian and Śaiva mysticism organised by the Abhishiktananda Society. Of these, the latter comes closest to comprehensively addressing the complex intertwining of Hindu doctrine and mysticism in *Śaivism*. Unfortunately, even this dialogical approach to doctrine and mysticism veers into syncretism, struggling to uphold the uniqueness of the Christian gospel in conversation with *Śaiva* mysticism.

This susceptibility to syncretism highlights an academic gap in the closely related Tamil Siddha tradition. Distinctly characterised by the practice of *Śiva* deification, in which the practitioner's body is identified as the temple of *Śiva*, this tradition holds that through Yoga, the practitioner may attain higher states of consciousness culminating in union with *Śiva*. While this mystic school is well represented academically by Tamil Siddha theologians such as T.N. Ganapathy and Geetha Anand, its mystical deification has yet to receive a rigorous Christian theological response that maintains the uniqueness of the Christian gospel.

Theosis in the Christian tradition bears resemblance to deification in Tamil Siddha mysticism. Until now, there has been no attempt to evaluate deification in Tamil Siddha mysticism in conversation with Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck's view of theosis. This study seeks to address this gap by placing Bavinck's view of theosis in intercultural conversation with Ganapathy and Anand's understanding of Śiva deification. Through this intercultural conversation, this study aims to explore insights that can guide a faithful, doctrinally sound and contextually grounded apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha mysticism.

1.4 Research Objective

This study aims to examine what insights can be gained from an intercultural conversation between Bavinck, regarding his views on theosis and Siddha scholars T.N. Ganapathy and Geeta Anand, who write on *Śiva* deification in the Tamil Siddha tradition. These insights are expected to guide Indian Reformed theologians to continue an apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha theologians, presenting a contextual, doctrinally sound response to this mystic phenomenon that maintains the uniqueness of the Christian message.

This primary objective will be reached through the following sub-objectives:

a. Obtain a good understanding of the concept of deification in Hindu Tamil Siddha from primary and secondary sources from Hindu Tamil Siddha scholars T.N. Ganapathy and Geeta Anand
b. Understand and document Bavinck's views on theosis from primary and secondary sources

c. Stage an intercultural conversation among Bavinck, Ganapathy, and Anand on the similar mystical concepts of theosis and Śiva deification to understand their similarities and differences
d. Analyse and evaluate the above conversation for its usefulness in apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha mysticism on deification.

1.5 Research Relevance

The present study contributes to the body of Christian theological knowledge in the Indian context by addressing *Śaiva* mysticism at large and, in particular, the distinct mystical phenomenon of *Śiva* deification within the Tamil Siddha school. The primary audience of this study is Indian Reformed theologians, who can employ its insights to further a faithful apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha mysticism. Additionally, by utilising Bavinck's view of theosis to facilitate an intercultural conversation with Tamil Siddha theologians Ganapathy and Anand, this study aims to extend the reach of Neo-Calvinist theology in the Indian Reformed context, thereby contributing to the body of intercultural theological scholarship between Western European and Indian contexts.

1.6 Research Question

Main Question

What insights does Bavinck's view on the doctrine of theosis render for an apologetic dialogue with Indian theologians T.N. Ganapathy and Geetha Anand on the concept of Śiva deification in the Indian Tamil Siddha context?

Sub-questions

1. What is the concept of Śiva deification within Hindu Tamil Siddha mysticism, according to T.N. Ganapathy and Geetha Anand?
2. What is Bavinck's view on the doctrine of theosis?
3. What can we learn about the similarities and differences between theosis and Śiva deification from a conversation between Bavinck, Ganapathy and Anand?
4. What can we learn from this conversation above for an Indian Reformed apologetic dialogue on deification with Tamil Siddha mysticism?

1.7 Position of the Present Researcher

I practised Tamil Siddha yoga for about six years from 1998 to 2003 under the tutelage of a Tamil Siddha guru who was also a medical practitioner. I have firsthand experience with *Śiva* deification. Confessionally, I am a Reformed Christian and theologian and hold to the neo-Calvinist theological tradition. Another aspect worth mentioning is my ability to read and write Tamil. Part of this proficiency stems from my experience preaching in Tamil in an Indian Reformed setting.

1.8 Research Methodology

This study will use a mix of hermeneutical and intercultural methods. The research will be conducted on primary and secondary sources. For Bavinck, English translations of primary sources will be used, along with secondary sources in English. To clarify the meaning of 'theosis', I will draw on the authoritative treatments of the topic by Jaroslav Pelikan and John

Anthony McGuckin. For Tamil Siddha, I will use primary sources in Tamil alongside secondary sources in English. In the study, the Tamil texts will be transliterated and translated into English. To understand the Hindu Tamil Siddha mystic concept of "body as the temple of *Śiva*", I will use a hermeneutical research method, analysing the writings of T.N. Ganapathy and Geetha Anand. I will be descriptive in representing the Tamil Siddha school of thought and will allow the authors' voices to speak for themselves. To understand Bavinck's response to theosis, I will use a hermeneutical research method. I intend to study Bavinck's critical treatment of theosis and derive guidelines for an interaction with Hindu Tamil Siddha mysticism's Śiva deification.

To inform the Indian Reformed conversation on Hindu Tamil Siddha mysticism's concept of deification, I will adapt Dutch Reformed intercultural theologian Jos Colijn's intercultural methodology from his work, "Testing the waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology interculturally".[17] I will use his method to stage an intercultural conversation between Bavinck, Ganapathy and Anand. I will use this methodology in a narrower sense. Colijn stages a "multi-layered" conversation with a synchronic layer representing members from three Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, North India and Central Malawi, a diachronic layer represented by the voice of Reformer John Calvin; and a normative and ecclesiastical layer.[18] In my conversation, I will present only one layer, with theologians from two religious traditions, Christianity and Hindu Tamil Siddha, all providing the formal voices of theology. Colijn plays two roles within the conversation. The first is that of a moderator, and the second is that of a conversation partner.[19] I intend to follow in Colijn's footsteps, but with one

[17] For a description of this intercultural method refer to: J. J. A. Colijn, "Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally" (Thesis, Protestant Theological University, 2023), 27–32, https://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl/659/.
[18] Colijn, "Testing the Waters," 156.
[19] Colijn, 157.

caveat. In the role of moderator, Colijn assumes a technical function, choosing the topics that form the conversation in his field research. I do not have a field research component, and I will choose topics for discussion from the descriptive chapters on Tamil Siddha's *Śiva deification* and Bavinck's view on theosis. I will fulfil the second function in the role of moderator, namely, extracting connections between conversation partners. With these modifications, I intend to stage the dialogue and also present my personal reflections as my evaluation of the conversation. This ensures that my voice is not hidden from my readers.[20]

To explore guidelines for apologetic engagement, I plan to extend the contextual theological model proposed by American New Testament scholar and missiologist Dean Flemming, which comprises affirming, relativising, confronting, and transforming culture.[21] Flemming uses this model to understand how Paul contextualises the gospel in the Greco-Roman context. But this model can also be extended to dialogue with Tamil Siddha mysticism's deification as a cultural phenomenon within Tamil Culture. Instead of Scriptural texts, I plan to use insights from the intercultural conversation as the source for applying Flemming's method. I will treat the religious phenomenon of Śiva deification in Tamil Siddha mysticism as a cultural concept that is affirmed, relativised, confronted, and thereby invited to transformation. Here are the definitions of the terms used in Flemming's method:

Affirming Culture: Cultures are part of God's created order, and while they are fallen, they do retain aspects of God's knowledge that can be identified, affirmed and used as contact points for the gospel message. Flemming assures that, "Although the pagan world is severely sinful, it has

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[20] The table talk model presented by Timothy Tennent is an attractive option for a dialogue such as the one this study aims for. But Tennent's model while very creative and lively has one caveat - it does not allow for the researcher's voice to be unveiled clearly. For a description of Tennent's dialogue methodology, see: Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*, 27–33.

[21] Dean Flemming, "Paul the Contextualizer," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew Cook et al. (William Carey Library, 2010), locs. 762–803, Kindle.

the capacity to be reconciled and remade by the God who made it in the first place. It is the arena of God's gracious activity. Consequently, Paul can affirm and identify with aspects of pagan culture and use them to bring the story of Christ to the pagan world."[22]

Relativising Culture: In Paul's ministry in the Greco-Roman context, affirming culture is the starting point of the contextualisation journey, but he does not stop there. Flemming informs us that Paul does positively affirm culture, " however, we discover another stream in Paul's thought—that cultural distinctions are relativised in light of the gospel. Paul believes that God has done something radically new in Christ that signals an end to the old order of things."[23]

Confronting Culture: Cultures are charged with the impact of human fallenness that needs to be pointed out and challenged. Flemming puts it this way: "Cultures along with their worldviews, structures, and social behaviours, are far from simply being neutral channels for the gospel…They are pervaded with the cancer of sin. As a result, when the gospel engages pagan culture, it speaks a 'no' as well as a 'yes.' The gospel cannot be good news without prophetically challenging the sinful elements in human cultures."[24]

Transforming Culture: God calls cultures to be transformed in the image of Christ's redemptive new creation, and this is made possible due to the grace available in the gospel. Flemming advises, "The gospel's judgment on culture is never the last word. Paul's optimism of grace opens up the potential for cultures to be re-formed from within. Just as sin had a negative impact on culture, so the new creation in Christ that the gospel proclaims will affect culture, with its values and practices".[25]

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[22] Flemming, "Paul the Contextualizer," 782.
[23] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 135.
[24] Flemming, "Paul the Contextualizer," loc. 823.
[25] Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament*, 142.

I want to make clear that it is my voice as an Indian Reformed theologian and ex-Tamil Siddha practitioner that you will hear in applying Flemming's model on the fruits of the intercultural conversation.

1.9 Chapter Descriptions

In the first chapter, I introduce the research, the research problem, the research objective, the research question, the sub-questions, and the research methodology. In the second chapter, I will study the concept of Śiva deification in Hindu Tamil Siddha mysticism as presented in primary Tamil sources, with assistance from secondary literature on the concept in the works of Tamil Siddha scholars Ganapathy and Anand. In the third chapter, I will study Bavinck's view of theosis descriptively. In this exercise, I will also listen to the voices of Pelikan and McGuckin to clarify the meaning of 'theosis'. I will also draw on secondary literature by contemporary Bavinck scholars such as Huttinga and Bintsarovskyi to enhance the study.

In the fourth chapter, I will stage an intercultural conversation among Bavinck, Ganapathy, and Anand, Eastern Orthodoxy and Indian Christian theologians on the doctrine of theosis and the related concept in Tamil Siddha mysticism, *Śiva* deification. I will participate in the conversation and provide my voice in this chapter. In the fifth chapter, I will draw on the insights from the intercultural conversation in the previous chapter to understand how a Reformed apologetic dialogue on *Śiva* deification can be constructed. I will extend Flemming's model in conjunction with the gleanings from the previous chapter to contextualise the insights for the Tamil Siddha context.

In the final chapter, I will summarise all the previous chapters to consolidate an answer to the main question of this research. I will provide relevant recommendations based on the research

outcomes. I will also seek recommendations for further research in this area to bolster research on Hindu mysticism from the neo-Calvinist tradition.

Chapter Two: The Human Body is the Temple of *Śiva*

In this chapter, I will answer the first sub-question

- What is the concept of deification in Tamil Siddha Mysticism?

To do this, I will first focus on the monistic theism of Tamil Siddha in §2.1 and follow up with an introduction to Śiva in §2.2. I will then present the relationship between *Śiva* and creation as an emanation model in §2.3 and the acts of Śiva in §2.4. I will focus on the relationship between *Śiva* and the human soul in §2.5, and on how the body plays an important role in seeking liberation or deification in *Śiva* in §2.6. I will also describe the art of ascent through Yoga in §2.7, what the deification experience feels like to Tamil Siddha saints in §2.8, and briefly touch on the role of the guru or teacher within this system in §2.9. Following this, I will suggest using a common noun for the concept of God in Tamil rather than the proper noun *Śiva* in §2.10, which will help contextualise the findings of this chapter within the intercultural conversation I will stage in Chapter four. Finally, in §2.11, I will conclude the findings by highlighting themes that can be part of the conversation with Bavinck.

2.1 The Monistic Theism of Siddha Theology

Monism is a philosophy in which all of reality is of a single kind. What appears to be dual, like the body and mind, matter and things unseen, are all eventually projections of the underlying single reality.[26] Ganapathy and Anand argue that the Tamil Siddha school, as portrayed by Siddha Saint *Tirumūlar* in his work *Tirumandiram,* is a school of monistic theism rather than an

[26] See for instance the definition here: Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 685.

open pluralist Hindu school, as it has several parallels with Kashmir Saivism, a well-established monistic system of Śiva worship.[27] Anand has continued to research the monism of the *Tirumandiram.* Still, she sees further proof of monistic theism in the commonalities among the concepts of body, self, and states of consciousness as represented by either school.[28] I concur with this position not only because of the parallels between Siddha and Kashmir Saivism, but also because the mystic practitioners, or *Siddhis*[29]*,* of this school seek to merge with *Śiva* as the highest form of worship.

In contrast, other non-monistic schools within Hinduism do not seek such a telos. It is not that no other gods are mentioned in the classic works of Siddha; in which case, they could be interpreted as evidence of a pantheon, as seen in other schools of Hinduism. The Siddha Saint *Bōgar*, for instance, mentions the deity Ganapathi multiple times in his poems.[30] But the smaller deities like Ganapathi are not to be taken literally as being worshipped. As Ganapathy and Anand argue, they are merely symbols within the hierarchical plane of absolute reality[31] that descends into limited consciousness in the human soul. The focus is always on the absolute reality or *Śivam* and how to achieve oneness with it. I will now turn to a brief introduction to the absolute reality taught by this monistic school, which is also the object of its worship, *Śiva*.

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[27] Geetha Anand and T. N. Ganapathy, "Monistic Theism of the Thirumandiram and Kasmir Saivism," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (St. Etienne de Bolton, Quebec, Canada Bangalore, India: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 463.

[28] Geetha Anand and Sangeetha Menon, "Body, Self and Consciousness According to Tirumūlar's Tirumandiram: A Comparative Study with Kashmir Śaivism," *International Journal of Dharma Studies* 5, no. 1 (December 2017): 1–13, ATLAn4049640.

[29] In the Tamil language *Siddhi* is a person who has accomplished self-realization in Śiva. See: T. N. Ganapathy, "The Way of the Siddhas," in *Hindu Spirituality Post Classical And Modern*, vol. 2, ed. Krishna Sivaraman and Bitika Mukerji (New Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003), 234, http://archive.org/details/GmjK_hindu-spirituality-post-classical-and-modern-krishna-sivaraman.
The word can also mean "the experience of Śiva" according to Ganapathy. See: T. N. Ganapathy, "A Curtain Raiser," in *The Yoga of the 18 Siddhas: An Anthology*, ed. T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji's Kriya Yoga and Publications, Inc., 2004), 1.

[30] See for instance verse 8 of *Tirumandira Jñāṉam* in T. N. Ganapathy, *The Yoga of Siddha Boganathar* (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2003), 1:169.

[31] Anand and Ganapathy, "Monistic Theism of the Thirumandiram and Kasmir Saivism," 485.

2.2 The Supreme Being Śiva

In Tamil Siddha theology, *Śiva* is referred to as *kōn*[32], the Supreme King of the Cosmos, who is infinite, sovereign over all creation, and exists in absolute freedom. Ganapathy and Anand highlight that, as absolute reality, *Śiva* is infinite and not bound by space, time, or form.[33] Since Siddha is a school of Śaivism, the most common name for Śiva is *Pati,* or god, which is part of the *Pati* (god), *Paśu* (soul), *Pāsa* (bonds) triad, a core tenet of all schools of *Śiva* worship. A creation poem from Tirumūlar's Tirumandiram allows further insight into the portrayal of *Śiva:*

ādiyōṭ antam ilāta parāparam

bōtamatākap puṇarum parāparai

jyōti yataṉiṟ parantōṉṟat tōṉṟumāṉ

tītil paraiyataṉ pāltikaḷ nātamē.[34]

In English:

The Supreme Transcendent Being without beginning or end

Unites with the Supreme Power as pure consciousness

From that light spreads everywhere

The peerless transcendent cosmic vibration[35] from the Supreme Being

Śiva here is presented as the transcendent and Supreme Being without beginning or end, and also as absolute pure consciousness. *Śiva* is also portrayed as the eternal light. From *Śiva* emanates the primordial vibration that was at the beginning of creation and permeates the universe.

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[32] I could not but help notice the perhaps incidental similarity between the Dutch word for king, Koning and *Kōn* in Tamil.

[33] Anand and Ganapathy, "Monistic Theism of the Thirumandiram and Kasmir Saivism," 489.

[34] For the tamil text, followed by his own English translation of poem 381, see B. Natarajan's work here: Tirumūlar, *Tirumantiram*, trans. B. Natarajan (Chennai, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991), loc. 4897, Kindle.

[35] In monistic Siddha, the universe is alive with cosmic vibration which is the waves of ripples of the pure consciousness of *Śiva*. This doctrine of vibration is also present in Kashmir Saivism. See for instance Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices Associated with Kashmir Shaivism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 21–22.

As the Supreme Being, *Śiva* is also immutable, as Siddha scholar KR. Arumugam points out.[36] Another common characterisation of *Śiva* posits him as *sat* (truth), *cit* (consciousness), and *ānanda* (bliss), often expressed in the compound name *Satchitānanda*.[37] He is the absolute truth and pure consciousness and exists in complete bliss. Also, as Arumugam explains, he is "*sui generis* (self-originating). He creates all the forms without a form for himself. He has no birth, yet he is the seed of all births".[38] Though humans seek a form for *Śiva,* in his absolute self, he is not only formless or with form, but beyond the categories of form. Being beyond form, in his true self, he is the one without attributes[39], or even one beyond attributes. Human language is not sufficient to comprehend him, and he is beyond word and thought, and as such, he is incomprehensible.

2.3 Śiva and the Cosmos: Creation as Emanation

Much like Neoplatonism, Tamil Siddha mysticism holds that the cosmos emanated from *Śiva* the *Pati*. The emanation of the cosmos occurs in layers, starting with *Pati*, and is explained as the emission of the thirty-six tattvas,[40] or ontological principles, in Saivism.[41] The fount of emanation is the supreme infinite *Pati,* or, as Anand says, *Parāparam*,[42] who first emanates the

[36] KR Arumugam, "The Philosophy of the Tirumandiram," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 65–66.
[37] Arumugam, "The Philosophy of the Tirumandiram," 73.
[38] Arumugam, 69.
[39] Arumugam, 72.
[40] Anand and Ganapathy, "Monistic Theism of the Thirumandiram and Kasmir Saivism," 487.
[41] The concept of *tattva* is common among all schools of Saivism. Other schools of Hinduism also hold to *tattvas*, but they can vary in number. For a history of how Saiva Siddhanta settled on thirty-six *tattvas*, see the essay by Dominic Goodall here: Dominic Goodall, "How the Tattvas of Tantric Saivism Came to Be 36: The Evi- Dence of the Nisvasatattvasamhita," in *Tantric Studies. Fruits of a Franco-German Project on Early Tantra.*, ed. Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson, Early Tantra Series 4 (2016; Pondicherry, India: Institut Français de Pondichéry, n.d.), 77–111.
[42] Geetha Anand, "Inner Initiation for Transcendence: Siddha Agatthiyar's Antharaṅga Dīkṣā Viti," *Journal of Dharma Studies* 3, no. 2 (October 2020): 410, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42240-020-00079-7.

śuddha tattvas or pure *tattvas,* which are five in number. They are firstly *śiva tattva* or pure undifferentiated consciousness, secondly, śakti tattva or divine energy, thirdly *sadāśiva tattva* or the emergence of awareness; fourthly *īsvara tattva* or the principle where the universe obtains some form of distinction from the divine; and fifthly *śuddhavidyā* tattva where there is balanced awareness of the eternal self and the universe. This stage is not yet material, but it explains the evolution of divine self-manifestation.

In the second stage, we find the *śuddāśuddha* tattvas, or the pure-impure *tattvas*. At this stage, the first set of *tattvas* described above emits the core *tattva*, *māyā*, which is the principle that produces finitude and differentiation.[43] From *māyā* emanate the *kañcukas,* or the five limiting principles. These five *kañcukas* limit the power of the eternal soul and transform it into the *puruśha*, which experiences a finite reality.[44]

In the third stage, seven pure-impure tattvas then emit the impure tattvas, or *aśuddha* tattvas, which number twenty-four. They are four inner instruments, five organs of knowledge, five organs of action, five subtle elements, and five gross elements, for a total of twenty-four impure tattvas.[45]

These thirty-six tattvas provide the ontological framework for the cosmos that the *Śiva* worshipper encounters and understands, and all of them emanate from the absolute and infinite

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[43] There are parallels between the usage of *māyā* in Tamil Siddha and Advaita. *Ādi Śaṅkara* desbribes the difference between ultimate reality and *māyā* as superimposition of *māyā* on the ultimate reality making it seem limited. By way of illustration he says, "just as the superimposition of dust on the sky and its negation therefrom are made by the unwise"Ādi Śaṅkara, *A Thousand Teachings: The Upadesasahasri Of Sankara*, trans. Sengaku Mayeda (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 174, http://archive.org/details/sengaku-mayeda-a-thousand-teachings-the-upadesasahasri-of-sankara-state-universi.

[44] A clarification is needed at this juncture. The tattva *puruśha* is not to be confused with the word *paśu* which denotes the eternal soul. We could say that when the eternal soul or paśu is caused to be born in the world, its soul becomes *puruśha* and experiences the limitations of *māyā*. Unlike Christianity, the soul is eternal in Saiva Siddhanta, and consequently also in Tamil Siddha.

[45] "Appendix F: The Thirty-Six Tattvas," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (St. Etienne de Bolton, Quebec, Canada Bangalore, India: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 547–50.

Pati. In the stages of emanation, there is a descent or limit of the absolute reality into a limited reality in which humans live.

2.4 The Five Acts of Śiva

In connection with the cosmology above, Tamil Siddha places importance on the five acts of śiva. I present another verse from the Tirumandiram below to help describe these acts:

paṭaippu maḷippum payiliḷaip pāṟṟun

tuṭaippu maṟaippummuṉ tōṉṟa aruḷuñ

caṭattai viṭutta aruḷuñ cakalat

taṭaitta anātiyai ainteṉa lāmē[46]

In English:

Creation, preservation and withdrawal into

Dissolution, obfuscation and manifested grace

Grace given to escape the bodily

Hindrances; these all can be called five (acts)[47]

The poem clearly lays out the five acts, namely creation (*paṭaippu*), which I discussed above in the previous section, preservation(*aḷippu*), dissolution or the destruction of the cosmos(*tuṭaippu*), obfuscation or obscuring(*maṟaippu*) the absolute truth through the presence of tattvas that limit the ability of the soul to recognise *Śiva* and finally providing grace that allows the worshipper to escape from limited existence into complete oneness with *Śiva*. Arumugam says that *Śiva* performs these five acts out of love for the souls, and he argues that it is the grace of *Śiva* that

[46] This is a transliteration of the Tirumandiram poem number 2418. For the original Tamil text and Natarajan's translation in English see Tirumūlar, *Tirumantiram*, loc. 28312.
[47] This is my English translation of the poem

proves this love in helping them out of the bonds of the limited cosmos to reach him.[48] This is an important insight, as grace is an important theme in Bavinck's theology, as I will explore in the next chapter. This now leads to the next topic, which is the human soul caught in bonds which prevent it from realising *Śiva*.

2.5 The Human Soul/Paśu in its Bond/Pāśa

The human soul is eternal, just as *Pati* is in Tamil Siddha, but, as seen in the five acts above, *Śiva*, the *Pati,* causes the human soul to be born and enter a limited state, through which it is obscured from the Supreme reality. The obscuring of the human soul occurs because of its bondage or *pāśa* consisting of three *malas* or impurities: *āṇava*, or ego; *māyā*, the seed that generates the limited world; and *karma*, or actions, both good and bad, which is the cause of birth in the cosmos. The concept of *pāśa* and its three impurities is well documented in Siddha literature; for instance, below is another poem from the Tirumandiram:

Āṇava māyaiyuṅ kaṉmamu māmmalaṅ

kāṇu muḷaikkuṭ tavuḍumi yāṉmāvuṇ

tāṇuvai yovvāmaṟ taṇḍula māyniṟkum

pēṇuvāy maṟṟuṇiṉ pācam pirittē[49]

In English:

Āṇava, *māyā* and *karma,* the three impurities are like

The kernel, bran and husk to the soul, arresting

The soul from reaching the Lord, wrapping it;

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[48] Arumugam, "The Philosophy of the Tirumandiram," 67.
[49] Taken from verse 2192 of the *Tirumandiram*. See: Tirumūlar, *Tirumantiram*, loc. 25860.

Free yourself of *pāśa* and cleave to the Lord.[50]

The first impurity, *āṇava,* is the primordial eternal bond of the soul that signifies its independent existence or ego. To rid the souls of *āṇava*, *Pati* has to push them into the sea of the second impurity, māyā, and, according to Arumugam, he does so "to help the souls to get rid of their ignorance". Also, "it is only because of *māyā* the soul's natural potencies of knowledge, desire and action are activated".[51] The third impurity, karma, signifies actions performed through words and bodily deeds. *Karma* can be both good and bad.[52] Based on the level of bondage, Siddha theology also classifies souls into different categories, but a deep dive into the classification may not add value to this research.[53] Suffice it to say that these three bonds obscure the soul's true eternal nature, and the soul needs to escape these bonds if it desires to realise oneness with *Śiva*. The soul is not hopeless in its desire to be free, as it possesses what American Tantra scholar and practitioner Christopher D. Wallis calls "transindividual power of awareness"[54] or *cit* in Tantra and Tamil Siddha. It is capable of experiencing five states of consciousness in Tamil Siddha, namely *naṉavu* or physical consciousness, *kaṉavu* or dream state, *uṟakkam* or dreamless sleep, *pēruṟakkam* or the transcendental state, and the fifth state, *tūriyatīttam,* in which the soul has merged with *Śiva*. This transindividual power of awareness permeates the human body and is key to achieving deification. It is this power of *cit* that, through Yoga, can burn out the impurities that bind the human and prevent the ascent back to *Śiva*.

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[50] This is my own translation.
[51] Arumugam, "The Philosophy of the Tirumandiram," 74–75.
[52] Being the reason of birth or transmigration of the soul in all schools of Hinduism, karma makes for a great topic of research as to its impact on Hindu theology and how Christian theology can address this to proclaim the gospel.
[53] For more details, refer: "Appendix B: The Category of Souls," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (St. Etienne de Bolton, Quebec, Canada Bangalore, India: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 523–24.
[54] Christopher D. Wallis, "Alchemical Metaphors for Spiritual Transformation in Abhinavagupta's Isvarapratyabhijnavimarsini and Isvarapratyabhijhavivrtivimarsini," in *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*, ed. Dominic Goodall et al. (Leiden, Netherlands;Boston, MA: BRILL, 2020), 145.

2.6 Tamil Siddha and the Human Body

Tamil Siddha monism has a very positive view of the human body when compared to Advaita monism and shares this feature with *Tantra*.[55] British scholar of Hinduism and comparative religion Gavin Flood notices this speciality in *Tantra* saying, "while there are ideas in the tantric tradition that reflect the vedic, such as the theme that the body recapitulates the structure of the cosmos, some ideas and practices are prototypically tantric, such as the divinisation of the body and tantric mantras".[56] In keeping with this, in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā, the greatest monist philosopher theologian of Advaita, Ādi Śaṅkara, says, "just as a man puts on fresh clothes after discarding worn-out ones, so does the embodied Self, discarding worn-out bodies, proceed to take up new ones".[57] While Ādi Śaṅkara does not openly disparage the human body, he does not develop a positive view of it either, given his pure Vedic background. He does have a detailed ontology of the human body as composed of five sheaths or *koshas*, but he does not assign any role for the body in liberation.

In contrast, the mystic and experiential nature of the Siddha school places great emphasis on the human body as the vehicle of liberation or *moksha*. Tamil Siddha saint *koṅgaṇa Nāyanār* writes:

Ūththaich sadalamen reṇṇāthē – ithai

Uppitta pāṇḍamen reṇṇāthē

Pārththa pērukkē ūththaiyillai – ithaiyp

Pārththukkoḷ uṇranudalukkuḷḷē.[58]

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[55] Tamil Siddha can be seen as the Tamil contextualization of *Tantric* ideas. *Tantra* has influenced Buddhism, Saivism and other Hindu Schools too.

[56] Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body* (London, UK;New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 99–100.

[57] Ādi Śaṅkara, *Bhagavad Gita Bhashya Of Shankaracharya*, trans. A. G. Krishna Warrier (Chennai, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1983), 49, http://archive.org/details/yqTA_bhagavad-gita-bhashya-of-shankaracharya-with-translation-by-dr.-a.-g-krishna-war.

[58] My English translation of verse 24 of his *Kummi* composition. For the tamil text, see: A. R. Ramnathan, ed., *Siddhar Patangal*, 3rd ed. (Chennai, India: Prema Publication, 1968), 246, http://archive.org/details/jfuC_siddhar-patangal-edited-by-a.-r.-ramnathan-1959-chennai-tamil-prema-publication.

In English

Do not think of the body as a filthy vessel

Neither think of it as a pot seasoned with salt

There is no impurity in it to the one who has seen truly

The truth is within your body

Here *koṅgaṇa Nāyanār* wants to convey that the body has *Śiva* immanent within it as truth; thus, it is capable of deification, and one should not consider the body as impure as such. Another Siddha saint, *Śiva-Vākkiyar*, compares the act of not seeking deification in the body and allowing death to take over the body to a man who allows his beautiful wife to be kidnapped before his very eyes.[59] There is a broad consensus among Tamil Siddhas regarding their positive view of the human body, and they advise their readers to take care of it because it is the site of deification.

Tamil Siddhas also use the language of the temple in a novel sense in relation to the human body. Ganapathy says, "the human body is the abode of God" and "the temple is the image of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the cosmic man as well as the inner being of man". The intuitive order of considering the body as the temple is reversed: in the Siddha world, the temple reflects the body, because the body is the original temple of the *Śiva*. It is in the body that the thirty-six limiting principles can be overcome.[60] Appreciating the human body, *Tirumūlar* says:

uḷḷam peruṅkōyil ūṉuṭampu ālayam

vaḷḷaṟ pirāṉārkku vāykō puravācal

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[59] *Patiṉeṇ Cittarkaḷ Periya Ñāṉak Kōvai*, with Koviloor Andavar Library (Chennai, India: Sri Aadhimulam Press, 1921), 11, http://archive.org/details/acc.-no.-7873-periya-gnakkovai-1921.

[60] T. N. Ganapathy, "The Concept of the Human Body in the Thirumandiram," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 347.

teḷḷat teḷintārkkuc cīvaṉ civaliṅkam

kaḷḷap pulaṉaintum kāḷā maṇiviḷakkē[61]

In English:

The heart is the sanctum sanctorum, the body is the temple

To the generous Lord, the mouth is the tower of entrance

For the discerning, the human soul is *śivalinga*[62]

O shining eternal light, the five senses are deceptive

Thus the human body is the true temple of *Śiva* in Tamil Siddha, and as the temple, it is the site where one pursues deification. The human body requires the practice of Yoga to burn away all impurities and limiting principles in the body to ascend into this experience, and I will now turn to the art that helps the Tamil Siddha practitioner achieve deification in the next section.

2.7 The Ascent Back to Śiva through *Kāya Sādhana*

In section 2.3, I described the emanation of the cosmos from *Śiva.* I noted that this monistic representation of creation can be treated as a descent into a limited state of existence. The way back to infinite existence and to experiencing oneness with *Śiva* through deification is by an opposing ascent from limited consciousness to the infinite. It is an exercise that demands utmost devotion and is learned preferably when the person is young. Anand warns that the process takes more time to perfect if one learns the art after the age of fifty.[63]

The ordinary physical body of a human being is suboptimal as it is caught in the impurities or *malas*, unable to express the divine, and is called *sthūla-deha*; the body perfected by Yoga for

[61] For the Tamil text, refer to verse 1823 in Tirumūlar, *Tirumantiram*, loc. 21537.
[62] An abstract representation of *Śiva* generally carved out of rock housed in *Śiva* temples. See the entry *linga* in W. J. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford, UK: OUP Oxford, 2009), 187.
[63] Anand, "Inner Initiation for Transcendence," 412.

deification is called *divya-deha*. Transforming this normal physical body into the perfected body in which deification is experienced is called *kāya sādhana*. The first stage in achieving this perfected body is the practise of *Haṭha Yoga*.[64] Bōgar, one of the Siddha saints, poetically describes *Haṭha Yoga* as the lid that opens up the body to deification as follows:

adaippadu peṭṭi mūḍiyu maḍavāy

tiḍappadu mūḍit tiṟandidu akkuli

kadaippadu arucāṉ kalatti ḍupādi

tiḍappadu parpandi cayakīl mēliḍē

In English:

To preserve the body, open the lid;

The lid is opened by *Haṭha Yoga*

The human body considered as an appearance is the gateway;

By reversing the many-bonded body made it the truth and achieve victory.[65]

The *yoga-deha* is a hard body and ready for the next stage, *kuṇḍalinī* Yoga.[66] Ganapathy says that the three bonds of āṇava, māyā, and karma are removed through the practice of *kuṇḍalinī*

[64] This type of Yoga is physical, but it is done with an intention to gain mystical power. A good resource in this area is Mark Singleton's essay in the Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies. Refer: Mark Singleton, "Early Haṭha Yoga," in *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, 1st ed., ed. Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop (Oxon, UK;New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

[65] The English translation for verse 5 of the *Samādhi Dīkṣai-10* I quote is by Ganapathy. See: T. N. Ganapathy, "Bōgar: Samādhi Dīkṣai-10," in *The Yoga of the 18 Siddhas: An Anthology*, ed. T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji's Kriya Yoga and Publications, Inc., 2004), 111.

[66] *Kuṇḍalinī Yoga* is an advanced Yoga technique where the practitioner raises a power coiled at the base of the spine through chakras in the body to the third eye, which is a space between the eyes. This helps the practitioner achieve a state of higher consciousness and enter a trance where the practitioner can enjoy a state of bliss. For a psychological understanding, Carl J. Jung's book on the subject is still a relevant resource. Refer: C. G. Jung, *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Yoga, or *Śiva* Yoga,[67] being the exclusive type of Yoga that leads to deification.[68] When the practitioner is adept in *kuṇḍalinī* Yoga, the body is transformed into the *siddha-deha*. Ganapathy says that, "the *siddha-deha* can have free movement in the universe and it does not have to adhere to the spatio-temporal laws of it."[69] At this stage, the practitioner has mastered the body, and with further practice of meditation in *kuṇḍalinī* Yoga, the body reaches the final stage of *praṇava-deha*. At this stage, the human body is cleansed of all impurities and the ego of the practitioner merges with *Śiva,* and there is no I-Thou consciousness. The person who achieves this is said to be a being in nirvana, or a *jīvan-muktha,* and the ascent back to *Śiva* is complete.

2.8 Experiencing Śiva as Satchitananda in the Deified State

In the final state of *jīvan-muktha*, the practitioner experiences immortal bliss and infinite peace.[70] It is a heightened state of consciousness that feels like blazing light and is termed *veṭṭaveḷi,* or space or ether, in Tamil. Ganapathy says that this is "an expression of divinity where images and metaphors relating to luminosity, such as light, flame, fire, lamp, etc., are used".[71] A Siddha saint, *Bōgar,* uses the Tamil expression *oḷippāl*, meaning bright empty space.[72] This experience of being in a luminous space, while enjoying bliss, characterises the state of being one with the deity *Śiva; it* is the peak experience of mysticism in the Tamil Siddha mystic tradition. The experience is akin to a thousand lotus flowers blooming unceasingly and a state of supreme

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[67] T. N. Ganapathy, "Sundarānandar - Meyjñāṉaccurukam-16," in *The Yoga of the 18 Siddhas: An Anthology*, ed. T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji's Kriya Yoga and Publications, Inc., 2004), 294.
[68] T. N. Ganapathy, "Daṉvantiri-Jñāṉam-12," in *The Yoga of the 18 Siddhas: An Anthology*, ed. T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji's Kriya Yoga and Publications, Inc., 2004), 463.
[69] Ganapathy, "The Concept of the Human Body in the Thirumandiram," 368–69.
[70] T. N. Ganapathy, "The Mysticism of the Thirumandiram," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, T. N. Ganapathy, and Geetha Anand (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 268–69.
[71] Ganapathy, "The Mysticism of the Thirumandiram," 269.
[72] Ganapathy, 272.

pleasure.[73] Siddha practitioners who achieve such a state are said to have the keys of immortality. Their bodies do not age, their hair doesn't grow grey, and they seem to possess magical powers.

2.9 The Role of the Guru

Such a complex Yoga journey requires the Siddha practitioner to learn it under the auspices of a guru, who is "a self-realised being as declared by the Vedas and Āgamas and conceiving oneself as a *Śiva-yogin*, cuts the growing attachments with concentration asunder.[74] Being a *Śiva-yogin* then, the guru teaches the disciple to cut away from all worldly attachments that block access to deification. Without the guru's help, the disciple is not able to figure out on his own the way to deification, as the guru is the one who separates what is real or *sat* and what is unreal or *asat*. The gurus are part of a lineage that traces its origins back to *Śiva*,[75] the ultimate guru.

2.10 Finding Common Ground in *Kaṭavuḷ*

As part of the first steps towards contextualising the dialogue and extracting lessons from it, I would like to propose and adopt a better term for "God" that fits well within Tamil culture and is useful in further dialogue. The reason I would like to do this is to affirm that there is a generic way to address the Godhead in the Tamil language and culture, one that is familiar to Ganapathy and Anand and suitable for Christian theologians (including me) to use in the conversation. The word of choice is *Kaṭavuḷ,* which is listed as "God who transcends speech and mind" in the

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[73] T. N. Ganapathy, *The Yoga of Siddha Boganathar* (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2004), 2:47.
[74] T. N. Ganapathy, "The Concept Guru in the Thirumandiram," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 397.
[75] Ganapathy, "The Concept Guru in the Thirumandiram," 402.

Tamil Lexicon from the University of Madras.[76] Arumugam breaks the word into "*kaṭa*", which denotes transcendence, and "*uḷ*", which denotes immanence, thus presenting the picture of one that is both transcendent and immanent.[77] The word *Kaṭavuḷ* is perhaps the most common word in Tamil that conveys the English language idea of God.[78] It is present in contemporary usage, and when used by Christians, it denotes the Christian God; when used by Hindus, it can denote their own idea of God. It is also a term that can be loaded with trinitarianism, because the meaning in Tamil is only restricted to the one who is both transcendent and immanent, and does not go beyond the confines of this definition. With this choice, I will now move on to the intercultural conversation next.

2.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored what *Śiva* deification is within the Tamil Siddha school of mysticism. Some important theological themes have emerged, which could be useful in an intercultural context for this study. These themes can serve as conversational bridges between Tamil Siddha and Bavinck and are as follows:

2.11.1 The Primacy of Mystical Experience

At the heart of this school is the mystic experience of deification,[79] which apparently rewards the practitioner with immortality and takes on mythical proportions that seem to defy rational

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[76] University of Madras, "Tamil lexicon," in *Tamil Lexicon* (Chennai, India: University of Madras, 1936 1924), 662, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/tamil-lex_query.py?qs=%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%B5%E0%AF%81%E0%AE%B3%E0%AF%8D&searchhws=yes&matchtype=exact.

[77] KR Arumugam, "Śaivism as Conceived in the Tirumandiram," in *Yoga of Siddha Tirumular: Essays on the Tirumandiram*, by KR Arumugam, Geetha Anand, and T. N. Ganapathy (Quebec,CA; Bangalore,IN: Babaji Kriya Yoga Trust, 2006), 105–6.

[78] Also, in the Dutch context, the one native to Bavinck. The Cambridge Dutch-English online dictionary defines the word as "the creator and ruler of the world (in the Christian, Jewish etc religions)". See: *God*, June 17, 2026, line 1, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/dutch-english/god.

[79] See §2.8

explanation. Ganapathy says that this mystic experience "cannot be considered as 'true' or 'false' in the ordinary sense in which empirical facts are true or false, for they go beyond the 'either-or' pattern of the logic of understanding".[80] This mysticism is an important theme in relation to deification that I will revisit in the intercultural dialogue.

2.11.2 The Coeternity of the Human Soul or Paśu

An important facet of this chapter has been the coeternal nature of *paśu* in relation to *Kaṭavuḷ* and what that means for deification. This shall be a theme that will play a role in the discussion with Bavinck, who, from the Christian perspective, would object to the soul being eternal like *Kaṭavuḷ*.

2.11.3 Grace and the Deified Body

The role of *Kaṭavuḷ* in providing grace to the one seeking deification is important because crossing the limits of normal human existence, defined in Tamil Siddha as a faulty body or *sthūla-deha* that cannot be fit for deification, requires something outside the human, and this necessitates grace. Grace is also a topic of interest in Christian theology and figures prominently in Bavinck.

2.11.4 The Elitist Nature of Kāya Sādhana

The art of *Kāya Sādhana* requires immense discipline and practice and requires a guru who has experience in transmitting the knowledge and discipling those who are studying to achieve deification. Such an enterprise shows signs of elitism and cannot be for everyone. There are no known records of women raising their levels of consciousness through *Kāya Sādhana*. Over fifty years of age, the chances of attaining the deified states reduce, as each stage of *Kāya Sādhana* takes longer to perfect. Those who are physically challenged or those experiencing

[80] Ganapathy, "The Mysticism of the Thirumandiram," 259.

lifelong developmental challenges do not have access, thus making it fit only for non-disabled and able-minded young men, who have access to a guru. Bavinck resents any elitist, limited access to God in his theology, and this theme has potential in a discussion with him.

2.11.5 The Neoplatonic Bridge

An overarching theme of similarity with Neoplatonism shall play a role in the dialogue with Bavinck on the topic of theosis. The concept of creation as emanation and the ascent back to *Kaṭavuḷ,* culminating in deification, has parallels with Neoplatonism and could help at various points in the dialogue. In the next chapter, I turn to Bavinck's view of theosis to proceed to the next phase of this study, where I will identify these themes as they appear in the course of the descriptive exploration.

2.11.6 The Impurities that separate humans from Śiva

Finally, the excruciating demands of *Kāya Sādhana* disclose the intensity of the three impurities, namely, *āṇava mala, māyā mala, and karma mala,* that prevent humans from merging with *Śiva*. This theme parallels the concept of sin in Reformed theology, which separates man from God, as Bavinck says, "Sin by its very nature produces separation from God and thus carries with it darkness, ignorance, error, deception, fear, disquietude, a sense of guilt, regret, misery, and enslavement."[81] This theme of the seriousness of sin and the intensity of the impurities will be explored in conversation with Bavinck.

[81] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 169.

Chapter Three: Bavinck's View of Theosis

In this chapter, I will explore Bavinck's view on Theosis to answer my second sub-question, which is:

- What is Bavinck's view on the doctrine of theosis?

My primary source for this answer will be Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics. I will rely on Jaroslav Pelikan, an accomplished church historian, and on British Eastern Orthodox theologian and patristics scholar Andrew Louth to help inform my answer. I chose Pelikan because of his magisterial multi-volume series on the development of Christian doctrine, which not only provides details of historical events surrounding doctrinal development, but also discusses the movement of ideas and influences that shape the process. This helps me fill out the background of the well-documented historical doctrinal development in Bavinck's representation of the subject matter, which is a systematic theological approach that will remain at the forefront. I want to utilise Louth to provide the Patristic mystical balance, especially from the Eastern tradition of early Christianity, as a complementary check to Bavinck's contextual Dutch Reformed view. Throughout this chapter, I will use the terms theosis and deification interchangeably. I will also use the terms Western Tradition and West as synonyms of the Western Christian Tradition. I will use the abbreviations *RD1, RD2,* etc., to denote corresponding volumes of the Reformed Dogmatics.

A brief guide to how I will answer this question in this chapter: Bavinck's view on theosis in the Reformed Dogmatics is situated within his concerns about the impact of Neoplatonic mysticism on the development of doctrine within the Western tradition. He specifically sees the figure of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite as highly influential in shaping doctrinal impact in the West.

So in §3.1, I will briefly introduce Neoplatonism, focusing on two key figures in the philosophical tradition: Plotinus, its founder, and the Neoplatonic Christian theologian Pseudo-Dionysius. Following this, in §3.2, I will discuss Bavinck's view of theosis in the West. In §3.3, I will evaluate Bavinck's view of theosis in the East, both in the classical form treated in §3.3.1 through §3.3.5 and in the form of contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy in §3.3.6. Finally, in §3.4, I will bring up the harvest from this chapter that I will use in the intercultural conversation in the upcoming one.

3.1 Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism (c 250-529 AD) stands in the tradition of philosophies influenced by Plato's Old Academy (c 387-266 BC) and is preceded by middle Platonism (c 90 BC – 250 AD) and the Sceptical Academy (c 266 – 90 BC) as Dutch Bavinck scholar Huttinga rightly points out, "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".[82] At the end of this long journey, Neoplatonism evolved the ability to reinterpret Platonic philosophy as profound metaphysics and spirituality, and created a mystical framework that fit well within Hellenistic culture. In the following sections, I will briefly discuss two important figures in this school of thought: Plotinus, its founder and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a pseudepigraphical Christian theologian whose works had tremendous influence in carrying Plotinus's thought into the church.

[82] Wolter Huttinga, "Participation and Communicability : Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the Relation between God and the World" (Thesis, 2014), 44, https://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl/77/.

3.1.1 Plotinus

Plotinus (204-270 AD), born into a Greek-speaking family in Roman Egypt, was the founder of Neoplatonism and a pupil of the self-taught Platonist Ammonius Saccas (175-243 AD). His work has had a profound influence on Jews, Christians, Gnostics, pagans and early Islamic philosophers. Louth appreciates Plotinus as "the supreme exponent of an abiding element in what we might call 'mystical philosophy'. He represents man's inherent desire to return to heaven at its purest and most ineffable."[83] Plotinus presents three first principles in his philosophy: The One (*τὸ Ἕν*), the Intellect (*Νοῦς*) and the World Soul (*Ψυχή*). The One is utterly transcendent and is beyond all categories. The One emanates the Intellect, and from the Nous emanates the World Soul, and from the World Soul emanate all human souls and finally matter.[84] Emanation beyond matter is not possible, as it is the lowest level of emanation, and interestingly, according to Plotinus, matter is evil. He says, "matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then evil before soul and is primary evil".[85] But the soul is not hopeless and can escape back to the One.

French philosopher and novelist Gwenaëlle Aubry notes that, while the One is beyond essence, thought, knowledge, and act, and is utterly transcendent in Plotinus, paradoxically, Plotinus taught of a mystical union with the One.[86] The technical term for this union is *henosis*, and it does not involve physical exercise[87], unlike the type of union I described in the last chapter

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[83] Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford, UK;New York,NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35.
[84] I have noted the similarity between the Tamil Siddha idea of creation as emanation from Śiva in the form of 36 principles and Neoplatonic emanation in the previous chapter. See 2.3.
[85] Porphyry, *Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books with Enneads I:1-9*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 315.
[86] Gwenaëlle Aubry, "The One as the First Principle of All," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd Gerson and James Wilberding (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, n.d.), 90.
[87] Pao-Shen Ho, "Plotinus' Mystical Teaching of Henosis: An Interpretation in the Light of the Metaphysics of the One" (Doctoral Thesis, Die Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck, 2014), 164, https://diglib.uibk.ac.at/download/pdf/137226.pdf.

where Yoga plays a key role in the ascent back to Śiva.[88] His most famous disciple, Porphyry, who edited Plotinus's works, records that Plotinus experienced this union.[89] He says, "his end and goal was to be united with, to approach the God who is over all things. Four times while I was with him, he attained that goal, in an unspeakable actuality and not in potency only."[90] American scholar of ancient philosophy John Bussanich notes that, "both cognitive and emotional training seem to be necessary conditions for achieving the highest stage of human development- mystical union with the One".[91] This can explain the attraction that Neoplatonism held for people from diverse backgrounds. It offered a mystical path back to perfection through disciplined cognitive and emotional development that fit well within the *paideia* of the ancient Greek Platonic academy. This attractive influence of Neoplatonism on Greek culture was felt powerfully in the Church, too, and perhaps the person through whom it most affected the Church and who, in turn, influenced others deeply was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, to whom I will now turn.

3.1.2 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was a Neoplatonist Christian theologian active in the late 5th and early 6th centuries and pseudepigraphically identified himself as Dionysius, whom Luke records in Acts 17:34 as a member of the Areopagus who embraced the Apostle Paul's gospel. British scholar of early Christian history and an expert on Pseudo-Dionysius, Rosemary A. Arthur says that, in Epistle 10 of his works, he presents himself as an older man writing at the end of the first century. He apparently models himself not on the Dionysius in the book of Acts,

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[88] See §2.7
[89] This experience can be likened to the oneness that Śiva deification brings to the practitioner as I've detailed in the previous chapter. See §2.8.
[90] Porphyry, *Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books with Enneads I:1-9*, 71.
[91] John Bussanich, "Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40.

about whom little is known, but on a later Dionysius, who was the bishop of Corinth around 180 AD.[92] His pretence seems to be very successful, and he began to influence the thought of many Christian theologians. Bavinck notes that in the late patristic period of the East, the most important Dogmatic output "were the five writings for a long time attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, which appeared in the fifth century: *The Divine Names, The Celestial Hierarchy, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, and the Mystical Theology, as well as the Ten Letters*".[93] Louth seems to think that he "appears to have come from a Syrian and Monophysite background – though his own writings are not unequivocally Monophysite in theology."[94] Although there were initial doubts about the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, these worries seem to have died down rapidly. Many late patristic Fathers in the East and the West began commenting on his works, and his thoughts reached mainstream dogma in the church.

3.2 Bavinck's view of Theosis in the West

Before I approach Bavinck's view on theosis in the West, a disclaimer is in order. Much has changed in Roman Catholic theology with Vatican II. Belgian prelate and ex-archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, Godfried Danneels, has Karl Rahner in mind when he says that many like him hold "that the Council marked the end of the Constantinian period in church history and that Vatican II as a Council ranks with Nicaea and Trent in establishing a genuinely new period of development".[95] If I consider this as some form of consensus on the enormous impact of Vatican

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[92] Rosemary A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria* (London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Routledge, 2016), 1–2.
[93] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, vol. 1, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 129.
[94] Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 156.
[95] Godfried Cardinal Dannels, "The Ongoing Agenda: A Council Unlike Any Other," in *The Second Vatican Council*, 1st ed., ed. Gavin D'Costa and Emma Harris (London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: T&T Clark, 2013), 20.

II, I don't think that much of Bavinck's critique, which I will discuss below, can be applied to the Roman Catholic Theology of today, at least not in the form I will represent in this chapter.[96] Having hopefully cleared the air, I will now turn to Bavinck's view on deification.

Bavinck does not treat deification as an isolated concept in the Reformed Dogmatics. His opinion is that the West inherited the concept of deification from the East and that it influenced how the West conceived several doctrines. Exploring the impact of deification in *RD3*, he says, "mystical contemplation, the doctrine of the superadded gifts, the theory of transubstantiation, all rest on the idea that the finite is capable of participating in the infinite."[97] This provides useful insights[98] into Bavinck's thought for structuring this section. In the following sections, I will discuss deification alongside other doctrines and concepts. In section 3.2.1, I will discuss it in relation to the doctrine of the state of glory, in which I will also touch upon a related topic of the vision of God. In section 3.2.2, I will discuss its impact on the doctrine of the Image of God conceived in the Roman Catholic Tradition. In relation to the doctrine of the Image of God, I will also broach the concept of the *donum superadditum* or superadded gift. In section 3.3.3, I will discuss the impact of deification on the Roman Catholic understanding of grace. Following this, in section 3.2.4, I will discuss how deification operates within Pseudo-Dionysius's hierarchies and briefly examine how mystical contemplation fits into this scheme.

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[96] "To what extent has Vatican II reversed the impact of Neoplatonism and in particular the works of Pseudo Dionysious the Areopagite?" could be an interesting question for another research. For now, I will not venture into the topic further.

[97] Bavinck, *RD*, 3:256.

[98] Bavinck does not discuss deification in connection with transubstantiation in RD4 where he discusses the subject at length. But he discusses the other topics mentioned in the quote.

3.2.1 Deification, Status Gloriae and the Vision of God

The doctrine of the state of glory (*status gloriae*) concerns the eschatological telos of redeemed humanity.[99] Speaking about this state of glory, Bavinck says, "gradually, under Neoplatonic influence, this state of glory was viewed as a condition that far transcended the state of nature, not only in an ethical but also in a corporeal sense."[100] This domination of corporeal transcendence and the suppression of ethical aspects of redemption are important to Bavinck. The corporeal transcendence of nature was a powerful idea that became a decisive factor in the Christological debates in the post-Nicene period to the point where "the deity of Christ and of the Spirit was affirmed particularly with the argument that they were the authors of deification for humans."[101]

At the heart of the state of glory was the doctrine of the vision of God, which changed with the impact of Neoplatonism. According to Bavinck, the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers did not think that in glory, believers would be able to see God in His essence.[102] He says, "Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodoret, Jerome, Isidore (et al.), accordingly, denied that in the hereafter we would see God 'with respect to his essence'".[103] Pelikan is useful in verifying this claim in the case of the Cappadocian fathers. The Cappadocian fathers were given to repetitive use of language about contemplation, and "a central figure in the language of the Cappadocians about the knowledge of God in the life of the *aeon* to come was the concept of the

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[99] For contemporary views of the eschaton in the Catholic Church, refer to chapter VII of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in Vatican II that is available online here: "Lumen Gentium," VII, accessed June 3, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[100] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2: God and Creation*, vol. 2, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 539.

[101] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:539.

[102] That God will be seen in glory is not in question, the question is whether He will be seen in His essence.

[103] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:188.

vision of God."[104] Gregory of Nyssa expounding Matthew 5:8[105] on this concept says that the verse can be construed in two ways: firstly, to know God in His nature and secondly, being united to him ethically in purity. The former is impossible in Gregory's opinion, as the "authority of Scripture ruled out a knowledge of divine nature in itself'. [106] I would interpret this as a careful maintenance of the creator-creation distinction in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa.

But this opinion changed in the later patristic period, and "under the influence of Neoplatonic mysticism, which profoundly influenced Pseudo-Dionysius, a different view of the vision of God made its debut."[107] As proof of this claim, Bavinck recruits pope Gregory the Great and Prosper of Aquitaine.[108]

Bavinck also notes, that over time this view crystallized in the West and the Council of Florence "declared that souls 'immediately upon their entrance into heaven, would obtain a clear vision of

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[104] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 316.
[105] The beatitude on the sermon on the mount concerning the vision of God
[106] Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 316.
[107] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:188.
[108] As proof of this claim, Bavinck quotes Pope Gregory the Great and Prosper of Aquitaine. For Gregory the Great, Bavinck summarises his position on the visibility of God from Moralia in Iobum (Morals in Job), specifically according to the English translation from Job 1:18 used by the Editor John Bolt and Translator John Vriend, quoting "'for his nature is its own perspicuity; perspicuity itself is his nature.'" See : Bavinck, *RD*, 2:188. But there is an issue here, Gregory the Great does not talk about the subject of perspicuity in his commentary on Job 1:18, but in Job 28:17. I am not sure if this is a miss from Bavinck or from the editor and/or translator. The 1839 English translation by Anglican priest Henry de Romestin on in Job 28:17 does have a similar quote, but there is nothing in the exposition to imply beyond reasonable doubt that Gregory the Great supports the vision of God in His essence. As for the quote from Prosper, which in RD2 reads, "contemplating within their hearts the substance of their own creator," it is from De Vita Contemplativa, and recent research has shown that it was penned by Julianus Pomerius (late 5th century to early 6th century), a Christian priest in Gaul. See the journal article by codicologist and patristic scholar Nicholas De Maeyer which discusses this wrong attribution: Nicolas De Maeyer, "The Transmission of Pomerius' De Vita Contemplatiua. Part 1: Descriptive catalogue of the complete and partial manuscript witnesses," *Revue d'Histoire des Textes* 18 (January 2023): 149–223, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.RHT.5.133017.
However, the quote itself is an accurate translation as the latin reads "sui Creatoris substantiam mundis cordibus contemplantes" according to the text made available online through the University of Zurich here:"Corpus Corporum," accessed June 5, 2026, https://mlat.uzh.ch/browser/7699:1.6.
Further, the English translation is also a match. See: Julianus Pomerius, *The Contemplative Life*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Mary Josephine Suelzer, with Universal Digital Library (Westminster, MY: The Newman Bookshop, 1947), 21, http://archive.org/details/ancientchristian009932mbp.
This aligns well with Bavinck's complaint that the impact of Neoplatonism shifted the earlier consensus among the Post-Nicene and Nicene Fathers that it is not possible to see God in His essence to a contemplative vision of God in His very essence, and Pomerius provides clear support for Bavinck's thought.

the one and triune God as he really is – nevertheless in proportion to the diversity of their merits, the one more perfectly than the other'".[109] Thus "the essence of the state of glory increasingly came to be the vision of God according to his essence (*per essentiam*), deiformity or deification, a participation in the divine nature that was not only moral but corporeal, a 'melting union' with God."[110] Bavinck clarifies that "even though the caution was added that the vision of God does not amount to comprehension and differs in believers in proportion to their merits, this doctrine nevertheless resulted in the deification of humans."[111] This is significant for this study because Bavinck's view of theosis is a corporeal 'melting union' with God, in which the boundary between creator and creature ceases to exist. Bavinck's argument that "a corollary of vision of God in his essence would be the deification of humanity and the erasure of the boundary between the Creator and the creature"[112] is a logically strong one. It perhaps also exposes the background of the pagan influence of Plotinus's experience of mystical union I discussed earlier.[113]

3.2.2 Deification and the Image of God

Bavinck terms the state of glory discussed in the previous section "mystical view of man's destiny"[114] because of the impact of deification. He says that it, combined with the doctrine of the meritoriousness of good works, gave rise to the doctrine of the superadded gift (*donum superadditum*), which was used to explain the supernatural view of the image of God in Adam. Bavinck says, "the heavenly blessedness and the vision of God, which is man's final destiny—and was so for Adam—can be merited *ex condigno* only by such good works as are in accord

[109] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:188.
[110] Bavinck, 539.
[111] Bavinck, 189.
[112] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:190.
[113] See §3.1.1
[114] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:539.

with that final destiny".[115] This means that the good works that Adam works have a "supernatural character and hence proceed from a supernatural principle: infused grace."[116] Since, in the Neoplatonic view, Adam's nature could not work supernatural works, the only explanation possible is a supernatural grace that is given to him to elevate him above nature. This supernatural grace, the *gratia gratum faciens,* or the grace that makes one pleasing to God, is the image of God. Bavinck diagnoses the problem as follows: "Roman Catholic theology has a dual conception of humanity: humankind in the purely natural sense, without supernatural grace, is indeed sinless but only possesses natural religion and virtue and has his destiny on earth; humankind endowed with the superadded gift of the image of God has a supernatural religion and virtue and a destiny in heaven."[117]

Bavinck faults the derivation of this logic on a wrong mystical telos that is not part of Scripture. He also checks the interpretation of the state of glory that gives rise to this doctrine, saying, "the salvific benefits of the covenant of grace, therefore, far surpass the reach of all our thoughts; but nothing in Scripture even hints at the notion that it is all a 'superadditive' that originally did not belong to our human nature".[118] He also chides the Roman Catholic theologians for first deriving a wrong picture of grace and then reading it back into the image of God in the first human. He says, "it is incorrect because between 'grace' and "glory" it constructs a bridge of meritoriousness and proceeds by applying it also to Adam".[119] He sees that starting from deification and combining it with merit has opened the gates to Pelagianism. He notes the long-pending victory that the Reformation brought in this arena of confusion, saying, "It was against

[115] Bavinck, 539–40.
[116] Bavinck, 540.
[117] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:541.
[118] Bavinck, 543.
[119] Bavinck, 544.

this Neoplatonic Areopagite philosophy that the Reformation, taking its stand in Scripture, took action."[120]

3.2.3 Deification and Grace

In connection with Tamil Siddha in the previous chapter, I pointed out the theme of the role of grace in deification,[121] and a variation of this theme is present in Bavinck as well. In *RD3*, Bavinck explores "those gifts of God's special grace which in the preaching of the gospel are offered to all hearers and are effectively granted to the elect".[122] The Roman Catholic view of grace that fits this definition, *gratia gratum faciens*, is divided further into actual and habitual grace. Habitual grace is a perpetual change in the soul of the Christian, elevating the human to a supernatural state. Actual grace is a transient grace which prompts the Christian to perform good and eschew evil in a specific circumstance. It is important to note that habitual grace is necessary not because humans are sinful and cannot please God, but because they "having lost the superadded gift, are now purely natural beings who in the nature of the case cannot perform supernatural good works or saving acts".[123] This fits again in the scheme of deification, because habitual grace "creates in humans a kind of being by which, in a totally special way, they are divinized. It elevates them 'into the divine order.'"[124] Bavinck's identifies this portrayal of grace which sidelines the forgiveness of sins and relegates faith to a mere preparatory step as a symptom of Neoplatonic union with the One that is present in Pseudo-Dionysius.[125]

In responding to this version of grace, Bavinck celebrates the Reformation's positive role in identifying and countering Neoplatonism's influence. He says, "The Reformation rejected this

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[120] Bavinck, 546.
[121] See §2.11.3
[122] Bavinck, *RD*, 3:574.
[123] Bavinck, 575.
[124] Bavinck, 576.
[125] Bavinck, 577.

Neoplatonic mysticism, returned to the simplicity of Holy Scripture, and consequently gained a very different concept of grace. Grace serves, not to take up humans into a supernatural order, but to free them from sin."[126] He further adds, "In the Catholic view, this physical operation of grace is the opposite of an ethical one, in any case, one that far exceeds the ethical; in the view of the Reformation, the operation of grace is and remains ethical."[127] Here we see the tussle between the ethical and the physical again. In the Roman Catholic view, the impact of deification renders grace predominantly physical, deemphasising the Scriptural ethical focus. The Reformation identifies the impact of Neoplatonic deification that drives this dissonance and, in Bavinck's view, corrects it, aligning the doctrine of grace so that it is once again in step with Scripture. Here again, the theme of the Reformation's victory in freeing the Church from the grip of a wrong understanding of grace, due to its capitulation to Neoplatonism, is dominant in Bavinck.

3.2.4 Deification and Hierarchies

While Bavinck acknowledges that Scripture, "clearly teaches that among angels there are all kinds of distinctions of rank and status, of dignity and ministry, of office and honor, even of class and kind",[128] he critiques the scheme of hierarchies presented by Pseudo-Dionysius in *The Celestial Hierarchy*. He sees the typical Neoplatonic premise that God, who was One, enters multiplicity to create these hierarchies in heaven and on earth. In heaven, there are three classes of angels. The ones nearest to God serve him exclusively. The second class of angels serve both visible and invisible creation, and the third only the material earth. The ecclesial hierarchy then becomes a mirror of this hierarchy, which is a very attractive scheme that finds eager acceptance

[126] Bavinck, 577.
[127] Bavinck, *RD*, 3:578.
[128] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:452.

in the West.[129] At this point, it might be good to supplement that, as from Gregory the Great onward, this influence on hierarchies found support in the West. Gregory's homily on Luke 15:1-10 shows that he was influenced by the angelic hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius. He says, "it is related that Denys the Areopagite, an ancient and venerable father, says that those who are sent forth, either visibly or invisibly, to carry out some function, are from among the lesser bands of angels, because either angels or archangels come to give comfort to human beings".[130] Thus Bavinck's critique is maybe well constructed as he points out how the scheme of hierarchies betrays a Neoplatonic deification as its telos. He says, "this hierarchy as a whole has its origin and head in Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and its goal in deification."[131] Within this arrangement of hierarchies, moving out from God in concentric circles, there is a special place for the mystic who seeks union with God through contemplation. Bavinck says, "On the highest level stands the mystic, who by meditation, ascesis, and prayer already here on earth achieves contemplation".[132]

Pelikan helps verify this impact of Pseudo-Dionysius and the relationship between deification and hierarchies, because for the Neoplatonic theologian writing about celestial hierarchies, "it was the purpose of a hierarchy, whether celestial or ecclesiastical, to achieve, 'as much as attainable, assimilation[133] to God and union with him'."[134] Pelikan also directs us to a section of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy[135] in which Pseudo-Dionysius says that salvation is not possible

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[129] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:453.
[130] Pope Gregory I, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. Dom Hurst (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 292.
[131] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:453.
[132] Bavinck, 545.
[133] I think Pelikan is right in using the term "assimilation" to translate the word ἁφομοίωσίς in the original. The primary meaning for the word listed in the Patristic Greek Lexicon is "becoming like, assimilation to". Refer ἁφομοίωσίς in: G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1961), 278.
[134] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 1:The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago,IL ; London,UK: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 344–45.
[135] The 1987 English translation of the definition of deification from the Paulist Press is close to Pelikan's reading and is translated thus: "divinization consists of being as much as possible like and in union with God". See: Pseudo

unless deification occurs, and quotes Pseudo-Dionysius's definition of deification as "as much as attainable, assimilation to God and union with him"[136], thus establishing the link between deification as assimilation into God and the hierarchies in Pseudo-Dionysius's thought. The argument from Pelikan, which matches Bavinck's thought, is perhaps further strengthened by the fact that the Greek texts of both *the Celestial hierarchy*[137] and *the Ecclesiastical hierarchy*[138] use the same formulation *προς θεόν ώς έφικτόν άφομοίωσίς τε και ενωσις* to express this idea of assimilation. This impact presents a picture in which the Church is structured as a hierarchy, with an elite few already on Earth, the closest to Christ owing to their prowess through asceticism. For Bavinck, then, the impact of deification within a syncretistic hierarchical cosmos that creates ranks among the people of God and places the ascetic at the highest plane clearly runs counter to the Reformers' battle for the priesthood of all believers. This elitist scheme seems to have much in common with Tamil Siddha's elitist presentation of *Kāya Sādhana*,[139] which I highlighted in the previous chapter.

3.3 Evaluation of Bavinck's View on Theosis in Eastern Orthodoxy

Bavinck does not develop a substantial view of theosis in the Eastern Orthodox tradition in the Reformed Dogmatics. However, he acknowledges the East's tremendous impact on Western theology and offers some insights into his thinking about the Eastern Orthodox tradition. One limitation in Bavinck's time was his lack of access to high-quality resources on the development

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Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 198.

[136] Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 1*, 345.

[137] Pseudo Dionysius, *Corpus Dionysiacum II. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita: De Coelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mystica Theologia, Epistulae*, 2nd ed., ed. Heil Gunter and Adolf Martin Ritter (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2012), 17.

[138] Dionysius, *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, 66.

[139] See §2.11.4

of the Eastern Orthodox tradition beyond the seventh century. He says, "A history of theology and dogmatics in the Eastern church after John of Damascus does not yet exist".[140] But the developments in the East before this period were accessible to Bavinck, and I will limit this section to the history of Eastern Orthodoxy to this period. I will follow a similar structure to the previous section to evaluate Bavinck's concerns. Still, I will also include a section on the *filioque* in connection with mysticism in Eastern Orthodoxy, which I believe helps provide a better understanding of Bavinck's thoughts. I will use Eastern Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth as a conversation partner to help provide context and guide the discussion on the four sections that mirror Bavinck's view of deification in the West.

3.3.1 Deification, Status Gloriae and the Vision of God

Earlier, I mentioned how Bavinck nods in approval at the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers who deny that, in glory, humanity will have access to the sight of God's essence.[141] I will discuss three Greek Fathers, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, to examine whether there was a demonstrable regression from the approved stance of Bavinck.

According to Louth, Athanasius broke away from the Neoplatonic influence of Origen as a result of the impact of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Louth sees a complete "anti-mystical" transformation in Athanasius, "and at the root of this reaction lies the perception that the soul is not in any way connatural with God, and certainly not co-eternal with him."[142] At this juncture, I would like to recall that the coeternity of the soul is a theme I highlighted in connection with

[140] Bavinck, *RD*, 1:131.
[141] See §3.2.1
[142] Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 76.

Tamil Siddha, [143]and it is interesting to note how Athanasius dealt with the theme in the context of Neoplatonism.

The definition and emphasis of deification change in Athanasius, and "man is divinized, as he is restored to conformity with the image of God, that is the Word, by the condescension of the Word himself to our fallen state in the incarnation."[144] The Neoplatonic theme of the ascent is prominent, but has been transformed by the ontological meaning supplied by the incarnation. As Louth notes, "though the soul can see the way back to God, this can only be accomplished by the Word of God's making himself personally present in the created order, and overcoming the metaphysical and ontological consequences of the Fall."[145] In Athanasius, we do not yet see a development of the doctrine of *visio Dei*, but the grounds for a creator-creation differentiation are powerfully laid.

Gregory of Nyssa, who inherited Athanasius's legacy, also traces this trajectory of distinguishing what is pagan and what can be recovered as Christian within Neoplatonism. While Origen surely influences Gregory and has a strong mystical aspect to his theology,[146] his commitment to expressing Christian ideas in contrast to Neoplatonism stands out. Louth says, "the gulf between uncreated and created is such for Gregory that there is no possibility of the soul passing across it". Gregory also rejected the concept of experiencing ecstasy when it assimilates into the uncreated. Louth stresses that "this rejection of the possibility of ecstasy marks Gregory of Nyssa off from the pagan mysticism of Platonism and neo-Platonism."[147] Further, in Gregory's

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[143] See §2.11.2

[144] Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 75–76.

[145] Andrew Louth, "The Fouth Century Alexandrians: Athanasius and Didymus," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, by Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 277.

[146] I fully concur with Boersma's comment on Gregory which reflects his influences from Platonic and Stoic elements and yet he is in the first place a Christian thinker. See: Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

[147] Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 79.

theology, Louth also notes that the soul in its ascent back to God only realises its utter difference from God in his incomprehensibility.[148] At this juncture, it is right to recall Bavinck's approval of Gregory of Nyssa about his stance on the *visio dei*.[149] This can reinforce Bavinck's view that, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, the theology of the *visio dei* is well thought out.

Louth also provides sufficient insight into the stance of Maximus the Confessor (AD 580–662), a Byzantine monk who precedes John of Damascus. While Maximus seems to have been influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius, the basic posture on the *Visio Dei* remains unaltered when compared with the Post-Nicene Fathers.[150] There is the theme of oneness and union through interpenetration of God into creation in the eschaton, but never at the level of God's essence.

3.3.2 Deification and the Image of God

Whereas in the West, the understanding of grace operational in the life of a new covenant believer was read backwards into the definition of the image of God in Adam, the Greek Fathers moved forward from the exegesis of Genesis creation accounts towards Christ as the image of God. Louth tells us that the linguistic features of the Greek language dictate this. The Greek Septuagint uses the form *κατ' εἰκόνα,* which we translate in English as "in our image". Louth says that the preposition κατ' is a strong one that demands a question "according to what image?" The answer to this arrives from the New Testament: Jesus Christ "the image of God, the one who images forth God in his incarnate state."[151] Additionally, the text also talks about the likeness or *ὁμοίωσιν*, which resotes with the idea of affinity and assimilation with God in Plato.[152] Louth says that for Athanasius, it is not mere rationality that marks us as the image of

[148] Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 38.
[149] See §3.2.1
[150] Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, The Early Church Fathers, ed. Carol Harrison (Routledge, 1996), 156.
[151] Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 84.
[152] Louth, 85.

God, but participation in Logos, which allows affinity with God. It also implies a relationship with the true image of God, Christ, and the ability to hold communion with God.[153] The themes of participation, communion, and relationship are grounded in the idea of humans as bearing the image of God. Louth also notes that Maximus the Confessor develops a more pluralistic idea of the image of God, in which "the Church can be seen to be the image of God".[154] In all these ideas, we see the readiness for deification built into the doctrine of the image of God, but deification does not seem to influence the formation of the doctrine in the way it does in the West. In the West, Bavinck complains that the impact of deification in the *visio Dei*, combined with the doctrine of merit, births the doctrine of the *superaddendum*, which is then read back into Adam. Such a complex and interesting intermingling of ideas does not exist in the East.

3.3.3 Deification and Grace

The impact of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo led Athanasius to posit that grace existed even in creation. Louth says that "the soul in *De Incarnatione* is created *ex nihilo*, is frail, and depends on God's grace even for steadfastness before the fall". But there is more to Athanasius's understanding of grace. In section 38 of the *Orantiones Contra Arianos*, patristics scholar Anatolios Khaled translates Athanasius as saying:

> He was not promoted on account of having descended, but rather he himself promoted those things which needed advancement. And if he descended to accomplish the grace of their advancement, then he did not come to be called "Son" and "God" as a reward, but rather he himself made us sons for the Father and divinized human beings when he himself became a human being.[155]

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[153] Louth, 85–88.
[154] Louth, 93–94.
[155] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Early Church Fathers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 96.

The grace Athanasius is talking about is the grace of advancement, a grace that divinises human beings and clearly carries the connotation of promotion. While this is not a *superaddendum* per se, it is more likely to represent a transcendence of nature. This transcendence of nature reaches more prominence in Maximus the Confessor's treatise on the Lord's prayer, where he declares, "The Logos bestows adoption on us when He grants us that birth and deification which, transcending nature, comes by grace from above through the Spirit".[156]

This definition of grace as somehow physically transcending nature is an apparently steady stream of thought in the East. As Bavinck scholar Bintsarovskyi astutely observes, "Bavinck differentiates nature and grace primarily by arguing that grace, 'in its real sense,' was not necessary for Adam before the fall."[157] Here Bavinck would surely disagree with Athanasius. Bintsarovskyi further clarifies, "the inapplicability of the term 'grace' to the prelapsarian condition does not imply for Bavinck the absence of the supernatural dimension in human life, provided this dimension is not understood as being detached by nature."[158] In contrast, the transcendence of nature is present both in the prelapsarian stage and in postlapsarian thought in the East. Bavinck would surely see this transcending of nature as a misrepresentation of God's grace, which, to Bavinck, is always grace that frees man from sin and guilt, and not an elevation into the supernatural.

3.3.4 Deification and Hierarchies

Since, in Bavinck's view, it is the hierarchies in Pseudo-Dionysius that are the cause of such a scheme of thought in the West, I will analyse the theology of Maximus, who is chronologically after Pseudo-Dionysius. Louth's lecture, *Apophatic Theology and the Liturgy of St. Maximos the*

[156] Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 33.
[157] Bintsarovskyi, "God Hidden and Revealed," 226.
[158] Bintsarovskyi, "God Hidden and Revealed," 226.

Confessor, is a revealing source in examining the shape of Maximus's thinking about hierarchies. Louth says that the influence of Dionysian apophatic theology is evident in his works, but Maximus seems to use it in a very different fashion from Pseudo-Dionysius. He uses the apophatic to usher in an experience of God through the liturgy. This experience becomes a gateway to an encounter between God and man, and it is ascetically demanding. But is this only for ascetics, then? Louth answers negatively saying, "Hence the evocation of the threefold way of 'ethical philosophy' (or *praktiki*, or 'ascetic struggle'), natural contemplation, and mystical theology; it is a way open to any baptized Christian, and indeed a way required if we are to remain faithful to our baptism, but it is a way of human, or personal, transformation that is costly."[159] The design of the liturgy is replete with hierarchies. Still, the whole liturgy seems to be organised to allow all believers to express some form of ascetic endeavour as part of their communal participation.

Another important input in this regard comes from Maximus's approach to monastic life. As a monk, Maximus wanted to advise other ascetics on the praxis of real Christian living. American patristics scholar George C. Berthold examines Maximus's thought in this area. He says, "Maximus makes clear that praxis refers not only, or even mainly, to specifically monastic traditions such as fasting, vigils, psalmody, etc., but also to the practice of virtues and the struggle to acquire them. Seeking God through contemplation alone will be fruitless."[160] The ascetic who eschews community and is only busy with contemplation is not the type of monk Maximus has in mind. While I have been unable to find sources on how ordinary believers

[159] Andrew Louth, *Wisdom Of The Byzantine Church: Evagrios of Pontos and Maximos the Confessor*, ed. Jill Raitt (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1998), 38.
[160] George C. Berthold, "Christian Life and Praxis: The Centuries on Love," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), loc. 11563.

responded to Maximus's theology, his approach to hierarchies does not fit the pattern that Bavinck criticises.

3.3.5 Filioque and Mysticism

In addition to the topics covered regarding deification, Bavinck says something significant about the mystical theology in the East in connection with the *filioque*, and I believe it adds some depth to this evaluation that I would like to discuss. I would also like to recall that the theme of the primacy of mystical experience is an important one for Tamil Siddha,[161] and the rejection of the *filioque* brings a similar theme into focus in this chapter.

The *filioque* clause first appeared in the Third Council of Toledo (AD 589), and this doctrine has been a point of contention between the East and the West ever since.[162] Bavinck, commenting on the *filioque,* says that the Eastern Orthodox tradition regards the Father as the sole source of both the Son and the Spirit, with each person independently revealing the Father. The Son, on the one hand, does this through divine knowledge he communicates through the intellectual aspect. The Spirit, on the other hand, does this through the mystical enjoyment of God and emotions. Therefore,

> "Orthodoxy and mysticism, the intellect and the will, exist dualistically side by side. And this unique relation between orthodoxy and mysticism is the hallmark of Greek piety. Doctrine and life are separate. Doctrine is for the intellect; it is a suitable object for theological speculation. Alongside it there is another fountain of life: the mysticism of the Spirit. This mysticism does not arise from knowledge but has its own source and

[161] See §2.11.1

[162] American Church historian A. Edward Siecienski thinks that the filioque is among the most ancient debates in Christendom. See: A. Edward Siecienski, "The Filioque: A Brief History," in *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the 21st Century*, 1st ed., ed. Myk Habets (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2014), 7.

> nourishes the human heart. The head and the heart are not rightly aligned and related. Ideas and emotions are separate. The ethical linkage that should unite the two is lacking."[163]

The rejection of the *filioque* by the East leads Bavinck to express uneasiness about the mystical revelation of God the Father apart from the Son, which remains a possibility in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Binstarovskyi rightly says, "Bavinck claims that Eastern theologians not only separated the head from the heart in this way, but also gave higher priority to the heart, insisting that the religious life has more to do with feelings than with thought."[164] Further, according to Bavinck, "Orthodox opposition to the filioque is a last lingering remnant of subordinationism."[165] To put this in perspective, this weakness of a dual channel of revelation, with the emphasis on the mystical, places the Eastern Orthodox tradition in tension with Bavinck's Trinitarian theology, in which Bavinck sees the lack of the ethical as a bridge which could have healed this duality, and also a trinitarian model that sways more to the culture than to scripture in subordinating the Son and not truly treating as coeternal and coequal with the Father. Deification in the East must be seen in this broader context of the tension of Bavinck's critique of mysticism in connection with the rejection of the *filioque*.

3.3.6 Contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy on Deification

Thus far I have discussed the East in terms of a united Church up until John of Damascus. But the intercultural conversation has to be presented in the contemporary setting with Tamil Siddha. To bring the results of the evaluation into a contemporary frame for Eastern Orthodoxy, I would first like to define the term "deification" as it is understood today. In this bid, *the Oxford*

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[163] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:317–18.
[164] Bintsarovskyi, "God Hidden and Revealed," 210.
[165] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:317.

Handbook of Deification, edited by Ukrainian patristics scholar Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Dominican priest and patristics scholar Andrew Hofer and systematic theologian Matthew Levering, is helpful and reads:

> "Deification is a process and goal by which the human being or church or in some way the whole creation comes to participate in God, Christ, divine life, divine attributes, divine energies, or divine glory by growing into the likeness of God, while remaining a creature ontologically distinct from the Creator. This process is often also described as divine adoption, regeneration, glorification, sanctification, and union with God. Human deification is made possible by the incarnation of the divine Logos in Jesus Christ and is sustained by the Holy Spirit through the sacramental life of the church, prayer, ascetical discipline, and growth in virtue."[166]

In this definition, there is clarity on how deification occurs: it is in the uncreated divine energies. This is a later development from Gregory Palamas (AD 1296–1359)[167], which is carried over into contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology. This doctrine of uncreated energies poses a challenge to the divine simplicity of God. French-born Orthodox priest and theologian John Meyendorff (1926-1992) was instrumental in reviving interest in Palamas's theology. Meyendorff has argued that this doctrine should not be interpreted as a challenge to divine simplicity. But Bavinck scholar Bintsarovsky's complaint that "while Meyendorff clearly states that God's essence and energies are united rather than separated, he is less clear as to *how* they

[166] Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Andrew Hofer, and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* (New York: OUP Oxford, 2024), 5.

[167] Palamas's predecessors had begun to identify revelation with the uncreated light of God, citing important passages in the Bible, such as the transfiguration. Palamas then extended their thought and reworked it to propose that deification happens as humans are exposed to the uncreated energies of God, rather than the essence of God.

are united"[168] is a strong one and creates friction with Bavinck's trinitarian theology regarding divine simplicity.

Another trinitarian topic of concern to Bavinck is the rejection of the *filioque* I discussed in the previous section. British scholar of Eastern Orthodox theology, Stephen Thomas, who authored the section on deification in *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, helps in grasping the contemporary understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in mystical knowledge. He says, "We have intimate communion with Christ in a manner hidden from the world; it is mystical knowledge (Col. 3.4; 1 Pet. 3.3–4). We possess 'all truth,' knowledge of the Trinity, knowing by experience the relationship of the Father to the Son, because the Holy Spirit takes everything belonging to the Father and shows us that it also belongs to the Son (Jn.16.13–15)."[169] A careful reading of the text in John 16:13-15 will reveal that the Holy Spirit explicitly receives from the Son what He makes known to the disciples. Besides this, the knowledge discussed in the text is spoken knowledge[170] rather than mystical knowledge, as Thomas interprets it. The rejection of the *filioque* looms in the background of this theology, and Bavinck's concerns in this area are also valid in contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy's definition of deification.

I would also like to very briefly visit the praxis of deification to check if Bavinck's concerns around the priesthood of believers resurface. There is a very useful and concise resource that I would like to refer to: *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* by Archimandrite George (1935-2014), who was the abbot of Mount Athos monastery from 1974 until his death. The experience of deification happens in stages, and before the stages, there are qualifications for

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[168] Bintsarovskyi, "God Hidden and Revealed," 206.

[169] Stephen Thomas, "Deification," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 1st ed., ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Maiden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 183.

[170] The NIV translates verse 15 thus: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." The emphasis on speaking is evident in the text.

theosis. Firstly, it is humility;[171] secondly, it is asceticism;[172] and thirdly, it is the sacraments or holy mysteries[173] and the liturgy of the Church, where all these culminate. Once the qualifications are met, in the first stage, one undergoes repentance or metanoia.[174] In the second stage, one experiences Theoria. In Theoria, the human who has been cleansed of passions begins to see the uncreated light.[175] But humans may fail to achieve deification for the following reasons: Firstly, an attachment to the cares of everyday life rather than a godly disposition. Secondly, it is legalism or moralism, where the grace of God is undermined. Thirdly, it is buying into the myth of anthropocentric humanism, which dominates human life.[176] It is mostly monks who are apparently able to view the uncreated light. He speaks approvingly of asceticism, saying, "Many of the monks who experience Theosis and sanctification also help the whole Church, for, as we Christians believe, following the age-long holy Tradition of the Church, the struggle of the monks has a positive effect on the life of every struggling faithful in the world. In our Orthodoxy, the people of God have great reverence for Monasticism because of this."[177] This would lead me to believe that access to God in deification is, in theory, open to all humans, but only an elite few achieve deification.

In summary, the doctrine of the uncreated light and the rejection of the *filioque* create friction regarding deification within Bavinck's theology. It is highly doubtful that Bavinck would approve of such a doctrine of deification. Further, contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy has an

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[171] Archimandrite George, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* (Mount Athos, Greece: Holy Monastery of Saint Gregorios, 2006), 47.
[172] George, *Theosis*, 51–53.
[173] George, 53–56.
[174] George, *Theosis*, 57–58.
[175] George, 58–63.
[176] George, 64–68.
[177] George, 61.

official stance and a ground reality that differ in praxis regarding the priesthood of all believers. Monks are the elite few who have access to the deification experience.

3.4 Conclusion

I started this chapter to answer the following sub-question of this research project.

- What is Bavinck's view on the doctrine of theosis?

I attempted to answer this question descriptively from Bavinck's systematic theology in Reformed Dogmatics, supplemented by the expertise of Jaroslav Pelikan, a church historian of Christian doctrine, and that of Louth, an expert in Patristic studies and a representative theologian of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. I found that Bavinck's view of the doctrine of theosis is explicitly linked to his profound discomfort regarding the syncretic infiltration of Neoplatonic influences of Pseudo-Dionysius into Christian dogma. This must not be construed as a judgment on Neoplatonism itself. Just as the early Church Fathers, like Augustine, believed that Christians can use the truths discovered by pagan philosophers just as Israel took Egypt's gold and silver, Bavinck, too, is skilled in using philosophy to the best advantage. His irenic stance towards those he critiques is remarkable. In the section on the goodness of God in RD2, we find a discussion of God's love, where he says that God's love originates in God and, through his creatures, returns to him. He then quotes Pseudo-Dionysius in this regard, saying, "Pseudo-Dionysius, accordingly, spoke of God's love as 'an endless circle [travelling] 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.'"[178] Thus, I conclude that his stance is not a dismissal of Neoplatonism but a critique of theologians'

[178] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:216.

failure to use philosophy effectively, allowing syncretic elements to invade doctrine. In this case, it is the way deification was used in a syncretic fashion. The concerns of Bavinck around deification are connected to four important pillars in Bavinck's theology:

1. The Creator-Creature distinction: The infinite essence of God cannot be embraced, encompassed or dissolved into by the finite creature. A formulation of theosis that hints at such a "melting union" meets the rejection of Bavinck[179] because it ignores the truth that God "is positively infinite in his characteristic essence, absolutely perfect, infinite in an intensive, qualitative sense."[180]
2. The priesthood of all believers: Access to God through Jesus Christ is a reality that is open to all baptised believers in the Church. A hierarchical representation of the Church that allows for an elite class of believers who are the closest to Christ on earth because of their ascetic abilities of contemplation and achieving deification runs counter to the priesthood of all believers that the Reformation fought for.[181]
3. The ethical character of grace: God's grace must be understood primarily as ethical, which delivers humanity from the tragedy of sin and guilt. Thus, a physical portrayal of grace as that which exalts nature into the realm of the supernatural and accomplishes deification is incorrect according to Bavinck.[182]
4. Unified view of the Father's revelation through the Son and the Holy Spirit: The rejection of the *filioque* opens up the possibility of duality in revelation, where the Father reveals himself through the Son in intellectual ways, and the Spirit in the emotions and in mysticism. Bavinck rejects this dualism that separates the intellectual and the emotional,

[179] Refer for possible correspondence to 2.11.2
[180] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:148.
[181] Refer to §2.11.4
[182] Refer to §2.11.3

> and thus allows deification to function in a sphere of mysticism subtly divorced from the revelation of the Son, who, in Scripture, reveals the Father in all His fullness. Bavinck complains that this rejection is the last remnant of subordinationism.[183]

By harvesting these precise dogmatic insights, the ground is now cleared to transition from a descriptive study of Bavinck's view on theosis to an intercultural dialogue. To guide the upcoming intercultural conversation, I propose to carry forward these insights into a set of questions as follows:

1. What can be said about deification and the Creator-creation distinction?
2. In what way does deification provide equal access to God?
3. What understanding of divine grace does deification furnish?
4. What can we say about mysticism in connection with deification?

I will address these questions in the upcoming chapter.

[183] Refer for a connection to §2.11.1

Chapter Four: The Intercultural Conversation

In this chapter, I will answer the third sub-question of this research, which is:

- What can we learn about the similarities and differences between theosis and Śiva deification from a conversation between Bavinck, Ganapathy and Anand?

This is how I will structure this chapter: In §4.1, I will discuss the format of the intercultural conversation that I will stage to answer the sub-question above. Following this, from §4.2 to §4.5, I will stage the intercultural conversation around the four questions I proposed at the end of Chapter 3. To conclude this chapter, I will share my personal reflections on the conversation in §4.6.

4.1 Staging an Intercultural Conversation

The intercultural conversation I will stage will follow the method developed by Jos Colijn in his study *Testing the Waters: Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology*. I will stage this intercultural conversation and will play two roles in it:[184]

a. Moderator: In this role, I decide which topics to discuss in the intercultural conversation and invite the conversation partners into a scholarly exchange.
b. Conversation partner: I am a Reformed theologian from India, but as I disclosed earlier in the introductory chapter, I am an ex-practitioner of Śiva deification, which gives me mystical and theological expertise within the School of Tamil Siddha Hinduism. I will provide my own voice in this conversation at the end of the chapter.

Here are my four conversation partners:

[184] Colijn, "Testing the Waters," 157.

1. Bavinck

2. Eastern Orthodoxy

3. Indian Christian theologians

4. Indian Hindu Tamil Siddha theologians Ganapathy and Anand

Next, I will discuss the four topics which I identified as crucial in the last chapter.

4.2 What can be said about Deification and the Creator-Creation Distinction?

The voice of Bavinck, which is directed to the Church in the West, underscores the tendency of deification to smuggle in Neoplatonic ideas of *henosis* or, in Bavinck's words, a "melting union", which leads to the erasure of the creator-creation distinction in glory. Bavinck is strictly against such theology that ignores the truth that *Kaṭavuḷ* "is positively infinite in his characteristic essence, absolutely perfect, infinite in an intensive, qualitative sense,"[185] and thus, even in glory, man cannot access the essence of *Kaṭavuḷ*.

Eastern Orthodoxy does not falter in this area; on the contrary, not only does the tradition agree with Bavinck, but it also uses the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to deny such a possibility of deification that can erase the boundary between creator and creation, either in the now or in glory. But this position opens up a trinitarian friction. In a bid to maintain the creator-creation distinction and place deification at the heart of the Christian faith, Palamite theology distinguishes between the essence of *Kaṭavuḷ* and the uncreated energies of *Kaṭavuḷ*. *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* says, "According to Palamas, deified humans participate in the uncreated divine energies, but not in the divine essence. Thus, creatures participate in God without becoming identical with the divine essence."[186] This creates a new conundrum for

[185] See §3.4
[186] Gavrilyuk, Hofer, and Levering, *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, 6.

Bavinck because, for him, if *Kaṭavuḷ* "is in any sense composite, then it is impossible to maintain the perfection of his oneness, independence, and immutability."[187] Thus, while the creator-creation distinction is maintained in deification, it is unclear how the uncreated divine energies relate to Triune divine simplicity.[188] So Bavinck has a bone to pick with Eastern Orthodoxy on this subject. He would argue that such a view challenges divine simplicity. While offering some explanation as to how humans do not participate in the divine essence, it complicates matters further by introducing an alteration to the doctrine of *Kaṭavuḷ*.

Indian Christian theologians would largely align with Bavinck, especially those in the apologetic and confessional trajectory, but an explicit statement on this subject is lacking. In the interaction between Christian and *Śaiva* theologians, this subject is, unfortunately, not clearly explored either. There is some role for the Holy Spirit, but that is not the topic of the current question. None of the theologians seems interested in deification in relation to the creator-creation distinction, which is rather unfortunate.

Ganapathy and Anand enter the discussion with a fundamentally different metaphysical framework. While they agree that *Kaṭavuḷ* is indeed the creator of the cosmos, they wonder what Bavinck means by words such as "essence" of *Kaṭavuḷ*. Such terms are not part of their philosophy. They would argue that the soul, or *paśu,* is coeternal with *Kaṭavuḷ*,[189] and that the *paśu* can be reunited with *Kaṭavuḷ* and merge with him completely.[190] This can happen through *Kāya Sādhana*, where humans can become adept at *kuṇḍalinī Yoga* and achieve deification.[191] They also present the human body as the temple of *Kaṭavuḷ*,[192] and as one that is transformed

[187] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:149.
[188] See §3.3.6
[189] See §2.5
[190] See §2.6, §2.7 and §2.8
[191] See §2.7
[192] See §2.6

through deification. When this happens, humans can exhibit divine characteristics of *Kaṭavuḷ,* have a body with supernatural capabilities, and possess immortality.[193] Thus, Bavinck's urgent warnings fail to make sense to Ganapathy and Anand due to the difference in context.

On the other hand, neither Bavinck nor Indian Christian theologians have thought about the human body in connection with deification. If Ganapathy and Anand were to ask how the human body is transformed in the act of deification, the Eastern Orthodox theologians would have much to say about it. The Archimandrite says, "Those who are very advanced in Theosis see this light, very few in each generation. God's Saints see it and appear within it, and, incidentally, this is what the halos in the holy icons show us."[194] So in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there is a halo of uncreated light that is seen and saints experiencing deification are also seen inside of the light, bodily. Also, "The Grace of Theosis preserves the bodies of the Saints incorruptible, and these are the holy relics which exude myrrh and work miracles."[195] So there are notable bodily changes, such as incorruptibility after death, and post-death bodies that exude fragrance and work wonders. The abbot sums it up rather well when he says, "Therefore, in the Church, we enjoy the Grace of Theosis not only with our psyche, but also with our body, because as the temple of the Holy Spirit Who dwells in it, and shares its struggles with the psyche, the body is surely glorified."[196]

In conclusion, all four conversation partners meet each other in considering deification as an important concept with high stakes in conversation, but navigate the boundaries of deification in relation to the creator-creation distinction in unique ways. Bavinck and the Eastern Orthodox tradition agree that deification should not obliterate the creator-creation distinction. Ganapathy

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[193] See §2.8
[194] George, *Theosis*, 58–59.
[195] George, 59.
[196] George, *Theosis*, 60.

and Anand, on the other hand, diverge from Bavinck and Eastern Orthodoxy as they come from a different metaphysical framework where the soul is coeternal and can completely merge with *Kaṭavuḷ*. They go beyond this and also provide a positive role for the human body in deification, indicating that the deified body achieves immortality and has miraculous powers. In this latter aspect, they find common ground with Eastern Orthodoxy, where the effect of deification through uncreated energies on saints has bodily effects, such as post-death bodies that do not yield to corruption, can work miracles and exude the smell of myrrh. The saints' bodies also appear in the uncreated light and are depicted as halos. Indian Christian theologians present a notable lacuna in the specific relation between deification and the creator-creation distinction.

4.3 In what way does Deification Provide Equal Access to *Kaṭavuḷ*?

Bavinck argues for equal access to *Kaṭavuḷ,* saying that the Scriptures know "only one idea of humanness, one moral law, one final destiny, and one priesthood, which is the portion of all believers."[197] The concept of deification can destroy this equal access to *Kaṭavuḷ* because it recognises the superiority of the ascetic who, through contemplation, can be closest to Christ.[198] This runs counter to the scriptures, in Bavinck's view, and he is rather insistent that this is what the Reformers fought against. The Eastern Orthodox tradition would agree with Bavinck in principle. For instance, Thomas, speaking about the feast of the Transfiguration, says, "The teaching of the feast is also about the possibility for every human being to experience the glory of God, his uncreated light, and to be transformed by it."[199] But Archimandrite George confirms that this uncreated light is seen by fewer and fewer people with each passing generation, and it is

[197] Bavinck, *RD*, 2:546.
[198] See §3.2.4
[199] Thomas, "Deification," 186.

predominantly monks who see it.[200] So what is practised is vastly different from the promise one finds in the feast of transfiguration.

If this question were addressed to Indian Christian theologians responding to Hindu mysticism, there is again a lack of depth and clarity around the connection between deification and equal access to *Kaṭavuḷ*. It is not possible to ascertain what each trajectory would say on this subject, because deification and access to *Kaṭavuḷ* are not the subject of their theology at all. This is not so, at least in Eastern Orthodoxy. While praxis and what is promised in principle might differ, the theological tradition treats this question with seriousness, a fact that must be appreciated.

A trend similar to that of the Eastern Orthodox tradition is observed in the Tamil Siddha tradition. In principle, all souls or *paśu* yearn to return to *Kaṭavuḷ*. However, the art of *Kāya Sādhana,* through which one achieves deification, paints a different picture. There are no written sources confirming that women can achieve deification through *Kāya Sādhana*. Furthermore, there is no evidence that people with physical or developmental difficulties can participate in *Kāya Sādhana*.[201] Anand warns that it takes a very long time to achieve deification if one starts after the age of fifty.[202] Many limitations might indicate this is not for everyone. It might be thought of as an elitist method of *henosis*, that is, possible only for a few mystic practitioners and not for the ordinary believer.

In conclusion, all participants meet deeply on a shared theological ideal that access to *Kaṭavuḷ* should be universal, yet they diverge in how this ideal is realised. Eastern Orthodoxy has elitism in the institution of the monastery, with mostly monks who see the uncreated light. Tamil Siddha does not allow women, children, and humans with physical or developmental difficulties to

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[200] See §3.3.6
[201] See §2.11.4
[202] Anand, “Inner Initiation for Transcendence,” 412.

access *Kāya Sādhana*. Bavinck stands in contrast to both these developments and points out that deification in reality compromises equal access to God. Indian theologians, unfortunately, do not treat the subject in depth, leaving the relationship between deification and accessibility insufficiently probed.

4.4 What Understanding of Divine Grace does Deification Furnish?

Bavinck, speaking about the mysticism that led the West to define grace as elevating humans into a divine order, says, "The Reformation rejected this Neoplatonic mysticism, returned to the simplicity of Holy Scripture, and consequently gained a very different concept of grace. Grace serves not to take up humans into a supernatural order, but to free them from sin."[203] Eastern Orthodoxy views grace very differently from Bavinck. Thomas says, "Grace is aligned with the rays of the Divine Trinity, the energies put forth by the Persons."[204] This logically implies that humans, as natural beings, transcend that which is natural through coming in contact with grace. Humans can cooperate with this grace, as Thomas says, "Free will and agreement, the energy of the created being, is necessary for salvation. Which comes through synergy, the union of divine grace and human will". This again is opposed to Bavinck's view, where "Grace restores nature and takes it to its highest pinnacle, but it does not add to it any new and heterogeneous constituents."[205]

Indian Christian theologians do not treat grace in depth in connection with Hindu mysticism, as Bavinck does or as the Eastern Orthodox tradition does. In their attempt to pioneer in the Hindu mysticism space, grace is not a leading subject and remains in the background. The clarity that

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[203] See §3.2.3
[204] Stephen Thomas, "Grace," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 1st ed., ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Maiden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 280.
[205] Bavinck, *RD*, 3:577.

Bavinck brings is simply lacking in the conversation with Hindu mysticism. The same cannot be said of Ganapathy and Anand, who have a conception of grace that is contextually dissimilar but well-defined. *Kaṭavuḷ* is the Lord of the souls, or *paśu pati,* and cares for them. It is grace through which *Kaṭavuḷ* places the soul in the human body, thereby freeing it from its primordial impurity of ego.[206] Further, *Kaṭavuḷ* is the supreme guru,[207] who is head over all human gurus, teaching the art of *Kāya Sādhana* to their disciples. Thus, there is grace in the progression of *Kāya Sādhana* that can be attributed to *Kaṭavuḷ*. He is the one orchestrating the process from start to end, from when he sends the coeternal soul into the cosmos in a human body, through the grace of teaching it how to perform *Kāya Sādhana,* and finally confirming success by manifesting himself in the body of those who have perfected the art.[208]

It would be alien to Ganapathy and Anand to grasp that *Kaṭavuḷ* saves humans from sin through grace. Bavinck's ethical connection between *Kaṭavuḷ,* sin and grace is not natural to the Tamil Siddha tradition. Tamil Siddha is not seeking freedom from sin, but freedom from a body that houses impurities and cannot express the divine in its natural physical form. The paradigms are utterly different.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition does understand the gravity of sin, but treats it very differently and does not see grace as freedom from sin as Bavinck defines it. Thomas says, "Foreign to the Eastern Churches is a version of atonement theology in which Christ's suffering on the cross satisfies the offence of human sin to the divine majesty and justice."[209] The emphasis is on a therapeutic message, where "Christ voluntarily suffered in order that the divine nature might

[206] See §2.5
[207] See §2.9
[208] See §2.8
[209] Thomas, "Deification," 186.

encounter suffering and attain the victory over death".[210] Both Eastern Orthodoxy and Tamil Siddha do not align with Bavinck in this area.

In conclusion, all conversation partners meet on the theological principle that grace is indispensable for reaching *Kaṭavuḷ*, but the meaning of grace varies considerably. Bavinck holds that grace is ethical in nature and redeems man from sin and guilt and restores nature. The Eastern Orthodox tradition does not dismiss sin, but its primary definition of grace is that it helps man transcend nature through the cooperation of the human will. Neither definition finds common ground with Tamil Siddha, where Ganapathy and Anand treat grace as *Kaṭavuḷ's* active guidance in herding the soul back to him by placing it in a body, leading it through the process of *Kāya Sādhana,* and finally confirming success by granting deification through complete body transformation. Indian Christian theologians remain vague about how to define grace in the context of Hindu mysticism, leaving this critical theological topic unclear.

4.5 What can we say about Mysticism in connection with Deification?

Bavinck treats Eastern Orthodoxy's approach to mysticism with caution because of its dual presentation of revelation, which he finds off the mark. Bavinck recommends a unified, integrated approach to understanding how humans experience God, in which both the intellectual and mystical aspects work together. Bavinck connects this duality to the rejection of the *filioque*.[211] In this respect, it is interesting to note that according to a contemporary theologian on the Filioque, A. Edward Siecienski, prominent Eastern Orthodox theologians like Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) complain that the Western greats like Anselm and Thomas Aquinas "had the effect of relativising and depersonalising the hypostases and were rightly rejected by the

[210] Thomas, 186.
[211] See §3.3.5 and §3.3.6

East". This sets the tone for the dialogue on the *filioque,* in which Eastern Orthodoxy in contemporary times criticises the West for lacking a mystical component in which the Triune God is experienced rather than intellectually grasped. Meyendorff, for instance, according to Binstarovskyi, went so far as to claim that the "supposed key to solving the *filioque* issue lay in analysis of the Christian *experience*".[212]

The East seems to be pointing out that the West lacks an experiential aspect to its faith. Bavinck, on the other hand, thinks that the East has lost its way because it has divorced the mystical from the intellectual. He would evidently complain about Ganapathy and Anand's conception of mystic experience as one that "cannot be considered as 'true' or 'false' in the ordinary sense in which empirical facts are true or false, for they go beyond the 'either-or' pattern of the logic of understanding".[213] But here, a new problem arises: the priority of experience does not require intellectual validation, and this is perhaps what Bavinck is worried about. He would have liked a single, unified revelation of the Father in Eastern Orthodoxy, in which both the intellectual and the mystical would work in tandem. This would allow the Holy Spirit to reveal something that can intellectually be verified as glorifying the Son. The risk of interpreting the Spirit's work as somehow autonomous from the validation of the Son's seal of approval as glorifying himself is real, especially in today's pluralistic world, and more importantly in the conversation with Hindu mysticism.[214] Indian Christian theologians have again come up short in this area. No theologian seems to explicitly mention the *filioque* when thinking about mysticism, nor do they seem to grasp that Hindu mysticism is an epistemology in itself that requires no further validation by the intellect. Thus, when a *Śaiva* mystic experiences deification, theologians like Descy are unable to

[212] Bintsarovskyi, "God Hidden and Revealed," 160.
[213] Ganapathy, "The Mysticism of the Thirumandiram," 259.
[214] Such an unfortunate separated autonomy of the Spirit is present in Panikkar's theology and Descy too seems to be bordering on such error.

confront it and instead adopt a posture of adulation, which culminates in a syncretic communication of the gospel.

In conclusion, all participants agree that mysticism is an undeniable part of how humans relate to God. However, there is a spectrum of how mysticism is related to the intellect. For Bavinck, mysticism must not serve as an autonomous mode of revelation, but must be tightly knit to Scripture and intellectual knowledge. The Eastern Orthodox tradition critiques the West for its dry intellectualism and depersonalization of the Trinity. It separates mysticism from intellectual knowledge as a revelation hidden from the world. It allows mystical experiences to serve as an epistemological basis for theology – a position tied to the rejection of the *filioque*. Ganapathy and Anand take this mystic autonomy a step further in claiming that mystic experiences of deification do not need any rational ratification and entirely transcend the empirical. Indian Christian theologians present a notable gap in these areas as well, and due to their vagueness, can end up with a posture of adulation for Hindu mysticism and veer towards syncretism.

4.6 Tabular Summary of the Intercultural Conversation

I want to present the findings of the various positions of agreement and departure among the conversationalists in the form of a table as follows:

Table 4a: Summary of Intercultural Conversation

Conversation Topic	**Bavinck**	**Eastern Orthodoxy**	**Tamil Siddha**	**Indian Christian Theologians**
Creator-Creation Distinction	1. Strongly opposes “melting union”.	1.Strongly opposes “melting union” via *creatio ex nihilo*, solves using Palamism	1.The soul (paśu) is coeternal with kaṭavuḷ and can achieve complete merging.	1. lacks an explicit, well-elaborated statement on this subject.

	2. Does not address or conceptualize bodily changes or physical transformation in relation to deification.	2. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Advanced saints physically experience/radiate uncreated light (halos), miraculous post-death relics	2. The body is the temple of *kaṭavuḷ*. Deification Results in supernatural physical abilities, divine characteristics, and physical immortality.	2. Like Bavinck, neglect the theological relationship between the human body and deification.
Equality of Access to *kaṭavuḷ*	Asserts strictly equal access for all believers. Rejects contemplative/monastic elitism.	Tension (Principle vs. Praxis): Affirms equal access in principle yet in practice, experiencing the uncreated light is largely limited to monastic ascetics, decreasing over generations.	Tension (Principle vs. Praxis): Although all souls yearn for *kaṭavuḷ*, the practice of *Kāya Sādhana* is elitist. It excludes women, lacks proof for those with physical/developmental difficulties, and is difficult for the aged	Lack of depth and theological clarity. No clear stance on equal access versus mystical elitism.
Understanding of Divine Grace	1.Grace restores nature to its highest pinnacle and frees humans from sin; it does not elevate nature into a supernatural, divine order or add heterogeneous constituents. 2. Grace is fundamentally connected to deliverance from the guilt and power of moral sin against God's justice.	1. Grace is the uncreated energy of the Trinity that elevates humans beyond nature. Requires human free will and cooperation (synergy) to achieve salvation. 2. Rejects Western satisfaction/atonement schemas. Christ's victory over death serves as a healing remedy enabling human participation in divine life.	1. *Kaṭavuḷ* offers grace through placing the soul in a body to free it from primordial ego. He acts as the supreme guru, orchestrating the *Kāya Sādhana* path from start to bodily manifestation. 2. Liberation is not freedom from moral guilt, but liberation from the three impurities that hold the soul back from *Kaṭavuḷ*.	1. Does not treat grace with depth in relation to Hindu mysticism; the topic is pushed to the background 2. Fails to address the divergence between the ethical category of sin and the liberation of the Siddha tradition.
Mysticism and Deification	Insists the intellectual and mystical must work in tandem under a single, unified revelation of the Father,	Charges the West with depersonalizing Kaṭavuḷ. Asserts that Triune reality must be experientially lived and participated in rather than	Mystical experience is its own proof, going entirely beyond standard "either-or" logic. It bypasses and does not require intellectual validation.	Fails to recognize Hindu mysticism as an autonomous epistemology.

	verified by the Son and the Spirit. Troubled by the duality of Eastern Orthodoxy	intellectually systematized.		Unable to critically assess mystical claims, leading to uncritical adulation (e.g., Descy) and syncretism. Does not recognize the role of the filioque in mysticism as well.

4.7 Personal Reflections

In winding up this chapter, I would like to offer some personal reflections on this intercultural conversation, drawing on my past expertise in Tamil Siddha and my current position as an Indian Reformed theologian.

Firstly, I would like to highlight the similarity between *Śiva* deification and *henosis* in Neoplatonism. I have already highlighted that the scheme of creation in Tamil Siddha bears resemblance to Neoplatonic emanation.[215] Further, the soul's ascent back to Śiva through *Kāya Sādhana*[216] is a striking parallel to the Neoplatonic ascent. Above all, the final stage of Śiva deification, where the practitioner becomes one with Śiva, seems like a more extreme form of *henosis* and even hints at a permanent state of deification, in which an irreversible merging has taken place.[217] I say an extreme form of *henosis* because, comparatively, Plotinus's experiences

[215] See §2.3
[216] See §2.7
[217] See §2.8

seem to be temporary, and Porphyry provides us with data about these experiences that he personally observed – they were four in number.[218] This points to a *henosis* that was not permanent; Plotinus could experience it for a while and then, arguably, return to normalcy. Ganapathy and Anand give us the picture of a rather permanent change in the individual who is deified. This link between Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha is something I will explore in the next chapter, when I will attempt to contextualise the dialogue.

Secondly, the unmistakable parallels between the Eastern Orthodox tradition, due to its Greek cultural background and the Tamil Siddha tradition are hard for me to ignore. Mysticism as an epistemology for expressing the divine is common to both.[219] Another theme of similarity becomes evident when I explore the roots of deification in each tradition. In my opinion, the search for immortality is the driving force behind the presentation of experience as the doctrine of deification. Tamil Siddha preaches deification through Yoga as the answer to immortality, and Eastern Orthodoxy maintains that deification through the uncreated energies of the Triune God is the precursor to immortal life, which will arrive in the eschaton. But even in the here and now, some saints can experience the effects of the coming immortal life, such as their post-death bodies showing signs of incorruptibility, smelling like myrrh, and having miraculous effects, and so on.[220]

Thirdly, I would like to emphasise that depth in contextual dialogue that addresses deification is hitherto lacking in Indian Christian theology, as I have demonstrated in this comparison. This finding reinforces the gap that this research aims to address. I hope that Indian Reformed theologians will have a clearer focus on this subject for future dialogue with Tamil Siddha.

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[218] See §3.1.1
[219] See §4.6
[220] See §4.3

Fourthly, it is important to note that neither Bavinck nor the Indian theologians have any answers for Ganapathy and Anand when they claim that the body is the temple of *Kaṭavuḷ* in relation to deification. The Eastern Orthodox tradition offers answers that seem to address this claim. The same goes for the impact of deification on the body, where we see that the miraculous nature of the post-death body that smells of myrrh does not corrupt and can work miracles in Eastern Orthodoxy.[221]

Finally, given the similarities and differences between the dialogue partners, bringing the fruits of this dialogue to bear on the Tamil Siddha context is unlikely to be a smooth transition for Bavinck. This is due to differences in context and worldviews, and I will call out limitations that are difficult to surmount.

With these in mind, I will now move to the next chapter, where I will focus on contextualising the findings for the Tamil Siddha context.

[221] I must point out that the bodily impact of deification does look mythical in both Tamil Siddha and Eastern Orthodoxy

Chapter Five: Lessons from the Reformed Intercultural Conversation

In this chapter, I would like to find an answer to the final sub-question of this research, which is:

- What can we learn from this conversation above for an Indian Reformed apologetic dialogue on deification with Tamil Siddha mysticism?

To do this, in § 5.1, I will apply Flemming's model to the intercultural conversation from the previous chapter to contextualise it. In §5.2, I will share my theological reflections on the mutual lessons learned from the contextualisation, which will answer the sub-question.

5.1 Applying Flemming's model for Contextualisation

In the previous chapter, I staged an intercultural conversation, and now I will use these inputs from Bavinck, Eastern Orthodoxy, and, where possible, Indian Christian theologians to contextualise them using Flemming's model[222] for the Tamil Siddha context. This will allow me to deduce lessons from the contextualised conversation for an Indian Reformed apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha.

5.1.1 Affirming Culture

Firstly, the most foundational theme that needs affirming in Tamil Siddha is the ability to express *Kaṭavuḷ* as the creator of the cosmos. There is no doubt in Tamil Siddha that the world exists

[222] See §1.8 for details on Flemming's contextualization model

because of *Kaṭavuḷ*. This is a firm base on which the apologetic model for Tamil Siddha can be built, as all Christian participants in the intercultural dialogue agree here.

Secondly, all Christian conversationalists would affirm that *Kaṭavuḷ* is sovereign in all his ways and dealings with men. This theme is central to Tamil Siddha and conveyed by the title *kōn*, or the supreme king of the cosmos. No one in the cosmos can contest the powerful sovereignty of the *kōn*, and this falls well in line with the idea of *Kaṭavuḷ's* sovereignty in Christian theology. Thirdly, the love and grace of *Kaṭavuḷ,* which are active in bringing back souls to him, need to be acknowledged. These are aptly conveyed by the Tamil term *paśu pati,* or the Lord of the souls. This can also be broadly translated as the herder or even shepherd of the soul. This seems to express that *Kaṭavuḷ* is intimately concerned about humans and wants to fellowship with them. This theme will find a warm reception among the Christian conversational partners, especially Bavinck, who, while not too pleased with several syncretic aspects of Pseudo-Dionysius's work, does him justice by appreciating the presentation of God's love influenced by Neoplatonism. Finally, all Christian conversation partners would affirm the seriousness with which Tamil Siddha approaches human separation from *Kaṭavuḷ*. The uncompromised, intense discipline required in *Kāya Sādhana* to remove the impurities of *āṇava mala, māyā mala, and karma mala* is a testament to this fact. While its diagnosis of the reason for the separation might be challenged, the importance it gives to the intensity of the separation is exceptional and needs to be identified and affirmed.

5.1.2 Relativising Culture

Tamil Siddha revealed an elitist attitude in solving the separation between man and *Kaṭavuḷ*. *Kāya Sādhana* and *kuṇḍalinī Yoga* are not for everyone and are reserved for younger males who are successful in finding an accomplished guru who can take them on as students. Little children,

women of all ages, men who are approaching an older age, and men who struggle with physical or developmental challenges are all excluded from being students of *Kāya Sādhana*. While Eastern Orthodoxy,[223] or even Indian Christian theologians,[224] will struggle to relativise the elitist culture of Tamil Siddha, Bavinck would surely relativise the requirements of *Kāya Sādhana,* in which women, children, older men, and anyone with physical or other developmental challenges cannot bridge the gap between themselves and *Kaṭavuḷ* that Tamil Siddha's deification promises.[225]

5.1.3 Confronting Culture

Firstly, Christian dialogue partners[226] would confront Ganapathy and Anand on the coeternity of the human soul in Tamil Siddha. Ganapathy and Anand hold that *Kaṭavuḷ* is *kōn*, the Supreme sovereign King of the Cosmos.[227] If the soul or *paśu* is coeternal with *pati*, and *Kaṭavuḷ* is not the author of souls, His power is merely one related to governance, not sovereign ownership as the true source of its origin. Further, the impurity of the primordial ego, *āṇava mala,* is also an eternal, uncreated entity that shrouds the soul.[228] Thus, *Kaṭavuḷ* in Tamil Siddha has to work around this coeternal defect of the soul, an entity that He did not create, that hinders souls that are coeternal alongside him. It is difficult for Ganapathy and Anand to justify the title of *kōn* on this account, and at the same time posit the soul as coeternal.

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[223] Eastern Orthodoxy agrees in principle that elitism is wrong, but in praxis ascetics are elite. See 4.3 for more details.
[224] Indian Christian theologians do not explore this elitism in connection with Hindu mysticism.
[225] See §2.7 and §2.11.4
[226] Within Indian Christian theologians, the Apologetics stream would be keen to address this confrontation. From other trajectories too I expect participation. But there may be outliers like Aleaz.
[227] See §2.2
[228] See §2.5

Secondly, they[229] would confront Ganapathy and Anand for diagnosing the human problem of separation from *Kaṭavuḷ* as an issue with the human body in its natural state, containing the impurities of *āṇava mala, māyā mala, and karma mala,* which is incapable of expressing the divine.[230] If it is hard to justify the coeternity of the soul and also claim that *Kaṭavuḷ* is *kōn*, it is equally hard to justify the coeternity of the primordial ego. The scheme of impurities does not seem like a sound explanation for the problem of separation between *Kaṭavuḷ* and humans. Further, it is not only men who feel this separation, but also women and children and all sorts of humans. However, since the explanation is strongly associated with the natural human body, within a patriarchal culture, only strong young males can overcome the impurities, leaving the others hopeless.

Thirdly, it is possible to confront Tamil Siddha on its mystical epistemology, which cannot be scrutinised by reason, with Bavinck[231]. This is not reasonable or supportable because the experiences of deification claim to bless practitioners with immortality.[232] Yet, there are no known practitioners of *Kāya Sādhana* who have attained immortality and are alive today.[233]

Finally, it is possible to confront Tamil Siddha's definition of grace, where *Kaṭavuḷ* herds the soul back to him through *Kāya Sādhana* and Yoga. Both Bavinck and Eastern Orthodoxy would challenge this definition of grace because the diagnosis of the separation between *Kaṭavuḷ* and humans is faulty, as described in the second confrontation above, and any definition of grace that is constructed within that understanding is not reliable.

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[229] Here too I do not expect some Indian Christian theologians who are outliers like Aleaz to join in.
[230] See §2.11.6 and §2.7
[231] Eastern Orthodoxy has a very similar tendency as Tamil Siddha to exalt the mystical aspect. Indian theologians do not treat this epistemological problem in detail. Only Bavinck has a strong viewpoint here.
[232] See §2.8
[233] My own guru was in his forties when I was a teenager. His guru he said was over too hundred years old (which I have doubts about), but he was not alive when I was initiated into *Kāya Sādhana*.

5.1.4 Transforming Culture

5.1.4.1 Transforming the Human Soul as Created and not Coeternal

Firstly, the area that needs transformation is the doctrine of creation in Tamil Siddha, especially the coeternal soul that I confronted. If *kaṭavuḷ* is truly *kōn*, the sovereign king of the cosmos, then the word can be moved from a framework in which He merely manipulates coeternal entities to one in which He is the true author of the world and everything in it. With such a transformation, *kōn* is no longer someone who inherits a pre-existing cosmic realm pre-populated with coeternal entities; rather, He is the true sovereign who creates *paśu*, the soul, out of nothing, just as he created the whole created order or *ulakam* out of nothing. In this transformed idea of kōn, *kaṭavuḷ* is truly sovereign, as He alone is eternal and worthy of worship. Humans and the whole cosmos do not share in His eternal nature. I want to call this idea of creation *illāmaiyiliruntu paṭaippu,* or creation out of nothing, or *creatio ex nihilo*. Constructing this into a full theological sentence could read something like this: *kōn, illāmaiyiliruntu ellāvatraiyum paṭaippavaṉ* or the sovereign king is the one who creates all things *ex nihilo*. I consider this a start, but a much more involved and intricate *creatio ex nihilo* project in constructive theology could be the subject of future research. In my opinion, this transformation is hard to syncretise within Tamil Siddha theology, because a coeternal soul is at the heart of its theology, and denying that would only invite a response that contradicts it rather than absorbs it.

5.1.4.2 Transforming the Creator-Creation Distinction

Secondly, having established that *Kaṭavuḷ*, the sovereign king or *kōn,* is the one who creates all things *ex nihilo,* it is important to address the creator-creation distinction and bring clarity in this area. I want to convey that *Kaṭavuḷ* "is positively infinite in his characteristic essence, absolutely

perfect, infinite in an intensive, qualitative sense,"[234] and humans are finite creatures. One way to effect this transformation could be as follows: If *Kaṭavuḷ* alone is eternal,[235] then the possibility of *paśu*, or the human soul, merging into *Kaṭavuḷ* must be reconsidered by Ganapathy and Anand because man is qualitatively and not just quantitatively, limited when compared to God's essence. But Ganapathy and Anand are not familiar with the terminology of "essence". This disconnect reveals interdisciplinary and theological research gaps. The interdisciplinary gap is the absence of comparative philosophy between Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha philosophy. The theological gap is the lack of contextual trinitarian theology for the *Śaiva Siddhānta* context. If the two areas are bridged, contextual communication would be of a higher quality. Still, it is possible to move forward with existing resources. The Church of South India has a Tamil-language translation of the Nicene Creed[236], which could convey the idea of 'essence'. Section 3, which in the Greek text reads "*ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί*"[237], and the Tamil equivalent is "*pitāvōṭē orē taṉmaiyuṭaiyavar*", where the word for essence is translated as *taṉmai*. Using the word *taṉmai,* it is possible to say something like:

Kaṭavuḷuṭaiya taṉmai muṟṟilum paripūraṇamāṉatum, tara-rītiyāka ellaiyaṟṟatum ākum. Āṉāl maṉitaṉuṭaiya taṉmai paṭaikkappaṭṭatum, ellaiyuṭaiyatum ākum. Ākaiyāl maṉitaṉuṭaiya taṉmai Kaṭavuḷuṭaiya taṉmaiyōṭu kalantoṉṟākavō allatu atē taṉmaiyākavō āka muṭiyātu.

In English:

[234] See §4.2 and §3.4
[235] Established above
[236] Church of South India, "Nicene Creed Tamil Full 14 Sections | PDF," Scribd, sec. 3, accessed June 28, 2026, https://www.scribd.com/document/857891343/Nicene-Creed-Tamil-Full-14-Sections-1-1.
[237] "The Nicene Creed - Agreed at the Council of Constantinople in 381," sec. 3, accessed June 28, 2026, https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/nicene_creed.htm.

The essence of God is absolutely perfect and infinite in an intensive, qualitative sense, whereas the essence of humanity is created and finite. Therefore, the essence of humanity can neither merge with nor become identical to the essence of God.[238]

In my opinion, this transformation is also hard to syncretise within Tamil Siddha because it goes against the grain of henosis.

5.1.4.3 Introduction to Transforming Human Separation

Thirdly, the area that needs to be transformed is the understanding of Tamil Siddha around the normal physical body as the locus of human separation from *Kaṭavuḷ,* due to the presence of the impurities of *āṇava mala, māyā mala,* and *karma mala*. This is a key area of transformation because it also transforms the concept of deification and provides a way for Tamil Siddha theologians to think beyond *Kāya Sādhana* and *kuṇḍalinī Yoga* as means of reconciliation with *Kaṭavuḷ.* There are two distinct ways to approach this transformation.

5.1.4.4 Transforming Human Separation the Eastern Orthodoxy Way

Firstly, I would like to explore the possibilities for transformation within Eastern Orthodoxy. Eastern Orthodoxy would argue that human nature tends toward corruption and death and involves the whole human, not just the human body. Thus, the way to immortality cannot be *Kāya Sādhana*. Unless *Kaṭavuḷ* himself becomes man through the incarnation as a descent, an escape from mortal and corruptible human nature or an ascent back to *Kaṭavuḷ* is impossible. In the incarnation, *Kaṭavuḷ* becomes man in Jesus Christ, takes on the corruptibility of human

[238] For now, I cannot say with certainty how effective this form of communication will be. But I intend this to be merely a temporary example until the gaps of comparative philosophy between Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha philosophy and contextual trinitarian theology for the *Śaiva Siddhānta* context are addressed.

nature, experiences death on the cross, and defeats it. The concept of *Kaṭavuḷ's* grace can be transformed as one that helps overcome the limits of human nature to live a divine life.

The Eastern Orthodox approach is powerful and can translate with minimal dependencies. Further transformation of the mystical aspect of deification is also possible. Tamil Siddha theologians can be introduced to the Eastern Orthodox view of deification, where the mystical practices of seeing the uncreated light of *Kaṭavuḷ* can be shared.[239] But this approach has one serious risk: while Tamil Siddha theologians would be attracted to the mystical aspect, they would wonder why they should trade *Kāya Sādhana*'s way of seeing the uncreated light for Eastern Orthodoxy's way. If the results of the mystical experience are comparable, the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ may not make sense to Tamil Siddha theologians. In terms of dependencies, a native Palamite theology will add depth to the dialogue around deification and grace.

5.1.4.5 Transforming Human Separation the Bavinck Way

Secondly, there is the Bavinck way. It recognises the intensity of effort required in *Kāya Sādhana* to overcome these impurities. It invites Tamil Siddha to recognise the seriousness of the separation, and to understand that the transformation required for this idea is that sin separates man from *Kaṭavuḷ*. Once sin is a category that is clear to Tamil Siddha theologians, it is possible to introduce Jesus Christ as the one who takes away the sins of the world. But here lies the problem. Tamil Siddha works within the framework of impurities. The idea of *Kaṭavuḷ* as the righteous judge of man's sin cannot take root unless there are first other projects that deeply analyse the concept of impurities in man, the purity of *Kaṭavuḷ* and come up with a constructive Christian hamartiology that can clearly convey the holiness of *Kaṭavuḷ* and bring to light the

[239] Tamil Siddha theologians can relate to *Kaṭavuḷ* as light (see §2.2). A further Palamite explanation may not be required at the initial stages of the apologetic dialogue. But for a rich engagement, this is essential.

seriousness of sin.[240] Without solving the dependency of a native hamartiology, it is not possible to make progress with even initial discussions, as the conversation will break down due to contextual differences.

Four more themes of transformation hinge on a convincing contextual hamartiology. Firstly, assuming that the understanding of sin is rightly secured, Jesus Christ as the Son of God who dies for the sins of the whole world, and who reconciles *Kaṭavuḷ* and man, can be shared. Secondly, the transformation of the understanding of grace as rescuing man from sin and guilt can be attempted. Thirdly, it is important to communicate and transform the area of equal access to *Kaṭavuḷ*. Jesus Christ as mediator opens up equal access for all humans of all sexes and ages, which is a powerful message that can transform the elite restrictions of *Kāya Sādhana*. Finally, the right presentation of revelation from *Kaṭavuḷ* through Jesus Christ as a combination of mystic and intellectual components can also be transformed. It is difficult to achieve these transformations successfully unless Bavinck's thoughts recast sin as the real problem separating humans from God within Tamil Siddha.

In summary, the Eastern Orthodox approach can work with very few dependencies as long as the conversation does not venture into complex theological terms or Palamite theology. With Palamite theology, the apologetic dialogue can take on more depth in discussing deification and grace. However, this approach can pose a major risk: the mystic experiences are comparable, and Tamil Siddha theologians may not see the advantage of accepting Jesus Christ and practising deification the Eastern Orthodox way, only to see the same uncreated light that is also accessible in a comparable form through *Kāya Sādhana*. While Bavinck's approach lacks the mystical appeal of Eastern Orthodoxy, when complete, it can retain the uniqueness of Christ as the

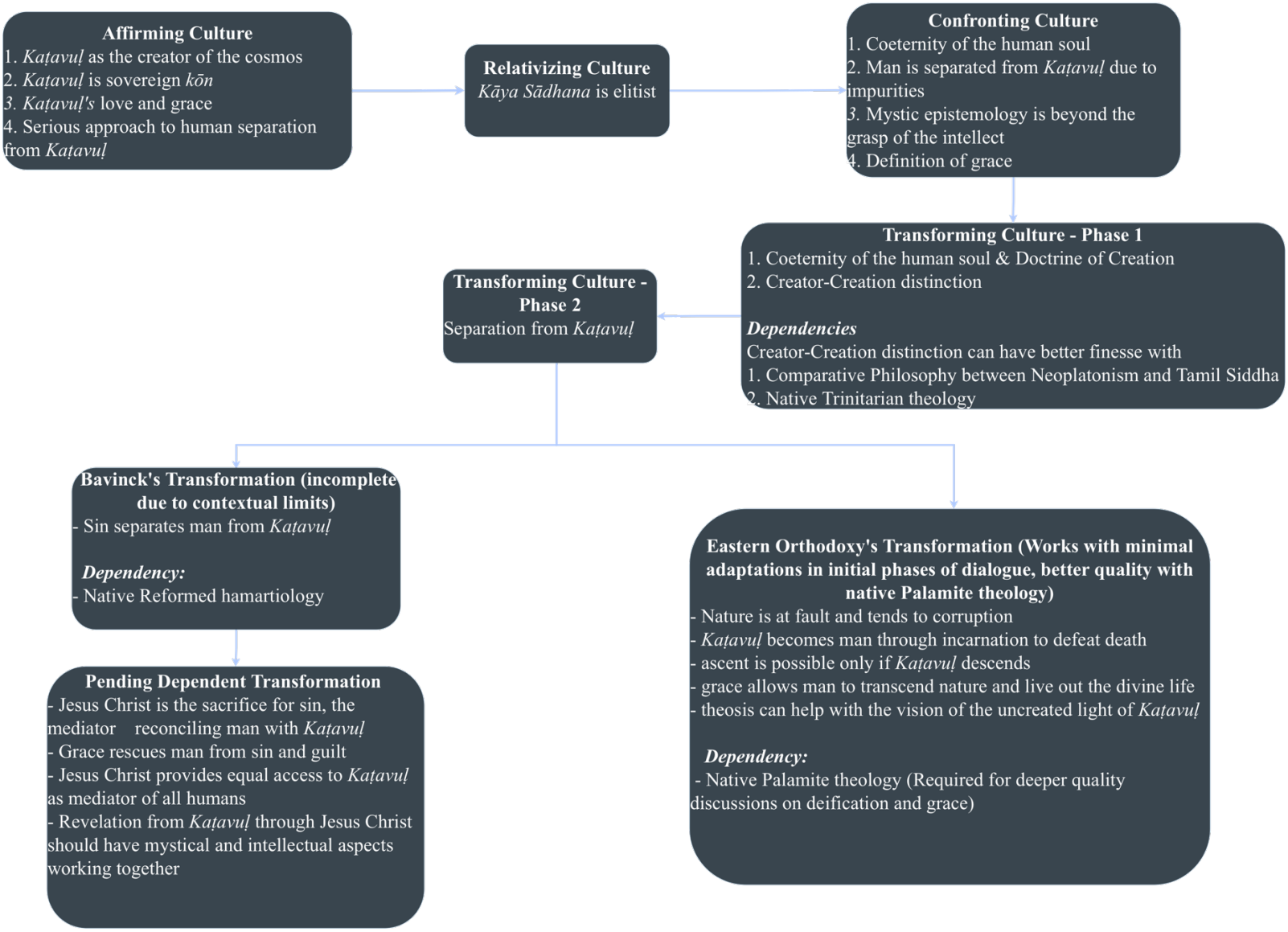
[240] This could be useful for dialogue with all other branches of Dharmic thought since the concept of karma is common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

mediator who sets the world free from sin, reconciles man to *Kaṭavuḷ,* and provides equal access to all.

5.1.5 Graphical View of the Apologetic Framework

What follows is a graphical representation of the apologetic framework I have discussed in the previous four sections:

Figure 5a



5.2 Mutual Intercultural Learning

Based on the model that I arrived at in the previous section, I would like to explore now the mutual lessons learnt as part of the intercultural exchange and contributions from the dialogue partners by asking a series of questions that can benefit Indian Reformed theologians and the conversation partners.

5.2.1 What can Indian Reformed Theologians learn from Bavinck?

Bavinck seems to have made some serious inroads in contextualising for Tamil Siddha, but it is evidently an incomplete task. To arrive at the lessons that Indian Reformed theologians can learn from Bavinck, I would like to present the pros and cons so that a clear view of what has been accomplished and what remains problematic and incomplete becomes clear.

Pros:

a. Bavinck was the only conversation partner who could relativise the elitist approach found in *Kāya Sādhana*. All other Christian conversation partners could not identify the elitist approach nor relativise it.
b. The most potentially powerful transformation in Bavinck is the transformation of the human problem from being linked to the impurities *āṇava mala, māyā mala, and karma mala* into the realm of sin. But it is here that Bavinck's limitations as a Western theologian bring the contextualization to a pause. However, I would like to call attention to this as a potential area that can offer a complete transformation to Tamil Siddha, and Bavinck should be appreciated for it.
c. Bavinck's transformation path, if accomplished, is watertight in securing the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. If Tamil Siddha theologians understand the seriousness of sin,

then they cannot dismiss the cross of Christ and the message of the resurrection as the solution to the human problem of separation from *Kaṭavuḷ*.

Cons:

a. It is difficult to bridge the gap in context without a contextual hamartiology. This dependency pauses the transformation. It is impossible to convey the seriousness of sin in simple terms and expect Tamil Siddha theologians to understand it.
b. The failure to contextualise sin as the reason for separation from *Kaṭavuḷ* cascades into a weakness that does not allow Bavinck to transform further potentially fruitful areas.
c. Bavinck lacks the initial mystical appeal of Eastern Orthodoxy
d. Bavinck's proposed unified mystic and intellectual aspects working together is a model that is yet to be realised powerfully in Reformed theology. The contemporary West seems still too analytical, lacking a powerful mystical aspect.

For Bavinck's contextualisation to work well, I have identified three projects that will help:

1. A project in comparative philosophy that compares Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha philosophy, which will provide the philosophical basis to connect previous engagements in church history with Neoplatonism to the Tamil Siddha context.
2. A constructive Reformed hamartiology that exclusively focuses on how to transform the locus of the problem of human separation from God, not located in the impurities, but in the concept of Sin.
3. A Trinitarian theology for the Tamil Siddha context that can offer Tamil Siddha scholars access to Christian ideas about God in an accessible way that can make sense to them from their native context.

5.2.2 What can Indian Reformed Theologians learn from the Eastern Orthodox Tradition?

Similar to the previous question, I would like to answer this one by listing the pros and cons of Eastern Orthodoxy's approach to contextualisation.

Pros:

a. The Eastern Orthodox tradition demonstrated greater potential for understanding the Tamil Siddha context, given its resemblance to the Greek context in which the concept of deification developed.
b. In contrast to Bavinck, its greatest advantage is its mystical richness in deification, which could appeal to Tamil Siddha theologians.
c. Without getting into too many theological details, it can sustain a complete apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha theologians and introduce Jesus Christ as the God who became man to defeat death. The discussion might lack depth and quality, but can still be attractive. For better quality, there is a dependency on contextual trinitarian theology and native Palamite theology.

Cons:

a. It struggled to relativise Tamil Siddha for the very reasons that it had great potential due to mutual similarity. Especially in its elite approach to deification, Eastern Orthodoxy lacked a strong means to oppose the culture of elitism that practitioners of *Kāya Sādhana* symbolise.
b. If a transformed message of Christian deification is communicated, Tamil Siddha theologians might wonder why they should exchange one way of looking at the uncreated light for another. The experience of Tamil Siddha deification has powerful mystical

components, making it hard to justify why deification in Eastern Orthodoxy is the better option for a Tamil Siddha conversation partner interested in exploring Christianity.

For Eastern Orthodoxy's contextualisation to have a richer quality and depth in conversation, the following projects are required.

1. A Trinitarian theology for the Tamil Siddha context
2. A contextual Palamite theology that can add depth to discussions on deification and grace.

5.2.3 What can Indian Reformed Theologians learn from the Tamil Siddha School?

The Tamil Siddha school provides the context for this whole conversation. This context has been traditionally ignored due to the complexity of *Śaiva* philosophy and theology, which was not accessible to many Christians because of the school's elite nature. Here are a couple of learnings Indian Reformed theologians can take away from this intercultural conversation.

a. Mysticism is deeply embedded in the praxis of this school. Consequently, long-term engagement must include a strong component to address this.[241]
b. Its similarities with Neoplatonism can open up venues for further research and connections with church history, which can be explored for a better understanding of Tamil Siddha as well as inputs and ideas on how similar theological themes were treated in the past.
c. Evangelical theologian of trinitarian theology of religions Gerald R. McDermott thinks that meditation in Buddhism can be incorporated in Christian praxis. He says, "their

[241] It is here that I hesitatingly recommend that the Eastern tradition has the upper hand. Bavinck can serve as the umpire in helping Indian theologians ensure that the contextualization is error-free, if they are willing to investigate the concept of deification in Eastern Orthodoxy, and can propose models that could have more mystical depth than Bavinck, but with none of the weaknesses that Bavinck would point out. Apart from Bavinck's critique I am also concerned that the claims of the effects of Eastern Orthodox deification on relics and dead bodies that exude fragrance start sounding like myths rather than reality.

meditation techniques can teach Christians how to relax, be calm, think in a deeper way, dispose themselves to receive God's love and grace, and pray with not just the mind but with the body as well"[242] While I do not have hands on experience in Buddhist meditation, I do have experience in meditation done in Tamil Siddha and I do not think this is an aspect that can be integrated well into Christian praxis it can open the door to the demonic as the spirit world is not a neutral one. Tamil Siddha meditation, in my experience, can serve as an entrance into it. But I would like to explore this further in another detailed study, and do not want to dismiss McDermott's suggestions without a deeper consideration.

5.2.4 What can Western Reformed Theologians learn from this study?

Here are a couple of important takeaways for Western theologians from this conversation

a. Participation, a subject related to deification, has gained significant momentum in the works of Dutch Reformed theologians such as Huttinga, Cornelis van der Kooi,[243] and Hans Boersma[244], to name a few. This perhaps happens because of the spiritual vacuum that post-Christian culture creates. I readily acknowledge that there is an immense thirst for tangible participation in God in the Western post-Christian culture.[245] I will not be able to make a substantial contribution to this context, given the limitations of this study's scope and my lack of sufficient first-hand experience and understanding of post-

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[242] Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?: Jesus, Revelation Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 96.
[243] Van der Kooi attempts a pneumatological participation model that uses Calvin's Threefold office of Christ as a launch pad. See: "The Threefold Office," in *This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality*, by Cornelis van der Kooi (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 2018), 99–123.
[244] Boersma resists the lampooning of Neoplatonism and proposes a sacramental ontology. See: Hans Boersma, "The Shape of the Tapestry: A Sacramental Ontology," in *Heavenly Participation* (Eerdmans, 2011), 19–39.
[245] Huttinga's introduction taking its artistic rolling start from Terrence Malick's 2011 film The Tree of life and moving on to a series of profound questions addressed to God are moving proof of this immense thirst. See: Huttinga, "Participation and Communicability," 15–16.

Christian culture. However, I do hope to highlight that Bavinck's view on mysticism, and consequently on deification, tends to be negative and is worth considering as the subject of participation in the post-Christian West is probed further.

b. The Reformed tradition needs a stronger expression of the type of mysticism that Bavinck desires, one that can keep the intellectual and the mystic in the unity of the ethical. This is perhaps a subject that warrants further research.

c. Bavinck's overall treatment of Neoplatonism is an interesting subject of research. My initial impression is that Bavinck is a theologian who likes to "plunder the Egyptians". What Bavinck seems to lament is the intrusion of syncretism from the impact of Neoplatonism through Pseudo-Dionysius. It is Neoplatonism that was not transformed and put to the right use in the service of the gospel that meets his disapproval. It could be interesting to research this subject further.

5.2.5 What can Eastern Orthodox Theologians learn from this study?

This study has uncovered some insights that can be useful for Eastern Orthodox theologians to explore

a. Revisiting the *filioque* clause: I have explored the theme of the *filioque* and would recommend that Eastern Orthodox theologians re-examine the rejection of the *filioque* and its connection to revelation and mysticism in the Eastern tradition.

b. Revisiting the Palamite doctrine of uncreated energies: This doctrine is well established in the Eastern Orthodox Church, but I think I would recommend a critical look at it if possible.

c. Revisiting Greek cultural influences that shape the understanding of grace: I would also request that the Eastern Orthodox tradition be open to other interpretations of grace as it expands into further conversations with Christians from around the world.
d. Hearing Bavinck's concerns about asceticism: I have highlighted how there is indeed a tendency to place the ascetic in an elevated position within the Church. I hope that Eastern Orthodox theologians will consider this critique and evaluate this further.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this chapter, I would like to bind all the strands of the research and conclude the study by summarising the key findings in relation to the research aims and questions, and also document the implications of the findings and the value it brings to the field of Reformed intercultural theology. I will also review the limitations of this study and propose recommendations for future research.

What insights does Bavinck's view on the doctrine of theosis render for an apologetic dialogue with Indian theologians T.N. Ganapathy and Geetha Anand on the concept of Śiva deification in the Indian Tamil Siddha context?

6.1 Revisiting the Research Objectives

I began this study intending to address a theological gap in Indian Christian theology in response to Hindu mysticism: the susceptibility to syncretism in existing Christian dialogue with *Śaiva* mysticism, and the lack of a gospel-affirming Christian response to *Śiva* deification in mystic Tamil Siddha tradition, which falls under the broader umbrella of Hindu *Śaiva* mysticism. To accomplish this main purpose, I progressed through four sequential sub-objectives

a. Understanding the concept of *Śiva* deification: By engaging in primary classical Tamil sources as well as secondary literature from Ganapathy and Anand, I descriptively mapped the mystical concept of *Śiva* deification as a form of henosis that seeks to merge with the Supreme being *Śiva* through yogic meditation.
b. Understanding Bavinck's view of theosis: Using Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics as the primary source, and with the help of secondary literature as well as support

from church historian Pelikan and Eastern Orthodox scholar Louth, I descriptively analysed and understood Bavinck's view of theosis.

c. Staging an intercultural conversation: I staged an intercultural conversation using Colijn's method, which brought the parallel concepts of theosis/deification and Śiva deification in juxtaposition, and I identified the points of connection and departure among four conversation partners: Bavinck, the Tamil Siddha scholars Ganapathy and Anand, Eastern Orthodoxy and Indian Christian theologians who have responded to Hindu mysticism.

d. Analysing and evaluating the intercultural findings for apologetic dialogue: Finally, using the insights from the intercultural conversation, I applied Fleming's model to develop an apologetic framework that can contextualise the gospel for Tamil Siddha's mystic henosis.

These objectives have been achieved. I was to demonstrate that an apologetic dialogue that balances intercultural depth and avoids the extremes of syncretism and hostile dismissal is possible. In doing so, I have provided Indian Reformed theologians with a blueprint to engage Tamil Siddha theologians respectfully, contextually, and, importantly, uncompromisingly in an apologetic conversation about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Refer to §5.1 for a full discussion on this apologetic framework. A visual representation of the same is available in §5.1.5.

6.2 Summary of the Major Findings

Objective a: In Chapter two, where I descriptively analysed what *Śiva* deification was in Tamil Siddha, I found that it is a form of henosis designed to overcome the separation from *Śiva* due to impurities emitted from creation and present in the human body. The human body is a

suboptimal temple, and cleansing these impurities through Yoga leads to oneness with *Śiva,* and this is what *Śiva* deification is. In connection with this deification, I listed themes of interest in § 2.11. As the first step of contextualising the response to Tamil Siddha, in §2.10 I introduced the term *Kaṭavuḷ* as a replacement for both the proper noun *Śiva* and the Western concept of God.

Objective b: I conducted a descriptive study of Bavinck's view of theosis in Chapter three and concluded that his concerns about theosis are connected to four pillars of his theology, which I identified in §3.4. These are the creator-creation distinction, the priesthood of all believers, the ethical character of grace and the unified view of the Father's revelation through the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Objective c: Observing a considerable overlap between the themes in Tamil Siddha and those in Bavinck, I staged an intercultural conversation among Bavinck, Tamil Siddha theologians Ganapathy and Anand, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Indian Christian theologians who have responded to Hindu mysticism, and discovered their points of agreement and departure in Chapter 4, which I have represented in a tabular format for ease of reading in §4.6.

Objective d: In Chapter 5, I used the above conversation to contextualise the gospel message from the Christian participants, Bavinck, Eastern Orthodoxy and Indian Christian theologians, for the Tamil Siddha context, using Flemming's method to extract lessons for an apologetic dialogue with Tamil Siddha. I was able to create a framework for apologetics with Tamil Siddha theologians with insights on themes in Tamil Siddha culture that can be affirmed, relativised, confronted and transformed to enable communication of the gospel, albeit with some limitations in the transformation stage. In affirming Tamil Siddha culture, in §5.1.1, I identified and appreciated four aspects: firstly, *Kaṭavuḷ* as the creator; secondly, *Kaṭavuḷ* as the sovereign king of the cosmos or *kōn*; thirdly, the love and grace of *Kaṭavuḷ;* and finally, Tamil Siddha's gravity

in approaching the separation between man and *Kaṭavuḷ*. In relativising culture, in §5.1.2, I relativised the elitist nature of Tamil Siddha that only permits young men of good physical and mental health to have access to deification. In confronting Tamil Siddha culture, in §5.1.3, I opposed four aspects: Firstly the belief that the soul is coeternal with *Kaṭavuḷ*; secondly the belief that humans are separated from *Kaṭavuḷ* due to impurities that are housed in the suboptimal human body; thirdly Tamil Siddha's mystic epistemology that is supposedly beyond the grasp of the intellect; and finally, Tamil Siddha's understanding of grace.

With regards to transforming culture, in §5.1.4.1 I transformed the human soul as created and not coeternal using contextualised Christian ideas of *creatio ex nihilo*. Following this, in § 5.1.4.2, I transformed the creator-creation distinction through the idea of the uncreated essence of *Kaṭavuḷ* as absolutely perfect and infinite in an intensive, qualitative sense. I identified that the heart of the transformation for Tamil Siddha lay next in the theme of separation between *Kaṭavuḷ* and man. Tamil Siddha teaches that it is impurities (*āṇava mala, māyā mala* and *karma mala*) that are the cause of this separation. Based on the intercultural dialogue, I detected two ways of transforming this core theme. In § 5.1.4.4, I found that Eastern Orthodoxy, due to its mystical parallels with Tamil Siddha, offered an attractive mystical transformation through the themes related to contextualised deification. Secondly, in § 5.1.4.5, I found that Bavinck's approach would be to diagnose the separation as an ethical one due to sin. Unfortunately, this created a contextual gap, which was difficult to overcome, as Tamil Siddha theologians can struggle to grasp the concept of sin due to limitations in their worldview. I will discuss this further in the limitations section below. I have represented the apologetic framework in a visual format in §5.1.5 that can aid in quick reference.

6.3 Implications of the Findings

Using Fleming's model to translate the findings of the intercultural conversation, I have presented an apologetic framework that can be used by Indian Reformed theologians in conversing with Tamil Siddha theologians on the subject of *Śiva* deification. While the affirming culture, relativising culture and confronting culture stages are united in transforming the core of the human problem of separation from *Kaṭavuḷ*, I have provided paths for Indian Reformed theologians: Firstly, the Eastern Orthodox way of transforming this theme through the themes of corruption in human nature, and how Jesus Christ, through the incarnation, solves the problem of corruption. Secondly, the Bavinck way, which identifies and transforms the human problem as sin, but is incomplete due to its dependence on a contextual hamartiology. Personally, I favour Bavinck's approach as it presents the seriousness of sin as the reason for separation from *Kaṭavuḷ*, and announces the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the saviour of humankind from sin. From my experience in Tamil Siddha, even if the full transformation is complete for Eastern Orthodoxy, I might wonder why one needs to see the uncreated light through Christian deification; it is already possible in a comparable form through *Kāya Sādhana*, which is an intensive practice of Yoga with increasing meditational intensity that can raise the levels of consciousness to the point where deification manifests accompanied with visions of being in a luminous space.[246] I see this as a potential risk that causes Tamil Siddha theologians to dismiss the uniqueness of Christ. In Bavinck's approach, it is impossible to avoid Jesus Christ as the one who bears the sins of all humankind, and that in knowing him (both intellectually and mystically) alone is eternal life. Indian Reformed theologians are free to experiment with both approaches and move the apologetic conversation forward with Tamil Siddha theologians, as I cannot rule

[246] For a description on these experiences see §2.8

out that there might be ways in which the risk I highlighted with the Eastern Orthodox way might be mitigated.

In terms of methodology, firstly, this study has demonstrated the effectiveness of staging a conversation between theologians from different religions and cultures using Colijn's intercultural conversational method. Secondly, a contextual gospel apologetic framework for conversation with Tamil Siddha has been developed and presented using Flemming's contextualisation method

6.4 Contributions of the Study

Firstly, this study adds to the growing body of Reformed intercultural theology by showing how Reformed theology can constructively engage non-Western mystical traditions. I have brought Bavinck into conversation with Eastern Orthodoxy, Tamil Siddha theologians, and Indian Christian theologians, and have demonstrated clear links and points of departure on themes related to deification. This allows Western Reformed theologians, Eastern Orthodox theologians, Indian Christian theologians, and Tamil Siddha theologians to use this work to discover connections between theosis and *Śiva* deification, and sustain further dialogue on this mystical topic.

Secondly, this study emphasises the interdisciplinary nature of academic discovery in the field of Reformed intercultural theology. I have uncovered the need for a comparative philosophy between Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha philosophy, which can further improve the quality of discussion with Tamil Siddha mysticism. This might, in turn, open up avenues to address *Śaiva* mysticism and other forms of *tantric* mysticism in India.

6.5 Limitations

Firstly, this research does not contain a field component, and hence its effectiveness in conversations with Tamil Siddha mystics and ordinary *Śaiva* believers cannot be established. For real-world conversations, further research is required.

Secondly, the transformation I have attempted to convey the idea of *Kaṭavuḷ's* essence is based on an existing translation of the Nicene Creed. Its effectiveness in theological conversation is not guaranteed. It is better to have a full-fledged contextual trinitarian theology for Tamil Siddha and retry this transformation.

Thirdly, Bavinck's transformation, as I have highlighted, requires further projects to achieve maturity and make further progress. At the close of this research, Bavinck's transformation of the human problem from impurities to sin is potentially powerful but incomplete. I will discuss the dependencies in the next section as recommendations.

Fourthly, while it is possible to present an attractive mystical transformation using Eastern Orthodoxy's way, there is no existing contextual Palamite theology that can add depth to the conversation. This will reduce the quality of the contextualisation for Tamil Siddha, especially on the topics of deification experience and the definition of grace.

Finally, I am not an Eastern Orthodox theologian, and my attempts at transformations are creative theology and might differ from what actual Eastern Orthodox theologians will present.

6.6 Recommendations

My recommendations in this section are directed to the direct objectives connected to study in the Tamil Siddha context. My recommendations to Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Reformed theologians are listed in §5.2.

Firstly, a powerful contextualization for Tamil Siddha requires suitable philosophical vocabulary in Tamil and a better understanding of its philosophy in comparison with Neoplatonism, which has influenced Christian history. My first recommendation is interdisciplinary: a comparative theology study of Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha philosophy.

Secondly, to increase the quality of the apologetic conversation, it is important to develop a contextual trinitarian theology for the *Śaiva Siddhāntā* context as a whole. Tamil Siddha can benefit from such a project, and so can other streams of Śaivism. Such a project will provide the right vocabulary and explanations for complex theological terms and themes.

Thirdly, to increase the quality of transformation for Eastern Orthodoxy, a contextual Palamite theology is required. This will help Tamil Siddha theologians better understand Christian theosis and grasp the connections between immortality and grace more clearly.

Fourthly, to complete Bavinck's transformation of the theme of impurities, I recommend a contextual and creative Reformed hamartiology. Bavinck did not make a connection between the human body and theosis in his theology. In Tamil Siddha, the human body, the search for immortality and the cleansing of impurities through *Kāya Sādhana* are closely connected. However, Bavinck's strong point is that he sees sin as the reason that man experiences separation from God. It is important to present *Kaṭavuḷ's* holiness and sin as the cause of death and separation from the holy *Kaṭavuḷ* contextually to Tamil Siddha. The result should be a profound transformation of the theme of impurities and the cleansing of impurities through *Kāya Sādhana*, giving way to the right understanding of the seriousness of sin and presenting Jesus Christ as the one who experiences death for humankind and who justifies humans through his resurrection.

Finally, I would recommend completing the transformation of three more areas for Bavinck. Firstly, with the right hamartiology in place, the right understanding of grace as freeing man

from sin and guilt has to be pursued contextually. This might include shame as a contextual extension. Secondly, it is important to transform the area of equal access to *Kaṭavuḷ.* It is here that Jesus, as the mediator who offers equal access to *Kaṭavuḷ* through his death and resurrection, can be presented contextually to transform the elite restrictions of *Kāya Sādhana*. Thirdly, the understanding of a united revelation of *Kaṭavuḷ* through both mystic and intellectual elements should also be transformed. The last one could be an interesting problem to solve for Indian Reformed theologians who live in a contextually mystic culture but hold to a deeply intellectual theology.

6.7 Final Reflection

I come with experience as an ex-Siddha practitioner and now write as a Reformed theologian, and I would like to share some personal lessons I have learnt in the process of this research:

a. Mysticism is not a new frontier for Reformed theology: The very fact that Bavinck speaks about mysticism and deification has given me confidence that I am not working on a field hitherto unexplored in Reformed theology. This gives me the confidence to look forward to a growing body of work in the Indian Reformed context. A related lesson is the value of early church history and patristics, and I realised that this is an area that I need to improve on.
b. Methodology matters: Choosing a method that minimises cultural bias in an intercultural conversation is a priority that cannot be skipped. I have adapted a limited version of Colijn's method in combination with Flemming's model, and this has helped me stop when transforming Bavinck's thoughts into the Tamil Siddha context proved difficult. This method helped me stay intellectually honest with the limitations of this research.

Choosing Flemming has helped me create a contextual apologetic framework that can be useful for Indian Reformed theologians.

c. Interdisciplinary connections: In the course of this study, I realised the importance of comparative philosophy. Neoplatonism and Tamil Siddha have much in common, and I realised that I would have made confident progress in transforming Bavinck's thoughts for the Tamil Siddha context if I had access to such comparative philosophy.

d. Being open to learning from other Christian traditions: As a Reformed theologian, I realised that I need to be more open-minded in learning from other Christian traditions. I was excited to learn much from Louth, especially in connection with Athanasius, which led me to a pivotal discovery that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is the right counter to the coeternal soul that is present both in Neoplatonism and in Tamil Siddha. I was able to check this with Bavinck's theology, and Bavinck too clearly realises the power of this doctrine to correct errors in philosophy.

I conclude by wondering how this study would have turned out if the Church were united just as it was in its early centuries. The concerns of a dry, analytical, and intellectual Western tradition and an extremely mystical Eastern Orthodoxy would perhaps vanish, and the united voice of the Church might have a better contextualization of the gospel for Tamil Siddha. I hope that such a day is not far off. In the interim, with all our imperfections, I am glad this study has made some headway into developing an Indian Reformed response to Tamil Siddha.

Summary

Existing Indian Christian dialogical engagement with Hindu mysticism has made significant contextual contributions, but has struggled to uphold the uniqueness of Christ. Moreover, Tamil Siddha's *Śiva* deification has not been considered for a contextually rich and doctrinally sound response. This research project addresses this gap by bringing Herman Bavinck into dialogue with Tamil Siddha scholars T.N. Ganapathy and Geetha Anand, along with Eastern Orthodoxy and Indian Christian theologians, on the topic of deification, to develop a doctrinally faithful yet contextually grounded apologetic framework to engage Tamil Siddha mysticism.

Methodologically, I employ a hermeneutical descriptive method to understand the concept of *Śiva* deification and Bavinck's view on theosis. I then apply Jos Colijn's intercultural conversation method to stage an intercultural conversation among Bavinck, Eastern Orthodoxy, Tamil Siddha scholars Ganapathy and Anand, and Indian Christian theologians. To contextualise the results of the intercultural conversation and to gather insights for an apologetic dialogue, I use Dean Flemming's contextualisation model.

In this study, I found that the intercultural conversation among Bavinck, Eastern Orthodoxy, Tamil Siddha scholars Ganapathy and Anand, and Indian Christian theologians yielded a coherent apologetic framework using Flemming's method to affirm, relativise, confront and transform aspects of Tamil Siddha culture surrounding deification. The resulting apologetic framework affirms elements compatible with Christian doctrine, relativises Tamil Siddha elitism that reserves deification for younger healthy males, and confronts incompatible areas concerning the coeternity of the human soul, identifying the locus of human separation from God as impurities in the human body, denying any rational examination of its mystic experiences, and its

misplaced understanding of grace. Finally, it transforms the coeternity of the soul through the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the creator-creation distinction through the concept of the absolute essence of God, and most importantly, provides two ways of transforming human separation from God. The first way is an attractive Eastern Orthodox way that is mystical and offers its own version of deification as a replacement for Śiva deification. The second is Bavinck's way, which identifies sin as the reason for separation. Both ways revealed contextual gaps: Eastern Orthodoxy requires contextual Palamite theology for more meaningful contextual communication, and Bavinck needs a contextual hamartiology to complete the transformation. I conclude this study by proposing this framework as a constructive basis for Indian Reformed theologians who seek a culturally grounded yet doctrinally sound way of engaging Tamil Siddha's *Śiva* deification.

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