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Abraham Kuyper's *Wisdom and Wonder*: Review Essay



by Jan van Vliet

As recently as three and a half years ago, on September 18, 2008, Abraham Kuyper made a 21st-century appearance in a medium close to his heart. In its “religie and filosofie” section, Amsterdam’s *Trouw* newspaper carried a substantial article, photograph included, explaining the true home of the Dutch neo-Calvinist statesman, intellectual, theologian, and village pastor. Titled “Kuyper komt

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thuis in the VS,” the article focused on the significance of the extensive collection of Kuyperiana housed in the Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. It was here that Kuyper famously delivered the Stone Lectures in 1898 and, with these lectures, formally set out a worldview which has become the foundational infrastructure of neo-Calvinism. As an interesting and serendipitous sidebar, a smaller yet prominent story on the digital release of the Koran in the Dutch language appeared beneath this article. Kuyper, the master cobelligerent—particularly in pursuit of the cause of public funding for private education—would have been pleased, recognizing that common grace facilitates cooperation between such apparently paradoxical and opposing worldviews as those behind the images represented by the reports.

Recently released, *Wisdom & Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art (W&W)* represents a highly readable translation of Kuyper’s view of common grace in the two realms of science and art. These ten chapters—five devoted to each topic—are a compilation of a series of newspaper editorials originally appearing in the weekly newspaper *De Herant* before their 1905 release in bound form as *De Gemeene Gratie in Wetenschap and Kunst* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser).¹ The work did not appear in the original 1902-04 Leiden edition of Kuyper’s extensive common grace study, but was added, appendix-style, to the last volume of subsequent printings of the three-volume project. Although

such timing and location might portray this work almost as an afterthought, *W&W* reflects a maturation of earlier thinking delivered in lectures four and five in Princeton in 1898. In his editorial comments on this work, James D. Bratt asserts that this deliberate placement underscores Kuyper's persua-

W&W represents a significant and carefully thought out advancement in Kuyper's conviction that common grace, operative in both science and art, explains both our shared humanity and our public responsibility within the context of God's preservation and superintendence of a fallen world, a world in which sin is restrained and a fallen humanity continues as benefactor of God's good gifts.

sion that both believer and unbeliever are equally capable of systematically engaging in the study of God's world on the basis of common grace, and that we must understand science more broadly to include the social sciences and what we might today call the liberal arts.² As such, therefore, *W&W* represents a significant and carefully thought out advancement in Kuyper's conviction that common grace, operative in both science and art, explains both our shared humanity and our public responsibility within the context of God's preservation and superintendence of a fallen world, a world in which sin is restrained and a fallen humanity continues as benefactor of God's good gifts. As image bearers of God, all humanity, first, can think God's thoughts after him—engage in systematic study in search of truth—and second, is endowed

to a greater or lesser degree with gifts that reflect divine creativity in the creation and enjoyment of art (broadly understood as the "arts"). "Wherever knowledge is advancing and the arts are flourishing," claims Richard J. Mouw, "common grace is at work."³

In the introduction to his translated work, Kloosterman makes a necessary clarification regarding Kuyper's nomenclature, particularly the Dutch word "*wetenschap*," generally translated "science." Kuyper intends the meaning to encompass the entire study of all that which reflects God's divine workmanship in the created order. Thus, for example, the humanities and social sciences are every bit as "scientific" as physics. In this sense, "*Wisdom*" is much more a work on epistemology or higher learning in general than a work on science as typically understood. It is telling that the biblical passages that introduce each article are drawn from the Old Testament wisdom literature and the New Testament texts on wisdom and knowledge.

Kuyper opens his work by asserting the independent nature of science. Contrary to the secularist view that science, or wisdom, is autonomous because religiously neutral, Kuyper argues that science has an autonomous existence because it was brought into being by God's divine thinking and actualized and preserved in his creative activity through the eternal Word (Christ, the *Logos*). It is thus inherent in the created order, predating the fallen world (in contrast to, say, the church, which was brought into existence as part of the divine remedy). Its being inherent in the created order places science in the domain of common grace, in contradistinction to a grace that is "particular" or "special." By virtue of the *imago dei*, humanity is equipped to reflect that divine thinking and engage in scientific exploration. The variety of talents and gifts among God's created humanity across both time and space establishes the creation mandate as a communal and progressive activity (36-45). In fact, both the immensity of creation and the immeasurable depth of God's thoughts *require* this pluriformity—just as the kingdom of God is variegated and pluriform—and thus demand the communal effort of all humanity as constructive re-interpreters in thinking God's thoughts after him. This emphasis on community demonstrates

the universal application and non-random endowment of common grace in the mastery of science (wisdom). However, as Kuyper insists, it is only in the kingdom of glory, finally, that this mastery will come to full bloom, that the grand design of the Artisan will be revealed. Indeed, only when the “entire temple” is completed will the “full splendor of its architecture” be displayed (44). For Kuyper, therefore, the entire exercise of all higher learning is teleologically oriented; it is purposive; it is non-random; it follows a pre-ordained plan grounded in God’s decree.

In chapter 2 Kuyper reminds us that the noetic effects of sin have seriously disrupted this epistemological project, causing a rift between true and false knowledge/science and simultaneously explaining humanity’s inability to detect the difference. The antithesis reigns here as well. At the same time, common grace gives unbelievers some access to true knowledge—just think of the near-encyclopedic “treasury of knowledge” (53) compiled by unbelieving philosophers and scientists, ancient and modern. So even though scientific investigation proceeds from presuppositional principles and pre-theoretical premises and philosophies, common grace mediates to all humanity a previously-held (pre-fall) innate and immediate knowledge. Yes, sin impedes but does not totally obstruct our seeing. Apart from common grace, the decay of knowledge/science would have become absolute. We have access to universal truth, even if this knowledge is only partial and incomplete.

What remains beyond the grasp of the unregenerate, explains Kuyper in chapter 3, is the true origin, unity/coherence, and destiny of scientific and epistemological endeavor because the unbeliever lacks the spiritual reflection (a higher science) required to inquire into, comprehend, and explain these matters. Even while exercising logic and rationality (hearing, seeing, measuring, weighing—the lower sciences), the unbeliever fails to grasp the “true context” and to systematically integrate and evaluate all things in this tri-dimensional way. Indeed, particularly because all investigation has truth as goal, all investigation is, by definition, spiritual. The unbeliever’s blindness, then, causes “universal validity”—unanimous agreement—to be mistaken for truth and can explain the abuse of

the very gifts of common grace that were given to enrich us (78).

Related to the idea of “universal validity” is that of “neutrality, a topic Kuyper repeatedly returns to in chapters 3-5. He emphasizes its delusional nature despite the various claims to neutrality based on the perceived objectivity of science. Kuyper denies neutrality any legitimacy in the “higher” or “spiritual” sciences, although he does acknowledge areas of study where “subjective differences” exist and do not matter. These are the lower sciences that “circumvent the antithesis” (78, 92-93). In the pursuit of truth, neutrality is fiction, and scientific investigation—epistemological endeavor, the search for biblical wisdom—cannot be freed from subjectivity. Since the unbeliever’s point of departure is the spirit of the world, and even though unbelievers and believers can cooperate in scientific endeavor, “they cannot labor together in building a temple of science” (92). We cannot conduct true science—grasp its origin, its coherence, and its destiny—with those disabled from spiritual reflection.

Kuyper concludes Part I by explaining that because the academy is such an essential cultural gatekeeper, it is paramount that Christians be involved in higher education. As recipients of special (particular) grace, Christians have been “placed by God amid the life of common grace” and must be active in the divinely appointed task of illuminating the “arena of science” with this “higher light [scripture].”²⁴ The distinction Kuyper makes between the higher and lower sciences is, by now, well known. This distinction was not explicitly made in his fourth lecture at Princeton, yet it is this very distinction that has come under considerable criticism. Or perhaps it might be better said that the pre-suppositional framework underlying this distinction has undergone some transition between 1898 and 1905.

In the final proposition of his fourth Stone lecture (“Calvinism and Science”), Kuyper laid out, at great length, the foundational claim that “every science in a certain degree starts from faith. . . . Every science presupposes faith” of some sort. The cosmos is perceived as either “normal” or “abnormal” and requiring regenerating power to bring it to its goal. The unbeliever represents the

former group, the believer the latter: “This, and no other, is the principal antithesis, which separates the thinking minds in the domain of Science [knowledge/wisdom] into two opposite battle-arrays.” The normalists, extreme evolutionists (*evolution in infinitum*), “refuse to reckon with other than natural data” and have a misplaced faith (in self, in logic, in laws, etc.), confusing popular opinion with truth in their search for the ideal norm in natural phenomena. They see no beginning and no end. The abnormalists, in contrast, recognize the entire biblical narrative and work towards the restoration of original righteousness, finding their ideal norm in the Triune God. These two scientific systems “dispute the whole domain of life.... You have to choose either the one or the other.”⁵

In his latter reflections on common grace and science, Kuyper continues this line of thinking. In fact, Kuyper’s predication on the antithesis is key to his contention that science’s claim to impartiality falsifies the entire scientific enterprise and denies its fundamentally subjective essence. It is perplexing, therefore, that in distinguishing between the higher and lower sciences, Kuyper clearly allows for “common territory” between the believer and unbeliever. What happened to the “principal antithesis” and the “opposite battle-arrays” of the Stone Lectures? Particularly in the lower sciences, he allows for a neutral zone. Through an exhaustive review of Kuyper’s discussions of common grace and science, Cornelius Van Til has uncovered these non-trivial inconsistencies.⁶ Charging that Kuyper’s thinking bears Kantian influence, Van Til concludes the following:

[Kuyper] seems to use these distinctions [between the higher and lower sciences] for the defense of his contention that there is an area of interpretation where the difference between those who build, and those who do not build, on the fact of regeneration, need not, and cannot be made to count. ...Kuyper shows how, because of the fact of regeneration, there must be a two-fold development of science. As a reason for this, Kuyper offers the fact that regeneration does not change our senses nor the appearance of the world around us. He therefore feels justified in concluding that the whole area of the more primitive observation, which limits itself to measuring, weighing, and counting [] is common to both.⁷

Indeed, this is precisely Kuyper’s claim when he concedes the existence of “a lower kind of science that circumvents this antithesis.” But we ask, with Van Til, whether there should not be methodological dispute even in the area of the lower sciences, even in something as ostensibly simple and mundane as “measuring, weighing, and counting.” There is no area of commonness, no common territory in epistemological investigation, between “natural” and “spiritual” humanity. All is battle ground. The natural mind is decidedly not God-referent in interpretation of either the self or the universe. Thus, surrender of “any area of commonness—that is, any area of commonness without qualification, however small—is a justification for larger areas of commonness, till at last there is but one common area.”⁸ The concession of both brute fact and any creature-referent epistemology

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at any level of scientific endeavor (no matter how “high” or “low” this science) results, ultimately, in irrationalism and a re-pristination of a Thomistic-style nature-grace dichotomy.

How do we get around this contradiction? To repeat, if differentiation between believer and unbeliever is true and complete, how can there be *any* common area? Does not the metaphysical assertion of non-neutrality require denial of the existence of any common area, no matter how slight, between believer and unbeliever? If neutrality is negation, then even one iota of neutrality constitutes negation and denial of God.

Van Til maintains that the common metaphysical consciousness of all humanity as image bearer represents the *only* “point of contact” between believer and unbeliever.⁹ Perhaps this commonness allows for “qualified” or “conditional” epistemological cooperation in the field of scientific investigation, as if the believer and unbeliever can occupy common ground. This *as if* type of cooperation

appears superior to Kuyper's explicit concession of epistemological common ground. Ultimately, one has to adjudicate between positions. Which position does less violence to the entire architecture intertwining both common grace and the antithesis? It may be best to propose that *all* investigation proceeds at high levels of epistemological self-consciousness, even measuring, weighing, and counting. Such predication goes furthest in bridging the ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent in subscribing both to common grace and metaphysical antithesis.¹⁰

Part II of *Wisdom & Wonder* elaborates earlier discussions of the relationship between common grace and art, found in the fifth of Kuyper's Stone Lectures. By "art," Kuyper means humanity's capacity, as image bearer of God, to both create and delight in something beautiful. In fact, such artistic expression and appreciation is "no separate function of the soul but an unbroken [continuous] utterance of the image of God."¹¹ Kuyper's focus on art (or, more generally, the "arts" as we understand the term today) was to serve as a reminder of its divine origins, to establish its legitimate place in modern society, to rehabilitate it from its natural inclination to sensuousness, and to show common grace as the medium by which the divine Artisan transmitted both beauty and its appreciation to a fallen humanity. Art is itself part of the creation but "owes its flourishing" to common grace (148). Artistic endeavor is not hostile to the Reformed faith, as many detractors of Calvinism portray it; neither should it be condemned, as is the tendency in certain pockets of the Reformed community itself (108). Further, in a society succumbing to the tide of materialism and secularism, the democratization and popularization of art in Dutch society, since at least its seventeenth-century Golden Age, had been rapid. If art was going to have universal appeal, it had to be understood as a gift of common grace, and, as such, to be elevated above the exclusively material. Art has a religious orientation; any appreciation for the arts that fails to take this religious orientation into account, Kuyper met with considerable ambivalence.¹²

Kuyper begins his rehabilitation of the place of the arts in the Christian life, in chapter 6, by illustrating that the biblical movement from shadow

to real, from prophetic to fulfillment, is demonstrated most clearly in artistic form—i.e., by symbol—from Old Testament type to New Testament anti-type. With believers' fulfillment in Christ, their need of the symbolic element "receded." We no longer worship via symbol; our praise is in spirit and truth. As our worship is in spirit and truth, this severance of worship from the necessity of symbolic elements gives art an independent existence, an independence achieved at the coming of Christ but fully recognized only at the Reformation, when it was freed from its bondage to the (medieval, Roman Catholic) Church and entered the realm of common grace. Art's role in worship is now rightfully subservient (111-120).

Even when the sensuous propensities of art are obvious, we are not compelled to condemn art and retreat into asceticism. There are plenty of biblical instances of beauty and our legitimate recognition of and attraction to it. Indeed, the reality of beauty as something beyond earthly reality, description, and perception is embraced in the phrase "kingdom of glory," which has reference to a "more exalted beauty" (129). Beauty belongs to the eternal nature of things; it is a defining characteristic of divine glory. It is "the Spirit radiating through what appears before our eyes" and will even surpass the original, untarnished beauty of Paradise (since Adam "was not created in his consummated situation") (132). As Kuyper explains in chapters 7 and 8, our present, post-fall existence is one located between the "marred beauty" of Paradise lost and the consummated beauty of the coming kingdom of glory. It is only due to generous sprinklings of common grace that beauty has been rescued from "consummate ugliness" (*voltoorde afzichtelijkheid*) and that art flourishes. Thus, both beauty itself and our sense of it are preserved, and art serves as a bridge to the kingdom of glory—reached on "the other side of the grave"—where its full beauty, richness, and nobility will be manifest (133-47).

Artistic acumen, explains Kuyper, through chapters 8 and 9, expresses the degree to which some humans are endowed with this aspect of God's creative capacity; in fact, human art is world-enriching, an "adumbration of God's ability" (149). It is a "life expression" (*levensuiting*) of the divine by his image-bearers and represents "prophetic glim-

merings” of the coming kingdom of glory (151-55). Unfortunately because of sin, these glimmerings are marred by the “evil of artistic genius,” by art’s sensuousness, since often art conducts itself as if above the laws of modesty and morality. Art often comes under the “tyranny of popular sovereignty,” and purveyors of art—“priests” (*priesters*) of art—have an intercessory responsibility to rescue it from the clutches of this tyranny with insights given by God’s grace (162-66). Kuyper argues that this rescue does not mean iconoclasm, because art is a gift of common grace and, as such, not only resists destruction but should be practiced in the service of God (166-67), the topic of chapter 9. Yes, the kingdom of glory is elusive; two competing sets of spirits compete for our allegiance. Yes, as believers we currently have dual citizenship, as it were, inhabiting both the world of the profane and the world of the sacred. Yet we should be in

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pursuit of beauty, amidst the confusion of the opposing and irreconcilable forces of the spirit of the world and the spirit of the divine. Until we overcome this artificial yet dominating sacred/profane dichotomy, our art will come short of the glory of God. Kuyper closes with the reminder that true art knows no such distinction and is dominated by the spirit of Christ.

This much-needed reminder to detractors of art both within and without the Reformed community at the turn of the twentieth century is relevant even today. There continue to be those who condemn all forms of art as needless at best and unbiblical idolatry at worst. Kuyper’s demonstration of the biblical provenance of art—its grounding in the creative capacities of the universe’s Artisan, its concomitant part in humanity’s image-bearing capacity, its significance in culture and in

the life of the forward-looking believer, and its subservient place in worship even while we await the fully-consummated kingdom of glory in all its unparalleled beauty—is more than just instructive for today; it is much-needed.

Kuyper’s provocatively speculative forays are well known and are considered a common trademark. Was he hyperbolic in his claims? Was he “fair” to his intellectual, religious, and political sparring partners? Was his intellect opaque at best and entirely incomprehensible at worst, particularly to his opponents?¹³ Was his faith in progress, technology, and science overstated and overly optimistic? Further, we could pose the hypothetical, if somewhat trendy, question of whether Kuyper was a “modern” or a “postmodern” man.¹⁴ Can we—perhaps better to ask, should we—resolve the numerous internal tensions surfacing throughout the complexity of his thought?

The entire body of critical literature created over the past century makes such assessment rather banal. Kuyper—and his perspective—was of the turn of the 20th century and was thus subject to his personal, social, ecclesiastical, and historical context; we would be disingenuous to judge him by contemporary standards, and we need to look beyond regular appearances of personal bias and common cultural prejudices. But we might find it helpful to provide a brief example of such a perspective from his thoughts on art.

Kuyper identifies three levels of reality—three stages or situations—in humanity’s “ascent to glory,” each phase of which has a corresponding level of beauty. These are the situations of paradise and its higher beauty, perfect glory and its consummated beauty, and the “in-between” situation with its marred beauty. In the latter we have our earthly habitation, but in that “mundane” marred beauty—characterized by the ugly and the ordinary—we are given glimpses of both paradisaical beauty and consummated beauty because “the activity of common grace swings restlessly back and forth” between these perceptions of the natural world (134). Drawing on what he considers to be humanity’s common aesthetic sense, Kuyper illustrates thus: “A lion is beautiful; a calf is ordinary; a rat is ugly. . . . The Arab attracts with his beautiful form, we Dutch are rather ordinary in appearance,

while some primitive tribesmen arouse a sense of aversion” (133). Although such imagination does no injury to the argument, the reader is reminded of the subjective nature of beauty and taste—aesthetics—despite the existence of objective beauty and its governance by an “objective and impartial standard.”¹⁵

A more problematic tension arises in Kuyper’s foundational apparatus. His exposition of the relationship between common grace and science is constructed upon an elaborate presuppositional foundation. Yet this foundation is entirely absent in his portrayal of the domain of art and surely raises questions about the internal coherence of his worldview. If the starting point for science is the human consciousness—either regenerate or unregenerate—why is the starting point for the arts grounded in the art of ancient Greece? Should all subsequent artistic endeavor be held to the standard of ancient Greece? Can it be maintained that the eternal laws for art, which lend it its legitimacy and authenticity as true art, are found there? This methodological inconsistency boasts no cogent intellectual, cultural, or historical explanation.¹⁶ Can the difficulty be explained by the ambiguity inherent in holding to the doctrines of both common grace and the antithesis, and by the attempt to inhabit that murky area that Christian thinkers must occupy if fully subscribed to the internal coherence of worldview thought?

Regardless of these tensions, Kuyper’s timeless reminders of the religious orientation and structure of both science and art, indeed of all human endeavor, should at the very least nudge us a little further in pursuing that worldview that Kuyper so passionately and elaborately laid out for us and that requires little adjustment for 21st-century life.

Finally, Nelson Kloosterman’s excellent translation of *Wisdom & Wonder*, with its valuable preface, introduction, and foreword, navigates well the complex labyrinth of Abraham Kuyper’s thought and expression. There is much to consider in such an effort, and options for faithful translation of both original language and thought are often limited and difficult. Despite a few quibbles we might have with word choice and turn of phrase, we have much confidence in the labors of the current translation effort and high anticipation that this addi-

tion to Kuyperiana will deliver only more of the same challenge from this “colossal man” (*reusachtige man*). Of the entire English language harvest of the current three-volume Common Grace project, Kloosterman’s contribution is surely a tantalizing foretaste.¹⁷

Endnotes

1. James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 165, 442; cf. Clifford Blake Anderson, “A Canopy of Grace: Common and Particular Grace in Abraham Kuyper’s Theology of Science,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 24 (1) (2003), 125.
2. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 441.
3. Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 68.
4. *Wisdom & Wonder*, 101-03, and intimated in “Calvinism and Science,” *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 138-41.
5. “Calvinism and Science,” 130-34.
6. See Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 14-18, 34-44. Van Til refers to Kuyper’s *Gemeene Gratie*, vols. 1 and 2 and his *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (3 vols; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 2.52-2.132.
7. Van Til, *Common Grace*, 41-42.
8. Van Til, *Common Grace*, 43.
9. And thus, for Van Til—the consummate presuppositional apologist—the only biblical warrant for apologetic endeavor.
10. For an extended discussion of these matters and a paradigmatic re-interpretation and re-construction of the doctrine of common grace as “temporal” (Van Til) rather than “spatial” (Kuyper) see my “From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til’s Doctrine of Common Grace,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 61 (1999), 73-100.
11. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 142, note.
12. As has already been noted by, for example, Peter S. Heslam in his *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 198-201.
13. Observations nicely summarized by J. de Bruijn, *Kuyper in Beeld* (Dordrecht: Uitgave Stichting Monument, Abraham Kuyper, 2006), 3.
14. Both yes and no.

15. And should today's neo-Kuyperians include the realm of competitive sports in the sphere of art?
16. Although Heslam makes an admirable effort in *Creating a Christian Worldview*, 215-17.
17. The translation project plans to publish a complete translation of Abraham Kuyper's three-volume work on common grace, totaling over 1,700 pages. Volume one is scheduled to appear in fall 2012. As Kloosterman points out in his preface, common grace and science had already been partially translated.