

8 / Jacob Klapwijk

Antithesis and Common Grace

In chapter 6 we examined Calvin’s views on philosophy. Calvin urged openness to the Word and Spirit of God. The basis of such philosophy ought to be ‘humility.’ True to this view of philosophizing Christianly, Calvin reflected on non-Christian thought, openly and critically. Open in the sense that he understood non-Christian thought as possible only by God’s sovereign and gracious involvement in the lives and reflections of people; critical, because in Calvin’s judgment non-Christian thought was based on what moderns would call self-sufficiency or autonomy. In this chapter I present an account of the *on-going discussion of ‘antithesis’ in Dutch neo-Calvinism since Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)*.¹

1. Introduction

The question of how to assess non-Christian philosophy arose again in the reformational tradition, be it in a much broader framework of reference, when in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a revival of Calvinism, both in the Netherlands and abroad. One of the most inspiring leaders of this neo-Calvinism was Abraham Kuyper. Following his conversion, Kuyper sought to

¹ The following abbreviations are used:

GG = Abraham Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*

LC = Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*

GD = Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*

RB = Johan H. Bavinck, *Religieus besef en Christelijk geloof*

PR = *Philosophia Reformata*

reassess the importance of the Calvinist Reformation for modern times and modern culture. Kuyper established the Anti-Revolutionary Party, a Christian political party, in 1879. In 1880 he founded the Free University in 'Amsterdam, based on 'the Reformed principles,' and became Professor of Systematic Theology at that institution. From 1901 to 1905 Kuyper was Prime Minister of the Netherlands.

Kuyper challenged adherents of the Reformed tradition not only to reflect on the need for Christian statecraft but also to develop a Christian or, more precisely, a Calvinist view of culture and science. He pondered [170] what might be the value of present-day, secularized science for Christians. Must it be accepted gratefully as a gift from God's hand, its apostate features notwithstanding? Or should its apostate direction be unmasked and opposed in the light of the Christian cultural mandate? Is it a sign of God's common grace? Or is it sooner an expression of a universal antithesis between belief and unbelief?

The plan of this study is as follows. First, I devote several sections to a sketch of Kuyper's position on the topic, noting the tensions inherent in his thought. Next, I compare Kuyper's views with those of two other Free University theologians, Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Johan H. Bavinck (1895-1964). After that, I discuss the more recent contributions of two philosophers at the Free University, Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) and Cornelis A. van Peursen (1920-). In the closing remarks I evaluate the ideas of these thinkers and add some personal conclusions.

2. Abraham Kuyper

Between 1902 and 1905 Abraham Kuyper published one of his most characteristic standard works, *De gemeene gratie*, in three volumes. The title itself indicates the framework within which Kuyper sought to answer the question concerning the value of non-Christian culture, science, and philosophy: the doctrine of general or common grace. In the systematic section of this work (vol. II), Kuyper introduces the problem by observing that the church often disappoints one's expectations and the world often exceeds them:

One is struck by ... the remarkable fact that, weighed against the doctrine of our depravity through sin, the unconverted world exceeds our expectations;

and the church, weighed against the doctrine of the re-birth, disappoints our expectations. (*GG II*, 29)

Evidently, Kuyper would expect more from the church and less from 'the world.' This inclination can be understood to a certain extent as a product of his Calvinist background. On the one side, Kuyper starts from the Reformed doctrine of the total corruption of human nature by sin. This doctrine is expressed in the *Heidelberg Catechism* (the confession of faith which so strongly influenced the preaching, faith life, and theology of Dutch Calvinism and Kuyper's thinking): the natural man is 'wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil.'² On the other side, Kuyper adheres to the Reformed confession of all-encompassing salvation [171] through Jesus Christ, through whom the believer is freed from sin and reborn to new life. It is this deep-rooted twofold conviction of humankind's total depravity and of Christ's universal salvation that explains Kuyper's saying that the church turns out to be worse and the world better than one would expect.

To demonstrate that the 'unconverted world' exceeds our expectations, Kuyper likes to point to the fruits of philosophy and science which that world has brought forth in such abundance. In view of the seriousness of sin, the explanation for this phenomenon, according to Kuyper, cannot be found in some residue of (partial) goodness in human nature. Kuyper can offer only one explanation for it: the goodness of God. God's goodness toward all people, i.e., God's common grace, explains why persons such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Darwin (!) have shone as 'stars of the first magnitude' (*GG III*, 498). Not humanity's excellence but God's grace is the cause. Again I quote Kuyper:

The doctrine of 'common grace' ... did not arise from philosophical speculation but from the confession of the deadly nature of sin.... Apparently, this [confession] did not accord with reality. There was so much that was beautiful, respectable, so much to be envied in that sinful world, also outside the church. This placed one before the choice either to reject all this good against one's better judgment and to go astray with the Anabaptists, or to present fallen man as not so deeply fallen after all and thus to go astray in the Arminian heresy.... The solution of this apparent contradiction, however, is ... that grace is operative outside the church, too,

² *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day III, 8.

among the heathen, in the midst of the world, not eternal or saving grace, but temporal grace, which restrains the depravity inherent in sin. (*GG* I, 11; cf. *LC* 121 ff)

3. Particular and common grace

In support of this doctrine of common grace, Kuyper appeals to Calvin. Rightly so, insofar as Calvin, too, had set non-Christian philosophy against the background of the depravity and powerlessness of sinners and God’s gracious dealing with the world. Yet, Kuyper’s position is not identical to Calvin’s. Kuyper is the one who systematized the doctrine of common grace by making a sharp distinction between God’s common grace to all people and his ‘particular grace’ to believers. Common grace has a different content, scope, purpose, and ground than can be ascribed to particular grace.

1. *Common grace has a different content.* The content of particular grace is deliverance from sin and the gift of eternal salvation. Common grace, [172] in contrast, ‘contains of itself not a single grain of saving grace and is, consequently, of a totally different nature’ (*GG* I, 9). The content of common grace is temporal blessing for humanity and creation. Kuyper explains this as follows. God has said in paradise that if man sinned, he would surely die (Gen. 2:17). Now, grace is sometimes extended to people who are under sentence of death. Similarly, according to Kuyper, God has extended grace to fallen humanity: grace in the sense that punishment (eternal death) has been postponed until the last day; that room has been made for the prolonged history of mankind; that the deadly poison of sin has been restrained—indeed, restrained not only in humans but in the whole of creation (*GG* II, 243 ff, 265 ff) .

2. It follows that *common grace is also broader in scope than particular grace.* Common grace is universal, applying to the whole world and the whole of humanity. Everyone, not just believers, benefits from God’s maintaining the order of creation. That art and culture, philosophy and science, and so on, remain possible in this world in spite of sin is to the advantage of all people everywhere.

3. *The purpose of common grace differs from that of particular grace.* To Kuyper, particular grace is the mysterious reality of God’s intervention in the human heart

whereby a person receives new life and becomes a citizen of the Kingdom of heaven. Rebirth is of a supernatural order: not simply given with the creation, it is in fact an eschatological reality, inasmuch as the believer is enabled here on earth to have a foretaste of the powers of the world to come (Hebr. 6:15). In comparison with the original creation the re-creation is not something totally new; still, it cannot be explained in terms of the old. Particular grace and its fruits (new life and, finally, the new heaven and the new earth) transcend the natural creation-order upheld by common grace (*GG* I, 243 ff; II, 613 ff). Particular grace means, therefore, that God makes a new beginning. The purpose of particular grace is to anticipate the new heaven and the new earth. Common grace, in contrast, means that God perpetuates the old. The purpose of common grace is to restrain sin and preserve the creature, or, put more positively, to make possible the disclosure of the potentialities inherent in the creation through the actualization, in the course of world history, of all the splendidly diverse fruits of culture (*GG* II, 616-23).

4. *Even the ground of common grace is different from that of particular grace.* Kuyper teaches that salvation history and the church, in short, the terrain of particular grace, is borne by Jesus Christ, the crucified Lord: he is the mediator of *salvation*. The creation-order, however, unfolding in the broad stream of history and culture, is the area of God's common grace, [173] founded in the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the divine Being: he is the Mediator of *creation* (*GG* II, 635, 647; III, 123).

How is one to assess this position? It appears to me that serious difficulties attend Kuyper's contrast between common grace and particular grace, between earth and heaven, creation and re-creation, between cultural activity and salvation of the soul, as if God had different grounds for being merciful to humans. In all of this lurks the threat of a spiritualizing dualism, a kind of mysticism that expresses itself in a bifurcated orientation to the hereafter and to the present. Only rarely does Kuyper manage to integrate the two spheres from a central point of view. Yet, at times he senses that the purpose of particular grace converges with the purpose of common grace: God wants the salvation of the soul to be included in the redemption of the created world. And this full salvation is attributable to the reconciling sacrifice of Christ. In other words, the ground for personal grace is the same as the ground for common grace: namely, the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross of Jesus bears the future but also the present; it bears the church but also the world. To

Jesus Christ is given all power in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). At such moments Kuyper honors Christ as the king also in the sphere of common grace. It is then that he proclaims: ‘There is not a square inch in the whole of our human existence of which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not say: Mine!’³

Mostly, however, the tensions in Kuyper’s theology of culture remain, as they do in his personal life. In part, his work echoes the mystery of the born-again heart, the sigh of the weary pilgrim who yearns for his eternal home. In part, he is driven to work with extraordinary vigor at the unfolding of God’s creation in state, society, and science. And even here his ideas seem sometimes at odds with each other. At times he regards the creation mandate as a common human task in which Christians and non-Christians struggle side by side. At such times it seems as if the terrain of common grace is equivalent to the realm of nature in medieval Scholasticism. At other times Kuyper is sure that the great cultural mandate leaves no room for cooperation with the non-Christian; he is sure that this mandate proclaims the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the whole world and that it must therefore be translated into a program [174] of organized Christian action in all areas of life, including science and philosophy.⁴

4. Common grace and the antithesis

This brings me back again to my main theme. Like everything else in creation, according to Kuyper, thought, science, and philosophy depend upon divine ordinances; they are grounded in ‘God’s own creation’ (*GG* III, 495). Hence, science, too, is to be regarded as a fruit of common grace. Because sin has darkened the understanding, it follows that all science would end in deceit and self-deception if there were no common grace. Common grace makes science possible. Kuyper is also convinced that science is seriously affected by sin. In fact, Kuyper’s opposition to non-Christian science is much stronger than his appreciation

³ *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*, 32. See also Sytse U. Zuidema, ‘Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper,’ 95. Kuyper encountered great difficulties in seeking to articulate a radically christocentric view of culture, for while he was whole-heartedly devoted to emancipating culture (regarded as the fruit of common grace) from the control of the church (regarded as the institution of particular grace), he feared that an exclusively christocentric view of culture might lead to renewed domination of political and social life by the church.

⁴ One can find a condensation of this program in the three volumes of Kuyper’s work *Pro Rege* (1911-12).

of it, despite his theory of *common grace*.⁵

In *De gemeene gratie* Kuyper is inconclusive. He finds that there are differences between the sciences. In the natural sciences, he thinks, general validity and common acceptance are possible to a large extent, because in these sciences a great deal depends on exact, objective observation. In history, philosophy, and the other human sciences, however, the subjectivity of the researcher often is a decisive factor, because here questions arise concerning the origin, coherence and purpose of things—questions that cannot be answered through observation alone (*GG III*, 508, 512). With respect to the natural sciences Kuyper seeks to avoid positing an opposition between what is Christian and what is not. Matters are different, however, where theology and the other human sciences (including philosophy of nature) are concerned. Two kinds of science are possible here, regenerate and unregenerate, so that a truly Christian science is obviously required. The distinctive character of such science would entail the consideration of scriptural data, but most importantly it would require the mind of a born-again Christian (*GG III* 514, 521).⁶ [175]

Thus Kuyper’s position on non-Christian thought is ambivalent. Sometimes he stresses the gifts which God in his goodness grants humanity. At such times he can speak with admiration of Plato, Kant, and others. More often, however, he stresses the theme that only the regenerate can compare ‘spiritual things with spiritual’ (I Cor. 2:13). That is, he stresses the necessity of specifically Christian human sciences and philosophy. Then he takes sides and pits ‘the science of the new birth’ against the ‘science outside the influence of the new birth’ (*GG III*, 515). The idea of common grace now ceases to function as the basis for appreciating non-Christian conceptions and instead becomes the basis for antithetical action; Kuyper uses it to justify taking Christian initiatives and attacking non-Christian

⁵ Kuyper states his grounds for maintaining that science is affected by sin. What does it mean, he asks, to say that our knowledge is darkened by sin? Certainly it does not mean that we can no longer observe with our senses or think logically with our minds. No, it means that we no longer see things in their coherence and divine origin. The human mind can still perceive various parts of creation, but it is no longer capable of understanding the unity, origin, and purpose of things. Thus, to Kuyper the darkening of the understanding means not only the end of natural theology and its philosophical ascent to God but also the impossibility of attaining true knowledge of creation. Cf. *De gemeene gratie III*, 499 ff.

⁶ That the born-again person would take Scripture, too, into account is to Kuyper an indispensable yet incidental difference, distinguishing regenerate from unregenerate science. It is an indispensable difference because the Bible sheds a bright light on the great questions of the origin, government, and purpose of things. Yet it is incidental, first because a person must be reborn to understand the Scriptures, and secondly because Scripture is primarily concerned with particular grace and with effecting the salvation of the elect. When the Scriptures shed light on creation too, then this is a welcome and indispensable reinforcement of the dim light of common grace. Cf. *De gemeene gratie III*, 515.

endeavors in science. He advocates an ‘organizational antithesis’ in the sciences—the building of a separate Christian scholarly movement within the world of learning.

Kuyper emphasizes the antithesis even more strongly in his renowned *Lectures on Calvinism*, which were presented as the Stone Lectures at Princeton University in 1898. In the chapter ‘Calvinism and Science’ a few words of admiration are devoted to the ‘treasures of philosophic light’ found in ancient Greece and Rome; for those treasures we are indebted to common grace (*LC* 121, 125). But Kuyper goes on straightway to present a program of Christian scientific activity that is even more universal and radical than the one articulated in *De gemeene gratie*. It is more universal because Christian and non-Christian activity ‘both claim the whole domain of human knowledge [They dispute] with one another the whole domain of life.’ Kuyper no longer acknowledges a common task even with respect to the ‘lower,’ natural sciences. This program is also more radical because, throughout, he speaks in terms of two types of people. Involved are ‘two kinds of human consciousness: that of the regenerate and the unregenerate.’ They are not the same, nor can they be made to ‘agree’ (*LC* 133, 137-38).⁷

To Kuyper the difference is striking. The unregenerate mind believes the cosmos to be ‘normal’ as it is. The regenerate mind knows that because [176] of the intrusion of sin, the world is ‘abnormal’ and unable to reach its goal except through regeneration. Thus the antithesis in science is between the ‘Normalists’ and the Abnormalists,’ there are ‘two absolutely differing starting points, which have nothing in common in their origin.’ The Normalists and the Abnormalists ‘cannot desist from the constant endeavor to pull down to the ground the entire edifice of their respective controverted assertions, all the supports included, upon which their assertions rest’ (*LC* 130-34).⁸

⁷ It should perhaps be said that these terms need to be understood in the context of Kuyper’s conviction that regeneration—together with the means to regeneration, namely, the incarnate Christ and the holy Scriptures—is ‘abnormal.’ See *Lectures on Calvinism*, 134. They connote a supernatural order and anticipate the new creation.

⁸ Remarkably, Kuyper stresses common grace again in his lecture on art, which is placed after the one on science. It is common grace that makes it possible for Christians to enjoy the art of unbelievers, he says; and (appealing to Calvin) he goes on to reject any linking of art and regeneration. He does so, he says, because art does not belong to believers alone and because art must be more than ecclesiastical art. In short, art is not a product of particular grace but one of the natural gifts (cf. *Lectures on Calvinism*, 161). Kuyper argues that Calvinism could not develop its own Christian art style and at the same time be true to its principle and its calling (149). Yet he is rather unconvincing. Kuyper does not succeed in making clear why regenerate aesthetic consciousness and regenerate scientific thought must part

5. *Three diverging lines*

It can be said that there are a good many ambiguities, tensions and contradictions in Kuyper’s position. More precisely, one can distinguish at least three lines in Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace. In the first place, there is a more or less mystical line, when Kuyper relegates common grace and particular grace to two separate areas in such a way that the regenerate heart, saved by God’s particular grace, transcends the natural order of existence, the terrain of common grace. Kuyper suggests that in virtue of rebirth (*palingenesis*) a new principle of life is implanted, a principle that is never fully explicable in terms of the natural order of creation. It puts humanity on the way of a higher, spiritual world, to the eternal house of the Father, where all will see God face to face.

It is clear that in this context ‘common’ and ‘particular’ grace are little more than different names for what Kuyper himself sometimes calls the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’ (*GG* II, 243). This line of thought, which testifies to a moderate mysticism, has a long tradition in the history of the Christian church—one encounters it in Bonaventure, for example. And wherever this line is found, the value of philosophy and culture, be they of Christian or non-Christian provenance, is relativized in a large measure, [177] as in Kuyper, if not disesteemed altogether. For after all, the heart of the Christian is elsewhere, in the pilgrimage toward the kingdom of glory and in the participation in the eschatological reality of that kingdom where God will be all in all. This first, semi-mystical line is not to be regarded as Kuyper’s most original contribution.⁹

In a second train of thought Kuyper elaborates the doctrine of common and

company and go their separate ways. One cannot escape the impression that Kuyper was advancing *ad hoc* apologetic arguments here; and we recall that his movement in the Netherlands produced a free Christian university but not a Christian academy of art. Nevertheless, Kuyper had touched upon this problem years before in *De gemeene gratie*. There he speaks of artistic expressions ‘inspired by the spirit of the abyss’ and of others ‘inspired by the spirit of rebirth.’ In connection with the latter he alludes, significantly, to a ‘gap in the life of Christianity’ (vol. III, 570 f).

⁹ Cf. John C. Vander Stelt, ‘Kuyper’s Semi-Mystical Conception.’ In Kuyper’s case one must, indeed, speak of a semi- or moderated mysticism, as Vander Stelt, following Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven, does. In the ‘*palingenesis*,’ on Kuyper’s view, the germ of supernatural life is implanted in the natural life of the believer; and that supernatural life transcends the natural order of creation in principle—and with Christ’s second coming transcends it altogether. ‘Then the re-creating power of Particular grace demands even the terrain of Common grace for itself, including both our bodies and the whole of the world’ (*De gemeene gratie* II, 685). Certainly there is an impulse in the direction of a higher, supernatural life, but ‘supernatural’ does not mean ‘divine’ in the scholastic vein.

particular grace in terms of a theory of two realms as well, but in such a way that a Christian fully accepts his calling in both. The first terrain is now viewed as a common human area where the Christian is called to far-reaching cooperation with those of other persuasions; an example would be the cooperation in the field of the ('lower') natural sciences where the standpoint of faith supposedly plays a negligible role only. Matters are entirely different on the second terrain. On the level of theology, philosophy, and the ('higher') human sciences in general, believers are assigned their own, exclusively Christian task.

This way of thinking may also be called 'supernaturalistic,' although oriented less to the tradition of mysticism than reminiscent of the synthesizing approach of Thomistic philosophy.¹⁰ This second line in Kuyper's thought can also be said to be not particularly original. Under the names of common and particular grace, a supernaturalistic dualism is reintroduced without the question being answered whether this dualism is in harmony with the exclusivity of the reformational *sola gratia*.

The third line in Kuyper's thought is one in which the distinction between God's common grace to all and his particular grace to believers is not worked out dualistically into a doctrine of two separate terrains of life; the attempt is made, rather, to view all of created reality as an undivided whole, as such damaged by sin but at the same time placed in the light of [178] God's gracious acts in Jesus Christ. Throughout human society, in church, state, and community, the believer is called *pro Rege*, that is, he is called to follow King Jesus. *Pro Rege* means mobilizing Christian forces for the battle against idolatrous and anti-Christian powers at work in culture. To build science on Christian principles is part of that calling. The other side of the coin is that every form of science based on, say, humanistic principles is to be opposed; demanded is a thoroughgoing antithetical attitude toward non-Christian thought.¹¹

It is here, I think, that we find Kuyper's most characteristic understanding.

¹⁰ Sytse U. Zuidema has noted that one can speak of 'Thomism' in Kuyper to a certain degree only. It must be remembered that in Kuyper (a) the distinction between nature and the supernatural is not given with the creation but first appears in connection with God's saving work after the fall; (b) the supernatural transcends the natural forces of creation, yet not in such a way that man participates in the divine being (see preceding note); (c) the dualism of nature and the supernatural is only temporary, because in the rebirth of heaven and earth the whole of created reality will be transformed into a supernatural creation. Cf. S. U. Zuidema, 'Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper,' 63-64.

¹¹ For the tendencies and tensions in Kuyper's view, see again the important article of S. U. Zuidema. See also J. Klapwijk, 'Abraham Kuyper, over wetenschap en universiteit.'

Following Calvin and the later Augustine, he takes the blinding power of sin seriously. His view here mirrors the suspicions harbored by believers of the first centuries toward all 'wisdom of the world.' Since the days of the ancient Church Father Tertullian, no one, perhaps, has placed such emphasis on the contradiction between Christian belief and non-Christian thought. In the final analysis, according to Kuyper, the conflict is not between belief and science but between two beliefs (Christian and non-Christian), demanding two sciences (Christian and non-Christian):

Not faith and science, therefore, but two scientific systems or, if you choose, two scientific elaborations, are opposed to each other, each having its own faith. Nor may it be said that it is here science which opposes theology, for we have to do with two absolute forms of science, both of which claim the whole domain of human knowledge.... [They dispute] with one another the whole domain of life. (*LC* 133)

Kuyper advanced this third, antithetical line as a Calvinistic view. And so it is, as we have seen, at least to a certain degree. Remarkably though, it seems a Calvinism set to a different key. Kuyper adapts Calvin's criticism of non-Christian thought, but less so his openness toward it. The background of this divergence is probably a difference in starting point. Perhaps one could say that 'the foundation of humility' on which Calvin sought to take his stand inclined him to seek out traces of God's presence even in non-Christian thought. This position of humility seems at times to have been supplanted by a position of self-confidence in Kuyper. I mean: a position in which the inclination exists to monopolize God's presence for Christian communities and Christian organizations and to interpret the world of culture and science, to the extent that it is estranged from God, exclusively in terms of human apostasy and unbelief. The doctrine of God's general grace is still defended, but mainly in this sense, that the world of philosophy and culture as such is infused with it and the faithful [179] thus relieved of the obligation of world-avoidance, since 'not only *the church* but also *the world* belongs to God' (*LC* 125). Given this perspective, Christians may enter the world without feeling uneasy about doing so, as long as the objective is nothing other than to claim the world for the Lord and, as a mobilized force, to capture it from the powers of unbelief. The doctrine of common grace legitimizes in this way the doctrine of organizational antithesis, an

antithesis that assumes visible form in this world. It leads not to a critical appreciation but to a complete depreciation of non-Christian thought.¹²

On this point Kuyper seems more readily comparable with the Church Father Augustine than with the Reformer Calvin. In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine, too, proceeded on the basis of a fundamental spiritual opposition in this world, i.e., between the ‘city of God’ and ‘the earthly city.’ Augustine, too, sought to visualize this antithesis in the course of world history by relating it to two ‘groups’ or two ‘communities’ within the human race (XV, 1). To concretize these still further, he identifies the two communities with the Assyrian and Roman empires on the one hand (XVIII, 2) and Israel and the church on the other (XVIII, 47; XX, 20). It needs to be kept in mind, however, that Augustine often also emphasized that these two kingdoms are always commingled in world history and that—like wheat and tares at harvest—they will not be separated before the Last Judgment (XVIII, 47; *Enarratio in Psalmum 52*, 6) (cf. ch. 1.7). Also, evaluating the goods of the Roman Empire, Augustine sometimes relinquished the religious contradiction between the two kingdoms and followed the principle of an ontological hierarchy of higher and lower goods in keeping with neo-Platonic emanation theory. In that context, at least where various worldly matters are concerned, he no longer proceeded on the basis of a contradiction but of a ‘harmony’ between the two states, whereupon it was possible for him, too, to arrive at a more positive appreciation of worldly cultural goods, including the philosophy and science of his time.¹³

6. Herman and Johan H. Bavinck

Kuyper’s view did not go unopposed. Herman Bavinck, Professor of Dogmatics at the Free University, was as staunch a supporter of a Christian [180] approach to science and philosophy as Kuyper was. Bavinck, too, put aside scholastic dualism, which denied the total corruption of human nature, including human reason. Yet Bavinck arrived at a much more moderate judgment of non-Christian thought than Kuyper did.

In the first place, Bavinck notes that the antithesis is a conflict of principles,

¹² For my objections to this ‘organizational antithesis,’ see my article ‘Dooyeweerd’s Christian Philosophy: Antithesis and Critique.’ I believe Kuyper had other, compelling motives for establishing Christian organizations, as I argued in ‘Christelijke organisaties in verlegenheid.’

¹³ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XIX, 17: ‘*Inter civitatem utramque concordia*’ (between both cities there is harmony). See also Jelle Wytzes, ‘Eenige gedachten van Augustinus over den staat.’

not of persons or of organizations. He therefore cannot follow Kuyper in concluding from two kinds of principles to two kinds of people and two kinds of science. Bavinck calls that a *metabasis eis allo genos*, a shift to another category. For Bavinck, the kingdom of the Truth can no more be equated with those who are born again than the kingdom of Satan can be identified with those who are not born again; there is in fact much error present in the one, much truth in the other.¹⁴

Assuming that there is a radical opposition of principle between belief and unbelief, the wellsprings of Christianity and paganism respectively, Bavinck asserts in the second place that this opposition is not exclusively antithetical. In *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, his major work, he writes that in the heathen religions ‘elements of truth’ must be acknowledged. In fact, Christianity may be called the ‘fulfillment’ of the heathen quest on the ground of God’s general revelation (*GD I*, 290-92).¹⁵

A different view of the antithesis brings with it a different view of contemporary philosophy! Bavinck, as I see it, somewhat more consistently than Kuyper, sees common grace as a source of light and truth, because to him God’s general revelation continues to shine, despite everything, in a world estranged from him. For this reason Bavinck, like Calvin, can look upon current philosophy as a *praeclarum donum Dei*, an excellent gift of God (*GD I*, 509).¹⁶

Bavinck adds something to this. He notes that Christianity did not destroy ancient civilization and philosophy but rather ‘Christianized’ and ‘sanctified’ them (*GD I*, 577). The Church Fathers themselves, according to Bavinck, came to the view that the existing science ‘was neither to be utterly rejected nor wholly accepted.’¹⁷ It is clear that compared to a consistent Kuyperian view of the antithesis this line of thought must make new and different demands of a Christian philosophy. Specifically, given such openness to non-Christian thought, it requires that Christian [181] philosophy never fall back into Scholasticism. Bavinck wanted to avoid such a relapse.

¹⁴ On this ‘*metabasis*’ see one of Herman Bavinck’s lecture notebooks for 1896-97 as cited in Rolf H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 40. Here Bremmer deals extensively with Bavinck’s assessment of Kuyper’s *Encyclopedie der heilige godgeleerdheid* (37-45).

¹⁵ In connection with the tensions in Kuyper’s position, compare the *Encyclopedie III*, 444, with the *Lectures on Calvinism*, 134, where the antithesis is described as ‘two absolutely differing starting-points, which have nothing in common in their origin.’

¹⁶ See also Herman Bavinck, *Verzamelde opstellen*, 53.

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap*, 14.

Herman Bavinck’s standpoint was subsequently worked out in greater detail by Johan H. Bavinck, who was Professor of Christian Missions at the Free University after World War II. In *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof* and other publications, J. H. Bavinck shows how ambiguous both non-Christian religions and non-Christian philosophies really are. On the basis of an extensive exegesis of biblical passages, especially Romans 1, Bavinck holds that two things are revealed in the non-Christian religions. First, one finds in them the self-manifestation and self-presentation of God (*RB* 113, 123). Paul states in Romans 1:20 that God has made known ‘his eternal power and Godhead;’ thus, there is knowledge of God among the peoples of the earth. Secondly however, there is also in these religions something that might be called the human suppression-mechanism. Knowledge of God is constantly suppressed and replaced (*RB* 128, 172). Paul writes of those ‘who hold the truth in unrighteousness’ (Romans 1:25). In other words, it cannot be said that the thought of non-Christians is unmitigated apostasy or pure and unmixed idolatry; rather it is evident that in their very apostasy and idolatry there is a struggle going on in them with respect to the truth; they bear witness to both the influence of and the resistance to the God who makes himself known to all people. Writes Bavinck:

Perhaps people will say to me, ‘There is that most authentic “point of contact” after all, the “suppressed truth!” Or perhaps the charge made against me will be, ‘Here we go then, driven into psychology under full sail.’ To both objections I answer with a great round ‘No!’ For this suppressed truth is not something of man’s; it is there despite and against man’s will. It is there because powerless man in his abominable immorality is capable of pushing God’s truth aside, of banishing it, of putting it away from him, but he is never capable of destroying it without remnant. It is always there in his life as a threat, and it never lets go of him. (*RB* 175)

7. The Van Peursen–Dooyeweerd discussion

Against the background of this sketch of Kuyper and the Bavincks, I add a comment on the discussions between the two Free University philosophers Cornelis A. van Peursen and Herman Dooyeweerd, portions of which were

published in *Philosophia Reformata*.¹⁸ Their arguments are of [182] importance for us because one of the main points of difference between them is their evaluation of non-Christian philosophy. And, as far as I can see, this difference arises from the fact that where the principle of antithesis is concerned, Dooyeweerd is in the line primarily of Kuyper while Van Peursen's position is more like that of J. H. Bavinck.

Dooyeweerd and Van Peursen both want to give a positive evaluation of non-biblical thought. However, both the degree and the grounds of their appreciation differs considerably. Dooyeweerd holds that human thought and, hence, all rational and philosophical systems are subject to the principle of religious antithesis. Most theories are driven by an apostate religious motivation, a motivation which stands in 'radical antithesis' (a term of Kuyper's) to the biblical groundmotive, that is to say, the all-embracing power of God's word as it is incarnated in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord (*PR* 25, 144ff). Non-Christian philosophies can and ought to be appreciated only insofar as they appear to be confronted with undeniable 'states of affairs which conform to the law-structures of creation.' That is to say, in spite of conflicting religious starting points, Christian and non-Christian philosophers alike have to face the states of affairs which impinge upon every person within the structures of God's creation order (*PR* 25, 105 ff, 150).

Van Peursen does not recognize such a divine creation order nor does he recognize anything like 'states of affairs' based on it. According to him the 'affairs' are never 'static;' to the contrary, they are related to the meaning-giving human subject and therefore move within patterns of human interpretation (*PR* 24, 162ff, 168). Where, then, does Van Peursen find a ground for this appreciation of and communication with non-Christian thinkers? In separating faith and reason? That would be impossible, because both Dooyeweerd and Van Peursen are convinced of the impact of religion on human rationality. But for Van Peursen the religious antithesis is not as absolute as it is for Dooyeweerd. To Van Peursen the religious antithesis, God's No to sin, is preceded by a religious thesis, God's Yes to the whole of creation. In the line of the Bavincks, Van Peursen emphasizes the presence of God in our created world on the ground that God

¹⁸ See *Philosophia Reformata*, vols. 24 (160-68), 25 (97-150), 26 (189-200). See also Cornelis A. van Peursen, 'Culture and Christian Faith.'

reveals himself to humans even within false religions and humanistic ideologies (*PR* 24, 168). Not in the general structures of a supposed creation order but in this general appeal of God to every human being can the real basis be found for a mutual appreciation and a rational communication between Christian and non-Christian scholars, as Van Peursen sees it (*PR* 24, 168). [183]

8. Questions and considerations

The controversy about 'states of affairs' and 'God's presence' raised many questions, the most crucial of which for the Reformed tradition would be whether an inevitable dilemma confronts us here.

Consider Dooyeweerd's point. Does he not deserve support when he speaks of incontrovertible states of affairs? Granted that humans are able to give a new meaning to certain matters and to re-interpret familiar events, it remains the case that the possibilities for doing so are always limited and never arbitrary. Human meaning-giving is always effected within the framework of divine meaning-stipulation. If God is the Creator, is he not likewise the final law-giver and meaning-giver of creation? 'Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth' (Is. 40:26).

It is precisely at this point, I believe, that the great value of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace is to be found, too. With this doctrine Kuyper wanted to express the fact that in spite of human sin and self-will, God does not forsake the work of his hands. He upholds the world by his 'creation ordinances' (*GG* I, 243, 259). In his grace he is and he remains the sovereign law-giver and meaning-giver. Yet, as we have seen, Kuyper did not adequately stress that God does all this for the sake of Christ. Kuyper stated that the earth (common grace) bears the Cross (particular grace); he often did not see that in a deeper sense the reverse is true: the Cross bears the earth. Now, Dooyeweerd's contribution has been to re-formulate Kuyper's view of common grace on such a christocentric basis.¹⁹ The doctrine of

¹⁹ See also J. Klapwijk, 'The Struggle for a Christian Philosophy: Another Look at Dooyeweerd.' Dooyeweerd solves Kuyper's problem (a christocentric, yet non-ecclesiastically oriented view of

common grace can be kept unsoiled by the stubborn tradition of the two-realms theory on condition that it be anchored christocentrically alone. Only then, furthermore, is it able to offer the possibility of evaluating non-Christian thought correctly.²⁰ [184]

Granted the truth of all this, the question still arises whether something else should not be taken into consideration as well. By that 'something else' I mean the point urged by the Bavincks and Van Peursen: God's presence. The theme of God's presence is, as I see it, closely related to the question of the nature of all religion, including Christianity. No religion is comprehensible apart from the presence of God. Every religion has an 'answer-structure.' That is, religion is religion because and to the extent that it responds to an appeal from God, be it to God's revelation in his Word (special revelation) or to God's revelation in his works (general revelation). The answer that people give in religion is always one of either surrender or rebellion. Whatever the human response, there echoes in it always something of the original call of God.

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? (Gen. 3:8,9)

I think one has to grant Dooyeweerd that an apostate groundmotive is at work in non-Christian thought. It must be added, however, that this apostate motive also affects the mind of the Christian, who is likewise a sinner; and that the presence of this motive in no way contradicts the presence of God. Conversely, the apostate motive, too, is always religiously directed toward God in the sense that it is a self-willed cry against heaven, a suppressing and distorting of the Truth that confronts humans continually, rebellion notwithstanding.²¹ [185]

culture) by making a sharp distinction between religion and faith. His view of culture and science, while religiously rooted in Christ, does not imply any direct tie with ecclesiastical articles of faith.

²⁰ Any two-realm theory has to be rejected here. As I see it, it is necessary to realize that Christ and his redemptive grace are both present in the heart of man and revealed as the ground of culture. The same holds for common grace. Common grace is revealed not only in the world of culture and science (for example, in the moments of truth when pagan and secularized thought is able to give a convincing interpretation of incontrovertible 'states of affairs') but also, and even in the first place, in the religion and heart of man. Calvin has already pointed to the awareness of divinity (*divinitatis sensus*) and sparks (*scintillae*) of the knowledge of God in the hearts of all men. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, 3, 3; 4, 1; 4, 4; 5, 1; 5, 14; and 11, 2, 12. Kuyper himself has said that God's common grace has checked the corruption of sin even in the heart of man. Cf. *De gemeene gratie* I, 250.

²¹ As a consequence of this, non-Christian thought cannot simply be understood as Dooyeweerd

We must acknowledge that the Christian life is a mixed existence: Christian thought does not escape the blight of sin. We must likewise recognize that, thanks to God’s grace, non-Christian existence is also a mixtum: on the plane of human rationality remarkable insights have been achieved, even though ultimately the full Truth always has been suppressed. This is why all pagan religions and every apostate ideology and theoretical system proves to be ambiguous and ambivalent. It would be incorrect to conclude from this that they turn out to be better than could have been expected (as Kuyper did); for the fact that the human lie is mixed with the divine Truth does not tend to weaken the lie, it just discloses its guilty, parasitic power. Even the lie feeds on the Truth. In its own way, it confirms the superior power of the Truth: ‘For we can do nothing against the truth but for the truth’ (II Cor. 13:8).²²

In summary it can be said that to render the ambivalent character of non-Christian thought comprehensible it is not enough to appeal only to the personal presence of God, nor does it suffice to appeal exclusively to the structural order of creation. An exclusive appeal to the presence of God detached from recognition of the creation order will not do, if for no other reason than that God’s personal self-revelation already presupposes a created order. That man is made for God—‘Thou has made us for Thyself,’ said Augustine—is, after all, one of the creation ordinances (Gen. 1:26). Consciousness of the Godhead is written (*inscriptus*), yes, engraved

would understand it, that is, in terms of apostate religious groundmotives such as form–matter, nature–freedom, and so forth. Similarly, there should be no talk, at least in the absence of further qualification, of a ‘radical antithesis’ between religious groundmotives, as if there were a perfect parallelism involved in which non-Christian thought would flow from the apostate motives in a way strictly analogous to that in which Christian thought would flow from the ‘biblical groundmotive’ of creation, fall, and redemption. The biblical witness to the enmity between ‘the seed of the woman’ and ‘the seed of the serpent’ (Gen. 3 : 15), between Christ and Satan, must in no way be diluted; yet the religious attitude of the non-believer can only be understood in terms of both. In other words, one can say that non-Christian thought is ruled by an apostate groundmotive (and one has to add that the Christian mind, too, never frees itself entirely of its influence), but this does not alter the fact that non-Christian thought ought to be examined precisely in its apostate groundmotives, in the overpowering light of the Christian groundmotive. Dooyeweerd touched on this problem himself when he said, ‘The biblical groundmotive in the revelation of the fall embraces and discloses them [i.e. the non-Christian groundmotives in their true nature]’ (*Philosophia Reformata* 25 (1960): 146). I agree with this, but I think the Christian groundmotive (I would rather say ‘the biblical Word-revelation’) is much more sweeping and penetrating than Dooyeweerd suggests. The Word-revelation ‘discloses’ not only through the revelation of the fall but also through the revelation of creation and the revelation of redemption: it makes clear that non-Christian thought is driven both by the power of sin and by God’s revelation in creation (so that sayings of pagan sages and philosophers even appear in the Old and New Testaments), and that influence of God’s revelation in creation is in its turn an expression of God’s overpowering redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.

²² See also J. Klapwijk, ‘Dooyeweerd’s Christian Philosophy: Antithesis and Critique.’

(*insculptus*) in the hearts of all people, says Calvin.²³ Yet, the reverse one-sidedness must be rejected as well. An exclusive appeal to universal states of affairs in God's creation order does not work either, because it does not make clear why humans in their sinful nature should not consciously disregard or deny the facts or values of life, turning philosophy into a grandiose lie devoid of all truth.

Since the issue here is one of a controversy within the Calvinist tradition, it is relevant to cite Calvin's *Institutes* at this point:

The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God. Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's mind that seed of religion (*religionis semen*) of which we have spoken [186] but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. (I, 5, 1)

In a broader context Calvin makes clear that the possibility of philosophy, and of the sciences, too, depends in part on the unavoidable sense of 'God's created order.'²⁴

It seems that it would be impossible to overemphasize the close coherence between God's action upon the human heart (general revelation) and his upholding of creation structures (common grace).²⁵ We cannot separate revelation and creation, because the Bible teaches that God reveals himself to us in and through the created works of his hands. God's voice and the voice of the facts are indivisible. If the voice of God were no longer to be heard throughout the length and breadth of the world, the human mind would disintegrate and the facts, too, would fall still.²⁶

9. Critical transformation

At this point one might ask: Granted that the Christian has good reasons for paying

²³ Calvin, *Institutes* I, 3, 1; 4, 4.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* I, 3, 3: 'creationis lex;' 5, 5: 'ordo a Deo prescriptus.'

²⁵ The relation between general revelation and common grace is continually discussed in the history of Reformed theology. However, its elaboration was often quite unsatisfactory. e.g., a falling back into the scholastic idea of a '*lumen naturale*,' etc. The *Canons of Dordt* III/IV are curious in this connection with their rejection of the Remonstrant doctrine of 'common grace (through which they understand the light of nature)' in article 5. This is the only place in the Reformed confessions where the term 'common grace' is mentioned *expressis verbis*.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* I, 3, 3.

close attention to non-Christian thought and for appreciating positively greater or lesser parts of its contributions in science and philosophy, how can he avail himself of them in his own thought?

Any attempt to bring Christian faith and pagan or secularized ideas together in an all-embracing synthesis is misguided and leads astray, I believe. It cannot be correct to judge by the standard of Christian faith some concepts of modern or ancient philosophers to be true and therefore suitable for such a synthesis and to lay aside some others as untrue. Any such eclecticism, however often Christians may have applied it, proceeds on the basis of the false assumption that truth is divisible. When we proceed eclectically, we cannot do justice to the philosophers we use. We detach the conceptions from the person who advanced them. We divorce from the thinkers ideas that they have forged into a unity and that they experience or once experienced as a result of their personal struggle, as the way to deeper insight, as a window through which the [187] light of the Truth might fall. Most importantly, eclecticism ignores what Kuyper rediscovered: the biblical antithesis between the 'wisdom of this world' and the 'wisdom of God' (I Cor. 1:18-25).

In other words, the value of non-Christian thought for the Christian cannot be done justice through a procedure of synthesizing and eclecticism. It can be done justice, as I see it, only in a process of critical *appropriation through transformation*. Let me try to be as concrete as possible by referring to a favorite theme of Augustine and other Church Fathers, Origen for example, namely, the theme of 'despoliation,' or plundering. The Church Fathers recalled how the children of Israel were asked to despoil the Egyptians of their cultural treasures, their silver and gold, when they left the land (Ex. 12:35,36: '... and they borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment... And they spoiled the Egyptians'). As the Israelites made use of the treasures of Egypt, so, the Church Fathers believed, were they justified in making use of the cultural treasures of the classical world, including its philosophy.²⁷

I think that in principle this despoliation theme yields a useful analogy to what can be done with non-Christian ideas and insights. Yet the Church Fathers did not always have sharply in view (a) that the Israelites were called to take the gold

²⁷ See Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* II, 40, 60; cf. *Confessiones* VII, ix, 15.

and the silver of Egypt and to use these valuables for the ‘work of the tabernacle’ and the ‘service of the sanctuary’ (Ex.35:21; 36:1); and (b) that these treasures had to be smelted and refined before they could be used as vessels in the service of God. What I mean to say is that, thanks to God’s universal creation order and to his universal self-presentation within it, the philosophies—not to mention the sciences—of the day can be viewed in certain respects as excellent gifts of the Spirit of God, and that to that extent they can be used by Christians. On two conditions:

(1) *Critical appropriation or integration.* Knowledge and wisdom, wherever we may find it, will have to be taken up into the service of the Lord. In other words, the purpose can never be simply to adopt the valuable insights of non-Christian thinkers or to accommodate them in some way to the content of the Christian faith. That would amount to either eclecticism or Scholasticism. No, if we think it possible to make use of the chattels of non-Christian thought—the Egyptians’ silver and gold, much of it useful, some of it excrescent—then this is only permissible, I think, to the extent that we are in a position to really integrate it into a Christian, God-directed view of life. [188]

(2) *Transformation.* The integration of non-Christian thought into the Christian view of life can never take place in the absence of far-reaching changes. The insights of philosophy and even, I think, of science in general, function in the framework of a total view of life, in a *Weltanschauung* that is religiously charged and that I would call an ideology to the extent that it is in conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is therefore necessary for the Christian thinker to take the ideas he borrows from others and smelt and refine them. At the very least, he must pry them loose from their ideological context. The Christian philosopher should engage in communication and discussion with non-Christian thinkers, and yet must always disentangle their insights from the ideological connections present in their minds and perhaps present in his or her own mind as well—the connections which lead people to resist and suppress the truth of God. Christian philosophers must take these insights and critically transform them. In short, they must take the gold that comes *from God* and consecrate it again *to God*.

When the apostle Paul spoke of non-Christian thought he had in view, I suggest, a similar process of rejection and appropriation, of criticism and transformation: ‘We

destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ’ (II Cor. 10:15). On the basis of the Christian faith it is simply not possible to accept in part and to reject in part either ancient, pagan philosophy or modern, secularized thought. From the Reformed perspective it is appropriate to plead for the reformation of philosophy itself. But the reformation of philosophy is never possible without communication with dissenters. Such a communication means transformation after the model of the Israelites. Thus, a program for a reformation of philosophy is at the same time a call for an on-going transformation of philosophy.

10. For further reading

For further study in Kuyper and Dutch Neo-Calvinism read: Abraham Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*, especially chapter 4, which deals with Calvinism and science. Sytse U. Zuidema has given an important presentation of Kuyper’s conception in his article ‘Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper.’ For Dooyeweerd read from his main work, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, volume I, part III, 1, on antithesis and synthesis in philosophical thought. A more popular exposition of his thought may be found in his *Roots of Western Culture. Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*. Those who read Dutch may consult my essay ‘Honderd [189] jaar filosofie aan de Vrije Universiteit,’ in the volume commemorating the first centenary of the Free University, *Wetenschap en rekenschap 1880-1980*, for a more extensive introduction into the development of philosophy at this university. For a further study in the broader Calvinian tradition see the volume *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, edited by Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

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