A RESPONSE AND A STRATEGY

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Ernst Conradie’s reflections on Abraham Kuyper’s legacy for contemporary ecotheology address a wide range of theological topics and display great insight into the facets of Kuyper’s thought—which continue to provide a valuable resource for theological discourse related to our understanding of the natural world and our public responsibility for the created order. In this conversation, which addresses questions of general and special revelation, common and particular grace, natural theology and theology of nature against the backdrop of the relationship between creation and redemption, Conradie’s essays emerge as a wide ranging discourse that travels through many regions of the theological landscape. There are a number of places which help prompt further proposals for developing and advancing Kuyper’s legacy in ways which will potentially stimulate ecotheology.

In my own response, I will first briefly offer a general reaction to Conradie’s argument followed by my own attempt to develop Kuyper’s legacy by brief reflections on his journalistic and rhetorical mode of discourse as well as the doctrines of creation, pneumatology and ecclesiology. My method will be distinct from Conradie’s approach; he first presents Kuyper’s legacy in prominent contrast with Karl Barth’s resistance to natural theology (a necessity for multiple reasons, especially the history of theological resistance to apartheid), and his second strategy is to view Kuyper’s legacy through the lenses of figures such as Herman Bavinck, Arnold van Ruler and G. C. Berkouwer. In contrast, my aim is to look more directly at Kuyper’s life as an approach to theology and public life as well as some of his works as sources for contemporary ecotheology. My question concerns how Kuyper’s work provides sufficient theological content as well as how his legacy can move in directions that have tended to be less prominent for those in the Kuyperian stream. The goal is to look at Kuyper as a certain model of improvisational reflection who stimulates a creative engagement in the world, including ecotheology.
In response to Conradie’s general argument, there are two aspects that I have chosen to emphasise. First, Conradie is clearly seeking a way to enhance the fortunes of natural theology in a way which allows us to listen more attentively to what we can learn about reality from not only the biblical texts but also from sources such as the modern scientific enterprise (of course, it is a generalisation to refer to the scientific guild as a monolithic group of people who all share the same conclusions, but there is a sense in which there are certain common assumptions or conclusions about the way that we “read” the created order). If ecotheology is going to move forward, presumably with the goal of addressing the contemporary questions that arise from various crises in the natural world (from how we should address global warming to how we discover ways to live harmoniously on the planet we share), it will be necessary to consider how our theology prompts us to consider seriously the earth’s destiny. The conversation about natural theology must address how one thinks of creation and redemption, and the extent to which one holds these two doctrines together. Related to this one must consider how general and special revelation yield content which is distinct and separate or complementary. Ultimately, in such a conversation we must ask how it is that we are able to apprehend or “receive” the content of divine revelation and how we are able to communicate it. It is in this regard that Conradie makes one of his most notable and bold statements:

A sharp distinction between nature and history cannot be maintained. This is a core insight in contemporary ecotheology. Nature is historical and history, also human history, is the history of nature. Likewise, the figure of Jesus cannot be separated from other religious leaders at the time; the religious quest in Israel has to be understood in the context of the religious quest elsewhere at the time. The problem with the Barthian approach lies in its apparent refusal to see the hermeneutical significance of the recognition that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ forms part and parcel of human language, of human history, and indeed of evolutionary and natural history…(p. 81)

The implication is that all theological reflection, also Barth’s own theology, emerges from nature. Indeed, in this sense of the word all theology is natural theology…(p. 82).

…My argument is that all theological reflection may be regarded as natural theology in the sense that we inevitably use categories (vocabularies) derived from the world around us (in this sense from “nature”), for better or for worse. (p. 83)