

## The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl\*

Herman Bavinck

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[369] There has been a significant change in the relationship between theology and philosophy since Descartes and also thanks to him. Prior to this time, theology was the mistress with unlimited authority; she fashioned for herself a philosophy or appropriated an existing one such as that of Aristotle as she had need of it and could use it without doing harm. In more recent times, however, the roles were reversed. Theology lost its undisputed control and became dependent on philosophy. Consequently, it experienced the influence of Descartes and Wolff, of Kant and Fichte, and of Hegel and Schelling. It has now come so far that it is impossible to know and understand theological positions without serious examination of the philosophical positions to which they have attached themselves. One could almost say that the study of philosophy is as essential for understanding the principles of contemporary theology as that of the theology itself.

\*Translation of Herman Bavinck, “De Theologie van Albrecht Ritschl,” *Theologische Studiën* 6 (1888): 369–403. Original pagination is provided in square brackets: [ ]. Careful readers will observe that the translation is slightly longer than the original and that it contains many more footnotes. The added notes provide explanations and bibliographic information absent from the original. Beginning at p. 381 in the original, where Bavinck starts to engage Ritschl’s *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* in some detail, for the sake of clarity I have chosen to insert numerous additional direct citations from the standard English translation of Ritschl’s *magnum opus* rather than to provide my own translation of Bavinck’s compact and dense summary—in the Dutch language!—of Ritschl’s German text and technical vocabulary. I have retained Bavinck’s occasional repetitions. All additional notes not found in the original are set apart by square brackets. My editorial insertions into the text in order to provide transitions or clarifications are placed in curly brackets: { }.

As is generally acknowledged, neo-Kantianism is currently the highest authority in the arena of philosophy. No single school of Kantians, either in a narrower or broader sense, has arisen since Liebman in his *Kant und die Epigonen*<sup>1</sup> and F.A. Lange in his well-known *Geschichte de Materialismus*<sup>2</sup> issued the rallying-call: “Back to Kant.” However, every person who is busy with philosophy feels obligated to start with Kant and as a result there has arisen a volume of literature about Kant that is already beyond anyone’s mastery [370] and it grows daily. It took no prophetic gift to foresee that this turn in philosophy would also soon affect theology. It required only one man, with the sufficient training in philosophy and theology alike, to apply the principles of neo-Kantianism purely and rigorously to all the areas of theology and set forth a coherent theological system. Such a person arose in the person of Göttingen Professor, Albrecht Ritschl, whose clear insight and powerful intellect, which he demonstrated in his historical and dogmatic studies, proved that he was superbly qualified for the task.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Ritschl’s theology rose to prominence so quickly and continues to make progress. Ritschl achieved something that is extraordinary in our time: he started a school. Thanks to the generosity of Minister Falk,<sup>3</sup> numerous [university] chairs are now occupied by men who are Ritschlians, and in Emil Schürer’s *Theologische Literaturzeitung*,<sup>4</sup> Ritschlian theology has a superbly edited organ. Ritschl’s followers are

1. [Otto Liebmann, *Kant und die Epigonen: Eine Kritische Abhandlung* (Stuttgart: Schober, 1865).]

2. [Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Kröner, 1875, 1876).]

3. [Paul Ludwig Adalbert Falk (1827–1900) became Minister of Education in Otto von Bismarck’s Prussian government in 1872 with responsibility for Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* against the Roman Catholic Church. He was responsible for the “May Laws” or “Falk Laws” of 1873 which gave responsibility for training and appointing clergy to the state. Nearly half the seminaries in Prussia were closed by 1878. Information obtained from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Adalbert Falk,” accessed May 04, 2012, [http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/200739/Adalbert-Falk.](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/200739/Adalbert-Falk)]

accepted within Germany and outside of it, and the literature that has arisen, both for and against, receives an enormous reception. The reasons for this are not to be found, in the first place, in the newness or originality of this theology but rather in the close link with the spirit of our age that drives it. On the one hand, people are sated with the idle and useless speculation that came from the philosophical idealism which dominated the first half of the nineteenth century. There is a general aversion against metaphysics and dogmatics; skepticism, doubt that we can know anything about that which transcends our senses, is in the very blood of our generation. Distrustful of all attempts idealistically to rise above reality, our age is characterized by empiricism and realism. On the other hand, we also shrink back from naked materialism. As a result, [371] many phenomena in the social and political arena—socialism, anarchism, nihilism, and so forth—point to the necessary conclusions to which people must come.

A reaction against these movements is therefore not unwelcome and can be observed in many areas. Many people once again place a high value on religion and morality as goods to be maintained and defended. The question arises: how can these two—empiricism and rationalism on the one hand and these ideal goods on the other—both be maintained so that they can remain standing together without constantly colliding with each other?

It is to answer this question—once it was seen that Hegel and Schleiermacher offered no resolution—that people reached back again to Kant. After all, he had distinguished the theoretical from the practical reason and completely separated them from each other. In the *First Critique* [of *Pure Reason*], he concluded that the super-sensible world was completely unknowable. The only subjective certainty that we can have about it is not scientific in nature but moral. In our innermost being we feel the absolute duty of obedience to the moral law. This obligation impels us to accept the existence of God, freedom, and immortality, not as scientific conclusions, but as moral postulates. In this way, as Kant himself

4. [Founded by Schürer in 1876 and co-edited with Adolf von Harnack from 1881–1910.]

declares in the Preface to the Second Edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, “I have found it necessary to deny *knowledge (Wissen)*, in order to make room for *faith (Glaube)*.”<sup>5</sup>

And it is exactly this that is so in tune with and echoes the dominant spirit of the second half of the nineteenth century. At first glance it might appear that Kant’s apriorism and idealism has little in common with the dominant empiricism and realism of our age. But one must recall that Kant’s apriorism is completely *formal*, that only the [372] *forms* of observation and thought are apriori; the *content* is not apriori but comes completely from without. That is why various scientific investigations, especially those involving sense impressions, can be fully brought into line with Kantian ideas. Following in his footsteps, one had to give up all knowledge of super-sensible reality, which then left an important and inviolable place for faith. The key here is the separation of believing and knowing, {faith and science}. A full-blown empiricism reigns on the level of the sensible, observable world and gives rise to genuine science. This science can never damage faith because it is restricted to the sensible and knows nothing of the super-sensible. Faith, therefore, occupies a free zone; our imaginative capacity can fill this unknown world to our heart’s content and {philosophical} idealism can find complete satisfaction. Faith and knowledge—separated for good—can live happily together.

This principle, that is, as it were, part of the air we breathe and that influences everything, has been worked out and applied better and with more talent by no one than by Albrecht Ritschl. He articulates this as the necessity of totally and permanently separating theology and metaphysics. Nonetheless, this formula is quite inadequate for us to understand the distinctive character of his theology. Metaphysics itself is an idea that is not static and is regularly reconceived. Ritschl takes metaphysics to be the investigation of the general conditions of all being, the doctrine concerning the essence of things, without [373] making any distinction in those things between nature and spirit and therefore

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1965 [1929]), 29.

without distinguishing their value. In this sense, metaphysics includes both ontology and cosmology; that is, the apriori concepts by which the multiplicity of observable things are gathered together and ordered in the unity of the world.<sup>6</sup> In this way Ritschl banishes metaphysics not only from theology but abolishes it altogether although he does not clearly say this. Indeed, according to Ritschl, as we have noted, there is no knowledge of that which transcends the senses and therefore no metaphysics. Yet, in another sense Ritschl still does retain metaphysics. That is why he claims that he is not expelling all metaphysics from theology and that the debate between him and Frank<sup>7</sup> is not about *whether* metaphysics is to be used in theology but about *which* metaphysics.<sup>8</sup>

Ritschl defines metaphysics in a unique manner. After initially claiming that metaphysics is concerned with investigating the general conditions of all being, on the very same page, without any acknowledgment, he turns these general conditions into “conditions of knowledge” (*Erkenntnisbedingungen*) that are common to perceptions of the natural and spiritual worlds; namely, in the elementary and formal capacities by which humans simply designate things as such and in the forms by which the knowing spirit designates the objects of its knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In this manner, metaphysics becomes nothing more than epistemology (*Erkenntnistheorie*), and it is in this sense that Ritschl is able to claim that he has not abandoned metaphysics. On the contrary, he claims that all differences between him and his opponents are rooted in a different epistemology,<sup>10</sup> and places before all scientific theologians the impossible demand that they must become self-

6. Albrecht Ritschl, *Theologie und Metaphysik* (Bonn: A. Marcus, 1881), 6, 7, 28.

7. [The reference here is to Franz Herman Reinhold Frank (1827–1894), professor of theology at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg and an important figure in the neo-Lutheran “Erlangen School.” For more on Frank, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:525–35; hereafter referenced as *RD*.]

8. Ritschl, *Theologie*, 38.

9. *Ibid.*, 6.

consciously aware of the epistemologies they use to defend their legitimacy scientifically.<sup>11</sup> Ritschl accomplishes two things: on the one hand he eliminates metaphysics on the level of any knowledge [374] concerning the transcendent; on the other, he inserts an altogether different metaphysics into theology, a metaphysics that is nothing else but a particular epistemology taken over from Kant and Lotze.<sup>12</sup>

What exactly is Ritschl's epistemology? He says that a popular understanding {of the world} believes it is possible, by investigation, to know things as they are in themselves. One then distinguishes things as they are in themselves, outside of any relation to our observation, from things as they are for us. But this is a grave error. Things as they are to us as knowing subjects are always and necessarily part of the relationships within which we perceive things. We have absolutely no ability to know things as they are in themselves. Our ordinary perception may consider things as they appear to us to be less than real and over against this seek certainty in the effort to know things in themselves. However, this is simply impossible; the perception of many has established that things are exactly as they are for us.<sup>13</sup>

A second mistake of the popular understanding is to believe that we form a permanent, unchangeable image of things from recalled perceptions and that this image remains neutral over against all changes and gives evidence of an established series of characteristics and properties in the midst of others that are accidental and constantly changing. The remembered image is thought to lie behind our occasional perceptions and distinguished

10. Ibid., 30, 43ff.

11. Ibid., 38.

12. It would be very valuable to demonstrate the extent to which Ritschl is in agreement with both of these philosophers and in what way he departs from them. To avoid getting too expansive, the preceding will have to suffice. [Rudolf Herman Lotze (1817–1881) was a German philosopher whose work in metaphysics and logic led him to a form of monism. Bavinck refers to him in *RD*, 2:81, 115.—Trans.]

13. Ritschl, *Theologie*, 30ff.

from them. Essentially, this is the understanding of Plato, who considered the ideas that exist in their own place, behind and above the perceptible world that is subject to all occurring change, to be the only real world. Ritschl considers this entire presentation to be in error. What our perceptions [375] deliver cannot be regarded as something quiet and unchangeable but only as a relation, as movement, in our remembering. The idea, the image of a thing is definitely not its real, true reality, but rather is in conflict with that which is changeable and variable in each thing. It is an error to believe that one can get behind and above the appearances of things and arrive at a sure and clear knowledge in a mental category. No matter what it is called, this sort of image or idea has no reality; it exists only in our mind and exists as a mere shadow of appearances in our memory. There is nothing behind the appearances and perceptions, and every attempt to get behind them to know things as they are is vain and fruitless.<sup>14</sup>

How do we then form concepts about any one thing that remains the same in spite of the many changes it undergoes? According to Ritschl, this can be explained by the fact that we regularly receive impressions of things from a definite place and in a fixed order. For example, when we receive a series of impressions from our senses of touch, sight, and taste, then we organize all these impressions into the idea of an apple. This idea is not something distinct from the impressions, but we always and only know a thing in its relationships; there is nothing behind or outside of them. The subject is {contained} only in the predicate; the thing is itself its own origin in its relationships; it is itself its own goal in the fixed series of its changes. The impression that something retains its identity in the midst of changing characteristics can be explained by the fact that we organize appearances in a manner analogous to our own soul; even when our awareness {of things} changes, we feel that we remain unified selves. From this analogy we are able to consider things as both origin and end; I feel myself as the origin and goal of all my initiated and intended actions. In this way, [376] Ritschl sets aside the entire Platonic metaphysics that considers

14. *Ibid.*, 32ff.

pale, removed ideas—which are themselves unchangeable and unmovable—as the truly real and the origin of all changes in the things of the observable world.<sup>15</sup>

It is not clear whether Ritschl only denies the knowability of a reality behind the properties and functions of things or the actual existence of things themselves. From his major work one gets the impression that he only denies the former. On the one hand, he sets aside there not only the entire Platonic-Aristotelian doctrine of the knowing faculty that purports to know the things themselves as well as their properties; he also, on the other hand, repudiates the teaching of Kant who restricts our knowledge to the sensible, with the observation that a world of phenomena can only be the object of our knowledge if there is something that appears. If not, appearances are phantoms. This comment against Kant could lead us to conclude that Ritschl considers the knowability of things as part of the phenomena as well as their existence. But this conclusion would be too hasty. As he explores this further, Ritschl attaches himself to Lotze and replicates his notion that in the phenomena we come to know a thing “as the cause of its qualities operating on us, as the end which these serve as means, as the law of their constant changes.”<sup>16</sup>

Ritschl provides an amplified explanation of all this in his brochure *Theologie und Metaphysik*. Here we get the impression, as we have already noted above, that there is no substance, no essence, no nature in things and that a thing is completely comprehended in its properties and actions, the subject [377] in the predicate. The notion of a “thing” is thus only a formal concept without content; it is a representation that is nothing more than the

15. *Ibid.*, 30–38; cf. 17, 18, 29.

16. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, 2nd ed., translated by H. R. Macintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 19–20 (quote at 20). [This work is a translation of vol. 3 of Ritschl’s *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1882–1883). In the footnotes that follow, Bavinck’s original references to the third volume of *Rechtfertigung* will be cited from and referenced to the English translation.—Trans.]



collective summary of our perceptions.<sup>17</sup> The nature of a thing consists of nothing more than a series of changes that proceed in an orderly manner, one after another. There is no *being*, only *becoming*. As with {Herman} Lotze, *being* consists only of existing in relationship.

It is undoubtedly true that we only know actors from and by means of their activities. But these activities do lead us to knowledge of the actor; the predicate brings us to the subject; perceptions draw us to essences. There has to be something behind the perceptions that comes to expression in them. Relationships presuppose realities that stand in relation to each other; predicates without subjects are unthinkable. Ritschl thus comes into conflict with himself. Against Kant he correctly observes that the reality of perceptions can only be regarded as firm when there is something actually in them; otherwise the perceptions are apparitions. Therefore, if Ritschl truly considers things as nothing more than formal concepts, then he has thereby condemned his own understanding of things. In addition, if Ritschl takes the analogy of our souls as the origin and end of our selfhood, and applies this to the reality of things outside of us, why not apply this with equal legitimacy to essence and perceptions? After all, we humans are aware of ourselves, and, even with all the changes we undergo, remain as identical subjects; and the soul, as even Ritschl acknowledges, is not merely a formal but a substantial unity with its awareness and operations.

One could possibly argue that this is all virtually innocent and takes place completely outside the realm of theology. Perhaps it is not without value, therefore, to spend a few words [378] to consider the consequences for Christian dogma that Ritschl draws from his epistemology.

If it is true that realities have nothing more than a formal unity with their perceptions, then it follows in general that theology is never concerned with the realities of Scripture, God, Christ, Holy Spirit, etc., in themselves, but only as they are *for us*. Each

17. *Theologie*, 18, 35.

phenomenon, therefore, is dependent on the observing and knowing capacity of human beings. A thing that is not observed is unknowable, is nothing; it becomes a thing only when observed, thanks to the relationship that it now has with the knowing subject. Therefore, God does not exist without his kingdom, Christ does not exist without his church that confesses him as their Lord, revelation does not exist apart from those who receive it, justification does not exist without faith, and so forth. What they might be in themselves is idle speculation.

In the area of anthropology, Ritschl concludes the following: the human person is a “self” only in the direction of his will and in the orientation of his feeling. There is nothing more real and actual “behind” human “beings” that we need to know in order to understand them. We know nothing of a “soul” in itself beyond its functions and operations.<sup>18</sup>

Concerning the doctrine of sin, Ritschl provides us this proposition: it is absurd to consider a general idea of sin behind individual sinful acts. A circumstance in which one passively finds himself cannot be considered a sin. There is, therefore, no original sin; sin is not an existence, not a condition, but an act of the will. A good or bad character develops as a result of the deeds that one wills.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, in this epistemology, mystical union {with Christ} is simply an agreement of {a person’s} inclination and will {with that of Christ}. The union of believers [379] with Christ is not an immediate personal and living fellowship but a unity of disposition and acts that are mediated by our memory of {his} word. Any union beyond this or apart from this is nothing more than imagination and hallucination, a false mysticism.<sup>20</sup>

The implications for the doctrine of God are even more serious. According to Ritschl, God is unknowable in himself apart from what he is for us. To identify God with the final end of the world; to

18. *Theologie*, 37, 44; *Rechtfertigung*, 3:20–21 [*Justification*, 20–21].

19. *Theologie*, 57; *Rechtfertigung*, 3:311ff. [*Justification*, 311ff.].

20. *Theologie*, 39ff., 46ff.

describe him as eternal Being, as the Absolute, to whom we then attribute other predicates; to attempt proving his existence from cosmological or teleological arguments—all this is metaphysics and must be removed from dogmatic theology. God is only active in the form of will; he possesses no inactive nature and attributes. To ascribe such to him would be to turn him into a limited personality. There is nothing that may be predicated of God apart from his relation to us.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, with respect to Christology, Ritschl claims that theology can say nothing about Christ's divine nature, his essential unity with the Father, or his pre- and post-existence {as human}. The question is not what or who Christ is in himself but only about his value and significance for us. The Christological dogmas are of no value in helping the church express its valuation of the person of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

These few examples are already enough to demonstrate the profound influence of Ritschl's epistemology on the whole of theology and on every doctrine. Furthermore, the examples we provided are implications that Ritschl himself draws from his principles and applies to the articles of Christian faith. It is relatively easy to show that not everything encapsulated in Ritschl's principles are on display in his theology. [380] If one took Ritschl's epistemology seriously, as he develops it—namely, that one must repudiate the distinction between the phenomenal and intelligible world; that things in themselves {*Ding an sich*} have no existence

21. *Theologie*, 7–10, 13ff., 31; *Rechtfertigung*, 3:232ff. [*Justification*, 232ff.].

22. *Theologie*, 22, 27ff.; *Rechtfertigung*, 3:371ff. [*Justification*, 385ff., esp. 394–95. According to Ritschl, while Luther retained the “Church formula” concerning the deity of Christ, it was in the *worth* of Christ's *work* appropriated in trust by the believer that one must measure Christ's true divinity. The “Articles of the Creed anent the Trinity and the Person of the Christ are incomprehensible to the understanding” and “Christ's Godhead is understood as the power which Christ has put forth upon *our* redemption. It is true that even in this connection Luther has no desire to dispense with the unintelligible formulas; but the very fact that they are pronounced unintelligible forbids their being viewed as other than worthless for the faith which consists in trust.” *Justification*, 394–95.—Trans.]

but are only representations that have their origin in the images constructed in our memories; that every concrete thing that we observe on earth exists in our consciousness—then, without any hateful *Konsequenzmacherei*,<sup>23</sup> it is easy to see that all science, including theology, ends up in idealism and illusion. We never have anything to do with beings, with natures, with substances, but always only with perceptions, functions, relationships. God is not an absolute person who exists independent of my representation, but his personality is only the form within which I conceive of Him as love.<sup>24</sup> In himself, Christ is completely unknowable to us; to the extent that he is object of our knowing, he is an appearance [*verschijning*]. All that Scripture and church doctrine say about him does not describe his essence but only expresses the religious consciousness of the church. Christ is nothing more than the Christ-appearance in the consciousness of the church. The Holy Spirit is not a being, not a person, but the foundation of the communal consciousness of being a child of God. The case is similar with all doctrine. From beginning to end, theology becomes subjective. All that is objective is lost and becomes a mere product of our consciousness. The Ego creates and posits the non-Ego. Being is consciousness.

In addition to this noetic principle that we have just briefly described, there follows a second principle of no less significance to Ritschl's entire theology. We have seen that Ritschl believes that our knowledge is limited to perception; things in themselves cannot be known [381], in fact have no existence. This is of enormous significance for theology because it follows from this that we can know nothing about that which transcends our senses. Now, then, one of two things must be true: either no theology is possible since that which is supernatural cannot be the object of our knowledge;

23. [The term *Konsequenzmacherei* refers to the practice of drawing entailments from someone's convictions to such an extreme where people no longer recognize their own beliefs. E.g., "Since you believe in the distinction between body and soul you must be a Platonist who devalues earthly, bodily life."]

24. *Rechtfertigung*, 3:255 [*Justification*, 273–74].

or, there remains an alternative route open to us other than the way of science through the perceivable world. Ritschl holds to the latter and seeks the basis for religion and religious knowledge not in empirical reality, or speculation, or mysticism, but—in imitation of Kant—in moral and ethical principles. Thus, Ritschl adds a second principle—the radical disjunction between religion and science, between a theoretical and religious worldview—to the first principle of his theology, namely the restriction of our knowledge to the phenomenal world.

This distinction does not exist, in the first place, in the object, as if religion encompasses the world as a totality while philosophy tracks down the particular and general laws of nature and spirit, because the latter also seeks out the world as a whole, to understand it from a unitary law. Nor is the difference that religious knowing alone consists of value judgments while philosophical knowing is disinterested. “For without interest we do not trouble ourselves about anything.” “All continuous cognition of the things which excite sensation is not only accompanied but likewise guided, by feeling. For in so far as attention is necessary to attain the end of knowledge, will as representing the desire for accurate cognition, comes in between; the proximate cause of will, however, is feeling as expressing the consciousness that a thing or an activity is worth desiring, or that something ought to be put away.” “For without interest we do not trouble ourselves about anything. We have therefore to distinguish between *concomitant* and *independent* value-judgments. The former are operative and necessary in all theoretical cognition, as in all technical observation and combination. But *independent* value judgments are all perceptions of moral ends or moral hindrances in so far as they excite moral pleasure or pain, or, it may be, set in motion the will to appropriate what is food or repel the opposite. If the other other kinds of knowledge are called ‘disinterested,’ this only means that they are without these moral effects. But even in them pleasure or pain must be present, according as they succeed or fail.”<sup>25</sup>

25. [*Justification*, 204–5 (arrangement altered)]. In the original, Bavinck summarizes Ritschl’s views in a few clauses and sentences that are rather dense

This philosophical knowledge<sup>26</sup> “is accompanied or guided by a judgment affirming the worth of impartial knowledge gained by observation. Scientific knowledge seeks to know the laws of nature and spirit through observation, and is based on the presupposition that both the observations and their arrangement are carried out in accordance with the ascertained laws of human cognition.” By contrast, “in Christianity religious knowledge consists in independent value-judgments, inasmuch as it deals with the relation between the blessedness which is assured by God and sought by man, and the whole of the world which God has created and rules in harmony with His final end.”<sup>27</sup> Now, “the intermingling and collision of religion and philosophy always arises from the fact that the latter attempts to produce in its own fashion a unified view of the world.” [382] When philosophers allow themselves to be led astray this way, then they are no longer really doing philosophy but “betray an impulse religious in its nature, which philosophers ought to have distinguished from the cognitive methods they follow.”<sup>28</sup> “Now the desire for scientific knowledge carries with it no guarantee that, though the medium of observation and the combination of observations according to known laws, it will discover the supreme universal law of the world, from which, as a starting point, the differentiated orders of nature and spiritual life, each in its kind might be explained, and understood as forming one whole.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, “the opposition to Christianity which has been raised by Pantheism in its various modifications and by materialism, arises likewise from the fact that the law of a particular realm of being is set up as the supreme law of all being, though the

and difficult; to give greater clarity, the translation provides a longer direct citation in Ritschl’s own words. The extended quotations in the paragraphs that follow also expand the original and have been slightly rearranged to provide a more logical flow.]

26. [The English translation uses the expression “scientific knowledge.” *Justification*, 207.]

27. [*Justification*, 207.]

28. [*Justification*, 207.]

29. [*Justification*, 207.]

other forms of existence neither would nor could be explained by its means.”<sup>30</sup> If only religion and science alike would limit themselves to their own field there would be no conflict between them.<sup>31</sup> Science would then yield the laws of spirit and nature but offer no interpretation of the world as a whole. Religion {for its part} would then consist only of independent value judgments, completely unreliant on science. Religion thus lies completely isolated from the realm of science; it begins only where science leaves off. Religion always contemplates the whole, designates the value of spirit over against nature and directs humanity with God’s help to dominion over all creation.

At first glance, this distinction and separation of theology and science has something very attractive about it. Perhaps it is possible in this manner to reconcile the ages-long struggle between faith and knowledge. All previous attempts, up to and including those of Hegel and Schleiermacher, have shipwrecked. But if now the entire field of inner and external perception can be given to science, with religion restricted to making value-judgments about the world as a whole, perhaps we have found a solution. There are many today who fly with this hope and repeat after Ritschl: “Every cognition of a religious sort is a direct judgment of value.”<sup>32</sup> [383] Outside of these value judgments there is no knowledge of God. “The nature of God and the Divine we can only know in its essence by determining its value for our salvation. . . . we know God only by revelation, and therefore also must understand the Godhead of Christ, if it is to be understood at all, as an attribute revealed to us in His saving influence upon ourselves.”<sup>33</sup>

There is, however, little ground for such an expectation. In the first place, science is neither able nor willing to be satisfied with this

30. *Justification*, 208; cf. *Theologie*, 7, 9.

31. In the first edition of *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, religion and science were described as “contrary [*entgegengestzte*] activities of the spirit” (3:170); in the second edition, they are described as “distinct” [*verschiedene*] (3:182).

32. *Justification*, 398; cf. 205.

33. *Ibid.*

restriction of its field. It is all well and good to say that science must be purely empirical and avoid proposing a worldview. Practically, however, this is simply not possible for the scientist is also a human being who, in addition having a mind, also possesses heart, conscience, and emotion. In addition, science itself cannot impose limits on its investigations. Rather, science wants to investigate everything and test all things by the standard of truth. Secondly, if religion is really separated from science in this manner and consists of nothing but value judgments, then we are forever finished with its objective truth. That states the matter rather starkly, but we do well to think through what it means to say that religion consists only of value judgments. This means more than simply that every religious truth must have value and meaning for life, or that all propositions which might be important for the academy but are otherwise unfruitful should be removed from dogmatics, or that all theology must be thoroughly practical. Even then, if it was only a difference of opinion—such as theologians have always debated—about whether theology was a theoretical or practical {discipline}, then the separation of religion and science as Ritschl presents it would not have met with such earnest resistance. In that case, the notion that religion only consists of value judgments would definitely be nothing new and peculiar but something that theologians of all stripes had set forth hundreds of times before.

But the intention of Ritschl's slogan is altogether different. Ritschl does not say that religion, after establishing objectively one or other reality—let us say, the person [384] or work of Christ—then, subsequently, shows us the value that the person or work has for us. Who would raise even a single objection against this? But Ritschl claims that religion consists purely and solely in value judgments; outside of value judgments there is no knowledge of the essence of God or of Christ. In other words, there is no discussion about the objective reality of dogmatic statements; these are all banned in the name of metaphysics. Who or what God is—or Christ, or the Holy Spirit—lies beyond all consideration; the only thing that can be said is that all these completely unknown great realities have value for us. To clarify this with an example, when Ritschl grants to Christ the predicate of deity, this does not mean that Christ is the



Son of God, partaker of the divine nature, but only that he has the value of God for us. Christ does not possess deity objectively, it does not exist outside of us in his person but exists only in us, in our perception and valuing of him.

Now if indeed this is Ritschl's understanding—and anyone who studies his works cannot deny it—then it is not too crass to say that this robs religion of all its objective truth. Value judgments are something in us; they do presuppose a reality outside of us about which we do the valuing, but this reality remains completely hidden, an unknown X, a mystery. A theology that consists of value judgments alone describes nothing objective; all that is present are certain subjective perceptions, discoveries, or circumstances of awareness. Now one of two things must be true: either those value judgments that certain subjects hold about one or other reality are grounded or they are simply flights of imagination. On Ritschl's own terms, the first possibility must be ruled out because one can only know the value of something when one knows the essence and nature of that thing, and, according to Ritschl, we can only know the essence and nature of Christ within the arena of the value they have for us. [385] It thus follows that value judgments only have subjective value, they are not grounded in the nature of things; in fact, they can only be considered as imaginary.

For example, if Christ is not truly God, then he cannot and may not have value of God for us. If we then still predicate deity to him, then we declare something about him that is not true. Our valuing is then nothing more than a fancy of the imagination like the Roman Catholic declaration that Mary is the Queen of Heaven. When we proceed only from our valuing, then who could say that the predicate of deity does apply to Christ but not to Mary? Value-judgments [*Wurthurteile*] must be grounded in judgments about being [*Seinsurtheile*]; if not, they are reduced to subjective fantasies; religion that has only value-judgments as its content ends up totally bankrupt.<sup>34</sup>

34. Whoever closely examines the theology of Ritschl has to put the public controversy that has surrounded it in recent years in an altogether different light than did Prof. Chantepie de la Saussaye in his otherwise important essay on

Apparently Ritschl himself felt and feared this danger. Even though he initially strictly separated religion and science, he did attempt to bind them together and to vindicate the scientific character of theology. In order to do this he utilized the moral proof for God's existence. He rejects all the other proofs as inadequate because they "fail to transcend the conception of the world, and therefore fall short of the Christian idea of God."<sup>35</sup> At best they lead us to a God who experiences himself within the world, that is to say, to pantheism.<sup>36</sup> In opposition to this, Ritschl places great value on Kant's moral argument with this one difference: Ritschl does not restrict himself to the practical significance of this argument but attributes definite theoretical significance to it. The proof rests on undeniable data of our life in the spirit. "[K]nowledge of the laws of our action is also theoretical knowledge, for it is the knowledge of the laws of spiritual life. Now the impulses of knowledge, of feeling, and of aesthetic intuition, of will in general and in its special application to society, and finally the impulse of religion in the general sense of the word, all concur to demonstrate that spiritual life is the end, [386] while nature is the means."<sup>37</sup> This is the case even though nature follows a different set of laws than spirit. "Theoretical knowledge must recognize as given the reality of spiritual life, and the equal binding force of the special laws which obtain in each realm. With respect to this, theoretical cognition must simply accept the fact that while spiritual life is subject to the laws of mechanism so far as it is interwoven with nature, yet its

Ritschl, P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, "De Theologie van Ritschl," *Theologische Studiën* 2 (1884): 262, 267ff., 270, etc.; cf. M. A. Goozsen, "De Theologie van Ritschl," *Geloof en Vrijheid* 22 (1888): 362ff.

35. [*Justification*, 215]

36. *Theologie*, 8ff.; *Rechtfertigung*, 3:200ff. [*Justification*, 229. Bavinck is referring here to Ritschl's comment about the cosmological argument: "But the thing thus fitted to be the cause of all other things is simply the world-substance, the multiplicity of things regarded as a unity." *Justification*, 216.—Trans.]

37. [*Justification*, 222 (arrangement altered). For the sake of clarity I have provided a full quotation from *Justification* rather than translating Bavinck's summary paraphrase. The remainder of this and the next paragraph are also significantly longer than Bavinck's original.]

special character as distinct from nature is signalized by practical laws which declare spirit to be an end in itself, which realizes itself in this form.”<sup>38</sup>

Nature thus follows a different set of laws than spirit does. {Therefore theoretical reason and practical reason yield different postures toward nature.} “Now, when we mark the attitude taken up by the human spirit towards the world of nature, two analogous facts present themselves: in theoretical knowledge, spirit treats nature as something which exists for it; while in the practical sphere of the will, too, it treats nature as something which is directly a means to the common ethical end which forms the final end of the world.” {Both impulses proceed from different assumptions about the relation between nature and spirit.} “The cognitive impulse and the will both take this course without regard to the fact that nature is subject to quite other laws than those which spirit obeys, that it is independent of spirit, and that it forms a restraint on spirit, and so far keeps it in a certain way in dependence on itself.” {The question whether spirit is truly independent of nature cannot be avoided. Either it is superior to nature and able to transcend it or spirit’s estimate of itself is illusory.} “Hence we must conclude either that the estimate which spirit, as a power superior to nature, forms of its own worth—in particular, the estimate which it forms of moral fellowship which transcends nature—is a baseless fancy, or that the view taken by spirit is in accordance with truth and with the supreme law which is valid for nature as well.”<sup>39</sup>

The former cannot be true because our spirit would then be obligated to condemn itself as a dependent part of the world and deny its own drive for independence.<sup>40</sup> If the latter is true, “then its ground must lie in a Divine Will, which creates the world with spiritual life as its final end. To accept the idea of God in this way is, as Kant observes, practical faith, and not an act of theoretical

38. [*Justification*, 222 (arrangement altered).]

39. [*Justification*, 224.]

40. *Justification*, 224–26, 635ff.

cognition.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, Ritschl believes that with the aid of the moral argument he can demonstrate not only the existence of God but also the rationality of the Christian worldview and the scientific character of theology. “Now it is the duty of theology to conserve the special characteristic of the conception of God, namely that it can only be represented in value-judgments. Consequently it ought to base its claim to be a science, when looked at in itself, on the method described above (p. 15),<sup>42</sup> and when looked at in its relation to other sciences, by urging that, as Kant was the first to show, the Christian view of God and the world enables us comprehensively to unify our knowledge of nature and the spiritual life of man in a way which otherwise is not possible. When we have once got a true conception of this point, a review of the moral constitution of man, based on the principles of Kant, will serve as the *ratio cognoscendi* of the validity of the Christian idea of God when employed as the solution of the enigma of the world.”<sup>43</sup>

In this way, the moral argument takes on an all-encompassing and determining role in Ritschl’s theology. We are perfectly within our rights, therefore, to ask whether he achieves what he intends with it. It needs noting, first of all, that Ritschl contradicts himself with this proof. Earlier we noted that Ritschl insists that science must limit itself to observations and discerning the links between observable data. When philosophers {go beyond this} and posit worldviews, they are no longer doing philosophy but “[betray]

41. [*Justification*, 224–25.]

42. [This internal reference in Ritschl’s text points back to a passage in which he rejects biblical theology as the entry point into Christian theology. “And so we cannot reach dogmatic definitions simply by summing up the exegetical results of Biblical Theology” (*Justification*, 5). Though Ritschl insists that the theological method is properly based “on the theory of knowledge which we consciously or unconsciously obey,” that is to say, on metaphysics, he opposes “combining a theory of things in general with the conception of God” (*ibid.*, 15, 17). It is worth noting that Bavinck also reject “so-called biblical theology” that fails to address metaphysical and epistemological foundations or *principia*. *RD*, 1:82ff.]

43. *Justification*, 225–26.

rather an impulse religious in its nature.”<sup>44</sup> But now, in a scientific act, Ritschl reconciles the conflict between nature and spirit by appropriating the idea of God. Apart from this, is the moral proof any more convincing, and does it provides us with anything more than the other proofs? Ritschl proceeds from the {presupposition} of the spirit’s independence from nature. “In religious cognition the idea of God is dependent on the presupposition that man opposes himself to the world of nature, and secures his position, in or over it, by faith in God.”<sup>45</sup> Whether or not this is theoretically denied, it still must always be shown to be practically valid. But Ritschl himself acknowledges that this presupposition itself cannot be proved because it is not universally owned by all people and definitely proceeds from the Christian faith.<sup>46</sup>

[387] Let us grant this point, acknowledging that nothing can be demonstrated without certain presuppositions. However, what is then gained with this argument? That God exists? Ritschl hardly dares to make this claim. “{Kant’s procedure} does not start dogmatically from the idea of God, nor from a preconceived idea of the world; rather, he finds the final unity of his knowledge of the world in the Christian idea of God, and that, too, expressly in such a way as to limit that idea to the sphere of religious knowledge.”<sup>47</sup> Since it is “the task of cognition to seek for a law explaining the coexistence of these two heterogeneous orders of reality,” {Kant fails because he} “abandons the attempt to discover, by the methods of theoretical cognition, a principle which will unite spirit and nature in one.” {Kant is satisfied to} “bid us explain the combination of both in a single world through practical faith in God, conceived as endowed with the attributes which Christianity ascribes to Him.”<sup>48</sup> According to Ritschl, therefore, the expression “God’s existence” is not used in this argument but only a claim that

44. [*Justification*, 207.]

45. [*Justification*, 219.]

46. *Justification*, 220–21.

47. [*Justification*, 221.]

48. [*Justification*, 223.]

“the Christian view of God and the world enables us comprehensively to unify our knowledge of nature and the spiritual life of man in a way which otherwise is impossible.”<sup>49</sup> If theoretical knowledge seeks to understand the world as a whole, it must accept the Christian understanding of God, the world, and the destiny of human beings.

But this moves us further in acknowledging the reality and existence of God because without it the problem of the world must remain unsolvable. No explanation other than the one provided by the Christian idea of God exists.<sup>50</sup> This entire line of argument finally comes down to this: if science is not to end up with an unsolvable problem, it has no choice but to accept the existence of God. In this way the Christian idea of God serves as a “scientific hypothesis.”<sup>51</sup> In the final analysis, Ritschl not only says that Kant’s moral argument clearly is influenced by a Christian worldview but also he utilizes it to accept the existence of God, the rationality of the Christian worldview, and the scientific character of theology. Everyone has to acknowledge that, in any case, Kant’s proof cannot carry such a burden. Even if we could deduce from it God’s existence as a personal, self-aware being, we are still a long ways from the fullness and richness of a Christian understanding of God. We therefore do not have much more than what was claimed in previous generations by natural theology [*Theologia Naturalis*]. This is all the more remarkable because Ritschl categorically rejects natural theology only now, as it were, to re-introduce it through the back door. If, in addition to demonstrating the existence of God, he also intends to use the proof to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian faith and the scientific character of theology, then the charges of rationalism that are often leveled against him [388] are easily understood. By far the majority and the most important aspects of the Christian faith reside a long ways away from this moral argument. These remarks should be sufficient to help us see that the divide that Ritschl created, first of all between religion and

49. [*Justification*, 225–26.]

50. *Justification*, 224.

51. *Justification*, 220.

science, with assistance from this scientific argument, is far from being overcome. Even if Ritschl distances himself from Kant and claims that the practical reason is not opposed to but is a task of theoretical knowledge,<sup>52</sup> nothing is changed in the basic principle that religion and science are two completely different and diverging activities of the spirit. His entire theology rests on this foundation.

In addition to the two principles we have now learned about Ritschl's theology, there remains a third and final related one about the origin and essence of religion. The restriction of science to the phenomenal world drives those who still want to maintain {the reality of} religion to a complete separation of faith and knowledge. In its own turn this dualism requires that one look for the foundation of religion outside of the field of science. One is then led to choose the origin of religion either in Schleiermacher's "feeling" {of absolute dependence} or Kant's moral consciousness. Ritschl takes his stance firmly against the former and for the latter.

We have already seen that conflict between nature and spirit is of great significance for Ritschl's theology. On its presupposition he builds the case for God's existence. It is also the source of religion. "In every religion what is sought, with the help of the superhuman spiritual power revered by man, is a solution to the contradiction in which man finds himself, as both a part of the world of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature. For in the former *rôle* he is a part of nature, dependent on her, subject to and confined by other things; but as spirit he is moved by the impulse to maintain his independence against them. In this juncture, religion springs up as faith in superhuman spiritual powers, [389] by whose help the power which man possesses of himself is in some way supplemented, and elevated into a unity of its own kind which is a match for the pressure of the natural world."<sup>53</sup> Religion is therefore a supplement, a completion [*Ergänzung*] of the human person; it compensates for human dependency on the world by a dependence on God. For Kant, God

52. *Justification*, 217–18.

53. *Justification*, 199.

served to bring duty and blessedness [*geluk*] in harmony after this life; for Ritschl, God is the power who maintains our independence from nature and guarantees it.

Ritschl also defines the essence of religion from this perspective. He does not go to extra lengths to find a formula that could serve generically for all religion, acknowledging that his own description of God, world, and salvation carry a Christian imprint and have only comparative resemblance to other religions.<sup>54</sup>

If religion in every case is an interpretation of man's relation to God and the world, guided by the thought of the sublime power of God to realise the end of this blessedness of man, advancing insight into the history of religions has forced on us the task of formulating a universal *conception of religion*, under which all the particular species of religion might find their peculiar features determined. But this task involves no slight difficulties, and contributes less to the understanding of Christianity than is often expected. The formula by which this very thing, religion in general, has just been described, makes no claim to be a definition proper of the generic conception of religion. It is too definite for that. The ideas which it employs—God, world, blessedness—have so directly Christian a stamp, that they apply to other religions only in a comparative degree, *i.e.* in order to indicate the general idea of religion, we should have to specify at the same time the different modifications which they undergo in different religions.<sup>55</sup>

Ritschl goes on to say that the different religions should not simply be set next to each other as different species of the same genus but as “stages” {in a hierarchy}. “For the observation and comparison of

54. [The block quotation that follows is not in the original; it is provided for clarification. The same applies to the longer citations in the following paragraphs.]

55. [*Justification*, 194–95. It may be helpful here to highlight Ritschl's distinction between a “regulative” and a “constitutive” use of a generic definition of religion: “In the investigation of Christianity the general conception of religion should be used *regulatively*. I desire to distinguish myself very precisely in this respect from those who, in interpreting Christianity, make a *constitutive* use of the general conception. For when this method is employed . . . in such a way that the influence of the general conception of religion makes one even one moment neutral towards the Christian religion itself, in order to be able to deduce its meaning from the conditions of the general conception, then the only effect of this is to undermine Christian conviction.” *Justification*, 196.]



the various historical religions from which the general conception is abstracted, likewise shows that they stand to one another not merely in the relation of species, but also in the relation of stages. They exhibit an ever more rich and determinate manifestation of the chief features of religion; their connection is always more close, there aims more worthy of man.”<sup>56</sup> Christianity claims to be the highest religion. “When, therefore, as Christians, in reviewing the series of stages presented by the religions of the world, we judge them by the principle that Christianity transcends them all, and that in Christianity the tendency of all the others finds its perfect consummation, the claim of the science of religion to universal validity many seem to be sacrificed to the prejudice arising from our own personal convictions.”<sup>57</sup> {Ritschl’s aim, however, is more modest. He does not claim scientific proof for the superiority of Christianity, only that the claim is *compatible* with the scientific study of religion.}

But it is impossible for us, when arranging religions in a series of stages, to shut our eyes to the claim of Christianity to occupy the highest place. For those qualities in other religions by which they *are* religions are intelligible to us chiefly as measured by the perfection which they assume in Christianity, and by the clearness which distinguishes the perfect religion from the imperfect. The arrangement of religions in states, consequently, amounts to no more than a scientific attempt to promote mutual understanding among Christians; and assent to the statement that Christianity is the highest and most perfect religion is therefore no obstacle to the scientific character of the theory.<sup>58</sup>

{In summary}, though the more perfect {religion} sheds light on the imperfect, the former is not illumined by the latter. We should not lose sight of either of these two observations that Ritschl makes about the essence of religion.

Ritschl identifies two characteristics that are essential to religion. The first is that “they are always the possession of a community. . . . All religions are social.”<sup>59</sup> “The various historical

56. [*Justification*, 196.]

57. [*Justification*, 197.]

58. *Justification*, 197.

59. [*Justification*, 27.]

religions are always of a social character, belonging to a multitude of persons. [390] Thence it follows that to assign to religion a merely psychological complexion, in particular to refer it to feeling, is not a solution, but only an abridgement of the problem. . . . Now the multiplicity pertaining to religion is one of distribution, partly in space and partly in time.” The consequence of the latter is “that every social religion implies a doctrinal tradition. The dispersion in space of the members of the same religion is a direct obstacle to their fellowship, but it is compensated for when the religion takes real shape in the gathering for worship. Feeling, as pleasure or pain, as blessedness or suffering, is the personal gain or the personal presupposition which impels individuals to participate in religious fellowship. . . . [T]he historical religions claim service from all the functions of the spirit—knowledge, for the doctrinal tradition, i.e., for a particular view of the world; will, for the common worship; feeling, for the alternation of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, moods by which religious life is removed from the ordinary level of existence. No religion is correctly or completely conceived when one element of this succession is regarded as more important or fundamental than the others. . . . {No} explanation of the total fact of religion shall give the preference to one or other of the functions of spirit.”<sup>60</sup>

The second characteristic “perceptible in religious conceptions” is that “they express not merely a relation between God and man, but always at the same time a relation toward the world on the part of God, and those who believe in him.”<sup>61</sup> {It is} “from the social character of religion {that} we can gather that, in a complete view of it, its relation to the world must necessarily be included. For the majority of those who exhibit attachment to a common religion employ, in the commerce and outward expression of it in worship, such means as are characteristic of mankind’s situation in the world.”<sup>62</sup> What makes it even more evident is the way human beings rely on God in order to be set free from their dependence on nature

60. *Justification*, 198–99.

61. [*Justification*, 27.]

62. [*Justification*, 28.]

and to become spiritually independent over against nature. “Every religion, on closer examination, is found to consist in the striving after ‘goods,’ or a *summum bonum*, which either belongs to the world, or can only be understood by contrast with it.” {Therefore} “three points—not just two—are necessary to determine the circle by which a religion is completely represented—God, man, and the world.” “Theology . . . is not as a rule prepared for this. . . . {because} it states the problem of the content of religion . . . in terms of the position of the mystic, in which the soul which sees God sees Him as though it alone were seen by God, and as though apart from Him and it naught existed. [391] Schleiermacher, too, so far from abandoning this method, rather confirmed it.” But it is, nonetheless, completely wrong. “For the central point is always this, that the religious community, as situated in the world, endeavors to obtain certain goods in the world, or above the world, through the divine being, because of His authority over it.”<sup>63</sup>

For us to understand this condensed summary explanation of the origin and essence of religion correctly, the following observations surely are not superfluous. In the first place, one can raise against Ritschl the objection that applies to every psychological and historical explanation of religion’s origin. Every psychological or historical explanation of religion presupposes a shorter or longer period when there was no religion and then tries to demonstrate how religion arose from elements that are not religious. In this way religion becomes a product of the human spirit and acquires the character of something accidental. This is quite clear in Ritschl. Human beings experience themselves as both dependent upon and elevated above the world; in this conflict, with God’s help, humans lift themselves up. Now I do not deny that human beings truly perceive themselves as being in such an antinomy; even less do I deny that religion is the means by which people strive for a resolution of this conflict and achieve it in greater or lesser degree. However, when one looks for the origin and sole purpose of religion in the resolution of this duality, then one places

63. *Justification*, 29.

religion in the same linear continuum (albeit in greater degree) as art and science, with family life and society and state, all of which also serve to free human beings from the domination of nature. The result is that, should humanity succeed in liberating itself from this domination by the above-mentioned powers alone, then religion would be unnecessary.

But Ritschl's explanation does not deliver what it promises; he really does not clarify the origin of religion. Granted that consciousness of the world and self-consciousness stand in tension, how do human beings arrive at the notion that there is a spiritual power above the world [392] by whose help they can be liberated from the power of nature? Where does the idea of God come from? Is it not obvious that human beings who lack any idea of God are only capable of considering means that are in the world itself in order to assert their independence? Furthermore, the world does make these available. Even though the tension between our self-consciousness and our consciousness of the world might be strong and nature appear to us as a mysterious, unfriendly, terrifying power, it is also more than that. It also makes available through the probing, investigative, discovering spirit of human beings the means by which we can do battle against this power. How do humans, then, arrive at the notion that they should seek a higher power above the world, a reality about which the explanation provided knows nothing?

In addition, the essence of religion is in no small measure misunderstood in this explanation. What task is given to religion here? Religion exists for no other reason than to give human beings dominion over the world. Humans face a struggle against the oppressive power of nature and come to realize that their own powers are inadequate for the task; he runs into all sorts of dangers and faces death. And now religion arises as a powerful partner in this struggle and leads to triumph. Religion is thus an *Ergänzung*, a completion of humanity. The existence of God is assumed in order to lift human beings above nature. But this is not and cannot be the essence of religion. Religion is not an aid for morality. Ritschl himself acknowledges that religion can never be a means to another

end.<sup>64</sup> God cannot be merely an aid in the struggle against the world.

Nonetheless, there is a beautiful thought in the definition Ritschl provides for the essence of religion. In his definition he attempts to allow the frequently misunderstood ethical dimension of religion to fully come into its own. But this will become more clear after [393] we first consider how Ritschl uses his definition to come to a judgment about Christianity.

All religions believe in a spiritual, supernatural power by whose help people free themselves from their dependence on the world. In the pagan religions this power is in various ways tied to specific manifestations in nature, and for that reason they do not achieve the desired goal.<sup>65</sup> The religion of the Old Testament comes much closer to that goal since “the concrete conception of the one, supernatural, omnipotent God is bound up with the final end of the Kingdom of God, and with the idea of a redemption. But that end is conceived under the limits of the national commonwealth; while the condition of the end being realized is conceived, it is true, as purification from sin, but partly under the garb of the chosen people’s political independence; partly it is accompanied by the hope of outward prosperity destined to arrive with the perfect rule of Jehovah.”<sup>66</sup> In Christianity these limitations and restrictions fall away. In Christianity the kingdom of God is presented just as God intended it; namely, free from all the restrictions of nationality and directed to a common end by elevating all people into an ethical community. In this way Christianity became the perfect spiritual-moral religion. Thanks to the redemption of Christ, Christianity was liberated from the natural and sensuous limitations—temple,

64. At least in the first edition of his *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, 3:8; this is dropped in the second edition, 3:13.

65. *Rechtfertigung*, 1st ed., 3:175, 440. This is shortened or dropped in the second edition. [The English translation is based on the third edition, and apart from the few general statements about the superiority of Christianity to other religions (see nn. 55–60 above), there is no extensive discussion of “paganism” or “nature religions” in *Justification*.—Trans.]

66. *Justification*, 9–10.

sacrifice, priest, etc.—of the Old Testament and free to become the perfect spiritual religion.

In Christianity, the Kingdom of God is represented as the common end of God and the elect community in such a way that it rises above the natural limits of nationality and becomes the moral society of nations. In this respect Christianity shows itself to be the perfect moral religion. Redemption through Christ—an idea which embraces justification and renewal—is also divested of all conditions of a natural and sensuous kind, so as to culminate in the purely spiritual idea of eternal life. Nor do the outwardly sensible circumstances, amidst which Christ's passion took place, affect its redeeming significance. That significance attaches to His willing acceptance of His sufferings, to the obedience which, under these circumstances, He displayed in his God-given vocations. And inasmuch as redemption through Christ comprises justification and renewal, what is obtained is such an emancipation from evils as, being a spiritual process, is distinct from Old Testament anticipations.<sup>67</sup>

These twin characteristics of religion as *moral* and as *spiritual* belong together in Christianity.

In both these respects we have in Christianity a culmination of the monotheistic, spiritual, and teleological religion in the Bible in the idea of the perfected spiritual and moral religion. There can be no doubt that these two characteristics condition each other mutually. Christ made the universal Kingdom of God His end, and thus He came to know and decide for that kind of redemption which He achieved through the maintenance of fidelity in His calling and of His blessed fellowship with God through suffering unto death.<sup>68</sup>

{This duality affects the understanding of the Christian religion which should not be seen as having a central dogma but as having a dual character.} “But Christianity, so to speak, resembles not a single centre, but an ellipse which is determined by two *foci*.”<sup>69</sup> Christ's work included both; it was a work of redemption and of establishing the Kingdom of God. For God's children, freedom in God is as much the goal of the individual as the Kingdom of God is the communal final goal. “Western Catholicism has recognized this

67. [*Justification*, 10.]

68. [*Justification*, 10.]

69. [*Justification*, 11.]

fact in its own way. [394] For it sets up not merely as an institution possessed of the sacraments by which the power of Christ's redemption is propagated, but also as the Kingdom of God in the present, as the community in which, through the obedience of men and States to the Pope, Divine righteousness is professedly released."<sup>70</sup> Protestantism, however, devalued the idea of the Kingdom of God. "Now it has been a misfortune for Protestantism that the Reformers did not purify the idea of the moral Kingdom of Christ from sacerdotal corruptions, but embodied it in a conception which is not practical but merely dogmatical."<sup>71</sup> It was Kant who once again saw the significance of the Kingdom of God. "Kant was the first to perceive the supreme importance for ethics of the 'kingdom of God' as an association of men bound together by the laws of virtue."<sup>72</sup> Schleiermacher also described Christianity as a teleological (i.e., ethical) religion, but he failed to work it out further in his *The Christian Faith*. "But it remained for Schleiermacher first to employ the true conception of the teleological nature of the Kingdom of God to determine the idea of Christianity. This service of his ought not to be forgotten, even if he failed to grasp the discovery with a firm hand."<sup>73</sup> Ritschl wants to maintain both and describes Christianity as "the monotheistic, completely spiritual, and ethical religion."<sup>74</sup>

70. [*Justification*, 11.]

71. [*Justification*, 11.]

72. [*Justification*, 11 (altered). Ritschl adds (in parentheses) a reference to "Kant, 1:412ff." The most likely referent is the conclusion of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* wherein he discusses the *summum bonum* as an objective reality, "not as referring to an object of an intelligible intuition (we are unable to think any such object), but as referring to the sensible world, viewed, however, as being an object of pure reason in its practical employment, that is as a *corpus mysticum* of the rational beings in it, insofar as the free will of each being is, under moral laws, in complete systematic unity with itself and with the freedom of each other." A few pages farther, Kant speaks of a "moral world (*regnum gratiae*)" leading "to a transcendental theology—a theology which takes the ideal of supreme ontological perfection as a principle of systematic unity." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 637, 642.]

73. [*Justification*, 11.]

74. *Justification*, 13; cf. 194–97, 205–6, 543ff.

What then is the proper relation between these two marks of Christianity? It is a mistake to identify the distinction between religious and ethical dimensions of the Christian religion with the distinction between dogmatics and ethics. Neither can do without the other. “The history of theology affords only too many examples of the construction of what is either merely a doctrine of redemption or merely a system of morality. But it must also be observed that we are not to base theology proper on the idea of redemption, and ethics upon the idea of the Kingdom of God. On the contrary, so far as theology falls into these two sections, each must be kept under the constitutive influence of both ideas.”<sup>75</sup> Nor are we to think of the religious and the ethical as two distinct fields separated from each other. Although in the religious sense where redemption takes place we are dependent on God, the subjective acknowledgement of that dependence is itself evidence of our independence. Conversely, from the religious perspective, we also believe that our willing and acting is done in dependence on God. Thus, in the religious dimension we are also independent and in the ethical dimension we are also dependent.<sup>76</sup>

Nonetheless, the religious and ethical ends of Christianity should not be confused with each other, and even less may they be reduced to each other. Moral decisions and acts do not follow logically and mechanically from the belief that one is reconciled with God; it requires serious struggle and an act of the will.<sup>77</sup> There are many people who give evidence of this such as believers whose strong consciousness of [395] reconciliation {with God} is accompanied with pride and arrogance, disparagement, and lovelessness toward those who think differently. Catholicism and Protestantism differ at precisely this point as becomes obvious in the different understandings in each tradition about justification. “. . . Catholic doctrine represents Christianity first and foremost as the form of a moral direction of the will set in opposition to sin,

75. *Justification*, 14.

76. In the first edition, which I have followed here (3:18–23), this is articulated more clearly than in the second (3:29–33) [*Justification*, 12–17].

77. *Justification*, 100–14, 140–48, 520–23.



while Protestantism represents it first and foremost as the true religion, in contrast to the operation of sin as the ground of all irreligion and false religion.”<sup>78</sup> “The moral necessity of this connection {of faith and love}, however, follows from the fact that the same God both guarantees reconciliation and freedom from the world, and bestows the impulse to help in realizing the Divine Kingdom. The heterogeneity of the two aspects of the Christian life, however, is balanced in the subjective result—that we are blessed in the experience that all things serve for our good, and that we are blessed in doing good.”<sup>79</sup>

It occurs to me that Ritschl offers hints here that can earn some sympathy and expresses ideas that could become fruitful for the whole of theology. The relation between religion and morality, between faith and love, remains quite unclear notwithstanding all the study that has been dedicated to it. It is easy to say with Luther that faith does not ask whether good works need to be done; before one asks the question, they are done. Similarly, the Heidelberg Catechism {confesses} that it is “impossible for those who have been grafted into Christ not to produce fruits of gratitude.”<sup>80</sup> The reality, however, displays a great divide between faith and love. It cannot be denied that lack of neighbor-love is often paired with great faith. Nor can one deny that between Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as among the various churches within Protestantism, there are differences in how each emphasizes either the ethical or religious dimension of Christianity. It is this fact that Ritschl placed under scrutiny and made known. Although he judged that both of these marks are equally essential to Christianity and should not be confused or reduced to each other, nonetheless [396] his definition placed them side by side, and he attempts to demonstrate how religion and morality both are perfected in Christianity.

78. *Justification*, 80, cf. 35–47.

79. *Justification*, 522.

80. [Lord’s Day 34, Q. & A. 64.]

Although it must gratefully be acknowledged that Ritschl has so clearly and lucidly described the ethical character of Christianity, the danger is not imaginary that, having avoided the shoals of mysticism, he is nonetheless left stranded on the sandbar of moralism. His description of the essence of religion invites us to be concerned about this. According to his definition, religion cannot be understood in terms of two notions—God and humanity—but must include the world as a third term. Furthermore, the goal of all religion is, with God’s help, to achieve a certain good in this world. From this the question naturally arises whether religion still has its own content, whether it retains an independent significance; or, does it risk becoming nothing more than an aid for morality?

In his definition of religion and Christianity, Ritschl has arguably gone to work in the exact opposite manner that was customary before him. Then Christianity was exclusively regarded as religion and its ethical dimension was hardly considered as a distinct topic. The assumption then was that the ethical flowed rather naturally from the religious. Over against this, Ritschl first of all insists that human beings have a distinct calling and destiny that is related to this world. We are to be lords of the world, not in a physical but in an ethical sense, just as Jesus was. We are to partake of eternal life already in this life and not only in the life to come. Humans thus stand firmly in the certainty that whatever threatens them on earth cannot harm them or overcome them because everything will be turned to their good. This applies not only to the destiny of individuals but also to humanity in general. The human race is destined to become an ethical community, the Kingdom of God, which the whole of physical nature serves and to which it is subject.

Now, in order to arrive at this destiny, human beings need religion, particularly the highest religion—Christianity. In order truly to do the good and pursue our ethical destiny [397], we need to be set free from the oppressive sense of sin and guilt—the limitations placed upon us by the world—and to partake of Christian joy, carefreeness, and independence. Therefore Ritschl is absolutely correct in maintaining the religious character of

redemption and justification.<sup>81</sup> However, all of this, taken together, is still considered subordinate to and as a means toward achieving humanity's ethical destiny. {The contrast, therefore, is sharply drawn.} Whereas salvation in Christ was formerly considered primarily a means to separate man from sin and the world, to prepare him for heavenly blessedness and to cause him to enjoy undisturbed fellowship with God there, Ritschl posits the very opposite relationship: the purpose of salvation is precisely to enable a person, once he is freed from the oppressive feeling of sin and lives in the awareness of being a child of God, to exercise his earthly vocation and fulfill his moral purpose in this world. The antithesis, therefore, is fairly sharp: on the one side, a Christian life that considers the highest goal, now and hereafter, to be the contemplation of God and fellowship with him, and for that reason (always being more or less hostile to the riches of an earthly life) is in danger of falling into monasticism and asceticism, pietism and mysticism; but on the side of Ritschl, a Christian life that considers its highest goal to be the kingdom of God, that is, the moral obligation of mankind, and for that reason (always being more or less adverse to the withdrawal into solitude and quiet communion with God), is in danger of degenerating into a cold Pelagianism and an unfeeling moralism. Personally, I do not yet see any way of combining the two points of view, but I do know that there is much that is excellent in both, and that both contain undeniable truth.

[398] From the preceding it is easy to determine the method that Ritschl uses for theology. Religions do not stand over against each other as true or false but are organized in stages with Christianity having achieved the highest form. All religions are therefore grounded in revelation. In Christianity, the revelation given in the Son of God is the firm core of all religious knowledge and activity. "The person of the Founder is not only the key to the Christian view of the world, and the standard of Christians' self-

81. Cf. Prof. Chantepie de la Saussaye, "De Theologie van Ritschl," 277. The professor does acknowledge, however, that Ritschl's opposition to the one-sided forms of Christianity that emphasize the understanding or feeling is not without its own one-sided emphasis on a religion of the will (280).

judgment and moral effort, but also the standard which shows how prayer must be composed, for in prayer both individual and united adoration of God consists.”<sup>82</sup> Not only is revelation here robbed of its specific character and in Christianity restricted to Jesus, but Ritschl’s epistemology also pushes him to reduce its content. Knowledge of things always depends on the impression they make on us; we do not know things as they are in themselves but only as they manifest themselves to us and exist in relation to us. The question is never about what is true in itself but only what is true for us. Divine revelation therefore is limited to what a worldview and the self-judgment that answers to it gives to us, namely, the certainty of salvation.<sup>83</sup> In other words, only that which is purely religious and ethical finds a place in theology; dogmatic propositions are not scientific, they are only value judgments.

In order to understand the religious-ethical content of dogmatic propositions we need to stand within the circle of the Christian community. “The immediate object of theological cognition is the community’s faith that it stands to God in a relation essentially conditioned by the forgiveness of sins. . . . [T]his benefit is traced back to the personal action and passion of Christ.”<sup>84</sup> This method differs from that ordinarily followed in the past. Then, in addition to a natural theology whose content is derived from an entirely different source, theologians also considered numerous loci in dogmatic theology—e.g., God, [399] creation, the world, humanity, sin—apart from Christ and apart from a stance within the Christian community. This method is completely wrong. “Advocates of this method, who are unaware of its defects and feel no need to get rid of them, are therefore likewise incapable of understanding and exposition of Christian doctrine which views and judges every part of the system from the standpoint of the redeemed community of Christ.”<sup>85</sup> A natural religion—that is to say, one whose concepts,

82. *Justification*, 202–3; cf. 30ff., 536ff.

83. *Rechtfertigung*, 1st ed., 3:357. These pages have been replaced in the 2nd ed. by a polemic against [David] Strauss. [*Justification*, 413–14.]

84. [*Justification*, 3.]

85. [*Justification*, 5.]

truths, commandments, activities and expectations are (1) given to us at birth before an education or training and (2) are acquired only by reflection and speculation—does not exist and is a figment of the imagination. Metaphysics as the doctrine of God and the proofs of God's existence only introduces into theology degeneration and categorically cannot serve as a foundation and preparation for a Christian worldview. Natural reason does not lead a Buddhist to a personal, self-conscious Being but to the conclusion that this world should not exist at all, and it led the Deism of the eighteenth century to conflict with Christianity.<sup>86</sup>

A different method is required. One does not begin the doctrine of God, for example, with meaningless metaphysical abstractions about the Absolute in order then later to add to them other predicates but places both feet firmly in the Christian community from the outset. All theological propositions must be treated from this vantage point. God, the world, humanity, sin, the person and work of Christ, providence, and so forth, can only be understood and valued from this stance.<sup>87</sup> With a decided preference for this method, Ritschl appeals to Luther and Melancthon and claims, in this way, to have restored genuine Lutheran theology.<sup>88</sup>

It is easy to spell out quickly and briefly the consequences that follow from this religious-ethical method for the authority and use of Scripture in theology. Ritschl rejects the traditional doctrine of inspiration categorically and unconditionally, but he does attempt to acknowledge an authority of Scripture. [400] This authority can only be demonstrated historically in comparison with later literature, and it can only be understood properly in contrast with the tradition. Theology is called to procure for us the authentic knowledge of the Christian religion. This can only be obtained from the original sources that are as close to the founding period of the church as possible. As is always the case, the principle that forms

86. *Theologie*, 11, 12, 62; *Justification*, 4–5, 534–35.

87. *Theologie*, 13ff.; *Justification*, 2–8, 13, 34, 174, 178, 197–98, 324, 387ff. (cf. 342ff. in the 1st ed. of *Rechtfertigung*).

88. *Theologie*, 4, 57ff.; *Justification*, 6–7; 212, passim.

the faith-content of the church is most distinctly and clearly set forth at the beginning of its development. That the Scriptures of the New Testament are indeed those original sources is confirmed by the fact that the writers of later pagan-Christian literature were unable to appropriate the Old Testament presuppositions of the ideas of Jesus and his Apostles for themselves. Thus the train of Jesus's thought and Apostolic knowledge of the content, goal, and origin of Christianity are mediated through an "authentic understanding" [*authentische Verständnis*] of Old Testament religion. The hallmark of Scripture's inspiration and authority is {the conviction} that "the entire range of Christian ideas is authentically shaped by the Old Testament."<sup>89</sup>

In actual fact, however, this authority is restricted in many ways by Ritschl. It is true that he does not take much account of biblical historical criticism, and in that respect shows himself to be rather conservative, even though, as far as I know, he was the first to draw Wellhausen's attention to the Graf-Kuenen hypothesis concerning the origin of the Pentateuch. He also frequently and correctly insists that dogmatic theology does not mine its material from religious experience or ecclesiastical confession but from Scripture.<sup>90</sup> He even acknowledges that the theologian must not be governed by church confession and development of doctrine in working with the material but should nevertheless be guided by them.<sup>91</sup> Finally, we can acknowledge with gratitude that Ritschl [401] truly makes much work of Scripture and sees much more clearly than Schleiermacher how the Old Testament relates to the New. Nonetheless, in practice he often undermines the authority of Scripture by his instructive but still frequently arbitrary and undisciplined exegesis.

A few examples can show this better than a lengthy discourse. In general, Ritschl repudiates a use of Holy Scripture that only cites texts—without even attempting an interpretation—simply to

89. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:4–20.

90. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:2ff., 7ff.

91. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:18–20.

demonstrate one or other truth as necessary for salvation [*heilsnothwendig*]. The Bible is not a textbook for all sorts of theoretical instruction; only that which reveals God's will and his goal for humanity and the world is appropriate for theology.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Ritschl also provides the general rule that the content of revelation is limited to that which is a development of Old Testament ideas and about which the New Testament writers are all in agreement.<sup>93</sup> In an arbitrary application of this subjective standard, Ritschl contends, for example, that the Psalms are products of religious experience but do not intend to reveal anything about God to us.<sup>94</sup> The pre-existence of Christ is not a dogma; Jesus's words in John 8:58 ["before Abraham was, I am"] were only intended to cut off discussion and have no doctrinal value for us.<sup>95</sup> The doctrine of original sin is presented in Romans 5:19 ["by the disobedience of one man"] as valid for God and as a mystery but not as something revealed to us and to be believed by us.<sup>96</sup> Paul's teaching in Romans 2 and 3 concerning the righteousness of God is borrowed from the Pharisees and is not an element of Christian doctrine.<sup>97</sup> The same apostle, in Romans 5:12 ["sin entered the world through one man"], attributes the death of all people to Adam as a consequence of his sin, [462] but this too is not an essential component of a Christian worldview.<sup>98</sup> Galatians 3:13 ["Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law"] is valid only for Jewish Christians and has no relevance for us.<sup>99</sup> Romans 6 contains powerful symbolism but no dogma.<sup>100</sup> And so we could go on. With this kind of method it requires no great artistic skill to set

92. *Theologie*, 40; *Justification*, 331 (cf. 278, 357 in the 1st ed. of *Rechtfertigung*).

93. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:14ff., 23.

94. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:105; the 1st ed. states this much more clearly (2:103).

95. *Rechtfertigung*, 1st ed., 3:357; the 2nd ed. has dropped this (3:382).

96. *Justification*, 346–50.

97. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:304ff. (cf. 3:223 in the 1st ed.).

98. *Justification*, 358–61.

99. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:246.

100. *Rechtfertigung*, 2:226ff.

aside every text in Scripture that stands in one's way and does not fit into one's system. Subjectivity here is given a completely free rein.

Nonetheless, this method does not stand on its own feet but is a necessary consequence of Ritschl's starting point. We should be grateful that Ritschl binds himself so closely to Scripture as he does and attempts to build his theology on a biblical foundation and not only on the broad lines of {the church's} history of dogma. And now, what was the one powerful principle upon which Ritschl takes his stand? It is the limitation of our knowledge to appearances; things in themselves [*Dinge an sich*] are unknowable. Science, therefore, is restricted to the sensual and observable world and does not lead us to the supersensible.

If this is indeed the case, the absolute separation of religion and science becomes necessary. All metaphysics—that is to say, all striving to know the essence of things along with that which is supersensible—must be banned, not only from religion but also from all science. Metaphysics completely disappears. All that philosophy sought to know about God and say about him is religious but not scientific.

However, can it be possible to maintain religion itself on the basis of such a division? Are we not led by necessity to deny, if not the existence of the supersensible (materialism), at least its knowability (agnosticism)? Along with other neo-Kantians, Ritschl denies this. There is, so they say, in addition to the path of observation that leads to science, another path that leads to valuing religion. Once religion separates itself from all metaphysical abstraction and [403] theoretical knowledge, then it retains its own content, namely valuing. Theology consists purely and solely of value judgments and makes no judgment about the nature and essence of God; it only deals with the value that these have for the Christian community.

Finally, in order to designate this value, the theologian must stand {within the circle of faith} in the Christian community. It is impossible to determine any objective value for theological propositions; we cannot stand in God's place {and see things from



his perspective}. It is up to us to describe the significance of theological propositions in the way that they are mirrored in the subject.<sup>101</sup> Everything that lacks significance for the subject (i.e., the Christian community) {therefore} is not a part of the Christian life or worldview and does not belong in theology even though it is present in Scripture.

The logic that hides in these principle is worth noting. {When} one begins with neo-Kantianism and the split between theoretical and practical reason, there is no other way to defend religion and Christianity than by the means with which Ritschl has done it—and done it with more knowledge and skill than anyone else has. Nonetheless, in my judgment, human beings, particularly religious people, can not live long with this dualism. The proposed division, however, attractive for a moment because it apparently ends the conflict, does not lead to the reconciliation of faith and science but destroys faith and degrades science.

—Kampen, October 1888

101. *Justification*, 34–35.