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The Academy and Aesthetics: A Review of Reformed Public Theology

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Abstract

"Warts and all, I still find the Neo-Calvinist vision deeply compelling, and one that is worth living in, working in, and developing."

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.

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Comments

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The Academy and Aesthetics: A Review of *Reformed Public Theology*

Gayle Doornbos

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In relation to the last two reviewers of *Reformed Public Theology*, I am perhaps the most likely Neo-Calvinist. As someone with a Dutch last name, I've spent my life living in the small Dutch enclaves of North America (Rehoboth, NM; Holland, MI; Ancaster, ON; Lynden, WA, and Sioux Center, IA)—places that for most people are not even a dot on the map, but within the circles I grew up in were treated like major destinations/centers of life. I've attended Reformed institutions from grade school through grad school, and, as a pastor's kid, I've been immersed in the Neo-Calvinist waters since childhood.

While in some ways this biography could read like Paul recounting his credentials to the Philippians, in reality, it opens up the space to tell the story of my own particular relationship with the Neo-Calvinist tradition. As one raised in this tradition, I have also encountered and experienced the weaknesses and faults—its tendency towards intellectualism, the ability to get lost within parochial debates, and (at times) ethnic and theological triumphalism. My rose-colored glasses were removed long ago.¹ However, warts and all, I still find the Neo-Calvinist vision deeply compelling, and one that is worth living in, working in, and developing, especially because of its capacious vision of the Christian life. At its best, Neo-Calvinism presents a vision of people enmeshed in every aspect of creational life whose lives are formed and shaped by a vibrant and alive theological imagination.

Reformed Public Theology demonstrates what the Neo-Calvinist vision can look like at its best. In Parts 4 and 5 of the book, the reader is invited to explore Public Aesthetics (Part 4) and the Public Academy (Part 5). On the surface, Part 5 takes readers somewhat familiar with Neo-Calvinism through what may feel like familiar ground, exploring the ways in which

Christians are called to engage in the life of the mind and contribute to public discourse. However, the chapters in this section offer more than just a call to participate in intellectual discourse; they present tangible proposals from within the tradition on topics of pressing contemporary concern such as engaging on pluralistic campuses (Jenkins), understanding the task of scholarship (Wolterstorff), and how to enter into a helpful and fruitful dialogue with Critical Race Theory (Liou). Thus, rather than simply reprise a call to take the life of the mind seriously, these chapters explore what that looks like in the nitty-gritty, often contested reality of life on today's college campuses and within public discourse.

Part 4 (Public Aesthetics) invites readers into considering the “importance of aesthetics for public life.”² Of all the chapters in the book, chapters 12-15 get at aspects of life often overlooked in discussions of public engagement and theology: art (Fujimura), poetry (Smith), fashion (Covolo), and urban planning (Jacobson). They show that these are not just private goods or hobbies to engage in but part of public, creaturely life—places within which we experience delight, have our imaginations formed by our engagement with the aesthetics of creation, engage in cultural life, and love our neighbors.

In many ways, Parts 4 and 5 carry over the themes already mentioned in the previous reviews from Justin Bailey and Donald Roth. They show that Neo-Calvinism can offer insights beyond its Dutch roots, as authors draw on themes like common grace, creational order, and sphere sovereignty. However, there are two other themes present in these chapters that are worth mentioning.

The first is the celebration of the ordinary life as the place of Christian discipleship and engagement. Covolo's article on fashion is a prime example of this, showing the reality that the Neo-Calvinist tradition—despite its celebration of the life of the mind—is not, at its best, confined to an ivory tower. It is concerned with the everyday, ordinary work of life. As one of my university professors once noted, the Neo-Calvinist is the person at the table whose fingers are dirty from playing in creation all day long. This aspect of the tradition shines through Part 4.

The second is a common recognition of the fallenness of creation and the ways in which Christians are called to fight against how fashion, urban spaces, etc. can be formed in ways that are dehumanizing *and* called to unveil, show, and lament the brokenness of the world, especially through the arts. Particularly powerful in this regard is Fujimura's article that introduces the term “common curse” to go along with this discussion of “common grace.” For Fujimura, we met with others not only on the grounds of common grace but also in our shared brokenness and experience of trauma, sorrow, and suffering.³ Thus, as he explains, one of the callings of the artist is to “sympathize with and share in the suffering of those different from us” because we share life in a broken world.⁴ Similarly, Smith points out that the poet who attends to the world “must also show us the shadows.” Why? Because, as Smith points out “the world we attend to, even celebrate, is a creation groaning.”⁵ For a tradition that can get caught up in activism, seeking to bring shalom, and recognizing the goodness of God in the midst of a

fallen creation, Fujimura, Smith, and the other authors in this section remind us that it is not antithetical to the Neo-Calvinistic tradition to sit and weep, to show the shadows, and to engage in public acts of empathy with those who suffer, for we all share in the brokenness of the world.

In closing, I echo what the previous reviewers have commended about this volume's worth. This book presents a reformed vision that is striking in its depth and breadth. Furthermore, it does not tell the reader that the Neo-Calvinist tradition is useful; it shows a living tradition that has a compelling vision for our contemporary context. For this likely Neo-Calvinist, it is an exciting vision that I hope can reach those who have inhabited this tradition for a long time as well as invite others in to continue developing a rich conversation.

1. In no way is this comment made in relation to the previous two reviewers as if they are also not critical of some of Neo-Calvinism's faults.
2. Kaemingk, "Introduction," 16.
3. Fujimura, *Japanese Aesthetics and Reformed Theology*, 171.
4. Fujimura, *Japanese Aesthetics and Reformed Theology*, 171.
5. Smith, *Poetry in the Reformed Tradition*, 182.