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An Unlikely Story: A Review of Reformed Public Theology

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An Unlikely Story: A Review of Reformed Public Theology

Abstract

"If Neo-Calvinism is to have a future, it will need to be translated into new settings, allowed to grow organically in new soils."

Posting about the book *Reformed Public Theology* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/an-unlikely-story-a-review-of-reformed-public-theology/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

An Unlikely Story: A Review of *Reformed Public Theology*

Justin Bailey

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I am an unlikely Neo-Calvinist. As a Filipino American raised in an independent Baptist church in suburban Kansas City, I was relatively insulated from formative currents of the wider Christian world. From the perspective of my childhood church, my choice to attend Moody Bible Institute was something of a gamble, not least because they used Bible versions other than our beloved KJV. Prior to attending Moody, I had never even heard of Wheaton College, much less Calvin College, and certainly not Dordt University, where I now teach.

Situated in the evangelical mainstream at Moody, I moved along the edges, spending a decade in non-denominational immigrant congregations (Filipino and Korean), where the concerns of white evangelicalism only occasionally intruded. And though I was briefly infatuated with the “young, restless, and reformed” movement, my initial exposure to Kuyper failed to resonate. I thought the Kuyperian stream of Calvinism was too ethnically specific, too Eurocentric, too Dutch; and therefore, it was not for me.

So, what changed? That is a longer story, but it is not difficult to name a powerful source of attraction. I was yearning for a more grounded and generous theology, one that resisted the sensational and attended to the ordinary. I found what I was looking for through Rich Mouw. I first encountered Rich as a writer, then as a mentor, and finally as a friend. His winsomeness won me over. Without surrendering his convictions, Rich was willing to talk to anyone, listen to anyone, learn from anyone. This posture, he maintained, was the direct implication of his Calvinist theology, one that worked out doctrines like common grace and sphere sovereignty in service of what he called principled pluralism, convicted civility, holy worldliness. If Rich represented the sort of Christianity that Neo-Calvinism could produce, it was worth my serious re-consideration.

As I have made a home in the Neo-Calvinist tradition during the last seven years, I remain keenly aware of its Dutch character. Recognizing these roots is important, both for

discerning the tradition's blessings and blind spots. But if Neo-Calvinism is to have a future, it will need to be translated into new settings, allowed to grow organically in new soils.

A new book, dedicated to Rich, shows how this translation project has already been taking place. *Reformed Public Theology*, edited by Matthew Kaemingk, contains more than 20 essays written by intellectuals, artists, and activists who have been shaped by the Kuyperian tradition. A few of the authors bear Dutch surnames, as one might expect: van der Kooi, Wolterstorff, Joustra. But other names bear witness to the tradition's increasingly global character: Rodriguez, Fujimura, Sutanto. Together, these authors—representing various nations, denominations, and vocations—testify to a faith that refuses to be private, insisting that Christian faith offers constructive contributions for the common good.

The first part of the book, for example, gathers five essays under the heading “public culture.” These chapters offer Reformed reflections on migration (Rubén Rosario Rodríguez), language diversity (James Eglinton), African decolonialism (Nico Vorster), Dutch euthanasia (Margriet and Cornelis van der Kooi), and religious pluralism (Gray Sutanto). Amidst these chapters, there are common threads: a careful mining of Scripture and tradition, constructive attention to cultural others, and creative proposals for dealing with contemporary challenges. But it is striking that—unlike Calvin or Kuyper—the authors in this section do not assume Christianity's ascendancy. And yet, believing that the world still belongs to God, they show how Neo-Calvinism leads them to welcome refugees, preserve endangered languages, learn from those on the underside of power, embrace finitude, and protect religious diversity.

In the weeks that follow, other writers at *In All Things* will offer their own reflections on other parts of the book, which considers markets, justice, aesthetics, academics, and worship. The danger with any edited volume, of course, is that in the diversity of contributions, the center becomes thin. But for my part, I found the diversity delightful. I frequently found myself nodding and saying, “Yes! This is why I resonate with this tradition.”

I remain an unlikely Neo-Calvinist. But *Reformed Public Theology* gives me hope that stories like mine could become more common.