

## **Book presents a more approachable Kuyper**

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**a book review of Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction**

**by Richard J. Mouw, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011**

In his vision of active involvement in public life, Richard Mouw, president and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, wanted to steer his way between a privatized evangelicalism and liberal or Catholic approaches to public discipleship (ix). He found that in Dutch politician, journalist and educator Abraham Kuyper's "theology of culture." In short, easy to read chapters he lays out Kuyper's views in the book's first half and updates some views in the second. The book seems especially directed at evangelicals, who "have not been known for having a coherent theological-philosophical perspective on efforts to influence the policies and practices of the larger society" (xi), but is also useful for teachers and people unwilling to slog through scholarly tomes.

Kuyper, not content with a purely personal spirituality, argued that every Christian is called to be an agent of God's Kingdom in every area of life, basing this cultural mandate on Genesis 1:28 and John 3:16-17. The former gives a three-part mandate: to be fruitful concerns reproduction; to fill the earth is a call to cultural activity; and to have dominion means managing the patterns and processes of culture in obedience to God's will. Mouw illustrates this with an imagined episode of Adam and Eve's first day collecting branches, which involves use of technology, distribution of labour and labeling system. While the fall, an ethical rebellion, didn't diminish the importance of cultural formation, it introduced patterns of cultural disobedience. Israel was chosen as a means of displaying some of God's original intentions for cultural processes and products.

Mouw discusses various major Kuyperian themes for cultural renewal. He notes that antithesis is not always obvious in reality. Pluriformity was necessary for created life to flourish. It even extended to churches, their fragments held together by Christ. Mouw summarizes Kuyper's view with the maxim, "What the Creator wants us to keep apart, let no human being try to squeeze together." Sphere sovereignty showed Kuyper's concern about the fundamental distinction between the Creator and creaturely. He agreed with enlightenment philosophers that the spheres should be liberated from the church's (medieval) control, but agreed with the medieval model that God's rule must be acknowledged in all spheres.

Many evangelicals regard politics as "the way of death" and therefore want to delimit the government's role. By contrast, Kuyper (for whom the political sphere was part of the creational design and could be life-giving) apportioned government a limited interventionist duty: adjudicate disputes and clarify boundaries between spheres, protect the weak within spheres and exercise its coercive power when necessary. Rejecting governmental financial assistance to the poor as a matter of principle, he nevertheless argued that if no help was forthcoming the state must help.

Although Kuyper has some vital insights to offer about Christian cultural and political leadership of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some views need updating and intemperate statements and rhetorical excesses need rephrasing. In connection with Kuyper's racism, Mouw, using Herman Bavinck's notion that the image of God is only fully developed in the whole of humanity, posits that we need to think cross-culturally.

In spite of the discouraging climate, Mouw proposes, based on Kuyper's interest in Islam (albeit ambiguous), that Christian and Muslim should dialogue, an idea many evangelicals find difficult to accept. Kuyper pointed to one important topic for conversation: "our different ways of experiencing and understanding the divine call to serve the cause of righteousness in all areas of life." Furthermore, Muslims have a similar understanding of the nature of the human being and of the present human condition. This cross-religious thinking, together with cross-

cultural thinking, is an “engagement in worldviewing,” a term Mouw prefers to “worldview,” since worldview is not a static but an ongoing dynamic activity.

Because times have changed, Mouw now wants to enhance the church’s role, encouraging people in various fields of endeavor. He mentions Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, which has a flourishing Center for Faith and Work, including an arts ministry for people in the Manhattan area, an indication that God’s kingdom is larger than the church. Since the family sphere is shrinking, he suggests that churches, for example, become involved in mentoring.

Upholding that the Constantinian compromise harmed the church and that there are limits to the kinds of political compromises Christians can agree to, Mouw nevertheless observes that “the Constantinian project had its origins in a creative response to a significant cultural challenge.” His view on the Constantinian compromise may need rethinking since it opened the door for Christians to persecute others.