

Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction

Richard Mouw

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011 (148 pages)

Richard Mouw's personal introduction to Abraham Kuyper takes to heart the very Dutch Calvinist sentiment that there are no brute facts. Mouw, author of *Praying at Burger King*, does not apologize for giving us his interpretation of Abraham Kuyper. I think Kuyper would raise a Whopper to that, and I would like to take the same liberty here.

A few weeks ago, my server at a local breakfast joint refused to butter my toast. Per state regulations, she said, she was not allowed. Eating lunch with my daughter just yesterday—different place, different server—my server refused to refill my cup, instead bringing me a new drink in a new Styrofoam cup. Again, per state regulations, refills are off limits. I confess that I am not, by any stretch, the greenest consumer around, but on this one I suspect that even Al Gore would agree with me on the intrusiveness and wastefulness of these government policies. If Al Gore read Abraham Kuyper, I suspect that he would also agree with Richard Mouw that Abraham Kuyper needs to be rehabilitated in our time. Concepts such as sphere sovereignty—that there are a diversity of cultural spheres with both legitimate and limited authority—are shouted down by Obamacare on one side and binge Tea Partying on the other.

Now, I have written my own book about Kuyper, but it is not necessarily one of the first books I would recommend for a beginning exploration of Kuyper. Professor Mouw's book is. His book is for anyone who would like to know more about Abraham Kuyper's theology, especially those features relevant to Christians trying to navigate modern Western society. In addition to sphere sovereignty, Mouw writes short chapters, three to seven pages, on Kuyper's concepts of the antithesis, pluriformity, the church, and others. In the second half of the book, Mouw offers his own thoughts for bringing Kuyper up to the twenty-first century. Here the personal character of the book comes to the fore. Mouw writes in particular for his American evangelical audience, and he addresses issues such as race, pluralism, and Islam that confront contemporary Christians in ways not expected by Kuyper himself.

Mouw is primarily interested in Kuyper for purposes of cultural engagement, which we have been taught is a hallmark of American neo-Evangelicalism. There are other aspects of Kuyper, equally important as those that Mouw mentions, that I wish would become part of American Christians' discourse: Kuyper's critique of religious conservatism, for example. There are also aspects of Kuyper's thought that evangelicals ought to walk circumspectly about. For one, Kuyper's doctrine of the church has much to commend it, but, as Professor Mouw says, Kuyper also tends to make the church into just one social institution, or sphere, among many.

No one can gainsay the inroads neo-evangelicals have made into mainstream American culture. They constantly stand atop the *New York Times* bestseller list. Nonetheless, I find that if I want something more substantial than a *New York Times* bestseller, more often than not I turn to Christians from ecclesial traditions: Catholics, Lutherans, and now and

then a confessional Presbyterian. Recently there is talk of the melioration of the scandal of the evangelical mind, in which the Dutch have played their part, but I remain skeptical that the kind of tradition that can form and nurture a “mind” can be constructed in seven or eight years. I cannot help but think that there is a connection between concern for the church’s sacramental and historical reality and the ability of these ecclesial traditions to speak to culture. Notwithstanding the salutary elements of Kuyper’s ecclesiology, it occasionally veers in an individualistic and desacralized direction—the same side of the road that evangelicals tend to run off. Kuyper himself does not advocate the church hosting art fairs, as Professor Mouw does, but that is a possible application of Kuyper’s thought. Mouw defines culture as “the ways in which we humans cultivate patterns and processes that give meaning to our collective interactions, as well as the things that we ‘grow’ as a result of those interactions.” On this definition of culture, might it be that the church’s primary culture-forming activities are not so much art fairs or music festivals but the more proper ecclesial activities: the preaching of the Word, the administering of the sacraments, and prayer? That is another plausible reading of Kuyper for future consideration.

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