

A Canopy of Grace: Common and Particular Grace in Abraham Kuyper's Theology of Science

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I. INTRODUCTION

In his chapter on "Calvinism and Science" in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Abraham Kuyper maintained a delicate balance between the doctrine of common grace and the concept of the antithesis. On the one hand, Kuyper argued that the doctrine of common grace permits Calvinists freely to recognize and to appropriate the scientific achievements of non-Christians. The doctrine of common grace prompts Calvinists to seek God not only in Scripture but also in "nature and its wondrous character, in the production of human industry, in the life of mankind, in sociology and in the history of the human race."¹ Common grace breaks down the barrier between Christian and non-Christian in the sciences, legitimizing the contribution of "secular studies" to the formation of the Calvinist mind.² On the other, Kuyper described a "principal conflict" between "two scientific systems" that he titled the "normalist" and the "abnormalist."³ Whereas the normalist conforms the spiritual to the framework of the natural sciences the abnormalist interprets the data of natural science within the framework of divine revelation. An absolute antithesis divides normalist and abnormalist sciences. "The *normal* and the *abnormal* are two absolutely differing starting-points, which have nothing in common in their origin. Parallel lines never intersect."⁴ The antithesis between normalist and abnormalist arises because of the influence of particular grace; the mind of the normalist is unregenerate whereas the mind of the abnormalist has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit.⁵ Famously, Kuyper asserted that the antithesis between normalist and abnormalist ran so deep that it demanded the establishment of distinct universities, founded upon distinctive principles, in which normalist and abnormalist researchers

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 125.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, 126.

³ *Ibid.*, 131ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 136ff.

could pursue scientific research according to their preferred paradigm. In short, Kuyper called attention both to the work of common grace in science and to the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian science. His simultaneous commitment to the work of both common and particular grace in the sciences required Kuyper to balance his desire to break down the walls dividing Christians and non-Christians against his desire to build them back up again.

Commentators have long noted internal tensions in Kuyper's theology of science. In a 1939 article titled "Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer," Herman Dooyeweerd called attention to a fundamental tension between what he termed the "Calvinistic" and the "scholastic" lines of thought in Kuyper's theology of science.⁶ Dooyeweerd traced the "Calvinistic" line to Kuyper's doctrine of the antithesis; he traced the "scholastic" line to Kuyper's acceptance of the "metaphysical logos doctrine," that is, the theological speculation that the world bears within itself the imprint of the divine logos through which it was created.⁷ Dooyeweerd argued that these lines of thought stood in irreconcilable conflict. "The truth is that both lines of thought in Kuyper's scientific work are demonstrably in contradiction with one another and that an internal reconciliation must therefore be considered impossible, since they go back to completely mutually exclusive points of departure."⁸ Granted, Dooyeweerd did not oppose particular to common grace in this article. He freely admitted that truth emerges on the other side of the antithesis. "The philosophy of the law-idea [*de wijsbegeerte der wetsidee*] has never defended the notion that important elements of truth cannot shelter in philosophy that has not sprouted from Christian roots [*Christelijken levenswortel*]."⁹ Still, by rooting out the "scholastic" line from his theology of science, Dooyeweerd was undermining a key pillar of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace, namely, the belief that Christians and non-Christians could both progress in the natural sciences because God created their minds in harmony with the natural world.

I sympathize with Dooyeweerd's assertion that the tensions internal to Kuyper's theology of science cannot be harmonized into a single coherent account. The richness and abundance of ideas in Kuyper's theology resists systematization. And, of course, not every concept that Kuyper took up and explored in his theology is edifying or worth retaining. Contemporary theo-

⁶ Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Wetenschapsleer," *Philosophia Reformata* 4(1939): 193-232.

⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 219.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196f. My translation.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 200. My translation.

logians must exercise a greater than standard degree of interpretative vigilance when analyzing Kuyper precisely because of his capacity to absorb so many divergent strands of the broader intellectual and cultural tradition into his theology. But I think that even if we accept Dooyeweerd's criticisms of the "scholastic" strand in Kuyper, the most important aspects of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace in the sciences can still be salvaged. Moreover, I think a revised version of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace can be made compatible with his concept of the antithesis, although I also think that those two sides of Kuyper's theology will always stand in some tension. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate how the tension between common and particular grace in Kuyper's theology of science can be rendered creative rather than contradictory through his christology.

II. KUYPER'S DOCTRINE OF COMMON GRACE

The best way to grasp the significance Kuyper attached to the doctrine of common grace is to consider its function in the development of his theology as a whole. In the second of his two volume study of Abraham Kuyper and the *Vrije Universiteit*, J. Stellingwerff produces an illuminating periodization of Kuyper's theology that helps to clarify the development of his concept of common grace and of the antithesis.¹⁰ Stellingwerff divides Kuyper's works into four periods: "The first period ran from his conversion at Beesd to the death of Groen van Prinsterer (1863-1876), the second until after the Doleantie (1876-1887), the third from the lecture *Twofold Fatherland* to the end of Kuyper's prime ministership (1887-1905) and the last to Kuyper's death (1905-1920)."¹¹ In each period, Stellingwerff contends, Kuyper regarded and appropriated his Calvinist inheritance from a different theological perspective. The struggle to renew the spirit of Calvinism in The Netherlands dominated the first period of Kuyper's activity. From his call to the ministry in 1863 to his encounter with the conventicle led by Pietje Baas and his conversion to Reformed orthodoxy during his pastorate in Beesd (1864-1867), from his forays into journalism in *De Heraut* and *De Standaard* to his entry into politics in 1874, Kuyper waged internal and external battles for Reformed orthodoxy. This period ended with the death of Groen van Prinsterer—Kuyper's political mentor—and Kuyper's nervous breakdown in February 1876.¹² In his second period, Kuyper dedicated himself to forming

¹⁰ J. Stellingwerff, *De Vrije Universiteit na Kuyper* (Kampen: Kok, 1987).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44. My translation.

¹² On the reasons for his breakdown, cf. Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 40-42.

institutions based on distinctively Reformed principles. The constitution of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1879, the founding of the *Vrije Universiteit* in 1880, and the break with the state church in 1886 all took place during this second period of Kuyper's activity. "Theologically, this period was characterized by the motif of the antithesis," Stellingwerff remarks, "such as found in the books *That Grace Is Particular* and *The Work of the Holy Spirit*."¹³ In the third period, Kuyper modulated his emphasis on the antithesis by focusing on the concept of common grace. With his return to active political life in 1894, which culminated in his term as *Minister-President* from 1901-1905, Kuyper developed a theology that encouraged Christian participation in the various spheres of common life such as politics, society, the arts, and the sciences. "Kuyper's major works came into being during this period: *E Voto* (1886-1895), the *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (1893-1894), *The Lectures on Calvinism* (1899) and *Common Grace* (1895-1905)."¹⁴ The concluding period of his activity found Kuyper acting as elder leader both to his colleagues in the Anti-Revolutionary Party and the *Vrije Universiteit* and to the so-called *Kleyne Luyden* who read his political and theological articles from week to week in *De Standaard* and *De Heraut*. "In his last period, Kuyper sought once more to express his synthesis between particular grace and common grace from the perspective of Christ's royal office."¹⁵ Major works from this final period include *Pro Rege or the Kingship of Christ* (1911-1912) and *Anti-Revolutionary Political Theory* (1916-1917).

Kuyper first published his reflections on common grace as a weekly column that appeared in *De Heraut* from September 1895 to July 1901.¹⁶ The opening chapter of *Common Grace* supports Stellingwerff's contention that Kuyper was seeking to modulate his earlier concentration on the antithesis between the regenerate and non-regenerate. Kuyper acknowledged that his primary concerns in *De Heraut* theretofore had been the defense of the particularity of grace and the elucidation of the covenant of salvation.¹⁷ While not denying these antithetical forms of grace, he now asked his readers to consider a third form: common grace. As opposed to particular grace and federal grace, "General grace is, with differences of degree, the portion of *all* human beings, including those who have wandered furthest away, who are completely burned up in their consciences and eternally lost."¹⁸ Kuyper

¹³ Stellingwerff, 45. My translation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45f. My translation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46. My translation.

¹⁶ Cf. James Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 165.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* (Kampen: Kok, 1931), 1:5ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:9. My translation.

appealed to common grace alongside particular and federal grace because he saw a danger latent in his appeals to the antithesis.¹⁹ Specifically, he saw that any exclusive emphasis on the particularity of grace denies the inherent value of culture and institutions. Kuyper argued that the elimination of common grace reduces theology to soteriology, which considers all institutions as instrumental to the singular value of salvation.²⁰ He quipped about the pietist who reasoned "that his father and mother, who were not among the elect, had lived only in order to bring him, the elect, into the world."²¹ Only by recognizing God's gracious work among all human beings—the regenerate and the unregenerate alike—can the soteriological reduction of theology be avoided. Kuyper contended that God created the world for his own glory and not for the salvation of sinners alone; God magnifies his glory not only by saving sinners, but by bringing the values latent in creation to full flower.

This standpoint provides space and place for *Gratia communis*. Only then can the root be exposed from which all the human arts and sciences in the fields of literature, medicine, law and natural science loom up. And so it becomes clear how there can be something of importance in the world for God apart from the elect.²²

Kuyper wrote his articles on common grace in *De Heraut* as an apology for his Reformed followers to leave the bulwarks he built up during the phase of the "antithesis" and to engage the common spheres of life for the glory of God.

The development of the concept of common grace was among Kuyper's especial contributions to Reformed theology. Though cognizant that the concept derived from remarks of John Calvin, Kuyper noted that Calvin left that concept underdeveloped. He pointed to *Institutes* II.3.3 as among the clearest expressions of what Calvin understood by "common grace."²³ In that section, Calvin argued that the virtues of non-Christians did not imply that the corruption of fallen humanity was only partial, but rather that God restrained the corruption of fallen humanity by grace. "But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God's

¹⁹ Kuyper attributed to "Methodism" the error of celebrating particular grace to the detriment of common grace. Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek: Locus de Magistratu, Consummatione Saeculi* (Kampen: Kok, 1910), 5:23ff. No doubt that Kuyper's personal experience with revivalism, which contributed to his nervous breakdown in 1876, stands in the background of his criticisms of "Methodism." Cf. Heslam, 40ff.

²⁰ Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 5:23ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5:23. My translation.

²² *Ibid.*, 5:24. My translation.

²³ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 1:10.

grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly."²⁴ Elsewhere in the *Institutes*, Calvin spoke of a grace that not only restrains, but also prompts non-Christians to do good works. Referring in all probability to the philosophers of Greece and Rome, he counseled: "But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance" (II.2.16).²⁵ Abraham Kuyper appropriated both the negative and positive dimensions of Calvin's remarks and elaborated them beyond anything Calvin would have recognized. As Cornelius van der Kooi points out, the question whether Kuyper's appeal to Calvin is legitimate depends on the hermeneutical principles with which Calvin is interpreted; according to Kuyper, the task of the Reformed theologian is not so much to repeat Calvin as to bring his thought to fruition.²⁶ In any case, Kuyper recognized that the paucity of remarks on common grace left behind by Calvin meant that he would have to be more constructive here than elsewhere: "No other option remains to us except to pave our own way this time. . . ."²⁷

A danger inherent to the doctrine of common grace is its tendency to identify human achievement with divine ordination. Such an identification threatens to undermine the eschatological judgment of God against human culture. As van der Kooi remarks, "there has been no current in Dutch Protestant theology which has been so severely criticized for having neglected the eschatological reservation as the neo-Calvinist movement."²⁸ Kuyper flourished in the period before the First World War and many contemporary readers find his remarks on the promise of science and technology overly optimistic.

The unbridled optimism regarding the riches of Western civilization has subsided. In the light of the questions that technical and medical capacities have laid before us, more than ever we have reason to think again about the vulnerability of human individuals and their humanity, and not embrace every advance or enlargement of medical and industrial potential as desirable, or even necessary.²⁹

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20, ed. John McNeill, tr. Ford Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 292.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

²⁶ Cf. Cornelius van der Kooi, "A Theology of Culture. A Critical Appraisal of Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace" in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of his Life and Work*, ed. Cornelius van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 96f.

²⁷ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 1:9. My translation.

²⁸ Van der Kooi, 96.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

There is no doubt that Kuyper shared in the cultural expectations of his time. More harmful than the stimulus the doctrine of common grace gave to Kuyper's optimism about the cultural possibilities of technical and medical progress was his use of that doctrine to bolster his cultural prejudices. There is a palpable tendency in Kuyper's reflections on common grace to garner divine sanction for cultural ideology. For example, Kuyper bolstered his contemporary historiographical prejudices, particularly his subscription to what Peter Heslam calls the myth of the "heliotropic" development of culture, by way of the doctrine of common grace.³⁰

Clearly, any cultural prejudices imported into Kuyper's theology should be subjected to stringent criticism. But does such stringency also require the expurgation of the doctrine of common grace itself from his theology? Here we must be careful. The doctrine of common grace does perhaps facilitate the theological justification of existing cultural prejudices. But that doctrine also opens a theological channel to voices outside the Christian antithesis. Recall that a primary positive function of the doctrine of common grace is to provide a rationale for Christians to learn from non-Christians. In the case of cultural prejudice, the doctrine of common grace, applied consistently, should prompt Christians to look for divine activity in all non-Christian cultures. Perhaps a vigorous doctrine of common grace would even open Christians to listen for divine judgment being spoken against them by non-Christians.

In summary, Kuyper's doctrine of common grace provides a theological ballast to particular grace. On the one hand, the doctrine prevents Christians from falling prey to a one-sided emphasis on salvation by ascribing inherent value to the so-called "secular" spheres of life such as the family, the state and the sciences. On the other, it provides a theological explanation for the obvious ethical, cultural, political, scientific and technological developments that Christians discover among the non-regenerate. In short, the doctrine of common grace supplies a theological rationale for Christians to enter into mutual dialogue with the "secular" world. But the conduit the doctrine of common grace opens to the secular world can also become the means by which cultural prejudices are imported into theology.

III. COMMON GRACE IN SCIENCE

Kuyper articulated his theology of science in many different works. Among his most mature expositions, however, was his *Common Grace in Science and*

³⁰ Cf. Heslam, 78f.

*Art.*³¹ Although Kuyper eventually incorporated it into his major three-volume work on *Common Grace*, the treatise was first published in 1905, several years subsequent to the original edition of the series.³² This treatise makes clear that he continued to wrestle with key issues in his theology of science even after the publication of the *Encyclopedia* (1893-1894) and the *Lectures on Calvinism* (1898). In particular, the five part series on science in *Common Grace in Science and Art* demonstrates his continuing ambivalence about the precise relationship between common and particular grace in the scientific sphere.

Kuyper opened *Common Grace in Science and Art* with the claim that science belongs to the order of creation, not to the order of redemption.³³ His argument for common grace in the sciences depended on the theological distinction between the orders of creation, which include, for example, the family, and orders that came about as a consequence of the fall and redemption, such as the state and the church. Kuyper defended the independence of the sciences from the church and the state on the basis of this distinction.³⁴ Reverting once again to an organic metaphor, Kuyper argued that although science had historically developed under the protection of both church and state, it was nevertheless not an offshoot of either, but possessed an independent root in creation.

Science is not a branch sprouting out from the stem of political service and even less a branch sprouting from the root of the church. Science possesses its own root, from which it springs, and from the stem, which rises from its particular root, it must put forth its branches and produce its fruit.³⁵

Kuyper explained the historical relation of the sciences to church and state by comparing science to a weak sprig that needed external support to grow to maturation.³⁶ The separation of the sciences from the church and the state takes place when the tree of science has grown into maturity and no longer requires their support. In any case, the full flowering of God's purposes required the differentiation of the spheres of the sciences, the church and the state. Science has "received an independent calling from the Creator" that it

³¹ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 3:485-572. There is a partial translation in Bratt, 441-460.

³² Cf. James Bratt's textual explanation in Bratt, 442.

³³ Cf. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 3:488.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:487ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:488. My translation.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

would have had to fulfill apart from the drama of sin and grace and the divine ordinances that arose as a result of that drama.³⁷

The "scholastic" strand of the doctrine of common grace emerged prominently at the opening of *Common Grace in Science and Art* when Kuyper articulated his explanation for the human ability to comprehend the universe scientifically. In working out his proposal, Kuyper linked the concepts of the divine decree and the *imago dei* against the background of what may be termed a Christian Platonism.³⁸ Since everything that has been created can be "considered only as the issuance of that thinking of God," Kuyper reasoned, "God's thinking must be enclosed within all created things."³⁹ He then argued that though not all creatures can read the thoughts of God contained in the created world—a fish lives in water but cannot understand its composition or qualities⁴⁰—human beings can read the divine thoughts in creation because God created them in his image. Humanity has the ability to understand creation from the divine perspective—to read God's "blueprint" for creation—because God created human beings with the ability to think his thoughts after him. Kuyper emphasized that this ability derives not from particular grace, but from the "order of creation."⁴¹ He summarized his position as follows:

So then we get these three facts, which agree one with another: first, the full and rich clarity of his thoughts are in God from eternity; second, God has revealed, expressed, and embodied a rich fulness of his thoughts in the creation; and third, God created in the human being, as the bearer of his image, the capacity to understand, to grasp, to think and to put together as a whole those thoughts expressed in creation.⁴²

Kuyper concluded that "on these three things . . . rests the essence of human science."⁴³ Although this line of argument has been criticized as more speculative than biblical,⁴⁴ it should be said that Kuyper was addressing a question that still surfaces in the dialogue between theologians and scientists, namely, why should it be the case that human beings have the ability to understand the universe? If Paul Davies is correct that evolutionary biology

³⁷ Ibid., 3:488f. My translation.

³⁸ Cf. K. Veling, "Kuyper's Visie op de Wetenschap als Organisme: Kanttekeningen bij een Metafoor" in *Beziëld Verband* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1984), 285.

³⁹ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3:490. My translation.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3:491.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3:492.

⁴² Ibid. My translation.

⁴³ Ibid. My translation.

⁴⁴ Cf. Veling, 285.

cannot be expected to account for our extraordinary capacity to understand the universe scientifically,⁴⁵ then we must look elsewhere for an account. Kuyper put this quandary to apologetic ends, arguing that only the doctrine of creation provides "the sufficient ground" for "the remarkable correspondence" between the human mind and the universe.⁴⁶

Kuyper also contended that common grace counteracts the consequences of the fall both in and through science. On the one hand, common grace works *in* the sciences by tempering the effects of the fall on the human mind. Kuyper contended that the fall was devastating enough to destroy any correspondence between the human mind and the universe. Although it may seem that the darkening of human rationality brought about by the fall can be lifted only by particular grace, Kuyper held that the empirical evidence of scientific capacity among non-Christians demonstrates that common grace also mitigates against the cognitive effects of the fall.

Whoever does not take common grace into account can arrive at no other conclusion on his own than that *all* science, apart from the domain of the sacred, lives from appearance and self-deceit, and therefore must lead anyone who listens to its voice into deception. But the outcome shows that that is not how things stand.⁴⁷

Kuyper argued that only common grace can account for the dissonance between expectation and outcome. That non-Christians like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle produce science that Christians find useful can be explained only by common grace, which inhibits the effects of the fall and restores, if only in part, the ability of the human mind to grasp and understand the created world.⁴⁸ On the other hand, common grace counteracts the consequences of the fall *through* the sciences. "In the ordinance of God's common grace, science is also one of the most powerful means to combat sin as well as the error and misery that have flowed forth from sin."⁴⁹ Kuyper asserted that progress across a wide variety of scientific fields had tempered the effects of the fall by raising the standard of living, fostering social order, curing diseases, and managing natural forces.⁵⁰ Kuyper was not Panglossian about the benefits of scientific learning and technology; he acknowledged that they

⁴⁵ Cf. Paul Davies, "The Intelligibility of Nature" in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert Russell et al. (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1993), 153f.

⁴⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaëdie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (Kok: Kampen, 1909), 2:29.

⁴⁷ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 3:497. My translation.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3:497f.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3:523. My translation.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3:524.

may be misused.⁵¹ Progress in technology and the sciences represents an ambiguous channel for common grace, but he asserted that they represent a genuine channel nonetheless.

If Kuyper attributed so much to the working of common grace, what role did he reserve for particular grace in the sciences? In his fourth article on the role of common grace in science, Kuyper admitted that the Bible opposed "the science of the world" to "the true science."⁵² He attributed this distinction first and foremost to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration—that is, to particular grace. The differentiation between the regenerate and the unregenerate must come to expression not only in society and politics, but also in the sciences. "If it is thus presupposed that there are two kinds of human beings, who differ in principle in their own ego and in their internal consciousness, then the scientific investigation of both cannot go hand in hand."⁵³ The distinction between the two kinds of humanity—regenerate and unregenerate—implies the distinction between two kinds of science. But Kuyper did not think that regeneration sufficed to bring about the distinction between two kinds of science. A second primary reason for the emergence of that distinction is the clarity that special revelation brings to the sciences.⁵⁴ The special revelation of God in the biblical witness provides the regenerated scientist with data that the unregenerated scientist either does not understand or does not value. Kuyper was subtle here, however; he sought to avoid the reductionism that he associated with "Methodism" by refusing any strict identification of special revelation with particular grace. Kuyper argued that though the light of special revelation had been provided for the benefit of those who had been regenerated by particular grace, the scientific principles that special revelation illuminates belong to the sphere of common grace, not particular grace.⁵⁵ In sum, Kuyper held that the distinction between Christian and non-Christian science arises both because of the regeneration of scientists by particular grace and because of the illumination that special revelation sheds on common grace in the sciences.

How, then, did Kuyper fix the precise boundary between Christian and non-Christian science? In "Abraham Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," Del Ratzsch supplies an excellent analysis of the fuzzy border that Kuyper drew between the two kinds of science.⁵⁶ Proposing a hierarchy of the sciences,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3:525f.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3:513.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3:514. My translation.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:515f.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:516f.

⁵⁶ Del Ratzsch, "Abraham Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992):277-303.

Ratzsch argues that the division between Christian and non-Christian science widens at successive levels of that hierarchy. At the base of the hierarchy, Ratzsch locates the "exact sciences" of logical and quantitative analysis. He notes that Kuyper claimed in the *Encyclopedia* that, at this level, there is no split between Christian and non-Christian science. Ratzsch remarks, "This commonality is evidently due to common grace."⁵⁷ At the next level of the hierarchy, which he terms "natural science," Ratzsch detects a partial split. On the one hand, Kuyper maintained that Christians and non-Christians have an equal awareness of the natural law. On the other, he thought that Christians and non-Christians disagree about the origins of natural law. Disagreement emerges, Ratzsch contends, because Christians are conscious of divinely revealed facts about the origin, purpose and destiny of the world that non-Christians do not know.⁵⁸ At the third level in the hierarchy, "natural scientific theory," Ratzsch argues that the gap grows wider. Although Ratzsch wishes Kuyper had made his position clearer, he detects some allowance in Kuyper for agreement at the level of scientific theory.⁵⁹ But he contends that the dominant theme increasingly becomes the disagreement between Christian and non-Christian natural scientific theories. In large part, this split emerges because Christians and non-Christians construct scientific theories against the backdrop of radically opposed conceptions of the spiritual context of the natural sciences. The split becomes complete at the level of "broad sciences," that is, at the level of the integration of natural and human science into a comprehensive worldview.⁶⁰ Kuyper held that Christians cannot compromise with non-Christians over the validity of ultimate principles like materialism or pantheism; they must be prepared to reject such principles and develop an alternative vision of the unity of science. To sum up Ratzsch's argument in my own words, he argues that common grace prevails at the base of the scientific hierarchy and that particular grace prevails at its summit; the intermediate levels subsist at different locations on the spectrum between common and particular grace.

Ratzsch presents a plausible solution to the tension between common and particular grace in Kuyper's theology of science by locating their effects at different levels in the scientific hierarchy. Unlike Dooyeweerd, Ratzsch's exposition of Kuyper's philosophy of science by and large harmonizes the so-called "scholastic" epistemology that Kuyper put forward in the *Encyclopedia* with his concept of the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 288f.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 290f.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

science. But Ratzsch also recognizes that not everything Kuyper said about the antithesis can be harmonized so readily. He notes, for example, that Kuyper sometimes claimed that every science is "permeated" by the antithesis, which suggests that the divisions run much deeper than the higher levels of the scientific hierarchy.⁶¹ Ratzsch admits that he is "not quite sure how to reconcile these statements with Kuyper's repeated insistences of commonality. . .," adding that they "may simply represent a tension in Kuyper's position. . . ."⁶² In fact, Kuyper himself seems to have vacillated in his writings on science between the harmonizing proposal that Ratzsch puts forward and the one-sided resolution in favor of the antithesis that Dooyeweerd commended.

In an ingenious article, K. Veling exposed the extent of Kuyper's ambivalence by attending to his use of organic metaphors in his writings on science.⁶³ Kuyper frequently likened the sciences to an organism. He liked, for example, to compare the development of science to a growing tree spreading branches from its trunk.⁶⁴ Veling pointed out, however, that Kuyper did not employ the metaphor in an unambiguous manner. In his *Encyclopedia*, Kuyper portrayed science as a single tree with both fruitful and unfruitful branches. The natural branches bear no fruit. The fruitful branches have been grafted onto the tree from an unnatural stock. Veling commented, "With this figure of speech Kuyper connects his conception of the single origin of science with his conviction that there are, through regeneration, two sorts of humanity and also two sorts of science"⁶⁵ This rendering of the metaphor favors the harmonizing solution to the tension between common and particular grace. In his *Lectures on Calvinism*, by contrast, Kuyper did not claim that the sciences spring out of creation like a tree from its seed. The tree springs forth, Veling noted, from faith.⁶⁶ The change in the roots of the tree produces a radical change in the sense of the metaphor as a whole; there are now independent *trees* of science, growing from different roots. Veling summarized, "If Kuyper speaks in the *Lectures on Calvinism* about two kinds of science, then he does that not in terms of 'grafting' but rather he sees different plants, each with its own roots."⁶⁷ This rendering favors the antithesis. Dooyeweerd clearly valued Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* more than the *Encyclopedia* and, though cognizant of certain general dangers latent to the use of organic metaphors to describe the growth of the sciences, apparently

⁶¹ Ibid., 299.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Cf. K. Veling, 277-288.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 277.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 283. My translation.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 283f.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 284. My translation.

so did Veling. "Kuyper's metaphor fosters radicalness," he contended. "The antithesis between light and darkness may not be weakened to a difference in insight about certain points."⁶⁸ Strangely, Kuyper seems to have made use of both renderings of the metaphor in *Common Grace in Science and Art*, describing science as possessing its "own root" in the creation⁶⁹ but later contending that "what we need is a plant of science flourishing on a Christian root."⁷⁰

V. COMMON GRACE: A CHRISTOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

We have seen that the likening of science to an organism produced ambiguities in Kuyper's theology of science that commentators have sought to iron out. An unambiguous interpretation of Kuyper's theology of science seemingly demands a resolution that favors either common grace or the antithesis. But do not attempts to fix the precise relation between common and particular grace threaten to undermine the flexibility and functionality that the organic metaphor generates in his theology of science? Although it may be that Kuyper had simply become so attached to the metaphor of the organic that he failed to note its inadequacy to describe the relation between common and particular grace, may it not also be that Kuyper—a politician and a journalist as well as a theologian—avoided flattening out the metaphor because he appreciated its dynamism? Did Kuyper stress the interpretation favoring common grace when building bridges to the surrounding intellectual culture and the interpretation favoring the antithesis when building up Christian institutions?

I think that the creative tension between common and particular grace contributes to the continuing attraction of Abraham Kuyper's theology of science. On the one hand, Kuyper did not want to isolate scientists at Christian institutions from scientists at secular institutions. Although the precise boundary was fuzzy, Kuyper evidently envisioned a significant degree of overlap between secular and Christian science. The debacle that took place after Kuyper's death at the Synod of Assen (1926) demonstrates the intellectual stalemate between theology and natural science that arises when the boundary between the Christian and the non-Christian sciences becomes too firmly fixed by special revelation.⁷¹ On the other, Kuyper saw that Christians must oppose the philosophical worldviews that secular scientists develop out

⁶⁸ Ibid. My translation.

⁶⁹ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 3:488.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3:527. My translation.

⁷¹ Cf. Stellingwerff, Chapter Seven.

of scientific research. Although Kuyper could praise Charles Darwin along with Plato, Aristotle and Kant as "geniuses of the highest degree, that however much also not confessing Christians, have nevertheless expressed very deep thoughts and that possessed this brilliance not from themselves, but received their talents from the God that created them and made them capable of their conceptual work,"⁷² he nevertheless mistrusted evolutionary biology and sharply opposed what is now termed "social Darwinism." In like manner, although we may draw the boundaries differently, contemporary Christians are likewise obligated to sort out the legitimate scholarship in the works of neo-Darwinians like Richard Dawkins from extravagant claims about the purposelessness of the universe.⁷³

Of course, defending a creative tension in Kuyper's theology of science is not the same as defending an equivocation. And mounting such a defense also does not mean refraining from criticizing the kind of philosophical speculation that Dooyeweerd opposed in Kuyper's theology. In my view, the primary quandary facing contemporary Christian scientists and theologians who want to appropriate Abraham Kuyper's legacy is how to maintain a creative tension between common grace and particular grace without equivocating between them and without falling into speculation.

This quandary leads us to Abraham Kuyper's christology. As Stellingwerff makes clear, it was by way of his christology that Kuyper sought to synthesize common and particular grace—not only in politics, but also in science—during his final period of intellectual activity.⁷⁴ In the second volume of *Common Grace*, we already find him pointing out the christological unity of common and particular grace. Kuyper argued that since God both created and redeemed the world through Jesus Christ common and particular grace find their common root in Christ. Jesus Christ is

the root of common grace because he is *the firstborn of all creation* and, at the same time, the root of particular grace because he is *the firstborn from the dead*. There can be no doubt, therefore, that common grace and particular grace stand already in a very close connection due to their origin and that this connection lies in the *Christ*.⁷⁵

The christological unity of common and particular grace led Kuyper to prefer the likeness of a single tree with divergent branches to the likeness of

⁷² Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 3:498. My translation.

⁷³ Cf. Richard Dawkins, *A River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 132-3.

⁷⁴ Cf. Stellingwerff, 46-52.

⁷⁵ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 2:645. My translation.

pillars of different origins that have been tied together. "On the other hand, it is a different situation in the case when two branches *from the same tree* become intertwined," Kuyper wrote. "Then both branches still have a common origin. They both have *one* root. Before they shot out, they both had a *single* life in the same stem."⁷⁶ Kuyper gave a wonderful twist to his metaphor here. The spheres of common and particular grace have a common root in Christ. After the fall, those spheres diverge like different branches, each responding differently to the effects of sin upon creation. But the branches grow together again, retaining their distinction, but forming in their interwovenness a unified canopy of grace.

In my view, this eschatological vision of the intertwining of common and particular grace suggests that the *antithesis* between Christian and non-Christian need not represent a sundering of the spheres, but a waxing and waning distinction. It is perhaps because the precise level of distinction between common and particular grace depends on the stage of the organic development of history that commentators have found it so difficult to fix precise boundaries. In any case, this rendering of the metaphor makes clear the origin and the destiny of common and particular grace: both arise and come to completion in Christ, the alpha and omega of God's purposes in creation.

The organic unity of common grace and particular grace in Jesus Christ also has particular implications for the theology of science. In my opinion, it suggests the distinction between Christian and secular science cannot be made absolute, but must remain relative. I believe the christological unity of common and particular grace relativizes the *antithesis* by preventing any separation between them; Kuyper's theology points toward the eschatological reunion of Christian and secular science.

Perhaps the tension in Kuyper's theology of science may best be maintained not by stressing the common roots of Christian and secular science in creation or by emphasizing the separation of the sciences fostered by the division of humanity by particular grace but by considering the growth and development of the sciences in light of God's providential purposes for creation. May a doctrine of providence centered in christology provide the best framework for considering the relationship between common and particular grace in the sciences? In *Common Grace in Science and Art*, Kuyper claimed that divine providence guides the development of the sciences. He put forward a scientific version of the classic slogan: *hominum confusione? Dei providentia!*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* My translation.

Indeed, science does not come into existence as if one of the best architects had prepared a detailed blueprint for the building of this temple and then the following generations, by mutual agreement, calmly carried on the work of that original blueprint and so gradually made the temple rise on high. Instead, the entirety of the temple is built *without* a human blueprint and *without* human agreement. . . . And when now across the endless confusion it nevertheless appears that, in the course of the centuries, a temple is rising out of the apparently disorderly work that exhibits steady lines, manifests style, and already has us guessing how the entire building shall be completed, then it *must* be acknowledged and confessed, that all this work has been imperceptibly led and directed by an Architect and Artist that nobody sees.⁷⁷

This line of thinking need not ascribe the growth of the sciences to divine seeds planted in creation; Dooyeweerd rightly criticized such speculation as biblically ungrounded. It also need not succumb to speculation about necessary dialectical stages of development, although Veling may be right to suggest that Kuyper leaned closely toward Hegel in his ideas about the providential development of the sciences.⁷⁸ If we take the providential guidance of the sciences to be a temporal expression of God's eternal purposes in Christ, then that activity need not be restricted to any single period of salvation history, whether the creation, the federal covenants, or the redemption of the world. The providential guidance of the sciences also need not follow a schematic and rationalistic pattern. God is free in Christ to bring about his purposes in Creation as he sees fit. In sum, a christocentric doctrine of providence preserves both the commonality of creation and the particularity of redemption without fusing or sundering Christian and secular science.

V. CONCLUSION

I consider that Abraham Kuyper's christology furnishes the most promising fulcrum for maintaining the creative tension between Christian and secular science. A christocentric doctrine of providence allows for dynamic interaction between common grace and particular grace in the sciences without collapsing the tension between them. Moreover, the doctrine of providence allows for historical fluctuations in the balance between common grace and particular grace. Just as Stellingwerff noted that Kuyper empha-

⁷⁷ Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* 3:494-5. My translation.
⁷⁸ Veling, 285.

sized one aspect of his thought more than the other according to the different stages of his career, contemporary Christians may feel it necessary to adjust the relative balance between common and particular grace differently in different situations. The precise location of the antithesis may move up and down the levels of the scientific hierarchy that Ratzsch analyzed according to God's providential action in history. That is, during some historical periods Christians may find that the antithesis-motif must predominate even in fundamental natural sciences and during other periods they may emphasize the effects of common grace even in so-called moral sciences. The doctrine of providence is also flexible enough to allow that the balance between the antithesis and common grace may differ in different disciplines. For example, the balance may have tipped toward common grace in the dialogue between Christian and secular physicists because of the resonance between 'Big Bang' cosmology and the Christian concept of creation but toward the antithesis in the dialogue between Christians and secular environmentalists because of the dissonance between strands of radical environmentalism and Christian eschatology.

Brad Allenby forcefully states the challenge of the contemporary environmental movement to the Christian worldview in his monograph, *Observations on the Philosophical Implications of Earth Systems Engineering*. If Allenby is correct when he claims that Christianity and environmentalism are conflicting ideologies—indeed conflicting theologies—⁷⁹ and that the conflict between them reaches all the way down to the level of purportedly objective and factual "environmental science,"⁸⁰ then Christians may find it necessary to emphasize the antithesis more than common grace in the environmental sciences today. The ethical implications of what Allenby terms "environmentalist eschatology," for example, surely cannot be tolerated by Christians.⁸¹ Nevertheless, though the antithesis-motif may set the tone for the dialogue, the doctrine of common grace requires Christians environmentalists to remain critically engaged with their "secular" counterparts. The doctrine of common grace instructs Christians to listen for truths uttered on the other side of the antithesis, even by "greens" who consider Christianity to be the ideological enemy.

⁷⁹ Allenby refers to environmentalism as "the last Great Enlightenment ideology—perhaps even the greatest existing Christian heresy." Cf. Brad Allenby, *Observations on the Philosophical Implications of Earth Systems Engineering*, Batten Institute Working Paper (Darden School of Business: University of Virginia, 2002), 79.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 76-105.

⁸¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 104.

In any event, the vision of common grace and particular grace as branches stemming from a christological root should become, I suggest, the primary rendering of the organic metaphor in Abraham Kuyper's theology of science. Kuyper leaves us with the wonderful image of a mighty and growing tree whose branches are weaving both apart and together to form a magnificent canopy of grace over God's creation.

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