
Pro Rege

Volume 29 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2001

Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology (Book Review)

Fred Van Geest
Dordt College

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Recommended Citation

Van Geest, Fred (2001) "Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 29: No. 4, 31 - 32.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol29/iss4/5

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A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology, by John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001). 502 pp. Reviewed by Fred Van Geest, Associate Professor of Political Studies.

From the title of this book, the reader might expect a detailed treatment of an American public theology that Abraham Kuyper developed. However, it is not clear from anything Bolt says that Kuyper actually produced such a thing. Instead, Bolt develops Kuyper's American public theology as he seeks to illustrate Kuyper's relevance to the American context. He completes this task by bringing together key general Kuyperian ideas and the few particular thoughts Kuyper did have on America. For instance, Kuyper's generic views on the role of Christians in the political realm are noted and applied by Bolt to the American context, along with Kuyper's view that American liberty was the "leading indicator of the providentially directed world-stream of history as it spread steadily westward from its cradle in the Mediterranean region, through Europe, and then to America" (260). Bolt frequently notes Kuyper's admiration for the "American experiment" but falls short of explaining how this constitutes an "American public theology".

However, if the title of the book were a more accurate reflection of the text, the book would still lack a clearly identifiable purpose and method, which may account for its length. It is probably some combination of an historical or literary work and a political missive. At different times, the purpose seems to be any of the following: to prove Kuyper's contemporary relevance; to build a case for viewing Kuyper as a poet; to show how Kuyper viewed America; to show where Kuyper's thought fits or doesn't fit within the American religious and political scene; to provide a detailed commentary on the role of various Christians in the culture war in America. Perhaps the underlying theme that appears most often is Bolt's argument that there is a greater need than ever for Christians to be active and vocal in the public square. The particular angle he takes is to come to the defense of American Christian conservatives against attempts by secular opponents to silence and attack them as narrow-minded theocrats. Kuyper is inserted along the way as a figure who argues forcefully for protecting the liberty of Christians to be active political participants without being theocrats. Bolt also appeals to his and Kuyper's belief that the American experiment as originally laid out by the founding fathers had within it a very Calvinist notion of liberty, a liberty that should protect the right of Christians to speak publicly today.

Bolt's main purpose as he states it is to "show how Kuyper's thought and practice are particularly appropriate for a contemporary American evangelical public theology" (xx), but he crosses too much terrain, diverging too widely from this purpose. For example, it is not clear how the first section of the book is relevant to this purpose. In this section, Bolt reaches outside his area of expertise (by his own admission) and attempts to provide a different way of looking at Kuyper by portraying him as a poet. In doing so, Bolt spends an inordinate amount of time (eighty pages) reviewing art, rhetoric, and poetry. Dutch poets

Willem Bilderdijk and Isaac da Costa receive a good bit of his attention, all with the apparent aim of arguing that art "plays a significant political role in a nation by imaginatively providing a social vision for its citizens" (16). Bolt makes the point that Kuyper was a rhetorical, literary master capable of capturing the imagination of many people. If one is interested in studying Kuyper from a poetic or artistic point of view, or if one wants to see the connections between Kuyper's passion and imagination on the one hand and political change or the political significance of art on the other hand, then this would be useful and interesting reading. However, its relevance to an "American public theology" remains unclear. Also troubling is the fact that Bolt does not in any meaningful way substantially return to this theme of Kuyper as poet in the rest of the book.

In the next chapter, Bolt points out that religious commitment remains strong in America, defying predictions and experience with secularism elsewhere. However, Bolt seems more interested in criticizing the literature in which people have predicted continued and growing secularization throughout the world. Unfortunately, the effort to integrate Kuyperian public theology into this discussion consists of only a few pages at the end of this chapter pointing out the work and presence of some unsecularized American Christians working out a Kuyperian vision. It remains unclear how this chapter relates to the rest of the book.

In chapters three, four and five, Bolt places Kuyper's thought in comparative context by reference to figures such as Alexis de Toqueville, Jonathan Edwards, and Walter Rauschenbusch. For example, Bolt explains that he is exploring de Toqueville's thought to see linkages between the way de Toqueville viewed America and the way Kuyper did. While comparisons may be interesting, it is unclear how Bolt's stated purpose is furthered by this review of other important historical figures. Elsewhere in the book, the contextualization also goes on at great length without clear focus. In a book whose title suggests a limited scope, Bolt offers extended commentaries on disparate and disconnected figures, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Pat Robertson, Seymour Martin Lipset, James Madison, Gustavo Gutierrez, Ron Sider, Rousas J. Rushdoony, Jim Wallis, Doug Bandow, Martin Luther King Jr., Cal Thomas, Pope Leo XIII, and many, many others. Similarly, unrelated events like the Tiananmen Square massacre, the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572 or "Holland Mania" in America between 1880 and 1920 get lengthy treatment, without a clear connection to the stated purpose of the book.

The lack of focus continues with chapters six, seven, and eight, under the heading "Issues and Options in American Evangelical Public Theology Today." Chapter six is devoted to a review of libertarianism and liberationism, chapter seven to theocracy and pluralism (and to addressing the apparent theocratic nature of John Calvin's thought), and chapter eight to a variety of topics,

including evangelical-catholic alliance, civility, opting out of the culture wars, and some alleged alternatives to the traditional opposing sides of the culture wars.

Given the digressions throughout, an integrative, concluding effort toward the end of the book would have been most helpful. Instead, the concluding chapter deals with the extensive debate surrounding a book written by Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, entitled *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* Bolt, who disagrees with both, devotes virtually the entire concluding chapter to a critique of the Thomas/Dobson argument. Unfortunately, it does not provide any conclusion to the book, failing to integrate the various topics of previous chapters. He says only that American Christians should continue to take advantage of the political liberty they have. To be sure, the issues debated by Thomas and Dobson are important, and central to how Christians in the United States should think about their political involvement. The problem is that Bolt leaves it up to the reader to make the necessary connections to Kuyper and earlier arguments.

Finally, a particular idea is expressed throughout the book that may be a key to understanding it. Bolt makes frequent reference to the "genius of the American experiment" and the "ordered liberty" he describes in America (without fully defining what is meant by the phrase). He sees this "ordered liberty" as being both unique and especially interesting in the United States and also a model for the world. He says, "it seems to me beyond debate that as goes the path of American liberty, so goes the path of world freedom" (xxi). Unfortunately, this triumphalist feeling and the emphasis on "ordered liberty" in America may present difficulties to readers outside the United States who fail to see its relevance for other national historical contexts such as in India or China where freedom is experienced and is developing in different ways. Bolt is particularly addressing the relevance of

Kuyper to the American context, not the essence or universality of Kuyper's ideas in general.

More significantly, it seems that Bolt is operating with a limited view of liberty. The liberty of which he speaks is primarily a basic political liberty—the right to freely and publicly express and live out one's faith. However, comprehensive freedom entails much more than this. For many people in the world, the right to freely express one's faith in public means little when they do not enjoy the freedom to work and earn a living, basic democratic or legal rights, or the right of mobility, to name just a few other important dimensions of freedom.

A Free Church, a Holy Nation certainly has its merits. A Kuyperian approach to Christian political involvement is an attractive model for American Christians today, and there are parallels between the respective situations of Christians in the Netherlands during Kuyper's time and in the United States today. This book, like others written about Kuyper, helps us see that. For those who make it their practice to study and learn more about Kuyper, the first part of this book which portrays Kuyper as a poet-historian will be interesting. Kuyper's thoughts about the role of the United States in historical development will be interesting to others. For those concerned with the relationship between faith and politics, there is also much food for thought in this volume. However, the book will not be a useful source for those who are interested in the basic ideas of Abraham Kuyper or for those who do not have the patience for lengthy digressions and for comparisons with other historical figures and events that may place Kuyper in context. Finally, while Abraham Kuyper certainly has a useful "public theology" and while his ideas are extremely helpful in thinking through Christian political involvement in the American context, this book represents more of John Bolt's view of the American religious-political context than Abraham Kuyper's.