
Book Review

George Harinck and Brant M. Himes (Editors): *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Neo-Calvinism in Dialogue: Perspectives in Public Theology*

(Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023) ISBN: 9781666725186, hbk, £44.00, pp224.

Steve Bishop

Independent researcher

Presteigne, Wales

What has Bonhoeffer to say to Kuyper and Bavinck? What has Amsterdam to say to Breslau? Is it plausible to describe Bonhoeffer as a “Reformational Christian”¹? These are some of the questions explored in this volume.

Though Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran, and Kuyper a neo-Calvinist may seem like “unlikely conversation partners” this collection of essays demonstrates there is significant overlap, and that such a conversation is fruitful. Editors George Harinck and Brant Himes have previously written on Bonhoeffer and Kuyper. Here they are joined by other neo-Calvinist and Bonhoeffer scholars to explore the intersection and contributions of Bonhoeffer and the neo-Calvinists to public theology. Thus, as the editors highlight, “This collection of essays is a result of scholars with specialized and narrow knowledge endeavoring to channel the generosity of two distinct traditions into new conversations for understanding and application in history, theology, ethics, and the church.”

Harinck’s opening chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the reception of Bonhoeffer in the Netherlands, setting the scene for the rest of the book. He identifies three versions of Bonhoeffer: the fervent Christian, the good German, and as the theologian of secularization; while also examining the orthodox and liberal interpretations of Bonhoeffer.

1 This was suggested by Georg Huntemann, “Bonhoeffer as Reformational Christian” in *The Other Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment*. Translated by Todd Huizinga. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 77-87. This chapter would have made a good addition to this volume, especially as Kamphuis (Chapter 4) interacts with it.

Himes, in Chapter 2, draws upon themes from his *Called to Holy Worldliness* to explore the circumstances that Kuyper and Bonhoeffer each faced in relation to confession, forgiveness, and restoration.

Chapter 3 delves into the area of homiletics, particularly how Bonhoeffer and Bavinck might be brought into dialogue on this subject. Here, Javier Garcia (1987-2021) finds that for both Bavinck and Bonhoeffer, the preacher and theologian are one and the same. Particularly intriguing are Bavinck's and Bonhoeffer's views on preaching and life in America. He cites Bavinck, who astutely observed, "Religion does not master the people; the people master religion. ... Religion is a matter of amusement, of relaxation."

The idea that Bonhoeffer could be a "Crypto-neo-Calvinist" was explored by German Calvinist theologian Georg Huntemann (1929–2014). This notion is scrutinised by Barend Kamphuis in Chapter 4. While acknowledging several similarities he identifies profound differences between neo-Calvinism and Bonhoeffer's views—not least their view of Scripture. He concludes that Hunteman did not have sufficient grounds to regard Bonhoeffer as a Crypto-neo-Calvinist.

Jordan Ballor explores the topic of natural law in Kuyper and Bonhoeffer in Chapter 5. He notes the reevaluation by Protestants of natural law theory, post the "Barthian hegemony" and seeks to place Kuyper and Bonhoeffer within that tradition. He claims that "Rightly understood, both Kuyper and Bonhoeffer are natural-law thinkers with respect to their theological ethics". He observes that the natural-law tradition is not a singular entity, nor is it univocal. He utilises Troeltsch's distinction between absolute and relative natural law. He sees natural law as a "particular manifestation of [Kuyper's] common grace".

In Chapter 6, Matthew Kaemingk explores the consensus and tensions between Kuyper's sphere sovereignty and Bonhoeffer's doctrine of the mandates. He notes that both were "on the run", one for political office, the other from the Nazis. Kaemingk shows the closeness of Bonhoeffer and Kuyper and that "the pseudo-Lutheran label does not do justice to the deep Christological foundations of Kuyper's spheres" (197).

Herman Paul addresses the issue of historicism, exploring how Bonhoeffer and Kuyper respond. He questions the philosophical origins of Kuyper's organicism but recognises that it provides an "openness toward the historicity of moral thought" (224).

Chapter 8 by Gerard den Hertog maintains that Bavinck and Bonhoeffer share similar intuition, but with a distinct elaboration as he examines their respective approaches to ethics and war.

Javier Garcia, in his second essay in this book (Chapter 9), poses the question, "What is the church?" In addressing this question, he compares Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* and sections from Volume 4 of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*. He sees both as "representatives of creative modern appropriations of Reformed theology" (274). He uses the word and sacrament to evaluate their ecclesiologies. Although a Bonhoeffer's scholar, it seems that Garcia favours Bavinck's ecclesiology. He makes the important observation, that "primarily Christological versus a primarily Pneumatological ecclesiology accurately summarizes the basic difference between the conceptions of the church presented in Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* and Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, respectively." He also offers some important and sage advice: "Neo-Calvinist ecclesiology must pay heed to Bonhoeffer's generosity in his understanding of the church."

In the final chapter, Dekker and Harinck highlight parallels between Bonhoeffer and Kuiper. They note the brilliance of both as theologians, their roles as clergy and academics, and their impact beyond the church realm. Despite nuanced differences, they underscore the substantial similarities in the views of Kuiper and Bonhoeffer regarding the church institute's role in society. Both stress the institute's relative importance, emphasizing the Kingdom of God (Kuiper) or Christ's manifestation (Bonhoeffer). They advocate for the institute's limited role in preaching and administering sacraments, aiming for purity as a religious community. The institute holds essential significance for the world, acting as a force for Christian life and the preservation of humanity. However, they caution against the exercise of power and warn against the clericalization of life in influencing the world.

This volume exemplifies a meaningful dialogue between Bonhoeffer and neo-Calvinist scholars. An improvement, in addition to an index, would be authors providing brief comments on each other's papers, fostering further interaction. Hopefully, future projects could explore dialogues between different theological traditions, such as those between 1930s French Christian philosophy and neo-Calvinist philosophy. The book serves as a valuable resource for scholars in both neo-Calvinism and Bonhoeffer studies.