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Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* by Matthew Kaemingk. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018. 296 pp. ISBN: 9780802874580.

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Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear

Matthew Kaemingk

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018 (352 pages)

As I write this review on a flight from Amsterdam to Minneapolis, my wife is playing peekaboo and reaching forward to interlock fingers with the stretched out little hand of a beautiful eighteen-month-old boy with striking Arabian features and big, smiling dark eyes who is sitting facing backward on his mother's lap in the row in front of us. After a few minutes of this, he peers around his mother's seatback to get a better view and sees me, smiles widely, and reaches with fingers wriggling furiously. I look up from my laptop, smile, and tickle his extended fingers. It is not long before the smiling, hijab-wearing young mother stands and passes the little boy between the seats to my wife's lap where he now sits, frenetically pecking at her Kindle to stimulate screen movement, while his mom explains they are returning to the US from Sweden. Her parents saw their grandson Yunus for the first time.

Welcome to the twenty-first-century global village, where every Christian will, at some point, have an opportunity to extend hospitality and, quite literally in my wife's case, embrace.

With *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*, Matthew Kaemingk has given us a highly readable piece of work destined for lasting relevance within the rapidly growing body of literature on Christian-Muslim dynamics. Engaging the matrix of discourses necessitated by so potentially polarizing a topic, Kaemingk aptly navigates through the various social, political, and religious landscapes resulting from the changing social and political experiments of the wrong-headed twentieth-century Dutch experience. Then, guided by Christian principles of hospitality and of treatment of the "other," Kaemingk recommends a workable corrective for today's polarizing and destructive American reality. The goal is to prevent a repeat of the doomed social engineering of enforced Christian-Muslim interaction that is twenty-first-century Dutch society.

The book proceeds in four parts, thematically anchored in a reworking of the well-known rhetorical query of the second-century church father Tertullian, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" To which, of course, his answer was "not much." But now pose the question in the context of conflict, not between faith and reason, but between the two largest faith traditions in the world: "What has Mecca to do with Amsterdam?" A lot, as it turns out. Because Christians and Muslims are interwoven in our global village, let us not focus on the unbridgeable chasm but appreciate the colorful richness of this tapestry. Let us avoid the simplistic narratives and kneejerk reactions of both the Right and the Left. Before we judge Islam to be either peaceful and good as we throw open our doors in unthinking acceptance and tolerance, or violent and evil as we hunker down behind high walls and tough policies, perhaps we should examine our politics of difference in an alternative way. We already know these two simplistic default responses will not work from the nearly three-quarters-century-long experience in the Netherlands. But we know

this even more from their proscription by a set of Christian behaviors grounded in the precepts of hospitality, belonging, and embrace.

Applying these principles to the issue of inclusion of the “other” has a history in the intellectual stream of twentieth-century latter-day Renaissance man Abraham Kuyper and his twenty-first-century followers. This small and, to all appearances, very provincial group has applied the power of conviction and has provided a counternarrative that has the potential to reverse the demonstrated divisive and damaging social policies that tear at the fabric of a multicultural society. This counternarrative is a policy of “principled pluralism.”

The book’s first part reviews the sad history of Dutch experimentation with multiculturalism beginning with the mid-twentieth-century immigration of temporary “guest-workers” from former Dutch colonies such as Islamic Indonesia. This became a “problem,” however, when over time these guest workers stayed permanently, challenging social and political convention. Eventually Islam became a “problem to be solved” and the polarizing and failed solutions were grounded in misguided notions of multiculturalism as these received expression, first, in the ideology of pillarization (think “mosaic”) and then, second—when this proved catastrophic as a social policy—of assimilation into the liberal consensus, a “melting pot,” with its enforced embrace of liberalism. Commencing particularly with the tragic events of the opening years of the twenty-first century in the United States and the Netherlands, this liberal consensus was radically transformed into populist hardliners and gentler assimilationists, both of whom held that Islam must fold into Dutch society and adopt the two central principles of liberalism: autonomy and freedom. “Liberalism has ... made its moral language the only moral language permitted in the public square” (68).

But Kaemingk reminds us of a “distinct counterpublic that subversively seeks justice, hospitality, and grace for Muslims amidst the clash between Mecca and Amsterdam” (73). Part 2 reviews the intellectual history and broader Christian principles articulated by Abraham Kuyper, commencing with his well-known opposition to ideological hegemony and uniformity. Kuyper’s opposition to liberalism is anchored in the ontological reality that all of life is religious—neutrality, the grand presupposition of all liberal thinking, does not exist. To hold otherwise is to be hopelessly disingenuous. Therefore, we must deal with this permanent reality: the state of spiritual fragmentation (the antithesis) arising from the pluriform faiths of the world, despite the inherent similarities of both morality and sin, which all image bearers of the creator God exhibit. Things are not the way they are supposed to be, not because of ignorance, but sin. The desired liberal uniformity is a fruitless pursuit because faith is pervasive, pluriform, and public.

A constructive theological case for pluralism is then articulated employing Kuyper’s public theology, a pluralism that has at center the Christian principles of love, justice, and grace. This posture frequently put Kuyper at odds with both the liberals and the Christian theocrats of his day. While Kaemingk demonstrates deep respect for Kuyper’s thought, he rightly shows that Kuyper’s pluralism—his opposition to ideological hegemony—while soundly trinitarian at heart, is too narrowly based on a truncated christological schema in which Christ’s sovereignty receives exclusive focus. The resulting pluralism is severely

limited in scope and leads to a political discipleship couched in the concepts of power, rights, and freedom—all juridical emphases.

Kaemingk develops a holistic, complex, and helpful pluralism with a more comprehensive christological portrait—the whole of Christ—by drawing on the christological insights of other Kuyparian and neo-Kuyparian theologians. This is the undertaking of part 3. By delving into the complete mosaic that constitutes the biblical Christ, a more principled pluralism emphasizes that God’s love is a just love, and God’s justice is a loving justice. True embodiment of these theological truths results in Christian character formation characterized by the principles of hospitality, vulnerability, teaching, healing, patience, humility, sacrifice, and more as we consider the rich theological iridescence of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Further, the practices of the principled pluralist in state, church, and culture are nothing more than these truths embodied and lived, as we participate in the daily rituals and liturgies through our “way of life” (237), living the story of God. In a nutshell, we do well to remember the example of late medieval spiritualist and theologian Thomas à Kempis in his *Imitation of Christ*, a reference the book makes multiple times and is referred to by Calvin as well.

The work of public theologian James K. A. Smith is repeatedly drawn on in this book, and the Smithian spirit pervades throughout. Principled pluralism is not an idea; it is a lived experience. This means principled action. The book’s final section suggests ways in which American evangelicals can learn from the Dutch experience, distance themselves from the fractious hostilities dominating public discourse and the cultural landscape, recognize that successful democracy requires a “multiplicity of publics,” reify principled pluralism in institutions and networks, and become Christian cobelligerents. We must develop the very heart of Christ, not just understand the framework.

In sum, using the late modern history of the misguided and ruinous policies dominating the social-political landscape of the Netherlands as a lesson for twenty-first-century culture, Kaemingk has blazed a solid Christian, neo-Kuyparian trail toward a superior nation-building philosophy within a pluralistic global village. Given its particular relevance to the United States today, we do well to take heed.

The book is highly readable and meticulously documented. It is a sound piece of scholarship and, as a consequence, bears traits of its dissertation origins. At times it feels like a “book of lists”—introduced topics are regularly fleshed out using the familiar “first,” “second,” and “third” organizational style. Moreover, I counted over a dozen spelling or typographical mistakes, syntactical errors, and identical repetitious phrases, all issues easily identified and corrected by any number of online proofreading systems.

Finally, Kaemingk’s protestations to the contrary (see note 27, pages 89–90), the work would most certainly have benefited from the recently released book, *On Islam* (2017), the English translation of Kuypers’s meticulously documented travelogue of his early twentieth-century nine-month journey through the Mediterranean basin. In various places, but particularly in the concluding chapter, Kuypers builds a strong case for interfaith dialogue between those descendants of the “Semitic family”—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—but particularly the latter two. Moreover, Kaemingk would find solidarity

with Kuyper, who did not recommend proselytizing as a way of doing missions among Muslims. It is rather the heart of Jesus—as seen in the lived behavior, habits, and rituals of his children—that will be the tipping point in Christian witness. And so should Kaemingk’s volume be understood, for it is the transformative forces of Christian love, hospitality, and vulnerability that will most likely bring my new little friend Yunus within the embrace of gospel grace.

—Jan van Vliet
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