“GRATIA NON TOLLIT NATURAM, SED PERFICIT”

Kees van der Kooi

The attempt to discuss Abraham Kuyper’s legacy for contemporary ecotheology is likely to be received with some reluctance and suspicion. At least, this applies to the situation in South Africa where some aspects of Kuyper’s thought were appropriated for a theological defence of apartheid. It applies no less in the Dutch situation, in which Kuyper’s name and fame are still identified with the figure who split a church and undermined the idea of the unity of the Dutch society. This reluctance might even be greater than initially felt, because, with the subject of ecotheology, the theme of creation is put on the agenda. In the recent past, creation, and particularly creation ordinances, has been a subject associated with conservatism and with appeals to race and “volk”. The debate between Barth and Brunner on natural theology determined the demarcation lines between right and wrong in theology. For a long time the theme of creation has functioned as a red flag. Everyone who tries to enter this field is invading a landscape filled with traps and bombs that could easily explode and destroy a sound Christian theology.¹ As soon as nature, creation or an element of our reality gets attention, the theological conscience is raised, because independent powers might raise their heads and overwhelm the substance of the gospel. In discussing the question of ecotheology, is there not a danger that the Trojan horse of natural theology may be welcomed into the city?

Nevertheless, it is clear that the questions related to the debate on natural theology, are not resolved, but remain to be genuine questions for Christian theology. One of these questions is how the truth of the gospel—the story of the cross, resurrection and the gift of the Spirit—is related to our daily life and reality. Christian faith, in its discovery of God’s enduring and embracing love, cannot but believe that this God

is the God of the whole world. Put differently, Christian faith cannot but believe in the universality of the Father of Jesus Christ.

Seen in this light, the project of a Christian ecotheology is an attempt to explore the universality of the Christian gospel in relation to our world as God’s own creation.

Conradie obviously breaks away from the generation of his teachers, when, in this ecotheology project, he explicitly tables the question of creation (as creatura), the future of our world and, thereby, the relationship between creation and re-creation. He is intrigued by the way Abraham Kuyper was able to place the meaning of the gospel within the whole of the story of humankind and this world. The universal outlook of Kuyper, his ability to construct a theology that gave motivation and sense to ordinary people for living their lives in obedience to God, is for him a source of astonishment and curiosity. But will he escape the pitfalls that are associated with the theology of Kuyper?

Theology from the Cross and Creation

Some of the concerns regarding ecotheology have already been mentioned. In what degree will creation become a theme apart from salvation and re-creation? Is the danger not looming here that creation is regarded as something that can be rediscovered and restored when we simply scrape away the dust and filth of sin? What is, in other words, the relation between creation and salvation? Is salvation restoration of a lost paradise? This concept of salvation as mere restoration has been rejected and put aside in contemporary theology as too simple and leading to a loss of eschatological reservation. A more eschatological concept of creation has become the alternative that has replaced the restoration motive. A theology of the cross instead of an emphasis on creation has dominated theology in the last decades.

In this context, Conradie points to the tendency in contemporary theology “to understand the whole of creation from the point of the cross.” Here a well-known statement of the Dutch theologian Oepke Noordmans can be recalled: “Creation is a spot of light around the cross.”

Noordmans feared that the heirs of neo-Calvinism would settle themselves too much in this world. Theology should keep awake

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2 See O. Noordmans, Verzamelde werken, vol. 2 (Kampen: Kok. 1979), 45. Dutch: “Schepping is een plek licht rondom het kruis.” (translation—KvdK; unless other-