

Status Quaestionis[†]

† Conceived as a complement to our *Scholia*, which are original translations of early modern texts and treatises on ethics, economics, and theology, the *Status Quaestionis* features are intended to help us grasp in a more thorough and comprehensive way the state of the scholarly landscape with regard to the modern intersection between religion and economics. Whereas the *Scholia* are longer, generally treatise-length works located in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the *Status Quaestionis* will typically be shorter, essay-length pieces from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

General Biblical
Principles and
the Relevance of
Concrete Mosaic
Law for the
Social Question
Today (1891)

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Herman Bavinck

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I

The creation of human beings is to be distinguished from that of other creatures in a number of significant ways. It is preceded and introduced by a solemn declaration of God (Gen. 1:26) and receives its location from the deliberate formation of the human body from the dust of the earth while the breath of life is breathed into his nostrils from above (Gen. 2:7). The result is that the human person is the image and likeness of God.

Human destiny accords with this origin. As God's image bearer, human beings have a calling rightly to know their Creator, love him with all their heart and live with him in eternity. Human destiny is higher than that of all earthly creatures; it rises far above the earth, coming to rest in eternity rather than in time. However much was given to humanity at the beginning, this was still not yet what was

¹ Full Dutch Title: "Welke algemeen beginselen beheerschen, volgens de H. Schrift, de oplossing de social quaeestie, en welke vingerwijzing voor die oplossing ligt in de concrete toepassing, welke deze beginselen voor Israël in het Mozaïsch recht gevonden hebben." ("According to Holy Scripture, what are the general principles [provided for] a solution to the social question and what pointers towards this solution lie in the concrete application given to this principles for Israel by Mosaic law.")

possible and meant for us; eternal life and salvation still had to be gained though the way of obedience that humans had to fulfill.

This eternal destiny in no way forecloses our earthly vocations. The spiritual does not come first; the natural does. The first man was earthly, from the earth (1 Cor. 15:45–47), and was given a vocation also for this world. Thanks to his body, man is connected to the earth, dependent on it for his existence, and in many respects shares its life. With a view to earth, humans are given a double task, to fill the earth and rule over it (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). [150] This earthly calling is distinguished from the eternal destiny of humans, just as the institution of the Sabbath alongside the workweek bears testimony. They, however, are not in conflict and form no contradiction; true fulfillment of our earthly vocation is exactly what prepares us for eternal salvation, and putting our minds on those things that are above equips us for genuine satisfaction of our earthly desires.

Because humans were image bearers of God, created with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and inclined in heart and equipped to bring God's plan to fruition, they were given every necessary gift and power to fulfill this double calling. By creating humanity as male and female God equipped them to fill the earth and subdue it. This duality of sex, this institution of marriage, contains *in nuce* all subsequent social relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, servants and freemen, civil rulers and subjects. It is here also that we see, in principle, all the inequalities that would eventually come to pass among people: differences in body and soul, in character and temperament, in gifts of understanding and will, in heart and hand, and so forth. Inequality is a given of creation, grounded in the very will of God himself, and not first of all a consequence of sin.

It is this dual vocation that sets the responsibility of work before humans. God, who himself is always at work (John 5:17) and calls us to be like him in this, did not create us for idleness and blissful inactivity. He gave us six days, therefore, for all sorts of labor involving our heads and our hands as we subdue the earth; our work is also a divine institution. He also added a seventh day, blessed it and hallowed it, so that humans could rest from their labors and make heaven rather than earth the final goal of their work. Together with all creatures, humans are called to find their rest in fellowship with God.

God's law—written on human hearts—was given as a rule and guide for our entire existence in its internal and external dimensions, covering our daily walk and our commerce.² This law is summarized in the duty to love God and

² Translator's note: Bavinck's Dutch plays on two words: "handel en wandel" (literally: "commerce/trade/business" and "walk").

the neighbor. So long as humans followed this rule, they did not need to fear any disturbance in the various relationships within which they were created. As servant of God and lord of creation, they stood in right relationship to all things; death with all its before-and-after consequences could not intrude here. Even his external situation was in full accord with his inner disposition; Paradise was his home; there was harmony between duty and happiness, between holiness and blessedness. [151]

II

However, sin—that is, transgression of God’s law—did come into the world and worked its disturbing and devastating way into all the relationships within which humans had originally been created. In the first place, the relation of fellowship with God was broken; sin brought unbelief, disobedience, and enmity against God. Sin leads us to forget the things that are above, to lose sight of our eternal, heavenly destination. Instead, sin throws us down to the earth and directs us to look for our salvation and happiness in its visible things. Thanks to sin, human beings became “flesh.”

Consequently, the right relation of humans to themselves was also disturbed. Proper balance was destroyed; soul and body, spirit and flesh are now at odds with each other. Head and heart, understanding and will, and desire and duty are in irreconcilable conflict as the various human gifts and powers engage in perpetual war with other, are devalued or misused. Egoism replaces love in the human heart and as a result produces envy, deceit, hatred, murder, and so forth. Sin has thus become the basic given of human life, the motivating power of human conduct.

In this way, the entire social existence of human beings becomes a war of all against all. Husbands and wives, parents and children, rich and poor, and so forth, come to be enemies of each other; differences become oppositions; inequalities are changed into clashing contrasts. Driven by egoism, everyone no longer thinks about that which they have but focuses on what belongs to someone else. Society becomes a stage-play about the struggle for existence, a world where one man acts as a wolf toward the others.

Similarly, the relationship of humans to the natural world is also affected by this disturbing power of sin. God remains the same and his command does not change: We are still given the responsibility to fill the earth and subdue it. However, the character of our labor now is changed: Women bear children in pain and sorrow, and men eat bread by the sweat of their brow because nature is no longer cooperative but antagonistic. Human dominion over creation has

given way to situation where nature is indifferent even hostile, where “thorns and thistles,” the animals of the field, and the forces of nature are our enemies. [152] Our labor has become a struggle merely to survive. Paradise is closed behind us and we are sent out into the raw, wasted world without any weapons.

Furthermore, to top it off, in all this, humans feel the judgments of God that multiply above our heads. Rebellion against God’s law never goes unpunished; sin is itself misery and is followed by an ocean of disasters. Shattered souls and broken bodies are the wrecks of justice; inner disturbance, a sense of guilt, an agonized conscience, and fear of punishment gnaw at the hidden life of every human being. Illness and troubles, tragedies and evils, mourning and death, all take away the joys of our earthly life. Dust celebrates its triumph in the grave; destruction sings its victory song.

III

This devastating path of sin’s work over time is nonetheless restrained by God’s grace. His thoughts after all are not directed to destruction but to the preservation and redemption of humanity. Already in his role as Creator and Sustainer God redirects sin, opposes it and reins it in so that sin does annihilate creation and frustrate his decree.

God does this, in the first place, by the punishments and judgments that he links to sin. Restless souls, the trials of life, the struggle for existence, the toils of our daily labor, all of these are, at the same time, revelations of divine wrath and instruments of his common grace, by which he throws obstacles in the path of sin’s progress and opposes the most horrific outbursts of sin.

In addition, with respect to human beings, God does this by allowing a few weak remnants of his image and likeness to remain [after the Fall]. He grants them reason and conscience; preserves in them some knowledge of his existence and character, a seed of religion; a moral sense of good and evil; and a consciousness of our eternal destiny. In this way, God keeps before people a tie to another and higher world than the visible one limited by our senses. Even with all the corruption present among all people and every individual, there remains a natural knowledge of God [for everyone].

Finally, God does that by establishing the structures of family, society, and state among human beings. He awakens in the human heart a natural love between men and women, parents and children. He nurtures a variety of social virtues among people: a pull toward social relationships and a longing for affection and friendship. [153] He also scatters humanity into different people groups and languages to protect them from total decline. Among those nations, he creates

the national virtues of affection for and love of fatherland. He permits these different people groups to organize themselves into states to whom is given the calling to regulate the relationships among the many diverse spheres of society and maintain justice.

Nonetheless, this endowment of common grace and divine long-suffering is not enough; it restrains human beings but does not renew them. While the Lord permits the pagan nations to wander along their own path, he sets Israel apart and makes known to them his ways and his laws. God is Israel's King, Lawgiver, and Judge (Isa. 33:22). These laws regulated the totality of Israel's existence and life, not only externally but also internally, its religious and moral life and its statecraft and social relationships. With respect to the social terrain, we find the following institutions and structures.

- a. Israel is the people of God, set apart from all the nations to be his holy people and called to walk in his ways (Ex. 19:5, 6, etc.). In the law-giving at Mt. Sinai, it is this religious destiny for Israel that stands in the foreground. However, it is not only the *people* but also the *land* that God owns as his possession. In the freedom of his decree, he took the land of Canaan from its previous inhabitants and gave it as an inheritance to Abraham and his seed. The land belongs to God and the Israelites are strangers and tenants (Lev. 25:23). Israel possesses the land in fiefdom to use as a renter. God manages it and determines how the land is to be divided among the tribes and clans (Josh. 13ff.)
- b. God maintains these tribes and clans and protects their inheritance. He promises fertility for Israel's families (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; Deut. 28:4) and kept alive among them the conviction that children are a blessing and inheritance from the Lord (Ps. 113:9; 127:3–5; 128:3). Inherited portions of land were passed on through sons; in families that had no sons, it was given to daughters but with the obligation to marry men from their own tribal clan (Num. 27:8; 36:1–13). A childless widow was to be taken as wife by a brother or close relative of the deceased man in order that his name not be blotted out from the land and his inheritance given to another (Deut. 25:5–10).
- c. In turn, the inherited portions of land were protected and preserved for the tribe and clan, especially by the principle of jubilee. In the Year of Jubilee, all Israelites whose poverty had led them into slavery were to be released (Lev. 25:39, 40 [also Deut. 15:12]); the right of redemption was to be available to them in perpetuity (Lev. 25:47) [154]—their property could not be sold for good; it could only be

used until the Year of Jubilee when it was to be returned freely, without payment of a purchase price, to the original owner. Even prior to this year, the owner or his redeemer retained the right to buy back the property (Lev. 25). However, this institution of redemption and return did not apply to houses in walled cities (Lev. 25:29–30) nor to land that was dedicated to the Lord (Lev. 27:16–21).

- d. It was thanks to these stipulations that Israel avoided both pauperization and accumulation of land and capital. At the same time, this did not eliminate differences between rich and poor, freeman and serf. God willed that there should be poor (Deut. 15:11; Prov. 22:2), and bondage or serfdom was a lawful institution (Ex. 21:20ff.). Nonetheless, the basic necessities for a life of human dignity³ were made possible for most Israelites. Contrasts [between rich and poor] were mitigated, in most beautiful manner on the Sabbath and the feast days. Poor and rich did not exist then; all lived, apart from their labor, freely from the hand of the Lord; all were free, throwing off their work clothes and donning festal garments. This was a time to rest from all labor and to rejoice in the presence of God.
- e. In addition to this, we must not forget the ministry of mercy in Israel. Loans were to be given to the poor freely and willingly (Deut. 15:7); surety was not to be taken by force and even, in some cases, to be returned before sunset (Deut. 24:6, 10ff.; Ex. 22:26). No interest was to be charged a brother Israelite (Deut. 25:19; Lev. 25:36) and debts were to be forgiven in the seventh year (Deut. 15:1ff.); day-wages were to be paid in a timely fashion (Deut. 24:15). In addition, widows and orphans, the poor and the stranger were to be treated justly in the courts (Deut. 14:7; Ex. 22:21, 22); they had rights of gleaning after annual harvests (Lev. 19:9ff.; Deut. 24:19ff.) and to the entire harvest in the Sabbath year (Lev. 25:5); they also had rights to share in the meals from sacrifices and tithes (Deut. 14:28ff.; 16:10ff.; 26:12ff.). Those with disabilities were not to be mocked (Lev. 19:14; Deut. 27:18) and the elderly were to be honored (Lev. 19:32). God's law even provided for the life and well-being of animals, including their rest (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 25:4; 22:6, 28). This entire ministry of mercy is repeatedly predicated on Israel's oppression and sojourning in Egypt (Ex. 22:20; 23:9; etc.). Israel's moral law is written from the vantage point of the oppressed. [155]

³ The Dutch expression here is "menschwaardig bestaan."

IV

In the fullness of time, the old dispensation gave way to the new; its essence remained, but its form changed—when the body comes, the shadows disappear. Now the law is not simply abrogated and set aside, but it is fulfilled in Christ and in this way reaches its own end. For that reason, the New Testament does not give us laws that could as a matter of course be adopted by the state and enforced with its authority. Rather we must go to the Old Testament where the eternal principles are set forth by which alone the well-being of families, societies, and states can be guaranteed. These principles are not written on tablets of stone but penetrate the bodily tablets of human hearts and, through the church of Christ, the world.

It is indisputable that the salvation of human souls stands in the foreground of the New Testament. Sin, in the first place, breaks off fellowship with God, and then, in consequence, all genuine relationships that humans have with all other creatures. Thus, the first order of the day is restoring our proper relationship with God. The cross of Christ, therefore, is the heart and mid-point of the Christian religion. Jesus did not come, first of all, to renew families and reform society but to save sinners and to redeem the world from the coming wrath of God. This salvation of our souls must be our ultimate concern for which we are willing to sacrifice everything: father and mother, house and field, even our own lives, in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 6:33; 16:26, etc.). This new, reconciled relationship to God that is effected through faith in Christ, is of such great significance and value that all our relationships and distinctions vanish because of it. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free (Col. 3:11).

However, this does not set aside all the differences and inequalities that exist among people in this earthly life. Property ownership does not disappear; the example of the Jerusalem church in Acts is all too often taken by itself and is too exceptional to provide a counter claim. The differences between rich and poor, slave and free, parents and children, civil authorities and subjects, is assumed and honored fully by Jesus and his apostles in their words and deeds. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 make it clear that every person, even after their conversion, ought to remain in the calling to which they have been called. [156] The differences that are present in creation by the will of God are not set aside by the Son in redemption.

Redemption does change matters however. From the principle of reconciliation with God, all other human relationships are given a new ordering and led back to their original state. God is the owner of every human being and their possessions; we are simply tenants, renters, and must give an account of our

stewardship (Luke 16:2; Matt. 25:14ff.). Husbands and wives (Eph. 5:22; Titus 2:5; Col. 3:18), parents and children (Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20–21), masters and slaves (1 Cor. 7:21–22; Eph. 6:5–9, Col. 3:22), civil authorities and subjects (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–2; 1 Peter 2:13–16, etc.), are all brought into proper relationship with each other. Distinctions in our social life remain but they lose their sharp edge. The New Testament is overflowing with warnings against riches (Matt. 6:19; 19:23; 1 Tim. 6:17–19, etc.), but poverty is no virtue and the natural is not unclean in itself (Mark 7:15ff.; Acts 14:17; Rom. 14:14; 1 Tim. 4:4). Work is commended and tied to food and wages (Matt. 10:10; 1 Tim. 5:18; Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:10). In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus himself removes for his followers all anxious concern about this earthly life. Because the redemption in Christ renews but does not eliminate the various earthly relationships in which we find ourselves, there remains a large place for the ministry of mercy. Just like the poor (Matt. 26:11; John 12:8; Rev. 13:16), so, too, the many needy will always be with us. In the same way that Jesus the compassionate High Priest is always deeply moved by those in need, so, too, directs his followers especially to clothe themselves with the Christlike virtue of compassion ([Matt. 5:43–47]; Luke 6:36).⁴ Having received mercy from Christ, his followers are expected in turn to show mercy to others (1 Peter 2:10; Matt. 18:33). It is for this reason that the church has a distinct office for the ministry of mercy.

⁴ Bavinck mistakenly cites Matthew 5:17 here.

The Resolutions

Bavinck's Original Resolutions

#1: The inequalities that exist in every respect among people are grounded in the Creation, that is to say, in God's will itself, and serve precisely to make possible humanity's earthly task.

#2: Sin eliminated the unity of this diversity, turned differences into oppositions, and placed creatures in a relationship of enmity against God and to each other.

#3: Redemption does not set aside the differences that exist thanks to God's will but renews all relationships to their original form by bringing all of them into a reconciled relationship with God.

#4: According to Scripture the important general principle for a solution to the social question is that there be justice (*gerechtigheid*). This means that each person be assigned to the place where, in accord with their nature, they are able to live according to God's ordinances with respect to God and other creatures.

Final Resolutions of 1891 Sociaal Congres

#1: Holy Scripture teaches that human society must not be ordered according to our own preferences but is bound to those laws that God himself has firmly established in Creation and His Word.

#2: Even the existence of inequalities among people is rooted in creation, that is to say, in God's will, and serves precisely to make possible humanity's earthly task.

#3: In general, the origin of all social ills and abuses comes from setting aside these ordinances and laws. Thanks to this, the differences that are present among creatures by virtue of creation, lost their unity, were changed into oppositions, and placed creatures in a relationship of enmity against God and to each other.

#4: Redemption does not set aside the differences that exist thanks to God's will but renews all relationships to their original form by bringing all of them into a reconciled relationship with God.

#5: According to Scripture the important general principle for a solution to the social question is that there be justice (*gerechtigheid*). This means that each person be assigned to the place where, in accord with their nature, they are able to live according to God's ordinances with respect to God and other creatures.

Status Questionis

#5: Therefore, it is entirely in keeping with Holy Scripture to:

- a. not only prepare people for their eternal destiny, but also to make it possible for them to fulfill their earthly calling;
- b. in the political arena, uphold the institution of the Sabbath alongside the workweek so as to maintain the unity and distinction of our double calling;
- c. guide all our life's relationships in a new way and restore them to their original shape by the same cross of Christ that proclaims our reconciliation with God. This has special relevance for the social arena where [we should seek to]
 - prevent poverty and misery, especially pauperization;
 - oppose the accumulation of capital and landed property;
 - ensure, as much as possible, a "living wage" for every person.

#6: Civil authority, as God's servant called to maintain justice in society, has an obligation, to test this justice and to base it on the eternal principles (*beginselen*) laid down in Scripture for the various spheres of society.

#7: There remains, in addition to this, a very large role for the ministry of mercy since all kinds of miseries will always be with us and can never be removed by justice [alone].

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#7: Civil authority, as God's servant called to maintain justice in society, has an obligation to base this justice on and deduce it from the eternal ordinances (*ordinantiën*) laid down in Scripture for the various spheres of society.

#8: There remains, in addition to this, a very large role for the ministry of mercy since, thanks to the working of sin and error, all kinds of miseries will always be with us, and in this earthly dwelling can never be removed by justice [alone].