REVISITING THE RECEPTION OF KUYPER IN SOUTH AFRICA

Introduction

Within the contemporary South African theological context, the mere selection of Kuyper as a conversation partner is controversial to say the least. This obviously has to do with the way in which Kuyper’s ideas and vocabulary were used and abused, for better, but often for worse, in the context of theological legitimations of apartheid. It is therefore necessary to comment on the mere selection of Kuyper as a conversation partner. Here some autobiographical background is necessary in order to explain my personal interest in Kuyper’s work, but also the many reservations I continue to have in this regard.

In this essay, I will address the selection of Kuyper as conversation partner at three levels. I will start the essay at the autobiographical level in order to place my own interests upfront. This cannot be separated from the reception of Kuyper’s theology in the wider South African context (the second level). As I will indicate below, this is significant in an extraordinary way. In reformed theological circles in South Africa, Kuyper was probably the dominant conversation partner for several decades—from around 1930 to at least 1974—when the (in)famous document *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif* was accepted by the general synod of the DRC in 1974.¹ This may be regarded as the climax but also the death knell of apartheid theology. After this period the voice of Karl Barth became increasingly dominant (in reformed theological circles in South Africa). After 1990 South African reformed theologians explored a whole range of other conversation partners (see below). One may therefore say that the selection of Kuyper vis-à-vis Barth was (and to some extent still is) a rather loaded one, requiring some explanation. Thirdly, the underlying theological issues at stake in this regard (which are, in my opinion, of a complex hermeneutical nature) are of course also explored in theological discourses further afield.

¹ The official English translation was entitled *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (Cape Town, Dutch Reformed Publishers, 1976)—which hides the connotations attached to the categories of “race”, “people” (volk) and “nation”.
In this essay I will therefore offer narrower autobiographical comments on my personal return to an interest in Kuyper, discuss the wider reception of Kuyper in South Africa and then increasingly widen the scope of the inquiry (moving away from mere autobiographical concerns) in order to identify and discuss the underlying theological and hermeneutical issues at stake in this regard.

On Selecting Kuyper as Conversation Partner: Some Autobiographical Comments

There are several reasons why I have been hesitant in the past to even consider working on Abraham Kuyper, despite his obvious stature in the Dutch reformed tradition and elsewhere. As it will become evident, these reasons are quite personal and have more to do with the reception of Kuyper in South Africa than with Kuyper himself or with his work.

As an ecumenically-minded student I more or less deliberately avoided a narrow focus on Dutch theologies. Although I read mid-twentieth century theologians such as Berkhof, Berkouwer, Noordmans and Van Ruler with much appreciation, I wished to widen my horizons, engaged in a form of theological rebellion against my own tradition, and subsequently focused on the hermeneutics of David Tracy for my doctoral research.

Two of my lecturers at Stellenbosch University (Hennie Rossouw and Willie Jonker) completed their doctoral theses under G. C. Berkouwer at the VU University Amsterdam—who followed Herman Bavinck more than Kuyper.² I picked up from them a retrieval of the early reformed tradition (Calvin and the reformed confessions) in order to move beyond the rigidity of reformed orthodoxy.³ They emphasised a dynamic engagement with scripture in order to hear the Word of God anew, every morning. They avoided an exposition of a set of eternal

² Early critics of apartheid theology within the Dutch Reformed Church such as Keet and Marais could be regarded as followers of Bavinck, while apartheid theologians such as Potgieter and others followed Kuyper more closely. See F. E. Deist, Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg: ’n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Ned. Geref. Kerk (1840–1990) (Pretoria: HSRC, 1994): 226.

³ Berkouwer helped his students to see the anti-Scholastic elements in Bavinck’s theology, whereas Kuyper’s dogmatics remained much closer to the reformed orthodoxy than Bavinck’s. See H. Berkhof, Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989): 114.