

# The Place of Theology in the Contemporary Church: Where does God fit into Contemporary Religious Debate?

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There are a variety of different approaches to the discussion of religion. Here, we consider how God fits in—or does not fit in—to some of these approaches. We will also reflect on how theology can assist the contemporary church to make a good confession of faith in the face of these widely divergent approaches to religion. Broadly speaking, the approaches to religion we will consider are these; (a) the *rejection* of God; (b) the *accommodation* of God; (c) the *marginalization* of God.

## **(a) *The Rejection of God***

Atheism is one side of the coin. Authoritarianism is the other. This is an apt description of the atheism of a great many people in our generation. They have no liking for authoritarianism. God is identified with authoritarianism. They have no liking for God. Often, the atheism of our generation is not so much a rejection of God in the strongest sense. Perhaps, when directly challenged regarding the question of God, such atheism will make a conscious statement of unbelief. For the most part, however, modern atheism takes the form of God being ignored, dismissed, not taken seriously.

How is the contemporary church to address this situation? How can theology help the church to speak constructively and convincingly in the face of such widespread unbelief? The connection between atheism and authoritarianism is surely a significant factor we must take account of as we do our theology, as we, in the church, speak of God. If atheism and authoritarian-

ism are two sides of the one coin, then theology—in its challenge to atheism—must take seriously the problem of authoritarianism. The way in which we handle the problem of authoritarianism will significantly influence our effectiveness in addressing the problem of atheism.

What is authoritarianism? It would be tempting to identify authoritarianism as a purely conservative problem. This, however, is not the case. Some liberal theologians show little openness towards the views of others particularly if they perceive them to be coming from a theologically conservative direction. This can lead to significant theological voices remaining unheard, because they have been written off as ‘conservative’, written off in a way that makes them out to be much more narrowly ‘conservative’ than they really are. Some theologians, conservative by conviction, show considerable openness and willingness to learn from those of a more liberal persuasion. Authoritarianism is not a purely conservative problem. It is a problem for anyone who dares to make pronouncements of any kind.

Authoritarianism is a problem which faces the whole theological community. It is the danger of presenting our opinions from the kind of god-like stance which serves only to boost our own sense of self-importance. It is the danger of speaking in a way that belittles those who have the audacity to disagree with us. It is a danger to which both liberals and conservatives can and often do fall prey. Authoritarianism is not to be identified with a particular theological viewpoint. Rather, it should be viewed as a matter of temperament. How do we do theology? What attitude do we bring to our study of theology?

Authoritarianism is a problem which adversely affects the church's witness to the world. What is the unbelieving world likely to think when it sees one wing of the church viewing the other as the opposition or the enemy? How are we to do theology in a way that draws attention to the unity among Christians rather than the divisions between Christians? As far back as 1606, James Arminius gave the church four pieces of succinct yet extremely important advice:

First, it is very difficult to discover truth and avoid error; second, people who err are more likely to be ignorant than malicious; third, those who err may be among the elect; and fourth, it is possible that we ourselves are in error.

What is your reaction to my quoting a seventeenth-century writer in a paper regarding the contemporary church? Is it to say, 'That's ancient history! What has that to do with the contemporary church!?' That is an authoritarian reaction, with a modern feel about it. It is the reaction of the closed mind—What can we moderns learn from ancient history? What is your reaction to my quoting from James Arminius, widely regarded as an arch-enemy of the Reformed Faith, in a paper concerned with 'Theology in the Church of Scotland', a denomination which takes pride in its Reformed heritage? We must not be too hasty to assume that we know it all, either as contemporary theologians or as Churchmen standing in the Calvinist tradition.

What does this have to do with the challenge of atheism? Simply this—Can we expect the unbelieving world to take the Christian church seriously when it sees theologians pouring more energy into disagreeing among themselves than they do into the much larger and more significant challenge of calling the unbelieving world to faith in Jesus Christ? You may ask, 'Is a controversial figure such as Arminius a good model to use for the purpose of encouraging better attitudes between one theological camp and another?'. He's not such a bad model as you might, at first, imagine.

Did you notice in the earlier quotation that Arminius uses the expression, 'the elect'? Some people, with too much of a liking for theological pigeon-holing, would hardly expect Arminius to use the words 'the elect', except in an angry outburst against Calvinist doctrine. Our contemporary theological pigeon-holing may not run along the lines of the Calvinist–Arminian distinction. But it happens whenever we pick up a book, take a cursory glance at it and set it aside with the thought, 'This is a conservative writer (or a liberal writer). I won't learn much from him or her.' Thus, our preoccupation with theological pigeon-holing robs us of a potentially enriching experience. Again, Arminius can help us here. Given the history of the Calvinist–Arminian debate, what would you expect Arminius to say about

Calvin's commentaries? Let me tell you what he does say:

(A)fter the reading of Scripture, which I strenuously inculcate . . . more than any other . . . I recommend that the *Commentaries* of Calvin be read . . . in the interpretation of the Scriptures Calvin is incomparable . . . his *Commentaries* are more to be valued than anything that is handed down to us in the writings of the Fathers . . . I concede to him a certain spirit of prophecy in which he stands distinguished above others, above most, indeed, above all.<sup>2</sup>

What does all this have to do with modern theological study? What does it have to do with the call for the church to communicate the Christian message in an increasingly unbelieving world?

Let me take you from Arminius and seventeenth-century Amsterdam to G. C. Berkouwer and twentieth-century Amsterdam. I began my recent book, *The Problem of Polarization: An Approach Based on the Writings of G. C. Berkouwer*, with a statement which has a more modern feel about it:

Dilemmas always are a source of polarization. We quickly go over to simplistic either-or's . . . in which the fulness of truth is torn apart. And in the atmosphere of false polarities, we often stop listening to each other and lose our ability to understand each other's words. With this, irritation and pique poison the theological discussion. But it is striking and, at the same time, reassuring that the clear intent of the gospel comes through even in the midst of theological polarization, especially when all the parties *intend* to be faithful to the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

Berkouwer's emphasis on our mutual affirmation that we intend to be faithful to the gospel together with a mutual commitment to Arminius' emphasis on 'the reading of Scripture, which I strenuously inculcate . . . more than any other', is vitally important if 'the clear intent of the gospel' is to get through to the contemporary church and thus strengthen the church's witness in an unbelieving world.

Commenting on the state of contemporary theology, Berkouwer, in the Foreword to his book, *A Half Century of Theology*, writes:

I believe that without genuine curiosity . . . theology will not do well. I regret every sign that theologians have lost their curiosity. It happens when we are satisfied with a small territory we have carved out for ourselves and lose our feel for new perspectives and new opportunities for enrichment. Besides, without the tensions of curiosity there is little hope for any essential corrections in one's own insights. A complacency sets in, a feeling that the gospel has been adequately thought about and understood,

and that we can restfully settle down with what has already been said. A curiosity that works itself out in passionate study and serious listening to others promises surprises, clearer insight and deeper understanding—no matter from which direction they come. And so curiosity brings a certain joy as we walk through the challenging terrain.<sup>5</sup>

This is very relevant to the church's task of communicating the gospel. What does the watching world think when it sees a deeply divided church? Overcoming the breakdown of communication within the church must surely be an important step towards a more affective communication of the gospel. If this is to be achieved, we must learn to distinguish clearly between authentic authority—the authority of the gospel—and unwarranted authoritarianism which occurs where too much prominence has been given to the opinions of the theologians, where too much importance has been attached to the theological system. The last thing the church, and the world, needs is 'theologians who are more interested in their own thoughts about God than in God himself'.<sup>6</sup> We must never forget that our theology is meant to equip the saints for service.<sup>7</sup>

***(b) The Accommodation of God; and (c) The Marginalization of God***

I described atheism and authoritarianism as two sides of the one coin. I wish to continue with this metaphor. The accommodation of God and the marginalization of God are also the two sides of the one coin. When I speak of the accommodation of God, I have in mind the kind of rationalism which cuts God down to size by accommodating him to our ways of thinking. The phrase, 'the marginalization of God', refers to the kind of mysticism which tends to limit God to a world of inner experience, distancing him from the difficult issues of the world out there.

Herman Bavinck begins his book, *The Doctrine of God*, with a chapter entitled, 'God's Incomprehensibility'. He stresses that 'Mystery is the vital element in Dogmatics', emphasizing that 'Dogmatics has throughout to do with God: the Incomprehensible'. He begins with the timely reminder that 'the believer cannot fully comprehend revealed truth'.<sup>8</sup> Bavinck's words are reminiscent of Alfred Tennyson's verse, 'Our little systems have their day; They have their day and cease to be: They are but broken lights of Thee, And Thou, O Lord, art more than they'.<sup>9</sup> We must not become so proud of our own opinions that we dare to reduce God to the size of our own particular theological system. He is always greater than any and every system of theology.

We recognize, in Bavinck's words, an important

corrective to the tendency towards cutting God down to size. Nevertheless, we must ask, 'Where does Bavinck's emphasis on God's incomprehensibility take us? Does it take us towards a mysticism which hardly dares to articulate what we mean when we use the word, "God"? Does it lead us into a mysticism which escapes from the world out there into a world of inner experience?'

To answer these questions, we need to look more closely at what Bavinck says about God's incomprehensibility and we need to observe how Bavinck thinks about the scope of Dogmatics. Concerning God's incomprehensibility, he writes, 'According to Scripture God is incomprehensible yet knowable, absolute yet personal'. The words, 'according to Scripture', are of great importance for the contemporary church as it participates in contemporary religious debate. Here, Bavinck is affirming his conviction that 'God has revealed himself'.<sup>10</sup> While acknowledging the many difficulties in biblical interpretation, we, as theologians, will serve the church well by stressing that 'God has revealed himself'. Whatever difficulties there may be in interpreting Scripture, the principle—'according to Scripture'—does give the contemporary church a criterion by which a whole variety of views of God can be evaluated. We encounter a highly rationalistic view which appears to rob God of much of his greatness, and we ask, 'How does this match up to the teaching of Scripture?'. We hear of an extreme approach which seems to make God very remote from the problems we face in today's world and we ask, 'Is this how Scripture teaches us to think about God?'

When Bavinck speaks of mystery as the vital element of Dogmatics, we are hardly surprised to find him writing, 'the more it (Dogmatics) meditates on him . . . the more it is transformed into worship and adoration'.<sup>11</sup> This kind of language may make us wonder whether we are being led into a mysticism which is far removed from everyday life. Is this, however, the direction in which Bavinck wishes to lead us? When he writes of God's incomprehensibility and our response in worship, Bavinck does not mean to lead us into a ghetto, where God has been marginalized, where he has been kept within the confines of inner experience.

Citing Bavinck's lecture on 'Modernism and Orthodoxy' (1911), Berkouwer writes,

He was . . . intrigued by the expanding knowledge of a world rapidly opening its secrets. We had no right, he said, to 'despise the knowledge that God in his providence is disclosing to us from all sides in this century. We must use every means that science and culture make available for a better understanding of God's truth in general revelation'.

While Bavinck, with his 'according to Scripture'

approach to theology, 'typified liberalism as "anti-supernaturalist" in that it recognized no reality beyond and above nature . . . (he) refused to be totally negative about liberalism' since 'he saw modernism as at least attempting some of these things' which theology should be doing. As well as the interaction with science, Bavinck highlighted the importance of 'study-(ing) the psychological and historical conditions under which revelation, inspiration, incarnation and regeneration took place'.<sup>12</sup>

Since Bavinck's day, there have been great advances in the fields of psychology, history and science. Some will tell us that such advances have dispensed with the need for God. Others will allow us to believe in God, but will insist that we must think of him in ways that are rather different from any faith that is recognizable as biblical faith. What are we, as contemporary theologians, to make of this situation? How can we help the contemporary church to relate positively yet confidently to modern discussions about religion? We must not draw back into an authoritarian stance. We need to encourage people to listen and learn from others of a different persuasion. Being open-minded does not, however, mean being empty-minded. We do not abandon our conviction that God has revealed himself. We affirm our conviction—'according to Scripture'—by continuing to read the Bible regularly in an age where many have set aside the Bible as a book which belongs to the past and no longer concerns modern men and women. If our listening to and learning from others is constantly accompanied by listening to and learning from the Bible, we will be better equipped to continue worshipping and serving God in the face of the many pressures

towards either unbelief (the rejection of God) or distorted faith (the accommodation of God and the marginalization of God).

### Footnotes

1. *The Works of James Arminius D.D.*, (American edition of 1956), I, 183. Cited by Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, (Grand Rapids, 1985), 276.

2. *Praestantium ac eruditorum virorum epistolae ecclesiae et theologicae*, no. 101 (excerpt from a letter to Egbertsz., May 3, 1607). Cited by Bangs, *Op. cit.*, 287.

3. *Rutherford Studies in Contemporary Theology, Volume 2*; Published for Rutherford House, Edinburgh by Edwin Mellen Press, (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter, 1992).

4. *ibid.*, x. Citing G. C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, 1977), 208.

5. 7–8.

6. H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, (Grand Rapids, 1979), 30.

7. *ibid.*, xi.

8. Edinburgh, 1977, 13.

9. H. Berkhof, *Op. cit.*, cited on one of the title pages.

10. *Op. cit.*, 13–14.

11. *ibid.*, 14.

12. *Op. cit.*, 15–16.

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