

2. THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT AMONG OTHER FAITH COMMUNITIES ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM KUYPER

This chapter critically examines the first sub-question: How does Abraham Kuyper's pneumatology conceive the work of the Spirit among other faith communities? The discussion unfolds through four stages. First, it investigates his perspective on the cosmic Spirit's presence among religions. Second, it examines his interpretation of non-Christian religions. Third, it considers the role of the Spirit in these religious communities through his doctrine of common grace. Finally, the chapter concludes with a critical synthesis of these insights as a response to the guiding question.

2.1. The cosmic Spirit

This section explores the question through Kuyper's doctrine of the cosmic Spirit. It begins by exploring Kuyper's expansion of pneumatology from the Spirit's sanctifying work in the redeemed to its cosmic dimensions, elaborating on the Spirit's cosmic activity, addressing the challenges of Spirit discernment, and discussing the implications of this broader cosmic work.

2.1.1. The Spirit works not only in redemption, but also in creation

According to Kuyper, the Holy Spirit—the Third Person of the Trinity—works not only in the elect and the church, but also in creation. As such, Kuyper went against the tendencies of the Heidelberg Catechism and his reformed contemporaries that confined the discussion of the Holy Spirit to sanctification and ignored the biblical testimonies that describe the creational work of the Spirit.¹ He broadens the

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries, Logos Bible Software (New York ; London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1900), 44–45.

scope of the Spirit's work in a cosmic direction through three key moves: the cooperative work of the Triune Persons, the filioque, and the organic motif.

First, he suggests the perfecting role of the Spirit within the cooperative work of the Triune Persons. Kuyper believes in the unity of divine activities. Thus, he states, “There is *distribution*, no *division* in the divine activities.”² Still, this distribution does not imply any separation, but rather *cooperation* of the three Persons.³ The cooperative work of the divine activities is described as follows: Kuyper starts with the general distinction borrowed from the early church Fathers:

That in every work effected by Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in common, the power *to bring forth* proceeds from the Father; the power *to arrange* from the Son; the power *to perfect* from the Holy Spirit.⁴

Note that the divine operation is threefold, not three operations. Thus, the singular “work” and the adjective “common.” Each divine Person has their own “role”: the Father originates all created things, the Son gives consistency to them, and the Spirit leads them to their final destiny. Thus, Kuyper distributes the perfecting and orienting role to the Spirit. Regarding the work of creation, Kuyper gives the following illustration: the Father is compared to a king who wants to build a place and provides the materials and the plans. The builder is the Son who constructs all things from the Royal Source with the wisdom and power generated in Him by the Father. The cooperative work of the Father and the Son in the act of creation is incomplete without the work of the Holy Spirit, who perfects all things according to their nature. Thus, the Holy Spirit gives creation purpose and destiny.⁵

² Kuyper, 31.

³ Kuyper, 212.

⁴ Kuyper, 19.

⁵ Kuyper, 20–21.

Second, with filioque, Kuyper links the creative work of the Father and the Son to the Spirit. Within the Trinitarian relations, Kuyper asserts that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and the Son (et filioque)*.⁶ Consequently, the work of the Spirit is doubly bound to the Father's creative work and the Son's mediation. Thus, the Spirit's activity is not limited to sanctification, but to the entire cosmos.

Third, using organic motif, Kuyper emphasizes the historical continuity of the life of believers and the Messiah to extend the Spirit's realm of activity beyond sanctification. The organic motif⁷ highlights an organism's continuity, encompassing its historical development and ongoing environmental interaction. First, believers' lives exhibit an *organic* continuity between life before conversion and life after. Thus, if the Spirit guides a believer toward their destined perfection through sanctification, it must also be at work within their broader life circumstances, albeit subtler. This includes their personal life before conversion, human life as a whole, the creation of humanity, and the formation of the human environment—namely, heaven and earth.⁸ Second, organic reasoning is also applied to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Messiah: The Messiah is connected not only to the preparatory work in the Patriarchs and Prophets of Israel, but also to the following work in the Apostles. Israel is also organically related to humanity, its creation and historical development, and humanity to the earth, heaven, spirit world, and the whole cosmos. Therefore, the work of the Spirit is not confined to the Messiah but expands to the entire cosmos.⁹ In this way, Kuyper expands the scope of the Spirit's work across both space and time. While the

⁶ Kuyper, 16.

⁷ Here Kuyper adopts the Romantic concept of the world as a living organism. See Jacob Klapwijk, "Abraham Kuyper on Science, Theology and University," *Philosophia Reformata* 78, no. 1 (November 27, 2013): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116117-90000537>.

⁸ Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 24.

⁹ Kuyper, 8.

Spirit's primary focus is on the sanctification of the elect, its influence extends outward to encompass all of humanity. Likewise, the Spirit works not only in creation, regeneration, and sanctification, but also embraces the entire history to the end of time.¹⁰

2.1.2. *The cosmic Spirit: immanent, life-giving, talent-bestowing, and sin-antagonizing*

What does the cosmic Spirit do? Kuyper explains:

This inward, invisible something is God's direct touch. There is in us and in every creature a point where the living God touches us to uphold us; for nothing exists without being *upheld* by Almighty God from moment to moment. ... The Holy Spirit is the Person in the Holy Trinity whose office it is to effect this direct touch and fellowship with the creature in his inmost being, it is He who *dwells* in the hearts of the elect; who *animates* every rational being; who sustains *the principle of life* in very creature.¹¹

Note that God *touches* every creature through the Holy Spirit. Kuyper uses the adjective “direct”, a haptic metaphor, and locates the touch in “his inmost being” and “in very creature.” These emphasize the immanent character of the Spirit's presence and activity. Furthermore, *every* part of creation is touched without exception. Not only animated creatures, but inanimate things, such as atoms, the sun, the moon, and stars, are also touched by God through His Spirit.¹² The Spirit is the Person of the Trinity by which God touches his creation:

It is this act of coming into immediate contact with every creature, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, rational or irrational, that, according to the profound conception of the Word of God, is performed not by the Father, nor by the Son, but by the Holy Spirit.¹³

¹⁰ Kuyper, 9.

¹¹ Kuyper, 26.

¹² Kuyper, 44.

¹³ Kuyper, 43.

This implies that all God's dealings with the cosmos and humanity are done exclusively through the immanent Spirit.

Kuyper identifies four distinct works of the Spirit concerning creation. First, the Spirit's hovering over chaos in Gen. 1:2 is likened to a parent bird that spreads its protective wings over its young, which suggests a nurturing metaphor. It implies that the earth had been created, and the Spirit was to subsequently nurture the seeds of life, to form the formless, to bring forth life, and to guide it towards its ultimate purpose. Kuyper asserts that the Spirit did not create material forces and the seeds of life, but that the Spirit worked on them *after* the Son had made them.¹⁴ Second, the Spirit created the host of heaven and of the earth. Kuyper reads Psalm 33:6 as suggesting that the Son was the agent who created the being and nature of the heavens, and the Spirit brought forth their host and produced their heavenly glory.¹⁵ Third, the Spirit ordered the heavens. Job 26:13 speaks of the Spirit garnishing the heavens. Finally, the Spirit animates human beings and animals based on Psalm 104:30 and Job 33:4. In the former, Kuyper suggests that David was speaking not of the creation of sea monsters in the beginning, but in his present time. Similarly, the latter speaks of Job talking about the creation of himself, not Adam and Eve. Therefore, the Holy Spirit's creative, life-giving work is not limited to the initial act of creation at the beginning of time but continues to the present.¹⁶

The Spirit's life-giving work is evident in creating human personality and individual talents. Kuyper understands the personality of a human being as the "you" and the "I". The Holy Spirit creates human personal beings. He derives this from

¹⁴ Kuyper, 29–30.

¹⁵ Kuyper, 30.

¹⁶ Kuyper, 30–31.

Psalm 104:30, which says, “the Spirit of God has made *me*.”¹⁷ In addition, scripture testifies that the skills of Bezaleel and others for building the Tabernacle came from the Spirit of God, Ex. 31:2-3. Kuyper suggests that these skills were not necessarily bestowed instantaneously as miraculous gifts but were cultivated through the Spirit’s work in the gradual learning processes, likely acquired during their time in Egypt.¹⁸ In politics and the military, the Spirit also gave judges, heroes, and politicians their intellectual ability and the power to influence the masses. The Spirit, as seen in the cases of Cyrus and Saul, clearly empowers individuals for official roles. The endowment of individual talents and abilities is uniquely attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than the Son or the Father. While these gifts originate from the Father and are distributed through the Son, they are activated within individuals exclusively by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

The Spirit’s multifaceted role is also evident in the realms of art, individual talent, and vocation through systematic reasoning. According to Kuyper, art is not a human invention but a manifestation of divine possibilities embedded in creation, realized through God-given intellect, perception, and skill. The Spirit uniquely empowers individuals with the genius required to unfold these material possibilities, refine inherited crafts, and develop artistic traditions. Kuyper extends this understanding to historical events, such as attributing Germany’s military victories in 1870 to the Spirit’s sovereign provision of talented generals. Additionally, the Spirit directs individuals and nations toward their appropriate vocations, bestowing or

¹⁷ Kuyper, 33.

¹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ’s Kingship*, ed. John H. Kok and Nelson D. Kloosterman, trans. Albert Gootjes, vol. 3, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 80–81.

¹⁹ Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 38–40.

withdrawing collective talents over time, as evidenced by the rise and decline of the Dutch Golden Age.²⁰

Finally, the Spirit also antagonizes sin. He characterizes sin primarily as an inhibitive power that obstructs creation and humanity from fulfilling their divine destiny. While the Spirit's redemptive work in the elect, Christ, and the church remains paramount in combating sin, Kuyper's organic reasoning extends the Spirit's activity of antagonizing sin beyond redemption.²¹ Consequently, the Spirit resists sin throughout the cosmos, albeit in varied and non-uniform ways.

2.1.3. *The difficulty of discerning the Spirit's cosmic work*

Despite the Spirit's pervasive influence, Kuyper notes that the cosmic, life-giving work of the Spirit remains largely numinous, even for Christians. While only believers, equipped through Christ, can discern the Spirit's presence, since Christ asserts that the unbelieving world does not recognize the Holy Spirit, many of the Spirit's activities in creation remain enigmatic.²² Kuyper emphasizes that Scripture is essential for understanding the Spirit's work, as believers' spiritual experiences offer only vague and unclear glimpses of the Holy Spirit's actions.²³ Yet, Kuyper laments that even Scripture offers limited illumination on the subject, noting, "How scanty is the light upon the work of the Holy Spirit compared with that upon the work of Christ!" Whereas Christ's presence is tangible and well-defined, the Holy Spirit is invisible, intangible, and mysterious.²⁴ The difficulty of articulating the Spirit's

²⁰ Kuyper, 40–42.

²¹ Kuyper, 24–25.

²² Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, vol. 2, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 379.

²³ Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 4.

²⁴ Kuyper, 6.

activity is compounded by its distance from the work of redemption: As the Spirit's actions extend further from God's redemptive purpose, they become less visible, making His influence in the celestial realm almost imperceptible. In this context, Kuyper poignantly asks, "Who can trace His work in the star-movements?" to underline the elusive nature of the Spirit's involvement in the vastness of creation.²⁵

Kuyper's difficulty in discerning the Spirit's work leads him to articulate only the Spirit's role in animating life. Regarding the Spirit's preparatory work in the lives of the elect, Kuyper limits his discussion to the Spirit's role in animating all personal life.²⁶ Similarly, in addressing the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, Kuyper proposes a hierarchical view of reality, with a foundational, mysterious life-giving principle—attributed to the Spirit—underpinning all levels of existence. This principle radiates upward, influencing higher realities, including the celestial realm.²⁷

2.1.4. *Summary*

The Spirit operates not only in redemption but also cosmically. Kuyper reached this conclusion through three key moves: the cooperative work of the Triune Persons, the filioque, and the organic motif. Through the Spirit, God is immanent within creatures, animates life, bestows human personality, arts, talents, and vocation, and antagonizes sin. However, the cosmic work remains numinous and challenging to discern, as Scripture predominantly testifies to the Spirit's work concerning redemption.

²⁵ Kuyper, 24.

²⁶ Kuyper, 302–3.

²⁷ Kuyper, 25–26.

2.1.5. Discussion

Kuyper's expansion of the Spirit's work from redemption to the entire cosmos provides a legitimate foundation to affirm the work of the Spirit among religions. He appropriately resisted the tendencies to confine the Spirit's activity solely to redemption—a limitation that persists to the present in Anglophone reformed circles: Berkhof observed in 1976 that before his contributions, only Calvin and Kuyper had significantly engaged with the concept of cosmic pneumatology.²⁸ Beeke observed in 2021 that contemporary Christians often neglect the link between the Holy Spirit, creation, and providence.²⁹ Even major Reformed confessions have historically underexplored these connections, a gap only recently addressed in Yuzo Adhinarta's 2010 dissertation.³⁰ In response to such reductionistic tendencies, Kuyper's emphasis on the Spirit's cosmic presence offers a timely and appropriate corrective.

Affirming the Spirit's cosmic presence provides a crucial foundation for recognizing the Spirit's activity within religious traditions. This resonates with Amos Yong's claim that divine omnipresence necessarily includes the Spirit's presence in religions. However, this does not equate to endorsing all religions as inherently good or truthful, underscoring the need for continued exploration and discernment.³¹

Nevertheless, Kuyper's doctrine of cosmic Spirit lacks discernment power, a limitation he acknowledges by describing its nature as largely numinous. The failure

²⁸ Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 96.

²⁹ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology. Volume 3: Spirit and Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021), 71.

³⁰ Yuzo Adhinarta, "The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Major Reformed Confessions and Catechisms of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" (Doctoral Dissertation, Grand Rapids, MI, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2010), 3, https://www.calvin.edu/library/database/dissertations/Adhinarta_Yuzo.pdf.

³¹ Amos Yong, *An Amos Yong Reader: The Pentecostal Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 46–47.

is evident in his blanket conclusions, such as his simplistic attribution of Germany's military victories in 1870 to the Spirit's sovereign provision of talented generals. A critical question arises: would French Christians, victims of the war, accept Kuyper's conclusion? Furthermore, had Kuyper lived in 1940, during the swift defeat of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France by Nazi forces, would he have attributed Adolf Hitler's military success to the Spirit's granting of genius? Kuyper's doctrine lacks the guardrails needed to prevent such conclusions. John Bolt rightly cautions against the longstanding tendencies to equate specific socio-political movements with the work of God's Spirit, a pattern evident from the time of Constantine to the Nicaraguan revolutions of 1979.³²

2.2. Kuyper's interdisciplinary view of religion

To further comprehend Kuyper's perspective on the Spirit's work among non-Christian religions, it is essential to analyze his understanding of religion. While Kuyper never authored a specific book on religion, his views can be systematically pieced together by examining relevant comments scattered throughout his various works.

2.2.1. Religions as divergent expressions of the divine-human relationship

All non-Christian religions carry a faint echo of the divine-human relationship, in which humanity offers worship to the transcendent God.³³ Human beings were created initially with original righteousness,³⁴ conveying a divine-human relationship

³² John Bolt, "The Ecumenical Shift to Cosmic Pneumatology," *Reformed Review* 51, no. 3 (April 1, 1998): 263.

³³ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:772; Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:40.

³⁴ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:199.

(“the right position before God”).³⁵ The first man did not acquire this relationship, but was already created *within* it. The relationship reflects humanity’s fundamental dependence on God, which is the foundation of all true religion. It entails the recognition of God’s transcendence and the continual reliance of human existence upon Him.³⁶ Although the Fall resulted in the loss of original righteousness, this sense of dependence endures in various religions, albeit in corrupted forms. Kuyper commended contemporary African religions for preserving the fear of gods, while he criticized the ancient Greek philosophers for being self-sufficient and intellectualizing the knowledge of God.³⁷

A genuine spiritual relationship is essential to true religion. While rituals may support worship, they risk devolving into legalism if disconnected from authentic spirituality.³⁸ During his travels in the Levant, Kuyper observed Islam’s legalistic nature, rooted in strict ritualism,³⁹ but noted that Sufism counterbalanced this rigidity by preserving fervent devotion.⁴⁰ He appreciated Sufism’s spiritual influence, recognizing its capacity to inspire millions.⁴¹

Kuyper conceives various religions from differing interpretations of the relationship between the infinite (the divine) and the finite (humanity). Paganism,

³⁵ Kuyper, 1:182.

³⁶ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:438; Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ’s Kingship*, ed. John H. Kok and Nelson D. Kloosterman, trans. Albert Gootjes, vol. 1, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 42.

³⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 304–5.

³⁸ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:40; cf. “Divine worship is not an exercise in religion, but an acting out of religion, and that is impossible if the congregation has not been brought into fellowship with their God,” Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, ed. Harry Boonstra, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 16.

³⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *On Islam*, ed. James D. Bratt and Douglas A. Howard, trans. Jan van Vliet (Ashland: Lexham Press, 2018), 59.

⁴⁰ Kuyper, 50.

⁴¹ Kuyper, 174.

including Animism and Buddhism, equates the infinite with the finite, God with creatures. Islam isolates the infinite from the finite. The Roman Catholic conceives the church as mediating the relationship of the infinite with the finite. Calvinism, which Kuyper believes is the most proper interpretation, believes that the infinite, as the Holy Spirit, enters into an immediate and intimate communion with the finite.⁴²

2.2.2. *Religions as lived expressions of distorted natural theology*

For Kuyper, religion is inadequate when it is limited to ritual or cultural expressions and must include natural theology. He rejects the notion that Christianity and other religions are united merely by phenomenal religious expressions, and locates unity in the epistemological idea of natural theology.⁴³ Natural theology refers to the “knowledge of divine things that is available to man in the absence of Holy Scripture and without internal illumination by the Holy Spirit,”⁴⁴ which enables recognition of God as a personal Creator, but is insufficient to establish personal communion with Him.⁴⁵

Despite the presence of sin, natural knowledge of God endures, as evidenced by the Devil’s acute awareness of God’s omnipotent power.⁴⁶ Its endurance is rooted in the ever-present majesty of God in creation, which always awakens in every human being a *sensus divinitatis*—an innate awareness of the divine.⁴⁷ This awareness, also called the *semen religionis* or “seed of religion,” is fundamental to human

⁴² Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton* (New York ; Chicago ; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), 17–19.

⁴³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, 300–301.

⁴⁴ Abraham Kuyper, “The Natural Knowledge of God,” trans. Harry Van Dyke, *Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 73.

⁴⁵ Kuyper, 100.

⁴⁶ Kuyper, 76.

⁴⁷ Kuyper, 76.

relationships with God.⁴⁸ In this context, Kuyper builds upon Calvin's idea. Calvin views this seed as leading to a firm conviction in God and an inherent inclination toward religion.⁴⁹ He contends that the human mind contains an instinctive, numinous sense of the divine, naturally guiding individuals to conviction of the existence of a creator God, thus making religion fundamental to humanity. Furthermore, he believes God continually imparts to all people an understanding of His divine majesty.⁵⁰ Kuyper expands this insight by likening the *sensus divinitatis* to a musical instrument God strikes to stir religious feelings. Yet, due to the corrupting influence of sin, this instrument no longer produces the pure harmonies of divine melody but instead yields discordant and jarring sounds.⁵¹

Besides *sensus divinitatis*, the content of natural theology partly derives from what Kuyper calls "paradise tradition." This tradition refers to the divine revelation of the Creator God that the first man carried out of paradise and spread among all nations. However, it gradually deteriorated in varying degrees. He demonstrates this through two points: the shared memory of one original God among ancient civilizations, which initially adhered to monotheism before devolving into polytheism, and the widespread Flood narrative across many tribes.⁵² He also asserts that Scripture testifies to this ancient revelation, citing examples such as Abram worshipping the Lord of heaven and earth, Melchizedek as the priest of the Most

⁴⁸ Kuyper, 75.

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), chap. 1.iii.2.

⁵⁰ Calvin, chap. 1.iii.1.

⁵¹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 52–53.

⁵² Kuyper, "The Natural Knowledge of God," 90–91.

High, Abimelech's belief in the living God, and Paul's claim that the Gentiles are offspring of God.⁵³

Two elements of natural theology, *sensus divinitatis* and the paradise tradition, underpin all religions.⁵⁴ One significant concrete expression of *sensus divinitatis* is prayer. Kuyper views prayer as a profound manifestation of humanity's dependence on God.⁵⁵ He observes that even pagans and the unconverted pray in various contexts.⁵⁶ Using the same analogy of the musical instrument in the heart, he used to describe *sensus divinitatis*, Kuyper describes the prayers of the unconverted. He notes that selfish prayers, blasphemies, and curses show that the instrument created by God within the human heart remains intact, though it produces only harsh and discordant sounds.⁵⁷ Furthermore, he asserts that the paradise tradition originates from the idol worship practiced by his European and Germanic ancestors, which retained traces of belief in the Creator God, allowing missionaries to connect these elements with the gospel.⁵⁸ Finally, he asserts, "There is no single datum in idolatry, which is inherent in it, but has sprung from natural theology."⁵⁹

Christianity represents the only true fulfillment of natural theology, while other religions constitute distorted expressions.⁶⁰ Religions without special revelation are compared to a glass with numerous cracks, incapable of clearly reflecting the pure

⁵³ Kuyper, 89–90.

⁵⁴ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:216.

⁵⁵ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 54.

⁵⁶ Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 632.

⁵⁷ Kuyper, 632–33.

⁵⁸ Kuyper, "The Natural Knowledge of God," 91–92; Abraham Kuyper, *Uit Het Woord. Stichtelijke Bijbelstudiën.*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Amsterdam ; Pretoria: Boekhandel Höveker & Wormser, 1899), 202.

⁵⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, 305.

⁶⁰ Kuyper, 302.

light of the infinite.⁶¹ Nevertheless, this distortion is not absolute. Following the Protestant Reformers, Kuyper does not entirely repudiate paganism; instead, he acknowledges that it retains fragments of truth and beauty, inherited from the original paradise tradition. He expresses particular respect for figures such as Buddha and Plato, whose religious and ethical reforms he esteems, even though their influence was ultimately limited and lacked enduring vitality.⁶² Turning to non-Christian religions shaped by special revelation, he views them not as purely pagan but as containing corrupted elements of Christian truth.⁶³ Concerning Islam, he acknowledged that Muhammad was not a fraud.⁶⁴ Islam and Christianity have three things in common: First, there is a “historical point of union”⁶⁵ in Abraham and Moses. Second, together they have a common cause against pantheists, polytheists, atheists, and agnostics.⁶⁶ Third, both accept God’s revelation written down in the Old Testament, though Islam rejects Jesus and replaces the New Testament with the Qur’an.⁶⁷ While he believes that Islam stands closer to the truth than pagan religions like Moloch, he still insists that Islam remains “infinitely far from *the* truth.”⁶⁸

2.2.3. *The spiritual character of religions and their demonic influences*

Kuyper maintains that religion is intrinsically spiritual, pertaining to the realm of spirits, because human beings were created as spiritual beings, a capacity not

⁶¹ Kuyper, 307.

⁶² Kuyper, “The Natural Knowledge of God,” 104.

⁶³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, 306.

⁶⁴ Kuyper, *On Islam*, 167.

⁶⁵ Kuyper, 16.

⁶⁶ Kuyper, 16.

⁶⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Women of the Old Testament*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1934), 18–19.

⁶⁸ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:117.

shared with animals.⁶⁹ This spiritual constitution equips humans for spiritual communion with God, who, being spirit, must be worshipped in spirit.

Religion in Paradise can then be considered a loving spiritual communion between the Father of spirits and human spirits, a relationship between the divine and human spirits. After the Fall, the spiritual bond was broken, and religion becomes a failed grasping of the Spirit: animism as a grasping of created spirits; pantheism as a grasping of a spirit in the physical world; and polytheism as a grasping of spiritual qualities in the physical realm.⁷⁰ He views idolatrous religion as a confluence of the spiritual and the material. He regards the central idea of worship as “offering our best to God.” However, when “our best” is understood in material terms, such as women's virginal honor, divine worship becomes corrupted into immorality, as demonstrated by the temple prostitution at Baal Peor.⁷¹

The spirituality of religions is also evident in the influence of demons. Kuyper believes that the opposition between Christianity and other religions can be equated to the opposition between Christ and the unholy spirits.⁷² He believes that “all idolatry is motivated by a satanic impulse.”⁷³ By “idolatry”, he includes Islam since he considers “Allah” as an idol.⁷⁴

However, Kuyper does not completely demonize other religions, as he criticizes his predecessors for explaining idolatry solely from a demonic viewpoint.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:355–56.

⁷⁰ Kuyper, *On Islam*, 137.

⁷¹ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:502.

⁷² Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:216.

⁷³ Kuyper, 1:217.

⁷⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, trans. Harry Van Dyke, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 309.

⁷⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, 313.

While reflecting on his travels in the Levant, he admired Muhammad's “unparalleled charisma”⁷⁶ and regarded Muhammad's intellect as having “a spiritual power of the highest order.”⁷⁷ This was demonstrated by Muhammad’s unwavering dedication to monotheism, which led to the emergence of Islam, a religion that profoundly shaped history.⁷⁸

2.2.4. *Christianity’s eschatological exclusivity and supremacy*

Kuyper suggests that the clear division between true and false theology became historically evident only from the time of Abraham. While the antithesis between these two paths existed before, it is only from this point onward that each theology takes its distinct course. According to Kuyper, true theology progresses towards its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, reaching its peak in the person of Jesus. In contrast, though it may have origins in earlier forms, false theology deteriorates and continues on a negative trajectory, ultimately culminating in its destructive end.⁷⁹ This vision highlights Christianity’s exclusive and supreme character, with all other religions ultimately leading to falsehood and sin.

Special revelation, centered on Christ and his truth,⁸⁰ is *the* antithetical element between Christianity and other religions. Kuyper rejected Schleiermacher's and Hegel's attempts to turn this unbridgeable antithesis into a bridgeable process, i.e., a historical development of religion from the lowest (natural theology) to the highest (Christianity). He insists that this revelation of Christianity has “no correlates” and “a

⁷⁶ Kuyper, *On Islam*, 167.

⁷⁷ Kuyper, 167.

⁷⁸ Kuyper, 167.

⁷⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, 303–4.

⁸⁰ Kuyper, 542.

phenomenon of an entirely *singular* kind.”⁸¹ Reducing Christianity to one among many religions will have a profound implication: the loss of the divine reality.⁸²

Christ’s eschatological rule demands the abolition of other religions. Kuiper interprets the book of Revelation as offering assurance to early Christians of Christ’s ultimate victory in history. In these visions, Christianity is presented as the only true and pure form of worship destined for global dominance, with all other religions abolished as sinful and dishonoring to God. This eschatological vision demands the eradication of all idolatry, priesthoods, and temples, leaving Christianity to be universally acknowledged and honored under Christ’s rule.⁸³

Kuiper’s eschatological vision of Christianity’s ultimate supremacy and exclusivity implies that other religions still possess present significance, retaining specific values and benefits, including the capacity to offer consolation and peace.⁸⁴

2.2.5. *The formation of a religious association through the dynamic of superstition, fear, and bondage*

Kuiper uses the social-psychological narrative of superstition, fear, and bondage to account for the formation of non-Christian religions. He suggests superstition arises from human awareness of a mysterious, uncontrollable power influencing people’s lives. To protect themselves from this perceived threat, people turn to magic and witchcraft, effectively worshiping demonic spirits. In essence, they attempt to counter demonic influence by enlisting the help of other demons, which only entangles them further in demonic bondage, leading to greater fear and

⁸¹ Kuiper, 318.

⁸² Kuiper, 319.

⁸³ Kuiper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:414–15.

⁸⁴ Kuiper, *Pro Rege*, 2019, 3:367.

hopelessness.⁸⁵ Additionally, the fear of death drives people to combat malevolent spirits that seek their destruction, often by attempting to appease benevolent gods.⁸⁶ Similarly, nature worship develops from the same dynamic. Nature, perceived as an overwhelming force capable of threatening human life, inspires fear, leading people to venerate it as a protective response.⁸⁷

In addition, superstition contributes to the formation of a religious sphere in society: When people are superstitiously afraid of spirits, they try to dispel them. But when they realize they are not quite powerful individually, they gather in a communal worship beyond their families, forming a religious association, to find a common solution to their common perils.⁸⁸ In Kuyper's time, however, as scientific advancements enhanced humanity's control over nature, he observed a corresponding decline in the fear of mysterious forces and, consequently, in religious belief.⁸⁹

2.2.6. *Religion as the core of culture and its interconnection with other life spheres*

Kuyper envisions religion as a life sphere inherently connected to other concrete spheres of life. He recognized the challenge of converting Muslims, noting that conversion is not simply a shift in intellectual beliefs but is deeply intertwined with one's moral framework, thought patterns, and lifestyle.⁹⁰ Religion, as a central aspect of human existence, is also closely tied to its "soil" and "climate," including the nation's character and history; it serves as the core of a culture.⁹¹ In his time, Kuyper reflected on China, Japan, and India, "All of national life, all domestic habits,

⁸⁵ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:187–88.

⁸⁶ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2019, 3:39.

⁸⁷ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:132.

⁸⁸ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2019, 3:41–43.

⁸⁹ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:239–40.

⁹⁰ Kuyper, 1:339.

⁹¹ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:768.

and all industrial, artistic, and scholarly developments are interwoven with customs and regulations rooted in their religious concepts. Religion, culture, and national development form a complete unity.”⁹² The interconnection of religion with various spheres of life is significant for Kuyper. Therefore, he appreciates Islam, which unites all aspects of life under the monotheistic religion of Allah.⁹³

Religion, law, and morals are closely connected. He believes that law and religion are “twin sisters” (“*tweelingzusters*”⁹⁴) since the making of laws always begins with religion and divine worship.⁹⁵ Thus, religion indelibly puts a stamp on a people’s laws and morals.⁹⁶ He appreciates that the pagans and Islam still bind the law to God/gods, unlike the humanists of his time.⁹⁷ He argues that the legitimacy of law depends on belief in gods who establish principles of law, justice, honor, and governance. Without religion, a nation risks becoming ungovernable and ultimately facing collapse.⁹⁸ Drawing from Romans 2:14-15, Kuyper suggests that the moral law written in the hearts of all people explains why pagans still uphold the law.⁹⁹

The interplay between religion and other life spheres is evident in the multiformity of religious groups. Kuyper highlights the variations among Reformed Christian groups across different regions of the Netherlands and observes similar distinctions within other denominations, such as Roman Catholicism. He extends this

⁹² Kuyper, *On Islam*, 13.

⁹³ Kuyper, 168.

⁹⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde. Dl. 1: De Beginselen* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1916), 83.

⁹⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 392.

⁹⁶ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:768.

⁹⁷ Kuyper, *Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde. Dl. 1: De Beginselen*, 83.

⁹⁸ Kuyper, *Our Program*, 52; Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God’s Gifts for a Fallen World*, vol. 3, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 198–99.

⁹⁹ Kuyper, *Our Program*, 76–77.

analysis to religions like Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, noting that various locations foster unique religious expressions. Kuyper attributes these differences to the ongoing interaction between religion and domestic and national contexts. Factors such as national history, cultural character, and influential figures contribute significantly to the distinct forms religions take.¹⁰⁰

2.2.7. *Support for freedom of religion in society*

Despite his strongly antithetical views and sense of superiority, Kuyper supported freedom of religion in Dutch society and the colony of the East Indies. Notably, he did this when the non-religious were a small minority in the Netherlands, which had about 5 million inhabitants.¹⁰¹ Kuyper advocated for religious freedom in his 1879 political manifesto: *Our Program*. He argued that the government should not suppress non-Christian religious associations (i.e., groups), even if they were anti-Christian or atheistic. These groups should be allowed to grow freely without special protection or repression, as Christianity, according to Kuyper, must engage in a spiritual battle, not a political one, against other religions.¹⁰² For the pagan and Islamic inhabitants of the East Indies, Kuyper also promoted freedom of religion, not out of appreciation for the value of these idolatrous religions, but because he believed Christianity spreads through persuasion, as exemplified by Jesus, rather than through force.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:769–70.

¹⁰¹ George Harinck, “Abraham Kuyper’s Vision of a Plural Society as a Christian Answer to Secularization and Intolerance,” in *Secularization, Desecularization, and Toleration*, ed. Vyacheslav Karpov and Manfred Svensson (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 118, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54046-3_6.

¹⁰² Kuyper, *Our Program*, sec. 58.

¹⁰³ Kuyper, sec. 259.

2.2.8. *Summary*

Kuyper's view of non-Christian religions is interdisciplinary, encompassing theological, sociological, psychological, and political dimensions.

Theologically, Kuyper understands religion as encompassing both belief and ritual, expressed communally as a lived manifestation of humanity's relationship with spiritual powers. This relationship supplanted the original communion with God, grounded in natural theology and enabled by the spiritual nature of human beings. Yet religion remains fundamentally corrupted by sin and demonic influence, even as it retains vestiges of beauty, truth, and spiritual vitality. He also affirms the eschatological exclusivity and supremacy of Christianity, grounded in the unique revelation of Christ, and thus considers all non-Christian religions ultimately false, inferior, and destined to disappear; yet he simultaneously acknowledges their ongoing relevance by recognizing that they still embody certain values and offer present benefits.

From a socio-psychological perspective, he explains the emergence of religious communities as a response to superstition and deep-seated fears of death and demonic spirits, formed as a means of self-protection. He recognizes the interconnectedness and mutual strengthening between religious communities and other life spheres. Politically, Kuyper upholds Christianity's ultimate supremacy while firmly advocating religious freedom, believing that the faith advances through non-violent persuasion.

2.2.9. *Discussion*

Kuyper's recognition of religion's spiritual nature suggests a shared cosmology across faith traditions, acknowledging transcendent spiritual powers. This perspective challenges the modern rationalistic and mechanistic worldview, which

dismisses the spiritual realm and undermines religion's essence.¹⁰⁴ A spirit-filled cosmology offers a non-reductionistic foundation for discerning the Holy Spirit's work among religions.

His interdisciplinary approach to religion merits further development. Fellow neo-Calvinists echo his approach. Herman Bavinck advocated for a scholarly approach that respects religions' historical and cultural contexts while maintaining theological discernment. Bavinck emphasized replacing outdated dismissive attitudes with a more nuanced understanding, integrating religious studies with Christian dogmatics.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, the apologetic approach of renowned Dutch missionary J. H. Bavinck¹⁰⁶, known as “elencitics,”¹⁰⁷ underscores the importance of thorough religious analysis in engaging with non-Christian faiths. By incorporating theology, history, psychology, and the phenomenology of religion, J. H. Bavinck demonstrates the value of a holistic study of religions.¹⁰⁸

To enhance Kuyper's theological understanding of religion today, insights from contemporary religious studies should be incorporated. His theological evaluation can be seen as an *a priori* endeavor, relying primarily on Christian dogmatic reasoning without significant engagement with the lived realities of non-

¹⁰⁴ Amos Yong, “On Binding, and Loosing, the Spirits: Navigating and Engaging a Spirit-Filled World,” in *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World: Loosing the Spirits*, ed. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kirsteen Kim, and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137268990>.

¹⁰⁵ Herman Bavinck, “Theology and Religious Studies,” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 55.

¹⁰⁶ Johan Herman Bavinck, the nephew of Herman Bavinck, served as a pastor and missionary in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) from 1919 to 1926 and 1930 to 1939. In 1939, he returned to Netherlands and became the first Professor of Missions in VU Amsterdam.

¹⁰⁷ Johan Herman Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 83.

¹⁰⁸ Johan Herman Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian Reformed and Publishing Company, 1960), 233–40.

Christian communities. Additionally, his reliance on the paradise tradition—historically known as *prisca theologia* (“ancient theology”)—lacks substantiation from historical evidence.¹⁰⁹ This limitation is understandable, given the nascent stage of religious studies during Kuyper’s time.¹¹⁰ Evangelical scholars McDermott and Netland rightly argue that developing a theology of religions requires theological reflection and a prior, careful, and accurate analysis of the lived experiences and practices of specific religious communities to prevent misrepresentation.¹¹¹ For example, Kuyper did not sufficiently highlight the significance of rituals in religion. While he acknowledged ritual as an essential part of religion, he did not prioritize its significance, likely due to his focus on revelation and his effort to uphold the antithesis between Christianity and other faiths in opposition to the liberal science of religion. This theological emphasis led Kuyper to downplay rituals, seeing them as secondary to divine revelation. Nevertheless, since Clifford Geertz’s influential 1973 definition of religion, the secular study of religion has increasingly observed rituals as central to religious identity and practice.¹¹² For example, Richard Sosis has proposed in his ethnographic fieldwork in Israeli religious communities that the survival of a belief in a demon called *ruach ra’ah* can primarily be explained by its linkage with a morning handwashing ritual.¹¹³ Similarly, Reformed theologian James K. A. Smith underscores how liturgies sustain Christian faith and identity, illustrating the

¹⁰⁹ McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 116.

¹¹⁰ See Arie L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, Numen Book Series 105 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2005).

¹¹¹ McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 233.

¹¹² Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 125.

¹¹³ Richard Sosis, “The Last Talmudic Demon? The Role of Ritual in Cultural Transmission,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 375, no. 1805 (June 29, 2020): 20190425, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0425>.

indispensable role of rituals in shaping belief.¹¹⁴ Beyond rituals, contemporary religious studies have introduced additional dimensions of religion that Kuyper overlooked. For example, McDermott and Netland reference Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion: ritual, narrative, doctrinal, ethical, social, experiential, and material. These dimensions greatly expand Kuyper's narrower focus on religion as revelation. Additionally, contemporary religious studies emphasize the fluidity of religions, noting that they evolve significantly over time and across contexts. McDermott and Netland highlight Japanese Buddhism as an example, showing how, over fifteen hundred years of interaction with Japanese culture and local religious traditions, it has evolved so drastically from its Indian origins that some scholars now question whether certain widely practiced forms can still be classified as Buddhist. This example underscores the importance of engaging with religions as they exist in their specific cultural and historical contexts, rather than relying on assumptions or stereotypes.¹¹⁵

Finally, Kuyper's interdisciplinary view of religion encourages attentiveness to non-spiritual influences, such as economic, political, and cultural forces. Richard Sosis emphasizes that religious groups are shaped by "external factors including the social, political, economic, ecological, and religious environment."¹¹⁶ This perspective serves as a reminder to avoid overspiritualizing our understanding of religions. At the same time, the inherently spiritual character of religion warns against

¹¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1, Cultural Liturgies / James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), chap. 1.

¹¹⁵ McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 242–45.

¹¹⁶ Richard Sosis, "The Building Blocks of Religious Systems: Approaching Religion as a Complex Adaptive System," in *Evolution, Development and Complexity*, ed. Georgi Yordanov Georgiev et al., Springer Proceedings in Complexity (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 429, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00075-2_19.

reducing religions solely to these natural forces, highlighting the need to incorporate both spiritual and non-spiritual dimensions.¹¹⁷

2.3. The Spirit among religions through the lens of common grace

Kuyper's doctrine of common grace may offer a nuanced perspective on the Spirit's work among non-Christian religions. He developed the doctrine to explain God's activity in the world beyond the realm of particular (or saving) grace, i.e., the church of Christ. He urges Christians to recognize the good and beautiful aspects found outside the church as evidence of God's common grace while still acknowledging the pervasive reality of sin.¹¹⁸

Kuyper provides a comprehensive exposition of the doctrine, particularly regarding religions, in his three-volume work *Common Grace* (1902–1904). This section will first examine God's work of common grace in religions, then identify the Spirit as its dynamic agent, and finally, critically analyze common grace as a framework for understanding the Spirit's activity among religions.

2.3.1. Common grace in religions

Despite the post-Fall corruption, God's common grace enables religion to exist by sustaining a shared foundation among religions through preservation of the seed of religion, natural knowledge of God,¹¹⁹ and spiritual character of religion.¹²⁰ The seed of religion, instilled in humanity at creation, remains embedded in the human heart through common grace.¹²¹ The presence of common grace is precisely

¹¹⁷ Cf. McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 254.

¹¹⁸ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:8–9.

¹¹⁹ Chapter 2.2.2.

¹²⁰ Chapter 2.2.3.

¹²¹ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2020, 3:231.

evinced by idolatrous worship, not only as a rejection of God but also as evidence of humanity's innate inclination and need to worship, sustained by divine grace.¹²² Moreover, common grace operates within sinners to safeguard remnants of natural knowledge of God from being fully obscured by sin,¹²³ and vanishing entirely.¹²⁴ Finally, God's common grace preserves the spiritual character of religion. Human community still serves as a contact point between the spirit world and all areas of life.¹²⁵ Through common grace, God restrains demonic influence and counters it with the work of His good spirits (i.e., holy angels) to preserve the spiritual atmosphere of the community.¹²⁶

Common grace enables religious communities to flourish within society by producing fruits that benefit other spheres of life.¹²⁷ It fosters the formation of religious associations as worship communities and their integration into society.¹²⁸ Kuyper observes that in the ancient world, religion (except for Christianity) and government were often intertwined under the influence of common grace, with both supporting one another. Common grace employed the political sphere to maintain and grow the religious sphere. Pagan governments, too, could develop sophisticated legal systems due to the effect of common grace, as exemplified by the 6th-century Code of Justinian.¹²⁹ The influence of common grace in the interconnection between religion and law can be seen in two ways. First, according to Kuyper, legal traditions in many

¹²² Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:490.

¹²³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, 302–3.

¹²⁴ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2020, 3:573.

¹²⁵ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:466.

¹²⁶ Kuyper, 2:468–69.

¹²⁷ Kuyper, 2:197–98.

¹²⁸ Cf. Kuyper, 2:582–83. Also Chapter 2.2.5 and 2.2.6.

¹²⁹ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2019, 3:239.

nations are partly derived from those of Solon, Israel, and the paradise tradition. The latter represents the religious element preserved by common grace after the Fall.¹³⁰ Second, these legal traditions are plausible because they correspond to the divine law inscribed in man's heart from the beginning, which common grace preserves from destruction.¹³¹ Thus, in a sophisticated legal order, common grace enables the potential for justice in the human heart to converge with the legal fruits of the religious sphere.

Kuyper's doctrine of common grace leads him to recognize the historical significance of non-Christian religions. For instance, he attributes to common grace the emergence of exceptional individuals, virtues, and talents among pagans and the cultural and intellectual achievements of ancient India and Islam. Despite viewing Muhammad as a false prophet, Kuyper acknowledges Islam's vast influence across social, political, scientific, and aesthetic spheres as evidence of common grace.¹³²

How does the relationship between common grace and particular grace affect non-Christian religions? Three points explain this: the first two highlight how common grace supports particular grace, while the third emphasizes how particular grace contributes to common grace.

First, common grace may prepare individual elects in other religions for conversion by particular grace. Kuyper compares common grace to soil on which the seed of regeneration, brought by particular grace, falls. While the seed will inevitably grow, its growth depends on the soil's condition, shaped by common grace. Kuyper attributed differences in Christian life and confession, such as between converts in the

¹³⁰ See chapter 2.2.2.

¹³¹ Abraham Kuyper, "Our Relationship to the Law," in *On Charity & Justice*, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 375–76.

¹³² Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:198–202.

Netherlands and pagan converts in Sumba, to varying degrees of common grace in both societies. Likewise, the early Christian church thrived in Rome and Athens because the Greco-Roman civilization had reached a high level of cultural development, as demonstrated by figures like Plato and Cicero.¹³³

Second, the fruits of common grace in religions might be incorporated into God's eternal kingdom. As common grace advances, its misuse near history's end will heighten demonic opposition between Christianity and other religions, culminating in the destruction of unbelievers at Christ's return.¹³⁴ However, the eschatological fruits of common grace in religions and other spheres will not be eradicated but purified when particular grace recreates the whole earth.¹³⁵

Third, particular grace may enhance the development of common grace within other religions. Through actions and teachings, Christian moral influence may affect other religions by shaping individual conscience, public opinion, and cultural values, thereby promoting righteousness and restraining sin. Additionally, God's blessings, such as favorable climates, fertile lands, and advancements in science, bestowed for the benefit of His church, may indirectly extend to people of other religions.¹³⁶ Although these blessings are not directly tied to religion, their impact on broader life spheres may also influence the religious sphere.

Three indicators have been identified to discern the level of common grace in religions. Since all religions embody a mixture of sin and common grace, they cannot be wholly rejected or entirely affirmed, but must be discerned carefully.¹³⁷ The first

¹³³ Kuyper, 2:314–16.

¹³⁴ Chapter 2.2.4.

¹³⁵ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:595, 535–36; Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:778.

¹³⁶ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:765–66.

¹³⁷ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:511–12.

indicator is the moral life of a community, which reflects the degree of common grace in its religious life. By distinguishing two domains of common grace, moral-religious and intellectual-artistic, he argues that common grace is strongest when both areas thrive, less potent when only moral-religious life is preserved, and weakest when intellectual-artistic life flourishes while moral-religious life deteriorates.¹³⁸ Thus, Kuyper emphasizes that moral-religious life is a more significant indicator of common grace than intellectual-artistic life.¹³⁹ Drawing on Romans 1:28, Kuyper highlights how Paul links the immorality of nations to their prior sin of apostasy, thereby connecting moral and religious life under the influence of common grace.¹⁴⁰ Accordingly, the moral condition of a community reflects the degree of common grace active in its religious life. To illustrate, he contrasts two moral types of pagans: the Queen of Sheba, who visited Solomon to seek wisdom, and Rabshakeh, who came to mock the God of Israel. The Queen of Sheba represents those who embody moral ideals, often surpassing Christians, suggesting a high degree of common grace in their religious life and communities. Conversely, Rabshakeh, characterized by brutality, sensuality, and arrogance, represents a lower degree of common grace.¹⁴¹ The second indicator is the theological alignment of the object of worship with the Christian God. Kuyper identifies the worship of inanimate objects, such as the sun, moon, stars, or icebergs, as the most primitive form of religion. A slightly higher form involves animal worship, as observed in India. Greece, he argues, progressed further by venerating human beings, while Islam occupies a significantly higher plane by

¹³⁸ Kuyper, 1:506–7.

¹³⁹ Cf. Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:469.

¹⁴⁰ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:499.

¹⁴¹ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:23.

abolishing image worship altogether.¹⁴² Thus, the closer the theological concept of the object of worship aligns with the Christian understanding of God, the greater the level of common grace present. The third indicator is that social actions of mercy serve as a key measure of common grace. A religious community with a high level of common grace will demonstrate care for its members and those beyond its circle. In contrast, communities marked by indifference, egotism, and hardness of heart reflect a lower degree of common grace.¹⁴³ Kuyper maintains that these indicators serve as aids in discerning the presence of common grace within religious traditions.

2.3.2. *The Spirit as the dynamic agent of common grace in religions*

Building on Vincent Bacote's insights, the Spirit's work among religions can be understood through the lens of common grace. Bacote identifies the Spirit as the dynamic agent of common grace, emphasizing the overlap between Kuyper's descriptions of the Spirit's cosmic activity and common grace. He highlights several parallels: the Spirit leads creation to its destiny, animates life, and opposes sin, while common grace enables development, sustains life, and resists sin's curse. Kuyper's attribution of divine contact with creation to the Spirit further supports this connection. Bacote also notes that both the Spirit and common grace bestow talents and genius and share the same telos—realizing creation's potential.¹⁴⁴ Thus, by linking common grace and the Spirit, the Spirit's activity can be recognized within religions.

The dynamic agency of the Spirit among religions can be further observed in two key areas. First, the Spirit operates common grace in the prayers of the

¹⁴² Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2020, 3:573; Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:201.

¹⁴³ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2020, 3:516.

¹⁴⁴ Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology*, 114–16.

unconverted. According to Kuyper, the prayers of unregenerate sinners often stem from egoism, as they perceive God as existing for their benefit rather than the reverse. Despite the flaw, he asserts that such prayers arise from the “heart instrument” created by the Spirit, though sin renders the melody of prayer discordant. Thus, the fundamental capacity for prayer, even in sinners, originates from the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁵ Occasionally, unregenerate sinners may also offer unselfish prayers that transcend egoism and deeply move the soul, which Kuyper attributes to general grace (i.e., common grace¹⁴⁶) wrought by the Spirit:

If there were no general grace, muzzling sin and plowing the field, the sinner could no more pray than Satan, but like him would curse God without ceasing. But now he still prays, he has prayed for ages, and by his prayer, even tho it is the fruit of tradition, he has sometimes risen above the sinful egoism of his heart. But this prayer never sprang from the root of sin, nor from something good which he had kept along with sin in the holy closet of his heart; it was but the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Evidence of the deep inworking of this grace is found in the exalted devotions that still sound in our ears from the most ancient traditional prayers of Indian, Egyptian, and Greek antiquity; and in the ministry of prayer from the pulpit by unconverted ministers whose supplications often move and touch the soul. ... And all these operations of general grace are, as soon as they touch the life of prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁷

Thus, the prayers of unbelievers reveal the Spirit as the agent of common grace.

Second, Kuyper identifies the Holy Spirit as the agent behind the elevating influence of particular grace on common grace. He argues that a Christian nation, like the Netherlands in his time, consists not only of the elect but also of a broader population influenced by the elect. The Holy Spirit uniquely indwells the elect, imparting particular grace, which then radiates outward to the visible church, encompassing both true believers and hypocrites, and further into society, combating

¹⁴⁵ Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 632–34.

¹⁴⁶ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 1:5–6.

¹⁴⁷ Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 634–35.

sin and fostering human development.¹⁴⁸ Kuyper illustrates this influence with the metaphor of the “atmosphere of the Holy Spirit”:

This congregation of the living God receives the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, such that it lives from the Spirit and, at the same time, spreads around itself an atmosphere of elevated and holier human life. It is the city set on a hill that not only enjoys the light itself, but also shines that light to the outside. The atmosphere of the Holy Spirit pushes back the atmosphere of Satan’s spirit. A Christian life in politics, society, science, and art developed particularly in Europe. Magic and witchcraft disappeared from the Christian circle, and the human spirit was freed from them. Humanity’s spirit, now liberated, began by the sweat of its brow also to eat from the bread of knowledge, and through science to win back the dominion over nature that we now enjoy.¹⁴⁹

Consequently, the Spirit’s work extends beyond the church, indirectly impacting non-Christian religious communities, particularly where the church engages with them.

These observations lead to the conclusion that the Spirit is the one who actualizes God’s common grace within religious communities.

2.3.3. *Summary*

Against sin, divine curse, and death, common grace enables us to see the Spirit’s work among faith communities in the following ways. First, the Spirit establishes religion by preserving its seed, remnants of natural knowledge of God, and spiritual character, enabling religious communities to flourish within society and empowering them to make contributions of social and historical significance. This reveals the inherent ambiguity of religion, shaped by both divine and demonic influences.¹⁵⁰ As McDermott and Netland argue, reducing religions to either wholly satanic or entirely free from satanic influence is both simplistic and naive.¹⁵¹ This complexity calls Christians to discern the Spirit among other faith communities.

¹⁴⁸ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:280–81.

¹⁴⁹ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:198.

¹⁵⁰ Yong, *An Amos Yong Reader*, 24.

¹⁵¹ McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 254; See also Yong’s Thesis Five: Yong, *An Amos Yong Reader*, 24.

Second, the Spirit may work indirectly among religions through Christian individual and communal influence. Through interactions with adherents of other faiths, the Spirit may operate via church witness, missions, and interreligious dialogue. This underscores the active role of Christians in bearing the Spirit's transformative presence both within and beyond their communities.

Additionally, the Spirit's work of common grace is oriented toward particular grace, either preparing communities for conversion or producing fruits to be purified at Christ's return, even as the community faces destruction. This understanding encourages a posture of openness, gratitude, and humility. Openness is vital because the Spirit may bring religious communities to future conversion, countering a fatalistic outlook and premature judgment. Even if such communities ultimately face condemnation, the Spirit's work within them can produce valuable fruits for the Christian church that can be enjoyed in the present or at the eschaton. Though speculative, the core insight remains: while the precise continuities and discontinuities between the present world and the new creation are uncertain, we can trust that creation will not be entirely lost to sin. Instead, some elements will be transformed into the new creation.¹⁵² This perspective calls for humility in leaving final judgment to God.

Finally, the extent of the Spirit's activity in religions can be critically assessed through three indicators: moral life, theological alignment with Christianity, and acts of mercy.

¹⁵² Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2017), 44; For a biblically-grounded reasoning, see Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching in: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, Rev. ed (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

2.3.4. *Two limitations*

The pneumatology of common grace faces two primary limitations: its lack of discernment power and its tendency to compartmentalize the Spirit's activity.

First, although Kuyper rightly distinguishes varying levels of common grace, his approach lacks a clear discernment framework. This limitation is evident in the ambiguity of the indicators he proposes and in his failure to evaluate differing degrees of common grace across religions effectively. The spiritual ambiguous character of religions raises a critical question: how do we differentiate the work of the Spirit from the influence of sin and demonic powers within specific religious communities? One proposed approach utilizes the three identified indicators of common grace: moral-religious life, the object of worship, and the social actions of mercy. However, these indicators often lack the clarity needed for concrete discernment. First, a “high moral life” is historically and culturally contingent. The New England Puritans, despite worshipping the Christian God, defended slavery and witch hunts, while Kuyper himself condemned slavery but espoused racist views. Similarly, many Neo-Calvinists in South Africa supported apartheid,¹⁵³ demonstrating the difficulty of using morality as a reliable indicator of common grace. Second, religious life is equally ambiguous. Fervent devotion is not necessarily in line with the Spirit's movement, as exemplified by the Pharisees, whom Jesus rebuked despite their zeal for the God of Israel (Matt. 12:22–32). Third, social actions of mercy can be misleading. The Peoples Temple, under Jim Jones, engaged in charitable work but ultimately culminated in the tragic Jonestown massacre,¹⁵⁴ demonstrating that acts of

¹⁵³ Vincent Bacote, “Kuyper and Race,” in *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First-Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, ed. Jessica Renee Joustra and Robert Joustra (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2021), 146–62.

¹⁵⁴ Rebecca Moore, *Peoples Temple and Jonestown in the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009032025>.

benevolence alone cannot serve as definitive markers of the Spirit's work. Thus, while Kuyper's framework provides a theoretical model for identifying common grace, it lacks concrete criteria for discernment.¹⁵⁵

Two factors contribute to this lack of discernment power. First, Kuyper's common grace often implicitly equates the divine Spirit with human spirit, linking human culture and technological progress, science, morality, and similar areas to the Spirit's activity.¹⁵⁶ He argued that since Pentecost, the Spirit liberated the human spirit to advance in knowledge and regain mastery over creation, tying salvation closely to general human development.¹⁵⁷ He even attributed historical events, such as the fall of the Roman Empire, to the activity of the Spirit of the Father,¹⁵⁸ risking the unwarranted legitimization of various historical (religious) causes and movements as expressions of God's Spirit. In response, van der Kooi emphasizes that cultural developments are mere lacunae of possibilities—neither inherently holy nor purely secular—requiring careful discernment to determine what spirits fill these gaps.¹⁵⁹ This distinction between human spirit and divine Spirit necessitates a more nuanced pneumatology.

Second, Kuyper's lack of discernment in concrete situations arises from his dependence on abstract theological concepts. Kooi argues that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace, shaped by constructs such as double predestination, creation

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 148. "While Kuyper was extremely certain that the Holy Spirit was cosmically active in all faith and cultures, bringing them together for moments of consensus and cooperation, Kuyper was never certain of what those moments of consensus would look like or how long they would last."

¹⁵⁶ Cornelis Van der Kooi and Gijsbert Van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma and James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 520.

¹⁵⁷ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2016, 1:165–66, 188.

¹⁵⁸ Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, 2019, 3:219.

¹⁵⁹ Van der Kooi and Van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics*, 513, 522–23.

ordinances, and the eternal Son, remains disconnected from the concrete historical realities, where spiritual discernment is crucial. He suggests that the whole story of the Son, both eternal *and historical*, must be considered, since it is primarily through the historical life of Jesus Christ that God's presence in concrete life and culture becomes evident and normative.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, a pneumatology that engages lived experiences and is firmly rooted in the narrative of Jesus Christ is indispensable.

Another key limitation of common grace is its compartmentalization of the Spirit's work, demarcating his creative activity from his redemptive activity. Van der Kooi illustrates this dualism through the example of healing: is it governed by common grace (medical science) or particular grace (the gospel)? While Christians seek medical treatment for physical ailments and turn to the church for spiritual needs, the New Testament affirms that the church, as the sphere of particular grace, also engages in physical healing (e.g., Jas. 5:14-15).¹⁶¹ Thus, common grace may inadvertently reinforce a division between church and non-church realms. This dualism also emerges in whether love of neighbor belongs to common or particular grace. Paul identifies love as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), yet in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus portrays an outsider and perceived enemy of God's people as

¹⁶⁰ Cornelis Van der Kooi, "A Theology of Culture. A Critical Appraisal of Kuyper's Doctrine of Common Grace," in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of His Life and Work*, ed. Cornelis Van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, VU Studies on Protestant History 3 (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 101; Van der Kooi and Van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics*, 188. The Christian norm for discerning God's presence in daily life is rooted in the history of God's covenant with Israel and in the person of Jesus Christ. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 132–35. Mouw argues that Kuyper's vision of Christ as the exalted, triumphant heavenly Ruler should be complemented by the Jesus of Mother Teresa—one who suffers and grieves concretely with the poor, as portrayed in the New Testament.; Both aspects, the eternal and the historical, are important. See, Jochem Douma, *Common Grace in Kuyper, Schilder, and Calvin: Exposition, Comparison, and Evaluation*, ed. William Helder, trans. A. H. Oosterhoff, Perlego (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna: CRTS Publications, 2017), chap. 5.5, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2892723/11>. "We may say: to be avoided are the Scylla of Kuyper with his often abstracting attention for the Son of God as Mediator of creation and the Charybdis of Barth and his followers, who have attention only for Jesus of Nazareth and creation."

¹⁶¹ Cornelis Van der Kooi, *This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 96.

exemplifying genuine neighborly love, even toward his adversary (Luke 10:25-37). Without further differentiation, Kuyper's framework, though he denies it in theory,¹⁶² tends to assign common grace to those outside Christianity and particular to those within it. This dualism, in turn, needlessly separates the Spirit's creative and redemptive work. Since Kuyper's framework defines common grace in contrast to particular grace from the outset,¹⁶³ it naturally emphasizes discontinuity while limiting an exploration of their interconnections. Addressing this dualistic tendency is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the Spirit's work.

2.4. Conclusion

Theological affirmations of the Spirit's work among other faith communities—grounded in three key elements of Kuyper's theology: cosmic pneumatology, interdisciplinary understanding of religion, and the doctrine of common grace—can be summarized as follows:

First, religion comprises religious beliefs and ritual practice as lived expressions of the human spirit's engagement with spiritual powers—good and evil—embodied in communal life that is integrally linked to other life spheres.

Second, the cosmic Spirit bestows common grace upon religious communities, enabling their formation and relative flourishing even amid the distorting powers of sin, evil, and demonic influence. This grace manifests in the granting of artistic and intellectual gifts, the restraint of sin, the preservation of religious awareness and natural knowledge of God, the opposition to destructive demonic forces, and the

¹⁶² Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2016, 1:505.

¹⁶³ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2019, 2:249.

empowerment of religious communities to contribute meaningfully to society and history.

Third, given the intrinsic ambivalence within religions, where traces of truth and beauty coexist with deep distortion, Christians must avoid both demonizing and idealizing other faiths, and instead exercise discerning attentiveness to the Spirit's activity within them.

Fourth, recognizing the Spirit's presence in faith communities necessitates interdisciplinary engagement with their complex lived realities, rather than relying on preconceived, theoretical, or stereotypical judgments.

Fifth, the Spirit's work of common grace, directed toward particular grace—whether by preparing communities for conversion or producing fruits to be refined at Christ's return despite the community's potential destruction—involves a posture of humility, openness, and gratitude.

Sixth, the Spirit often operates indirectly among religious communities through the faithful presence and witness of Christians, whether through interfaith dialogue, missionary proclamation, or lay engagement in shared cultural and social spaces.

Kuyper's doctrine of common grace offers programmatic vision of the Spirit's presence in other religious communities. However, it exhibits significant limitations, particularly in its failure to adequately integrate the cosmic and redemptive dimensions of the Spirit's work. While Kuyper's broader cosmic pneumatology could potentially mitigate this deficiency, it too lacks a robust account of discernment—a gap that the doctrine of common grace does not address adequately. We now turn to Michael Welker's contemporary Reformed pneumatology to engage these interconnected shortcomings.