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3

4 IS IT NATURAL FOR HUMANS TO BELIEVE IN GOD?  
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6 Religion, Science and General Revelation

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8 *1. Religion and Human Nature*

9 Ever since the Enlightenment, religion has more and more generally come to be seen as  
10 irrational and unnatural in Western culture. The dominant narrative is that the religious  
11 outlooks that are still prevalent, stemming from pre-modern times, should be stripped  
12 off so that our real human nature can finally emerge. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor  
has aptly coined the term ‘subtraction stories’ in this connection, meaning by that

13 ‘[...] stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them [i.e. modernity and  
14 secularity] by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, con-  
15 fining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or  
16 secularity – is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all  
17 along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.’<sup>1</sup>

18 According to many, being non-religious is the default position – a view that is fobbed off  
19 on us time and again, for example by the media. To be religious is to be strange, weird,  
20 abnormal. And to the extent that theology, however one wants to define that concept,  
21 engages in an explication – let alone a defence – of religion and religious truth claims, it  
22 shares this fate.

23 In such a situation, it is difficult for both theologians and religious believers to be tak-  
24 en seriously as partners in dialogue, since rationality is supposed to reside unilaterally  
25 with those who have left the religious outlook behind, like belief in Santa Clause is uni-  
26 versally left behind by children of a certain age. The core idea that religion distorts hu-  
27 man nature has been forcefully exploited and disseminated in the past decades by the so-  
28 called ‘new atheists’. According to them, religions are ‘viruses of the mind’, to which  
29 poor little children with minds like sponges are especially vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> Once such chil-  
30 dren are brainwashed with religious ideas, it turns out to be very hard for them to get rid  
31 of these. The religious education of children is therefore sometimes even compared to  
32 sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, the continued existence of religion is seen as the result of  
33 ongoing processes of spiritual pollution.

34 What if, however, religion(s) and religiosity were much more natural phenomena – not  
35 impregnated on our minds by others with twisted ideas but, on the contrary, deeply con-  
36 nected to what it is to be human? If the religious impulse emerges from our deepest  
37 selves, either from within or as a spontaneous response to stimuli from outside, or both,  
38 there might still be sound reasons to distrust religions, their truth claims and practices,  
39 since obviously not everything which spontaneously comes up in our minds is by defini-

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 176, 311–344.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dawkins, ‘Religion’s Real Child Abuse’, *Free Inquiry* 22.4 (2002), 9–12; the paper used to be posted on Dawkins’ website ([www.richarddawkins.net](http://www.richarddawkins.net)), but for some reason it has been removed from there.

1 tion true or worthwhile. It would not be self-evident, however, that distrust is the most  
 2 rational attitude towards religion. For clearly, other faculties and tendencies with which  
 3 we are born or which come to us naturally are not *prima facie* wrong or misleading either.  
 4 One can think of typically human phenomena like loving art, being moral, thinking and  
 5 acting in rational ways, and even believing that other minds exist (for which we have no  
 6 direct empirical evidence). As Wentzel van Huyssteen has pointed out: ‘[...] the natural-  
 7 ness of religious ideas actually supports religious claims rather than undermines them: if  
 8 religious beliefs are largely produced by normal human cognitive systems and if we gen-  
 9 erally trust these systems, then we should not suspect them in the case of religious be-  
 10 liefs.’<sup>4</sup> At the very least we would need some additional reason or reasons to distrust our  
 11 religious beliefs. Thus, there would be a basis for conversation and dialogue on the cre-  
 12 dentials of religion in this scenario, since rationality would no longer self-evidently reside  
 13 with secularity and the burden of proof with religion.

14 Interestingly, from a scientific perspective it has become more and more plausible that  
 15 religion is a phenomenon that comes to us quite naturally indeed. Though opinions  
 16 about the precise natural mechanisms – evolutionary ones or otherwise – that are con-  
 17 ducive to the rise of religion still vary greatly, a lot of recent empirical research has con-  
 18 firmed that important components of the religious outlook are as it were built into the  
 19 fabric of our human constitution. Examples of this are belief in supernatural powers, a  
 20 preference for teleological explanations of natural phenomena (i.e. explanations which  
 21 presuppose belief that these phenomena have been created with a particular purpose)  
 22 and belief in an afterlife. On the basis of psychological experiments among young chil-  
 23 dren, especially children who had not been in touch with religious ideas before, some  
 24 scholars have even tentatively concluded that children are ‘intuitive theists’.<sup>5</sup> Others  
 25 agree that a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and intended by a super-  
 26 natural intelligent being is part of the natural make-up of children’s minds. According to  
 27 cognitive scientist of religion Justin Barrett, ‘[i]f we threw a handful [of children] on an  
 28 island and they raised themselves I think they would believe in God’.<sup>6</sup>

29 Such findings are hardly amazing when we realize that by far the largest part of the  
 30 world’s population continues to be religious over time. Instead of becoming gradually  
 31 less religious, as the secularization thesis wanted us to believe, the world seems to be-  
 32 come even more religious than it used to be. In any case, religions and other expressions  
 33 of religiosity belong to the most normal things on earth. Religion is found in all times  
 34 and cultures; until today it captures the imagination of the vast majority of human be-  
 35 ings. As Christoph Schwöbel has suggested, the 21<sup>st</sup> century may even become ‘the cen-  
 36 tury of the religions’. The scientific era that was announced by August Comte has arrived  
 37 indeed, but instead of ushering in the expected end of religion it brought ‘an enormous

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<sup>4</sup> *Wentzel J. van Huyssteen*, ‘From Empathy to Embodied Faith? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Evolution of Religion’, in *Evolution, Religion, and Cognitive Science*, eds. *Fraser Watts* and *Léon Turner* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2012), 149. See also *Aku Visala*, *Naturalism, Theism, and the Cognitive Science of Religion: Religion Explained?* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 185; *Justin Barrett*, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2004), 95–105.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Deborah Kelemen*, ‘Are Children Intuitive Theists? Reasoning about Purpose and Design in Nature’, *Psychological Science* 15 (2004), 295–301.

<sup>6</sup> *Justin M. Barrett*, ‘Born Believers?’, lecture at Faraday Institute Cambridge (2008), as quoted in *The Telegraph* (November 24, 2008); cf. *Justin M. Barrett*, *Born Believers: The Science of Children’s Religious Belief* (New York, N.Y.: Free Pr., 2012).

1 renaissance of the religious', expressed in a confusing multitude of religions.<sup>7</sup> In light of  
 2 this, the theory that the religious is somehow intrinsically connected to human nature is  
 3 not far-fetched.

4 Schwöbel has even convincingly argued that the plurality of religious and pseudo-  
 5 religious views of life is in the end irreducible; we do not and will not have one dominant  
 6 secular master narrative at the fringes of which a couple of obsolete religions will gradu-  
 7 ally wither away. Instead, what we have is a process in which pluralism becomes more  
 8 and more fundamental, to the extent of including our most basic convictions.<sup>8</sup> There is  
 9 no God's eye point of view which transcends the multitude of views of life and from  
 10 which we can make rational judgements; rather we are always part of our profoundly  
 11 pluralist world from the very beginning. Thus, '[e]very interpretation of reality is radically  
 12 perspectival', and Schwöbel rightly infers from this that is incumbent on Christians to  
 13 understand this situation from the perspective of their Christian faith.<sup>9</sup>

14 At times, Schwöbel even suggests that this perspectivism might also apply to the natu-  
 15 ral sciences, arguing that 'all our knowledge is fundamentally and unavoidably perspec-  
 16 tival, shaped by basic presuppositions that [...] have a view-of-life character.'<sup>10</sup> True as  
 17 this may be, Schwöbel is careful enough not to overstate his point here, immediately  
 18 adding that he does not want to deny the 'objectivity of knowledge'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one of the  
 19 amazing characteristics of science is that as people from very different views of life we  
 20 can agree about the overwhelming majority of its methods and outcomes – and if we  
 21 disagree about these it is often for intrinsically scientific reasons rather than for reasons  
 22 that have to do with our views of life. In line with this, it should not be excluded that we  
 23 might come to agree beyond the boundaries of religious and atheistic views of life about  
 24 the experimental evidence for the naturalness of religion, thus creating a new space for  
 25 discussing its rationality. But would Christian theology allow for a positive evaluation of  
 26 such a result? Or would it rather have to distrust the type of religion that comes naturally  
 27 with us humans? That is the question we will investigate in this contribution.

## 28 *2. Science and Theology on the Naturalness of Religion*

29 Thus far we have seen that science more and more comes to acknowledge the natural-  
 30 ness of the religious impulse. Of course this does not mean that all religions are equally  
 31 valid, true or helpful. It does help, however, in creating a level playing field for the de-  
 32 bate on the rationality of religion, thus fostering the idea that rationality can only prosper  
 33 *in conversation*. At first sight, it may seem that Christian theology should welcome this de-  
 34 velopment. After all, the classical theological notion of a *sensus divinitatis*, a general human  
 35 awareness of God or the transcendent, may not have been far off the mark. This notion,

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<sup>7</sup> *Christoph Schwöbel*, *Gott im Gespräch. Studien zur theologischen Gegenwartsdeutung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 167 ('das Jahrhundert der Religionen'), 168 ('eine gewältige Renaissance des Religiösen').

<sup>8</sup> *Schwöbel*, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Schwöbel*, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus*, 188.

<sup>10</sup> *Schwöbel*, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus*, 393; cf. 32: 'Die radikalste Form des Pluralismus greift dort Platz, wo auch die Wissenschaft sich pluralisiert [...]'.  
 11 *Ibid.* ('Damit soll weder die Objektivität der Erkenntnis [...] bestritten worden'; note that 'Objektivität' is a pretty strong term here – Schwöbel subsequently unpacks it in terms of inter-subjectivity).

1 which figured most notably in John Calvin's theology, was considered to function in the  
 2 context of the book of nature: the natural awareness of God was thought to be sponta-  
 3 neously elicited in our minds when seeing the wonders of the created world. Its roots  
 4 can be traced back at least as far as St. Paul, who wrote in his letter to the Romans: "Ev-  
 5 er since the creation of the world his [= God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible  
 6 though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made"  
 7 (Rom.1:20). In Christian theology, this text – or, more precisely, the passage in which it  
 8 occurs: Romans 1:18–21 – has traditionally functioned as an important proof-text for the  
 9 notion of a natural knowledge of God. Remarkably, however, in 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant  
 10 theology it became a vexed question how the text should be interpreted. Does it indeed  
 11 convey the idea that cross-culturally humans have an innate awareness of God, and thus  
 12 a religious impulse? And if so, how should this innate awareness of God be valued?

13 In the remainder of this chapter we will examine the answers given to these questions  
 14 by three influential late modern systematic theologians: Herman Bavinck (1854–1921),  
 15 Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014). We include the Dutch  
 16 Reformed theologian Bavinck since in some sense he can be seen as the apex of ortho-  
 17 dox Protestant thinking on the issue. The affirmation of a natural or general revelation  
 18 of God may be seen as a cornerstone of his theological thinking. In his Stone-lectures,  
 19 *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck argued that by virtue of human nature every human  
 20 being believes in God, so that atheism is 'an intellectual [...] abnormality'.<sup>12</sup> To be sure,  
 21 Bavinck opposed the tendency to isolate general revelation (as he preferred to say) from  
 22 God's special revelation in Christ. Nevertheless, he holds that Christian theology never  
 23 wholly thought through the notion of general revelation, nor fully made clear its rich  
 24 significance for the whole of human life.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, in the course of his lectures  
 25 Bavinck tried to show extensively how God's revelation encounters us in nature, history,  
 26 culture, the religions, etc. The leading idea here is that general revelation leads us to spe-  
 27 cial revelation, whereas special revelation refers back to general revelation.<sup>14</sup> There seems  
 28 to be a harmonious and largely unbroken relationship between the two.

29 Next, we examine Barth's exegesis of the passage in various stages of his life. As is  
 30 well-known, in his resistance against natural theology Barth went so far as to deny any  
 31 natural awareness of God. According to Barth there is no general revelation at all, and in  
 32 the second half of the twentieth century this view more or less won the day. Even theo-  
 33 logians who were critical of other aspects of Barth's theology were often convinced by  
 34 his view that no human knowledge of God is possible apart from God's special revela-  
 35 tion in Jesus Christ as testified in Holy Scripture.<sup>15</sup> It was even considered to be danger-  
 36 ous to think otherwise, as the fate of the *Deutsche Christen* showed. So it seems that Barth

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<sup>12</sup> *Herman Bavinck*, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (London: Longmans & Green, 1909), 79: 'Thus, when man grows up and develops in accordance with the nature implanted in him [...], he attains as freely and as inevitably to the knowledge and service of a personal God as he believes in his own existence and that of the world. He does not invent the idea of God nor produce it; it is given to him and he receives it. Atheism is not proper to man by nature, but develops at a later stage of life, on the ground of philosophic reflection; like scepticism, it is an intellectual and ethical abnormality [...].'

<sup>13</sup> *Bavinck*, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Bavinck*, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 28. 'General revelation leads to special, special revelation points back to general. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom which God has displayed in creation and redemption.'

<sup>15</sup> *G.C. Berkouwer* is an example here; cf. e.g. his *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), e.g. 285.

1 succeeded in showing Bavinck's adherence to the notion of a general revelation and a  
 2 natural awareness of God to be both wrong and naïve. Although Barth does not men-  
 3 tion Bavinck in his devastating critique of natural theology, it can hardly be doubted that  
 4 Bavinck fell under his judgement as well as many others. Are Bavinck's Stone-lectures, as  
 5 well as the entire tradition of both Protestant and Roman Catholic thinking encapsulated  
 6 in it, indeed characterized by a theological method that has to be rejected as obsolete and  
 7 sub-Christian?

8 At this point we will turn to Wolfhart Pannenberg and his response to Barth's reading  
 9 of the *locus classicus* in Romans 1. The American Bavinck-scholar John Bolt has suggested  
 10 (without elaborating this point) that 'formally Bavinck's project is comparable to that of  
 11 Wolfhart Pannenberg', in that both wanted to maintain the unity of Christian faith and  
 12 human knowledge.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to test this claim – however partially and provision-  
 13 ally – by looking at the conclusions both theologians have drawn from Paul's seminal  
 14 passage in Romans 1. We shall tentatively conclude that Barth should be seen as the ex-  
 15 ception rather than as the rule when it comes to delineating a Christian view on the natu-  
 16 ralness of religion and the general human awareness of God. There may be very sound  
 17 reasons for allowing exceptions and they may even be vital from time to time – but ex-  
 18 ceptions should not be turned into the rule.<sup>17</sup> As Christoph Schwöbel has boldly argued  
 19 (drawing on Eberhard Jüngel here), today in its dialogue with the natural sciences the  
 20 church should incorporate the questions of natural theology in its discourse once again.<sup>18</sup>

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### 3. Bavinck and Romans 1

22 It is characteristic of Bavinck's method of doing theology that one finds little exegesis in  
 23 his work. The index of biblical places 'that are more or less explained' at the end of the  
 24 final volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics* is remarkably small.<sup>19</sup> Romans 1:18–21 does not  
 25 belong to these passages. Neither do we find an explanation of its meaning in *The Philos-*  
 26 *ophy of Revelation*. Usually, when Bavinck wants to seek biblical support for some dogmat-  
 27 ic thesis, he simply enumerates quite a number of biblical texts without interpreting them  
 28 from within their context. In this respect Bavinck's way of doing theology belongs to the  
 29 past. For good reasons we no longer follow the classical scholastic proof-texting meth-  
 30 od, which ran the risk of taking biblical texts at face value.

31 This being so, we can reconstruct Bavinck's interpretation of Romans 1:18–21 by  
 32 looking at the way in which he used it. In the *Philosophy of Revelation* we find both an ex-

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<sup>16</sup> John Bolt, 'An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24 (2013), 85.

<sup>17</sup> See for a similar evaluation Gerhard Sauter, 'Theologisch miteinander streiten – Karl Barth's Auseinandersetzung mit Emil Brunner' in *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935): Aufbruch – Klärung – Widerstand*, ed. Michael Beintker et al. (Zürich: Theol. Verl., 2005), 279.

<sup>18</sup> Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus*, 383: 'Eine der ersten Konsequenzen der Öffnung der Kirchentüren für ernsthafte Gespräche mit den Naturwissenschaften könnte die Reintegration der Fragen der natürlichen Theologie in den Diskurs der Kirche sein'; it should be carefully noted here that 'the questions of natural theology' is not the same as natural theology itself. Asking whether it is natural for humans to believe in God implies taking up the questions of natural theology but not necessarily natural theology itself.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatick*, Vol. 4 (Kampen: Kok, 1930), 717 (this list has not been copied in the English translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 4, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008).

1 plicit reference to the Romans-passage and an implicit one.<sup>20</sup> The explicit reference is in  
 2 the very first chapter. Here, Bavinck contrasts what he calls the supra-natural worldview  
 3 that characterizes both orthodox Christianity and the other religions (17) with the pan-  
 4 theistic monism after Hegelian fashion that was propagated by contemporary British  
 5 theologians such as R.J. Campbell. This modern pantheistic world-view tends to identify  
 6 revelation with ‘the development of all that exists, with nature and history, with all na-  
 7 tions and religions’ (14–15). Bavinck rejects this identification, first of all because ‘[a] re-  
 8 ligion which has nothing to offer but an immanent God, identical with the world [...],  
 9 can never satisfy man’s religious and ethical needs’ (16–17). Secondly, however, Scripture  
 10 itself makes a sharp distinction between God’s ongoing revelation to the pagans through  
 11 nature and ‘the false religion to which the heathen have abandoned themselves’ (19).  
 12 And here, of course, the reference to Romans 1 comes in. Bavinck refers to the passage  
 13 in order to make clear that not all religion is worship of the true God, since only the  
 14 God of Israel, who revealed himself to Moses and the prophets, is the living God.

15 As so often in Bavinck, however, when we read on it turns out that he was more sen-  
 16 sitive (some might even say vulnerable) to the intellectual force of the ideas he contested  
 17 than at first sight one would have thought. For example, he goes on to emphasize that  
 18 Scripture clearly teaches God’s *immanence* in creation. Even when it is said that God has  
 19 heaven for his dwelling-place, this does not count against God’s immanence, since  
 20 ‘heaven is part of the created universe’ (21). Further, according to Bavinck our eyes are  
 21 nowadays more and more opened to the fact that God’s revelation – and here he clearly  
 22 means special revelation – is in many ways mediated by historical and psychological pro-  
 23 cesses: special revelation has taken over ‘numerous elements’ from God’s general revela-  
 24 tion. At the end of the first chapter, it even appears that the very project of developing a  
 25 philosophy of revelation is intended by Bavinck as an attempt to restore the unity be-  
 26 tween these two modes of God’s revelation. That is why he wants ‘to trace on all sides  
 27 the lines of connection established by God himself between revelation and the several  
 28 spheres of the created universe’ (24).

29 It is not surprising, then, that later on Bavinck returns to the famous passage from  
 30 Romans 1 in a more positive mode. Improving on Schleiermacher, Bavinck argues at the  
 31 end of his third lecture that human self-consciousness includes both a sense of depend-  
 32 ence and of freedom. It is this twofold testimony of self-consciousness which forms the  
 33 basis of religion, because ‘[i]t leads man everywhere and always, and that quite freely and  
 34 spontaneously, to belief in and service of a personal God’ (78). According to Christian  
 35 theism, this is not the result of some innate idea of God, however; rather, it has to do  
 36 with the fact that ‘God’s eternal power and divinity [is] revealed in the works of his  
 37 hands’ (78) – and here we have an implicit reference to Romans 1. Alluding to Acts  
 38 14:17 (another *locus classicus* for the notion of a general revelation), Bavinck adds that  
 39 God as the world’s creator has not left himself without witness, but speaks to humanity  
 40 ‘through all nature’, i.e. both through our human nature (by which Bavinck probably  
 41 means our conscience) and through the external world. As a result, ‘[b]y nature, in virtue  
 42 of his nature, every man believes in God’ (79). According to Bavinck this belief is not  
 43 just theoretical but implies the practice of worship: this ‘revelation alone accounts for  
 44 this impressive and incontrovertible fact of the worship of God’ (79).

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<sup>20</sup> Page numbers within brackets in this section refer to Bavinck’s *Philosophy of Revelation*.

1 Talk of false religion, idolatry and image-worship has almost disappeared by now. And  
 2 although Bavinck is keen not to treat general revelation in isolation from God's special  
 3 revelation in Christ but closely connects the two (see e.g. 27–28), he now uses the pas-  
 4 sage from Romans 1 (amongst other passages) in order to underline the *universality of*  
 5 *God's revelation* and the positive fruits which follow from it. That this is indeed Bavinck's  
 6 leading idea, is confirmed when we compare our findings with the sections on general  
 7 revelation in his *Reformed Dogmatics* and his *Magnalia Dei*.<sup>21</sup> From these larger works it be-  
 8 comes clear that according to Bavinck general revelation enables us to acknowledge 'all  
 9 elements of truth that are present also in pagan religions.'<sup>22</sup> The great world religions can  
 10 be evaluated positively, especially as compared to the more primitive forms of religion  
 11 from which they proceeded. In this connection, Bavinck gives praise to the upright in-  
 12 tentions of religious leaders such as Zarathustra, Confucius, the Buddha and Mu-  
 13 hammed.<sup>23</sup> Although the religious knowledge that is available to adherents of non-  
 14 Christian religions continues to be insufficient for attaining salvation (because it is  
 15 abused for idolatry rather than used to thank and glorify God), the fundamental connec-  
 16 tion between God's general revelation and the human religions warrants a basically posi-  
 17 tive attitude towards the latter.<sup>24</sup> According to Bavinck, '[t]his general revelation has at all  
 18 times been unanimously accepted and defended in Christian theology. It was particularly  
 19 upheld and highly valued by Reformed theologians'.<sup>25</sup> Together with quite a number of  
 20 other biblical texts, Romans 1:18–21 plays an important role when Bavinck elaborates  
 21 and substantiates this view.<sup>26</sup>

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#### 4. Barth on Romans 1

23 In the famous second edition of his *Letter to the Romans* (1922) Karl Barth explains Ro-  
 24 mans 1:18–21 in accordance with the main emphasis in this 'hermeneutical manifesto'  
 25 (Gadamer): God is God and humans are humans. There is an infinite distance between  
 26 God and humanity. The human predicament, however, is that we deny this distance and  
 27 treat God as if He were one of our fellows. 'We allow ourselves to enter into a normal  
 28 relationship with Him. We allow ourselves to count on God, as if this were nothing spe-

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<sup>21</sup> *Herman Bavinck*, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003; orig. ed. Kampen: Kok, 1928<sup>4</sup>), 301–322; id., *Magnalia Dei* (Kampen: Kok, 1931<sup>2</sup>), 22–50. In both works, 'general revelation' figures as a separate locus of theology.

<sup>22</sup> *Bavinck*, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1, 318.

<sup>23</sup> *Bavinck*, *Magnalia Dei*, 48–49.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *H. van den Belt*, 'Religion as Revelation? The Development of Herman Bavinck's View from a Reformed Orthodox to a Neo-Calvinist Approach', *The Bavinck Review* 4 (2013), 9–13. As *Van den Belt* points out, the positive way in which Bavinck, especially in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, speaks about the non-Christian religions is quite remarkable.

<sup>25</sup> *Bavinck*, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1, 311.

<sup>26</sup> 'Positive' references or allusions are to be found in *Bavinck*, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1, 307, 310, 321 and in *Bavinck*, *Magnalia Dei*, 43; 'negative' ones in *Reformed Dogmatics* 1, 313, 315 and in *Magnalia Dei*, 45, 51. Interestingly, in the exposition in his *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck uses a kind of sandwich-model: first he emphasizes the positive meaning of general revelation, next he goes on to elaborate its insufficiency, but then again he ends his discussion by underlining its 'rich significance' (322).

1 cial. [...] We exchange time and eternity. That is the irreverence in our relation to God'.<sup>27</sup>  
 2 From Paul's words in Romans 1, Barth concludes that this is not 'the necessary state of  
 3 affairs between God and us' (22). For clearly, it is especially God's *invisibility* that is visi-  
 4 ble to the eye of reason from the creation of the world. That is: A calm, sober, religiously  
 5 unbiased approach might have learnt us that God is invisible to us, that we cannot know  
 6 anything about Him, that we aren't God ourselves. Barth refers to Job in this connec-  
 7 tion, who heard God speaking in the thunderstorm, and conceded that in talking about  
 8 God he had talked about things he did not understand, about marvels that were to great  
 9 for him to know.

10 Thus, Barth emphasizes that it is the invisibility of God that might have been clear to  
 11 us from God's work ever since the creation of the world. Clearly, he equates this invis-  
 12 ibility with God's infinity, with the 'infinite qualitative difference' (a phrase he borrowed  
 13 from Kierkegaard) between God and humanity. In a remarkable exegetical move, he ar-  
 14 gues that God's eternal power and divinity is nothing else than this invisibility. He even  
 15 translates the text of Romans 1:19 in this way: 'For his invisibility (and this is precisely  
 16 his eternal power and divinity) is from the creation of the world visible to the eye of rea-  
 17 son through His works' (21). Thus, it is not the case that we could know already some of  
 18 God's attributes, viz. God's power and majesty, from his works in creation. The only  
 19 thing we could have known is that God is God, i.e. that in no way God can be compre-  
 20 hended or understood by the human mind. But it is precisely this knowledge that we  
 21 suppress when we align God with the natural powers in the world that we can manipu-  
 22 late. That is why we are inexcusable: we could have known and loved our Judge, but we  
 23 did not (and do not) do so (22). Barth even says that we could have known God's invis-  
 24 ibility 'always', 'throughout the entire history' (22). Thus, it is clear that he interprets Paul  
 25 as drawing on a possible knowledge of God that is prior to and independent of God's  
 26 revelation in Christ.

27 Interestingly, this is different when we read Barth's later interpretation of the Pauline  
 28 passage in his *Church Dogmatics*. Both in the famous section on 'Religion as Unbelief' in  
 29 I/2 and in his exposition on the knowability of God in II/1, Barth argues that in Ro-  
 30 mans 1 Paul is not speaking of the heathen in themselves and in general, but as people  
 31 who have been confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> When Paul in 1:18 points to  
 32 the revelation of God's wrath, he does not mean another revelation than the one he had  
 33 mentioned in the preceding verse: that of God's righteousness as proclaimed in the gos-  
 34 pel of Jesus Christ. The revelation of God's wrath in verse 18 is nothing else than a  
 35 'shadow side' (*Schattenseite*) of the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> This shad-  
 36 ow side is the theme of the entire first part of the epistle to the Romans (1:18–3:20). So  
 37 the passage 1:18–21 must be understood as an integral component of Paul's evangelical  
 38 kerygma: if the shadow side is not known, the light side becomes unintelligible (*ibid.*).  
 39 Therefore, in these verses Paul reminds us of the fact that precisely when we are told  
 40 about the grace that has come to us in Christ, we also have to see and believe that we are

<sup>27</sup> *Karl Barth*, *Der Römerbrief* (Zürich: Theol. Verl., 1999), 20; page numbers in brackets refer to this edition, which is based on the second printing of the second edition, München: Kaiser, 1922 (the English translation is mine).

<sup>28</sup> *Karl Barth*, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 304ff.; *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 119–123.

<sup>29</sup> *Barth*, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 120.



1 fully subject to God's judgement.<sup>30</sup> It is from Golgotha that this judgement becomes  
 2 clear. From Golgotha it becomes clear that the heathen, like the Jews, have always  
 3 sinned against God.

4 At this point, Barth concedes that the heathen knew the truth so well since 'God was  
 5 revealed to them from the very first. The world which always surrounded them was al-  
 6 ways His creation and spoke of His great works and therefore of Himself' (II/1, 120).  
 7 This does not mean, however, that they also knew *God*. On the contrary, Paul argues that  
 8 since they denied and betrayed this truth, the wrath of God comes upon them justly.  
 9 Barth is therefore quick to add that all this is not the content of a knowledge which they  
 10 already possessed when they came to hear the Gospel. Rather, 'it is all ascribed, reck-  
 11 oned, and imputed to the heathen as the truth about themselves in consequence of the  
 12 fact that in and with the truth of God in Jesus Christ the truth of man has been revealed'  
 13 (II/1, 121). So Paul does not suggest for a moment that in the proclamation of Jesus  
 14 Christ he is talking about things which the heathen knew already on the basis of a pris-  
 15 tine revelation.<sup>31</sup> 'It is impossible to draw from the text [of Romans 1] a statement  
 16 (which can then be advanced as timeless, general and abstract truth) concerning a natural  
 17 union with God or knowledge of God on the part of man in himself and as such' (II/1,  
 18 121). What Paul says about the heathen in this passage cannot be understood in isolation  
 19 from the apostolic proclamation about the incarnation of the Word (I/2, 306). For clear-  
 20 ly, it is only in and through Christ that we come to know God.

21 This is how Barth dealt with Romans 1 in the first volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*.  
 22 There are signs, however, that later in his life Barth mitigated his Christological reading  
 23 of the passage to some extent. To be sure, in his *Shorter Commentary on Romans*, a study of  
 24 Paul's letter dating from the early forties but prepared for publication only in 1959, Barth  
 25 still argues that Paul speaks of the Gentiles as confronted with the Gospel. The argu-  
 26 ment seems to unfold in more or less the same way as in the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth even  
 27 elucidates it further, for example when he adds that Paul speaks about something 'which  
 28 certainly concerns the Gentiles, but which was by no means known to them, which was  
 29 entirely unknown to them: he tells the Gentiles [...] the greatest news concerning them:  
 30 that God has in fact for a long time, yea always, since the creation of the world been de-  
 31 claring and revealing himself to them'.<sup>32</sup> But then all of a sudden Barth goes on to state:  
 32 'Objectively the Gentiles have always had the opportunity of knowing God, his invisible  
 33 being, his eternal power and godhead. And again, objectively speaking, they have also  
 34 always known him. [...] God as the Creator of all things has always been, objectively  
 35 speaking, the proper and real object of their knowledge.'<sup>33</sup>

36 Although it is unclear how exactly these statements relate to Barth's earlier exposi-  
 37 tions, what *is* clear is that Barth now interrupts his rejection of all human possibilities to  
 38 know God outside of Christ by some more positive utterances about the Gentile reli-  
 39 gions. No doubt it is no coincidence that in that same year 1959 Barth published the first  
 40 half of *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, in which he developed his so-called *Lichterlehre*. Subordi-

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 306.

<sup>31</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 307.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on the Romans* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007; orig. ed. 1959), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Shorter Commentary*, 15; the 'objectively speaking' seems to imply that the Gentiles knew God without being, subjectively speaking, aware of that fact. Cf. Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 125

1 nate to the one true Light Jesus Christ, the world contains a number of lesser lights that  
 2 reflect (however weakly) the glory of God. Thus, it is suggested that God's revelation in  
 3 Christ not only sheds a radically negative light on what is going on in the religions, but  
 4 may also be seen as connected with them in a more positive way. Still, however, Barth  
 5 cautions that we have to avoid expressions such as 'revelation of creation' and 'primal  
 6 revelation'.<sup>34</sup>

7 In conclusion, we can see the development of Barth's thinking on revelation and reli-  
 8 gion neatly reflected in the subsequent expositions on the *locus classicus* in Romans 1  
 9 which he published throughout the years. However, Barth never revoked the unique  
 10 Christological exegesis that he elaborated in the first volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*.  
 11 Therefore, Barth's answer to the question that figures in our title ('Is it Natural for Hu-  
 12 mans to Believe in God?') remains predominantly negative: by nature human beings do  
 13 not believe in God, since they do not (at least subjectively speaking, i.e. consciously)  
 14 know Him.

15

#### 5. Pannenberg on Romans 1

16 Eighty years after Bavinck's Stone-lectures and some fifty years after Barth's first exposi-  
 17 tions on Romans 1 in the *Church Dogmatics*, Wolfhart Pannenberg joined the discussion in  
 18 the first volume of his *magnum opus*, *Systematic Theology*. In the second chapter of this work  
 19 Pannenberg starts his exposition of the Romans-passage by substantiating a claim that  
 20 we already heard Bavinck making, viz. that general revelation has at all times been unan-  
 21 imously accepted and defended in Christian theology. As to Protestant theology, up to  
 22 the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nobody 'ever disputed [...] the fact that we have here a  
 23 different form of knowledge of God from that of the historical revelation in Christ'.<sup>35</sup>  
 24 The implicit reference to Barth in this sentence is soon made explicit: Although '[e]ven  
 25 Barth, in his exposition of Rom.1:20–21' conceded that as human beings we know God  
 26 from creation, Barth grounded this knowledge in the event of God's revelation in  
 27 Christ.<sup>36</sup> In fact, it is not a knowledge that we have in ourselves, but one that is ascribed  
 28 to us from outside (that is, one might add: in the apostolic preaching of the Christ-  
 29 event). Only in this way Barth can remain faithful to his view that the revelation in Christ  
 30 is the only revelation of God.

31 It is precisely with this basic presupposition of Barth that Pannenberg has problems,  
 32 however. For might it not be characteristic of God's revelation in Christ 'that it presup-  
 33 poses the fact that the world and humanity belong to, and know, the God who is pro-  
 34 claimed by the gospel, even though a wholly new light is shed on this fact by the revela-  
 35 tion in Christ'?<sup>37</sup> Here Pannenberg refers to another famous passage, viz. John 1:11,  
 36 where it is stated that in the incarnation the Logos 'came to his own', so that, painfully

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 73. Pannenberg sub-  
 stantiates these claims by means of quotations from Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and Melanchthon.  
 He points out that Schleiermacher was one of the first theologians who came to criticize the notion of  
 natural theology – but without contesting the notion of a natural knowledge of God.

<sup>36</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 75.

1 enough, those who did not receive him were not strangers but his own people.<sup>38</sup> In that  
 2 case, however, they must already have been aware of God before the incarnation – and  
 3 this is exactly what according to Pannenberg Paul argues in Romans 1:20. For Paul  
 4 points out here that God has given humans a knowledge of his deity ‘from the creation  
 5 of the world’, which is ‘long before the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ’.<sup>39</sup> It  
 6 is not even a *disposition* to know God which God has given us (which must still be actual-  
 7 ized), but an *actual knowledge*. It is because of this knowledge that we become guilty when  
 8 we turn to idolatry.

9 Pannenberg goes on to argue that Paul’s statement that God – the God of the gospel  
 10 – is known to all people by nature, although not, as Barth had rightly observed, a state-  
 11 ment of natural theology (by which Pannenberg means the realm of rational arguments  
 12 for the existence of God), nevertheless refers to what traditional dogmatics had called  
 13 the ‘natural knowledge’ of God. For if no real and generally available human knowledge  
 14 corresponded to these sayings, it would become unintelligible how such knowledge  
 15 might leave us ‘without excuse’ if we don’t use it for worshiping the true God.

16 In an intriguing train of thought, Pannenberg now develops this classical notion of a  
 17 natural knowledge of God as grounded in Romans 1 into his own notion of a ‘nonthe-  
 18 matic awareness’ of God. According to the older Protestant dogmatics, our natural  
 19 knowledge of God can be of two kinds: either it is innate, or it is acquired. Luther and  
 20 Melanchthon intuitively opted for the first possibility, because acquired knowledge of  
 21 God seemed to involve the proper use of reason, which was of course distrusted espe-  
 22 cially by Luther. In his 1532 commentary on Romans, however, Melanchthon could not  
 23 escape noticing that Paul associated the natural knowledge of God with our experience  
 24 of the created world. Therefore he no longer ruled out that our original knowledge of  
 25 God is acquired rather than inborn, but still he continued to see some form of innate  
 26 knowledge as its basis.<sup>40</sup>

27 Now Pannenberg concurs with Melanchthon here. Indeed, according to Romans 1 the  
 28 knowledge of God is gained by our experience of the world, so in that sense it is ac-  
 29 quired. Still, however, an innate knowledge underlays it, viz. an intuition of ‘a mystery of  
 30 being which transcends and upholds human life, and gives us the courage to trust it’.<sup>41</sup>  
 31 Pannenberg (following Rahner here) calls this an ‘unthematisches Wissen von Gott’.<sup>42</sup> It  
 32 cannot properly be named knowledge of God since it is inarticulate. Like according to  
 33 Exodus 6:3 the patriarchs worshiped YHWH without knowing this name (which was  
 34 only revealed later to Moses), God ‘is present to all of us from the very first and known  
 35 by us, although not as God’.<sup>43</sup> Pannenberg hints at the psychological notion of a child’s  
 36 ‘basic trust’ in this connection, which also precedes the conscious differentiation be-

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<sup>38</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 75; interestingly, in the Shorter Commentary on Romans, Barth also argued that the Gentiles cannot ‘exculpate themselves by saying that God is a stranger to them’ (16), so it may seem that Pannenberg’s criticism of Barth misses the point; but then here again Barth grounds this observation in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, especially in Christ’s death on the cross (17).

<sup>39</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 117.

<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie* 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1988), 129. (I use the German original here because ‘Wissen’ is much vaguer and less articulate than its usual English translation – ‘knowledge’ – suggests).

<sup>43</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 117.

1 tween mother and child. Similarly, only in the course of our growing experience of the  
 2 world, we start to differentiate between an infinite God and the finite world – not by ac-  
 3 tualizing some disposition that we have, but simply by becoming conscious of what has  
 4 been the case all the time. This, according to Pannenberg, is what Paul has in mind in  
 5 Romans 1:20:

6 ‘There has not been a philosophical natural theology from the beginning of creation. But in the history of  
 7 humanity there has always been in some form an explicit awareness of God that is linked to experience of  
 8 the works of creation.’<sup>44</sup>

9 Thus, unlike Barth, Pannenberg answers our title question in the affirmative: it is natural  
 10 for human beings to believe in God and to know him, even though they can distort this  
 11 knowledge in a myriad of ways.

12 It is this rehabilitation of the traditional doctrine of a natural knowledge of God that  
 13 leads Pannenberg to a more positive evaluation of what is going on in the religions than  
 14 we encountered with Barth until the end of his career. At the very least, we cannot con-  
 15 clude, says Pannenberg, that the religions ‘are all from the root up no more than idolatry’  
 16 (as Barth had phrased it).<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, we have to recognize that there is  
 17 knowledge of the true God in them, as acquired from creation – although at the same  
 18 time there is also ‘the exchanging of the incorruptible God for creaturely things’ (Ro-  
 19 mans 1:23, 25).<sup>46</sup> This conclusion leads Pannenberg in the third chapter of his book to  
 20 have a closer look at the religions, and even to ground his dogmatics not in the religions  
 21 as such but in a theological analysis of their significance for Christian theology – thus  
 22 overcoming the old opposition between Schleiermacher (who started from the religions  
 23 while ignoring that we can only know God from revelation) and Barth (who started from  
 24 revelation while dismissing the religions).

25

### 6. Conclusion

26 We have seen that the expositions on Romans 1 in the works of Bavinck, Barth and  
 27 Pannenberg form a mirror in which their respective doctrines of the revelation and  
 28 knowability of God is clearly reflected. It turned out that there is more similarity be-  
 29 tween Bavinck’s and Pannenberg’s views on general revelation and the knowledge of  
 30 God than between either of them and Karl Barth. Both Bavinck and Pannenberg accept  
 31 some form of general revelation, but neither of them isolates it from God’s special reve-  
 32 lation in Jesus Christ; similarly, contrary to Barth, both Bavinck and Pannenberg  
 33 acknowledge the existence of a natural human knowledge of God. Both of them think  
 34 that it is natural for human beings to believe in God, so that atheism is a much stranger  
 35 phenomenon than religiosity. Here, they are perfectly in line with present-day empirical  
 36 research as briefly surveyed in section 1 above. Finally, both Bavinck and Pannenberg  
 37 read off from Romans 1 a nuanced evaluation of what is going in the religions, taking  
 38 into account both positive and negative aspects from a Christian theological perspective.  
 39 In Barth a negative evaluation dominates. Barth goes to great lengths to elaborate a new,

<sup>44</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 117.

<sup>45</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 117; in *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 307, Barth had argued that the pagan way of sensing, thinking and doing ‘already in its root does not have God as its object’.

<sup>46</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 118.

1 unprecedented exegesis of Romans 1:18–21, but despite its ingenuity this exegesis can-  
2 not but strike the impartial reader as artificial. Both Bavinck and Pannenberg explain the  
3 passage in what seems to be a much more ‘natural’ and therefore convincing way.

4 Finally, Christoph Schwöbel, for one, has attempted to overcome the dialectics under-  
5 lying these diverging evaluations by carefully elaborating the intricate relationship be-  
6 tween the irreducible particularity of God’s revelation in Christ and the universality of  
7 human experience, including human *religious* experience. Schwöbel has especially un-  
8 packed the hidden potential of the doctrine of the Trinity for adequately construing this  
9 relationship.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Schwöbel has made clear in his own way that endorsing the univer-  
10 sal dimensions and implications of God’s revelation is not at odds with the particularity  
11 of the Christian message. Rather, both are inextricably linked up with each other. There-  
12 fore, Christian theologians need not be surprised when this universality is more and  
13 more confirmed by scientific research showing that religion is by and large a natural and  
14 universal human phenomenon. They might instead grasp the opportunity for a new con-  
15 versation on the rationality of the religious impulse, behind which they may surmise an  
16 existential longing (however distorted) for the God and Father of Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. e.g. *Christoph Schwöbel*, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), 83–120 (esp. 118–119), and the extended German equivalent of this chapter in *Gott in Beziehung. Studien zur Dogmatik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 53–130, here: 111. Schwöbel clearly starts from God’s particular revelation in the Christ-event here, but then argues that precisely this revelation opens up the conditions of the possibility of all human experience.

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