



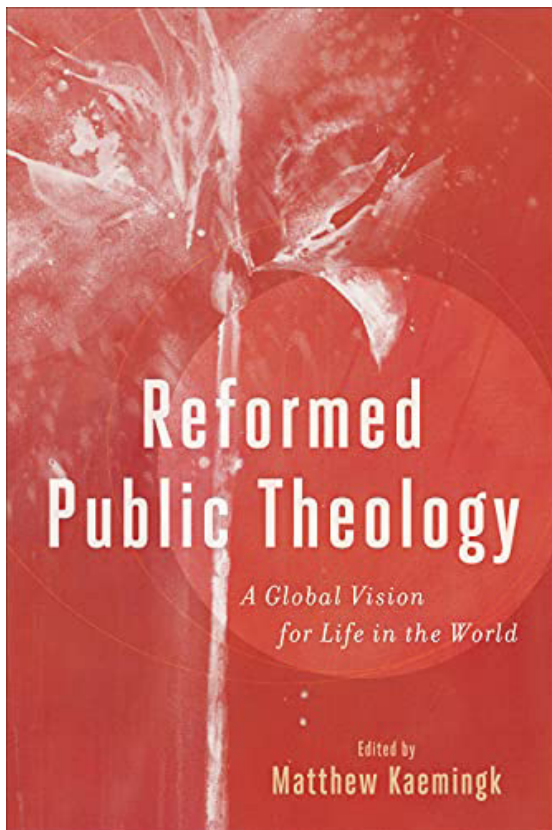
ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World

Matthew Kaemingk, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021)

REVIEWED BY DR JAMES RUSTHOVEN



Matthew Kaemingk has assembled a masterwork that witnesses to the practice of Reformed theology in public life today. The term “public theology” titles a relatively young global and ecumenical enterprise, popularized by

Martin Marty in the 1970s and firmly established through the 1980s by David Tracy, Max Stackhouse, Robert Bellah and others. Yet, the activity of public theology has been practised since the beginnings of ancient Israel and the dawn of Christianity. As historian Gary Ferngren and others have documented, eyewitness accounts testify to the care and compassion given by Christians to suffering fellow Christian and pagan neighbours alike during the devastating plagues of the 3rd and 4th centuries, at extraordinary risk to themselves. These early saints lived out their confessions of love for their needy neighbours; they lived out a public theology of caring.



Andrea Vicentino, *Dressing the Naked, Sheltering Pilgrims and Visiting the Sick*

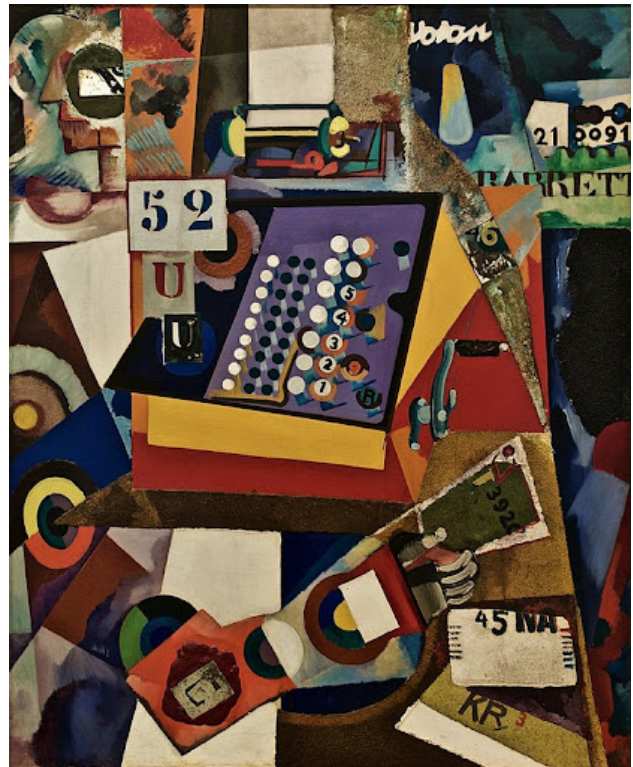
Kaemingk prefaces this book with a detailed dedication to the life work of Richard Mouw whose concept of Christian engagement in public life is ingrained with the recurrent theme of common grace as a core pillar of

public theology. Common grace is God's gift that allows the persistent beauty and glory of God's creative work to be discovered, understood and enjoyed in the lives of all human beings. For half a century, Mouw has preached, taught and exercised critical appreciation for Reformed theology and its application to the complexity, beauty, joys and brokenness that is public life in this world, while forthrightly acknowledging its weaknesses and blind spots. As Kaemingk points out, Mouw works to develop what he coins a "holy worldliness," a righteous way of being in the world but not of it in its fallen sense. It sees God's goodness mysteriously manifesting in the activities and discoveries of neighbours who may not see or may resist the salvific power of particular grace in their daily lives.

Contributors to this book also appeal to others of Reformed persuasion to learn from other faith and cultural traditions in humility and appreciation for the insights that God provides, even when revealed through apostate minds and actions. One contributor calls the book a Festschrift to Mouw. This writer appreciates the book even more as a larger celebration of the Reformed tradition with its ample references to works of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, John Calvin, Karl Barth, Tim Keller, Calvin Seerveld, Nicholas Wolterstorff and others. In the chapter on "Modern Political Ideologies: A Reformed Alternative," authors Bruce Ashford and Dennis Greeson approach their political thought through the spectacles of the Reformational strand of the larger Reformed tradition, emphasizing the common confessional roots of both.

Kaemingk tells his readers he wrote the book as a "'taste and see' introduction" to the intersection between Reformed theology and public life. This involved the necessary selection of diverse issues within public life and the crafting of an editorial prescription for authors to emphasize in their chapters positive ways that Reformed theology takes hold of the engagement of their particular area of study and practice. There is also less attention to "public sins" of Reformed giants like Barth, Calvin and Kuyper. Kaemingk confides that limited space disallowed adequate acknowledgement of wisdom from voices of other denominational traditions that make up what he calls the deeper catholic archipelago forming the ecumenical lineage of theological traditions in public theology. Other stated limitations include no chapters addressing certain key issues such as the environment, gender and technologies (though excellent references for further reading are provided) or probing the disciplines of psychology, science or literature, and no contributing authors represent the Middle East or Indian regions.

The book still covers a wide range of topics and issues in the contexts of particular geo-cultural spaces. His excellent "Introduction" identifies nine common patterns or marks that have emerged within the literature of public theology. He goes on to present points of emphasis, "public habits of the Reformed heart" as he calls them, that characterize Reformed thought across the book's diverse essays. These points form a helpful heuristic for the reader in understanding the variety of public concerns and Reformed theological emphases that make up each chapter.



Amadeo de Souza-Cardozo, *Untitled (Cash Register)*

Reformed Public Theology is organized in six major parts that umbrella distinct arenas of public engagement: Public Culture, Public Markets, Public Justice, Public Aesthetics, Public Academy and Public Worship. Within these sections are chapters wrestling with critical areas of public concern, often in the context of particular cultural settings within which are very real human struggles that challenge the everyday lives of the inhabitants in those spaces. Such areas of concern include euthanasia in the Netherlands, a Reformed response to populism and violence in the Philippines, workers' rights in China, and engaging resources of Reformed theology within pluralist university campus cultures while applying them to classroom learning and broader contemporary debate on issues such as critical race theory. Authors were chosen to represent a diversity of disciplines, contexts, issues and ecclesiastical denominations. Kaemingk notes that many consider themselves as practitioners first and theorists

second, giving testimony in their essays to the daily grassroot challenges of their very public work.

The global breadth of these arenas is wide. It spans from New York City to Brazil and on to Indonesia and China. The social challenges are no less broad, including the persisting impact of apartheid, understanding “the stranger” as refugees and migrants trying to understand the meaning of home, and living through political power struggles in the Philippines and state-manipulated religious pluralism in Indonesia. Art, poetry, urban design, and even fashion are targets of public scrutiny and formative renewal through a Reformed public theology moulded to fit into the discourse and action within each arena. The time scale for public theology is redemptive time, specifically the already-but-not-yet time interval that we find ourselves in. As authors Ashford and Greeson note, we live within an age of divine patience wherein still fallen human beings often struggle to distinguish God’s action within history from misguided deeds of fallen humanity.



Titia Ballot, *Flight*

God’s gift of common grace to our troubled world keeps our eyes open to God’s love, mercy and justice even when they emit from activities of our Muslim, animistic, or professed atheist neighbours. Author Nico Koopman lives

through the lingering influence of apartheid on South African life. Drawing from the insights of South African Reformed theologian Adrio König, he feels the deepest meaning of baptism as a public act that has profound implications for political and cultural reality in the world. Baptism initiates a public life that puts the people of God into a covenantal *modus operandi* in relating to God, to our neighbours, and indeed to all of creation. Baptism does not cut off unbaptized neighbours but rather extends God’s grace through our public action, particularly for those at the margins of society. Citing Allen Verhey, Koopman notes that baptism restores a life of inclusion, equality and mutual service.

In the concluding chapter on piety and the public life, Jessica Joustra compares Bavinck’s struggle involving the duality of faith and culture in his day, with its contemporary counterpart expressed as evangelism and social justice, or faith and works. Bavinck stresses that the gospel of Christ must always precede action toward social and political change, a public imitation of Christ as it were, through the power of his Spirit. Activity so directed gives a creation focus on public activities and instils Jesus as the living law that guides our pattern for public life. This emphasis on a law-patterned nature of Christian spirituality in public discipleship teaches both proper worship and piety while guiding proper public action embracing our neighbours. Once the believer is fixed on Christ’s saving work, reforming and renewing power follows with the believer as its instrument. Then all things in creation will hold together and be reconciled to Christ.



David Zelenka, *Baptism of Christ*

While this book honours the life and work of Richard Mouw, it also celebrates the God-glorifying public work of all formative leaders of Reformed theology as applied to every square inch of God’s created world. It offers thanksgiving for the fruit of that work, work inspired by God’s Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit to

transform, lift up and restore a troubled creation in troubled times. This book brings a powerful message of hope in the continued work of God's kingdom that crosses geographical, cultural and political divides in this not-yet time. The testimonies and insights of the authors and those with whom they have experienced God's love and power in their work should bring joy to the reader's heart. God's redemptive plan is alive and well and this book should be an inspiration for the reader's own redemptive vocational work.

Dr Jim Rusthoven is a distinguished Canadian oncologist, and also has a PhD in theology and bioethics, published as Covenantal Biomedical Ethics for Contemporary Medicine: An Alternative to Principles-Based Ethics (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014). Jim thus combines professional and theological expertise, an invaluable combination. Jim is an Associate Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology.

