

## The truly human and Greek philosophy

A Janse

*De Reformatie* 17 (1936-37) No. 44, 30 July 1937, pp. 357-358.

When in our days we are warned against the synthesis of Christianity and Greek philosophy, it seems some people are under the impression that the rejection of this synthesis is a misunderstanding of the gifts that God has given also to the ancient Greek pagans.

They do not really see why it is the case. It does not matter, what great gifts of brainpower and energy and perseverance in seeking the solution for life's problems, the Lord God has given to many pagan Greeks. As if we would not appreciate that!

But it deals with what they have done with that and what they achieved as a result of their thinking about the most important basic principles of world- and lifeview and knowledge of humankind. The first question for humanity is the question of God. Who is He and what do you know of Him, and how humanity stands before him. Finally, the most important question is: what does the Most High think about us.

The Greek philosophers immersed themselves in all these questions. And now it is for us a point in question whether we can connect their wisdom with the wisdom of the Scriptures, and whether their problems and their terminology can continue to serve as an integral part of a Christian Calvinist science, as it concerns these fundamental principles. Also, whether their terms must not always be defined with great care and precision according to their content.

Now it is represented as if the rejection of the synthesis is something entirely new, yes /22/ it is even ridiculed as something unheard of. It seems then, as if for example the word "soul" in Scripture (in the New Testament: ψυχή, psyche), would have the same content as that word psyche had in Aristotle and Plato and in the psychology of the Middle Ages, which is based entirely on these philosophers. Whoever denies this is mistaken for someone who is delivering up follies.

They even look for a psychological explanation for this "nonsense." It would be that the preacher of these "new" ideas is jealous because he has not had a "classical education" - he did not have that great opportunity to learn about Greek life - so he gives the wise men the boot. And then he speaks of "the" Greek philosophy. The simpleton does not know that the philosophers had mutual differences between them!

The ferocity of these attacks has shown the significance of the issue.

It is certainly not about the word "soul" or the principles of psychology alone.

Ultimately it concerns across the board the purity of Christian Science as a science, which is open to hear the pure word of God, without mixing this with pagan wisdom. There is no objection to using words other than those in the Bible to including principles of psychology. Also people can derive words for this from the language of the Greeks. And why not? But what should be contraband is this: that **specific terms from Greek philosophy**, which are filled with a specific content and are historically heavily loaded, so are put next to the scripture, as though they say the same.

For example, it is not legitimate to take the word psuche from a book of Aristotle and Plato and just to read it in Matt. 10:28 and 39, as if the same thing as it meant by soul (psyche) as was meant by these philosophers.

That has been criticized from both historical and linguistic perspectives, apart from the danger of pagan wisdom.

Those who have no objection to the psychology of Aristotle, will still have to make an objection against equating the biblical word "soul" and the word in Greek philosophy. I thought that surely this was generally acknowledged by the classically trained. The simple folk, who have not studied, can not judge so easily because they have known the biblical word "soul" from reading the Bible, but can not accurately ascertain what is tied up with the Greek scientific term. Only because the latter formed the tradition can they feel something of this.

In his **Biblical and Religious Psychology** (1920), Prof. Bavinck wrote: "As a rule we mean by the soul that spiritual substance, which along with the body /23/ constitutes the essence of man, and by its immateriality and immortality is precisely distinct from the body formed of dust. This is, however, a conception of the soul, which is derived more from the philosophy of Greece, than from Christian theology." (p. 30). Also the modern conception of soul as a collection of the phenomena of consciousness Professor Bavinck considered "as foreign to the Scriptures" as the Greek.

I continued to work on just this point – my book **Man as Living Soul** is certainly not without connection to the work of previous generations. What is foreign to Scripture, should not be read into it - neither through science as in the Middle Ages, which mixed them up, nor by tradition, which was influenced by that science.

If it is established, that psyche in Greek philosophy and the medieval Christian tradition in psychology and in tradition is "alien" to the word psyche in Scripture, then there is a basis for both meanings to be worked out further according to the specific principle of each.

Good science must begin with good distinctions and must not confuse concepts that literally look alike, but are actually fruits of a completely different world of thought.

Meanwhile, in this case psyche is only a symptom of the evil of synthesis. If the simple reader of Scripture is initiated as a matter of course into the biblical term "soul," he learns without difficulty of the "living soul" and the hungry soul, and he is amazed by the excitement that these days is made of that word. He is right in his position.

When the synthesis did not need to be disputed, also here; when everyone merely read their Bible simply, it would not even be necessary to fight against the Greek conception. Most of us would do well just to hold onto the Bible with the marginal comments and not be troubled by those people who request a whole new Calvinist science in pocket-size, in which all possible curious questions about the "substance" of the dead and about a "germ" of the body in the grave and about heart, kidneys, and mind, which they consider must be satisfactorily answered.

We must bear it in mind that this issue is only a part of the struggle against the idea of synthesis.

The veneration of the Greek classical world in the medieval church was one of the factors of the decline. The apostasy against God along with the pagan world in the Old Testament church was also always the beginning of the slippery slope.

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This veneration appears to be greater among us than one might suspect.

And still no novelty is introduced among us in the rejection of the synthesis.

In 1902 a book appeared by Professor P. Biesterveld, professor at the Theological School in Kampen. It was titled: **The genuinely human. How it is sought and where it is to be found.**<sup>1</sup> Prof. Biesterveld discusses the search of the pagans and of modern philosophy. The book is written in a popular style. It does not detail the individual philosophers and describes their problems very broadly - but what it lacks in breadth, it gains in depth. Here all the searching of the world is seen from a Scriptural standpoint. I was 12 years when I got hold of the book, but I read and reread it<sup>2</sup> - it was my "introduction" to philosophy - and I am grateful that I was then able to handle that book then. I "devoured" it.

Prof. Biesterveld had an eye for how the Lord in Ezekiel speaks of "the majestic nations" (Ezek. 32: 18).

He writes: "Did all those people live on earth without purpose in their thinking, struggling and suffering? Has God, as the poet of Psalm 86 sang about it, really made all the nations? He is, Paul testifies, not the God of Jews only, but also of

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<sup>1</sup> P Biesterveld. **Het echte Menschelijke. Hoe het is gezocht en waar het is te vinden.** Rotterdam: D A Daamen, 1902.

<sup>2</sup> Janse is reported to have read it six times.

the Gentiles (Rom. 3: 29). God reigns over all the kingdoms of the nations (2 Chron. 20: 6), which is why they are also called to rejoice with the Lord's people (Deut. 32: 43), and to listen to the words of prophecy, in which Jehovah is speaking about his wrath with them! (Isaiah 35)."

Here then is someone speaking who knows how to appreciate "the Gentiles" based on a purely Scriptural foundation.

He works this out even further and praises Rome and Greece for their many gifts. He says: "Therefore, any man, who wants to be respected for his work in scholarship, must dedicate many years of his life to the study of the language and history of Rome and Greece, so that he might become an independent scholar. God has used Greece and Rome, on the one hand, in order for Christianity to forge ahead through the preparation in the fullness of time, and on the other hand those peoples express in their wise men and artists the rules for thinking and speaking, which were laid by God Himself in human nature, but waited for a mouth which would formulate them. Aristotle and Plato, Cicero and Quintilian have been gifts of God for all humanity.

We must then speak of a **bankrupt** (the Gentile world), when it comes to the question: have the heathen with all their rich development found the answer to the great mystery of man, his origin, nature, destination, /25/ fall and redemption."

He then speaks in detail about India (Brahmins, Buddhists, Islam), about China, Greece and Rome, and then he concludes: "How far from the true ideal (the genuinely human) the best of the philosophers (Aristotle, Plato) still stand, appears when they try to develop their ideas practically.

No, this philosophy (of Plato) does not grasp that, it is selfishness personified.

For centuries in Greece and Rome, the mightiest minds have laboured on what they thought the ideal moral life to be. And what was the result, when the flourishing of the classic life was at its peak?

Paul of Tarsus knew that paganism. And it represents for him a venal painted wench, a whitewashed tomb.

He pulls the mask off the face, removes the whitewash, shows the reality, when he sketches that world: "they have changed the truth of God into a lie,.... filled with all unrighteousness, haters of God, foolish, covenant breakers, without natural affection, without mercy". The whole of paganism, from the beach of the Yellow Sea to the banks of the Tiber, lies there before us, desolate, immoral, hopeless, desperate!"

So far Prof. Biesterveld.

When 35 years after these words were written I make the same claim as Professor Bavinck, namely that "soul" in the sense of "the" Greek philosophy (the definite article is that of Prof. B.) is "completely alien" to that word in the Scripture - and I work that data out further - then a certain magazine ascribes that to... resentment. Then that magazine exults: "Greek philosophy is rich and beautiful, and long flourished in a variety of famous schools: its practice requires the erudition of a classical scholar."

The magazine, however, forgets to add that the wisdom of the Scriptures, which brought Professor Biesterveld to his deeply felt Christian lamentation about the "majestic nations," can also be understood by any simple believer. "The erudition of a classical scholar" is here made prior to discerning the spirits of the "simple" in the scriptural sense. If such a simple person is also a classical scholar, they will not glory in the beautiful paganism. They will not - when is it pointed out, that a Greek philosophical concept is not in agreement with the biblical concept - raise the alarm and start speaking of "a mockery of the noblest of our goods."

When Scripture and philosophy are held apart by a certain term, such alarm is not required. Anyone who disagrees must prove that I'm wrong - and that Professor Bavinck erred in this.

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And in any case, no praise of "Diana of the Ephesians" is involved. There is simply no one who does not know how great she is in the eyes of the world.

N. B. I do not call the **gifts** of the "beautiful" heathens "Diana" - but by this I indicate the idolatrous worship of Greek philosophy, which resounds in such an inappropriately intoned hymn.