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Distilling Kuyper: A Review of Calvinism for a Secular Age

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Distilling Kuyper: A Review of Calvinism for a Secular Age

Abstract

"This book provides a balance from within Kuyperian thought that supports the overall contention that there's something to be gained from engaging with the tradition."

Posting about the book *Calvinism for a Secular Age* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Distilling Kuyper: A Review of *Calvinism for a Secular Age*

Donald Roth

February 10, 2022

Title: *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First-Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures*

Author: Jessica R. Joustra, Robert J. Joustra

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The goal in distilling spirits varies depending on what you're trying to make. Good vodkas are almost tasteless, ready to mix in with about anything. Good whiskey retains strong characteristics from its initial ingredients and a flavor that is further deepened and enhanced by aging. As a result of this (and the impact that has on price), whiskey is more of a niche thing, especially if you're trying to distill *really good* whiskey. In short, if you're looking to reach the largest volume of people, make a vodka, but if you want to reach the really passionate consumers, a whiskey might be more appropriate.

When it comes to distilling the insights of a work like Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures, there can be some tension in what sort of spirit we intend to produce. On the one hand, there is appeal in distilling Kuyper's essential insights into something that could mix well with the widest possible audience. On the other, Kuyper viewed his theological commitments as absolutely central to his more broadly applicable insights, like sphere sovereignty or structural pluralism. The challenge then is this: Is it better to retain the flavor of these commitments at the potential risk of only appealing to a more niche audience?

In the edited volume *Calvinism for a Secular Age*, Jessica and Robert Joustra have gathered a number of Kuyperian scholars to attempt to distill Kuyper's work so that it might inspire a new generation. So, what sort of spirit have they produced, and is this the spirit we need to respond to our "secular age"?

Removing Impurities

No matter what sort of distilling process one undertakes, a significant goal of the process is to remove impurities that would leave a bad taste in our mouth. When it comes to Kuyper, there

are challenges presented by the source material, but the most serious is his racism and ethnic snobbery. With growing societal concern over these issues, young people tend to find this sort of language particularly unpalatable. I have had several students who have found Kuyper's casual comments about African inferiority so off-putting that they struggle to see any merit in his other ideas. Since one of the goals of this book is to promote Kuyper's ideas to a new generation, this is an issue that had to be addressed.

The real question is how this is done. It would be possible to try to excise the offending ideas, but that would detach Kuyper from his historical moment and likely still fail to adequately address the concerns. It would also be possible to try to dismiss his ideas as a product of that historical context and fail to grapple with the inconsistencies of Kuyper calling for a "mixing of blood" in his European context but rejecting the same in South Africa.

Instead, this book balances Kuyper with his own thought. We can perhaps forgive someone who wrote so prodigiously for some inconsistencies, but it is a source of perennial frustration for my students (and me too) that Kuyper isn't a more systematic thinker. By pointing out where Kuyper did better (and how these ideas are more closely wed to his key insights), this book provides a balance from within Kuyperian thought that supports the overall contention that there's something to be gained from engaging with the tradition.

This isn't just a side concern, either. It provides crucial guidance in the broader endeavor of distilling Kuyper for a new generation.

Against Tasteless Spirits

Just how wide of an audience *can* Kuyperian insights appeal to? I remember having a conversation with a prominent scholar visiting the campus at Dordt who questioned why we'd want to bother with bringing Kuyper to the masses. To him, you could get to Kuyper's insights through traditions like subsidiarity, or the thought of less-compromised voices like John Locke. If it's just concepts like sphere sovereignty, worldview, or structural pluralism that matter today, why go through the extra effort of distilling these concepts from a source that many link to things like apartheid? To go back to abusing my framing metaphor, is it worth distilling vodka from Kuyper?

I don't think it is.

If the primary heritage that Kuyper offers can be distilled down to certain philosophical principles, the argument to look for similar ideas elsewhere is compelling. Even something more religiously grounded like "every square inch" can be domesticated into a sense that all of our life has spiritual significance, and there are other theologians who get us to that concept.

George Harinck's historiographic chapter offers thought from one of Kuyper's contemporaries that addresses this from a different direction. Describing Kuyper's thought, Herman Bavinck

said, “The various Reformed doctrines to him are not loosely connected *loci communes*, but, being most intimately related, they form one world of ideas, one strictly coherent system.”¹ *Loci communes* means common places, a buffet of ideas that we could pick and choose from. Kuyper argues instead for a worldview, and Bavinck argues elsewhere that, while our worldviews are personally inconsistent, the concept itself appeals to coherence.² Ultimately, it is this coherence that I think most speaks to the needs of our age.

Well-Aged

For the most part, the authors of this book tend toward retaining this integral character—that is, distilling whisky over vodka. This is probably most clear in Jessica Joustra’s conclusion, where she emphasizes not only the centrality of the sovereignty of God, but the essential character of our connection to Him as a driving element of Kuyper’s thought. In some ways, it makes sense that it’s just an “addendum,” as it’s not a primary emphasis in the lectures themselves, but the final section of the book links Kuyper’s thought on worldview to his perspective on piety, and it’s the piety of a life truly lived *coram deo* that gives life to Kuyperian thought.

While we can get to concepts like worldview in the thought of Kant, sphere sovereignty in Catholic principles of subsidiarity, structural pluralism in the thought of Locke and others, these sources don’t connect all of this to the same sense of an immanent, personal God that animated Kuyper’s thought. Christ might declare “mine” over every square inch of creation, but that is a deeply personal, intimate claim for Kuyper in a way that even those coming after him sometimes domesticate into a mere assertion of political jurisdiction. The world is quite comfortable when we create room for ennobling human action, but it is less sure about the relentlessly theological, God-oriented vision that Kuyper is casting.

Ultimately, though, my students have resonated with the thought of Kuyper, Bavinck and others because they confronted trends in modernity that have only accelerated. We live in a time that is more fractured and less integrated, and we’re told that this is a good thing because it gives us the tools to fashion our own identity without the pressures of transcendent meaning. When the lectures were given, even Kuyper was more optimistic about the ability of more traditional cultural channels to resist these disintegrating pressures. His original audience was, too.

Times have changed. As Kuyper’s thought has aged, we’ve come to a moment where integration and coherence are perhaps more keenly needed than before. Philosopher Craig Gay has argued that this age pressures us toward “practical atheism”—that is, to live as if God was irrelevant to our daily lives. He argues that the only solution to this is a relentlessly theological outlook on life, where we develop our understanding of personhood rooted in the One who we were first made to relate to. This is the vision that Kuyper puts before us. Purified by careful distilling, matured over years, the time is ripe for sharing neo-Calvinist thought with a new generation, and I applaud the scholarship of these authors in helping with that important work.

1. p. 167

2. Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview* (Crossway, 2019), 53.