

The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper

Vincent E. Bacote

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This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature that engages the legacy of the great Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Its primary concern, however, is not to provide a critical commentary on Kuyper’s thought but to weave some of Kuyper’s key insights into a public theology that lays particular emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in creation—in other words, on “cosmic pneumatology,” a relatively neglected theme in academic theology.

Bacote is keen to set his discussion of Kuyper’s thought within a contemporary theological context. The first chapter starts, therefore, with an examination of the work of contemporary theologians such as Sinclair Ferguson, Colin Gunton, Jürgen Moltmann, Max Stackhouse, and Ronald Thiemann in the area of public theology (the latter two representing a confessional and an apologetic approach respectively). When Kuyper is eventually introduced, it is with a thumbnail sketch of his career and achievements that highlights his belief in, and embodiment of, the transformative potential of Reformed principles when applied to every area of life.

The second and third chapter focus on Kuyper’s public theology and its foundations in common grace. Its contours are traced by means of an engagement with some of Kuyper’s most significant writings during the peak of his career at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century—a period that culminated in his becoming Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Bacote emphasizes the rhetorical nature of Kuyper’s public theology: “At the pinnacle of his career,” he writes, “Kuyper articulated a form of public theology that clothed his deep Calvinist convictions in mythopoeic language” (150). Kuyper’s aim, we are told, was to inspire his followers with confidence in their confessional identity while motivating them to engage actively with contemporary culture. Bacote concludes that Kuyper’s public theology should therefore be considered both confessional *and* apologetic. Though a creative mix, it made for tensions in his theology that he never fully resolved.

The third chapter examines Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace in more detail and links it to his doctrine of the Spirit’s work in creation. While Kuyper never explicitly made this link, Bacote presents compelling evidence that behind Kuyper’s appeal to common grace as a basis for public engagement lies a belief in the Spirit’s work in creation. This belief, Bacote claims, is the key to understanding Kuyper’s public theology. For Bacote it also challenges theological positions that emphasize the sovereignty of God and Christ’s redemption to such an extent that the role of the Holy Spirit is relegated to the interpretation of Scripture and the application of the benefits of redemption.

The fourth chapter aims to draw out the contemporary relevance of Kuyper’s view of the Spirit in creation by means of an encounter with the public theology of Arnold A. Van Ruler. From this encounter, Bacote concludes that all that is good in human culture

is a result of the Spirit's continual immanence in creation. Public theology must therefore be construed around the concept of the responsible stewardship of creation. In response to the criticism of some ecological theologians that the notion of stewardship is partly to blame for environmental degradation, Bacote argues that, properly understood, the concept can form the basis of an ecologically sound theology and praxis. He is equally positive about its potential in the realm of politics, even though this may not necessitate the development of distinctively Christian political organizations as it did in Kuyper's context.

Bacote's fifth and final chapter is a call to "go public" with a renewed Kuyperianism that seeks to develop theologically grounded approaches to Christian engagement in every area of life.

In seeking to show how the Spirit is the dynamic element in Kuyper's concept of common grace, Bacote has succeeded in the much-needed task of articulating Kuyper's theology in a way that is more fully trinitarian. We can now see that the Spirit's work of animating life, restraining sin, and moving creation to its *telos* is as central to Kuyper's public theology as the notion of common grace, with which it is intimately connected.

Bacote's cautious approach as to how we can actually perceive the work of the Spirit in creation is also welcome. He is right to warn that often we can only make provisional assessments of the extent to which cultural, social, or political developments are "of the Spirit." His approach reflects an uncomfortable truth: Our discernment tends to be more accurate when we look back than when we look ahead.

The chief shortcoming of the book is that it does not fully live up to its promise to "appropriate" the legacy of Abraham Kuyper. While the cosmic pneumatology that emerges from Bacote's discussion of Kuyper has profound implications for Christian engagement in contemporary culture, readers are left to work out for themselves what these implications might be. This is reflected in the fact that Bacote's final chapter, which focuses on contemporary application, is by far the shortest of all five chapters.

Some pointers are offered, however, as to what general direction Kuyperian thought and activity should take. These include social transformation without triumphalism and the encouragement of greater multicultural expression so that the challenges of globalization can be addressed more effectively.

It is too easy, of course, to criticize books for what they fail to cover. My hope is that Bacote will tease out the implications in a subsequent publication. His book, together with the work of the creative genius that is Kuyper on which it is based, lays a solid foundation for much fruitful reflection on Christian engagement with contemporary culture in the unique circumstances of the twenty-first century.

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