

The Five Magnetic Points

J. H. Bavinck

Man by virtue of his place in the world, must always and everywhere give answers to the same questions. He has to struggle with the basic problems which his existence itself entails. He is afflicted by grief and misfortune; he meets both adverse and prosperous conditions; deep in his heart he has a vague feeling of responsibility; he has to adapt himself to the course of nature; he is aware he only a small being in the immeasurable greatness of the universe; and he knows very well that sooner or later death will knock at his door. Wherever he goes, he is surrounded by a multitude of questions, and although he has the power to escape from them for a certain time, he cannot help being overwhelmed by them at times. His being on earth is itself such an immense riddle that it threatens to crush him. The answers to all the questions with which he has to struggle may be different, but the problems themselves are always the same. And he has to respond to them, not only in his thinking and feeling but also in his whole attitude to life, in his acts and rites, in his existence itself; his whole way of life is a response. Therefore it stands to reason that this universal religious consciousness, with all its antagonisms and tensions, is something real and is to be found wherever men live and toil.

Is it possible to formulate the main points which have drawn the attention of man? Let us call them “magnetic points,” because they are points which demand our attention and which we cannot evade. We cannot help being confronted with them. Since they are rooted in our existence, they are stronger than ourselves, and somehow we must come to grips with them. We can define five such magnetic points, or focal points. It is our intention to deal with each of them more elaborately later on, but here we shall confine ourselves to mentioning their names.

The first focus point could be called the sense of cosmic relationship. It means that man feels a relationship with the cosmos. He is but a particle, an atom in the whole of the universe, but he knows that he is akin to the world in which he lives and to which he belongs, and that his life is in intimate relationship with the life of nature. He senses that there is not distance between himself and his environment. The first question man has to face is that of his relation to the cosmos. It can be summarized briefly as the relationship of *I and the cosmos*.

The second point is the religious norm with which man is confronted. There is something in his inmost being that warns him not to follow his own desires. He has a vague sense that there are certain rules which he must obey. It is the relationship of *I and the norm*.

In the third place, man comes face to face with the riddle of his existence. He is conscious that he is an active being -- he does things; he is always busy. But

on the other hand, he is sometimes overtaken by the strange idea that he is the victim of that indefinable something which he is inclined to call his fate or destiny. He stands between these two, *between action and destiny*, and he does not know his exact place. It is the relationship of *I and the riddle of my existence*.

The fourth point is man's craving for salvation. There seems to be something in man that compels him to believe that the reality with which he has to do every day is not as it should be. There is something wrong with the world; there are deficiencies that hamper him in his life. It is very hard to say what these deficiencies are, but it is quite certain that they exist. Nature is not as it should be; it is full of disastrous powers, floods and volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tempests. And not only nature, but also man himself, is not as he ought to be. There is also something wrong in his own existence. That is why we hear that dark and heartbreaking groaning for salvation through all the ages of man's history. Man has that remarkable tendency not to accept reality as it presents itself to him, but he always dreams of a better world in which life will be healthy and safe. It is the relationship of *I and salvation*.

And finally there is the fifth point, that of the reality behind reality. The Greek word for truth (*aletheia*) indicates clearly that there is a certain veil that conceals the deepest grounds of reality. That veil must be removed, the fundamental truth must be revealed. We are living in an imaginary world of which we do not see the substance. Behind the curtain of this phenomenal world there must be an invisible counterpart, a world of spiritual beings -- demons or gods or whatever they may be. This strange belief is also very fundamental to man's religious intuitions. Even when he is inclined to break with this belief and to become an atheist in the full sense of the word, he is often still overwhelmed by it, as it were. The idea that there is a *Supreme Power* to which he himself is related is apparently something that he can never get rid of. It is the relationship of *I and the Supreme Power*.

These are the five magnetic questions to which man is inevitably drawn. We cannot speak of them as innate ideas, because they are not a sort of natural religion. They are just questions with which man is confronted through the mere fact that he exists and that he finds himself in a world full of riddles and mysteries. These five questions keep him busy whether he likes it or not.

The answer which he gives to these questions determines his entire conduct and his attitude to life. Even when he never takes the time and the trouble deliberately to ponder on them and to penetrate into them, still his whole way of living already implies an answer, and is the answer. That is why we find these five focus points in every religion and in every human life, even in that of the so-called nonreligious man.