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Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper (Book Review)

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Creation of the American Republic. He also constructs an interesting and convincing defense of the important influence of the Reformed theological tradition in the

American founding. In these pluralistic times, Hall's work is a compelling reminder that our faith can still have a significant transformative influence in the public square.

Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. ISBN 9780802866981. Reviewed by Neal DeRoo, Professor of Philosophy, Dordt College.

As a long-time advocate of Kuyperian thought and Reformed principles, Richard Mouw needs no introduction to the readers of *Pro Rege*. *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, a collection of essays that have previously appeared in various journals and edited collections between 1989 and 2010, deals with a variety of topics ranging from the finer points of the doctrines of regeneration and covenant (as applied to the question of infant baptism) to the nature of the church, the school, government, and other elements of civil society. Using explications of the thought of historical Reformed figures (including Dooyeweerd, Schilder and Kuyper) to engage with contemporary social, theological, and political issues, Mouw tries to articulate both the spirit of what it is to be Reformed and how that spirit might be able to interact with the spirits of our age. Those wanting to understand better what it means to be neo-Calvinist in today's social and cultural context should look no further.

This is a book on "public theology," not a book on engaging Christianly with popular culture. That is, the book's approach to the topic of cultural discipleship is philosophical and theological, and its interests are more socio-political than economic or entertainment-related: it deals with the theological and/or philosophical background of institutional relationships. Issues discussed are theoretical (sphere sovereignty, modal diversity, natural law, and creational ordinances) and most often suggest how the church ought to relate to something, be it its own people (for example, in the chapter on infant baptism or the one on "True Christians and the True Church") or other social institutions (e.g., day-schools, seminaries, "theological" schools, the academy). What makes this an issue of cultural discipleship is the book's dogged determination to clarify what Reformed theological and philosophical principles mean for public engagement. Because our cultural life is "animated by a spirit" (223) that is unflinchingly religious, we must use all the resources at our disposal to analyze the spirit that drives our lives—not just individually but also communally, culturally. If we do not do this, Mouw warns, we may "simply [find our] place in the larger cultural milieu—or ... [our] many places, if you wish" with no clear understanding of whether or how our place reflects God's will (231). Without trying to understand the spirit that lies at the root of our community, we risk becoming a community that is driven by a spirit that is not the one we explicitly acknowledge and may, in fact, be fundamentally at odds with that spirit. Against this outcome, Mouw tries

to clarify a distinctly Reformed approach to the topics at hand and so maintain a Reformed Christian spirit as an operative force in our cultural world.

Indeed, it is Mouw's ability to think "in the line of" Kuyper's thought—without remaining dogmatically tied to it—that is the most important element of this book. It clearly shows that Kuyperian thought is a living, rich tradition that has much to offer our contemporary world by giving us tools with which to make sense of our ever-changing world. One of the biggest merits of the book is Mouw's ability to explain how the theological and philosophical ideas of the neo-Calvinist movement pertain to particular historical and cultural settings. This explanation moves in both directions, as he examines not only how certain philosophical themes (e.g., sphere sovereignty) can help us navigate contemporary issues (say, the question of an educational voucher system), but also how certain doctrines and tenets emerge as a response to particular problems in a particular historical community and may, therefore, not apply equally well to us today (say, the notion of cultural "pillarization" in the sixth chapter). Indeed, Mouw's extensive knowledge of the history not just of Reformed thought but of Reformed communities is helpful in reminding us of the complex interweaving of theological disputes, strong personalities, and immigrant concerns that led to the vast array of different Reformed communities that exist today. (After getting married, I was somewhat surprised that my wife, who is not of Dutch or Reformed background, would keep getting these different communities confused. Was the difference between the Dutch Reformed, the Netherlands Reformed, the Free Reformed, the Christian Reformed, the Reformed, and the Canadian Reformed not obvious?).

One small addition to the book that proves to be very beneficial in this regard is the Appendix, which provides a quick reference point for the different Dutch and Dutch American church groups. I found myself quickly consulting that Appendix several times while reading the book—and I grew up in a Reformed Dutch immigrant community! I can only imagine how welcome it would be for those not raised from birth in the web of these disputes and divisions.

By showing the "clear pattern of interaction between philosophical ideas and cultural context" (230) at the heart of the intra-Reformed disputes, Mouw helps us better understand each other in the Reformed tradition (the chapters on Schilder, on the "Dutch Calvinist 'splits'" and on "Dutch Calvinist philosophical influences in North

America” were especially helpful for me in this regard). In recovering the meaning of the basics of being Reformed, he is then able to trace out, from that basis, a Reformed approach to cultural issues. This sometimes leads to surprising conclusions, such as the distinctly Reformed *rapprochement* with Anabaptist thought that he offers, in critique of many in the Reformed tradition (including his earlier self; see 111).

The book is not perfect. Organizationally, the connection between the essays is not always clear, and the overall collection is not neatly organized or thematically unified (beyond the general relation to “public theology” broadly defined). The lack of a meaningful introduction to the volume (the one that exists is a little over two pages in length, and is more of a forward or preface than a real introduction) is emblematic of this difficulty. Further,

several important passages from Kuyper, Schilder, and others are directly quoted in different chapters and, hence, get repeated multiple times over the course of the book. While not in itself problematic, this repetition does contribute to the feeling that the book is a collection of disparately published papers (which it is), rather than one coherent volume on its own.

Still, it is a testament to Richard Mouw that such a collection of essays can so poignantly drive home the importance of thinking “in the line of” Kuyper for us today. All those who fancy themselves as thinking, working, and living in that same “line” will find out more about themselves and their community by attending to the articles contained in this book. Hopefully, this will help us stay true to the Spirit we love while we engage meaningfully with our culture.

Bratt, James D., and Ronald A. Wells. *The Best of “The Reformed Journal.”* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 321 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6702-5. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, emeritus professor of English, Dordt College.

What surprises the reader who picks up this collection is the sheer brilliance of the writing. Good writing, first of all, requires good thinking, and most of the essays in this volume are models of clear thought presented in elegant prose—prose that is not stylistically flashy or gaudy with metaphor and imagery but measured and balanced. Spanning forty years, from 1951 to 1990, and covering most of the social and theological concerns of Christian Reformed people living in that time period, the essays in this collection remind us that during this time, Calvin College had a cluster of brilliant scholar-writers who were eager to give to Christian Reformed laity a Christian perspective on the important issues of the day. The list of contributors reads like a Who’s Who of CRC intellectuals: Boer, Daane, Smedes, Stob, Zylstra, Wolterstorff, DeKoster, Mouw, Timmerman, Plantinga, and many more. Not many women wrote in the *Journal*, especially in the fifties and sixties—theology and philosophy departments, and college faculties in general, being largely male conclaves.

What might surprise the younger reader of this review is that *The Reformed Journal* was read by the laity of the church. My parents and uncles and aunts—none of them college educated—had copies of *The Banner*, *Torch and Trumpet*, and *The Reformed Journal* lying on their coffee tables, and they read them, for they took seriously the concept of a “world and life view.” I don’t think this was especially unusual in the rural homes of CRC-dom in the fifties and sixties.

The pledge that the *Journal* editors made in the first issue states that “as servants of Christ and of his church, we shall endeavor in all our writing to serve the church and her communion.” You will not find many footnotes in the articles of the *Journal*, probably because of this pledge to serve the church community. The articles are

never long, and the writers use a scholarly prose intended for non-scholars—prose that is neither condescending nor pretentious yet accessible to the reader of good will. None of the essays are over four pages long—though some have been abridged to attain this brevity.

The ninety articles of this collection are organized into three chronological sections: 1951-1962, 1963-1977, 1978-1990. Within each of these “time capsules,” the essays are arranged in thematic units that are similar though not identical as we move from one time period to the next, units such as “Education,” “Religion and Society,” “On Evangelicalism,” “Politics,” “Education and the Arts,” “Church and Theology,” and “On Gender.” The essays cover many subjects, and, not surprisingly, some of the same subjects come up in every time period—“the arts,” for example, and “politics” and “education.” Some are more decade-specific: race in the sixties and gender in the eighties. Interestingly, since the *Journal* stopped publication in 1990, there is not an article—at least in this collection—about homosexuality.

Perhaps the most striking thing to me about the early articles is how relevant they are to issues of our time. Here’s Harry Boer in his essay “The Cathedral,” which uses the cathedral as both a literal manifestation and a metaphor for human appreciation for history:

It [the cathedral] says that God is the Lord of History. Therefore it cuts the never-aging rock out of the eternal hills and fashions it into an enduring structure. [. . .] In such a cathedral one never stands alone. One stands in the consciousness of communion with and indebtedness to the past, and of a stewardship to discharge in the present and transmit to the future. It is this sense of his-